The Philosophy of Humor

“There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke” -Bob Dylan

Everyone enjoys a good laugh or do they? Humor remains a notoriously difficult subject to adequately define or explain. Is laughter a necessary response to humor or is it more like a judgement and dependent on many factors? How does this relate to philosophy which is generally more concerned with the abstract?

This presentation will attempt to explore the many classifications, modalities and moralities of humor. The three major categorizations of humor and laughter defined by D.H. Monroe (1988) will be considered, see below. This presentation is merely a brief synopsis and not an exhaustive analysis.

The Comedy of Philosophy

George Bataille (1922) was influenced by Bergson's book “Laughter” and went on to define himself as a “Philosopher of Laughter” in which philosophy is itself the joke. Bataille came to believe eventually that what it is may simply be the non-savoir, the unknowable. This suggested certain re-appraisals by Derrida of the Kantian Noumena as both a non-object of sensible intuition and object of non sensible intuition, as well as the Hegelian sublation (aufhebung—both abolish and preserve) as either meaningless or a comic double entendre. Laughter for Bataille is also an affective response to reason within a broader context of experience—tears, anguish, poetic, ecstasy. The comic stands as a transgressive and also as a sovereign figure releasing the unreason buried in philosophical reason.

History

Historically laughter has had a bad or at least a dismissive reputation. Disparaged by Plato as emotional distractions and condemned as harmful in the ideal state. Such views were echoed by other Greek thinkers and found their way into Christian ethics in the middle Ages and even the Enlightenment notables spoke against overt expression and laughter. The doleful Puritans were well known for their sober attitudes and went so far as to ban comedies during the English Commonwealth period. The origins of modern humor are to be found in Poggio Bracciolini’s “Facetiae” (1450). Probably the last and most comprehensive compilations of humor (mainly erotic) was G. Legman’s “Rationale of the Dirty Joke” (1969). who also claimed that no joke was original just variations on a theme. Sex and bodily functions are always a very popular theme of humor as well as ethnicity and human stupidity.

Laughter as Superiority or Domination

We may laugh at those we scorn or pity. We laugh at those whom we consider to be misinformed or ignorant, often to be accused of intent to ridicule or marginalize feelings of the Other and to demonstrate the superiority of our own opinions, moral, aesthetic or intellectual. Hutcheson (1750) a contemporary of David Hume said we do not laugh at those of lower status or whose aspect is no fault of their own such as animals or beggars unless we are totally unfeeling and devoid of human sympathy. Bergson saw laughter as a defense against the literary eccentric—though the quoted works of Johnathan Swift or Samuel Butler is directed against social convention. We can also be the butt of our own forgetfulness or stupidity when we make silly mistakes or misread situations.
Laughter as Relief

Herbert Spencer saw the release of nervous tension, or Shaftesbury's "natural free spirits", that in stressful situations reset the emotional balance through laughter thus avoiding the necessity of either a violent reaction or flight. Freud had a similar therapeutic interpretation regarding the role of laughter as a relief mechanism especially sexual puns or jokes which he claimed permitted the liberation of the libido, otherwise strictly under control. Freud also in Der Witz talks of laughter at the antics of clowns as releasing surplus energy. Here though the critical reader would surely raise the objection that they don't find clowns in any form amusing. He also mentions the Mark Twain story about the man who was inadvertently blown up by a dynamite explosion and landing some distance removed was docked pay for being absent from his place of work. This would better be described as an example of absurdity, which goes to show that categorizations are not rigid. The relief explanation was later revised and incorporated into palliatives for a number of medical conditions. To what extent is humor anchored by time and place? Chinese and Japanese girls still cover their mouths, tittering when embarrassed and hiding the teeth, such tradition reaches back to the time of Confucius.

Laughter as Incongruity or the Absurd

Most nonreligious people in the West live in a confusing and seemingly meaningless universe. Experience becomes the sub-text of a life long joke on the human condition. It was the late Enlightenment that established our more recent ideas of humor. The key structure of humorous incongruity is to set up initially certain expectations and then change the conclusion or bottom line, what comics would term the punch line, to something unexpected and contrary to the introduction. Even Aristotle could on occasion manage a little incongruity -"as he walked, beneath his feat were chilblains". Kant was reputed to have told quite a few jokes -the best of which was of the merchant who caught in a storm was forced to sacrifice his goods to the sea and such was his distress his wig turned gray overnight. Kant said that jokes work by evoking, shifting and dissipating our thoughts. This has nothing to do with reason but enables a beneficial re-arrangement of internal organs and ecologies. This is an echo of the relief theory. Schopenhauer declares that humor arises from the conflict between perception and concept. He illustrates this by the story of a man who declares he prefers to walk alone whereupon another hearing this declares that he too prefers such and suggests they therefore go together. Wittgenstein claimed that the incoherences of jokes reinforced the language games that defined communities.

Another way to think of humor is as a form of play. As Kant noted the pleasure in laughter is physical not intellectual. According to Aquinas laughter induces a cheeriness and a pleasant atmosphere. Later psychologists make explicit claims for playful activities as acts that transcend or break down social barriers and ease communication and understanding (Ted Cohen 1999). There is thought to be an evolutionary process at work since more primitive expressions of what are thought to be laughter and smiling can be observed in facial movements of the anthropoid apes. Such facial expressions are postulated in the past to have signaled intent in a world without spoken language.

Having briefly outlined some elements of the theories of humor the question remains:

What is it for something to be funny?
What makes people think of something as funny?

Is there some essential component in either word or image that can be identified or is it a matter of culture or individual temperament? It should be clear that no exclusive explanation captures the essence of humor or the distinction between the involuntary reaction and the cognitive response which could be little more than a smile. Robert Provine (1996) has made a long term scientific study of laughter explaining that it is simply the vocalization of ha-ha and found it not generally as a response to an explicit joke or humorous situation. In fact such interjections of ha-ha would appear commonly in the middle of a recorded conversation or more often at the end suggesting punctuation (perhaps a placeholder in some internal dialogue) and occurring without inducing any humorous response in the listener. (A para-linguistic event). His team also found that women laugh more than men. Perhaps the most rewarding arena to explore is that of comedy where people are assembled with the objective of being both entertained and as specific consumers of humor. Greek comedy in contrast to tragedy embodied anti-hero, anti-authority scenarios and later more general social relations. In the theater there are pointers and expectations-the catch phrase, the comic gesture, mannerisms and so on which provide the clues for the audience. In the past TV shows employed assistants in the aisles who held up boards saying “applaud” or “laugh” although this is now replaced with pre-recorded laugh tracks (canned laughter) to encourage audience response. American mass humor if it is to be characterized appears to be grounded in the slapstick, as in Keystone cops, Buster Keaton or Abbot and Costello.

Why do some find things funny and not others, and why are some kinds of jokes acceptable and not others? Jokes involving negative stereotypes, with the exception of certain political identities and ethnicity, are frowned upon. A farm lay within a disputed area after WW2 and the Border Commission was tasked with determining its proper location. As they announced their results the Polish farmer said “Thank God, I couldn't stand those Russian winters”. Stereotype yes, but of what? Is the joke about the lost English tourist asking the way to Kilkenny and being told by a local “Ah well if I was going to Kilkenny I wouldn't be starting from here”, racist? This does pose broader questions as to whether perceptions or even reality is changed through the disavowment of certain speech. Social progressives would claim that it is. Anti-moralists would claim that humor is anarchic, unrestrained and subversive, outside of normal social ethics. Most European countries have jokes about their neighbors, usually founded on some national characteristics. The Dutch make jokes about the Belgians, the Germans make jokes about the French and the Swedes do the same for the Finns etc, which has changed little despite most now being within an inclusive EU. The contemporary hyper-sensitivity to word or context is no joke though seemingly slurs and jokes directed at those outside the special protections is, constituting an allowable form of prejudice, what Cohen calls conditional jokes. Group identity is reinforced as laughter is more prevalent in social situations and amongst groups, now amplified via social media.

Humor and Art

Irony is a device where the meaning of the statement is not what it seems, derived from the Socratic dialectic e.g “I know that I know nothing”. Sarcasm, all too often crude and boorish has more in common with the mechanics of earlier Superiority theory. Satires and parodies can make us laugh but only if we understand the context. The Sokal Hoax (1996) would have no impact without some background in Postmodern Critical Theory. Or again as in the joke about Heisenberg and Schrodinger being stopped for speeding. “Did you know how fast you were going asks the cop. Now I do, responds Heidegger. Open the trunk, demands the cop. My goodness there is a dead cat in here. Now it is, replies Schrodinger”. Alfred Jarry d. 1907 in his play “Ubu Roi” and the standing joke about physics
(Pataphysics) prefigured absurdist literature and postmodernism. Martin Esslin (1961) drew the connections between the characters in Godot and stage comics in the earlier Vaudeville tradition.

Dada as a protest against war, employed incongruous humor. The title of Duchamp's Mona Lisa was LHOOQ which roughly translated means “she has a hot ass”. And Magritte's Surrealist “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” (1929), is a classic visual exercise in the irrational.

Differences-a brief comment

As noted there are cultural difference in the appreciation of humor these may be both linguistic/geographical or class related. Chinese humor is based on the (mis)pronunciation of words. Mexican humor is supposed to be rooted in exploitation of stereotypes -the dumb student in Pepito jokes. American humor pours ridicule on vanity and malfeasance in politics, perhaps a reflection of the democratic social structure which expresses as mass entertainment exaggeration and disparagement (Seinfeld sitcom?) and overt insults. Two notable wry exceptions are the Dilbert cartoons which satirized the foibles of American management and the films of Mel Brooks. The UK at least until recent years retained its class identities which have such a bearing on the success of Monty Python who ridiculed class attitudes but were based on Oxbridge sensibilities of the 1960's. Russian humor is usually dark as in “They pretend to pay us, we pretend to work”; a meme from the Soviet era.

Final Observations

It hopefully is clear that although humor is generally thought to be beneficial or even therapeutic there is no universal explanation for why anything is funny. Laughter may make an individual feel better or disgusted. Jokes may eventually be censored so that all that is left is the meta-joke. e.g. “An Englishman, and Irishman and a Scotsman went into a bar and the bartender said -what is this a joke?”. Yet what does remain is a certain utility that can transcend culture and time. Think of the line in Aristotle's Rhetoric “kill the opponent's earnestness with jest and their jest with earnestness”. This is very similar to the Chinese dictum that humor is “speaking nonsense words seriously”.

Want to read more?

There are the Stanford and the Internet Encyclopedia from which I drew some initial information. Provine's article on humor research is interesting.
See Jim Holt -for a modern light hearted overview of jokes and humor.