

**Taking Laughter Seriously.** John Morreall. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983, x + 144 pages, \$12.95 paper.

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Doubtless many readers of *Philosophical Studies*, a paradigmatic example of a journal devoted to hard-nosed analytic philosophy, were surprised to discover an article entitled "A New Theory of Laughter" in a recent issue of that journal. I am not now poking fun at the word "new," either (but see below). What is surprising, rather, is that there should have been an article on laughter at all. On the whole, laughter has not been a high priority topic in the history of philosophy, and those thinkers who have given it more than a cursory treatment would—with the likely exception of Hobbes—not be regarded with favor or even as bona fide philosophers by analytic philosophers.

The above-mentioned article (Morreall, 1982) was a refreshing attempt to introduce the topic of laughter to these practitioners of that critical style of philosophizing that has (loosely) come to be known as "analytic." *Taking Laughter Seriously* continues in this vein.

Part One expands upon the groundwork laid in the article, providing a more detailed argument structure and a more complex reading of the thesis previously advanced. Part Two proceeds with an informal discussion of the variety of humor, humor as aesthetic experience, humor as a force for mental liberation and positive social interaction, and humor as providing a meaning to life.

While Part Two makes for interesting and enjoyable reading and is not to be disparaged, the theoretical thrust of the book lies with Part One, which therefore holds the most interest for theoretical psychologists, philosophical psychologists, and philosophers of mind. So with this interdisciplinary group in mind, I will focus my discussion on the contents of Part One.

Morreall begins with a critical discussion of three of the most well-known accounts of laughter, viz. (1) the *superiority theory*, according to which laughter is an expression of a person's feeling of superiority—which may involve triumph, domination, derision, etc.—over others; (2) the *incongruity theory*, according to which laughter is produced when our experiences run counter to the orderly patterns we have come to expect; and (3) the *relief theory*, according to which laughter is a release of the nervous energy.

Morreall's treatment of these theories is detailed and informative, and of course his conclusion that each of them fails of sufficient generality to cover all cases of laughter is utterly convincing. The trouble is that not everyone who holds such theories holds them in the simplistic versions that Morreall has singled out for attack. Morreall admits this, but claims that it is unnecessary to examine other variants of these theories because they would likewise fail of comprehensiveness. This is surely too

quick, though. Gregory (1924), for example, holds a *genetic* relief theory, according to which present-day laughter has evolved from, and often still evinces a primitive release function. Clearly the mere citing of examples of current laughter not involving release would not suffice to invalidate such a theory, and in not addressing such variants, Morreall weakens the motivation for his own account.

Having dispatched his representative versions of the traditional theories, Morreall presents a “new”—albeit not brand-new (cf. Sully 1902/1907, p. 75)—theory of laughter according to which *laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift*. A “shift” is to be understood as a *sudden* change, and “results” is intended to convey that “. . . laughter is neither the psychological shift itself, nor the pleasant feeling produced by the shift. Laughter is rather the physical activity which is caused by, and which expresses the feeling produced by, the shift” (p. 39). This theory, Morreall is confident, will provide the key to understanding all cases of laughter.

Morreall’s italicized formula seeks to express a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the occurrence of laughter. As such, the condition it expresses could of course be satisfied by all sorts of things other than laughter. So the heuristic value of the characterization will ultimately turn on what the characterization nets along with the varied laughter phenomena missed by previous theories. If the other things besides laughter that result from pleasant psychological shifts turn out to be connected in interesting ways to laughter—say, if together with laughter they constituted some unified domain of behaviors—we would have a much more interesting necessary condition for laughter than otherwise. I am skeptical of this eventuality, but would not deny that there is a worthy research proposal lurking here.

But does Morreall’s formula *succeed* in expressing a necessary condition? Elsewhere, I have suggested it does not (Pfeifer, 1983). Morreall considers the case of embarrassed laughter as a possible counterexample to his characterization in that it does not seem to involve a change to a pleasant psychological state. His claims that embarrassed laughter is merely feigned laughter—so presumably not laughter, strictly speaking?—is not very compelling. (Furthermore, alluding to the matter of motivation again, Morreall’s explanation of why embarrassed laughter is contrived even when it does not appear to be is genetic. So he has availed himself of a move not conceded to the traditional theories of laughter.) Hysterical laughter, another seemingly clear counterexample to the pleasantness required by Morreall’s formula, is treated in a similar fashion, but with involuntary mechanisms to do the contriving.

As far as the suddenness inherent in the psychological shift is concerned, one need only think of the moderately ticklish person, whose pleasurable feelings build up gradually before erupting in laughter.

Finally, Morreall sets aside certain cases, such as laughter caused by hypothalamic lesions in multiple sclerosis or epilepsy, as irrelevant to his theory as a theory of laughter qua psychological response. This of course invokes certain views about the autonomy of psychology from physiology which many would resist, but which might turn out to have merit, for all that.

Granting Morreall the last point, there is another question concerning his claim that all the *prima facie* counterexamples to his theory of the psychological phenomenon of laughter, that is the non-standard cases of laughter involving embarrassment, hysteria, etc., are somehow *parasitic* on the standard cases.

In a sense that is a boring claim to make, for non-standard cases are typically explained in terms of deviations from the standard cases and vice versa. What is of interest here, however, is the form such explanations are to take. The underlying intuition suggested by Morreall’s handling of putative counterexamples is this: Laughing to a “purpose”—in some sense that excludes both mere reacting and mere

playacting (cf. McGinn, 1983, pp. 84-85) may divorce laughter from its function of expressing pleasant feeling, but one would have no call to laugh to that purpose if laughter did not standardly have that function in the first place. That is, achieving the purpose depends in some causal way on the pre-existence of that function.

Something like that may indeed be true. But I think such a "parasitology" of laughter points to a basic confusion on Morreall's part concerning the nature of his formulaic theory and what properly constitutes a counterexample to it. There are several ways of making this point, an easy way being this: Morreall's confusion is one of holding that indicating how a formula which expresses a general truth about standard cases can be used in explaining non-standard cases is tantamount to showing that the formula as such is true of the non-standard cases too. Once this implicit assumption is seen in its naked form, it is obvious that it takes more than parasites to undermine putative counterexamples to the account of laughter.

My criticisms and misgivings notwithstanding, it should be clear from the foregoing that Morreall has presented us with an exciting set of problems concerning laughter and a framework suitable for pursuing them at greater length. Readers can expect to have a stimulating and enjoyable time with this book.

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