**Guest Editors’ Introduction**

There is very little that is as universally common to all of humanity as humor. That we laugh—that we joke, heckle, kid, josh or prank someone is ubiquitous through the human experience, and finds instances in all cultures. A 2000 study by Bowling Green State University concluded that rats emit a high-frequency chirping sound when playing with other rats, and respond in a similar way when tickled. Thus it would seem that laughter is not merely contained to our own species.¹ Humor has interesting things to tell us about cognition, morality, the formation of social groups, and thus is a worthy object of philosophical attention. Sadly, palpably little has actually garnered sustained attention in the history of philosophy. Even more troubling is how baffling the question of what makes something funny becomes when given sustained attention to the diverse sorts of things that we consider to be humorous.

Humor—like ethics or political philosophy—is often considered a branch of axiology. It is a normative philosophical arena; in this sense, funny/not funny can be seen as vaguely analogous to either good/evil in ethics, or beautiful/ugly in aesthetics, etc. It is an evaluative judgment ascribed to the object. But humor is also has consequences for the psychology and the philosophy of mind.

Historically, there have been three major theories considered to give a viable account of humor, each of which has some plausibility in explaining those things that we find humorous. Each theory does explain some instances of amusement; but sadly, none of the three are completely without problems.

**Superiority Theory**

The *superiority theory* prescribes that the chief source of humor is emotional. Most often, it proposes that humor arises from a feeling of superiority of oneself over the comedian through their actions or words.

As with many questions in philosophy, the earliest version of this can be found in the writings of Plato. In *The Republic*, Plato describes humor as resulting from the ‘emotional’ or ‘spirited’ aspect of the soul. For Plato, the spirited aspect should be ‘ruled over’ by the rational aspect. Later in *The Republic* he likens humor to pity, an instance where we can see that emotions overpower reason. This is why he says that the guardians of the polis “mustn’t be lovers of laughter either” for “violent laughter” begets a “violent change of mood.”² Likewise in the *Philebus*, Plato describes a “mix of pleasure and pain” from which humor results. After noting that people often have inflated conceptions of themselves, and often think themselves richer or more physically
attractive—or even more virtuous—than they actually are, he concludes that while “ignorance [of oneself] on the strong and powerful is odious and ugly,” that “ignorance on the side of the weak, by contrast, deserves to be placed among the ridiculous and rank in nature.”

Plato had no love for comic poets in particular. In Laws XI he states “[n]o composer of comedies . . . must be able to ridicule either by description or by impersonation any citizen whatsoever, with or without rancor. Anyone who disobeys this rule must be ejected from the country that same day.” Again in The Republic, Plato condemns Homer for depicting the Olympian gods as laughing. “[I]f someone represents worthwhile people as overcome with laughter, we won’t approve” he tells us, “and we’ll approve even less if they represent the gods that way.”

Aristotle—Plato’s student and heir apparent—provides another early version of the superiority theory. In The Poetics, he describes the function of a literary work (whether comedy or tragedy) as providing a cathartic outpouring of emotion. Unlike tragedy, which represents characters worthy of praise, comedy results from “an imitation of men worse than average.” He defines the “ridiculous” as “a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others.” Aristotle also addresses wit in the Nichomachean Ethics. Here he assigns the term “vulgar buffoons” for those who excess in desire for social acceptance, striving for “humor at all costs”; and he claims that the deficiency—those who “can neither make a joke at themselves not put up with those who do”—are “boorish and unpolished.” Later in that section, he describes jest as “a sort of abuse.”

Aside from the Ancients, Thomas Hobbes provides perhaps the best known version of the superiority theory. He tells us: “[t]he passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly.” Also in the Leviathan:

Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.

There are plenty of examples of humor that are compatible with the superiority theory. We laugh at the Three Stooges, as well as slip-and-fall humor; put-downs and “yo Mamma” jokes; Moe Szyslak from The Simpsons, or Michael Scott from The Office, to name a few. However, there are many instances of ‘the funny’ which do not seem to involve a sense of superiority. Puns, for example, do not easily fit this model. For example: “I would have included a chemistry joke here, but I know I wouldn’t get a reaction.” Here the double-meaning of “reaction” (in the sense of a chemical reaction and in the sense of a comedic response) does not seem to rely on any sense of superiority. In
addition, when we laugh at ourselves, it stretches credibility to think that we are actually feeling superior to ourselves.

Relief Theories

The relief theory dictates that some (if not all) humor arises from a physiological or psychological tension, which when released results in a sudden catharsis bringing about laughter. On this model, the main function of humor is to serve as a “release valve” for these inner tensions.

One such attempt was made by Herbert Spencer in “The Physiology of Laughter.” Here Spencer claimed that laughter is nothing beyond a physiological reaction to a stimulus, just as jerky limb movement might result from a tickle. Consider the analogous case with the emotion of anger. This might result in mild muscular contractions (e.g., tightening one’s fists), or even more violent reactions. Just as this release might be characteristic of venting these pent up emotions, so too with laughter. Moreover, for Spencer, the humorous stimulus seems removed from the equation. He tells us that “the movements of chest and limbs which we make when laughing have no object.”10 The chief goal of laughter, in particular, is to expend excess “pent up” energy. Sadly, throughout the text, Spencer is rather vague on what brings about this “psychic energy.”

Likewise, in Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious,11 Sigmund Freud provides a much more elaborate description of the energy released by such a process. Specifically, Freud argues that the energy released is a product of a tension resulting from the superego—the source of socially acceptable behavior and ethics—denying satisfaction to deep-seeded repressed hostility and sexual urges within the id. When we joke, those latent urges flood into consciousness, and the energy that would have ordinarily been used to keep these urges under wraps must be expelled. Laughter is the release of this extraneous energy. Just as with the superiority theory, some types of humor do fit this model. Dirty jokes, especially those of a sexual nature, as well as the use vulgar language, often illicit laughter.

Just as with the superiority theory, there are plenty of examples of humor which don't quite fit the theoretical model. It has been widely noted12 that the relief theory seems more to be a theory of laughter than a theory of humor. Humor is not necessary for laughter. Some people may laugh in awkward, or even at tragic, circumstances with no funny stimuli present. While these examples seem to nicely fit the relief theory as an explanation of the laughter (to defuse the awkward situation, or relieve the sense of suffering or anguish), it does not seem to capture why we find amusement. In essence, the relief theory seems to confuse the antecedent cause with the effect.
Incongruity Theories

Incongruity theories locate the source of humor in cognitive processes, often as resulting from the sudden realization of a shift of meaning. The standard joke is a common instance. It consists of two parts: the setup and the punchline. The setup leads the mind to jump to one interpretation of the premise, immediately excluding other possibilities. When the punchline comes in, the mind shifts to the new interpretation of the premise. The incongruity between the two meanings and sudden shift of context come along with the punchline (in 'clashing' with the initial interpretation of the setup) results in laughter.

The earliest proponent of the incongruity theory is Immanuel Kant. Kant argues, “[w]hatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.” In this section of the Critique of Judgment, he provides three terrible jokes as examples that confirm his analysis:

[T]he joke must contain something that can deceive us for a moment . . . and so by a rapid succession and relaxation the mind is bounced back and forth and made to sway; and such swaying, since whatever stretched the string, as it were, snapped suddenly . . . must cause a mental agitation and inner bodily agitation.

Arthur Schopenhauer has an explanation very similar to Kant’s. Schopenhauer tells us that humor “results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through in some relation; and laughter is the result of this incongruity.” In this case, Schopenhauer is much more explicit than Kant. Ordinary cognition is passing a sensation through a concept or category. What happens in incongruity is that the same sensation is passed through the wrong concept, and this lack of fit results in humor.

Most contemporary scholars of humor adopt the incongruity theory—albeit often modified in various ways to count for recalcitrant instances of funniness. Of the three, the incongruity theory seems to capture more of the examples of humor than any of its competitors: standard jokes, as mentioned; as well as puns, “shaggy dog” stories; the absurd and ironic, literary satire, and the like. However, the incongruity theory is not without its limitations. For example, we might laugh at a joke we have heard before. In this case, there is no surprise: we know the punchline already, so the cognitive shift of context is clearly not what is at play here.

The articles that follow are part of a special issue put together in conjunction with the Lighthearted Philosophers’ Society. The Lighthearted Philosophers’ Society, founded in 2007, is an
organization dedicated to the philosophical study of humor. Since its inception, we have attempted to create a welcoming environment for those who are engaged in the academic study of humor, as well as those who eschew the dour seriousness with which philosophical research is often practiced. The contents of this issue are representative of this goal, many of whom are active members of the organization. Through each of the essays that follow, the authors make various attempts to engage philosophically with aspects of humor.

Chris Kramer’s contribution, “Incongruity and Seriousness,” explores the contrast between incongruities which we do and do not find funny. Pluming the depths of an historical account of incongruity from Arthur Schopenhauer and a contemporary version of the theory from John Morreall, Kramer contrasts the notion of incongruities in two different comportments to the stimulus: the playful mode and the serious. Camille Atkinson in her “Self-Deprecation and the Habit of Laughter” addresses the notion of self-deprecating humor. Likening the phenomenon to gallows humor, Atkinson explores both how relief theories and incongruity theories might account for this type of humor, providing a novel account of when, why and how people find this type of humor funny. Elizabeth Sills examines the notion of self-deprecating humor specifically in contemporary American politics. Sills focuses on the rhetorical elements, creating a space such that it can function to foster consent, and how it is used as a strategy to be a surrogate for political criticism.

Offensive humor is a common, although philosophically troublesome notion. Al Gini in his essay “Dirty Jokes, Tasteless Jokes, Ethnic Jokes” discusses the ethical import of offensive jokes, describing how they tend to shape our cultural traditions and practices. Thomas Brommage also takes on the notion of offensive humor in his essay, using a pragmatic model of language to discuss jokes as speech-acts. He provides a model for understanding jokes which helps us understand the difference between an offensive joke and a merely bad joke. Steven Gimbel in his essay “Heckler Ethics” discusses the moral bounds of professional comedians, and the constraints upon what sorts of jokes they can tell—as well as what latitude they might have in responding to hecklers in the audience. Finally, rounding out the volume, is Sophia Stone’s “review” of Hating Perfection by John F. Williams—which is an excellent example of how humor can be used in philosophy.

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Lighthearted Philosophers’ Society
Endnotes

1 Panksepp and Burgdorf 2000.
2 Plato, Republic III, 388c.
3 Plato, Philebus 48a-50a.
5 Plato, Republic 388e-389a.
6 Aristotle, Poetics 5.
7 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics IV, 8.
10 Spencer 1860.
11 Freud 1990.
12 See Morreal 2009 and Richards 2013.
13 Kant 1987, 203.
14 Kant 1987, 204.
15 Schopenhauer 1958.

Bibliography


