The Philosophy of Humour

Paul McDonald

(... JUST JOKING...)
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A Note on the Author

Humanities Insights
1. Introduction

The American philosopher Ted Cohen refuses to offer a universal theory of joking because he doesn’t think such a thing exists. Certainly there are numerous competing theories of humour and laughter, and the quest to adequately theorise them is as old as philosophy itself. The absence of a single theory implies the importance of assessing the various competing theories, of course, and one aim of this book is to do exactly that.

Humour has been discussed from a host of different perspectives over the years, many of which fall outside the discipline of philosophy. While concentrating chiefly on philosophical approaches to humour, this discussion inevitably moves into other fields such as cultural studies, literary theory, religion, psychoanalysis, and psychology; the broad focus will hopefully make for a richer account of humour and its bearing on the human condition.

Humour is a creative activity, and another aim of this book is to address that aspect of humour. Research shows that people are more receptive to new concepts when they are in a ‘humorous mode,’ and they are also more creative. Throughout the book readers will be invited to engage in creative writing exercises designed to exploit this crucial facet of humour, and to help them explore relevant issues imaginatively. In this way they will deepen their understanding of those issues, whilst at the same time cultivating their own creative skills. Thus the book will be of value both to people interested in the meaning of humour, and to those wishing to explore its creative possibilities. Students of philosophy will find the creative writing exercises useful in helping to engage with the debates that surround humour, whilst creative writers will discover that thinking philosophically about humour can lead to a better appreciation of how it might work for them in their creative lives. Also, at various points
throughout the book, readers will be invited to ‘pause and reflect’ on key issues; again this is intended to encourage active engagement with the topics under the discussion.

1.1 Humour or Laughter?

Pause and Reflect

What is the difference between laughter and humour? How are they related?

The title of this book refers to humour, and it is worth saying something about what this means, and how the word has signified through history. It has its origins in the Latin *umor*, which meant liquid. In medieval medicine it referred specifically to the liquids that were thought to comprise people, and which need to be in proportion if one is to be healthy. There were four: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Too much blood made people sanguine and over–excited, too much phlegm made them phlegmatic and sluggish, excess yellow bile made them choleric and irritable, while too much black bile caused melancholy, anger and depression. Only with all four fluids in balance were people deemed healthy, and in good humour; attempting to make people feel better came to be known as humouring them. This in turn led to the term being used to indicate a person’s state of mind, with the first evidence of this appearing in the sixteenth century when ‘good humour’ began to denote cheerfulness. Later one of its connotations was eccentricity, or behaviour incompatible with social norms, and it is this sense of the word that underpins its associations with the comic; by the eighteenth century it denoted funniness and the state of being amused. Laughter can have negative associations, and in the eighteenth century humanist philosophers began to use the word humour to distinguish acceptable forms of laughter and amusement from morally dubious forms like sarcasm, mockery, and wit, which were thought to demean people. The term humour was reserved for benign and non–aggressive amusement. As a result a ‘sense of humour’ came to be seen as something worth cultivat-
ing, and by the nineteenth century having a capacity for humour was
demed a virtue. In the modern world the word has lost this specific
meaning, however, and tends to be used as a general synonym for
joking, comedy and laughter.

So over the centuries humour meant different things, and the phi-
losophers of the ancient world did not use the word at all. Their focus
is mostly on laughter. Indeed, throughout this book there is much
reference to laughter, and it is worth noting that there is an essential
distinction to be made between humour and laughter. Obviously they
are often related, but not always. Laughter is a physical activity that
can exist without humour; the source of laughter doesn’t have to be
comic and can result from being tickled, from inhaling laughing gas,
from nervousness, from a shock, or from other non–humorous stim-
uli. Similarly, not all instances of humour generate laughter. For one
thing, people need to find things funny before they’ll laugh, and what
counts as humour for one person won’t necessarily work for another.
It is perfectly possible to discern humorous intent in something with-
out actually finding it funny enough to laugh at. There are lots of dif-
ferent kinds of humour, and some of the subtler forms may not pro-
duce physical laughter as such. Here the word amusement is useful,
and some modern philosophers actually prefer this to humour. It can
denote a humorous state of mind in which laughter may be absent,
while the word humour itself can be reserved specifically for referring
to objects of amusement. However, not all are so precise with
their language, and often, particularly in twentieth century philoso-
phy and humour theory, the terms humour, laughter, joking, comedy,
amusement, mirth, etc., are used synonymously. As this book deals
with a variety of approaches to humour, I will use terms as they are
employed by the philosophers in question, while in general discus-
sions I will use whichever term is most appropriate in context.

Creative Writing Exercise

Create a funny scene in which a comic novelist and a stand-up
comedian argue about the relationship between humour and
laughter, and the importance of the connection between the two.
Try to use as many synonyms for humour and laughter as possible
in the dialogue, and think about which character might use which terms, and why.

It is useful to do this exercise, and indeed most of the exercises in the book, with interested friends because this creates a mutual audience: someone else’s laughter always has the potential to stimulate you to higher levels of comic creativity. As will be seen, depending on which philosophy of humour you subscribe to, there are various reasons why this might be the case.
2. The Origins and Evolution of Humour

2.1 The Emergence of Humour

No society has ever been discovered that doesn’t use humour, and it seems to have been around for tens of thousands of years. When Australian aboriginals were first encountered by westerners it was noted that they could perceive and generate humour. As they had been isolated genetically for a minimum of 35,000 years, it probably follows that humour is at least as old as this.\(^1\) It has also been part our cultural life from the beginning. Humour occurs in some of the oldest texts in existence, such as those written in cuneiform in ancient Sumer up to five thousand years ago. Many Sumerian riddles and proverbs clearly have a humorous dimension, and some Sumerian tales have structures akin to those found in modern jokes, such as the riddle form and the ‘rule of three.’ Likewise, humour was very much a part of life in ancient Egypt, where it features in their narratives and artworks, and in ancient Greece where professional jokers could make a living as entertainers.

The consensus is that humour is an exclusively human activity. While many mammals exhibit bared–teeth displays akin to laughter, most agree that only humans have the requisite cognitive capability to create humour. It seems certain that an ability to appreciate incongruity is important for humour, and it is thought that human beings began to develop this—or at least an ability to juxtapose disparate concepts—roughly 50,000 years ago. One early example of this development is the Lion Man figure found in 1939 in the Swabian Alps, Germany and thought to be about 35,000 years old. Carved from a mammoth’s tusk, the figure has the body of a lion and the legs of a man; this

yoking together of man and animal creates the kind of mismatch or contradiction that is often present in humour. Interestingly it has been suggested that humanity’s capacity for spiritual thought emerged around the same time, and that this may be related to our ability to entertain humour. Humour and spiritual thought both demonstrate thinking that allows what Joseph Polimeni and Jeffrey P. Reiss refer to as ‘a direct violation of an ontological category;’ (‘The First Joke,’ 360–361); in other words, this level of thought permits one distinct plane of being or existence to be entertained simultaneously with another: human and animal in the case of the Lion Man; natural and supernatural in the case of spiritual thought. For an example of how this relates to humour consider the following joke:

What happened to the Pope when he went to Mount Olive?
Popeye beat him up.²

Here the world of twentieth century cartoons is juxtaposed with a figure from reality, and to fully appreciate the joke you need to recognise the difference between these categories, and hence the ‘violation’ at work in the narrative. While this joke contrasts ontological classifications in an obvious way (to make the point), clearly not all humour does so, but combinations of disparate elements are almost always part of humour, and an ability to perceive them seems to be fundamental.

No one knows for certain why or how humour developed in humans, and there is probably more than one reason, but some clues may be found in the relationship between humour and play. The work of ethnologists like Jan van Hoof show that primates exhibit facial expressions akin to human laughter when they’re signalling that they’re signalling that they are in play mode and their behaviour should not be taken seriously. Likewise, babies and toddlers laugh and smile in similar situations to those where primates show play mode expressions. As children’s cognitive skills develop, so does the sophistication of their play, and their ability to use humour as a part of that play; as they grow, so their humorous play becomes more abstract and cerebral. Early human’s

² Unless otherwise stated all of the jokes used in this book are in the public domain. For a list of sources for jokes, see the ‘online material’ section of the Bibliography.
capacity to use humour may have developed in a similar way, as their cognitive capacity evolved. John Morreall, for instance, suggests that, ‘For early humans to develop humour […] they had to acquire this ability to play with thoughts.’ Thus humour seems to be linked to an ability and desire to relocate play in the mind; a capability—that animals don’t have—to utilise our creative faculties in order to achieve the pleasure of play in a cerebral context.

**Pause and Reflect**

Think of some of the ways our ancestors may have benefitted from humour; clues might be found in how humour features in modern life.

**2.2 The Benefits of Humour**

Darwin said that there must be some sort of evolutionary advantage associated with humour, and it does indeed appear that humans developed it directly because it has numerous positive properties, and very few negative ones. Laughing uses up energy, perhaps, and the noise created by laughter might have made our early ancestors vulnerable to predators, but these potential problems are far outweighed by the benefits. Some argue that the pleasure associated with humorous exchange replaced the pleasure derived from social grooming at some stage in our development: both ‘laughter and social grooming release endogenous opiates’ and so ‘the feelings of gratification positively reinforce’ both types of behaviour. Thus it seems that one early function of humour was as a social lubricant, and ‘the fundamental evolutionary purpose of humour and laughter was to facilitate cooperation between people;’ essentially, ‘a laughing response signals that one is both ready and able to cooperate’ (Joseph Polimeni and Jeffrey P. Reiss, ‘The First Joke,’ 352). Observations of primates suggest that humour might be linked to our need to partake of mock–aggression and create safe spaces where social conflicts can be resolved; similarly anthropologists note that humour in traditional societies often

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