



# Philosophy of Humor

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## Abstract

Humor is a surprisingly understudied topic in philosophy. However, there has been a flurry of interest in the subject over the past few decades. This article outlines the major theories of humor. It argues for the need for more publications on humor by philosophers. More specifically, it suggests that humor may not be a well-understood phenomenon by questioning a widespread consensus in recent publications – namely, that humor can be detached from laughter. It is argued that this consensus relies on a cognitivist account of emotion, one that is open to debate, and that it becomes unclear what sorts of phenomena a theory of humor is supposed to explain when one questions this assumption.

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## 1. Introduction

Humor is a surprisingly understudied topic in philosophy. Joke-telling customs exist across cultures. Comedies are among the best reviewed and highest grossing films. Comedy shows such as, in the United States, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live* play a key role not only in entertaining but shaping citizens' perceptions of current events.<sup>1</sup> Yet surprisingly, little has been written in philosophy on humor.<sup>2</sup> This neglect is partly because of the difficulties involved in defining humor. It is surprisingly difficult to pin down a list of necessary or sufficient conditions for humor.<sup>3</sup> The neglect of humor may also be a result of the fact that it seems to involve less momentous emotions than art forms such as tragedy or melodrama and less rarified esthetic experiences than the beautiful or the sublime. Elements of this bias can be traced back to Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates urges that the guardians should avoid laughter because it undermines rationality and self-control (Plato 58–9). Subsequent philosophers may have ignored humor because they took it to involve childish emotions that do not merit philosophical reflection.

Recently, however, there has been a flurry of interest in humor. A number of noteworthy articles and books were published in the last decade, such as Ted Cohen's *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, in the analytic tradition, and Simon Critchley's *On Humour*, in the continental. The interest in the philosophy of art community in the relation between ethics and aesthetics has also led to several publications on the ethics of humor. In short, humor finally seems to be getting the attention it deserves. My aim in this essay, in turn, is twofold. My first aim is to survey the current literature on humor. My second is to propose some directions for further study. My main claim is that the relative lack of publications by philosophers on humor is a concern; it is indicative that humor is not a well understood phenomenon. To fully defend this claim by mounting a comprehensive assessment of the current literature is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I focus on questioning a single, widely accepted assumption – that humor can be detached from laughter. I suggest that reexamining this consensus exposes a widespread bias in the current literature on humor for cognitivist theories of emotion and, more

importantly, that what phenomena count as instances of humor becomes unclear when we question this bias.

## 2. *The Three Theories of Humor*

It has become customary since the publication of D. H. Monro's *Argument of Laughter* to distinguish three main theories of humor: the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories. Each tries to explain what it means for something to be humorous or what occurs when one perceives something to be humorous.<sup>4</sup> Let me offer a few points of clarification, however, before explaining.

Until fairly recently, philosophers who wrote on humor tended to equate humor with laughter, or, at least, to treat the two as coextensive, with laughter constituting a behavior that expresses one's perception of humor. However, as John Dewey noted in 'The Theory of Emotion', it is unclear that there is any necessary connection between the two. We can laugh from being tickled, from breathing nitrous oxide, and from shock without finding anything in our surroundings humorous, and we can find something funny without laughing at it, such as when we smile inwardly at jokes. More recently, then, philosophers have distinguished humor from laughter (LaFollette and Shanks 329; Carroll, 'Humour' 346; Smuts, 'Humor'). Laughter, the current wisdom runs, is a set of *bodily states* that culminate in specific vocal patterns (see Provine 55–97). Humor is an *amusing cognitive activity* that occurs in response to certain stimuli.

There is an ambiguity although as to whether the three theories should be understood as theories of *humor*, theories of *laughter*, or theories of *both* phenomena. Some have held that they should cover both phenomena. For example, Morreall notes that the incongruity theory may be an adequate theory of humor but faults it for not applying to all laughter situations (19). The more common view is that the three theories are best understood as theories of humor – theories that try to shed light on what it means to find something to humorous (LaFollette and Shanks 329; Carroll, 'Humour' 346; Smuts, 'Humor'). For now, I will follow what I take to be the consensus position in presenting these three theories as theories of humor. Later, I will return to whether humor can be detached from laughter.

A second point of clarification: one reason for the recent interest in humor is the more general interest in the relation between art and ethics. There have been several publications over the past decade on what it means for art to be immoral and whether artworks can be immoral yet artistically successful. Many have found humor useful for reflecting on parallel questions. For example, what does it mean for a joke to be immoral? Is it possible for a joke to be saliently immoral yet uproariously funny? Indeed, commentators sometimes invoke cases of morally controversial humor as evidence for positions in the art and morality debate. For example, Daniel Jacobson argues for immoralism with respect to art – the view that moral flaws can contribute to artistic success – by identifying comedies whose moral flaws seem to contribute to their success as comedies.

It is beyond the scope of this article to survey this literature on the ethics of humor. Suffice it to say that much of it has focused on two questions. First, what does it mean for a joke to be unethical? Second, can moral flaws contribute to humor or do they necessarily detract from it? Much of the scholarship on the first question has focused on how jokes require listeners to fill in background assumptions in order to get them. Some have argued that racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive jokes can be unethical in virtue of the attitudes listeners are required to possess in order to get them (Cohen, 'Jokes'; de Sousa 'When is it Wrong to Laugh?').<sup>5</sup> An alternative view, developed by Matthew Kieran, claims that a

joke's morality is determined by the emotions its teller expresses through it. Kieran's approach differs from the previous one in that he points out that the same joke can be used to express different emotions in different contexts, and it is these emotions, such as whether a joke's teller evinces maliciousness in telling it, that determine its morality (Kieran, 'Art, Morality and Ethics'). With respect to the second question, some of the most interesting work has been done by Berys Gaut, who argues that ethical considerations influence but do not determine humorousness (Gaut, 'Just Joking'). More specifically, Gaut's ethicism claims that moral flaws necessarily detract from humor. A criticism of this view is that there are cases where a joke's immorality seems to contribute to its being funny, such as dirty jokes. However, Smuts has recently argued that these arguments for 'comic immoralism' are unpersuasive because they do not explain how moral flaws can render a joke more funny than it would otherwise be, whereas proponents of ethicism have a straightforward explanation for how they detract from humor by inhibiting listeners' amusement (Smuts, 'Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?').

While it is beyond the scope of this article to survey this literature, it is important to note it as one of the key inspirations for the recent surge in interest in humor, and it is highly recommended as one of the areas in philosophy where some of the most interesting ideas about humor are being developed.

## 2.1. SUPERIORITY THEORIES

The first theory of humor is the superiority theory. It holds that humor involves a pleasing realization of one's superiority to some other being. This theory can be traced back to Plato's *Philebus*, in which he explains that the laughable person is one who exhibits some vice but is unaware of this flaw. (For vivid illustrations one need only think of David Brent on the British version of *The Office* or Michael Scott on the US version.) Hobbes is typically credited with penning the canonical formulation of the superiority theory. 'I may therefore conclude', he writes, 'that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising in some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly' (Hobbes 46). Humor involves a feeling of pride, then, that occurs when one compares oneself to others and finds oneself superior in some way. It is not difficult to find examples to illustrate this view. One thinks of the gamut of jokes that target some group for ridicule: Polish jokes, Irish jokes, blonde jokes, fat jokes, and so forth.

One objection to this theory is that there are cases where one does not find amusement in one's superiority but in one's ridiculousness (Critchley 93–111; Solomon). An example that comes to mind for the author of this essay is the blog 'Stuff White People Like', a series of satirical reports on things enjoyed by white North Americans – a list that includes coffee, breakfast places, indie music, and Portland, Oregon.<sup>6</sup> Many readers find this blog humorous, presumably, because it so accurately lampoons them. (Indeed, the author of this essay, a white male, wrote parts while sipping coffee at a breakfast spot in Portland and listening to indie music!)

To be fair, Hobbes acknowledges that one can *retroactively* find humor in one's flaws. The 'sudden glory' characteristic of humor can be triggered by recognizing our current superiority in 'comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly'. Nonetheless, it is unclear that this concession allows him to dodge the criticisms made by critics such as Solomon and Critchley, who persuasively argue that there are cases where we enjoy humor because it mocks our *current* ridiculousness, the ridiculousness we exhibit in our ongoing, day-to-day lives. Is it really the case, to take my earlier example, that I

find ‘Stuff White People Like’ humorous because it lampoons clichéd interests and behaviors that *formerly* characterized my life, or do I find it funny because each week the author manages to expose yet another way in which I resemble such clichés?

Some proponents of the superiority theory have replied by admitting that one can find humor in one’s present shortcomings but that in such cases there is still a kind of doubling of oneself. One can laugh at oneself but in doing so one distances oneself from oneself (Rapp). I find humor in those aspects of myself that can be reduced to clichés when I laugh at ‘Stuff White People Like’, but I also separate off another part, the part that does the laughing. This self-distancing may explain why we turn to dark comedies to cope with challenging situations. A proponent of the superiority theory would suggest that morbid humor which makes light of taboo or controversial subjects allows us to distance ourselves from them and, in doing so, allow us to elevate ourselves above them.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, there are flaws in this theory.<sup>8</sup> The most obvious objection is that there are cases of humor that have nothing to do with issues of superiority or ridicule. Morreall gives an example of finding a bowling ball in a refrigerator (12–13); one can imagine finding it funny to unexpectedly discover a bowling ball in one’s refrigerator, but it would be strange to think that one thereby intuits one’s superiority to a cold plastic sphere. Nor is it clear that the superiority theory applies to many puns. Consider the following: *The man who fell into the upholstery machine is now fully recovered*. Do we really find this pun funny because it leads us to delight in our superiority to the victims of upholstery accidents? Isn’t it rather humorous because it toys in a novel way with the double meaning of ‘recovered’?

## 2.2. INCONGRUITY THEORIES

Such shortcomings have led many to endorse the incongruity theory, versions of which can be found in Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard. The incongruity theory claims that humor involves delighting in a departure from some regularity or norm. Kant writes that in ‘everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd,’ and he proposes that laughter is ‘*an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*’ (177). For Kant, humor occurs when our recognition of some incongruity elicits a mixed response, a ‘strained expectation’ that dissipates ‘into nothing’. One reads the above pun, for example, assuming that ‘recovered’ refers to the victim’s health, but then one glimpses a second interpretation, one that diverges from the likely meaning of ‘recovered’, according to which the man was enveloped in upholstery, and, finally, the conflict between these interpretations ‘dissipates’ when realizes that the point of the pun is to elicit both.

There is debate among incongruity theorists over whether it is the expectation generated by incongruities (Hartz and Hunt), the relief that occurs when this expectation is resolved (Kulka), or the ‘flicker’ between these states (Morreall, LaFollette and Shanks) that is central to humor. Also, one’s perception of something’s being incongruous is widely recognized to be not a sufficient but only a necessary condition for humor. For example, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* famously shocked audiences when it was released because the character played by its biggest star, Janet Leigh, was murdered early in the film and, indeed, at the moment in which she had become most sympathetic to audiences (after resolving to return the money she had stolen from her employers). Clearly, although, it does not follow that *Psycho* is humorous simply because it surprised viewers by violating their expectations. Finally, several have noted that the incongruity in question must elicit the right sort of emotional response. Incongruities inspire anxiety in

horror films and thrillers (Hartz and Hunt 300; Carroll, 'Horror and Humor'), and they trigger problem-solving in riddles (Carroll, 'Humour' 350). The incongruity theory claims, then, that when one perceives something to be humorous one perceives it to be incongruous in some way and that one relates to this incongruity as a source of amusement rather than anxiety or as requiring problem-solving.

The incongruity theory has several advantages. Most importantly, it explains forms of humor not covered by the superiority theory. We enjoy puns because they toy with linguistic norms. We enjoy impersonations because they involve one person assuming the voice and mannerisms of another. We enjoy surreal humor because it presents us with raw incongruities in the form of absurdities. We enjoy dirty jokes because they violate social norms. Often, humor is performed by comedians with unusual physical features, such as clowns, comedians who dress eccentrically (Pee Wee Herman, Carrot Top), overweight comedians (John Candy, Chris Farley), short comedians (Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Woody Allen), or comedy duos in which the straight man's normality is used to accentuate the funny man's eccentricity (Martin and Lewis, Abbott and Costello). Finally, we enjoy 'meta-jokes' because they toy with the conventions of joke-telling itself. Consider how the following joke, for example, violates a convention of 'Knock knock' jokes, which is to pun on the answer given to the question 'Who's there?':

Knock knock.  
Who's there?  
*Non sequitur.*  
*Non sequitur* who?  
Rain.

The explanatory reach of the incongruity theory has led many to defend it as the best theory of humor. Variations have been defended by Koestler, Clark, Raskin, Kulka, LaFollette and Shanks, and Hartz and Hunt. Morreall admits that it may explain all cases of humor. Smuts calls it the 'reigning theory of humor'. Even Levinson, who is skeptical of aspects of it, admits that 'no account of humor can fail to accord [incongruity] a special status' (566).

There are objections though to this theory. First, there seem to be cases where we find something funny even though it is predictable. An example is the Comedy Lecture skit by Monty Python, in which a professor lectures on the history of comedy while his assistants illustrate by tripping each other and hitting each other with boards.<sup>9</sup> This skit is amusing even though its slapstick is announced ahead of time. To be sure, there are incongruous moments: one expects Michael Palin to slip on the banana peel when demonstrating the impact of colonization on the 'precipitation jape' instead of picking it up and grinding it into Terry Jones's chest. Nonetheless, the expected slapstick is no less funny for the fact that it is expected than these incongruous moments. Similarly, practical jokes amuse those who play them only when they culminate in results that the pranksters methodically plotted out ahead of time.

A related worry is that the incongruity theory cannot explain humor's longevity. Many jokes amuse even after repeated retellings. Why do we continue to find them funny after their incongruities no longer surprise us? It seems to be an important feature, too, of the culture of humor that we do not simply hear jokes but *reiterate* them. We often do not simply laugh at comedy sketches; we reenact them among friends. (Consider how rehearsing lines from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is *de rigueur* among gamers some 35 years after it was released!) If humor is triggered by unexpected incongruities, why do friends and families go on laughing at the same anecdotes for decades at a time?

Proponents of the incongruity theory have replies to these criticisms. Some argue that a new incongruity must become available on repeat performances of a joke or comedy sketch for it to continue to be found humorous (Morreall 50). I may be amused by the clash between the professor's highbrow lecture and the slapstick being performed the first few times I watch the Comedy Lecture skit, but once its novelty has worn off I must find some new incongruity, such as that between the pain being inflicted on Jones and his deadpan performance.

Others argue that these criticisms confuse the claim that humor is triggered by *incongruities* with the claim that it is triggered by *unexpected incongruities*.<sup>10</sup> My *non sequitur* joke may no longer surprise me given how often I have told it, but I can still appreciate how it toys with joke-telling conventions. To find something funny, then, one only needs to appreciate how it is incongruous with some set of expectations. One could argue, in turn, that pranks and physical comedy are not counterexamples. Typically, we avoid situations where people are hurt or made to look foolish. Physical comedy and pranks amuse because they depict (slapstick comedy) or create actual instances (practical jokes) of such (hopefully) anomalous situations. Thus, even if the prankster methodically plots her prank, and waits on pins and needles to see it unfold as planned, her aim is to create an incongruous situation. (Indeed, the fact that practical jokes create such taboo situations explains why customs exist that serve to regulate them by restricting them to specific times when it is okay to engage in them, such as April Fool's Day.)

One could argue, however, that the incongruity theory succeeds only because it never specifies what counts as a humorous incongruity (Carroll, 'Humour' 351). Consider the range of things it upholds as humor-inspiring incongruities: puns, physical spectacles, conceptual mistakes, stereotypes, odd sounds, *non sequiturs*, breaches of social etiquette, surreal situations, impersonations, facial expressions, etc. One begins to wonder if anything can count as a humorous incongruity.<sup>11</sup> Incongruity theorists point to the fact that many comedians have abnormal physical characteristics as evidence for their theory. Yet they can also argue that successful attractive comedians, such as Dane Cook and Sarah Silverman, support their theory by violating this norm. The incongruity theorist claims that comedians typically produce humor by telling jokes or narrating stories that lead audiences to imagine incongruities, but she can also argue that *avante garde* comedians who do not follow this practice, like Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman, support her theory by violating it. In short, it can seem as though anything and everything will count as evidence for this theory since one can always find some pattern or norm that is incongruous with any purported case of humor.

### 2.3. RELIEF THEORIES

The final theory of humor is the relief theory. The relief theory associates humor with processes by which we release pent up mental energy. Herbert Spencer and Freud are typically cited as the leading proponents of this theory. Spencer associates humor with a discharge of nervousness that occurs through the physiological processes characteristic of laughter. Freud offers a more complex formulation of this view in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, where he distinguishes ways in which different types of jokes release tensions generated by the mind's efforts to inhibit impulses toward nonsense, childish playfulness, and displays of aggression and sexuality.

The relief theory has been criticized on several grounds. Some claim that it assumes a dubious view of the mind – one that posits unverifiable, liquid-like psychic forces that become dammed up in the absence of humorous release (Carroll, 'Humour' 352). A



second concern is that we often react to humor too quickly for it to release any pent up mental energy. The relief theory may be applicable to jokes, where a joke's set up instills expectations that are relieved by its punch line, but what about inadvertently humorous remarks? It seems unlikely that we have had the time to build up the requisite tension to be released by this humor (Carroll, 'Humour' 352). Now, one could argue that humor plays a more pervasive role in our lives, such that we are continually building up stress as a result of self-repression, which we periodically release, like mental steam, through humor. Yet this reply has odd implications, such as that more inhibited people should be more likely to joke and to seek out humorous situations since they have greater reserves of stress to be purged, a claim that seems questionable (Smuts, 'Humor').

Let me end with a final word about the three theories. My aim has been to explain them and to rehearse some of the standard arguments for and against them. These theories are often presented as rivals, but, as others have noted (Levinson 566; Smuts, 'Humor'), it is unclear that their inventors saw themselves as elaborating full-blown theories of humor. A single philosopher's claims are often consistent with multiple views. Kant is quoted as defending the incongruity theory, but his depiction of laughter as a 'strained expectation' dissipating 'into nothing' has suggested to some that he defends a relief theory (Levinson 564). Carroll and Smuts link Bergson with the incongruity theory (Carroll, 'Humour' 347) because he equates humor with witnessing something vital and spontaneous behaving as though it were mechanical, whereas Levinson depicts him as a 'superiority theorist' (563) because Bergson thinks that our laughter at this encrustation of the living into the mechanical signals an appreciation of ourselves as vital beings.

It may be more accurate, therefore, to view the three theories not as full-blown theories but as more informal reflections – reflections that may be true of some humorous situations but not others. Reading them this way may have beneficial consequences. The tendency in recent work on humor has been to focus on the conceptual question, 'What is humor?' As a result, interesting questions, which were raised in passing by figures such as Aristotle and Bergson, have gone ignored. For example, is humor distinctive to humans? Can some animals appreciate humor? Is humor a uniquely social phenomenon? Why do we rarely laugh when we are alone but often laugh in the company of others? Are judgments about humor more objective or less objective than other sorts of esthetic judgments? Is producing humor dissimilar to the experience of consuming it, and, if so, do we need not a single theory of humor but theories for each experience? One benefit of acknowledging that earlier philosophers did not hope to fully define humor is that it may free commentators up to reflect on a greater range of questions raised by their writings.

### 3. *Humor Versus Laughter: Or, What Are We Talking About Anyway?*

Let me end by suggesting some shortcomings in the current literature. Perhaps, the most surprising feature of the current philosophic scholarship on humor is how little there is. Humor tends to be discussed only in passing in the works typically quoted as canonical examples of the major theories, such as Kant's brief remarks in the *Critique of Judgment*. More extensive monographs, such as Bergson's *Laughter*, Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, or Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, have been authored by figures whose status as philosophers is debatable. This is not to say that their writings are superficial or are of lesser philosophic significance than those of academic philosophers but merely that the lack of publications by philosophers is surprising given humor's ubiquity and significance in everyday life. Given that it is difficult to watch television without

seeing a sitcom or a commercial for a sitcom, given that studies show that we laugh multiple times each day, and given the penchant of philosophers for finding opportunities to debate over the most hairsplitting distinctions, one would expect to find more publications by them on humor.

This dearth can be seen even in more recent publications. I noted that there has been a surge in publications on humor over the past few decades. Much of this scholarship though has been confined to journal-length articles or to survey articles and encyclopedia entries, which, while insightful, do not seek to elaborate comprehensive philosophies of humor. Recently published monographs, such as Critchley's *On Humour* and Cohen's *Jokes*, have been fairly short (132 and 99 pp), considerably shorter than, for example, recent monographs on horror, such as Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* or Cynthia Freeland's *The Naked and the Undead* (256 and 320 pp). It is far from clear that humor plays any less significant a role in contemporary culture than horror, but it has yet to receive the sustained, rigorous analysis that horror has received in such works.<sup>12</sup>

This dearth is not in itself a problem. After all, little may be written about humor, but it could all be very good. The lack of publications on humor would be significant only if it is symptomatic of a primitive understanding of the subject. Are there signs, then, not simply that there has been *little* published on humor *but not enough*?

I believe there are, although I wish to emphasize in making this suggestion that I do not intend to be dismissive of the current scholarship on humor. Recent publications on humor are rich and insightful. Nonetheless, one gets the impression that philosophers have only begun to grapple with some foundational questions about it. First, as I noted earlier, it is not clear that the three theories of humor are full-blown theories as opposed to more informal reflections. Second, a number of puzzles raised by empirical studies of humor have yet to be addressed in much detail by philosophers. Consider studies of gender and humor. Studies show that men are more likely to produce humor in conversation but women are more likely to consume it. When women converse with men, they produce 126% more laughter in response to purported instances of humor than male interlocutors (Provine 28). These studies raise interesting puzzles about the nature of humor. Do men and women experience it differently? Are our current theories biased in favor of men's experiences? Do women's experiences suggest the need for an alternative, fourth theory of humor? Also, is the experience of creating humor the same as that of consuming it? Does the term 'humor' refer to one phenomenon or to two distinct phenomena? So far, however, such questions have received relatively little attention by philosophers.

I present these observations not as criticisms of the current literature on humor, which is insightful, but as signs that it is incomplete – that more needs to be written on the subject. Clearly, it is beyond the scope of this essay to defend this proposal by mounting anything like a comprehensive appraisal of the current literature on humor. I want to confine myself, therefore, to discussing one example where it may be mistaken and where this oversight is symptomatic, I argue, of deeper uncertainties about the nature of humor itself.

I noted earlier that there is widespread consensus that there is no necessary connection between humor and laughter.<sup>13</sup> Conceptually, the two seem to be distinct, and, empirically, one can find cases where laughter occurs without humor and *vice versa*. According to the current wisdom, then, laughter is a set of bodily states that can occur in conjunction with humor but need not, whereas humor is an amusing cognitive activity. I suggest, however, that commentators have been too quick to detach the two.

For the purpose of brevity, I will assume that the incongruity theory is widely accepted as the best of the three theories, and I will focus on it in presenting my arguments. My



aim although is not to fault this theory as such but to question the more general tendency to equate humor with cognitive activities that are distinguishable from the bodily states that occur when we laugh. It seems to me that our current thinking on humor presumes something like a cognitivist theory of emotion; humor is considered to be an affective state, one characterized by amusement, that expresses one's appraisal that something is incongruous. However, there are cases where people experience humorous amusements yet do not appear to have engaged in such appraisals. These cases do not necessarily refute either the incongruity theory or a cognitivist account of humor, but they do raise questions about them. More importantly, I suggest that these cases are better explained by a perceptual theory of emotion that associates emotion with internally registering that one is experiencing certain bodily states. Finally, it seems to me that the rivalry between these two explanatory approaches reveals deeper uncertainties about the nature of humor itself. For if I am not mistaken, what theory of emotion one endorses will shape what one accepts as instances of humor and thus one's intuitions about the range of phenomena a theory of humor should be able to explain.

So, why should we think that laughter and humor are intimately connected? Again, the current consensus is that humor is an amusing cognitive activity that is distinguishable from the bodily states that occur when we laugh. However, it is unclear that humor is best thought of as a cognitive activity, for there seem to be cases where people experience it even though they lack the cognitive abilities needed to make the appraisals that are supposedly essential to it. For example, infants find things in their surroundings funny long before they possess the cognitive abilities needed to appraise them as being incongruous. They laugh at funny sounds, such as squeaky voices, months after being born, and they laugh at physical comedy by age one. Yet it seems counterintuitive to think that they can appraise how funny sounds diverge from normal speech patterns or how physical comedy depicts anomalous social or physical spectacles.

Now, one could deny that infants and young children can experience humor as opposed to mere laughter (LaFollette and Shanks). However, this denial invites Occam's-razor-type objections. Consider a case where I watch Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* with a young child and find myself laughing at Keaton's slapstick with her. The incongruity theory would claim that I experience humorous amusement because I appreciate how his slapstick depicts uncommon social and physical spectacles. Yet it would be implausible to apply this explanation to the child's behavior prior to a certain point in her maturity. Instead, the incongruity theory would liken the child's laughter to something more like a tickle-response – an involuntary twitching accompanied by pleasurable sensations that are triggered by Keaton's slapstick. This explanation seems forced, although, given that her behavior is not substantially different from my own. She is not involuntarily writhing in laughter but, like me, observing and reacting to Keaton's pratfalls. To be sure, I can appreciate subtleties that are lost on her. However, it seems as though we are sharing in roughly the same experience. Denying that the child's laughter expresses humorous amusement seems to lead, therefore, to a situation where multiple hypotheses are needed to explain the same phenomenon: one story is needed to explain my laughter whereas a second is needed to explain the child's, despite the fact that the two seem to be instances of the same phenomenon.

Now, one could object that even young children can have expectations that are violated by Keaton's physical comedy. A 5-year-old viewer may have less sophisticated expectations than me, but she can still appreciate how Keaton's physical comedy involves uncommon behaviors. This explanation seems less persuasive, however, the less developed the child in question happens to be. It could be the case that 5 years old has been

acculturated to the point where he or she can appreciate how Keaton's physical comedy violates certain expectations, but is it plausible to think that a 1-year old who laughs at me when I perform pratfalls can formulate such expectations? If not, then it seems as though the same Occam's-razor-type concerns can be raised with respect to infant and child laughter; one hypothesis is needed to explain the infant's laughter at my pratfalls whereas another is needed to explain the child's laughter at Keaton's. A more parsimonious explanation would be that an infant who laughs at my pratfalls, a child who laughs at Keaton's physical comedy, and myself when I laugh at this same comedy all experience the same thing, humorous amusement, but that humorous amusement need not be as cognitively laden as the incongruity theory claims.

Empirical studies of humor also confirm that one can experience humor in the absence of cognitive appraisals. In *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, Provine discusses a study by Gazzaniga and LeDoux on a split-brained neurosurgery patient, PS, who could respond to verbal commands presented to either hemisphere but could only describe left hemisphere stimuli (Provine 53). Gazzaniga and LeDoux report that PS would laugh when his right hemisphere was given the printed command 'laugh' but would attribute his laughter to humorousness on the part of his researchers when asked to explain it. In short, he seemed to recognize that what he was feeling was humorous amusement even though he could not identify anything incongruous in his researchers' conduct.

There seems to be a cognitive bias, then, in our current thinking about humor. The consensus is that humor is an amusing cognitive activity – one that involves our judging the object of humor to be incongruous with some set of expectations. However, the above cases show that one can experience humor in the absence of such appraisals. Moreover, they suggest that undergoing certain internal states that register bodily changes may be more crucial to humor. The subject of Gazzaniga's and LeDoux's study recognized that he was feeling humorous amusement even though he did not construe anything in his surrounding to be incongruous. Instead, the researchers' command led him to undergo certain bodily states that registered in him as humorous amusement. Similarly, my belief that the child and I both experience humorous amusement when we watch Buster Keaton seems to be grounded in the recognition that his slapstick triggers similar bodily states in us rather than in the conviction that we are formulating similar judgments about how his conduct diverges from a specific set of expectations.

Indeed, one could argue that it is only by gauging whether a comedy succeeds in eliciting such states that one can determine if it is humorous. Presumably, one can recognize that something is a form of comedy without laughing at it. Yet can I recognize that a joke *is in fact funny* without experiencing *to some degree* the bodily sensations one undergoes when one laughs, albeit perhaps in more etiolated forms than what occurs in full-blown laughter? Suppose you do not find my knock-knock joke about *non sequiturs* funny. Presumably, you were able to recognize that it is a joke based on its use of the conventions of knock-knock jokes. You could also get its punch line without finding it funny. That is, you could recognize how it toys with these conventions, how it is incongruous with them, yet not find it amusing. What seems to be needed to find it funny is that it trigger certain *feelings* in you – that it lead you to experience feelings of mirth.

Now, one could argue that I am attacking a straw man. I make it sound as though the incongruity theory claims that humor is purely a cognitive act when it clearly states that there is an affective component as well. To find something humorous, one must undergo a certain emotional response, one of amusement, triggered by one's apparent detection of an incongruity. The incongruity theory can accept the claim, therefore, that one cannot find a joke funny until it triggers this emotion. It simply states that this response is

expressive of one's construing something to be incongruous. Moreover, why should we think that this emotion necessarily involves the urge to laugh? It may be true that I must experience feelings of mirth to find the knock-knock joke funny, but why conclude that I can only have such feelings if my respiration changes, my facial muscles tighten, my larynx constricts, and my endorphin levels change?

There is a certain legitimacy to these criticisms. Let me clarify, therefore, what I take my earlier examples to show and where I may be making debatable assumptions. My earlier examples expose a flaw in the incongruity theory inasmuch as they show that it is possible to experience humor without detecting an incongruity. More generally, they suggest that there is a tendency to overestimate the conceptual prerequisites of humor. Finally, they seem to show that what is essential to humor is experiencing certain feelings or emotions – what I am calling 'feelings of mirth' or 'the emotion of humorous amusement'. If one grants that infants and young children can experience humor, and that brain surgery patients accurately self-report when they claim to experience it, then it seems as though what is essential to humor is not that one make certain appraisals but that one feel certain feelings.

Now, what is meant by 'feelings of mirth' or 'the emotion of humorous amusement' is, I admit, vague, and I do make the assumption that the best way to explain this phenomenon is in terms of one's internal experience of certain bodily states. I also make the assumption that laughter provides a reasonable starting point for identifying the bodily states that typify humorous amusement. Here, I want to be careful to discourage overly reductive interpretations of this claim. It could be the case that several highly complex sets of bodily states internally register as humorous amusement, and it may not be possible to parse them down into anything like a list of necessary or sufficient conditions. My suggestion is simply that the best way to explain how it is that people can seemingly experience humor in the absence of cognitive appraisals is by associating humorous amusement with certain somatic states, and I propose that laughter provides us with an initial, paradigmatic example of these states. It is in this sense that humor may not be separable from laughter.

Put another way, my argument does assume the truth of something like a somatic or a perceptual theory of emotion of the type Jesse Prinz elaborates in *Gut Reactions*. It seems to me that a perceptual theory provides us with the best explanation of my earlier cases – of how infant children and brain surgery patients can experience humor. This is an assumption on my part. The point I would make though is that incongruity theories make a similar assumption in presuming cognitivist theories of emotion. Incongruity theories claim that humor is an affective state of amusement that expresses one's assessment that the object of humor is incongruous with some set of expectations. This claim seems plausible enough, for it seems to be a ubiquitous feature of comedies that they involve incongruities. Nonetheless, the fact that a cognitivist theory of emotion is being assumed can be seen in the tendency to try to detach humor from laughter and to dismiss potential counterexamples as instances of *mere laughter* rather than cases where one experiences humorous amusement.

Consider the following case. I am on a road trip with my wife. She is driving. She laughs at something, and I laugh with her, enjoying the moment, even though it is unclear what has inspired her laughter. She then describes a humorous bumper sticker she saw on a car she was passing. We both laugh at the sticker. I take it to be uncontroversial that we both experience humorous amusement the second time we laugh – when we both laugh at the sticker's witicism. According to the current consensus, though, only my wife experiences it the first time. Instead, I experience mere laughter, which,

presumably, is similar to a yawn – a set of bodily states that is contagiously triggered by her laughter. Yet why draw this conclusion? My laughter may be contagiously triggered by my wife's laughter. Yet it seems inaccurate to liken it too closely to a yawn, for it is not as though I am spontaneously overcome with a fit of laughter without being able to identify its source. I recognize that it is inspired by something in my wife's field of vision, and I seem to be laughing with her at this stimulus even though I do not yet know what it is.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, what I experience the first time I laugh could *feel* no different to me than what I experience the second time. It may be the case that I will feel more amusement when my wife describes the sticker, but it could also be the case that I will feel less, that it won't strike me as being as funny as she found it, or it could be the case that my amusement will remain the same. In those cases, therefore, where it remains the same, why not conclude that in both instances I experience the same emotion, humorous amusement, twice but that the incongruity theory is wrong to think that detecting an incongruity is a necessary condition for experiencing it?

To be clear: I do not mean to claim that this case proves that the incongruity theory is wrong. Rather, I present it to illustrate how this theory, and perhaps our current thinking about humor more generally, assumes a cognitivist account of emotion. If you believe that one can only feel humorous amusement if one has effectively made certain appraisals (that the object of humor is incongruous, that one is superior to the object of humor), then you will feel obliged to dismiss my first round of laughter as *mere laughter* rather than as expressing humorous amusement. But if you uphold a different theory of emotion, one that associates emotions with one's internally registering certain bodily states, this move will seem unwarranted, and it will strike you as equally reasonable to think that I could have felt humorous amusement in both cases. This ambivalence suggests to me that foundational questions about the nature of humor lurk behind the question of whether it can be detached from laughter. For if I am not mistaken, what theory of emotion you accept shapes what you consider to be instances of humor – the domain of phenomena a theory of humor is supposed to explain. If you are sympathetic to the cognitivist account of emotion that seems to undergird current thinking about humor, then you will dismiss certain laughter scenarios as irrelevant to reflect on humor. If you favor an alternative theory of emotion, one that denies that humor must have such conceptual prerequisites, you will be less likely draw such distinctions between humor and laughter situations more generally. You will be more likely to see humor in more places, such as in the feelings contagiously triggered in us by laugh tracks, infant laughter, or the polite laughter that peppers our day-to-day conversations.

My suggestion, then, is that re-examining the consensus that humor can be distinguished from laughter exposes some deeper uncertainties about the nature of humor itself. First, the consensus that humor can be detached from laughter may turn upon an uncritical acceptance of a cognitivist account of emotion. More importantly, it becomes increasingly unclear what range of phenomena a theory of humor should explain when one questions this assumption. I do not by any means take the arguments in this essay to have settled these questions. Rather, the joint force of them is to simply suggest that these are questions that merit further reflection.

### *Short Biography*

Joshua Shaw received his PhD in philosophy from Indiana University, Bloomington, in 2004. He is the author of *Emmanuel Levinas on the Priority of Ethics: Putting Ethics First* (Cambria, 2008). He has published on topics in philosophy of art in *Hypatia*, *Film-Philosophy*,

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, how Tina Fey's impersonations of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* influenced the last US presidential election. Prior to Fey's impersonations, in September 2008, a *Newsweek* poll found that US voters were evenly divided on whether Palin was qualified to be president. A second poll conducted in October, after Fey's impersonation, found that voters who doubted her qualifications had jumped by 14 points.

<sup>2</sup> Clearly, this is a controversial claim. See the start of the fourth section of this essay for a defense of it.

<sup>3</sup> The best article on this difficulty is Aaron Smuts's entry on humor for the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See this article's Works Cited for more information.

<sup>4</sup> Several commentators have noted that there is a tendency to confuse these two questions: 'What does it mean for something to be humorous?' and 'What occurs when one finds something to be humorous?' See Smuts's 'Humor' for concerns about this tendency. See Levinson's 'Humour' for a discussion about why the two are 'plausibly related' (563).

<sup>5</sup> See also Peter Kivy's 'Jokes are a Laughing Matter' for an interesting variation on this type of analysis. Kivy agrees with Cohen that jokes amuse by requiring audiences to fill in background assumptions. The tendency has been to focus on how jokes can be unethical by drafting people into immoral communities by forcing them to adopt various dispositions or emotions in order to get them. However, Kivy points out how 'inside jokes' can be used to alienate audiences from various communities by subtly suggesting that they lack the relevant background knowledge to belong to the community established by the joke. He reflects, for example, on the inside jokes he overheard at his first APA meeting as an example. Michael Wolf also associates the ethics of joke-telling with the ways in which jokes establish a sense of community in 'A Grasshopper Walks into a Bar: The Role of Humour in Normativity'.

<sup>6</sup> This blog can be found at the following URL address: <<http://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/>>. Technically, Portland, OR, does not appear on it. However, it appears on page 111 of *Stuff White People Like: a Definitive Guide to the Unique Tastes of Millions*, a collection based on this blog. Ironically, the author of this essay discovered that Portland was among top things white people like while visiting friends in Portland.

<sup>7</sup> Critchley criticizes this view, arguing that humor ideally does not lead us to feel elevated above our circumstances but to look upon ourselves with humility – to accept 'the modesty and limitedness of the human condition' (102). There may be a genuine debate between superiority theorists and inferiority theorists, such as Solomon and Critchley. For my purposes, though, it makes sense to treat both as two sides of the same coin; both claim that humor is connected to value judgments involving superiority and inferiority – a claim that distinguishes them from incongruity and relief theorists.

<sup>8</sup> A criticism I do not consider in this essay is that there cases where we find humor in another's *superiority*, such as when we find amusement at the physical prowess of comedians such as Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. See Carroll, 'Humour' 346 for more on his criticism.

<sup>9</sup> This sketch can be found at the following URL address: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seIdHOrUNSS>>.

<sup>10</sup> I am here reading between the lines of claims Robert C. Roberts makes in 'Humor and Virtues' (146) and Hartz and Hunt make in 'The Beauty and the Beast' (300–1). Roberts criticizes Morreall for assuming that one must discover new incongruities to continue to find something humorous. He proposes that the incongruities contained in good humor have a 'freshness' that lets them live on in 'an especially fresh or vivid way'. Hartz and Hunt instead propose that finding something, *x*, humorous only requires one to be 'aware that some specific features of *x* are incongruous with her expectations'. For my purposes, the differences between these two views is less significant than their similarities: both deny that one must discover *new incongruities* to continue to find something humorous, and both argue that humor requires that one be impressed by an *incongruity*, regardless of whether it is expected.



<sup>11</sup> I present this possibility as a criticism of the incongruity theory, but it is worth noting that at least one proponent, Kierkegaard, seems to embrace it. Kierkegaard explains in the 'Crop Rotation' section of *Either/Or* how the esthete can learn to triumph over boredom by cultivating a mindset in which everything she witnesses is seen as humorous. One could argue that it is consistent with the incongruity theory for everything to be humorous, provided one achieves a mindset where one genuinely does view everything as in some sense absurd.

<sup>12</sup> A few caveats are needed here. First, I hasten to add that there are exceptions to this rule, such as Monro's *Argument of Laughter*, which, at 264 pages, is both thorough and well-argued. But the fact that it is difficult to find more than one lengthy philosophic study of humor, let alone one published in the last 50 years, confirms that there is a puzzling dearth of publications on humor in philosophy. Second, I should add that interesting research is being done that links humor with play, and a comprehensive account of humor from the perspective of a 'play theory' may be in development. Smuts notes in his 2006 entry on humor for the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that something like a 'play theory' of humor was then beginning to be developed by researchers who consider humor to be an extension of animal play. Morreall recently published a book, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, that links humor with animal play and promises a comprehensive account of humor. I do not discuss Morreall's book as it was not published when I wrote this article. It may be the case, however, that the general neglect of humor in philosophy may not last much longer.

<sup>13</sup> A notable exception is Levinson (353–6). I do not have the space in this article to survey Levinson's arguments for the impossibility of detaching humor from laughter. However, his arguments, along with studies by Provine, were influential for my thinking in this last section of my essay.

<sup>14</sup> One could argue that the object of my laughter in this case is not the same stimulus as my wife's laughter. My wife is laughing at the bumper sticker whereas I am laughing at her laughter. Imagine a case, however, where it is unambiguous that the object of my laughter is my wife's laughter. Imagine that my wife has a ridiculous-sounding laugh. She laughs at the sticker, but her guffaw is so silly that I laugh at her. It is clear in this case that my laughter expresses humorous amusement at the sound of my wife's laughter. Yet this case is different from the original case described above. In the original case, I am not laughing at my wife, as I am in this second, but laughing with her at whatever has triggered her laughter.

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