

1000-Word PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY

1000wordphilosophy.com/2022/11/20/the-philosophy-of-humor/

The Philosophy of Humor: What Makes Something Funny?

Author: Chris A. Kramer

Category: [Historical Philosophy](#), [Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art](#), [Phenomenology and Existentialism](#), [Ethics](#)

Word Count: 995

People can laugh at almost anything. What's the deal with that? What makes something funny?

This essay reviews some theories of what it is for something to be funny. Each theory offers insights into this question, but no single approach provides a comprehensive answer.

1. The Superiority Theory of Humor

According to the *superiority theory of humor*, funniness results from feeling superior to another person, or at a former version of ourselves, and we laugh *at* them: "Ha! I'm better than you (or former me)!" We look down on the butt of the joke, and by comparison, smugly perceive how different we are from that person.^[1]

Consider laughing at someone who slips on a banana peel. Maybe we laugh because we presume we're better than them; after all, *we* have never slipped on pieces of fruit.^[2]

However, I might feel superior to all sorts of things, such as oysters,^[3] yet not laugh at them. Also, imagine Socrates, who is notoriously ugly, exclaiming to a group of people, "I'm the most attractive man here." That's funny, but there's no obvious assertion of superiority. But imagine *People* magazine's "World Sexiest Man" saying that: that's straightforward superiority, and it isn't very funny.

This reveals, for most scholars of humor, that the superiority theory misses the mark. After all, sometimes things are funny without resulting from superiority, and some feelings of superiority don't make things funny.^[4]

2. The Relief Theory of Humor

Laughter feels good! Maybe this is because laughing releases pent-up pressure. According to the *relief theory of humor*, venting nervous energy is the primary function of laughter; it releases the energy or emotions or thoughts which are deemed inappropriate or unnecessary.^[5]

Consider an example from Sigmund Freud^[6] about a criminal who says, while being led to his execution on a Monday, "Well, this is a good beginning to the week."^[7] Here, tension is built up in the set-up: we feel apprehension or pity for the criminal. When we recognize he's unconcerned about his state, that energy becomes "excess" and is released through laughter. The joking context offers cover to express ourselves about issues we might feel pressure to repress, like death or sex. Since we need not repress those urges here, the superfluous energy is released in laughter.

But sometimes humor doesn't involve built-up energy at all. Consider this joke from Steven Wright: "On the other hand, you have different fingers."^[8] There is no time to induce any sort of mental energy based on the set-up of this joke. There's no time to build up any energy that needs to be released. It's funny independently of any pent-up feelings, so the relief theory of humor can't account for this joke.

3. The Incongruity Theory of Humor

According to the *incongruity theory of humor*, humor results from the sudden recognition of dissonance or incongruence where our expectations had prepared us for something completely different.^[9] The temporary confusion is replaced with humor when we reinterpret the setup and its relation to the punchline. Instead of confusion, there's a kind of resolution, and our reward for getting it is humor.^[10]

The element of surprise cannot be frightening or dangerous, since these create negative emotions that block feelings of amusement. Finding the severed head of your favorite horse in your bed is incongruous, yet few would laugh.

Mere surprise is insufficient for humor.^[11] Consider: "The unfaithful artist heard his wife coming up the stairs. He said to his lover, 'Quick, take off your clothes!'"^[12] On an immediate, superficial reading, we are befuddled by his unexpected and incongruous request. But, we can reinterpret the set-up so it clicks: he's an artist "painting" her, and that

sometimes happens in the nude, so the wife would suspect nothing.^[13] Many simple and amusing riddles rely upon similar forms of ambiguity, such as this: “Why was 6 afraid of 7? Because, 7, 8, 9.” We easily shift between the meaning of *ate* and the phonetically identical numeral *eight*, and enjoy the alternating and incongruous frames of reference.

With humor, we undergo a psychological and conceptual shift “from a serious state of perceiving and thinking about things that fit into our conceptual patterns, to a nonserious state of being amused by some incongruity.”^[14] When we are serious, we are worried when the world is inconsistent with how we expect it to be. When we are playful, the incongruities are enjoyable. This analysis offers the groundwork for an empirically-based study into humor where the degree of incongruity can be tweaked within a laboratory setting, thereby increasing or decreasing the level of humor.^[15]

While most current theorists lean toward some version of the incongruity theory, it has limitations.^[16] The theory best applies to instances of humor that are clearly verbal, where ambiguity, for example, is most easily constructed; but not all humor is verbal. Also, we sometimes enjoy re-experiencing instances of humor, like re-watching a sitcom, where our expectations are *not* violated; indeed we consciously anticipate the impending humor. Finally, the sense of “incongruity” is so broad, including dissonance, contradiction, outright absurdity, that it loses its meaning, making the theory difficult to falsify: the concept of “incongruity” is so elastic, that it can be expanded *ad hoc* to cover any instance of humor, even that which, on the face of it, does not appear to rely on incongruity as such.^[17]

4. Conclusion: It’s Funny, None of These Theories Seem Adequate

Perhaps a combination of these theories can explain what makes something funny. There is little consensus regarding which theory is best, but, like most philosophical conundrums worth thinking about, this is not uncommon.

The philosophy of humor relies on many other philosophical areas, including logic, philosophy of language, aesthetics, and others.^[18] And since humor and laughter are emotions and expressions present in every known society in every time period, is no frivolous endeavor. Failure to find a complete account of what makes something funny might be

because it’s in the early stages of study. Or maybe we just aren’t in on the joke.

Notes

[1] This view was considered by Plato (429?–347 B.C.E.) who worried that our uncontrollable laughter could lead to maliciousness, as one would be more likely to feel and think less of those inferior to them. See Plato’s (1989) *Philebus*, pp. 49–50. It was most famously championed by Thomas Hobbes: “Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (Hobbes 2002 [1651], Part 1 Ch 6).

[2] Indeed, the extensive use of this example seems disproportionate to its occurrence in reality. Even though this example is central for Henri Bergson (1859–1941) (cf. Bergson 1911), and makes it into just about every analysis of humor, including this one, this has probably not happened that often in the history of humanity, or in the ape-world, where bananas are notoriously *appealing*. (Note: what just happened there is called a pun, sometimes deemed the *lowest form of humor*. But some puns can be *fruitful*, like that one, so, clearly, I disagree. Also, where’s the butt in puns? [Note on the note: *if* this note is funny, it is further evidence against the superiority theory of humor, since nothing in this note suggests any superiority on anyone’s part.]

[3] An example from Francis Hutcheson (1987) in response to Hobbes: “Strange!—that none of our Hobbists [nice] banish all canary birds and squirrels, and lap-dogs ... out of their houses, and substitute in their place asses, and owls, and snails, and oysters to be merry upon. From these they might have higher joys of superiority” (p. 29).

[4] Many humor theorists have sought both of these conditions to get at the essence of humor: “Traditionally, theories have taken an ‘essentialist’ approach ... by searching for an essence that is necessarily present in all cases of amusement and the presence of which is sufficient for being a case of amusement” (Roberts 2019, 25). But not everyone thinks there is an essence of humor to be discovered: “I think the best we can do is to explain the ways ‘humor’ and ‘amusement’ have been used, and analyze paradigm cases that fit under most standard usages of these terms. A search for necessary and

sufficient conditions would be futile” (Morreall 2009, 64).

[5] According to Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), our laughter is a physiological release of pent-up energy like in hydraulic systems (Spencer 1860). When there are few channels available, strong feelings of almost any sort lead to the discharge of energy, one being the uncontrollable paroxysms that is laughter. In this way, Jim Holt reminds us, borrowing a bit from the Marquis De Sade, “The objective of sexual congress is to elicit involuntary noisemaking from your partner—which is precisely the objective of humor” (Holt 2008, 66). We also release chemicals beneficial to pain and stress reduction through laughter (see Dunbar et. al. 2012), though Spencer would not have known this.

[6] Speaking of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), he continues the relief hypothesis, but introduces a “psychical” element to describe what is released in laughter, offering an account of humor not explicit in Spencer (Freud 1960). When we suppress thoughts about taboo issues like sex and bodily functions, mental energy is released by a well-crafted joke that would otherwise be needed to censor such inappropriate thoughts. This view is encapsulated by Cicero, though not a Relief theorist: “An indecency decently put is the thing we laugh at hardest.” Quoted in Holt, (Preface). This is also a nice entry into Steven Gimbel’s “cleverness” theory of humor (Gimbel 2017). Briefly, his view is that all humor is intentional, conspicuous, playful cleverness.

[7] Freud 1928, 1. Note, this might be humorous to you, yet fail to evoke any audible laughter (you might be tired, or just inclined to smile), revealing that the latter is not necessary to have the former. Also, one might laugh out of nervousness, laughing gas, or neurosurgeons stimulating a part of your brain forcing a guffaw, but none of these instances are caused by humor. Thus, laughter is also not sufficient for humor.

[8] Quoted in Huemer n.d. Really almost any placid, extraordinarily dry, joke from Wright might stand as a counter-example to the Relief theory. For more on the Relief theory, see Morreall 1983, 20–37; Roberts 2019, 91–93, and Freud 1960. Roberts (2019, 92) and Hurley et. al. (2011, 44) point out the additional concern that “psychic” or “mental” energy is an outdated notion. But, “tension” and “arousal” might be useful in explaining some reactions to humor, they

are simply not necessary for all instances, as the Wright example demonstrates.

[9] See almost anything from Monty Python n.d.

[10] When our expectations are violated in a non-threatening way, we often laugh. According to Arthur Schopenhauer, it is this recognition of dissonance that is necessary for humor: “Amusement, reveals that it is ‘delightful for us to see this strict, untiring, and most troublesome governess, our faculty of reason, for once convicted of inadequacy’ in its attempt to discern a perfectly reasonable universe” (Schopenhauer 1887, 279-80). For more on the mirth-as-reward for catching cognitive, linguistic, or logical errors, see Hurley et al. 2011).

[11] For an overview of this history see Morreall 1983, 1–59; Hurley et al. 2011, 37–56; Buckley 2005, 3–48, and for a defense of an incongruity theory against competing views such as Superiority and Relief/Release theories, see Oring 2003, 1–12; Marmysz 2003, 123–54. Other terms often used as synonyms to define/explain incongruity have been ludicrousness, ridiculousness, the unexpected, contradiction, paradox, absurdity, something inappropriate or inconsistent, logical fallacy, lack of harmony, ambiguity, having parts that do not fit together, etc. That is a lot! Perhaps too much, as we will see.

[12] Marmysz 2003, 136. He adds: “When we laugh at a joke, we do so because we recognize that an unanticipated outcome sensibly completes the story without contradicting our most general assumptions about what the world is like” (Marmysz 2003, 137). But not all incongruity in humor sustains our sense of what is real: “There were two muffins in an oven. First one says ‘Wow, it’s like a sauna in here.’ Second one says, “Oh my God! A talking muffin!”

[13] Immanuel Kant has a version of this approach: “Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). *Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.*” Kant, 1987, Part I, Division 1, Section 54. With Schopenhauer (1887), our reason is flustered by the surprising punchline in a joke, but we are not angered like we would be upon recognizing a lie, though there is often deception in jokes; instead, we are “gladdened” by the jesting, especially if/when there can be a resolution to the initial incongruity, something not clearly captured with Kant’s hypothesis. But Kant connects wit, a

humorous attitude, with “the play of thought”, that cultivates enjoyment of incongruity rather than annoyance. This notion has been extended to connect some humor with philosophical thought experiment. See Gooding (1998, 396), Morreall (2009), and Veale (2015). Thought experiment can be translated as *Gedankenspiel*, thought-play in German. There are many ways from here to study the intersections between intellect and emotion via analyses of humor, making this a fruitful area of study. There are links to the Play theory of humor from an evolutionary lens, in which our capacity to enjoy humor arose out of our inclination to play, as animals play-fight, in a non-threatening, and learning, situation (see Boyd 2004, 6-13 and Hurley et al. 2011, who present an error-detection model of the evolution of humor). Relatedly, there is Steven Gimbel’s (2017) Cleverness theory in which the degree of cleverness in the play of ideas is the necessary element of humor, and must be present whether there is relief, superiority, or incongruity.

[14] Morreall 1983, 38. But “nonserious” does not entail pure frivolity. One can be serious in their play, as with professional musicians and athletes, and one can be playful with serious ideas, as with philosophers and some subversive humorists (see Kramer 2020). John Morreall is largely responsible for making the philosophy of humor a significant field in its own right. Here is more on his brand of Incongruity theory: “1. We experience a *cognitive shift*—a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts. 2. We are in a *play mode* rather than a serious mode, disengaged from conceptual and practical concerns. 3. Instead of responding to the cognitive shift with shock, confusion, puzzlement, fear, anger, or other negative emotions, we *enjoy* it. 4. Our pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in *laughter*, which signals to others that they can relax and play too” (Morreall 2009, 50).

[15] See McGraw and Warner (2014) for the *Benign Violation Theory*. If a rule (usually social/cultural) is flouted but in an innocuous fashion in which no one is harmed or seriously offended (a difficult line to find), the violation is said to be “benign”, and we laugh. If there is no violation, or too strong of one, there is less amusement or none. This is an attempt to test the conditions for humor in a laboratory setting by tweaking the degree of rule violations. This is no easy task, as replicating any findings gets harder each time you introduce new subjects into the study,

and the same subject cannot be used for additional tellings of the same jokes.

[16] See Latta (1999), Hurley et al. (2011) and Gimbel (2017) for more limitations of Incongruity theories.

[17] Contrary to how this sounds, it is not necessarily a positive thing for any theory. At the very least, it renders it non-scientific, as there are no possible mechanisms for demonstrating under what conditions the theory would fail; the meaning of “incongruity” simply gets subtly reinterpreted in an *ad hoc* fashion in order to meet any challenge (see Gimbel 2017, 33–35 for a discussion on this point). This would be like trying to understand something like Freud’s Oedipal Complex, where all young boys pass through a phase in which they desire to kill their father and have sex with their mother. Anytime a boy who vehemently denies such feelings ever occurred to him, this putative counter-evidence is simply repurposed to support the theory: “That is *exactly* what a young man with the Oedipal Complex would say!”

[18] Despite its connection to philosophy more broadly, it was not until 2020 that the first journal devoted to this subject to emerge: *The Philosophy of Humor Yearbook* (Amir n.d.).

References

- Amir, Lydia (Ed.). N.d. *The Philosophy of Humor Yearbook*. DeGruyter.
- Bergson, Henri. 1911. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (trs.), London: Macmillan.
- Boyd, Brian. 2004. “Laughter and Literature: A Play Theory of Humor,” *Philosophy and Literature*, 28: 1–23.
- Buckley, Frank H. 2005. *The Morality of Laughter: A Serious Look at the Meaning of Laughter*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Dunbar, Robin et. al. 2012. “Social laughter is correlated with an elevated pain threshold” in *Proceedings of the Biological Sciences*, 22:279 (1731):1161–7.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1928. “Humour” in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 9: 1–6.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1960. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Gimbel, Steven. 2017. *Isn't that Clever: A Philosophical Account of Humor and Comedy*. New York: Routledge.

Gooding, David. 1998. "Thought Experiments." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 9. Edited by Edward Craig, Taylor and Francis.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. 1651. The Project Gutenberg eBook, Release Date: July 2, 2002 [eBook #3207].

Holt, Tim. 2008. *Stop Me If You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes*. New York: Norton and Company.

Huemer, Michael. "Stephen Wright Jokes." Accessed 19 November 2022. <https://www.owl232.net/wright.htm>

Hurley, Matthew, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams Jr. 2011. *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hutcheson, Frances. 1987. "Reflections Upon Laughter." In *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. John Morreall, New York: Suny. 26–40.

Kant, Immanuel. 1987. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.

Kramer, Chris A. 2020. "Subversive Humor as Art and the Art of Subversive Humor." In *The Philosophy of Humor Yearbook*, Ed. Lydia Amir, Vol. 1, No. 1: 153–179.

Latta, Robert. 1999. *The Basic Humor Process: A Cognitive-Shift Theory and the Case Against Incongruity*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Marmysz, John. 2003. *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

McGraw, Peter and Warner, Joel. 2014. *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Monty Python. "Monty Python." Accessed 19 November 2022. <https://www.montypython.com/>

Morreall, John. 2009. *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Malden MA: Wiley and Sons Ltd.

Morreall, John. 1983. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Oring, Elliot. 2003. *Engaging Humor*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Plato. 1989. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns Eds. Bollingen Series LXXI, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Roberts, Alan. 2019. *A Philosophy of Humour*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1887. *The World as Will and Idea: Volume II*. Trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp. Boston: Ticknor and Company.

Spencer, Herbert. 1860. *The Physiology of Laughter*. London: Macmillan.

Stone, Sophia. 2021. "Why You're Not Worthy: The Superiority Theory of Humor." In *It's Funny 'Cause It's True: The Lighthearted Philosophers' Society's Introduction to Philosophy through Humor*, 31–37. Eds. Henrigillis, Jennifer Marra and Gimbel, Steven. Lighthearted Philosophers' Society. 31–37.

Veale, Tony. 2015. "The Humour of Exceptional Cases: Jokes as Compressed Thought Experiments." In *Cognitive Linguistics and Humour Research*, edited by Geert Brône, Kurt Feyearts, and Tony Veale, Berlin: De Gruyter, 69–90.

Related Essays

[Aesthetics vs. Art](#) by Brock Rough

[Definitions of Art](#) by Brock Rough

[John Stuart Mill on The Good Life: Higher-Quality Pleasures](#) by Dale E. Miller

[Meaning in Life: What Makes Our Lives Meaningful?](#) by Matthew Pianalto

[Happiness: What is it to be Happy?](#) by Kiki Berk

[Camus on the Absurd: The Myth of Sisyphus](#) by Erik Van Aken

[Free Speech](#) by Mark Satta

[Gricean Conversational Implicature: What We Say and What We Mean](#) by Thomas Hodgson

About the Author

Chris Kramer is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Santa Barbara City College. His interests intersect across the philosophy of humor, mind, religion, informal logic, existentialism and phenomenology, and oppression. He wrote his dissertation on "Subversive Humor." half about humor, half about oppression. Readers will laugh and cry, but mostly cry, mostly because they are reading a Ph.D. dissertation: what has become of their lives? sbcc.academia.edu/ChrisKramer

*Follow **1000-Word Philosophy**
on **Facebook** and **Twitter** and subscribe to receive
email notifications of new essays
at **1000WordPhilosophy.com**.*