
INTRODUCTION: THE FUNNY THING ABOUT HUMOR IS THAT IT IS REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT!

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How many times have you laughed today? Research shows that the average adult laughs fifteen times each day, and in a 2013 survey, thirty-seven percent of men and fifty-eight percent of women identified a sense of humor as a “must have” in a relationship (Abbey). We encounter some aspect of humor everyday—on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, in trending memes and GIFs, in advertising, on television, and in our use of emoticons and emoji. If humor is all around us, understanding its significance in our lives becomes a worthy quest.

A variety of disciplines study humor—psychology, biology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, communication, and literature. Some scholars conduct research into the place of humor in our relationships. Others study the link between humor and bullying. Some humor scholars look for its evolutionary origins in an effort to identify humor’s function in human survival. Many researchers and health practitioners claim that humor possesses a variety of health benefits. For example, laughing involves the diaphragm and abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg, and back muscles—hence the expressions, “laughed until it hurt,” “side-splitting laughter,” and “laughed our butts off” (Brain). However, studies done to validate the claims that humor and laughter can have a positive effect on immunity, pain tolerance, blood pressure, illness symptoms, and longevity are, in general, neither consistent nor conclusive. Work in clinical psychology does reveal that humor can potentially benefit one’s sense of well-being and mental health (Martin 331, 270). Many who study the topic argue humor bridges cultural divides. Others, however, insist humor’s reliance on stereotyping often perpetuates racism, sexism, and classism. Although these groups of scholars express opposing views about the effects of certain kinds of humor, they acknowledge its power to persuade or influence our thinking. These various

disciplines and scholars employ different approaches and often stress the different aspects and effects of humor; however, they all assume that humor involves a degree of creativity and the capacity for conceptual understanding and conceptual shifts. Furthermore, many scholars argue that humor is a uniquely human characteristic. As you can see, humor is a relevant topic of study because of its significant role in the following three areas: identity (ontology), culture, and knowledge or meaning-making (epistemology).

What do I mean when I say that humor, or what we find funny, is connected to who we are, to our culture or society, and to what or how we know things? First, I proceed on the assumption that most of us agree that identity, culture, and knowledge are connected (at least, on some level, the culture and society in which we live, and the stuff we know, and how we make sense of things does influence our sense of self). Second, on the most basic level, I mean that what we find funny and how we use humor reflect and shape our identity. Third, because it generates from and means something within specific cultures and societies, humor reveals what a culture or society values. What a twenty-something-year-old Chinese American female living in San Jose, California finds funny might not tickle the funny bone of a twenty-something-year-old female living in Bangalore, India. In addition to this larger cultural aspect, our more immediate social environments influence what we find funny, and humor often serves a social purpose. We use humor to connect with people or to ridicule and exclude individuals, to smooth over awkward moments, or to diffuse a volatile situation. Fourth, because using and getting humor very often rely on stereotypes and on our prior knowledge, humor often influences our perspectives on people different from us and on political and social issues. In other words, what we laugh at can construct our knowledge of our world.

The articles, stories, studies, blogs, satires, and reports that comprise *Funny* complicate rather than simplify what humor is, how it works, and its place in our lives. These readings invite you to examine humor and laughter through diverse lenses and to think critically about the value, politics, and ethics of humor. As you read and write about this topic, you will necessarily have to grapple with issues of race, sexuality, class, exclusion, and inclusion, and perhaps religion, politics, free speech, nationalism, and health—all of which tie to identity, culture, and knowledge. Thus, becoming aware of the many aspects of humor opens exciting and provocative pathways of critical inquiry.

HUMOR, CULTURE, AND THE INTERNET

Today humor proliferates as the Internet has become the medium, par excellence, for creating and disseminating humor, as well as changing the cultural landscape of humor. The Internet meme phenomenon is only one example of social media's influence on what we deem funny. Although not a required characteristic, humor is often present in memes. A meme can suggest an "inside joke," and once the meme "goes viral," the circle of insiders who get the joke enlarges, thus expanding what individuals consider funny. Because

INTRODUCTION: THE FUNNY THING ABOUT HUMOR IS THAT IT IS REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT!

cultural ideas and cultural humor are important characteristics of memes, they transmit both, a transmission that can potentially enhance cross-cultural understandings. In other words, the Internet adds a global dimension to humor. This *global* aspect results from the Internet's ability to make visual the *local* by particularizing jokes, humorous events, and experiences. YouTube, which makes available a glimpse at specific cultural and topical humor to millions of people around the world, exemplifies the globalization of the local. For example, rappers Nice Peter and EpicLLOYD, creators of *Epic Rap Battles of History*, each assume different characters spitting rap lines at each other. When *Epic Rap Battles* pits Elvis Presley against Michael Jackson, or Albert Einstein against Stephen Hawking, or Gandalf against Dumbledore, or Santa Claus against Moses, it relies upon specific cultural knowledges and experiences. However, because these rap battles also feature physical humor, one can lack this cultural knowledge and still enjoy the humor. In other words, these raps can evoke laughter from those of us who may not fully get the humor, especially if we enjoy slapstick. This enjoyment explains the popularity and ubiquity of the "Epic Fails," "Scary Snowman," and pranking videos on the web.

The Internet *has* helped to translate humor across cultural lines, nevertheless *specific* social and cultural dimensions greatly influence what we do or do not find funny. For example, Cultural Savvy, a program to help global businesses develop cultural competency, provides "some basic rules to remember" regarding humor: "Each culture has its own style of humor." "Humor is very difficult to export." "Humor requires an in-depth understanding of culture." "Avoid the following: ethnic-type humor, stereotyping, sexist, off-color, cultural, or religious humor" ("Using Humor"). These "rules" clearly indicate the importance of understanding the link between humor and culture. However, as you know we can share laughter with people different from us; we may not always agree on why something is funny, but we all agree that humor is important in our lives and in our world.



Kevin Hart "says he has internalized something Chris Rock once told him: the only thing all people have in common, regardless of race, gender, faith, politics or sexual preference, is that they like to laugh" (Wallace).

HUMOR, LAUGHTER, AND HUMANNESS

As you study humor—read and write about it—you will do more than amass information about a subject because humor, according to philosopher Simon Critchley, tells us about *being* human. Whether tongue-in-cheek or not, Critchley writes that humor makes us human because Aristotle tells us so. His reference to Aristotle reminds us that humor and questions of being (ontological questions) have long fascinated philosophers. Most humor scholars agree with philosopher and humor theorist, John Morreall, author of *Taking Laughter Seriously*, that “our capacity to laugh is anything but a peripheral aspect of human life and to understand our laughter is to go a long way toward understanding our humanity” (x). However, philosophers are not the only scholars who make this claim about the ontological aspects of humor. Identifying their approach as that of theoretical cognitive scientists, Matthew Hurley, cognitive scientist; Daniel Dennett, philosopher; and Reginald Adams, psychologist point out that the jokes we tell and the situations, things, and people at which we choose to laugh reveal to others where we position ourselves in the world (12). In our laughter and through our sense of humor, we may reveal our humanity or perhaps, at times, our inhumanity.

The paradox of humor is that we need the mental dexterity to get and express it, but humor’s manifestation and expression almost always involve the physical body, which as some argue, becomes very “animal-like” in certain forms of humor. Take a moment to think about the language we use to describe our laughter: *cackle, howl, shriek, roar, bray, snort, hee-haw, crow*—all very animal-like, indeed! You might wonder if animals laugh, and if they do, whether their laughter means they “get the joke.” The abundance of images of laughing animals on the Internet seems to provide ample evidence of both. Do laughing animals make them more human, or do they disprove humor’s link to humanness? Neurologist and neuropsychiatrist, Richard Restak tells us that although studies of apes suggest they engage in teasing “accompanied by laughter,” apes cannot “make multiple interpretations of a situation” (22). In other words, they may laugh, but they are reacting to the play rather than to a conceptual understanding or appreciation of humor.

Getting humor involves the networks in the brain, networks located in the cerebral cortex “related to speech, general information, and the appreciation of contradiction and illogicality” (Restak 21). For humans, humor very much relies on one or more of these areas. In order to find something funny, we draw on what we know, believe, and expect. We depend on generalized scripts and unrecognized (and unexamined) assumptions on which these scripts rest. Our ability to make sense of an inconsistency between a script and a humorous situation and to *appreciate* the humor in the contradiction and illogicality is a mark of our humanness (22).

Restak also points to the distinction between laughter and humor. We can laugh even in the absence of humor, pointing out we may laugh when we are frightened, sad, or embarrassed.

INTRODUCTION: THE FUNNY THING ABOUT HUMOR IS THAT IT IS REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT!

Many humor scholars note that a difference exists between humor and laughter, yet, as you will discover, it often becomes impossible to address one without addressing the other. Marshall Brain, founder of *HowStuffWorks*, states, in “How Laughter Works,” “Laughter is the physiological response to humor.” Your first reaction might be that Brain is making an obvious distinction. However, as you explore this topic more fully through the readings, assignments, and activities in *Funny*, you may want to revisit this assumption. Perhaps untangling the physiological—or at least the corporeal—from humor is not quite as straightforward as it seems. Indeed, as noted above, Morreall argues for the centrality of *laughter* in



Sharing a laugh or sharing a joke?

human life. In light of Restak’s study, we might conclude that regardless of how animal-like our expression of humor or how human-like animal laughter seems the ability to interpret the joke, humorous event, or experience is a uniquely human characteristic. In addition, we might further conclude that humor’s cultural, ontological, and epistemological aspects solidify its link to our humanness. This book encourages you to investigate these arguments and conclusions and to figure out where you stand in relation to the various theories regarding humor’s place in our world.

THREE THEORIES OF HUMOR AND HOW HUMOR FUNCTIONS

Many of the readings in *Funny* draw from, rely on, or expand upon well-developed theories of humor. The following theories constitute the foundational explanations of humor—of what we find funny and why we laugh: the incongruity, the superiority, and the relief theories. The incongruity theory of humor aligns with the cognitive aspect of humor and laughter. This theory posits humor as an intellectual response to something that surprises us—to something that differs from the norm or accepted pattern. We laugh at situations, actions, or behaviors we find illogical, unexpected, or inappropriate. However, our ability to “resolve” the incongruity proves crucial for us to appreciate the

humor. The superiority theory of humor is, as its name implies, based on the notion that we laugh because we feel superior to other people. Laughter then becomes an expression of this feeling of superiority. This theory is used to ridicule, bully, exclude, as well as to strengthen group solidarity or as a social corrective. In its simplest form, the relief theory of humor ties to the biological function of laughter and expresses a physiological point of view. Humor and laughter release tension or excessive energy. Of course, the incongruity, superiority, and relief theories of humor are more complex than I present them here, and they necessarily overlap in many ways. Each offers slightly different explanatory approaches to the subject. The incongruity theory tells us why we find something funny; the relief theory stresses humor's function. The superiority theory seems to do both and also reveals the personal *and* social dimensions of humor.

Although our sense of humor may be individual and tied to a specific cultural context, humor and laughter are social. Many who study both argue that, in addition to *having* a social aspect, humor and laughter also *serve* a social function. In other words, humor is important not only for the health and well-being of the individual but also for that of a community, society, and culture. Morreall devotes an entire chapter of his book on laughter to “the social value of humor.” He sees laughter as contagious; it possesses a “cohesive effect” and is “a friendly social gesture”; “it facilitates social interaction” (114-20). Morreall’s view of laughter should resonate with all of us. At some point in our lives, we have “caught laughter,” laughed because someone else was laughing. Although the Internet and increased opportunities afforded to us by social media (check out Dave Barry’s “Technology” on this subject, page 219 in *Funny*) means that we often are physically alone when we encounter humor, one might argue that we are in a virtual social context. In other words, we have a sense of a communal or shared experience of humor just as we do when we watch TV.

Rod Martin, like Morreall, addresses the social context of humor, noting that “[h]umor can (and frequently does) occur in virtually any social situation” and identifies “the social context of humor [as] one of play” (5). This play, however, can often be very serious, and humor often becomes an effective mode through which to challenge the status quo, confront narrow-mindedness, or enact social protest. The use of humor to address inequality, oppression, and the abuse of power has a long history. While my purpose in *Funny* is not to present this history, I hope that as you encounter the various perspectives on humor and laugh at (or not) the stories and images in this text you will want to learn more about the historical roots of humor. Knowing that humor draws upon a rich tradition enhances our understanding of its potential to change perceptions and practices.

HUMOR’S PERSUASIVE POWER

When we examine the ways individuals unconsciously and consciously employ humor, we find that used skillfully and purposefully it is an effective persuasive strategy or rhetorical

INTRODUCTION: THE FUNNY THING ABOUT HUMOR IS THAT IT IS REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT!

tool. This idea—humor’s link to rhetoric—is not a new one. Plato, when he conceived of his perfect society, had strong views on laughter, marginalizing those at whom laughter is directed and condemning what he perceived as the inherently derogatory nature of humor. His concern with humor and laughter, however, indicates that Plato saw humor’s potential to influence how individuals think and act. Indeed, the Roman orators/rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian (whose ideas still influence our understanding and practice of rhetoric) acknowledge humor’s appropriateness in specific rhetorical situations, and both point out that humor may relieve or diffuse tensions thus benefitting the speaker and his argument (yes, they meant males).

In *On Oratory and Orators*, Cicero provides instructions for invention in oratory, specifically noting that “[a] jocose manner, too, and strokes of wit, give pleasure to an audience, and are often of great advantage to the speaker” (II.LIV 144). Used carefully and artfully, humor strengthens the speaker’s position and enhances his ethos (II.LVII 150). Quintilian, like Cicero, instructed orators of his day on the proper and effective techniques of oration, and, like Cicero, he finds value in the strategic use of humor. Specifically, in his textbook on the theory and practice of rhetoric, *Institutes of Oratory*, Quintilian, locates great power in laughter because it “very frequently dissipates both hatred and anger” (VI. III). He is quite clear, however, that the ability to use humor effectively—to the orator’s advantage—is rare. Nonetheless, Quintilian spends a considerable amount of time in Book VI providing examples of and explaining humor’s rhetorical fitness. In other words, he includes humor as an effective means of swaying an orator’s audience and opponents, of gaining an advantage, and of changing perspectives.

Satire may best exemplify the persuasiveness and the promise of humor. Satire, often humorous, critiques human vice and folly in an attempt to improve human institutions or humanity and relies on comedic devices such as parody and exaggeration. Satirists see great power in humor, and in their hands, humor becomes the mirror that reflects our flaws. However, rather than using it as a weapon to destroy humanity, satirists use humor as a tool to expose and dismantle these flaws—to offer social commentary and change perspectives. Television shows like *Saturday Night Live*, *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Parks and Recreation* offer satirical commentary on a wide range of topics. However, first and foremost, these shows make us laugh.

ETHNIC-RACIAL HUMOR

As today’s comedians make us laugh, they also make us think. Much like Shakespeare’s fools and clowns who often possess the clearest vision of their fellow human beings and their society, our comedians often force us to see ourselves and others more clearly and to listen more keenly to voices other than our own. Comedians like Richard Pryor, Dave Chappelle, Margaret Cho, Louis CK, and Gabriel Iglesias open a space for us to talk

about difficult issues such as racism, sexism, and classism. Although one can use humor to reinforce those “isms,” these funny men and women use humor to confront harmful stereotypes and to reveal unexamined assumptions about blacks, Asians, Mexicans, lesbians, gays, and working class Americans. These “isms,” stereotypes, and assumptions seem tightly linked to our sense of self and to important social and cultural issues.

Therefore, examining the relationship between humor and race is not always easy. How often have you laughed at a joke that you considered racist? Have you ever stopped someone from telling a racist joke? How does one use humor to challenge racism? Almost universally, ethnic and racial humor works on the model whereby jokes target marginalized groups. In this form of disparaging humor, according to David Gillota, author of *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America*, “Very often, the dominant group remains unseen or simply implied” (10). This invisibility extends into the opposing sets of adjectives that drive disparaging jokes (smart/stupid, industrious/lazy), with the positive value (smart, industrious) implicitly aligning with the perceived characteristics of the dominant group (Rappoport 133). Because stereotypes and slurs are staples of ethnic and racial humor, they become important areas to consider. If we look at the history of American ethnic humor, we see, from colonial times until about the 1950s, this humor included “ethnic caricatures in newspapers cartoons . . . in minstrel shows . . . [which] survive[ed] throughout much of the twentieth century” (Gillota 7). By the civil rights movement, ethnic comedians such as African Americans Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor and those of Jewish heritage such as Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, and Mel Brooks emerged. Although Gillota asserts that “these humorists would rework familiar ethnic stereotypes, often collapsing or subverting them,” I urge you to consider how one knows if the humor reinforces or challenges the stereotype (8). Nevertheless, when the difficult becomes funny, the potential for change, or empathy, or understanding does emerge.

BAWDY HUMOR—CHALLENGING TABOOS

However, this notion of “funny” gets stickier when we turn our attention to taste or bawdiness. In his 2013 piece on the backlash caused by Seth MacFarlane’s performance as host of that year’s Academy Awards, *Chicago Tribune’s* chief theater critic, Chris Jones, addresses the subject of offensive humor. Referring specifically to Jon Stewart and *The Onion* (a satirical online newspaper), Jones writes “that even top brand names in comedy are struggling to figure what’s actually offensive these days.” Like other aspects of humor and laughter that you will read about in *Funny*, questions about humor’s bawdiness have a long history. Contemporary comedy and comedic performances of scatological (vulgar, crude, off-color) humor flow from the tradition of the Greek dramatist Aristophanes (c 44-380 B.C.), whose plays abound with implicit and explicit sexual humor tightly wedded to his brilliant political satire. We find further examples of ribald humor in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1475), specifically in “The Millar’s Tale,” a *fabliau*, a story showing high class people in comical or satirical compromising situations

INTRODUCTION: THE FUNNY THING ABOUT
HUMOR IS THAT IT IS REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT!

involving sex and/or money. The “tradition” of bawdiness continues in the work of William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Almost all of his plays (the tragedies and comedies), contain sexual puns, double entendres, and characters engaged in sexual banter. Shakespeare, like Aristophanes and Chaucer, understood and evoked scatological humor because it makes us laugh, maybe because of or despite its “crudeness.” However, many argue humor and laughter remind us that we are human, in a bodily (bawdy) sense.

The current debates regarding off-color or vulgar humor are not new. When the civil rights movement provided a “stage” for ethnic comedians to talk about racial issues, these same comedians, most notably Redd Foxx, Lenny Bruce, and Richard Pryor, also incorporated raunch humor into their performances. However, these comedians’ bawdy humor sounded and looked very different from that of Aristophanes, Chaucer, and Shakespeare. Foxx, Bruce, and Pryor each deliberately violated taboos by giving public voice to private lived-experiences of marginalized peoples. Using X-rated language, Foxx spoke what he heard and knew about being a black man in white America. Pryor, too, drew on his own experiences as a black man in America and “defied the boundaries of taste, decency and race to become the comic voice of a generation” (Schudel). Intent on challenging the status quo, everything deemed socially acceptable, and the limits of free speech, Bruce may be the “poster boy” of scatological humor. This iconoclast of the 1950-60s, brought up on obscenity charges for his night club comedy, defended the comic’s right to free speech. Today, humor’s bawdiness seems routine in comedy clubs, television programs, films, and other media. However, as comedians, humorists, and satirists use humor to challenge taboos or find new ways to make us laugh, controversies regarding the limits of acceptability and taste will continue. Humor—what it is, how we use it, what it means, and how we interpret it—is messy.

WHAT *FUNNY* WANTS YOU TO DO

Funny embraces this messiness as it asks you to read, write, and think critically about the following



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FUNNY

questions: When and why is something funny or not? *Who* decides what is funny? Can humor transcend cultures? How do race, class, and gender affect our sense of humor? Does humor promote inclusion or exclusion? What can we learn about ourselves, about others, about our world by examining what we find funny and what other people find funny? Is humor *ever* innocent? Finally, I hope that *Funny* opens up a multitude of other areas for you to explore and that the selections get you thinking and, yes, laughing.



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INTRODUCTION: THE FUNNY THING ABOUT
HUMOR IS THAT IT IS REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT!

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