

Humor: Not Just a Laughing Matter

Susan F Goran

Learning Objectives for Class 2: at the end of this session, the learner will be able to:

- Describe how early philosophers perceived feelings regarding laughter led to the superiority theory.
- Provide an example of humor as described in the incongruity theory.
- Discuss which theory of humor best describes your beliefs.

Content Outline: Class 2

- Introduction: Why do we have humor?
- Theories of humor
 - The view from philosophers
 - Little mention of humor
 - Historical negative view of humor leading to first theory
 - Superiority theory: Laugh at others' misfortune
 - Built from a historical perspective: you feel superior
 - Critiques of superiority theory
 - Evolutionary Theory
 - Fear grinning
 - Relationships = survival
 - Relief/release theory:
 - Herbert Spencer
 - Sigmund Freud
 - Gallows humor
 - Medical profession
 - During war
 - Holocaust
 - Incongruity theory
 - People laugh at the juxtaposition of incompatible concepts and at defiance of their expectations—that is, at the incongruity between expectations and reality.
 - What the philosophers said

- Critique of the theory
- Play theory: what function does humor play in human life
 - Humor as an extension of animal play
 - Laughter as a play signal
 - Critique: differences between laughter & play
- Benign Violation: You think something is threatening or wrong but are OK with what went down
 - Builds on incongruity theory
 - Humor results when a person simultaneously recognizes both that an ethical, social or physical norm has been violated and that this violation is not very offensive, reprehensible or upsetting.
 - Simultaneity: You hold conflicting interpretations, ideas, or beliefs
 - Levity can also partly be a product of distance from a situation: humor is tragedy plus time
- Summary for class 2

References for Class 2: Humor Theories

- Bryant GA, Fessler DMT, Fusaroli R, et al. (2018). The Perception of Spontaneous and Volitional Laughter Across 21 Societies. *Psychol Sci.* 29(9):1515-1525. doi: 10.1177/0956797618778235.
- Dunbar RIM., (2022). Laughter and its role in the evolution of human social bonding. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc.* B37720210176. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2021.0176>
- Hardy C. Humor and sympathy in medical practice. *Med Health Care Philos.* 2020 Jun;23(2):179-190. doi: 10.1007/s11019-019-09928-0. PMID: 31637581; PMCID: PMC7259434.
- Morreall, John, "Philosophy of Humor", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>
- <https://iep.utm.edu/humor/>
 - Smuts, Aaron. Humor. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (IEP)
- <https://open.oclearnok.org/whatsfunny/chapter/introduction-the-three-theories-and-beyond/>
 - Perkins, Christopher. (2023). Understanding Humor Historically: An Introduction to the Three Major Theories. *Online Consortium of Oklahoma*

- Ross MD, Owren MJ, Zimmermann E. (2010). The evolution of laughter in great apes and humans. *Commun Integr Biol.*;3(2):191-4. doi: 10.4161/cib.3.2.10944. PMID: 20585520; PMCID: PMC2889984.
- Sabato G. (2019). What's so Funny? The Science of Why we Laugh. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/whats-so-funny-the-science-of-why-we-laugh/> 19 Sep. 2022
- Watson K. Gallows humor in medicine. *Hastings Cent Rep.* 2011 Sep-Oct;41(5):37-45. doi: 10.1002/j.1552-146x.2011.tb00139.x. PMID: 21980898.