

from "THE PHILOSOPHY OF LAUGHTER AND HUMOR":
"A NEW THEORY OF LAUGHTER"

by John Morreall

(Historical theories of humor and laughter)

In the first century the Roman Quintilian complained that no one had yet explained what laughter is, though many had tried. And even with all the philosophers and psychologists who have tackled the problem in the intervening centuries, the story is pretty much the same today – we are still without an adequate general theory of laughter. The major difficulty in constructing a comprehensive theory is that we laugh in situations which are so diverse that they seem to have nothing in common but our laughter. We laugh not only at humor, but also when we are tickled, when a magician makes an object appear or disappear, when we regain our safety after being in danger, solve a puzzle or win a game, run into an old friend on the street, anticipate some enjoyable activity, and feel embarrassed, to name a few representative cases.

In the face of this diversity, many have suggested that there could not be a single formula which covered all laughter situations. The correct approach, they say, is not to look for an essence of laughter, but to treat laughter situations in the way Wittgenstein treated games, as a set whose members show only family resemblances. Most of the work currently being done by psychologists on laughter and humor takes this approach, and simply catalogs different kinds of laughter along with their more interesting features.

Now while I heartily agree with Wittgenstein's complaint that bad philosophy often springs from an aversion to dirtying one's hands with empirical details, I think that when we examine the details of laughter situations, we can find an essence to laughter.

And one good way to gain the insights necessary for constructing a comprehensive theory of laughter is to examine the three traditional theories; though none of them is adequate as a general theory, they each have features which belong in a general theory.

The oldest, and probably still the most widespread theory of laughter is that laughter is an expression of a person's feelings of superiority over others. This theory goes back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle and was given its classic statement in Hobbes, who said that laughter expresses "a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."

In our century many have adopted versions of the Superiority Theory. Albert Rapp, for example, claims that all laughter developed from one primitive behavior in early man, "the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel." Konrad Lorenz and others treat laughter as a controlled form of aggression; for them the baring of the teeth in laughing is a way of asserting one's prowess.

Now some have responded to the Superiority Theory by denying the reality of hostile and derisive laughter. Voltaire, for instance, wrote that "laughter always arises from a gaiety of disposition, absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation." But this response is naive. Clearly people do laugh in scorn at other people, and have done so throughout recorded history. Even in Voltaire's day it was common for the rich to amuse themselves by taking a coach to an insane asylum to taunt the inmates. We may feel that people *should* not laugh in derision, but that is another matter.

The proper way to criticize the Hobbesian theory, I think, is to show that not all cases of laughter involve feelings of superiority, and hence that the expression of "sudden glory" cannot be the essence of laughter. The laughter of the baby at being tickled or at peekaboo, for example, cannot be attributed to a sense of superiority in the baby, because these kinds of laughter occur before the baby is capable of self-evaluation, indeed before the baby even distinguishes himself or herself as a being separate from the surroundings. There are many situations in which adults laugh, too, where there need be no feelings of superiority. We can laugh on being tickled, on seeing a magic trick, or on running into an old friend, all without self-evaluation. Indeed, if there is self-evaluation in laughing at the magic trick, the laugher would have to judge himself inferior, in at least one respect, to the magician who has fooled him. Much merely verbal humor, such as the use of excessive alliteration or the pun, can make us laugh without triggering any feelings of superiority. And the same is true of lots of absurd humor, such as the sight gag in which a physical law is apparently broken. The Superiority Theory, then, will not do as a general theory of laughter.

The second theory I want to look at is the Incongruity Theory, which had its beginnings in some scattered comments in Aristotle, but did not come into its own until Kant and Schopenhauer. The basic idea behind this theory is very simple. We live in an orderly world where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, properties, events, etc. When we experience something that doesn't fit these patterns, that violates our expectations, we laugh. As Pascal said, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees." Or in Kant's terminology, "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." Schopenhauer explained the incongruity behind laughter as a mismatch between our concepts and the real things that are supposed to be instantiations of these concepts.

Like the Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory clearly covers many laughter situations. In fact, I think that with proper refinement it can account for all cases of humorous laughter. But it is not comprehensive enough to cover all the non-humorous cases. The laugh of the five-month-old baby at being tickled involves no incongruity, for the baby's cognitive capacities do not yet include noticing incongruity. Even adult laughter need not involve incongruity; consider our laughter on winning a game or on anticipating some enjoyable activity.

Here, too, we might mention one of the refinements which the Incongruity Theory would require to serve as an account even of humorous laughter, for it will be important when we come to construct our own general theory of laughter. It is that not just any incongruity which a person experiences will trigger laughter: the experience must be felt

as pleasant by the person. An incongruity which evokes negative emotions such as anger, fear, or indignation, will not do the trick. If I opened my bathroom door to find a large pumpkin in the bathtub, for example, I would probably laugh. But if I found a cougar in the tub, I would not laugh, though this situation would be just as incongruous.

The last theory I want to consider is the Relief Theory. Historical reference to the power of laughter to relieve us of nervous tension goes back to Aristotle's comments on catharsis in comedy, the notion that laughter is a release of nervous energy was not carefully worked out until the nineteenth century. In an essay called "On the Physiology of Laughter:" Herbert Spencer claims that our emotions are, or at least in our nervous systems take the form of, nervous energy. And nervous energy tends to beget muscular action. In fear, for example, we make incipient movements of flight; if the fear becomes great enough, we actually flee. As anger builds up we clench our fists and make other aggressive movements; if the anger reaches a certain intensity we may attack the person who has angered us. Now laughter differs from these kinds of release of energy, according to Spencer, in that the muscular movements in laughter are not the early stages of larger movements associated with some emotion. Laughter, even if intense, does not lead to practical action such as flight or attack. Laughing, rather, is *just* a release of energy. It occurs, Spencer says, when some emotion has built up but then is suddenly seen to be inappropriate. If someone feels fearful because she thinks she hears an intruder in the house, for example, then upon discovering that it was only the cat she might break into laughter.

Spencer's theory influenced many subsequent theorists of laughter, including Dewey and Freud." Freud's theory is complex, and involves much more than the notion of the release of excess nervous energy. Indeed, to discuss it thoroughly would involve a discussion of Freud's general psychoanalytic theory. But it is not necessary for our purposes to explore all the details of Freud's theory. If we understand the basics, we can see how it qualifies as a Relief Theory.

Freud's theory of laughter is found in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Here he distinguishes three kinds of laughter situations, which he calls "jokes," "the comic," and "humor." The core of the theory is that in all laughter situations we save a certain quantity of psychic energy, energy that is usually employed for some psychic purpose but which turns out not to be needed. The discharge of this superfluous energy is laughter. In joking, he says, we save energy that is normally used to suppress forbidden feelings and thoughts; in reacting to the comic we save an expenditure of energy in thought; and in humor we save an expenditure of energy in emotion.