

What Makes Something Funny?

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Humor can be dissected, as a frog can,” E. B. White wrote, “but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind.” True to form, philosophers, scientists, and certain left-brained comedians have been scrutinizing humor’s innards for centuries, seeking a serious understanding of what makes things funny.

According to one scholarly definition, something is humorous if people cognitively appraise it as funny, if it creates “the positive emotion of amusement,” or if it produces laughter. But while the average adult laughs 18 times a day, laughter isn’t a reliable indicator. Researchers found only 10 to 20 percent of remarks that prompted laughter to be remotely funny.

One general theory, put forth by a decidedly non-zany murderers’ row of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Descartes, and Baudelaire, holds that we are amused when we are made to feel superior to others. Freud, for his part, suggested that forbidden things are hilarious (because humor is a pressure valve for repressive psychic energy). Yet another approach, pioneered by Kant and Schopenhauer and affirmed by Henny Youngman, sees humor as arising from incongruity: When conventions are undermined by an absurd situation, we’re tickled.