

Is humorous amusement an emotion?

John Morreall¹

Abstract

I challenge the classification of humorous amusement as an emotion by contrasting it with standard emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, and love. Standard emotions have four components. The first is the cognitive: beliefs and desires about the intentional object of the emotion. The second is the physiological component: bodily changes such as increased heartrate. The third is the motivational component: urges to take adaptive action. And the fourth is the proprioceptive component: sensations of the bodily changes. While humorous amusement has two of these—the physiological and the proprioceptive—it does not require the cognitive and the motivational. We need have no particular beliefs about things that amuse us, and we need not be motivated to do anything about them either. I conclude that emotions evolved in the lower mammals as practical adaptations to dangers and opportunities. The object of an emotion matters to us. We are serious and motivated to do something about it. Amusement is a higher-order phenomenon which is not a direct adaptation to dangers and opportunities. We are not serious and not motivated to do anything about the object of amusement. That is why amusement suppresses emotions, and vice versa. Given these important differences between amusement and emotions, we should stop talking about amusement as an emotion.

Key Words: amusement, emotion, beliefs, desires, bodily changes, motivation, fear, anger, sadness, love, incongruity theory

Many philosophers have classified humorous amusement as an emotion, usually without giving reasons, but I have been arguing—for over three decades now—that there are several reasons to be suspicious of that classification.² One is that the ways we talk about amusement indicate that we don't think of it as an emotion. We speak of people's emotions "getting in the way" of clear thinking, for example, but we never say this of amusement. While we often describe angry people and sad people as "getting emotional," we never say this of laughing people. We never

¹ Prof. John Morreall, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA, USA. jsmorr@wm.edu

² See John Morreall, "Humor and Emotion," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20/3 (1983), 297-304, reprinted in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press 1987), 212-24; "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 188-207; "Enjoying Incongruity," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 2/1 (1989), 1-18; and *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Chapter 2.

say to someone laughing loudly, “don’t get so emotional,” nor do we describe a bout of hearty laughter as an “emotional” outburst or event.

Standard emotions

A stronger reason for doubting that amusement is an emotion is that it lacks some basic features of standard emotions. Borrowing an analysis of emotions from Jerome Shaffer (Shaffer 1983), let me propose that standard emotions have four components:

- (1) cognitive component: beliefs and desires about the *object* of the emotion
- (2) physiological component: bodily changes, such as the secretion of hormones, increased heart rate, and muscle tension
- (3) motivational component: urges toward adaptive action
- (4) proprioceptive component: sensations of the bodily changes.

Here’s an example: suppose that on a camping trip in the desert, it’s evening and I enter my tent to get ready for sleep. As I slide my feet into the top of the sleeping bag, I hear a rattling sound and see a moving bulge in the sleeping bag. Instant *fear*! The *cognitive* component is my *belief* that there’s a rattlesnake in the sleeping bag, and my *desire* to avoid being bitten. The *physiological* component includes the secretion of epinephrine (adrenaline), and with it increased alertness and muscle tension, the release of blood sugar, faster heartbeat, shallower breathing, trembling limbs, the redistribution of blood away from the surface of my skin, and the cessation of digestion. The *motivational* component is my urge to get away from the rattlesnake. That’s obvious in the way I quickly pull my feet out of the sleeping bag, and scramble to get out of the tent. The *proprioceptive* component is my sensations of my pounding heart, stopping of digestion, muscle tension, and other bodily changes. Those are what I feel in “feeling afraid.”

In the other “fight or flight” emotion, *anger*, we also see these four components. The *cognitive* component is my belief that someone or something is threatening me, or has already harmed me, along with my desire to eliminate the threat, or to repay the harm if it has already occurred. The *physiological* component includes the release of the hormone norepinephrine (noradrenaline), which triggers bodily changes that equip me to fight—such as increased breathing, faster heartbeat, higher blood pressure, and increased muscle strength. The *motivational* component is my urge to overcome whatever is threatening me or has harmed me. The *proprioceptive* component is my sensations of the faster heartbeat, muscle tension, and other bodily changes.

A third emotion that shows the four components of emotions is *sadness*. Here the injury or loss has already occurred, so fighting or fleeing would do no good. Instead, we withdraw from activity. Human sadness resembles the self-protective reaction of other animals to injury or

sickness in which bodily movement is reduced. That reduces the chances of aggravating the injury and conserves energy, thus promoting healing and recovery. The negative feeling tone of sadness, too, serves as negative reinforcement, motivating animals and us to prevent similar suffering in the future.

Emotions have promoted the survival of the species as well as individuals. Sexual love leads to mating and reproduction, and parental love motivates care for the young. Pity motivates us to help kin and neighbors who might otherwise die.

Humorous amusement

If this sketch of standard emotions is reasonably accurate, then we have a good basis for contrasting humorous amusement with emotions. Those who classify amusement as an emotion seldom give reasons for doing so, but the usual rationale seems to be that amusement has *two* of the components mentioned above—the *physiological* and the *proprioceptive*. That is, when we are laughing about something, there are bodily changes and sensations of those changes. Our diaphragms move in spasms, our facial muscles are contorted, our eyes tear, we lose muscle coordination, etc. We sense these changes, and, as in positive emotions, these sensations are pleasant. But if we probe beneath the surface of these similarities, we find big differences. One is that amusement lacks the cognitive and motivational components of emotions. And psychologically speaking, these are more important than the physiological and proprioceptive components. In emotions, the bodily changes are caused by beliefs and desires, and those bodily changes, along with the beliefs and desires, motivate adaptive actions. But none of these three—beliefs, desires, or motivations—are required in amusement.

At the supermarket I once found an eggplant with a protuberance in the middle that looked like the ski-slope nose of Richard Nixon. Seeing the eggplant as Nixon's head, I chuckled. But I did not have to believe it was Nixon's head, nor did I need any desires about it, to find it funny. Emotions, by contrast, involve beliefs and desires. If the eggplant had looked like a shark, for instance, seeing it that way would not have made me feel fear, because I would not have believed that it was threatening and would not have desired to escape. Robert C. Roberts has written that "there is a presumption of belief-dependence in the case of emotions, which is lacking in the case of amusement" (Roberts, 1988, p. 273). Roger Scruton comments that "this 'indifference to belief' is an important feature [of amusement], and explains our reluctance to describe amusement as an emotion. Belief-independent fear—say, a phobia of black dogs—is deemed irrational, while belief-independent amusement is not" (Morreall 1987, p. 165). I would add that while all standard emotions come in irrational forms—where the beliefs are false—there is no such thing as irrational amusement.

Since amusement does not require beliefs about its objects, it does not require desires about its objects, either. In negative emotions, the object of the emotion matters to us. We care about it

and we want it to be different. We desire that the rattlesnake go away, that the bully leave us alone, etc. In positive emotions such as love and joy, the situation matters to us and we want it to keep it going. But countless objects of amusement are fictional situations that do not matter to us. Consider this cartoon:



"Thin-crust, no onions, with extra zebra and wildebeest."

To laugh at this cartoon, we don't need to believe that lions use telephones or order pizzas, and we don't need to have any desires about lions ordering pizzas. Nothing in the amusing stimulus needs to matter to us at all. We are practically—and I would add emotionally—disengaged from the whole lion-ordering-pizza scenario.

Here the object of amusement is fictional, but even when it is real, no desires are required. Fear, anger, and love for people involve desires about them. People I fear I want to leave me alone; those I love I want close to me. But I don't have to be attracted or repelled by things that amuse me. If I'm driving through a new housing development of small, simple, look-alike houses and I come to a big, brightly painted Victorian house with gargoyles on the downspouts, I don't have to like or dislike that house in order to find its incongruous placement funny. We often have a disinterested attitude toward things that we laugh about, but you can't have a disinterested attitude toward the object of one of your emotions. It matters to you; you care about it.

Along with the lack of a need for beliefs and desires in amusement goes the lack of a need for motivation. Emotions prompt us to fight, flee, mate, nurture, help those in trouble, etc. But amusement is notoriously idle. More than lacking motivation, indeed, amusement blocks action. When we are laughing heartily, our breathing is interfered with, our limbs shake, and we lose

muscle tone and coordination. Wallace Chafe has even argued in *The Importance of Not Being Earnest* that the biological function of laughter is to incapacitate us (Chafe 2007, p. 23). And so, as Robert C. Roberts has pointed out, “we explain people’s actions by referring to their anger, fear, and jealousy, but not by referring to their being amused” (Roberts, 1988, p. 273).

In contrasting objects of amusement with objects of emotions, I have been referring mostly to persons, things, and situations. But other kinds of objects of amusement have no parallels with emotions. Consider clever quips such as Oscar Wilde’s “Work is the curse of the drinking classes” and P. G. Wodehouse’s “If it’s feasible, let’s fease it.” These are neither persons, things, nor situations. Consider, too, Rita Rudner’s quip “A friend of mine was in labor for 36 hours—I don’t even want to do something that feels good *for 36 hours!*” When we laugh at quips like these, our amusement is quite unlike the pleasure of an emotion toward a person, thing, or situation. The words trigger a surprising train of ideas and we enjoy the surprise, but no thing, person, or situation is the object of our amusement. To use the language of the most widely accepted theory of humor, what we are enjoying is the incongruity in these quips.

Funny bits of language do not even have to elicit incongruous ideas; incongruous sounds may suffice. At a lecture I once attended about the Berber people of North Africa, the speaker was taking questions. When someone asked about the Berbers who live in cities, she started her answer with the words, “Well, the *urban* Berbers . . .” The audience chuckled, but not at the idea of Berbers living in cities. What amused them was just the repeated “r” and “b” sounds.

Let me summarize my contrast of humorous amusement with standard emotions. Emotions evolved in the lower mammals as practical adaptations to dangers and opportunities. They involve cognitive and practical engagement with what is going on around us. Someone or something that we love or hate, someone or something that scares us or makes us angry, is evaluated in a positive or negative way, as good or bad, and we are motivated to act appropriately. Because the person or thing matters to us, we are serious, focused on dangers and opportunities, and prepared to act to further our interests. Amusement, on the other hand, is not a direct adaptation to dangers and opportunities, and so does not involve the cognitive and practical engagement of beliefs, desires, and adaptive actions. We are not serious, not practically concerned, and not motivated to act. With much humor, such as P. G. Wodehouse’s quip “If it’s feasible, let’s fease it,” these aren’t even possible.

With all these oppositions between amusement and emotions, it’s natural that they suppress each other. I can’t be afraid of you or enraged by you, and amused by you at the same time. And so we joke with people to dispel their fear and calm them down when they are angry. Strong positive emotions are also in opposition with amusement. In sexual intercourse, for example, laughter shows a lack of passion; if both people crack up in amusement, the sex has been sidetracked.

In the face of all these contrasts between humorous amusement and standard emotions, I think that the standard classification of amusement as an emotion is highly misleading. I recommend that we stop talking that way.

References

- Chafe, Wallace. 2007. *The Importance of Not Being Earnest: The Feeling behind Laughter and Humor*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Morreall, John. 2009. *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- . 1989. "Enjoying Incongruity." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 2/1: 1-18.
- . 1987. "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity." In John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 188-207.
- . Ed. 1987. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 1983. "Humor and Emotion." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20/3: 297-304.
- Roberts, Robert C. 1988. "Is Amusement an Emotion?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25: 269-274.
- Shaffer, Jerome. 1983. "An Assessment of Emotions." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20: 161-73.