

Humor: Not Just a Laughing Matter

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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 therapy.
- Provide an example of humor as described in the incongruity theory.
- Discuss which theory of humor best describes your beliefs.

Assignment for Class 2: Please read the following article and be prepared to discuss your thoughts about the various theories and how they relate to changes in society.

Sabato, Giovanni. "What's so Funny? The Science of Why we Laugh." Scientific American. 26 June 2019, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/whats-so-funny-the-science-of-why-we-laugh/>

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 therapy
 - Evolutionary Theory
 - Fear grinning
 - Relationships = survival
 - Relief/release theory:
 - Herbert Spencer
 - Sigmund Freud
 - Release valve
 - 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

Assignment for Class 3: Please read the following 2 articles in preparation for discussion in class 3:

- <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/healing-benefits-humor-laughter.asp> “The Healing Benefits of Humor & Laughter,” US Department of Veteran’s Affairs. (2024).
- <https://prairie-care.com/resources/type/blog/humor-and-mental-health/> “Why Laughter is Good for Mental Health.” PrairieCare. (2025)

References for Class 2: Humor Theories (For further information)

- 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>
- 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.ocolearnok.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.
- <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>
 - Philosophy of Humor