

# Philosophy of Humour and Laughter – a critical analysis

Pooja Jadoenath  
Erasmus University Rotterdam  
427488 – [427488pj@eur.nl](mailto:427488pj@eur.nl)  
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Supervisor: Tim de Mey

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## Introduction

*A 911 dispatcher receives a panicky call from a hunter. "I've just come across a bloodstained body in the woods! It's a man, and I think he's dead! What should I do?"*

*The dispatcher calmly replies, "it's going to be all right, sir. Just follow my instructions. The first thing is to put the phone down and make sure he is dead."*

*There's a silence on the phone, followed by the sound of a shot. The man's voice returns, "Okay. Now what I do?"*

Now obviously, this was a joke. Some might not have found this funny, which is totally fine. However, those who did, probably did not think much of it. They heard a joke, laughed, and went on with their lives. Luckily for philosophers everywhere, others would try to analyse the reason behind the humour and laughter.

Some philosophers would laugh at the stupidity of the hunter, others at the sudden dark left turn this joke took in its conclusion. However, one thing most people and philosophers can agree on, is that humour is important. It can brighten sad moments and add levity to otherwise too dark or emotionally heavy subjects when needed. Though the question still remains: what makes it so? There are several ways of looking at humour and the way it makes people laugh. There are then also many variations of 'things that can make humans laugh'. Do we account for reflexive laughter, such as when someone (who is ticklish to begin with, sure) gets tickled? Or for a person who finds herself in an emotionally awkward situation and tries to laugh it off, was that humour? That is why in this thesis the focus will be primarily on humorous laughter, or laughter that was deliberately aimed at something the person in question perceived as humorous. Since nothing ruins a joke more than dissecting it to pieces, this thesis will get to the bottom of the barrel: what is humour, and why does it make us laugh?

Doctor of Philosophy John Morreall has gathered the most prominent theories on humour and laughter from the most prominent philosophers throughout the ages, from which three main theories emerge. In this thesis I will take a gander at these theories, as they provide a basis from which Morreall then formed his own. Then I will dissect Morreall's thesis by looking at his critics, after which a brand-new theory will emerge, which will integrate all the critic's criticisms.

First the superiority theory will be examined by looking at the writings of Thomas Hobbes and Plato on this subject. The same will be done for Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud's relief theory. Lastly, Immanuel Kant's and Arthur Schopenhauer's incongruity theory will be considered.

In the second part of this thesis, Morreall's own theory will be discerned. The broadest critique he has received from me is that his theory is not sufficient enough to describe all cases of humorous laughter. It is too broad and general to satisfactorily explain why people laugh, or what and why we find things humorous. His theory lends itself to critics, such as Karl Pfeifer, whose many answers to Morreall will be thoroughly studied as well. Moreover, a more in-depth look at play and humour will be provided in this section, as I think it is an important part of humour and laughter. To do so, a look will also be taken at Robin Tapley and Morreall's take on play and humour generally.

I will focus on the 'playful attitude' factor Morreall briefly landed on and integrate it with a deeper explanation of how play and humour are intertwined with Morreall's own theory on humour, which I do agree with. So, basically, this thesis will try to deepen Morreall's theory with the works of his critics.

## Superiority Theory

### *Superiority theory by Plato*

The term 'superiority theory' of humour was coined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but it has been around since Plato and Aristotle were walking the earth. The general idea of this theory is that humour, and its subsequent laughter, express a feeling of superiority over others or over a former state of ourselves.<sup>1</sup> This view does not seem so nice, and some would argue that this theory of humour caused a bad reputation of laughter and humour in general.<sup>2</sup>

The superiority theory was the leading theory of humour from Ancient Greece up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Though this theory seems outdated, I would argue it can still be seen today. Most evidently in so-called 'cringe' or embarrassment humour. This type of comedy employs jokes to make the audience feel embarrassed, or even cringe, at what the characters are doing to elicit laughter.<sup>4</sup> This type of humour is still very effective and popular, the successes of television shows such as *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979) and more recently the American version of *The Office* (2005-2013) attest to the idea that the superiority theory might plausibly explain contemporary examples of humour and laughter as well.

Plato does not appear to have been a humorous kind of man. He looked around the agora and reached the conclusion that people laugh at the vices of other ignorant, relatively powerless people.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he described laughter at people as a malicious act. In Plato's view laughter was something to be avoided, not only because it was always mean. Plato regarded amusement as an emotion, which could be dangerous because giving oneself over to this emotion would mean losing all rational control over oneself.<sup>6</sup>

### *Superiority Theory by Thomas Hobbes*

Considering that laughter and humour persisted over the ages, it seems safe to assume that not everyone held this view. This is difficult to assess, because not a lot has been written about humour by philosophers in the past. One old philosopher who had, however, was Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes largely agreed with Plato, and even strengthened this position in his own political-philosophical ways. Hobbes' view of laughter was that it was an expression of

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<sup>1</sup> John Morreall, "The Superiority Theory," *Philosophy of Humor*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last accessed June 30, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>.

<sup>2</sup> R.E. Ewin, "Hobbes on Laughter," *The Philosophical Quarterly* vol, 51 no. 202 (2001): 29.

<sup>3</sup> John Morreall, "Humor as Cognitive Play," *Journal of Literary Theory* vol.03 no. 02 (2009):244.

<sup>4</sup> Marc Hye-Knudsen, "Painfully Funny: Cringe Comedy, Benign Masochism, and Not-So-Benign Violations," *Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English* no.2 (2018): 14.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, "Philebus 48-50," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987):10.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, "Philebus," 10.

people's sudden glory when they got to feel superior to someone else.<sup>7</sup> Hobbes' reasoning was that laughter cannot just mean a joyous expression at wit or jest, because people laugh at wit-less indecencies and mischances all the time. Human beings are competitive creatures in this account of humour, which he then derided as a heinous act. However, it must be said that Hobbes does seem to consider inoffensive laughter. He said that 'laughter at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and when all the company may laugh together' it would not be malicious humour.<sup>8</sup>

Hobbes' most famous statement was 'homo homini lupus', or man is a wolf to another man. This statement summed up human nature, when humans are left in a state of nature. Therein people would be completely driven by self-preservation. Human beings are rational creatures, as opposed to wild bears who are only malicious when provoked. However, the trouble with rationality is that humans have more worries than simple bears do. For example, humans may still be on guard and not satisfied after just having eaten because they worry about where their next meal is coming from. We usually want to avoid death and will do so on instinct. This, combined with our rationality, makes it so that if left in a state of nature, humans are not so altruistic to one another, and compare themselves to the other. This can leave people with joy in others' misfortunes, as they will presumably be unable to take anything away from the laugher.

Hobbes observed that luckily for everyone we do not live in a state of nature. We chose to live together in a society, which is protected by a head of state. This often means that people can live relatively peacefully together. Regardless of Hobbes' seemingly bleak outlook on human nature, which does seem to communicate a rather malicious view on human interactions, he did believe that humans are social creatures.<sup>9</sup> The expression of benevolence and pity is a passion that humans know to express sometimes. What I think this means is that even though laughter can be a sign of pusillanimity and vanity and maliciousness, laughter is not necessarily bad. However, laughter in superiority needs to be avoided. Hobbes saw laughter itself as an expression of a passion. However, it is not a determined passion.<sup>10</sup> Just as when someone blushes, it can mean they are either embarrassed, or angry, or in love, laughter does not need to bear the same passion in all cases. The context then needs to be looked at, as people can be quite malicious, but are not necessarily so. Thus when Hobbes said: 'sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves', talks of laughter only in the case of feeling superior. It does not apply to all laughter in all situations.<sup>11</sup>

### *Morreall and the Superiority Theory*

Some philosophers such as Morreall, do not seem to wholly agree with the superiority theory, neither its content nor its conclusion. The only part of Hobbes' theory Morreall agreed with is the 'suddenness' of the humour. Morreall too believed that a humorous

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes, "Leviathan, Part I, ch. 6", in *The philosophy of Humor and Laughter*, ed. John Morreall (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987):19.

<sup>8</sup> Hobbes, "Leviathan Part I," 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ewin, "Hobbes on Laughter," 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 29.

feeling would spring itself upon the laugher. However, Morreall starts of by stating that of course people do laugh in scorn at other people, though this does not mean the superiority theory is all encompassing.<sup>12</sup> Morreall dismantles the superiority theory by pointing out that not all cases of laughter involve feelings of superiority.<sup>13</sup> For example, the laughter emanating from babies. Babies are too young to have developed superiority feelings, so this theory clearly is not for them. The baby in all likelihood has not even developed a clear idea of 'thinking'. Moreover, adult humorous laughter can result from a whole range of sources, such as seeing a magic trick, being tickled, etc. Some people laugh at wordplay jokes, which do not appear to have a victim to feel superior over. The same goes for lots of absurdist humour. Even though the superiority theory does cover some ground when it comes to humour, it is not enough. That is how Morreall dismantled Hobbes' theory, because the sudden glory arising from feeling superior is not a necessity to laugh. Therefore we can laugh without feeling when we do so, we are engaging in a malicious act. Moreover, we do not have to draw out a feeling of superiority when trying to create humorous media. Humour and laughter are possible without having to feel superior or demeaning others to make the joker look superior.

## Relief Theory

### *Relief theory by Herbert Spencer*

The relief theory has been around since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This theory is more concerned with human psychology and physiology than with philosophical notions of man as was the case with the superiority theory. The oldest version of this theory looked at the human body as a system of tubes, through which gases and liquids, so-called 'animal spirits', would flow.<sup>14</sup> These animal spirits would build up pressure until it would release, resulting in laughter. This is an out-dated explanation of the relief theory, but it still held legs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when in the 19<sup>th</sup> century psycho analyst Sigmund Freud and sociologist Herbert Spencer decided to tinker with this theory to develop it into the leading theory of why people laugh.

Spencer knew there were no things such as 'animal spirits' floating through our tubes. He defined relief theory in terms of excess nervous energy, which results in laughter. Here laughter is merely the relief.<sup>15</sup> The excess nervous energy results from inappropriate emotions or thoughts. Topics that are a taboo, such as the following 'rape joke' are a clear example of the building up of nervous energy, which in the end gets released via laughter:

*"My sister lived in a coed dorm at Boston University. One night she got very drunk and changed into a t-shirt and underwear to go to sleep. A few minutes later, the room started spinning and she ran to the bathroom and she started throwing up. And while she's vomiting, she can feel that somebody is tugging her underwear down. She couldn't turn around or stop it because she was throwing up so hard. She's vomiting and vomiting, and they're tugging her underwear down. It's going all the way down to the ground. And she finally finishes*

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<sup>12</sup> John Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter", in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987):129.

<sup>13</sup> Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," 129.

<sup>14</sup> John Morreall, *Comic Relief: a Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009):16.

<sup>15</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 16-17.

*throwing up, and she whips her head around to see who's there. But she didn't see anybody. Because she had been shitting herself."*<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, anyone hearing or reading this joke will be appalled in the first half, maybe even scared for the girl. This joke was performed at a stand up special by Sarah Silverman, and as she was telling the joke the audience suddenly fell dead quiet. Plenty of nervous energy. However, the filthy punchline in the end acts as a trigger for the pent-up energy to be released into laughter. Because the punchline shifted the nervous energy from the first half of the joke to feelings of relief at arriving to the conclusion that the girl was never in danger, thus the nervous energy can be vented into laughter.

### *Relief theory by Sigmund Freud*

However, the most famous version of the relief theory was penned by Freud in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. As with nearly all of Freud's musings, his version of humour is almost always linked with aggression or lust.<sup>17</sup> This was because he made a distinction between two types of jokes, innocent ones, and tendentious ones.<sup>18</sup> Tendentious jokes are the jokes from which the audience gains the most pleasure. These are jokes about societal and personal taboos and suppressed feelings, which in most cases are about aggression or sexuality. Innocent jokes do exist, which are jokes about anything else. However, Freud typified these jokes as less pleasurable. When tendentious jokes are made, the psychological inhibition that the audience held up until then, becomes unnecessary. The psychological energy that was required to maintain or create the inhibition, then can be discharged into laughter.<sup>19</sup>

Tendentious jokes, moreover, allow the jokers themselves to release inhibitions in a societally acceptable way. A joker may for example want to insult someone, but will not do so because of societal norms of propriety etc. The joker can instead make jokingly insults. They are not the same as actually insulting someone, but it can result in a small amount of pleasure for both the joker and the victim.<sup>20</sup> Humour can battle all kinds of repression in a societally acceptable way.

Freud distinguished three laughter situations, which were 'joking', 'the comic', and 'humour'. The first situation, joking, or as Freud put it *der Witz*, contain puns, jokes, verbal humorous sayings etc. In this case laughter result from the release of psychic energy, as discussed above. The laughter results from superfluous energy used in suppressing taboo thoughts or emotions. In cases of 'the comic', the energy that is released is the energy of thinking. When watching something comical, we do not have to spend a lot of thinking energy in understanding what is unfolding. Freud used the example of a circus clown. In watching them stumble around and mess up actions that we would perform without hold ups, we save thinking- energy we would have otherwise wasted on trying to understand the actions.<sup>21</sup> This release of energy then results in laughter. Finally, 'humour' relates to emotional energy and is largely similar to Spencer's relief theory. The awakened emotion

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Silverman, "*Sarah Silverman: a Speck of Dust*," released May 30, 2017, Netflix.

<sup>17</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> John Lippitt, "Humour and Release," *Cogito* vol.9 no.2 (1995):169.

<sup>19</sup> Lippitt, "Humour and Release," 169-170.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>21</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 18.

that is summed up in the beginning of a humorous bit becomes superfluous at the end of it, resulting in a release of emotional energy, which results in laughter.

There were more implications to humour and laughter than just release of superfluous energy, at least according to Freud. When humour gets exercised, it can be used as a tool to soften a person's suffering.<sup>22</sup> To Freud this implied that there was a certain power dynamic, wherein the joker took up the role of a caretaker, or parent, and the audience or receiver of the humour was placed in the role of a child.<sup>23</sup> But what happens when persons makes themselves laugh? Freuds' explanation of those scenarios was that there still was a dichotomy of parent-child, but in this case the superego is the protector or parent, and the ego is the child.<sup>24</sup>

### *Morreall and the Relief Theory*

The idea that humour has a healing function to some extent is a rather nice thought. Morreall's qualm with the relief theory is that not all laughter comes from a build-up of nervous energy. He gives the example of a pun with no clear 'prohibited' or taboo subject matters, such as: *I went to the dentist many times, so I know the drill*. There does not appear to be anything implied in this joke to produce nervous energy, or psychic energy to begin with. Yet it can still produce laughs, or a chuckle. Freud does not appear to have a theory on why we laugh at non-tendentious jokes in the first laughter situation, which seems to be the biggest qualm with his relief theory: it is not general enough. Though laughter does come from a release of some energy in your body, there is no way to check whether this is because of a packet of saved energy generated through one of the joking situations that Freud described. Psychic, thinking, and emotional energy is hardly measurable or particularly detectable in the case of figuring out why a person laughs. Moreover, Freud's theory would suggest that humour comes from repressed feelings. Psychological experiments have, according to Morreall, pointed out that those who laugh the hardest at 'taboo' topics such as sexual feelings and aggressions, actually indulge in those topics as well.<sup>25</sup> Thus the relief theory will simply not suffice.

### **Incongruity Theory**

#### *Incongruity theory by Immanuel Kant*

The incongruity theory can be seen as the most dominant theory on laughter in philosophy and psychology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though the idea of incongruity in humour has been around since ancient Greece, the word incongruous was first used to analyse humour by philosopher and poet James Beattie in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Incongruous means 'not going together', so the laughter here is produced by seeing two or more aspects which are not supposed to go together, be put together.<sup>26</sup> Morreall does point out that the term 'incongruous' in humour does get mismatched to non-incongruous laughter situations. Some comedians or philosophers use the term to mean absurdist, ludicrous, inappropriate,

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<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Humor", *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall New York: State University of New York Press, 1987): 113-114.

<sup>23</sup> Freud, "humor," 114.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>25</sup> Morreall, "Humor as Cognitive Play," 247.

<sup>26</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 9.

exaggerated, illogical humour, which are not the same as ‘having parts that do not fit together’.<sup>27</sup> Thus Morreall presents a core concept of the incongruity theory. According to this theory, humans experience the world through learned patterns. These patterns tell us, to a large extent, what we can experience in the future based on what we have experienced in the past.<sup>28</sup> For example, when we touch lava, we expect it to be hot. Most of the times, these patterns are right. However sometimes we perceive or imagine something that violates our mental patterns, such as imagining or seeing a cow with a man’s head instead of his cow-head. Anything violating our usual mental patterns and expectations is incongruity.

Two of the most influential philosophers to write about this theory were Arthur Schopenhauer and Immanuel Kant. To briefly sum up Kant’s view on laughter: it is caused by a mending of physical movements to the intestines, accompanied by the expelling of air by the lungs.<sup>29</sup> Mentally, humour can be very frustrating according to Kant, which is why the laughter comes from a physical place, not a mental one. When a person is listening to a joke, they build up a certain expectation. However, as often happens in jokes, this expectation might not be met, causing the audience to have a disconnect in the workings of their mental faculties.<sup>30</sup> Not only this, but the physical faculties, predominantly the workings of the intestines and guts, get disbalanced. Kant believed that this mental exercise had an effect on the movements of the intestines.<sup>31</sup> Thus the positive feeling of gratification does not result from the mental appreciation of the incongruity experienced in the joke, but rather from the homeostasis reached physically afterwards.

#### *Incongruence Theory by Arthur Schopenhauer*

Kant has shown that humour and laughter can be found when built-up expectations dissipate into nothing. Schopenhauer took a different route with his theory. To him laughter, is the expression of a sudden perception of an incongruity.<sup>32</sup> This incongruity happens when one concept is applied to two or more objects or events, so that they have been connected. When it becomes apparent, later on in the joke for instance, that the concept could only be transferred to both or all objects when looking at it from a certain point of view, leading to a new interpretation of one or more of the objects or events, the incongruity is detected.<sup>33</sup> Essentially, an incongruity occurs when there appears to be a mismatch between our sensory knowledge of things and our abstract knowledge of those same things.<sup>34</sup> An example from Groucho Marx will elucidate this framework further:

*“One morning I shot an Elephant in my pyjamas. How he got in my pyjamas, I don’t know.”*

The leading concept here is the mental image that when a person says: I shot an elephant in my pyjamas; they mean that they shot an elephant while the shooter was wearing pyjamas.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid,9.

<sup>29</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Critique of Judgment, translated by J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1892)”, in *the Philosophy of Humor and Laughter*, ed. John Morreall (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987): 48-49.

<sup>30</sup> Kant, “Critique of Judgment”, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 51.

In our sensory knowledge of things, it will not occur to us that an elephant could be wearing pyjamas. We assume that 1. the elephant was shot and 2. the person shooting the elephant was wearing pyjamas. These two occurrences are filed under one concept of “people hunting animals” that we are familiar with. Elephants and clothes do not fit together in our perception, so we do not even think to subsume the ‘elephant in my pyjamas’ under the concept of “animals wearing people clothes”. However, the second half of the joke delivers a new point of view. That first sentence can be interpreted differently, the shooter did shoot an elephant who was wearing pyjamas, producing a ludicrous cognitive effect! After it has been made clear that there is an incongruity, a person reading or hearing this joke can laugh.

Important to note here is that the incongruity needs to be perceived. It is not an objective thing that is universal. If a person were to find it usual that animals wear people’s clothes, they will not find the incongruity in the aforementioned joke because they will subsume the clauses under the intended concept.<sup>35</sup>

The joy or satisfaction felt with laughter is different on different circumstances. Schopenhauer went on to say there is a scale to how satisfying laughter is: the more unexpected, and the bigger the incongruity is, the bigger the laughter will be.<sup>36</sup> Schopenhauer regarded laughter as pleasurable, generally speaking, ‘we give ourselves up gladly to the spasmodic convulsions’.<sup>37</sup> This is because in these incongruities, it is often our reason that gets turned over by our perception. This ‘victory’ of perception over reason is pleasurable to us, because even though reason is an important faculty to have, it is also the reason for much of our fears, repentance, and of all our cares.<sup>38</sup>

Within this incongruity theory, Schopenhauer distinguished two kinds of the ludicrous, wit and folly. Wit is when two or more perceived objects or events are intentionally identified through the unity of a concept which comprehends them both.<sup>39</sup> This is how Schopenhauer defines a joke. The most relevant form of wittiness to this research is of course Schopenhauer’s account of humour. Humour to him means seriousness disguised by a joke or disguised as a joke.<sup>40</sup> Seriousness is the opposite of the incongruous; it consists of a perfect agreement of the concept and how it is perceived.<sup>41</sup> Irony, which is another subcategory of wit is when a joke is disguised by an air of seriousness.<sup>42</sup>

To round out Schopenhauer’s conception of the ludicrous, a brief look will be taken at folly as well. Folly is always unintentional. A person brings two objects or events together in one concept and acts on it until he or she recognizes the incongruity that was there all along. Schopenhauer gave the example of prison guards inviting a prisoner to play cards with them, until of course, he cheats. Enraged by his uncourteous behaviour, the prison guard does what he always does to cheating guests: he kicks the prisoner out of the building.

Schopenhauer’s theory on laughter seems to be broad and vast. Schopenhauer does seem to account for the subjectivity that comes with philosophy on laughter and humour by

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<sup>35</sup> John Lippitt, ‘Humour and Incongruity’, *Cogito* vol. 8 no.2 (1994):150.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, “The world as will and idea, translated by R.B. Haldane and John Kemp, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1907-1909)” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987): 55.

<sup>37</sup> Schopenhauer, “The world as will and idea,”60.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

having the ignitor of laughter, the realisation of the incongruity, happen cognitively. Therefore, it accounts for the fact that not everyone will perceive the same incongruities, which explains to a large extent why people can laugh at different scenarios or jokes. However, his theory does not seem to account for laughter at the non-ludicrous, such as laughter in delight as a person is blowing out the candles on their birthday cake.

### *Morreall and the incongruence theory*

Morreall makes the point that because there is not one universally accepted definition of incongruity, it is impossible to accept a single theory on incongruity. There is no *the* incongruity theory.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Morreall points out that not all incongruous situations give occasion for laughter. To him incongruity is anything that the observer comes across that challenges his or her's cognitive pattern, framing the certain thing or event set before them.<sup>44</sup> For example, finding your house burned to ashes upon arrival is incongruous, though most definitely not funny. It does not occur to anyone that when they come home their house will be burned to a crisp; it does not fit any consistencies or patterns you have experienced, usually. Non-humorous incongruity can be found all around, for example in art. In some dramas the incongruities that happen are not played out for laughs, but for tears or the thrill. An incongruity theory would be too broad in any conception to be applied to all cases of amused laughter or humour. Morreall made a distinction then between three types of reactions to incongruity.

The first, is incongruity as negative emotion. This means that the incongruous thing perceived by the observer is detrimental to them in some way – physically, emotionally, financially, etc. certainly nothing to laugh at. The example of finding your house burned down is a case in point.<sup>45</sup> The term 'emotion' here is used to refer to a momentary episodic state of the person, not a long-term attitude. Here the incongruity leads to a practical concern.

The second kind Morreall called 'reality assimilation'. This is when an incongruence is experienced that rather than amusement or a negative emotion, leads to questions. It is key in this type of incongruence that the observer would want to solve the incongruence. This happens for instance when a person opens up an envelope and finds a large sum of money in it. There is no negative emotion, there is no humour or laughter to be found here, but a question- who just gave me an envelope with so much money? Reality assimilation happens when we are presented with an incongruity we want to actively solve with our minds, so the incongruity is no longer there.<sup>46</sup> Morreall brings up the fact that Schopenhauer assumed in his theory that incongruity leads to humorous amusement because people can enjoy the disruption of their established mental patterns. Morreall does not wholly agree with this, because it seems counterintuitive to enjoy the subversion of expectation or to have unanswered questions concerning yourself. People like to rationalise the world, so enjoying incongruities overall seems irrational. Humans and animals, when not confronted with direct emotions such as fear are mostly preoccupied with an orienting reflex.<sup>47</sup> We try to make

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<sup>43</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> John Morreall, "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange and Other Reactions to Incongruity", in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987):202.

<sup>45</sup> Morreall, "Funny Ha-Ha," 190-192.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 193-194.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*,, 194.

sense of our surroundings, to eliminate potential dangers. Kant did seem to agree on this rationalising aspect humans have, however his account of laughter massaging the intestines as an explanation of why that type of laughter is gratifying, seems steep.

Morreall's third reaction to incongruity, the humorous amusement one can get from certain incongruities is the complete opposite to the previous two reactions. To react to an incongruity with reality assimilation, means there is a theoretical concern which the observer wants to solve. The opposite is true in humorous incongruities. Here, the joke only works if the mind is not trying to solve the incongruity, which can often ruin the joke. Leading then to a passive state of mind, allowing room for the person to just enjoy the incongruity. Morreall gave the example of a cartoon of a pair of ski tracks going perfectly around a tree. This was sent captionless to the New Yorker Magazine. This can be seen as a case of incongruity, and one can react to with humorous amusement. However, as soon as you try to solve this incongruity, and try to cognitively assess the situation so that it can make sense logically and adhere to the expectation of skiing and general laws of nature, the joke has gone. The humorous amusement incongruity does not want to be solved. The reaction has become one of reality assimilation, which does not leave much room for laughter or humour.<sup>48</sup>

Secondly, when approaching an incongruity from a place of humorous amusement, there is no practical concern as there would be when reacting from a place of negative emotion. In order for there not to be a presence of negative emotions in the observer of an incongruity, there also needs to be a degree of disengagement.<sup>49</sup> The observer cannot be concerned with the subject matter that is made to be incongruous, or in any way twisted for humour's sake. For example, a joke about drunk drivers may either elicit humorous amusement from observers who have never felt a practical concern towards drunk drivers or their potential victims. However, this joke may at the same time elicit negative emotions in people who are not distanced from this topic and who have genuine practical concerns regarding drunk drivers. This second group of people will then not find the incongruity humorous.

For humorous amusement to come to fruition, it seems that the incongruity perceived needs to elicit no theoretical or practical concern. Morreall went on to note, just as Freud had, that this incompatibility between humorous amusement and negative emotions can be exploited, if done well, to reduce fears and anxieties about certain issues.<sup>50</sup> Laughing then, does appear to be the best medicine. This also qualifies the distinction Morreall has made. If we are able to spin incongruities concerning practicality matters close to us into humorous amusement, the definition of humorous amusement may be too fluid to be defined within any set perimeters at all.



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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 198-199.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 200.

## Morreall's theory on laughter

There does appear to be a need for an encompassing account of laughter. One that proves the value of it, while being broad enough to encompass all cases of laughter. Morreall wanted an encompassing theory of laughter, so he made his own. The difficulty he had to tackle was to find a broad enough theory to account for all laughter situations, which can be comedic, or joyful, or even purely physical for example when being tickled. Morreall went to search for the essence of laughter, even though there are so many different situations in which a person might laugh. We humans do not only seem to laugh at the humorous or amusing, but also out of embarrassment, or anxiety. None of the aforementioned theories describe all laughter situations. The superiority theory described laughter only in the case of sneering or mocking situations, the incongruity theory is only applicable, at least in Schopenhauer's description, to humoristic situations and the relief theory, a physical explanation, has not been proven empirically. These theories did not find the essence of laughter because they neglected all other instances of laughter that have nothing to do with humour, such as laughing when being tickled. Even though Morreall did feel like the incongruity theory came close, it still did not explain all cases of laughter either, for example upon winning a game. No incongruity has to happen after winning something, but the person can still laugh throughout and after winning.

As Morreall had already made a distinction between possible reactions to incongruity, he assessed that in order for someone to laugh, the observer needed to experience a shift in their psychological state, from a serious one to an amused or humorous one.<sup>51</sup> The first part of this theory of laughter is that this shift must happen suddenly.<sup>52</sup> And the second part is that this shift must be perceived as pleasant.<sup>53</sup> Thus the theory is: laughter is the result of a sudden, pleasant, psychological shift.

This theory seems steady enough, and most laughter situations imaginable have a pleasant sudden psychological shift in play. Even when tickling a baby, it is the noticing of the sensation of tickles on the skin in opposition to no tickles on the skin which causes the laughter, hence a pleasant psychological shift according to Morreall. The psychological shift does not have to be perceptual or conceptual but can entail a shift in sensory input.<sup>54</sup> Morreall even found an answer as to why people laugh out of embarrassment, in which no pleasantness is to be detected. Morreall's answer was that in those cases the laughter is forced to soften the harsh embarrassing situation the person is in.<sup>55</sup> This is to save face. When laughing, the person is conveying a message of feeling comfortable despite any proof to the contrary, which is what most people want when caught in embarrassing situations.

Morreall's theory on humour has a vast historical backbone, and so far seems intuitively correct. However, a few faults are to be found. The first is that Morreall's descriptions of the previous established theories of humour and laughter are incomplete. In Morreall's book *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, for example, he discussed the superiority theory in Hobbesian terms. Morreall seemed to gloss over the fact that in Hobbes' theory on humour, Hobbes nuanced his stance clearly. Hobbes did write that not all

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<sup>51</sup> Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," 130.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 137.

cases of humour or laughter were in derision of others, but Morreall neglected to address this in his paraphrasing of the theory. This does weaken Morreall's historical structure to some extent, because he tries to dismiss theories that he has not clearly explained fully.

At face value, I do think Morreall's theory on laughter itself is sufficient to account for most laughter in humorous situations. However, it is the element of suddenness that seems to be a stretch according to his critics.

## Pfeifer and Morreall

A philosopher who has had a long correspondence of critique with Morreall is Karl Pfeiffer. Pfeifer mostly seems to critique Morreall for even trying to create a general theory of laughter in the first place. Historically, this has not been achieved fully. At least not by Hobbes, or Freud, or Schopenhauer who all made room for nuances in their own theories. Hobbes, as mentioned before, claimed that even though a lot of laughter can be attributed to the superiority theory, some laughter can be derived from other situations as well. Freud did claim that most laughter fit into a relief theory of some kind of energy, whether that be psychic, thought, or emotional energy. However, something that has not been mentioned by Morreall, is that not all humour falls into that category. Freud differentiated within the 'joking category' between tendentious and non-tendentious jokes. Though he personally seemed to think non-tendentious jokes would be less humorous, it is a form of humour that he has seemingly been unable to fit into his relief theory. Schopenhauer in his incongruity theory did make sure to make clear that because humour happens on a cognitive plane, it will be different to everyone. All three philosophers did, to some extent, avoid being entirely definitive in what humour is, as it has long been deemed impossible. Morreall, however, did not seem to involve these qualifications in his own explanation of the theories, nor did he qualify his own theory sufficiently for all laughter situations.

Pfeifer starts the correspondence by stating that 'neither sudden change of psychological state nor change to pleasant psychological state is necessary for the occurrence of laughter.'<sup>56</sup> Pfeifer argued that suddenness is not a necessary requirement for laughter. He takes the example of tickling, which can be build-up of intensity, or it can just be a sudden tickle attack, but this depends on the ticklishness of the person. Some people, such as Pfeifer, feel a gradual build-up before erupting in laughter, whereas others who are extremely ticklish might immediately start laughing as soon as someone starts the tickling.<sup>57</sup> The same can be said of laughter at humour, as sometimes a joke needs to settle in someone's mind before they can make up their mind on whether it is funny or not. Moreover, a joke usually involves a setup, meaning that there is a gradual build up to the punch line. I would argue that in these cases the gradual build-up is essential to get the big laugh at the end. Sometimes a joke also just needs a little more time for the receiver of the joke to *get* the point.<sup>58</sup> This all then counters the claim that laughter needs to arise from a sudden psychological shift. Or in any case, this shift does not need to be sudden.

Morreall responded to this criticism by stating that in the case of tickling it is the sudden sensation of having hands on your skin and not on your skin, alternately. It is the

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<sup>56</sup> Karl Pfeifer, 'Laughing Matters', *Dialogue* XXII (1983):695.

<sup>57</sup> Pfeifer, 'Laughing Matters,' 695-696.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 696.

psychological change here that is sudden that is important to Morreall's theory, not the finding the change pleasant.<sup>59</sup> Pfeifer brings up the point that in making someone laugh by tickling them, it is a continuation of touches, no one bursts out laughing if someone just puts their hands or fingers on them and lets them lay there, suddenly.<sup>60</sup> The laughter itself can be sudden, however the underlying psychological state that laughter expresses could be continuous, as is the case with tickling, according to Pfeifer.<sup>61</sup>

Pfeifer's second part of the takedown is that the change experienced which produces laughter, does not need to be pleasant either. Morreall already explained why laughter that does not arise from humorous or pleasant feelings such as embarrassment or fake laughter in general are learned behaviours and not genuine laughter. However, Pfeifer does not find this utterly convincing, as he can imagine uncontrived embarrassed laughter as well.<sup>62</sup> This is a grey area in itself, as embarrassed laughter can be seen as 'fake', to soften the blow of embarrassment publicly which happens automatically. However, it seems like a steep explanation as most people will experience laughter from embarrassment as purely uncontrived laughter without thinking too much about laughing itself. Morreall's defense that this feigning of laughter in embarrassment could happen unconsciously, is rather hard to prove as well. Moreover, if most people experience this type of laughter without consciously feigning it, it might as well be categorized as real laughter since feigning something would need to be intentional.

Pfeifer did have other examples, however. Bitter laughter, sardonic laughter, ironic laughter, empty laughter.<sup>63</sup> It is not hard to think of laughter situations where people laughed without anything about the situation being remotely pleasant or funny. People can laugh out of stress, for example. The case Pfeifer used to exemplify this was that of German soldiers in a film realising they walked into a trap and were all about to die. This can certainly be seen as a psychological shift, and it even can be described as sudden, but certainly not pleasant. Yet the soldiers erupted in laughter.

Morreall did not entirely agree with this. He stated that laughter in the situations mentioned above, are coping mechanisms of the situations people are in. The soldiers were essentially trying to fool themselves in hysterical laughter.<sup>64</sup> The crux of the problem to Morreall is that these cases are not standard, because here the pleasure comes after the laughter instead of vice versa.<sup>65</sup> However, it is still unforced laughter. Pfeifer brought up the point that not all laughter situations have to be pleasant, even when disregarding the non-standard cases of hysterical or embarrassed laughter. When someone tickles someone who does not want to be tickled, they may still involuntarily laugh, even though there is no pleasantness to be detected.<sup>66</sup>

The conclusion here is that Morreall had failed in writing a general theory of laughter. Pfeifer ends his article of critique with saying that he fears that it is not possible at all to ever come to a general account of laughter.<sup>67</sup> Morreall's theory of needing a sudden pleasant

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<sup>59</sup> Karl Pfeifer, 'More on Morreall on Laughter', *Dialogue* XXVI (1987):161.

<sup>60</sup> Pfeifer, 'More on Morreall', 162.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>62</sup> Pfeifer, 'Laughing Matters,' 696.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 697.

<sup>64</sup> Pfeifer, 'More on Morreall,' 164.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>67</sup> Pfeifer, 'Laughing Matters,' 697.

psychological shift to happen for laughter to occur, has a few faults. Neither the suddenness, nor the pleasantness are necessary conditions for laughter, though there are plenty of humorous situations where these conditions do suffice. It seems as though both are right. There are many occurrences in which laughter is produced where it does not feel like there has been a sudden change in psychological states. For instance, when someone is in a crummy mood and needs cheering up. They can finally let out a laugh at the jokes their friends are making. However, it is very arguable whether or not this change then happened suddenly or gradually. However, a change in psychological states was apparent and something both philosophers would be able to agree on.

### **Morreall's Theory on Humour**

Morreall was sure that incongruity was the key to amusement. We are amused when our expectations get violated, though Morreall does say that we do not get amused in such situations if we first and foremost feel fear or a need to solve the incongruity.<sup>68</sup> He goes on to say that the recipe for humour in humans is the ability to communicate through language, the ability to think in abstract ways, and our rational attitude towards the world.<sup>69</sup> Obviously, language is a necessity because it is the medium through which incongruities and congruities are communicated. Abstract thinking is necessary to make incongruities or to follow up on an incongruity, you would have to think outside your set of conceptual patterns and play with them. A rational attitude is necessary to be critical; when you are critical you are able to look for the incongruity. If you were to take everything as it is, nothing would seem out of the ordinary and thus, according to an incongruity theory of humour and laughter, nothing would be funny. Morreall then describes humour as a "flexible, versatile perspective".<sup>70</sup>

Morreall has so far given a quite playful image of people operating within a humorous state of mind. Because we find ourselves enjoying certain incongruities, our lives become more playful in every sense.<sup>71</sup> Which is a necessity in life because otherwise it would be boring. However, his account on humour needs more expanding. Why do we find incongruities humorous? Why do humorous incongruities make us laugh in amusement? Morreall seemingly painted a contrast between humorous amusement, reality assimilation and negative emotion in regard to perceiving incongruities, but has failed to explain *why* we enjoy the incongruity. He merely explained how humorous amusement is different from the other two types of reactions, but an absence of practical or theoretical concern is not enough to explain what *is* there which we find so amusing.

Morreall established the value of humour and laughter and has so far linked humour most obviously to incongruity, falling in line with the generally accepted theory in psychology and philosophy. We find amusement when it does not overlap with negative emotions or reality assimilation; it is something we then approach with a playful attitude.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Morreall, "Funny Ha-Ha," 202.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 202-203.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 205.

Since a theory on humorous laughter has proven to be nearly impossible to achieve, a critical look now has to be taken at Morreall's theory of humour itself. Morreall expanded on his theory, which is one of humour as cognitive play, with three more elements. "1) Humour is a non-serious activity in which we suspend practical concern and theoretical concern, 2) humour is primarily a social experience, and 3) humour is a form of play."<sup>73</sup>

Morreall put all the insights discussed above, minus those of the critics, together and came with a new theory: humour is play with cognitive shifts.

- A. Someone experiences a cognitive shift.
- B. They are in a play mode, disengaged from practical and theoretical concerns.
- C. Instead of reacting with puzzlement or negative emotions, they enjoy the cognitive shift.
- D. Their playful disengagement and their pleasure are expressed in laughter, which signals to others that they can relax and enjoy the cognitive shift too.

Morreall starts his account of humour by combining the elements of a change and its suddenness, which he refers to as a shift. Pfeifer has already proven why not all humorous laughter or even humorous feelings (amusement) have to come from a sudden change. Element B has also already been discussed. Though Morreall is correct in saying that practical or theoretical concern does not lead to humour, it still does not explain what does. This element does touch upon a seemingly crucial element to humour, which is passivity and non-seriousness. Nothing humorous is after all meant to be taken seriously. A non-serious attitude then implies having to be distant, practically and emotionally from the gist of the joke. An attitude of not caring or passivity needs to be adopted here; humour concerning subjects one cares about almost never elicit truly hearty laughs, unless of course the subject itself is not the butt of the joke. For example, rape jokes. I care deeply about this subject. However, in jokes where the victim of rape itself is not the subject but rather the perpetrator is, I can fully laugh because I simply do not care about the perpetrator in any meaningful way. This is a joke John Mulaney made in regard to the plethora of apologies from outed sexual predators in Hollywood:

*The male apology has become an art form. Like many men, I'm only just learning that women don't like it when you run at them fully erect with hate in your eyes. This is new to me. I'm here to listen.*

This joke clearly puts the perpetrators of assault in a negative light and has elicited laughs. It should be said that this element thus does need a lot of clarifying and nuancing. Morreall talked about the opposition of emotion and humour, but in the previous case it is clear that emotion does play a small role. Even though I do not care about the victim of the joke, I care that he is the victim of a joke which admittedly makes the joke subjectively speaking funnier. A stance of non-seriousness or disengagement is not enough to define a humorous stance. Loads of subjects can feel emotionally passive to people and yet not be seen as humorous, so what exactly makes it so? Moreover, even though negative emotion can be associated with certain jokes, they can still come across as humorous and elicit laughs.

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<sup>73</sup> Morreall, 'Humor as Cognitive Play', 251.

Morreall defends the second element of humour having a social nature by looking at a stand-up act. The same act can produce a roaring laughter on a full house night but can barely produce a chuckle when the audience number is dropped significantly.<sup>74</sup> This point is not elucidated further on, which leaves the question: how relevant is this aspect? Though intuitively it seems right, the laughter does seem more joyous when engaging with others at the same time, instead of home alone behind a laptop.

These two points then lead to the third: humour is play. Morreall stated that when two or more people suspend all practical and theoretical concern to just enjoy the situation they are in, or are regarding it in a non-serious way, than they are playing.<sup>75</sup> A play of thought, as Kant described it.<sup>76</sup>

Morreall takes an evolutionary approach to build his argument. This is because he had come to the conclusion that there must be a reason why amusement is associated with laughter.<sup>77</sup> He assumes the positions of ethologists such as Jan van Hooff who posited that human laughter has evolved from “facial expressions and vocalisations in pre-human apes that served as play signals”.<sup>78</sup> That is because play often manifested in mock-aggression, so by laughing or grimacing, the apes would show each other that it was all just for fun.<sup>79</sup> Van Hooff then concluded, as did Morreall, that human laughter evolved from this exact reaction.<sup>80</sup> Morreall then described laughter in this context as play-signals, which are essential to humour because otherwise fellow humans would not know that what is being presented is just for play, just for humorous purposes.

### **Morreall and Robin Tapley**

Morreall’s argument is rather contested. Fellow philosopher of humour Robin Tapley wrote an article to address the issue of equating play with humour. Morreall wrote that when children are playing it gradually helps them to develop the cognitive skills to understand humour later on.<sup>81</sup> Tapley finds that Morreall used children’s development in play over time as leading to humour, problematic, because a child playing and a person being humorous are two different things. Playing is for fun, humour is for “funny”. A child usually does not try to be entertaining while playing, so the play holds a different function entirely from the cognitive developments a child eventually goes through to learn what exactly “humorous” means to them.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, Tapley brought up the point that in play people are extremely engaged, especially children. While humour, she agrees, requires a form of disengagement from the scenario. Non-seriousness seems intuitively to fit with playfulness; however, in playing as a child would, they are utterly involved with the play itself. They cannot distance themselves from the scenario, nor can they distance themselves from themselves, a requirement

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>82</sup> Robin Tapley, “On Morreall: A Failure to Distinguish Play from Humor”, *J Value Inquiry* vol. 47 (2013): 159.

according to Tapley to understand humour.<sup>83</sup> Even though children may play with incongruities and language, they do not experience sudden shifts causing amusement or humour.<sup>84</sup>

Morreall does not equate his theory of cognitive play as humour to the play children engage in. Morreall posited that play in children, from birth to about age 7 shows how their play evolved the cognitive capability of humour. Humour should help the child develop cognitive skills, and humour is cognitive play, so play helps develop cognitive skills.<sup>85</sup> In his text, he makes the distinction when talking of the value of playing with cognitive shifts, which is not the same as the value of play generally.<sup>86</sup> However, Tapley does raise the point that Morreall did neglect to elucidate what he meant by cognitive play exactly. Or what he meant by play generally. If this is a different type of play he is basing his theory on, the meaning of the word “play” should be made clear as well.

### **What are Humour and Laughter**

In this last chapter an attempt will be made to answer the questions: “why do we laugh?” and “what do we find humorous?”. As can be seen by Morreall’s theory on laughter and Pfeifer’s reaction laughter can have several causes. We can laugh out of embarrassment, either to rectify the position we are in or because it is a genuine reflex, we can laugh because of physical stimulation, or because we perceive and enjoy a sudden cognitive shift. Moreover, we laugh when obtaining a good grade for a hard test, or when we see an old friend again, or any other incongruence we experience which does not fall into the categories of negative emotions or reality assimilation. There are too many laughter situations to opt for a singular philosophical theory on why we laugh.

Laughter is hard to explain philosophically because it is a reflexive reaction, usually. Obviously, there are those forced chuckles produced when someone in a position higher up tries to be funny; however, all genuine laughter is usually completely reflexive. This, in humorous situations, clearly indicates that we found humour in whatever has been presented to us. As in other situations such as seeing an old friend, the laughter signals our excitement. Laughter can be seen, as Morreall had alluded to, as a mostly external signaling of the mental state of the subject. Most people do not think when laughing, which is when laughter results in snorting, or highly pitched hyena sounding or other not so pretty ways of producing sounds of content. The beauty to be found in genuine laughter is that it is produced without the person thinking about it. It is also quite easy to tell, at least for most people, when someone is fake smiling and when someone is not. Thus laughter can be seen as a social unconscious communication device. At least, that is what I get from all reflexive laughter. Laughing at humorous situations, or situations presented to the subject with humorous intent, are to signal that the humour was understood and appreciated.

Sometimes people laugh in situations that are completely inappropriate. When someone is telling a very serious story maybe, or when breaking up a relationship. In those cases the smiling or laughter also is not a conscious decision. Laughter then signifies comfort to mask the discomfort the person is feeling. Because laughter outwardly is seen as a sign

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<sup>83</sup> Tapley, “On Morreall: a Failure,” 161.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>85</sup> Morreall, “Humor as Cognitive Play”, 257.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 257.

that the person doing the laughing is comfortable and enjoying him/herself, the brain may produce the same effect even when the cause is the complete opposite to sooth oneself. People are social creatures and subconsciously we want to fit in. In this sense, it would make sense that our brains would want to do whatever is in its power to signal outwardly that we are fine and not in distress when put in uncomfortable situations. The reason why for most people it is easier to let their guard down and not smile but frown or cry instead, is that they are in a comforting environment.

This fits with Freud's and Morreall's and many other's notion that humour itself, and the consequent laughter, consciously or unconsciously, is a comforting act. These philosophers, among many, have posited that we use humour to reconcile with, or to diminish the negativity associated with heavier subjects. By creating a position of disengagement and distance, one's negative feelings towards certain topics can be lifted, even if only temporarily. Thus, humour can be seen as a comforting force. This of course does not apply to all cases of humorous laughter. Sometimes people like jokes, such as puns or absurdist humour purely for the incongruence. But even then, the laughter signifies a transformation from a presumably neutral mental state, to an elevated one. Humour and laughter need not be comforting in the sense that we only enjoy it if we are in a low place and need lifting up. But comforting in the sense that whatever the mental state might be, if the brain perceives something humorous, it feels more pleasant than it did before. This comes quite close to the relief theory. I do believe that laughter is a release, because it physically is. The air comes out of the mouth and the entire body feels a bit lighter than it did before. Even Freud's theory on excess energy can bear some truths, intuitively speaking. For example, I do think that tendentious jokes provide harder laughs because they are taboo, generally speaking. Humour in this way does not only get used to lighten negativity, but to also delve into mental situations we would never actually find ourselves in. As a fun mental adventure without real life consequences.

But knowing why we like humour, it is comforting and even if someone does not need to be comforted, it is still pleasant or safely adventurous. What then exactly is humorous? Morreall has failed to provide a clear-cut answer to what exactly humour is. Humour needs to involve some type of incongruence, along the line of Schopenhauer's theory: two or more concepts brought under one, until it becomes clear that one or more can be looked at from another perspective. It is nearly impossible to find a humorous situation in which there was no incongruence of any kind involved. I think we find incongruences enjoyable because it stimulates our mind playfully. Rather than thinking it is frustrating as Kant thought, these little puzzles are humorous because they are not meant to be taken seriously.

This non-seriousness or a stance of disengagement concerning the subject of the joke is absolutely necessary. Otherwise we would look too deep into the incongruence and feel the frustrations Kant wrote about. This leads to concluding humour needs a playful attitude, the one Morreall had already mentioned himself. I do agree on the idea of playfulness being intertwined with humour, but Morreall seemingly fails to define this completely.

Playfulness in this sense does not mean playful in the way Morreall described young children or animals to be. Morreall went wrong here by simply using the word play. As many experts on the word playful, such as Johan Huizinga have said, play is intense, fun, and mirthful. This form of play is general, as can be found in young children and animals, and maybe even some adults. Humour is different from these descriptors as it is supposed to be more relaxing than intense, though still fun and mirthful.

Playful can also elicit connotations of messing about with words, concepts, or theories to create new seemingly weird, or out of the ordinary new words, concepts, or theories. This messing about way of trying to make other people laugh, is not the exact same thing as play itself. Play, in and of itself implies amusing oneself or others, in the form of theatre. What is implicit in this idea of play is that the main function of it is not to produce laughs, but merely engagement. Either of the one or few people playing amongst themselves, or the people putting on a play for an audience. In the case of the play for an audience, this can be of course comedic. However, the comedy in that case is implicitly instilled with the intent to make other people laugh, which is different from the overall intent of putting on a play: which is to make believe and get others to believe as well.

The other generally accepted meaning of the word “to play” is in the context of games. Here too, the play itself is not meant in the way of humour, but rather as amusement. When playing a game the intention and the consequence of the mental state during it, is that of engagement, not of laughing at perceived humorous aspects of it, though it can be a pleasant side effect.

Playful in a humorous sense means what Morreall had already described earlier: messing about with our rationality, reality, and language to create pleasant incongruences rather than incongruences that elicit theoretical or practical concerns.

Therefore, humour are incongruities that are perceived to be disengaged from the audience in a fun and mirthful manner. This is a very broad and general take on humour, however that was always going to be the case. As all aforementioned philosophers have mentioned, and as can maybe even be seen from the jokes used as examples in this thesis, humour will always be completely subjective.

## Conclusion

***The First Law of Philosophy:*** *For every philosopher, there exists an equal and opposite philosopher.*

***The Second Law of Philosophy:*** *They're both wrong.*

This thesis sets out to find an answer to what we find humorous, and why we laugh at things we find humorous. For that purpose, Morreall's theory was dissected to get to the answers. However, first a look had to be taken at the three main theories of humour on which Morreall based his own, i.e. to a degree. First the superiority theory by Hobbes was looked at. Hobbes posited that when laughing at a joke at the expense of others or a past version of oneself, the laughter is filled with a 'sudden glory'. The second theory was the relief theory by Freud. Freud posited that laughter came about from an excess of energy that had no other way of being released than via laughter. The third theory was the incongruence theory by Schopenhauer, who wrote that humour and laughter happen after combining two or more aspects under one concept, and finding out that this could only be done when looking at the aspects from a certain point of view. When the other shoe dropped, the audience would

learn that they had been looking at the joke or situation presented to them wrongly and then subsequently laughed.

Morreall in his theory said that laughter arises from a sudden, enjoyable, cognitive shift. Which is only possible if the audience is in a play mode. This theory clearly took some parts from the previous established theories. From Hobbes Morreall took inspiration out of the 'sudden glory' part, as in Morreall's theory the cognitive shift experience must be sudden. From Freud's relief theory Morreall picked up that humour has many purposes, which can be helpful in talking or processing taboos or negative situations. The play mode the audience should be in before being presented with something humorous makes it so that rather than just experience reality assimilation or negative emotions, the audience can laugh at any topic the comedian or performer throws at them. Because humour makes those topics more distant, to some extent. And lastly, Morreall took the most from the incongruence theory. He too believed that the structure of jokes or concepts or situations we find most humorous, are incongruities.

Morreall did not cover all aspects of humour and laughter in his theory perfectly, however. In his account on laughter he neglected a lot of cases of non-humorous laughter. Or even straight up said that those types of laughter, such as in the case of embarrassment, should not be taken into account, because those are not 'real' laughter. Moreover, he neglected to accurately compartmentalise what he meant by humour and play.

It has become apparent that within philosophy at large there are many different ways of regarding humour and laughter in the first place. Morreall and Freud seem to look at humour and laughter more in the context of society, of how we connect to one another, and what rules in society can be broken in order to create humour? Their accounts of humour then also do not read as overly negative or positive; humour is merely a form of social human behaviour. Hobbes and Plato did not seem to be too keen on humour at all. Hobbes did qualify his theory to include humorous laughter that did not originate in feelings of superiority. However, his account of humour in society, just as Plato's, seemed wholly negative. People use humour to beat each other down and to feel better about themselves; in that case the essence of humour is malicious. Kant and Schopenhauer seemed to write about humour as though it had mostly a cognitive function; in Kant's case a cognitive function with a physical effect.

My own take on humour and laughter is not all that different from all aforementioned theories. I believe humour is mostly societal and psychological. Humour is usually shared among the group of people one surrounds oneself with. Humour can bond, exercise the mind, relax the body, release tensions, etc. Some of these functions are clearly psychological, and some are societal. Humour can help improve the psychology or mental state of a person, which ultimately does affect the way they stand in society at large. Humour can be a psychological release in the sense that emotionally laden subjects can be eased through humour and laughter. I moreover agree with Kant and Schopenhauer that there does not seem to be an essence of humour. Humour itself is not an existing thing; it is a concept that needs to be broadly defined, as there are too many situations that are too different from each other which are deemed humoristic. Moreover, as Schopenhauer and Morreall have attested too, humour happens cognitively. Thus it is always a subjective experience.

Freud has also made some good points, even though I do not agree with the relief theory based on the fact that the excess of mental, emotional, or thinking energy can never be measured or proven. However, humour does seem to produce the biggest laughs when it

concerns subjects society deemes to be taboo. This combined with the thought that humour has a relaxing quality to it, as when a brain is in a humorous state, it is disengaged and thus less anxious than it was in the mental state before, does give the relief theory some credit. This is because when disengaged, there is no room for anxieties about practical or theoretical concerns. However, the thing that is actually relieved is hard to pin down.

To conclude, my takeaway from all the discussed philosophers is the following: unforced and unfeigned laughter is an unconscious sign to the people around us that we are comfortable and happy, and humour consists in perceived fun and mirthful incongruities that elicit disengaged pleasant attention from the audience.

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