HUMOR: NOT JUST A LAUGHING MATTER!

Class 2

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CLASS 2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

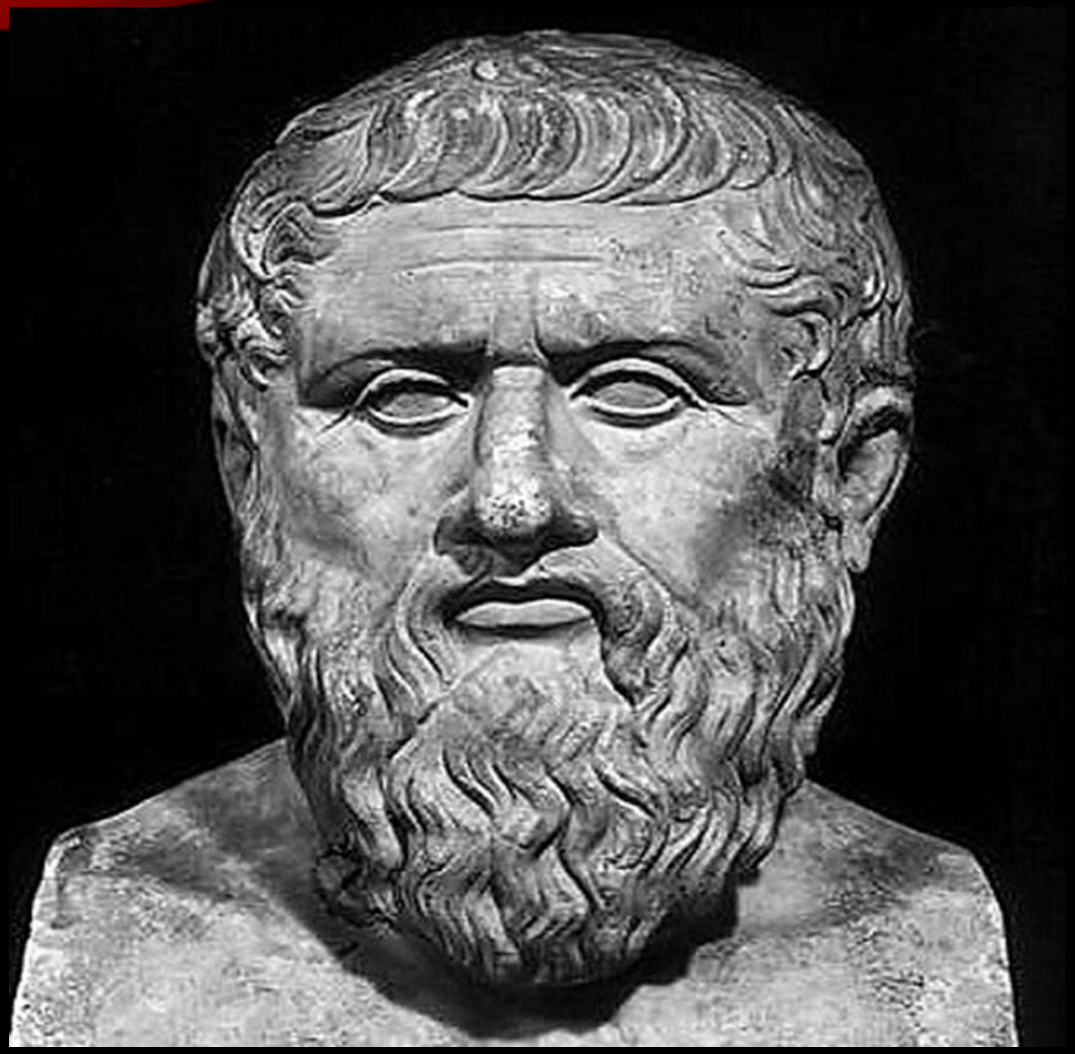
- Describe how early philosophers perceived feelings regarding laughter led to the superiority theory.
- Provide an example of humor as described in the incongruity theory.
- Discuss which theory of humor best describes your beliefs

Is there a common ingredient for all humor?

SEARCHING FOR THE ESSENCE

- Philosophers: Little was said or written
- Word *humor* was not used in its current sense of funniness until the 18th century
  - Henri Bergson's 1900 *Laughter* was the first book by a notable philosopher on humor. (https://philosophicalscraps.wordpress.com/2020/05/21/a-response-to-bergsons-laughter-pt-1/)
    - "Only humans laugh, and that when we laugh, we laugh at other humans or things that in some way remind us of humans"
    - "Here I would point out, as a symptom equally worthy of notice, the ABSENCE OF FEELING which usually accompanies laughter." "To feel strongly about something is to take it "seriously;" to laugh at something or someone is to step away emotionally and find the comic"

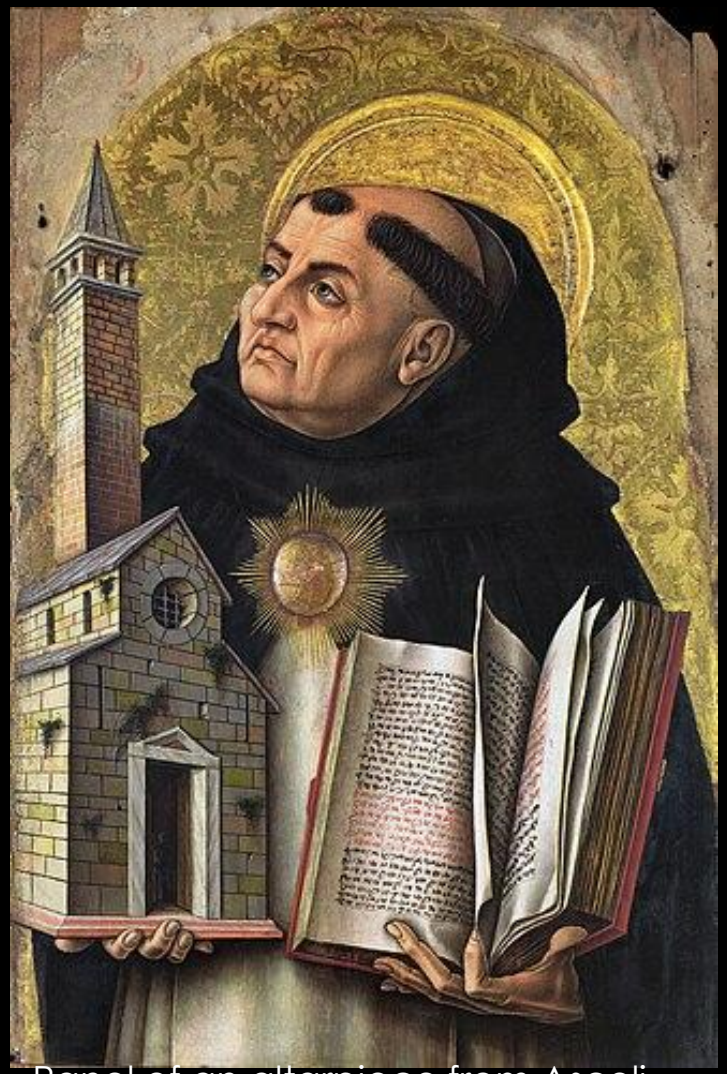
WHAT ABOUT EARLY INFLUENTIAL PHILOSOPHERS?



- The Rule of St. Benedict "prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter; do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter."

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

- Thomas Aquinas (1225-74)
- Humor as virtuous and suggests that humor has social benefits
- "Someone who is never playful or humorous is acting "against reason" and so is guilty of a vice.



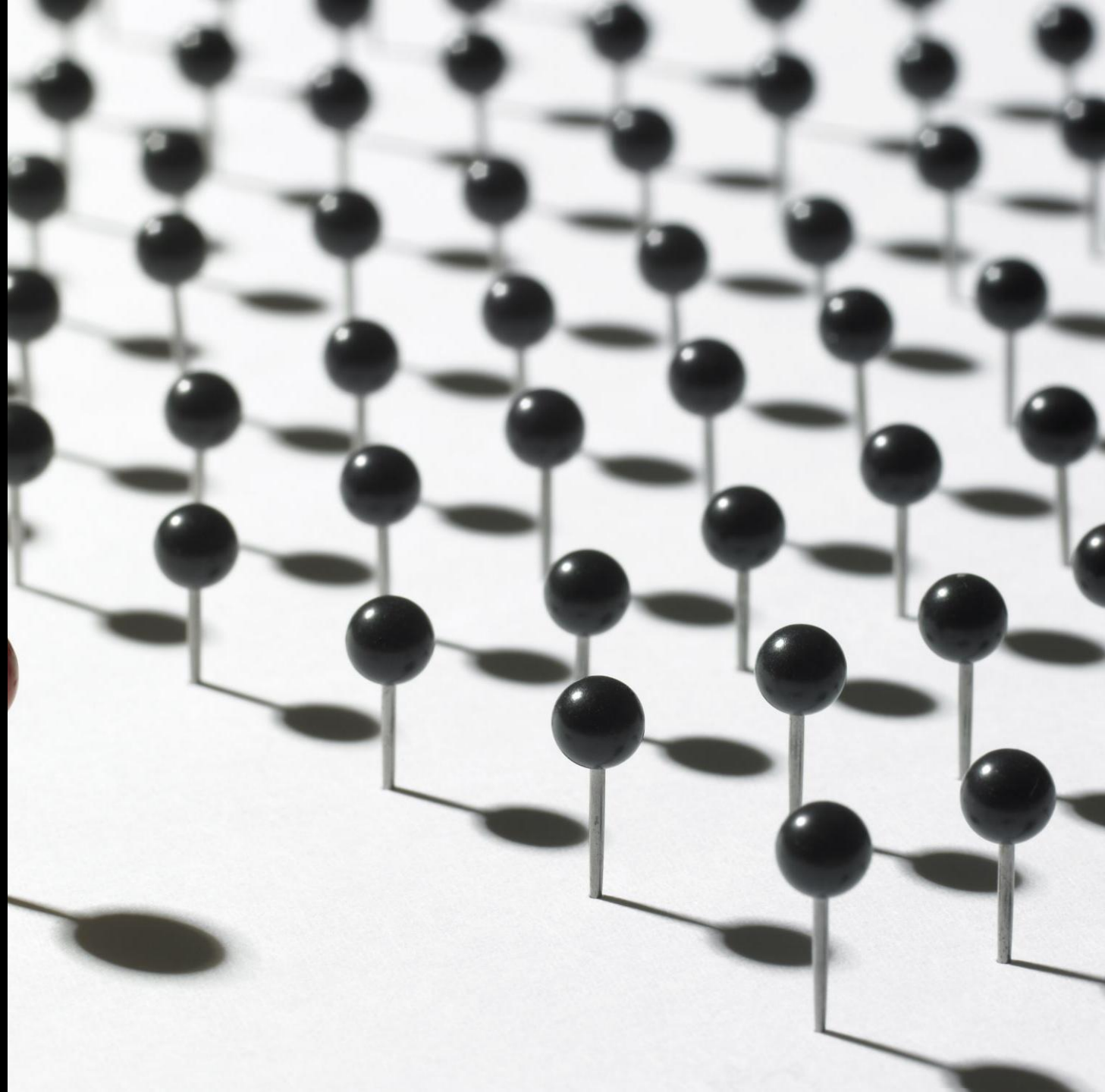
Panel of an altarpiece from Ascoli Piceno, Italy, by Carlo Crivelli (15th century)

NEGATIVE HISTORY OF HUMOR

- Christian European rejection of laughter and humor continued through the Middle Ages
- Reformers did not include the traditional assessment of humor
- Puritans came to rule England in the mid-17th century, they outlawed comedies
- Psychological theory negative view of for two millennia developed and remained the primary explanation of laughter until well into the 18th-century
- Laughter is a type of social corrective—a way that we regulate behaviors in society through ridicule

https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/ch122-coming-to-america

What humor theory arose from this perspective?



"I would never be that stupid," we might think.

SUPERIORITY THEORY

- Laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves.
  - Roger Scruton, who analyses amusement as an "attentive demolition" of a person or something connected with a person"
  - Charles Baudelaire: "laughter is satanic"—an expression of dominance over animals and a frustrated complaint against our being merely mortal."

https://quotefancy.com/quote/1024771/Scott-Adams-As-a-rule-I-don-t-like-to-laugh-at-the-misfortune-of-others-The-exception-to

CRITIQUES OF SUPERIORITY THEORY

- Francis Hutcheson (1750): "some ingenuity in dogs and monkeys, which comes near to some of our own arts, very often makes us merry; whereas their duller actions in which they are much below us, are no matter of jest at all."; impact of pity of those with misfortune "we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing." https://philosophicalscraps.wordpress.com/2020/05/21/a-response-to-bergsons-laughter-pt-1/

- Robert Solomon (2002) offers an *inferiority* theory of humor: source of humor based in inferiority or modesty; ability to laugh at ourselves (Three Stooges) https://iep.utm.edu/humor/

- A feeling of superiority is not a necessary condition of humor

philippe giraud/Corbis via Getty Images

Perhaps, there is another purpose. What did the evolutionary theorists believe the purpose of laughing is?

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

- Research (1990s) "fear grinning" in primates evolved as a signal of dominance or submission, especially in dangerous situations.
  https://www.google.com/search?q=the+evolutionary+theory+of+laughter&rlz=1C1SQJL_enUS809US809&oq=the+evolutionary+theory+of+laughter&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigATIHCAIQIRigATIHCAMQIRifBdIBCjE5MjkzajBqMTWoAgiwAgHxBe2pViPe-JMo&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8
- When meeting others = signal friendliness, reduce tension (don't confuse a smile with someone baring their teeth); evolutionary 'False Alarm'
- Evolutionary Roots in Primate Communication: Some researchers suggest that laughter may have evolved from primate vocalizations, such as playful pant-grunts, which are used to signal relaxation and playfulness.
  https://www.google.com/search?q=the+evolutionary+theory+of+laughter&rlz=1C1SQJL_enUS809US809&oq=the+evolutionary+theory+of+laughter&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigATIHCAIQIRigATIHCAMQIRifBdIBCjE5MjkzajBqMTWoAgiwAgHxBe2pViPe-JMo&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY: SOCIAL BONDING

RELIEF/RELEASE THEORISTS

IT'S ABOUT RELEASE OF ENERGY

SPENCER

- "The Physiology of Laughter" (1860)
- Excitement and mental agitation produces energy that "must expend itself in some way or another."
- Everyday activities often related to work stress build tension (blow off steam)

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/

DEWEY

- John Dewey (1894) Laughter, he said, "marks the ending … of a period of suspense, or expectation."
- It is a "sudden relaxation of strain, so far as occurring through the medium of the breathing and vocal apparatus… The laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief."

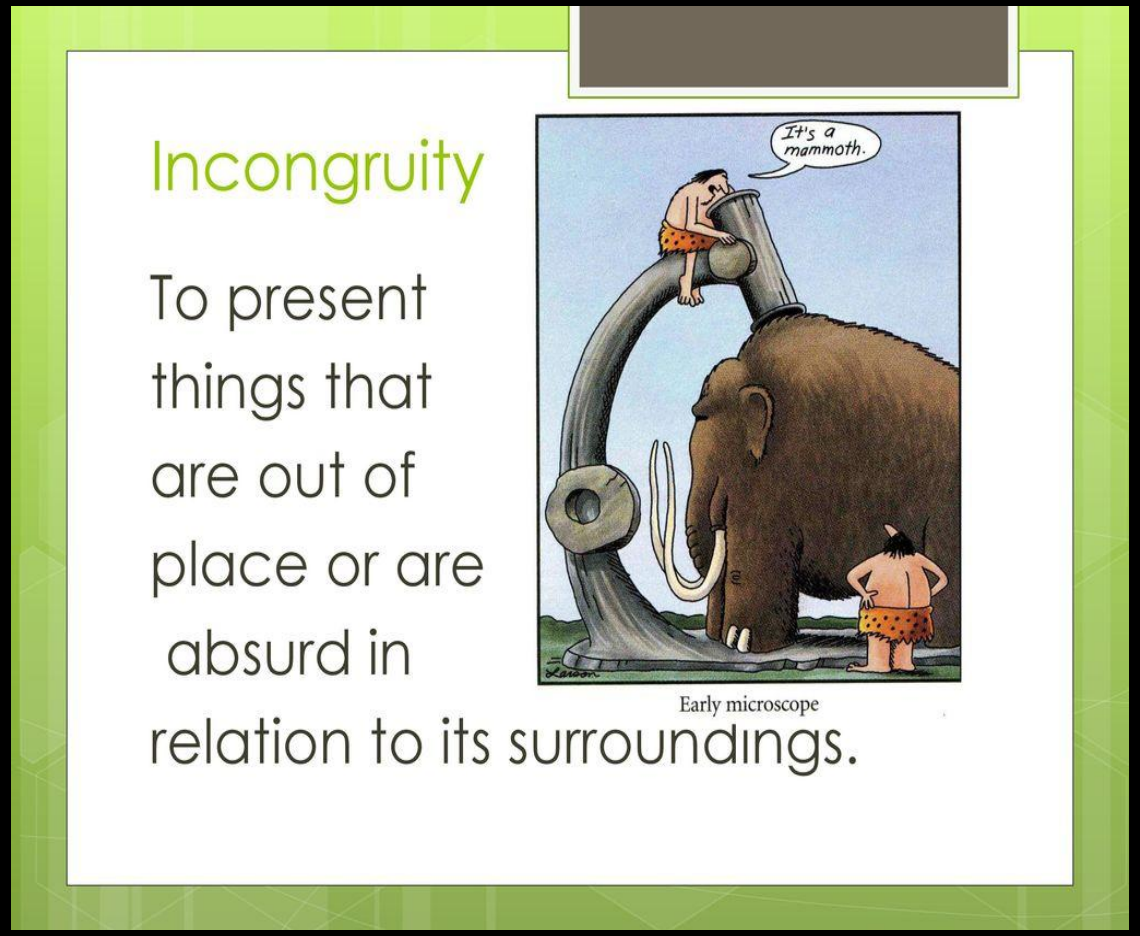
https://www.psychologs.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/why-we-laugh-when-nervous-the-brains-unusual-coping-mechanism-for-stress.jpg

SIGMUND FREUD

- Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905)
- 3 different sources of laughter—joking, the comic, and humor: all involve the saving of some psychic energy that is then discharged through laughter
- Repressed feelings regarding the rules of society: dirty jokes are especially funny
- Energy that would have been used to repress sexual and hostile feelings is saved and can be released in laughter

This is an examples of which humor theory?

INCONGRUITY/SURPRISE THEORY



- Perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations
- Focused not on what motivates laughter, but what actually causes it; logic and familiarity are replaced with things that normally don't come together
- It is now the dominant theory of humor in philosophy and psychology.

https://open.ocolearnok.org/whatsfunny/chapter/introduction-the-three-theories-and-beyond/

TELLING OF THE JOKE

- Create an expectation in the audience and then violate it
  - Stand up comedians: The set-up is the first part of the joke: it creates the expectation. The punch (line) is the last part that violates that expectation
  - Joke's ending is incongruous with the beginning

- Thomas Schultz (1976) and Jerry Suls (1972) have claimed that what we enjoy in humor is not incongruity itself, but the resolution of incongruity.

- Mae West said, "Marriage is a great institution, but I'm not ready for an institution,"

CRITIQUE OF THE THEORY: OWEN & MZEE

WHAT FUNCTION DOES HUMOR SERVE IN HUMAN LIFE?

- Similarities between play and humor suggest that the adaptive value of play might be like that of humor
- Play theory tries to give humor a genus by offering some differentiating characteristics, essential to humor
- Classify humor as a species of play

PLAY THEORIES

- Max Eastman: *The Enjoyment of Laughter* (1936)
  - Humor as an extension of animal play
  - Call our attention to the structural similarities between play contexts and humorous context
  - The wagging tail of a happy dog is a form of humorous laughter; broaden the definition of laughter to encompass other rhythmic responses to pleasure
  - What is central to humor and play is that both require taking a disinterested attitude towards what might otherwise be seen as serious

"we come into the world endowed with an instinctive tendency to laugh and have this feeling in response to pains presented playfully"

LAUGHTER AS A PLAY SIGNAL

- Certain kinds of humor involve mock aggression and insults, and because some forms of play activities result in humorous amusement.
- In animals, learn skills necessary for the future
- For children and young animals, the play activities that seem the most fun are those in which we exercise our abilities in unusual and extreme ways, yet in a safe setting (sports)
- The signal in adults

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LAUGHTER AND PLAY

- Johan Huizinga Homo Ludens (1938), criticizes identifying play with laughter or the comic
  - Laughter, he argues, is particular to humans, whereas, play is found in other mammals and birds
  - Questions whether humor and play share any necessary conditions, a requirement of the relationship if humor is a subtype of play

BENIGN VIOLATION

- 2010 in the journal *Psychological Science*, A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (University of Colorado Boulder), proposed a theory they call "benign violation" Derives from the theory of incongruity, but it goes deeper
- 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.
- Hence, someone who judges a violation as no big deal will be amused, whereas someone who finds it scandalous, disgusting or simply uninteresting will not

https://funnies.com/grosseyetrick_funny_picture/

BENIGN VIOLATION

- Levity can also partly be a product of distance from a situation (geographical or emotional remoteness); viewing a situation as imaginary
- McGraw argues that there seems to be an optimal comic point where the balance is just right between how bad a thing is and how distant it is.
- Does not address the role humor has played in humanity's evolutionary success

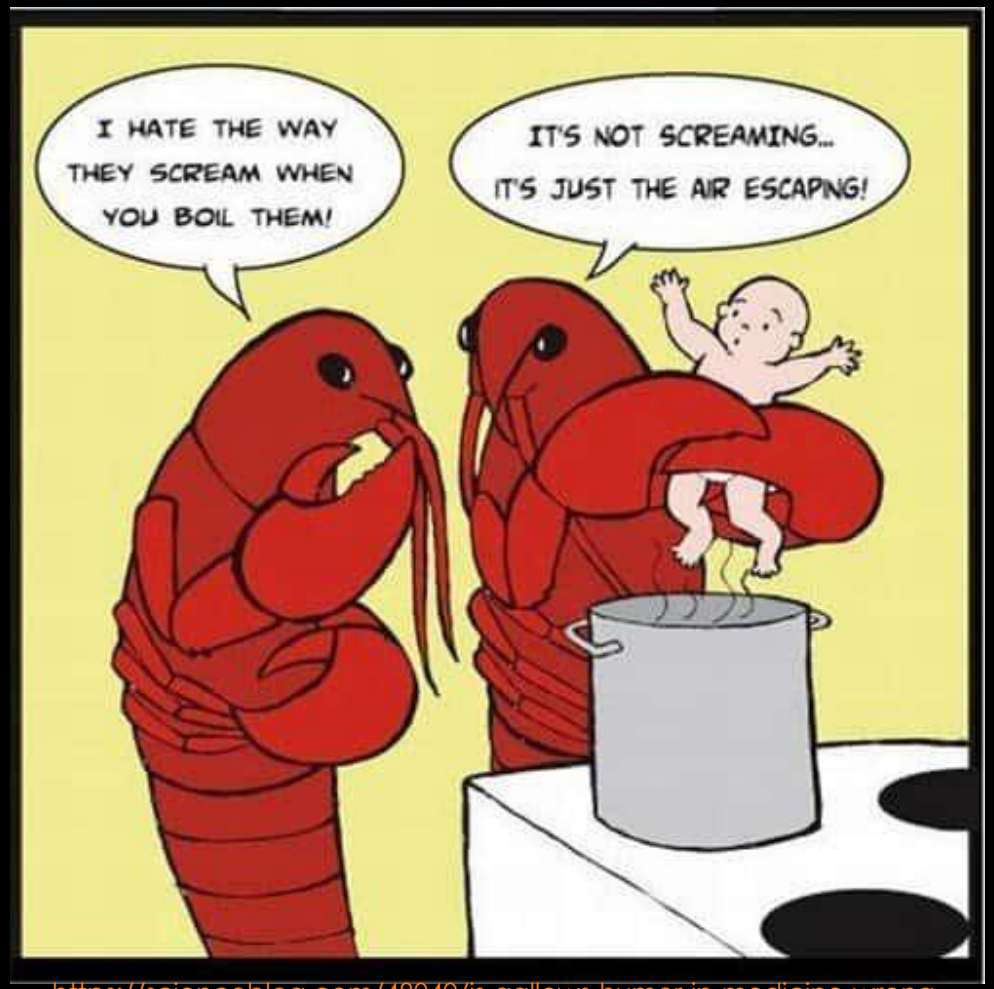
QUESTIONS REMAIN

- Some confusion about the relation between humor and laughter
  - "Laughter is a more social phenomenon, and it occurs for reasons other than humor, including unpleasant ones. Moreover, humor does not always make us laugh." Giovannantonio Forabosco, a psychologist and an editor at an Italian journal devoted to studies of humor (Rivista Italiana di Studi sull'Umorismo, or RISU)
- How can the sometimes opposite functions of humor, such as promoting social bonding and excluding others with derision, be reconciled?
- "What is humor? Maybe in 40 years we'll know," Forabosco says. And perhaps in 40 years we'll be able to explain why he laughs as he says it.

https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/whats-so-funny-the-science-of-why-we-laugh/

GALLOWS HUMOR

- Black comedy, black humor, bleak comedy, dark comedy, dark humor, gallows humor or morbid humor:
  - Style of comedy that makes light of subject matter that is generally considered taboo, particularly subjects that are normally considered serious or painful to discuss
  - Used by medical professionals, law enforcement
  - *Coping* humor vs *hoping* humor



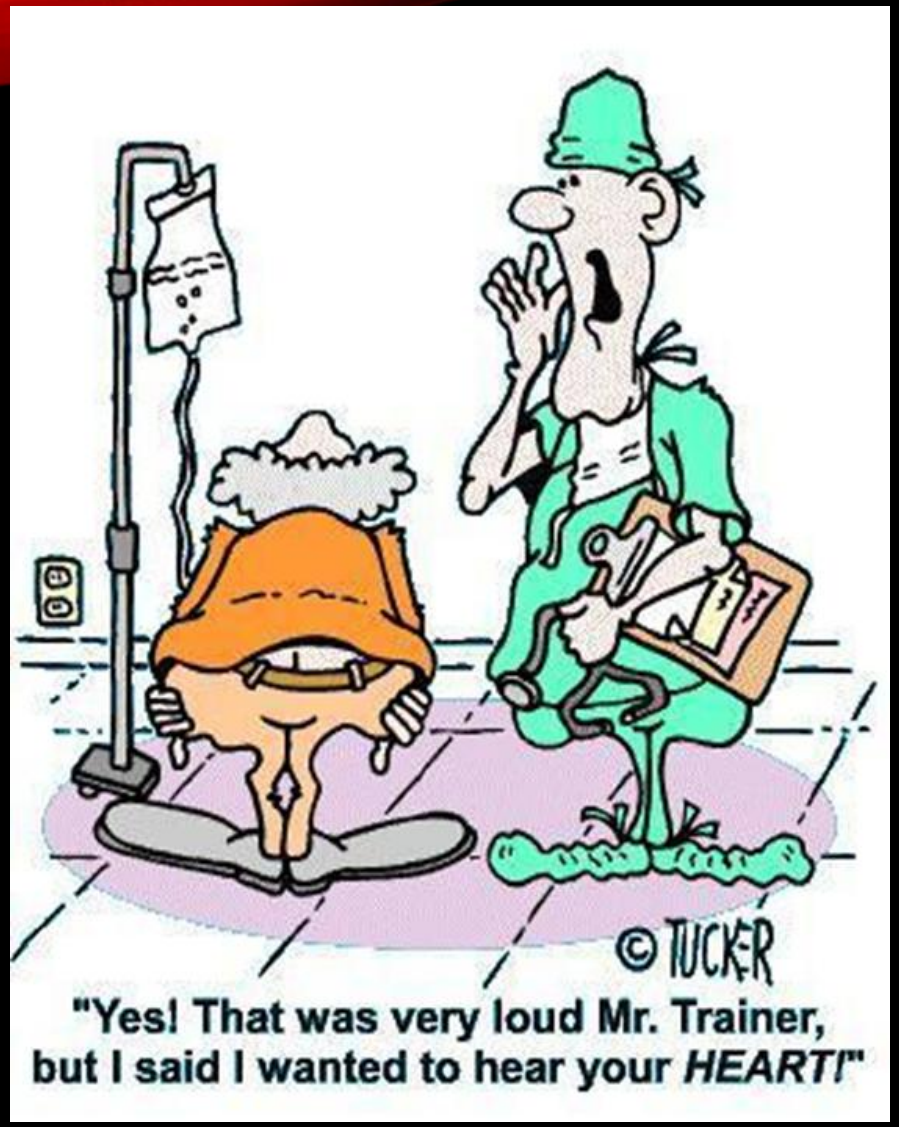
https://scienceblog.com/48040/is-gallows-humor-in-medicine-wrong

IS GALLOWS HUMOR ETHICAL?

- Perceived very differently depending on whether you are inside or outside the profession
- No patient wants to be the butt of their physician's jokes
  - FAIRFAX, Va. (CN) - Doctors mocked an unconscious colonoscopy patient, joking that he has syphilis and talking about firing a gun up his rectum, says a man whose cellphone allegedly captured audio of the entire affair.
- "because it is about moral distress, power imbalances between doctors and patients, and good people making surprising choices." Watson (2011) assistant professor in the Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University
- As a bonding and coping mechanism among insiders
- Raunchiest and grossed humor: ED, OR, & ICU

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.

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.



Is this funny to you? Why or why not?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- Situation: 3 ED residents tried unsuccessfully to save a teenage pizza delivery boy who had been shot while delivering their dinner. After finding the pizza box where the boy dropped it before running from his attackers, one of the residents made a joke: "How much you think we ought to tip him?" The residents laughed, and then ate the pizza. "Was it wrong to make a joke?" the doctor asked.
- Ethical question: "When is joking a form of abuse – of a patient, of trust, or of power?"
  - joke about a patient's condition told in front of the patient or the patient's family is unethical because it has the potential to harm them
  - the joke not harm anyone, she adds, it may have helped the residents "integrate this terrible event and get through the shift."

HUMOR DURING WAR

- Often found on the most violent and hopeless battlefields. Those who have nearly everything taken from them have nothing left but to laugh
- "It was astonishing how loudly one laughed at tales of gruesome things, of war's brutality — I, with the rest of them. I think at the bottom of it was a sense of the ironical contrast between the normal ways of civilian life, and this hark back to the caveman code…. It was the laughter of mortals at the trick which had been played on them by an ironical fate. They had been taught to believe that the whole object of life was to reach out to beauty and love…Now that ideal had broken like a china vase, dashed to hard ground. The contrast between that and this was devastating." *British war correspondent Phillip Gibbs*

HOLOCAUST HUMOR

- Self-humour: One of the interviewees was telling about their hair being cut upon arrival to Auschwitz. Many women were crying, but she started laughing. When asked why, she answered that never in her life had she had a hairdo for free.
- Black humor was a means of reducing anxiety of the awareness of death. An example well-known in Warsaw: "Moishe, why are you using soap with so much fragrance?" - "When they turn me into soap, at least I will smell good".
- Humor about food constituted about 7 percent of humor discussed in the study. The interviewees mention that there was lots of humor about food there was always not enough of it. An interviewee recalls: there was a group which liked to discuss recipes. Suddenly one of them lost her mood and stopped talking. "What's wrong with her?" - "I think her cake has burned".

Chaya Ostrower, *Without Humor We Would Have Committed Suicide*