

T

The Philosophy of Humour

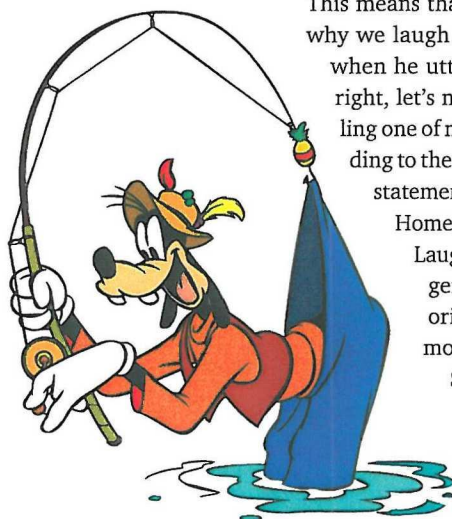
Philosophy deals with general and fundamental problems such as existence, values, language and logic. Throughout history, philosophers have dealt with the great issues and problems of human kind. It should come as no great surprise, therefore, that philosophers have thought about humour almost since the beginning of time. The most serious people of all time have thought long and hard about the nature of humour; and this has resulted in at least three theories that try to explain why people laugh – and what they find funny.

The Superiority Theory

The superiority theory is based on the assumption that people have an inherent need for feeling better than other people. This theory dates back to Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC), Plato (app. 428 BC-348 BC) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who generally claimed that we laugh at other people's shortcomings and misfortunes because we feel superior. According to advocates of the superiority theory, we tend to laugh at ugly people because we feel more beautiful – and we laugh at stupid people because we feel more intelligent. Laughter is a means for making us forget our inferiority complexes. By laughing at the idiots of the world, we avoid feeling like idiots ourselves.

This means that the superiority theory can explain why we laugh at a character like Homer Simpson when he utters an eloquent phrase such as "All right, let's not panic. I'll make the money by selling one of my livers. I can get by with one." According to the superiority theory, we laugh at such a statement because we compare ourselves with Homer in order to feel good about ourselves. Laughing at Homer's lack of education and general knowledge asserts our superiority. We feel better, more educated and more intelligent.

Sometimes the superiority theory may also be reversed so that we laugh at people who are socially above our level, such as politicians and others who can affect our lives



superiority overlegenhed
assumption antagelse
inherent iboende
claim hævde
shortcoming mangel
misfortune ulykke
superior overlegen
advocate tilhænger
means middel
inferiority complex mind-
dreværds kompleks
utter fremsige
eloquent udtryksfuld
assert gøre gældende
reverse vende på hovedet
affect påvirke

and make us powerless. Feeling powerless is essentially degrading, and it is therefore a healthy solution to make fun of the people who make us feel powerless. In this way we can regain some of our power by imagining that we are better than they are. This is essential in satire where we laugh at our bosses, kings, presidents and teachers. It may be seen as a self-preservation mechanism – a way of asserting our humanity in a context where we feel inferior.

degrading fornedrende
regain genvinde
self-preservation selvop-
holdelse
context sammenhæng
inferior mindreværdig

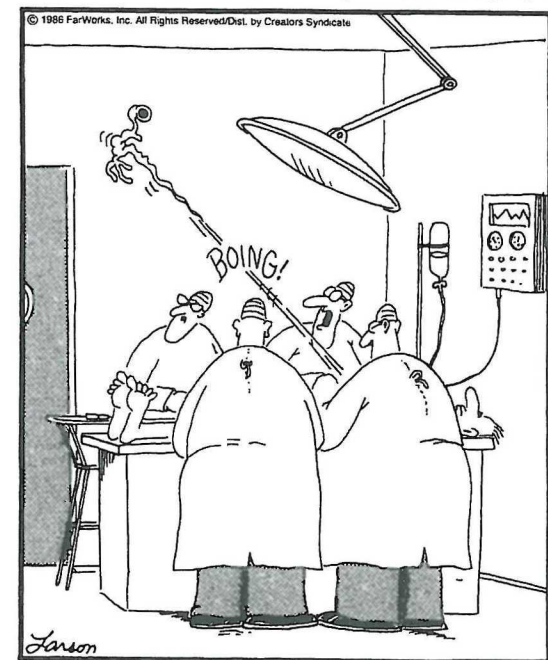
The Relief Theory

The relief theory is based on the assumption that people have a set of taboos they do not like to talk about. Most people have taboos, but they are not necessarily the same ones. Taboos also tend to change over time. No taboo, therefore, is universal, but some things are considered taboo by a majority of people. For instance, many people dislike talking about sex, disease and death.

The relief theory gains much of its power from the theories of the Austrian doctor Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who is known as the founder of psychoanalysis. Freud analysed the human psyche and concluded that everybody has something that he or she is ashamed of. In most people, these taboos are suppressed and hidden away in the subconscious part of our psyche which Freud called the "Id". This implies that we are not aware of our taboos and our shame, but they lie dormant in the "Id". We do not think about them all the time, but they are always present and ready to pop up.

Whenever we are confronted with one of our taboos, we feel shame. Laughter can deal with shame in two ways. First of all, laughter may deal

THE FAR SIDE® By GARY LARSON



"Whoa! Watch where that thing lands
—we'll probably need it."

relief forløsning
Austrian østrigsk
founder grundlægger
suppressed undertrykt
subconscious underbevidst

The Far Side® by Gary Larson © 1986 FarWorks, Inc. All Rights Reserved. The Far Side® and the Larson® signature are registered trademarks of FarWorks, Inc. Used with permission.

imply betyde
dormant i dvale
occur opstå
be at a loss for words
mangle ord
intimidating skræmmende
sphere sfære

with shame by releasing nervous energy. Being in a shameful situation or in a situation where we are forced to confront our taboos is unpleasant. Taboos and shame build up nervous energy, and laughing at our taboos and our shame releases some of that energy. Think of the term 'nervous laughter' which occurs in embarrassing situations where we are at a loss for words. Laughing at death, for example, makes it appear less intimidating and it allows us to relax.

Secondly, laughing at our taboos creates distance, and distance allows us to stay in control. Laughing at death, for instance, somehow removes it from our personal sphere. When we laugh at death, we no longer consider the fact that we are all afraid of dying. In this way it makes death less personal – and less unpleasant to talk about. Again, laughing at death makes death less intimidating.

All in all, the relief theory can explain why we laugh at diverse things such as certain scenes in horror films, our own stupid mistakes and jokes about death and disease. Horror scares us, but laughing allows us to distance ourselves from our fear. Laughing at our own mistakes allows us to stay in control and makes us feel less idiotic. Death and disease are simply not very pleasant to face, and laughing at these things removes them from ourselves and allows us to feel safe. In other words, humour is a safe way of confronting taboos and shame.

The Incongruity Theory

incongruity uoverensstem-
melse
perception opfattelse
advocate støtte
quote citat
gap hul
encounter støde på

The incongruity theory states that we laugh at things that do not match our perception of the world, or rather that we laugh when we realise that something does not match reality. According to the incongruity theory, we laugh at things that are unrealistic, exaggerated, weird or surprising. The incongruity theory was advocated by the philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) among others. Rowan Atkinson's quote from p. 8 seems to indicate that he is also an advocate of the incongruity theory. He says things are funny if they do not match our expectations – if they are incongruent with our perception of the world.

According to the incongruity theory, humour is based on gaps in perception. When we encounter a text, cartoon etc. that is unrealistic, exaggerated, weird or surprising, there is a gap between our realistic, down-to-earth ideas of how the world is supposed to be and the way it is presented in the text or the cartoon. The moment we realise this gap exists, the surprise forces us to laugh. According to the advocates of the incongruity theory, it is not the gap itself that is amusing, but our realisation that the gap is there. Surprise is an important element

in the experience of incongruity. Creating patterns and breaking them is also important. According to the incongruity theory, patterns are safe – and breaking patterns creates surprise and makes us laugh.

Sometimes incongruent humour does more than make us laugh, however. Sometimes it gives us new perspectives and new insight into the world. Hence we not only laugh at the incongruent act itself, but also at our culturally accepted dogmas and ourselves. Dealing with something that is weird and incongruent allows us to step back and look at the world around us.

As a result, we are provoked into thinking about what is normal – and how norms are often haphazard and silly. According to social norms, for instance, it is good style to wear a silk tie around your neck and a leather belt around your waist. Switch the two around, and you are a social outcast. Why are we allowed to dress one way, but not the other? Is this not strange?

The incongruity theory can explain why we laugh at absurd things such as many of Monty Python's sketches. Monty Python's reality is simply not very close to our reality. They were the inventors of unrealistic phenomena such as a gang of old women in leather jackets called Hell's Grannies, who attack young people and families. They wrote sketches in which pet shops sold dead parrots and persistently claimed that these "ex-parrots" were alive, and they had their television announcers sit at their desks in the ocean – or in other unlikely places. These things are strange – incongruent with reality – and therefore funny.



pattern mønster
hence således
dogma dogme; vedtaget
regel
haphazard tilfældig
outcast udstødt person
inventor opfinder
phenomenon fænomen
persistently vedholdende
announcer oplæser