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Humor as Cognitive Play

This article assesses three traditional theories of laughter and humor: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory, and the Incongruity Theory. Then, taking insights from those theories, it presents a new theory in which humor is play with cognitive shifts.

The oldest account of what we now call humor is the Superiority Theory. For Plato and Aristotle laughter is an emotion involving scorn for people thought of as inferior. Plato also objects that laughter involves a loss of self-control that can lead to violence. And so in the ideal state described in his *Republic* and *Laws*, Plato puts tight restrictions on the performance of comedy.

This negative assessment of laughter, humor, and comedy influenced early Christian thinkers, who derived from the Bible a similar understanding of laughter as hostile. The classic statement of the Superiority Theory is that of Thomas

Hobbes, who describes laughter as an expression of »sudden glory«. Henri Bergson's account of laughter in *Le Rire* incorporates a version of the Superiority Theory.

For any version of the Superiority Theory to be correct, two things must be true when we laugh: we must compare ourselves with someone else or with our former selves, and in that comparison we must judge our current selves superior. But neither of these seems to be a necessary feature of laughter or humor. First, not all laughter is about persons, and so there need be no comparison of persons. In an experiment by Lambert Deckers, subjects were asked to lift a series of apparently identical weights. The first several weighed the same, but then the subjects picked up a weight that was much heavier or lighter. Most of them laughed, but not because they were comparing themselves with anyone. Even when what we are laughing about is a person, we need not compare ourselves with that person. We may be amused by a stage comedian doing a perfect impression of some movie star without comparing ourselves with that comedian or the movie star. And even if we do compare ourselves with persons about whom we are laughing, we need not judge ourselves superior to them. They may make us laugh by surprising us with unexpected skills that we lack.

After two millennia in which the Superiority Theory was the only widely accepted account of laughter, the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory emerged in the 18th century. According to the Relief Theory, laughter operates like a safety valve in a steam pipe, releasing built-up nervous energy. Herbert Spencer had a simple version of the theory in which a laughter stimulus evokes emotions but then shows them to be inappropriate. Sigmund Freud had a complex theory in which there are three laughter situations: jokes (*der Witz*), the comic, and humor. In jokes, laughter is a release of psychic energy normally used to repress emotions such as hatred and sexual desire. The psychic energy »saved« in the comic is energy used for thinking. And the energy »saved« in humor is the energy of feeling emotions that are suddenly rendered unnecessary.

The simple version of the Relief Theory in which laughter releases emotions that have been rendered superfluous faces several problems. Our enjoyment of simple wordplay – »If it's feasible, let's fease it« – does not seem to require emotions at all, much less their being rendered unnecessary. Some experiences of amusement, too, seem to depend merely on surprise, as in Deckers' experiment.

Freud's complex theory of jokes, the comic, and humor faces even bigger challenges. There is no systematic way to sort laughter situations into his three categories. That is why no important theorist of humor after Freud has tried to maintain this distinction. Freud's distinction between three kinds of psychic energy – of repression, of thinking, and of feeling – is also unworkable and does not figure in later theories of humor. Several claims in Freud's account of »the comic«, especially his account of the mechanics of »mimetic representation«, are also counterintuitive.

The Incongruity Theory is the third traditional account of humor. Immanuel Kant, David Hartley, James Beattie, William Hazlitt, Arthur Schopenhauer, and

Søren Kierkegaard had versions of this theory, and in the 20th century it became the most widely accepted theory of humor. The core of this account is that humorous amusement is a reaction to something that violates our mental patterns and expectations. To this we need to add, as Michael Clark does, that in humor, we do not simply *experience* incongruity but *enjoy* it. Even that is not sufficient for humor, however, for we can enjoy incongruity in other ways than amusement, as in the grotesque, the macabre, the horrible, the bizarre, and the fantastic. There is also a more general problem at the heart of the Incongruity Theory: it makes humor look irrational, even psychologically perverse. Indeed, George Santayana and several contemporary psychologists have claimed that adults are not able to enjoy incongruity *per se*.

Before turning to my own theory of humor, I derive from the traditional theories four insights. First, humor is a cognitive phenomenon – it involves perceptions, thoughts, mental patterns, and expectations. Secondly, humor involves a change of cognitive state. Thirdly, that cognitive change is sudden. And fourthly, amusement is pleasurable. To these insights I add three of my own: 1) humor is a non-serious activity in which we suspend practical concern and concern about what is true, 2) humor is primarily a social experience, and 3) humor is a form of play in which laughter serves as a »play signal«. Coining the term *shift* for a sudden change, we can say that humor involves the enjoyment of cognitive shifts.

Putting all these ideas together, I present this theory of humorous amusement:

- A) Someone experiences a *cognitive shift*.
- B) They are in a *play mode*, disengaged from practical and noetic concerns.
- C) Instead of reacting with puzzlement or negative emotions, they *enjoy* the cognitive shift.
- D) Their playful disengagement and their pleasure are expressed in *laughter*, which signals to others that they can relax and enjoy the cognitive shift too.

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