

6. Understanding Humor Historically: An Introduction to the Three Major Theories

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So far in this book, we've reviewed some basics of academic writing and introduced the general subject of humor. Now it's time to move beyond what we already know and really start to consider the many ways in which thinkers have historically written about humor. The primary sources in this section span thousands of years of western thought and offer some interesting insights into humor and the reasons behind our laughter.

Historically, most explorations of humor have been focused on trying to answer one question: why do we laugh? However, various thinkers have approached this question in different ways. Some of them seem focused on what motivates our laughter socially, psychologically, and morally. Others focus on the thing that happens that causes laughter in a joke or humorous situation or comedy. From these different approaches, three general theories of humor emerged that dominated most of the discussion of humor until the late 20th-century. These three theories will be discussed and outlined in this chapter so that you can have a general sense of what you will be learning as you read the primary sources in the rest of this section.

The three major theories of humor are the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory, and the Incongruity Theory. As you read the works in this section, you will notice that all of these theories have *some* merit and can help you explain and understand *some* reasons for why you laugh, but no one theory explains *all* humor. What we are attempting to do by reading these theories is to try on new ways of seeing the humor in our lives. While understanding superiority, relief, and incongruity can help us get a better sense of things, none of these concepts will explain everything. This is, of course, part of the fun of learning about a subject like this: the more we know, the more we realize we don't know and still have to learn.

Superiority Theory

The oldest and potentially most problematic of the three major theories is the Superiority Theory. As the name implies, this theory claims that laughter comes from feelings of superiority to others or to our past selves. No doubt, this makes sense. How many of you have, at some point in your lives, remembered something "dumb" you did when you were younger and, from the detached perspective of the present day, laughed at your former self? "What an idiot, I was!" you might think as you chuckle about an outfit you rocked in middle school or that obviously wrong answer you gave when the teacher called on you. Similarly, how many of you have ever caught yourselves laughing at someone else giving a wrong answer or looking silly in some way?

Examples like these are common ways in which the Superiority Theory shows up in our daily lives. Beyond those examples, we don't need to look too far to find other examples of laughter that might be explained by

the Superiority Theory. Consider the popularity of “fail” videos and shows like *America’s Funniest Videos* or *Ridiculousness*. These texts offer us glimpses of people doing things (often painful things) that might give us a brief sense of superiority. “I would never be that stupid,” we might think.

Consider this “Epic Funny Fails” compilation:



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Historically, the Superiority Theory was developed by the ancient Greeks and remained the primary explanation of laughter until well into the 18th-century. In this book, writings by Plato and Thomas Hobbes offer some glimpses into how philosophers articulated the Superiority Theory. For these philosophers, laughter is a form of ridicule and takes on negative connotations. When you laugh at someone’s behavior, according to this theory, you are laughing at their ignorance of themselves. In most of the examples mentioned so far, we might laugh because the person we’re laughing at doesn’t seem to be as self-aware as they should be. The middle school kid doesn’t realize they don’t look awesome in that ‘fit. The young man trying and failing to break a board in the YouTube compilation is ignorant of his own weakness and inability.

According to the Superiority Theory, when we laugh at these kinds of situations and texts we do so to expose and ridicule ignorance. In this way, laughter is a type of social corrective—a way that we regulate behaviors in society through ridicule. For the ancient Greeks and the philosophers of the British Empire, this kind of social corrective was an important part of maintaining order and control in society. However, it is also important to consider the problems with this type of laughter. What about times when this malicious ridicule is aimed at those who do not deserve it, those whose “ignorance” is a result of not belonging to the dominant culture, those whose identities are deemed “less than” the dominant culture’s?

As you can probably see, the Superiority Theory doesn’t just apply to fails. Indeed, this theory also helps us to understand some of the potential ethical problems with humor that relies on putting others below us as a motivation for laughter. This can be the source of racist, sexist, homophobic, and other types of potentially harmful humor too. As you learn more about this theory, always think about how understanding the motivations behind laughter relates to the values and beliefs of the person laughing.

As you can see, just this theory alone is complex enough to keep us thinking for a while, but you can probably also see that it does not explain everything. No doubt there have been many times in your life when you have laughed that have had nothing to do with feeling superior to yourself or another person. So what else might be going on?

Relief Theory

Like the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory focuses on the motivations and the psychology behind our laughter. The Relief Theory is touched on by David Hartley, but it is most commonly associated with the founder of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. In his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud developed the theory that humor comes from the venting of excess energy. In the telling and hearing of a joke, we subconsciously build up tension and when the punchline comes, that tension is released. While we could apply Freud’s theory to many jokes and situations in which tension is released, it is perhaps most helpful when considering jokes about subjects that are socially taboo—what many call “dark humor.”

According to the Relief Theory, laughter provides us a release from the stress and psychic pressures of both

living in a world that doesn't allow us to fully express all of our animal desires and of knowing that someday we will no longer be living in this world. All of those ideas that are repressed and that weigh us down—sexual desire, inappropriate thoughts, the fear of death—must be shaken off from time to time and humor provides us a way of doing that.

So, the Relief Theory can help us understand a lot about things like “dark humor” and why people who have had the hardest lives often make the best comedians. Relief humor allows us the opportunity to laugh at the things that might otherwise make us angry or cry. As Freud says in his later essay “Humor”: “a man adopts a humorous attitude towards himself in order to ward off possible suffering.” In other words, humor serves as a sort of defense mechanism for us and making jokes about sex or death or tragedy—while not always appropriate in every situation—provide us with a necessary outlet.

Consider some “dark” jokes by watching this compilation of “Jokes on Death Row” (Warning, this video contains images and ideas that deal with death):



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If you laughed at any of the jokes in that video, you might have a slightly dark sense of humor, and Relief Theorists would say that the motivation behind doing so was to rebel against the potential suffering of being a human being who knows that death comes for us all. However, while the Relief Theory does explain why we might find taboo subject funny, it doesn't fully explain the humor in that video. While the subject matter is dark, the jokes themselves are really just puns. While our motivation might be to ward off dark thoughts, there is something else that actually makes us laugh, and that brings us to the final theory that we need to know about.

Incongruity Theory

Put simply, the Incongruity Theory claims that we laugh at things that are unexpected and incongruous. Unlike the other two theories, this one is focused not on what motivates laughter, but what actually causes it: the thing that happens that makes us laugh. Such incongruities can include situations in which we slip and say the wrong thing in the wrong context, a pun in which language works in unexpected ways, times when our pets seem to behave like humans, those hilarious moments when someone makes a reference to a movie at just the right time in a conversation, the extreme situations of cartoons, and so much more. In each of these situations, what we expect is somehow subverted in a way that delights us and causes us to laugh.

The philosophers Francis Hutcheson and Henri Bergson in this section will give you some ways of understanding incongruity as being related to the associations we make when we compare things and the behaviors that we exhibit. In general, most (but not all) examples of humor can be explained by incongruity in some way. For example, in the first “Jokes on Death Row” video linked above, incongruity might cause us to laugh in a couple ways. The video begins with the executioner asking if the inmate has “any last words.” The inmate replies, “I bet you make a killing at this.” Here, we have the pun on the word “killing” meaning both that the executioner makes a good amount of money for his work *and* that he literally kills people. Puns are a type of incongruity because they cause language to work in unexpected ways other than the straightforward.

Beyond the pun, though, this video continues with the actor who plays both parts making a grin as inmate and laughing out loud as executioner. In this moment, the two are enjoying the humor of the pun along with us the viewer. That is another form of incongruity because we do not expect an execution to turn into

a lighthearted, humorous moment between the executioner and his victim. Finally, the video ends with the executioner abruptly ending his laughter and flipping the switch that kills the inmate. Here, another incongruity furthers the humor because we have just let our guard down as we watched the two characters share a nice moment. When we do that, for a second, we might forget the setting of the video and the sudden return to the serious subject matter is a slight shock that might cause even more laughter.

How to Use These Theories

As you can see, thinking about the three theories of humor will help us to understand a lot about the motivations and psychology behind humor as well as the jokes and situations that make us laugh. As you read the primary sources in this section, consider how they work together to give you a fuller picture of the laughter in your life. While no one theory or theorist can explain everything, if we put them all together, we will have a pretty clear understanding of many of the most common examples of humor.

Of course, the readings contained here are old. Sometimes there may be issues with understanding the phrasing and the references that these older authors use, but supplemental readings and other sections of this book will bring us into the current day and provide more modern examples of how these theories are relevant today.

Work Cited

Freud, Sigmund. "Humor." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1928, pp. 1-6.