

Chapter 1 : Philosophy of Humor (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Definition of wit - the capacity for inventive thought and quick understanding; keen intelligence, a natural aptitude for using words and ideas in a q.

Philosophers are concerned with what is important in life, so two things are surprising about what they have said about humor. The first is how little they have said. From ancient times to the 20th century, the most that any notable philosopher wrote about laughter or humor was an essay, and only a few lesser-known thinkers such as Frances Hutcheson and James Beattie wrote that much. The word humor was not used in its current sense of funniness until the 18th century, we should note, and so traditional discussions were about laughter or comedy. The most that major philosophers like Plato, Hobbes, and Kant wrote about laughter or humor was a few paragraphs within a discussion of another topic. The second surprising thing is how negative most philosophers have been in their assessments of humor. From ancient Greece until the 20th century, the vast majority of philosophical comments on laughter and humor focused on scornful or mocking laughter, or on laughter that overpowers people, rather than on comedy, wit, or joking. Plato, the most influential critic of laughter, treated it as an emotion that overrides rational self-control. In *Philebus* 48a–50, he analyzes the enjoyment of comedy as a form of scorn. In laughing at them, we take delight in something evil—their self-ignorance—and that malice is morally objectionable. Because of these objections to laughter and humor, Plato says that in the ideal state, comedy should be tightly controlled. No free person, whether woman or man, shall be found taking lessons in them. Greek thinkers after Plato had similarly negative comments about laughter and humor. Though Aristotle considered wit a valuable part of conversation *Nicomachean Ethics* 4, 8, he agreed with Plato that laughter expresses scorn. Wit, he says in the *Rhetoric* 2, 12, is educated insolence. These objections to laughter and humor influenced early Christian thinkers, and through them later European culture. They were reinforced by negative representations of laughter and humor in the Bible, the vast majority of which are linked to hostility. The only way God is described as laughing in the Bible is with hostility: The kings of the earth stand ready, and the rulers conspire together against the Lord and his anointed king. The Lord who sits enthroned in heaven laughs them to scorn; then he rebukes them in anger, he threatens them in his wrath *Psalm 2*: In the Bible, mockery is so offensive that it may deserve death, as when a group of children laugh at the prophet Elisha for his baldness: Sometimes what they criticized was laughter in which the person loses self-control. Other times they linked laughter with idleness, irresponsibility, lust, or anger. John Chrysostom, for example, warned that Laughter often gives birth to foul discourse, and foul discourse to actions still more foul. Often from words and laughter proceed railing and insult; and from railing and insult, blows and wounds; and from blows and wounds, slaughter and murder. If, then, you would take good counsel for yourself, avoid not merely foul words and foul deeds, or blows and wounds and murders, but unseasonable laughter itself in Schaff, Not surprisingly, the Christian institution that most emphasized self-control—the monastery—was harsh in condemning laughter. One of the earliest monastic orders, of Pachom of Egypt, forbade joking Adkin, The Rule of St. The monastery of St. Columbanus Hibernus had these punishments: The Christian European rejection of laughter and humor continued through the Middle Ages, and whatever the Reformers reformed, it did not include the traditional assessment of humor. Among the strongest condemnations came from the Puritans, who wrote tracts against laughter and comedy. One by William Prynne encouraged Christians to live sober, serious lives. That makes us alert to signs that we are winning or losing. The former make us feel good and the latter bad. If our perception of some sign that we are superior comes over us quickly, our good feelings are likely to issue in laughter. In Part I, ch. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and to compare themselves only with the most able. He says that laughter accompanies three of the six basic emotions—wonder, love, mild hatred, desire, joy, and sadness. Derision or scorn is a sort of joy mingled with hatred, which proceeds from our perceiving some small evil in a person whom we

consider to be deserving of it; we have hatred for this evil, we have joy in seeing it in him who is deserving of it; and when that comes upon us unexpectedly, the surprise of wonder is the cause of our bursting into laughter. And we notice that people with very obvious defects such as those who are lame, blind of an eye, hunched-backed, or who have received some public insult, are specially given to mockery; for, desiring to see all others held in as low estimation as themselves, they are truly rejoiced at the evils that befall them, and they hold them deserving of these art. The Superiority Theory With these comments of Hobbes and Descartes, we have a sketchy psychological theory articulating the view of laughter that started in Plato and the Bible and dominated Western thinking about laughter for two millennia. In the 20th century, this idea was called the Superiority Theory. Simply put, our laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves. Feelings of superiority, Hutcheson argued, are neither necessary nor sufficient for laughter. In laughing, we may not be comparing ourselves with anyone, as when we laugh at odd figures of speech like those in this poem about a sunrise: If self-comparison and sudden glory are not necessary for laughter, neither are they sufficient for laughter. A gentleman riding in a coach who sees ragged beggars in the street, for example, will feel that he is better off than they, but such feelings are unlikely to amuse him. Sometimes we laugh when a comic character shows surprising skills that we lack. In the silent movies of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton, the hero is often trapped in a situation where he looks doomed. But then he escapes with a clever acrobatic stunt that we would not have thought of, much less been able to perform. Laughing at such scenes does not seem to require that we compare ourselves with the hero; and if we do make such a comparison, we do not find ourselves superior. At least some people, too, laugh at themselves—not a former state of themselves, but what is happening now. If I search high and low for my eyeglasses only to find them on my head, the Superiority Theory seems unable to explain my laughter at myself. While these examples involve persons with whom we might compare ourselves, there are other cases of laughter where no personal comparisons seem involved. In experiments by Lambert Deckers, subjects were asked to lift a series of apparently identical weights. The first several weights turned out to be identical, and that strengthened the expectation that the remaining weights would be the same. But then subjects picked up a weight that was much heavier or lighter than the others. The Relief Theory Further weakening the dominance of the Superiority Theory in the 18th century were two new accounts of laughter which are now called the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory. Neither even mentions feelings of superiority. The Relief Theory is an hydraulic explanation in which laughter does in the nervous system what a pressure-relief valve does in a steam boiler. John Locke, Book 3, ch. The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged upon their constrainers. Over the next two centuries, as the nervous system came to be better understood, thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud revised the biology behind the Relief Theory but kept the idea that laughter relieves pent-up nervous energy. When we are angry, for example, nervous energy produces small aggressive movements such as clenching our fists; and if the energy reaches a certain level, we attack the offending person. In fear, the energy produces small-scale movements in preparation for fleeing; and if the fear gets strong enough, we flee. The movements associated with emotions, then, discharge or release the built-up nervous energy. Laughter releases nervous energy, too, Spencer says, but with this important difference: Unlike emotions, laughter does not involve the motivation to do anything. The nervous energy relieved through laughter, according to Spencer, is the energy of emotions that have been found to be inappropriate. Reading the first three lines, we might feel pity for the bereaved nephew writing the poem. But the last line makes us reinterpret those lines. Far from being a loving nephew in mourning, he turns out to be an insensitive cheapskate. So the nervous energy of our pity, now superfluous, is released in laughter. If still more energy needs to be relieved, it spills over to the muscles connected with breathing, and if the movements of those muscles do not release all the energy, the remainder moves the arms, legs, and other muscle groups. In the 20th century, John Dewey In his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* [], Freud analyzes three laughter situations: In der Witz, that superfluous energy is energy used to repress feelings; in the comic it is energy used to think, and in humor it is the energy of feeling emotions. Der Witz includes telling prepared

fictional jokes, making spontaneous witty comments, and repartee. In *der Witz*, Freud says, the psychic energy released is the energy that would have repressed the emotions that are being expressed as the person laughs. According to Freud, the emotions which are most repressed are sexual desire and hostility, and so most jokes and witty remarks are about sex, hostility, or both. In telling a sexual joke or listening to one, we bypass our internal censor and give vent to our libido. In telling or listening to a joke that puts down an individual or group we dislike, similarly, we let out the hostility we usually repress. In both cases, the psychic energy normally used to do the repressing becomes superfluous, and is released in laughter. Here it is the energy normally devoted to thinking. An example is laughter at the clumsy actions of a clown. Our laughter at the clown is our venting of that surplus energy. These two possibilities in my imagination amount to a comparison between the observed movement and my own. The pleasure of humor € comes about € at the cost of a release of affect that does not occur: His example is a story told by Mark Twain in which his brother was building a road when a charge of dynamite went off prematurely, blowing him high into the sky. Having sketched several versions of the Relief Theory, we can note that today almost no scholar in philosophy or psychology explains laughter or humor as a process of releasing pent-up nervous energy. There is, of course, a connection between laughter and the expenditure of energy. Hearty laughter involves many muscle groups and several areas of the nervous system. Laughing hard gives our lungs a workout, too, as we take in far more oxygen than usual. But few contemporary scholars defend the claims of Spencer and Freud that the energy expended in laughter is the energy of feeling emotions, the energy of repressing emotions, or the energy of thinking, which have built up and require venting. Funny things and situations may evoke emotions, but many seem not to. These do not seem to vent emotions that had built up before we read them, and they do not seem to evoke emotions and then render them superfluous.

Chapter 2 : Wit and Wounding (NE IV.8) - Oxford Scholarship

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, wit can be understood as keen intelligence or else a natural talent for using words and ideas in quick, amusing ways. Wit has to be understood as a sharpness of the mind.

Chapter 3 : English wit and humor | LibraryThing

Emphasizing wit and humor rather than comedy as classically understood, the course considers selected texts and films (for example, Mark Twain, P. G. Wodehouse, Dave Barry, Dr. Strangelove, Annie Hall, Monty Python) in the light of theoretical studies by psychologists, sociologists, and critics who have tried to explain why people laugh, want to laugh, and pay to be made to.

Chapter 4 : Home : Oxford English Dictionary

Abstract. If every age has its own wit and humor, old age is surely no exception. It is possible to identify at least nine forms of gerontological humor in literature from classical times to the present, each involving some type of incongruity: the foibles of frustrating age sui generis, expressions of what it means to grow old, relativity of age, physical decline, mental decline, social.

Chapter 5 : wit | Definition of wit in English by Oxford Dictionaries

Oxford Collocations Dictionary adjective native verb + wit have, use phrases beyond the wit of man See full entry see also witless Word Origin Old English wit(t), gewit(t), denoting the mind as the seat of consciousness, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch weet and German Witz, also to wit in the archaic sense 'have knowledge'.

Chapter 6 : Humor | Define Humor at calendrierdelascience.com

'Through their humour, wit and banter, they made significant observations and remarks on social issues.' 'He didn't appreciate my humor and dragged me into the kitchen.' 'As well as James bringing his own inimitable brand of Jewish humour, in recent months clergymen of all denominations have chipped in with their own.'

Chapter 7 : John Bayley on the Difference Between British Wit and Humor

*The New York Times has reported that John Bayley died last week at eighty-nine. A literary critic and Oxford don, Bayley was best known for his vivid, searching memoir, *Elegy for Iris*, about his married life with Iris Murdoch, who in the late nineties had fallen deep into Alzheimer's disease.*

Chapter 8 : Wit - Wikipedia

Wit is most often a clever piece piece of humor that reveals a truth or observation or makes a point in a unique way. In other words with wit, it's not just funny - there's some meaning behind the humor and it's expressed in a clever way.

Chapter 9 : Puritans, wit and magic at the Oxford Literary Festival | Suzi Feay's Book Bag

The Oxford book of humorous prose: from William Caxton to P.G. Wodehouse: a conducted tour English wit and humor, American wit and humor. Publisher Oxford.