

Whats so funny?

Author: Gareth Landau

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Someone's impersonating an owl...

What makes something funny? Several theories attempt to explain why certain things make us laugh.

The Incongruity Theory posits that humour arises when there is a discrepancy between what we expect and what actually occurs. This surprise element triggers a cognitive shift, leading to laughter. For instance, a joke often involves setting up an expectation and then delivering an unexpected punchline. This theory explains why absurd or surreal humour, like that of Monty Python, can be particularly funny; it constantly subverts our expectations. Mom used to send me to the store with five bucks, and I came back with a loaf of bread, a gallon of milk, a magazine, two chocolates, a pack of cigarettes and change. Can't do that anymore. Too many CCTV cameras.

Another is the Superiority Theory, which dates back to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. This suggests that humour stems from a feeling of superiority over others. This theory explains why we might laugh at slapstick comedy or the misfortunes of others, as it gives us a sense of dominance or relief that we are not the ones suffering. While this theory might not encompass all forms of humour, it certainly applies to instances where laughter is derived from *schadenfreude* or mockery. Punching down, as modern critics put it. Have you heard the one about the kid with a terminal disease? It never gets old...

Relief Theory suggests that humour functions as a way to release psychological tension. Laughter serves as a mechanism to release pent-up nervous energy. This theory can explain why people often make jokes in stressful situations or use humour to cope with anxiety and fear. The cathartic effect of laughter can help alleviate emotional stress and create a sense of ease. Joe over there is a great doctor. Gave the guy six months to live. Couldn't pay the bill... gave him another six months. Understanding why we find things funny involves exploring both psychological and physiological responses.

Humour engages various cognitive processes, including perception, memory, and problem-solving. When we encounter something funny, our brain works to resolve the incongruity or understand the joke, which involves higher-order thinking skills. Humour also triggers emotional responses, often eliciting feelings of joy, surprise, or amusement.

Laughter has several beneficial physiological effects. It activates the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals, which promote an overall sense of well-being and can temporarily relieve pain. Laughter also reduces the levels of stress hormones like cortisol, thereby helping to lower stress and anxiety. Additionally, it can improve cardiovascular health by increasing blood flow and enhancing the function of blood vessels. In math class it can give you a fighting chance around girls who ordinarily not give you the time of day. Conversely, in gym class it can get the bigger boys the opportunity not to pay too much attention to you.

Laughter plays a crucial role in social interactions and cognitive development. It can strengthen social bonds, enhance learning, and improve mental health. My wife loves it when I tell mother in law jokes, for example. It brings us closer. Humour is a powerful social tool that can enhance relationships and build connections. Shared laughter creates a sense of camaraderie and trust, making social interactions more enjoyable and meaningful. In group settings, humour can serve as a social glue, fostering a sense of community and belonging. It can also defuse conflicts and facilitate communication, making it easier to navigate social complexities. Like a platonic pick up line, or an icebreaker.

Humour can also enhance cognitive functions, such as learning and creativity. By making information more engaging and memorable, humour can improve comprehension and retention. Teachers and educators often use humour to capture students' attention and make learning more enjoyable. Furthermore, the cognitive flexibility required to understand jokes and humorous situations can foster creative thinking and problem-solving skills.

The therapeutic effects of humour and laughter on mental health are well-documented. Laughter therapy, or humour therapy, is used to improve emotional well-being and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. The positive emotions elicited by humour can counteract negative feelings and promote a more optimistic outlook on life. Humour can also serve as a coping mechanism, helping individuals to manage stress and adversity more effectively.

Different cultures have distinct comedic traditions and sensibilities. For example, British humour is often characterized by its wit, irony, and understatement, while American humour tends to be more direct and exaggerated. In the meantime, German humour isn't funny at all.

The context in which humour is delivered also plays a significant role in its reception. Factors such as timing, delivery, and the relationship between the individuals involved can influence whether a joke is perceived as funny or offensive. Funerals are particularly good testing grounds for whether specific jokes work, or not, in specific contexts.

The thing is, humour is really a lot like a magic trick. You can give away the game and explain it, but that robs you of the effect of the trick. To an audience, a card trick is a wonderful thing. It blows their mind. It awakens a sense of wonder, and possibility. To the magician, the trick is a well-executed, but ultimately boring misdirection.

Comedy helps us cope. Even in eras where some people are so sensitive they are determined not to cope, and chase the jesters away, or demand acts that adhere to certain orthodoxies. These folks are really funny – more hilarious than any standup. And their time, luckily, is as much of a passing fad as any other trend or fashion.

Humour is subjective, ultimately. You can enjoy humour that is cruel or light-hearted, sophisticated or slapstick, political or pedestrian. You can actively dislike any of the above forms. You may think some jokes go too far, whereas you'd be perfectly comfortable with some who go to far but in a direction you don't mind.

So smile. And if you don't like a joke or a comic, simply move along, there's plenty else to keep you laughing... Because in the end, it's hard to take people who don't laugh seriously.