JOHN MORREALL

COMIC RELIEF

A COMPREHENSIVE PHILOSOPHY OF HUMOR

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A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor

John Morreall

Foreword by Robert Mankoff, Cartoon Editor of The New Yorker

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For Jordan,
who'll probably cure cancer and Alzheimer's
before all these issues get resolved

Foreword

Robert Mankoff

People tell me I have the best job in the world. They're wrong, because actually I have the best *jobs* in the world. For my day job, I'm cartoon editor of *The New Yorker* magazine, which means I get to see over one thousand cartoons, every week, from the best cartoonists there are. From those thousand, I get to pick the best of the best – the crème de la crème, de la crème de la crème, if you will. I also moonlight as a cartoonist for *The New Yorker*, contributing over nine hundred cartoons to the magazine since 1977. By the way, as a cartoonist, I use the pen name Mankoff, which, coincidentally, is the same as my real name.

However, as much fun as these jobs are, I take cartoons, and the humor they represent, very seriously – or, at least, very semi-seriously. I have to, because surveys done by *The New Yorker* magazine show that 98 percent of its readers view the cartoons first and the other 2 percent are lying.

Now, that last statement is itself a lie, but you didn't think of it as a lie, because you knew it was a joke, which, in this case, though not literally true, expresses through exaggeration ("98 percent of its readers") and fabrication ("2 percent are lying") a truthful insight. Further analysis of this joke might classify it as a certain type, a "one liner" that has the structure of a "set-up" and a "punch line." Still further analysis might bring to mind the famous quip of E. B. White: "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." Well, he was joking too, but was he also on to the truth?

Perhaps he was, back then, some 60 years ago, but times have changed. In the first place, a search on Google brings up 196,000 results for "frog dissection," so a lot of people are interested in the topic, plus, there are even virtual frog dissection kits online, which means, *mirabile dictu*, the frog lives!

Secondly, as fascinating as frog dissection is, and with all due respect to its legion of pithy devotees, the search results it brings up are quite meager when compared to the staggering 25,000,000 you get for "humor analysis."

So, compared to the frog, interest in humor is definitely an elephant. Unfortunately, in the past, it has been the proverbial elephant in the room of human experience, ignored by the social sciences, whose attention was focused on the twin 800-pound gorillas of aggression and depression. Lately that has changed with a growing understanding that attention must be paid to positive feelings like humor that not only make life enjoyable, but endurable and comprehensible as well.

Of course, this turn of events has enraged the 800-pound gorilla of aggression, and caused his depressive twin to go into such a deep funk that even the antics of the funny elephant couldn't alleviate it – that is, until he accidentally stepped on the frog, which caused everyone to burst into laughter, except the frog, who was already burst.

The hilarity quickly came to an end, however, when a bunch of glum blind men wandered in from another proverb by way of the department of social sciences to examine the elephant. Each glumly sought to explain it from within their particular discipline, which they did to their own satisfaction, but not to each other's, or, I might add, to someone like myself, for whom humor pays the rent.

What they, and I, and you need is an interdisciplinary approach. Fortunately we have it in this book, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, by that interdisciplinarian nonpareil, John Morreall.

John is a philosopher by training who combines the temperament of a scholar with the timing of a stand-up comedian. This book entertains as it educates us in what we find funny and why. It is both comprehensive and comprehensible. I guarantee you'll find it interesting and informative. If you don't, then, well, I'll warrantee it, and if that doesn't work for you, there's always the fascinating field of frog dissection to explore.

Preface

In college I stumbled into the philosophy of laughter and humor while looking for Aristotle's *Politics* in the stacks. Where it should have been was his *Problems.* Opening that book at random, I lighted on the question, "Why is it that no one can tickle himself?" A few seconds later I moved on to, "Why are drunks more easily moved to tears?" but the Tickle Question had lodged in my brain. Ten years later, as an assistant professor looking for a new research topic, Aristotle's question came back to me, triggering many more about laughter and humor. The big one was why humor is so important in ordinary life, but so neglected or frowned upon in traditional philosophy.[1] In *Taking Laughter Seriously* (1983), I wrestled with that and a dozen other questions about laughter and humor. That book is still in print and has been translated into Japanese and Turkish.

I went on to collect what traditional philosophers have said about laughter and humor, and put it together with contemporary essays, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987). That book brought some media attention, which led to invitations from medical and business groups to talk about the benefits of humor. So, printing up 500 business cards, I became a humor consultant to the likes of AT&T, IBM, and the IRS. That led to a practical book, *Humor Works* (1997). Then, following my wife's career, I joined a department of religion, where I started off with a course on humor in Zen. That got me thinking about humor as a world-view, and its competitors, especially what literary people call the Tragic Vision. So I wrote *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (1999).

This book returns to the philosophy of humor. The philosophy of X asks what X is and how X fits into human life; it describes X and assesses it. We'll be asking some standard questions such as whether humor has an essence and when it's wrong to laugh. But we'll also consider

neglected questions such as why humor is associated with the odd facial expressions and breathing patterns known as laughter; why laughter is contagious; and whether comedy is as valuable as tragedy. While most academic treatments of humor concentrate on fictional texts such as jokes, I will favor humor that we create spontaneously, as in conversation, and that we find in real situations. And to make sure my descriptions and assessments are reasonable, I will test them against lots of real examples.

The central idea of this book is that in humor we experience a sudden change of mental state – a cognitive shift, I call it – that would be disturbing under normal conditions, that is, if we took it seriously. Disengaged from ordinary concerns, however, we take it playfully and enjoy it. Humans, along with the apes that have learned a language, are the only animals who can do this, I argue, because we are the rational animals.

We'll focus on the playful disengagement in humor as we explore issues in psychology, aesthetics, and ethics. In psychology, comic disengagement differentiates amusement from standard emotions. In aesthetics, it explains why humor is so often an aesthetic experience, and it helps us contrast comedy with tragedy. In ethics, comic disengagement is the key to understanding both harmful humor and beneficial humor. In a chapter on philosophy and comedy, I'll argue that most philosophers have been either obtuse or perverse in not recognizing the value of comic disengagement, since they advocate a similar kind of disengagement.

Early in the writing of this book, I put "Comprehensive" in the subtitle to remind myself that I was aiming for at least three kinds of explanations. First, I wanted to clarify the concepts of laughter, amusement, and humor. Secondly, I wanted to provide two causal explanations: a psychological account of what causes what in amusement, and an evolutionary account of what in early humans led to humor, and how it then developed. That evolutionary explanation, being based on the survival value of humor, would lead to a third kind of explanation – an evaluation of the benefits humor has had for our species. To what extent I've succeeded in any of these explanations, I leave to you to determine.

Acknowledgments

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Figure 2.1: "We're from the FBI . . ."
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Figure 3.1: "Thin crust, no onions, with extra zebra and wildebeest"
Drawing © John Morreall 2008

Figure 4.1: "I don't get it. You never get it"
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Figure 5.1: "Have a good day, God bless, and for heaven's sake, lighten up"
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Figure 6.1: "But, seriously . . ."
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Figure 7.1: "By God, for a minute there it suddenly all made sense"
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Figure 8.1: "I heard a bit of good news today. We shall pass this way but once"
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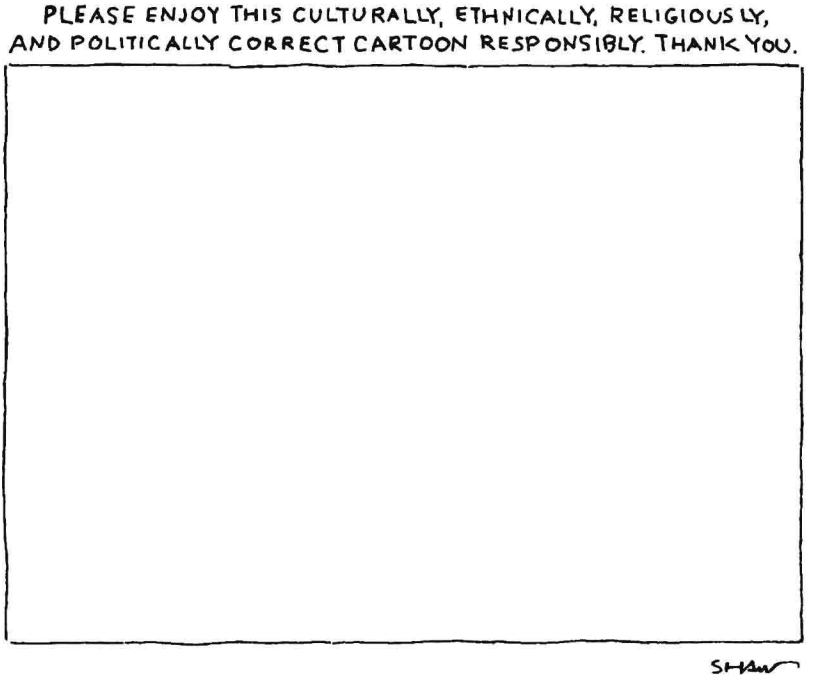
Contents

Chapter 1

No Laughing Matter

The Traditional Rejection of Humor and Traditional Theories of Humor



Humor, Anarchy, and Aggression

Of all the things human beings do or experience, laughing may be the funniest – funny strange, that is, not funny ha-ha. Something happens or someone says a few words, and our eyebrows and cheeks go up, as the muscles around our eyes tighten. The corners of our mouths curl upward, baring our upper teeth. Our diaphragms move up and down in spasms, expelling air from our lungs and making staccato vocal sounds. If the laughter is intense, it takes over our whole bodies. We bend over and hold our stomachs. Our eyes tear. If we had been drinking something, it dribbles out our noses. We may wet our pants. Almost every part of our bodies is involved, but none with any apparent purpose. We are out of control in a way unmatched by any other state short of neurological disease. And – funniest of all – the whole experience is exquisitely pleasurable! As Woody Allen said of stand-up comedy, it's the most fun you can have with your clothes on.

Not only is laughter biologically odd, but the activities that elicit it are anomalous. When we're out for a laugh, we break social conventions right and left. We exaggerate wildly, express emotions we don't feel, and insult people we care about. In practical jokes, we lie to friends and cause them inconvenience, even pain. During the ancient Roman winter festival of Saturnalia, masters waited on servants, sexual rules were openly violated, and religious rituals were lampooned. Medieval Europe saw similar anarchy during the Feast of Fools and the Feast of Asses, which were organized by minor clerics after Christmas. The bishop was deposed, and replaced with a boy. At St. Omer, they wore women's clothes and recited the divine office mockingly, with howls. At the Franciscan church in Antibes, they held their prayer books upside-down, wore spectacles made from orange peels, and burned soles of old shoes, instead of incense, in the censers.[1] Today, during Mardi Gras and Carnival, people dress in outlandish costumes and do things forbidden during the rest of the year, sometimes leading to violence.

In everyday humor between friends, too, there is considerable breaking of social conventions. Consider five of the conversational rules formulated by Paul Grice:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Avoid obscurity of expression.
4. Avoid ambiguity.
5. Be brief.[2]

Rule 1 is broken to create humor when we exaggerate wildly, say the opposite of what we think, or "pull someone's leg." Its violation is a staple of comedians like George Carlin:

> **Legal Murder Once a Month**
> You can talk about capital punishment all you want, but I don't think you can leave everything up to the government. Citizens should be willing to take personal responsibility. Every now and then you've got to do the right thing, and go out and kill someone on your own. I believe the killing of human beings is just one more function of government that needs to be privatized. I say this because I believe most people know at least one other person they wish were dead. One other person whose death would make their life a little easier . . . It's a natural human instinct. . . . Don't run from it.[3]

Grice's second rule is violated for laughs when we present fantasies as if they were reasonable hypotheses. If there are rumors at work about two colleagues having an affair, we might say, "Remember on Monday when nobody could find either of them – I bet they were downstairs making hot monkey love in the boiler room."

We can create humor by breaking Rule 3 when someone asks us an embarrassing question and we give an obviously vague or confusing answer. "You want to know why my report contradicts the Census Bureau? Well, we used a new database that is so secret I'm not at liberty to reveal its name."

Violating Rule 4 is the mechanism of most jokes, as Victor Raskin showed in *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*.[4] A comment, a story, or a question-and-answer exchange starts off with an assumed interpretation for a phrase, but then at the punch line, switches to a second, usually opposite interpretation. A simple example is Mae West's line, "Marriage is a great institution – but I'm not ready for an institution."

Rule 5 is broken in comic harangues, such as those of Roseanne Barr and Lewis Black.

Not only does humor break rules of conversation, but it often expresses contempt or even hostility toward someone, appropriately called the "butt" of the joke. Starting in childhood, we learn to make fun of people by imitating their speech patterns, facial expressions, and gestures in ways that make them look awkward, stupid, pompous, etc. To be mocked and laughed at can be taken as seriously as a physical attack would be, as the 2006 worldwide controversy over the Danish cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad showed.

The Superiority Theory: Humor as Anti-social

With all the ways in which laughter and humor involve the loss of self-control and the breaking of social rules, it's not surprising that most societies have been suspicious of them and have often rejected them. This rejection is clear in the two great sources of Western culture: Greek philosophy and the Bible.

The moral code of Protagoras had the warning, "Be not possessed by irrepressible mirth," and Epictetus's *Enchiridion* advises, "Let not your laughter be loud, frequent, or unrestrained."[5] Both these philosophers, their followers said, never laughed at all.

Plato, the most influential ancient critic of laughter, saw it as an emotion that overrides rational self-control. In the *Republic*, he said that the Guardians of the state should avoid laughter, "for ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction."[6] Plato was especially disturbed by the passages in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* where Mount Olympus was said to "ring with the laughter of the gods." He protested that "if anyone represents men of worth as overpowered by laughter we must not accept it, much less if gods."[7]

The contempt or hostility in humor, which Ronald de Sousa has dubbed its *phthonic* dimension,[8] also bothered Plato. Laughter feels good, he admitted, but the pleasure is mixed with malice towards those being laughed at.[9]

In the Bible, too, laughter is usually represented as an expression of hostility.[10] Proverbs 26:18–19 warns that, "A man who deceives another and then says, 'It was only a joke,' is like a madman shooting at random his deadly darts and arrows."

The only way God is described as laughing in the Bible is scornfully: "The kings of the earth stand ready, and the rulers conspire together against the Lord and his anointed king. . . . The Lord who sits enthroned in heaven laughs them to scorn; then he rebukes them in anger, he threatens them in his wrath." (Psalms 2:2–5)

God's prophet Elijah also laughs as a warm-up to aggression. After he ridicules the priests of Baal for their god's powerlessness, he has them slain (1 Kings 18:27). In the Bible, ridicule is offensive enough to carry the death penalty, as when a group of children laugh at the prophet Elisha for being bald:

> He went up from there to Bethel and, as he was on his way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Get along with you,

> bald head, get along." He turned round and looked at them and he cursed then in the name of the lord; and two she-bears came out of a wood and mauled forty-two of them. (2 Kings 2:23)

Early Christian thinkers brought together these negative assessments of laughter from both Greek and biblical sources. Like Plato and the Stoics, they were bothered by the loss of self-control in laughter. According to Basil the Great, "raucous laughter and uncontrollable shaking of the body are not indications of a well-regulated soul, or of personal dignity, or self-mastery."[11] And, like Plato, they associated laughter with aggression. John Chrysostom warned that,

> Laughter often gives birth to foul discourse, and foul discourse to actions still more foul. Often from words and laughter proceed railing and insult; and from railing and insult, blows and wounds; and from blows and wounds, slaughter and murder. If, then, you would take good counsel for yourself, avoid not merely foul words and foul deeds, or blows and wounds and murders, but unseasonable laughter itself.[12]

An ideal place to find Christian attacks on laughter is in the institution that most emphasized self-control and social harmony – the monastery. The oldest monastic rule – of Pachom of Egypt in the fourth century – forbade joking.[13] The Rule of St. Benedict, the foundation of Western monastic codes, enjoined monks to "prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter; do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter." In Benedict's Ladder of Humility, Step Ten was a restraint against laughter, and Step Eleven a warning against joking.[14] The monastery of Columban in Ireland assigned these punishments: "He who smiles in the service . . . six strokes; if he breaks out in the noise of laughter, a special fast unless it has happened pardonably."[15] One of the strongest condemnations of laughter came from the Syrian abbot Ephraem: "Laughter is the beginning of the destruction of the soul, o monk; when you notice something of that, know that you have arrived at the depth of the evil. Then do not cease to pray God, that he might rescue you from this death."[16]

Apart from the monastic tradition, perhaps the Christian group which most emphasized self-control and social harmony was the Puritans, and so it is not surprising that they wrote tracts against laughter and comedy. One by William Prynne condemned comedy as incompatible with the sobriety of good Christians, who should not be "immoderately tickled with mere lascivious vanities, or . . . lash out in excessive cachinnations in

the public view of dissolute graceless persons."[17] When the Puritans came to rule England under Cromwell, they outlawed comedy. Plato would have been pleased.

In the seventeenth century, too, Plato's critique of laughter as expressing our delight in the shortcomings of other people was extended by Thomas Hobbes. For him, people are prone to this kind of delight because they are naturally individualistic and competitive. In the *Leviathan*, he says, "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for Power after Power, that ceaseth only in Death."[18] The original state of the human race, before government, he said, would have been a "war of all against all."[19] In our competition with each other, we relish events that show ourselves to be winning, or others losing, and if our perception of our superiority comes over us quickly, we are likely to laugh.

> Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and to compare themselves only with the most able.[20]

Before the Enlightenment, Plato and Hobbes's idea that laughter is an expression of feelings of superiority was the only widely circulated understanding of laughter. Today it is called the "Superiority Theory." Its modern adherents include Roger Scruton, who analyses amusement as an "attentive demolition" of a person or something connected with a person. "If people dislike being laughed at," Scruton says, "it is surely because laughter devalues its object in the subject's eyes."[21]

In linking Plato, Hobbes, and Scruton with the term "Superiority Theory," we should be careful not to attribute too much agreement to them. Like the "Incongruity Theory" and "Relief Theory," which we'll consider shortly, "Superiority Theory" is a term of art meant to capture one feature shared by accounts of laughter that differ in other respects. It is not, like "Sense Data Theory" or "Dialectical Materialism," a name adopted by a group of thinkers consciously participating in a tradition. All it means is that these thinkers claimed that laughter expresses feelings of superiority.