

An abstract painting with a textured, painterly style. The top half is a muted blue-grey, transitioning into a bright orange and yellow band across the middle, which suggests a sunset or sunrise. The bottom half is dominated by vibrant, layered strokes of pink and red, with some darker, more saturated areas. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional intensity.

Noël Carroll

# HUMOUR

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Noël Carroll

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A Very Short Introduction

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*To Lorrie Moore,  
comediennne extraordinaire*

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# List of illustrations

- 1    **Buster Keaton, *Our Hospitality* 13**  
Metro/The Kobal  
Collection
- 2    **Cartoon by Robert  
Mankoff 15**  
© Robert Mankoff/The  
Cartoonbank
- 3    **Charlie Chaplin, *The Gold  
Rush* 69**  
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# Contents

Acknowledgements xiii

List of illustrations xv

A very short introduction 1

1 The nature of humour 4

2 Humour, emotion, and cognition 55

3 Humour and value 76

References and further reading 118

Index 123

# A very short introduction

This is a book about humour—its nature and its value. Humour has been discovered in every known human culture and thinkers have discussed it for over 2,000 years. Predictably, the subject has attracted a massive literature. This book is designed to provide you with a brief entrée into that conversation.

Chapter 1 focuses upon the nature of humour. The leading theories of humour are reviewed in the hope that the contrasts that emerge between them will highlight important aspects of the phenomenon of humour. Ultimately, the chapter spends most of its attention on incongruity theories of humour, because incongruity theories (and successors thereof) are regarded as the most promising contenders by the majority of philosophers and psychologists.

An attempt is made to get at the nature of humour by defining comic amusement, the mental state that humour is meant to provoke. Definitional approaches are often frowned upon nowadays, but I would defend my attempt on the grounds that this method is the most fruitful one we have for flushing out the often hidden features of what we seek to illuminate. For even when our definitions are too narrow, we in effect learn of further aspects of the phenomenon.



I also believe that the incongruity theory, even if not fully adequate, provides us with a useful heuristic for future comic research by guiding us toward the kinds of variables we should attend to when investigating specimens of invented humour such as comic narratives. In this way, using the incongruity theory as a heuristic may pave the way for superior successor theories.

However, I have emphasized the incongruity approach not only for the benefit of theorists but also for the benefit of curious readers. For the incongruity approach provides one with an eminently serviceable method for discovering the secret to the humour one encounters daily in the form of jokes, comic asides, cartoons, sitcoms, and so on. Using the many examples of incongruity included here, along with the proposed theory, one can cut to the quick of the wit one hears and sees as well as garnering important clues about the way in which to construct humour on one's own. In that respect, the incongruity theory has immense, practical use value.

Chapter 2 examines the relation of humour to emotion and cognition. I begin by considering whether comic amusement is an emotion. This may seem to be an esoteric place to start. However, in recent decades very estimable advances have been made in the analysis of the emotions. Thus, by considering comic amusement as an emotion, we can exploit the insights of psychologists and philosophers of mind by exploring the ways in which comic amusement fits that model. By means of this framework we are led smoothly not only to an examination of the cognitive and affective dimensions of humour but also to a discussion of the importance of humour in terms of the service humour performs to vital human interests.

Chapter 3 concerns the relation of humour to value, specifically in terms of its social functions. Humour, and the comic amusement that attends it, has a crucial role to play in the construction of communities. It can serve as a disseminator as well as an enforcer