What is humor?

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This lecture will not be very funny.

(Sorry.)
“There is a species of primate in South America more gregarious than most other mammals, with a curious behavior. The members of this species often gather in groups, large and small, and in the course of their mutual chattering, under a wide variety of circumstances, they are induced to engage in bouts of involuntary, convulsive respiration, a sort of loud, helpless, mutually reinforcing group panting that sometimes is so severe as to incapacitate them. Far from being aversive, however, these attacks seem to be sought out by most members of the species, some of whom even appear to be addicted to them… [T]he species in Homo sapiens (which does indeed inhabit South America, among other places), and the behavior is laughter” (Consciousness Explained, p.62).
What's so funny?

Human beings seem to be the only animals with a sense of humor.

Human = the laughing animal

*Homo ridens*

Why, then, did we develop this trait?

And what are we laughing at?
Terminological Preliminaries

Let’s call anything that might be appreciated as funny (in the sense of “funny ha-ha,” not “funny strange”) humorous.

Call the mental state or attitude that consists in the enjoyment of humor mirth.

Call the capacity to experience mirth having a sense of humor.
Like the property of being sweet, humor is thus a \textit{response-dependent} property.

Whether or not something qualifies as humorous depends on the \textit{effect} or \textit{response} it is apt to produce in us.
Terminological Preliminaries

While mirth is often expressed through laughter, laughter is neither necessary nor sufficient for mirth.
Terminological Preliminaries

Examples of mirthless laughter
- fake laughter
- hollow laughter
- laughter caused by tickling
- laughing from sheer joy or excitement
- hysterical/maniacal laughter
Terminological Preliminaries

Examples of laughterless mirth

• suppressed laughter
• mild amusement
• non-mammalian (e.g. robot or extra-terrestrial) mirth?
Superiority Theory

Mirth is the result of feeling oneself *superior* in some way to others (or to one’s past self).
Superiority Theorists

Plato
(c.429-347 B.C.E.)

Aristotle
(384-322 B.C.E.)

Thomas Hobbes
(1588-1679)
Superiority Theory

“[T]he passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly”

(Human Nature, ch.8, §13).

Thomas Hobbes
(1588-1679)
Superiority Theory

The predominance of this theory of humor in the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods of the Western philosophical tradition contributed to the widely-held view among philosophers of those periods that enjoyment of humor is morally suspect.
Superiority Theory

“A joke is a kind of abuse” (Nicomachean Ethics, IV, 8).

Aristotle
(384-322 B.C.E.)
Superiority Theory

“[T]he joy which comes from good is serious, whereas that which proceeds from evil is accompanied with laughing and derision”

(The Passions of the Soul, §62).

René Descartes
(1596-1650)
Superiority Theory

“I am convinced that there can be no regeneration of mankind until laughter is put down.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley
(1792-1822)
Against Superiority Theory

While humor is often at someone’s expense (sometimes in morally reprehensible ways, as in racist or sexist jokes), there nevertheless seem to be many examples of humor that we enjoy without judging ourselves to be superior to others in any way.
Against Superiority Theory

Counterexamples

• witticisms

“This wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. Either it goes or I do.”

– Oscar Wilde’s last words

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)
Against Superiority Theory

Counterexamples

• witticisms
• wordplay

“Tell him I was too f*cking busy - or vice versa.”
— Dorothy Parker

Dorothy Parker (1893-1967)
Against Superiority Theory

Counterexamples

• witticisms
• wordplay
• nonsense jokes

“What’s the difference between a duck with one of its legs both the same?”
Against Superiority Theory

Counterexamples

- witticisms
- wordplay
- nonsense jokes
- absurd humor
Against Superiority Theory

**Counterexamples**
- witticisms
- wordplay
- nonsense jokes
- absurd humor
- humorous displays of skill

Chico Marx
(1887-1961)
Relief Theory

Mirth is the enjoyable release of pent up *psychological energy.*
Relief Theorists

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)
Relief Theory
Relief Theory

“[A] large portion of the nervous system was in a state of tension... But now, this large amount of nervous energy, instead of being allowed to expend itself in producing an equivalent amount of the new thoughts and emotions which were nascent, is suddenly checked in its flow...”

(The Physiology of Laughter).

Herbert Spencer
(1820-1903)
Relief Theory

“The excess [energy] must therefore discharge itself in some other direction;... there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter”

(The Physiology of Laughter).

Herbert Spencer
(1820-1903)
Against Relief Theory

While Relief Theory seems to account for the role of humor in relieving stress, and the large amount of humor that deals with taboo subjects (e.g. “dirty jokes”), it relies on a quasi-hydraulic conception of psychic energy that most psychologists now see as false.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)
Incongruity Theory

We feel mirth in response to things that we judge or perceive to be *incongruous* in some way.
Incongruity Theorists

Immanuel Kant
(1724-1804)

Arthur Schopenhauer
(1788-1860)
Incongruity Theory

“The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (The World as Will and Idea, I, 13).

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860)
Incongruity Theory

“I want to die like my father, peacefully in his sleep - not screaming and terrified, like his passengers.”

Bob Monkhouse (1928-2003)
Incongruity Theory

“I always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize I should have been more specific.”

Lily Tomlin
(1939-?)
“I never use a napkin on my lap at a restaurant... because I believe in myself.”

Hannibal Buress
(1983-?)
Incongruity Theory

In a study by Lambert Deckers (1993), participants were presented with a series of identical-looking weights and asked to pick them up. The first few were roughly identical in weight, but participants were then given a weight that was either significantly heavier or lighter than the previous ones. Most participants found this humorous, and laughed.
Against Incongruity Theory

“There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh. A decrepit man under a heavy burden, five loaves and two fishes among a multitude, and all unfitness and gross disproportion; an instrument out of tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May, Archimedes studying geometry in a siege, and all discordant things; a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a breach of bargain, and falsehood in general; the multitude taking the law into their own hands, and everything of the nature of disorder; a corpse at a feast, parental cruelty, filial ingratitude, and whatever is unnatural; the entire catalogue of vanities given by Solomon, - are all incongruous, but they cause feelings of pain, anger, sadness, loathing, rather than mirth”

(The Emotions and the Will, pp.282-3).
Incongruity Theory

To deal with such non-humorous incongruitities, Incongruity Theorists typically add that to be seen as humorous, an incongruity must

(a) be apprehended in the absence of countervailing emotions, and

(b) be enjoyed for its own sake.
Incongruity Theory

Absence of countervailing emotions

For instance, if you walk into the bathroom and see a large pumpkin in your bathtub, you may find this incongruity amusing.
Incongruity Theory

Absence of countervailing emotions

By contrast, if you walk into the bathroom and see a grizzly bear in your bathtub, you may find this incongruous, but probably more terrifying than amusing.
Incongruity Theory

Absence of countervailing emotions

Certain incongruities that are not seen as funny at time due to the presence of countervailing negative emotions (e.g. fear, anger, or annoyance) may be seen as funny in retrospect after those negative emotions have dissipated.
Incongruity Theory

Enjoyed for its own sake

Incongruities seen as funny are also enjoyed not (or not solely) for some ulterior reason (e.g. if you’d made a large bet with someone that you’d encounter a certain number of incongruities within the next 24 hours), but simply for their own sake.
Incongruity Theory

Enjoyed for its own sake

While our enjoyment of an incongruity may be increased by feelings of superiority or sexual excitement (as in dirty jokes or jokes made at the expense of someone we dislike), at least some of our enjoyment must be due solely to the incongruous nature of the incongruity in order for our enjoyment to qualify as mirth.
What’s so funny about incongruity?

Assuming that Incongruity Theory is right, and that something is humorous if and only if it is seen as incongruous (and we enjoy its incongruity for its own sake), this still leaves us with the question:

Why do we find incongruous things funny?
The evolutionary value of humor

We might shed light on this question by adopting an evolutionary perspective, and asking:

What evolutionary advantage might be derived from the tendency to experience mirth in response to certain perceived incongruities?
The evolutionary value of humor

One hypothesis:
The sense of humor first evolved to motivate us to root out mistakes in our view of the world.

Recognition of incongruities alerts us to errors in our own beliefs (or the beliefs of others). The pleasure that we experience in noticing such errors prompts us to continue to monitor our beliefs for further mistakes.
The evolutionary value of humor

The development of a sense of humor thus sets up a kind of “cognitive debugging” mechanism that prompts us to continually update our beliefs so that they more accurately reflect our environment.

This enables us to respond more flexibly to our changing circumstances and avoid becoming stuck in overly rigid ways of thinking.
The evolutionary value of humor

Another hypothesis: The ability to see certain incongruities as humorous (and thus as enjoyable) serves as a helpful \textbf{counteragent} to the hold that negative emotions can obtain over our thinking (e.g. the confusion or frustration that we might otherwise feel when we encounter such incongruities).

John Morreall
The evolutionary value of humor

“Voltaire said that heaven had given us two things to counterbalance the many miseries of life, hope and sleep. He could have added laughter”

(Critique of Judgment, I.1.54).

Immanuel Kant
(1724-1804)
The evolutionary value of humor

“And if I laugh at any mortal thing, ‘tis that I may not weep”

(Don Juan).

Lord Byron
(1788-1824)
The evolutionary value of humor

“Perhaps I know best why man is the only animal that laughs: he alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was compelled to invent laughter” (The Will to Power).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)
The evolutionary value of humor

By breaking the hold that negative emotions have over our attention, behavior, and thought processes, the development of a sense of humor helps reduce the harmful effects of emotional stress, and enables us to think more clearly, abstractly, and rationally.

John Morreall
The social function of humor

In addition to the benefits it has in mitigating emotional stress and stimulating curiosity, rationality, and cognitive flexibility in *individuals*, humor serves numerous *social* functions as well.
The social function of humor

We use humor and laughter to:

• enforce social norms
• strengthen social bonds
• signal friendliness, non-aggression, and shared values
• select and attract partners
"You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others... Our laughter is always in need of a group... However spontaneous it may seem, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary... Laughter [is] a sort of social gesture" (Laughter).
The social value of humor

Many of the social functions of humor depend on the use of laughter as a signal to express mirth as well as group membership, attitudes of approval, admiration, and friendliness, and/or the endorsement of certain values or assumptions that one must share in order to find the thing one is laughing at humorous.
The dark side of humor

Humor can in this way serve as a valuable social glue and lubricant, but it can also be put to more nefarious uses, in erecting social barriers and promoting prejudice (e.g. via racist and sexist jokes).
The dark side of humor

"Nothing shows a man's character more than what he laughs at."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(1749-1832)
The dark side of humor

These morally objectionable uses of humor generate a number of interesting ethical questions, e.g.:

When is it morally permissible to laugh at something?

Is prejudiced humor intrinsically less funny, or is whatever humor it contains instead just outweighed by its moral repugnance?
The evolution of laughter

Some of the social signalling functions of laughter may be linked to more basic signalling behavior from which mirth-inspired laughter evolved.
The evolution of laughter

Some speculate that mirth-inspired laughter can be traced to certain panting calls in apes that seem to signal *non-aggression* and a desire to *play*.

Others speculate that the roots of mirth-inspired laughter lie rather in certain *false alarm* calls that many primate species use to cancel a previous signal of danger and indicate that all is well.
The End

Whatever the evolutionary function of mirth and laughter might be, I hope you enjoyed the lecture.

(If not, sorry. No refunds.)