

## Kinds of Pleasure and Types of Laughter in the Analysis of Laughter Provocation

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Mary Ann Cassar\*

**Abstract:** Most theorists of laughter provocation would agree that there is an essential link between laughter and pleasure. In introducing his provisional version of the Incongruity Theory in *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Carroll 2014: 49-50), Noël Carroll lists as requirements for comic amusement a ‘rise of enjoyment’ and ‘an experience of levity’, demonstrating the necessary occurrence of a kind of pleasure in any instance of successful laughter provocation. In a human context, an inclination to laugh may be part of what is meant when it is said that someone is pleased. Laughter may well be a constituent of pleasure. However, taking into account various genres of laughter provocation, should we consider comic amusement as the only kind of pleasure involved, as Carroll seems to hold, or are there other kinds? Another question would then follow: Is there any relation between different types of laughter and different kinds of pleasure? Answering these questions requires that we take a closer look at pleasure and at the way it manifests itself in laughter. This paper begins with a discussion of Plato’s and Aristotle’s accounts of pleasure. Taking ‘pleasure’ as an umbrella term for the cluster of words associated with it, such as amusement, delight, gladness, joy and hilarity, I use lexical patterning as a heuristic device to produce a taxonomy of these various terms and explore how the different emotions signified by these words may be related to characterizable nuances in the various modes of laughter.<sup>1</sup>

**Key words:** Kinds of pleasure; Types of Laughter; Lexical Patterning

Aristotle, in his definition of that which is laughter provoking, connects ‘laughter’ to ‘error’:<sup>2</sup> “the laughable is some mistake...that is not painful or destructive to life”. It seems that the essential pleasure related to laughter arises, in Aristotle’s view, from the realization that one has escaped the worst possible consequences of some moral or intellectual error

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\* Mary Ann Cassar, Department of Philosophy, University of Malta, [mary-ann.cassar@um.edu.mt](mailto:mary-ann.cassar@um.edu.mt)

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 5,1449a, 34-36, in G. F. Else, *Aristotle’s Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 183.

(except, of course, from an aesthetic point of view). Despite the seeming narrowness of Aristotle's definition, this does not automatically exclude other forms of pleasure that may lead to laughter, such as that which arises from the perception of some surprising feat of word-play, a pleasure similar to that obtained, perhaps, from watching a juggler at the circus.

Most people take for granted that there is an intimate logical connection between the notions of 'laughter' and 'pleasure',<sup>3</sup> one even more obvious than that between 'laughter' and 'error'. It appears clear enough that not all experiences of pleasure bring on laughter but all instances of genuine laughter are expressions of some kind of pleasure, whether this is interpreted as a feeling or a mood, since the word 'pleasure' is a token of homophony. However, several philosophers have disputed the existence of an essential connection between laughter and pleasure. Karl Pfeifer, for instance, musters a series of alleged counterexamples to deny this link: imitative laughter, nervous laughter, hysterical laughter, laughter due to tickling, and so on.<sup>4</sup> But these examples may be considered as instances of *pseudo-laughter* and they do not necessarily constitute a valid refutation of the general belief that there exists an essential connection between pleasure and laughter.

Laughter seems to be as related to pleasure as trembling is to fear, or as getting red in the face is to anger. In other words, laughter may well not be a *consequence* of pleasure, but rather one of its possible *constituents*. An inclination to laugh may be part of what is meant when it is said that someone is pleased. It would be difficult to conceptualise a person being pleased without any disposition to laugh or smile; if Punch is truly pleased, it may be because a smile is permanently fixed onto his face.

Some philosophers have also questioned whether 'pleasure' can be considered a general term that groups together an array of related feelings: "We resist the thought that there could be different types of pleasure, different species of the same genus. Such musings do frequently lead to the conclusion that pleasure is some sort of sensation, and the difficulties of that theory are familiar from Ryle's criticisms".<sup>5</sup> But the vast array of lexical terms used to refer to different forms of pleasure clearly evidence that there are many kinds of feelings associated with laughter: amusement, delight, gladness, glee, joy, gaiety, hilarity, mirth and jollity, to name a few. A careful description of these terms and their associated

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<sup>3</sup> Among those who have explicitly asserted it, one might mention Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, F. B. Kaye ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1729; 1924); J. Sully, *An Essay on Laughter* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1902); J. Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: SUNY, 1987) and his later publications.

<sup>4</sup> K. Pfeifer, "Laughter and Pleasure" in *Humor*, 7: 2 (1994), 157-172.

<sup>5</sup> R. A. Sharpe, "Solid Joys or Fading Pleasures", in E. Schaper ed., *Pleasure, Preference and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 97.

meanings is necessary if we are to better understand the forms of pleasure associated with laughter provocation.

Before embarking on such a journey, however, it is worth establishing the parameters of two related concepts: that of laughter and of laughter provocation. If one thinks of laughter as existing on a scale or gradient between the two extremes of an explosive guffaw and the mere hint of a smile, with different extents of the physical manifestation of laughter registered in between, then the provocation of laughter can also be categorised according to the kinds of response it gives rise to. Indeed, if one considers laughter according to its purely physical manifestations of audibility and facial expression, one can arrive at a five-fold classification that includes the smile, smirk, chuckle, cackle and guffaw. Each form of laughter can then be linked to a specific form of provocation. Farce or comedy, for example, may generally speaking be said to provoke guffaws, while humor<sup>12</sup> evokes smiles, wit leads to chuckling, jokes to cackling and irony often elicits a smirk.<sup>13</sup>

If these different terms related to laughter are not pure synonyms but may be understood as referring to actual different types of laughter, the same is true for the many different words we associate with pleasure. In common usage, as well as in the work of several theorists of humor, these words are not always distinguished from one another and are often used interchangeably. One may consider the use of such terms by James Sully who appears to use such lexemes synonymously, moving between them for the sake of stylistic elegance and variation. Despite this, however, he appears to instinctively, if not deliberately, still differentiate between the different meanings. Although Sully seems to delight in employing as many of these supposed synonyms as possible at one go, he almost invariably chooses the word ‘joy’ to indicate the incipient moment of laughter (e.g. “the swift accession of joy”, “the enjoyment that moves us to laughter”) and the word ‘gladness’ to refer to a mood that gives rise to extended laughter (e.g. “the persistent fit of laughter which frequently accompanies a prolonged gladness”, “renewed peals”).<sup>14</sup>

This article seeks to resolve some of the confusion associated with these terms by using lexical patterning as a heuristic device to chart the semantic landscape of ‘pleasure’ – a word that will be taken as an umbrella term for a cluster of other words associated with it. This analysis will investigate the way that these terms feature in normal uses of language and will attempt to extract from these uses a particular focal reference that can be said to be

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<sup>12</sup> Humor is not taken here as synonymous with laughter-provocation. Precise use of the word is given later.

<sup>13</sup> These taxonomies have been arrived at by applying lexical patterning. However time and word limits do not permit further explanation here and reader are asked to accept them, at least, for the rest of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> J. Sully, *op. cit.*, 71-75.

particular to each term. The article also considers how far the different feelings of pleasure described by these terms correspond to the various modes of laughter outlined above. Such a link is indeed suggested by Helmuth Plessner who categorically asserts that there is precise correspondence between types of pleasure and laughter, but does not attempt to give any further illustration of this.<sup>15</sup>

### **Plato and Aristotle**

Following Aristotle,<sup>16</sup> the word ‘pleasure’ is here understood in its widest possible sense denoting the positive feelings experienced by animals due to the good functioning of their nervous system (especially at the body’s extremities and surface) and, by analogy, the good functioning of the inner senses and the faculties of the mind.<sup>17</sup> Such an Aristotelian account of pleasure evidently rejects Platonic dualism and any associated devaluing of the body and of matter more generally.

In a manner that is consistent with his anthropology, Plato presents a moralising distinction in the *Republic*<sup>18</sup> between different forms of pleasure, denouncing sensual pleasure as bad, pronouncing pleasures found in the spirited being as tolerable, and deeming all pleasure derived from intellectual activity as good. In the *Philebus*, Socrates famously argues that apart from genuine pleasure, there also exist pseudo-pleasures that could perhaps, in the context of this argument, be associated with the types of bogus laughter briefly outlined above. But Socrates associates genuine or deceptive pleasures to truth and falsity, explaining that false pleasures arise out of false beliefs. Examples of such false pleasure are common enough. If a Woody Allen character believes that he has a chance with a beautiful blonde and anticipates the pleasure that this triumph will give him, the discovery that this belief is false reveals the anticipated pleasure to have been deceptive (while Aristotle analyses such moments of discovery or ‘*anagnōresis*’ in the context of tragedy, the same principle applies here to comedy or farce). Allen’s self-deception does indeed provoke laughter, but only on condition that it is witnessed in the cinema and recognized as fiction (as false in one of the senses of the word), or is recognized as being recuperable in some other way. The kind of

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<sup>15</sup> H. Plessner, *Le Rire et le Pleurer* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1995), 85.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 4, 1174b, 14-23, W. Ross trans., revised by J. O. Urmson, in J. Barnes ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle 2* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1857.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of pleasure not necessarily in the Aristotelian tradition see G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Penguin, 1949), 103-105; B. A. O. Williams and E. Bedford, “Pleasure and Belief”, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. 33 (London, 1959), 57-92; T. Penelhum, W.E. Kennick and A. Isenberg, “Pleasure and Falsity”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1: 2 (1964), 81-100.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Republic*, IX, 581c-592b, G.M.A. Grube, C.D.C. Reeve trans., in J. M. Cooper ed., *Plato Complete Works* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1188-1199.

pleasure that arises from this recuperability (another form of ‘*anagnorēsis*’) is yet to be analyzed.

Aristotle’s definition presents sensual feeling as a primary (and therefore good) form of pleasure. All other pleasures are can only be considered as such by analogy with these primary sensations. As opposed to the Platonic perspective, in Aristotelian philosophy pleasures can only be considered bad when one’s bodily senses are not being exercised according to their nature. According to Aristotle, all pleasure is good as long as it is authentic, i.e. when it accompanies the completion of the correct exercise of the senses. Bad pleasures, such as sadism, are false in the crudest moral terms. These Aristotelian definitions can be extended to a consideration of laughter: all genuine forms of laughter are primarily good, although some can be impure and can become corrupt. The same applies to the provocation of laughter. Diverse forms of pleasure can lead to laughter across its whole gamut, from the faintest of smiles to the most explosive and sustained of outbursts.

### **Relations of kinds of pleasure and types of laughter**

Let us now turn to an analysis of different kinds of pleasure and the types of laughter that can be associated with them.

(i) In the course of insisting that certain forms of communication (such as cases of laughter provocation) require joint making by an ‘I’ and an ‘Other’, Jacques Lacan opportunely develops his concept of *jouissance*. The term is first used to refer to the possession and enjoyment of rights or of any pleasure-giving object. Its meaning then evolves to refer to orgasm and later to the exquisite pain-causing ecstasies of the type described by mystics. But how can this concept of *jouissance* be related to laughter provocation?

According to Aristotle, the provocation of laughter necessarily involves a certain measure of pain – a pain that cannot go beyond a certain limit as, if it did, it would turn into something of quite a different moral and human quality than laughter provocation. For Lacan, *jouissance* is pleasure felt beyond the degree that an organism enjoys by nature.<sup>19</sup> *Jouissance* therefore involves suffering a certain pain due to an unbearable degree of pleasure, with this pain being unconsciously experienced as satisfaction. When laughter is explosive and unrelenting, the sensation of pleasure becomes so intense that it may reach an almost intolerable level of enjoyment that leads to pain. This situation is most often encountered in farce or comedy.

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<sup>19</sup> J. Lacan, *The Seminar 8: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 1959-60, Dennis Porter trans. (London: Routledge, 1992), see chapter 15.

(ii) 'Joy' refers to feelings of pleasure that seem to be more generally represented through visual expression than acoustically. This kind of pleasure seems to be more psychological than physical and its natural expression appears in the silent smile. As expressed by G. Meredith, "the least perceptible of smiles enhances the beauty of the human face by its appearing to reflect access to some hidden source of happiness".<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Nietzsche held that "the more joyful and secure the spirit becomes, the more man unlearns loud laughter (and) a spiritual smile is continually welling up in him".<sup>21</sup>

Indulgence in this kind of noiseless laughter is often simply described as the possession of 'a sense of humor', where 'humor' is not taken to refer to all kinds of laughter provocation and as synonymous with the 'comic' which was the word previously used for the purpose, nor as a subdivision of the comic as a way of inducing 'laughter with' rather than 'laughter at' but as that kind of laughter provocation that elicits a smile as a response. Smiling arises as a sympathetic reaction to serene pleasure at the recognition of the redeemability of an error that has been committed, this error usually constituting a failure in effecting appropriate mental transitions between possible worlds. Shared 'joy' appears to be the semantic frontier of all genuine smiling. Smiling expresses the disposition to share pleasure; it is an invitation to others to participate in one's 'joy'.

(iii) 'Delight' is a sheer positive feeling that peaks for a short instant as a reaction to an unexpected felicitous interpretation of events that had not been previously considered. Usually, this kind of pleasure is a reaction to a provocation within which language plays a prevalent part, such as some display of linguistic prowess involving wit or some other play on words including puns. It manifests itself in a form of laughter more intense than the smile, but that is still relatively quiet, such as the chuckle, accompanied by a twinkling of the eyes. As Conrad Hyers asserts, "'wisdom' and 'wit' have the same root, common to Indo-European languages, *vid...* Wit is not necessarily frivolous... but may contain wisdom in its own special form. Wisdom... contains wit... without the perspective and sparkle of wit".<sup>22</sup>

When laughter arises out of negative feeling towards the butt of the joke, a 'chuckle' may turn into a 'chortle'. 'Glee' is a more triumphant feeling than 'delight' and is expressed by more visible and, depending on its degree of intensity, also by more audible means.

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<sup>20</sup> G. Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* (Westminster: A. Constable and Company, 1898).

<sup>21</sup> F. Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and his Shadow", in *Human all too Human*, R. J. Hollingdale trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2, Part 2, §173, 351.

<sup>22</sup> C. Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 84.

(iv) ‘Gladness’ retains a faint echo of its original meaning, namely, ‘smoothness’; the feeling of pleasure it refers to is continuous over a stretch of time following upon the positive outcome of a contingency. It is usually expressed in faint or weak but usually prolonged bouts of laughter of the kind that has been given the unkind appellation ‘cackle’. Sully remarked more than a century ago that a protracted, mechanical iteration of the movements of laughter, as well as the tendency to relapse into laughter after a short pause, are outward expressions of gladness.<sup>23</sup> ‘Gaiety’ describes a feeling of gladness that also includes a trace of frivolity. ‘Mirth’ is the expression of more physical forms of pleasure than ‘gladness’ as ‘merriment’ denotes actions expressing mirth. ‘Jollity’ (as in ‘she’s a jolly good fellow’) refers to a tendency to festive merriment and hence is also a kindred term.

The term ‘hilarity’ has departed in a considerable way from the Medieval Latin ‘*hilaritas*’ that was more closely associated with ‘smiling’ and ‘humor’. Today the word refers to the expression of gladness with more than a trace of boisterousness, in ‘bursts’ or moderately explosive sounds that fall well within the range of the term ‘cackle’ and the laughter it describes.

The ‘cackling’ expression of hilarity can be expected to occur most often in response to brief narratives, mostly jokes, which dialectically involve both wisdom and folly. Here one may detect two pairings: wit and chuckling; jokes and cackling. The pairs may easily be distinguished from one another through their duration. Wit and chuckling dart out speedily as if to beat time, while the jokes’ narrative and the cackle waddle slowly.

(v) The word ‘amusement’, or rather the verb ‘muse’ from which the noun is derived, comes from the old French *muser* (to stare stupidly) with the addition of the intensive prefix ‘a’. The term ‘amusement’ came into use in the present form around 1600 when it already signified a certain exposition to irony. In 1606, for example, the character of Chapman says: “I am amused or I am in a quandarie”. Here the meaning of ‘amuse’ as ‘puzzle’ is clear. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the word came to mean diverting the attention of an enemy from one’s real designs or, more generally, diverting attention from the facts at hand. In 1796, for instance, Lord Nelson wrote in despatches: “It is natural to suppose their Fleet was to amuse ours whilst they cross from Leghorn”. The word finally evolved to mean the diversion of attention from serious business by something trifling or ludicrous, and, more generally, to

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<sup>23</sup> J. Sully, op. cit., 73-74.

divert by tickling the fancy. In 1853, H. Rogers wrote that “twelve guests, who all had a misfortune to squint, amused their host with their ludicrous crossed lights”.<sup>24</sup>

In contemporary times, ‘amusement’ (the term generally chosen to stand for the Greek *paidia*) has become a controversial term. In discussions of humor, ‘amusement’ is often given more importance than it actually deserves. We all agree that there are different genres of laughter provocation, so is it truly possible that all these give rise to just one kind of pleasure? Two of the major protagonists in this debate, John Morreall and Noel Carroll, feel the need to qualify ‘amusement’ using the terms ‘humorous’ and ‘comic’ respectively, which indicates that this term is not fully adequate. ‘Amusement’ may be considered as just one of the different kinds of pleasure that arise from various kinds of laughter provocation.

One characteristic of the feeling of amusement is that it points to an almost reluctant shift from a negative or perhaps neutral state to a positive one. This is the kind of pleasure that would be felt by an ironist, in the sense of *eiron* as Aristotle used it,<sup>25</sup> in moving from one view of an event or situation to another more positive one. This feeling most commonly results in a form of laughter in which the sonorous element is totally or almost suppressed, so that only a smirk survives.

This tentative taxonomy of terms related to the lexical field of pleasure results in five main groups: *jouissance*, joy, delight, hilarity and amusement. These may be paired with five main types of laughter: the guffaw, smile, chuckle, cackle and smirk. These are, of course, in no way meant to be understood as absolute categories, as the distinctions between the groups can be blurred and may overlap, reflecting the way that pleasure and laughter are experienced in the world.

The mechanism of laughter provocation may be perceived as forming a mirror image of the deception-pleasure dialectic. The one who provokes laughter generally seeks to ‘deceive’ the interpretant by leading him or her down a false path. After being taken in, however, the interpretant realizes that no permanent harm has been done and no humiliation has been caused as a consequence of the deception and his or her error and, consequently, experiences a genuine pleasure in place of the pseudo-version of pleasure that arose at the beginning of the process. The mistakes, errors or incongruities that lie at the basis of laughter provocation are various, and their classification would require another paper.

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<sup>24</sup> OED, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. on CD, OUP, 2004, for the three references.

<sup>25</sup> The character type embodying pseudo detachment as a technique of one-upmanship.



Genres of Laughter-provocation	Kinds of Pleasure	Types of Laughter
(i) Farce	<i>Jouissance</i>	Guffaws
(ii) Humour	Joy	Smiles
(iii) Wit	Delight	Chuckles
(iv) Jokes	Hilarity	Cackles
(v) Irony	Amusement	Smirks

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