

# 1

## Can There Be a Theory of Laughter?

IN the first century the Roman Quintilian complained that no one had yet explained what laughter is, though many had tried.<sup>1</sup> And even with all the philosophers and psychologists who have tackled the problem in the intervening centuries, the story is pretty much the same today—we are still without an adequate general theory of laughter. The major difficulty here is that we laugh in such diverse situations that it seems difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a single formula that will cover all cases of laughter. What could all of the following cases—and this is a relatively short list—have in common?

*Nonhumorous laughter situations*

Tickling  
Peekaboo (in babies)  
Being tossed and caught (babies)  
Seeing a magic trick  
Regaining safety after being in danger  
Solving a puzzle or problem  
Winning an athletic contest or a game

*Humorous laughter situations*

Hearing a joke  
Listening to someone ruin a joke  
Watching someone who doesn't get a joke  
Watching a practical joke played on someone  
Seeing someone in odd-looking clothes  
Seeing adult twins dressed alike

### *Taking Laughter Seriously*

Running into an old friend on the street	Seeing someone mimic someone else
Discovering that one has won a lottery	Seeing other people experience misfortune
Anticipating some enjoyable activity	Hearing outlandish boasting or “tall tales”
Feeling embarrassed	Hearing clever insults
Hysteria	Hearing triple rhymes or excessive alliteration
Breathing nitrous oxide	Hearing spoonerisms and puns
	Hearing a child use some adult phrase correctly
	Simply feeling in a silly mood and laughing at just about anything

Now this list could certainly be shortened by grouping some of the items under more general headings. We might lump joke telling and practical jokes together as jokes, for example, or we might make up a more general heading which covers both winning a contest and solving a puzzle. But is there some heading under which we might accommodate such diverse cases as winning a contest and being tickled?

Part of the difficulty in finding the “essence” of laughter, if indeed there is such a thing, is that it is not at all clear how to even categorize laughter among human emotions and behavior. When we look at the psychological and philosophical literature on fear or love, we find different approaches, of course, but there is agreement over the basics. Fear, for example, is an emotion connected with perceived imminent harm—theorists have agreed on at least that much since Aristotle. And they also agree that fear is connected with our actions inasmuch as it is connected with the impulse to flee. Ethologists like Konrad Lorenz have studied how fear is related to “fight or flight” mechanisms in animals, and much of this research yields insights that help us understand fear in humans. Further, we can study the physiology of the fearful state along with its ethology to gain some understanding of how fear has had survival value for other species and for our own, and thus how it has fit into evolution.

When we look at theories of laughter, on the other hand, we find no such agreement on the basics. Some have classified laughter as an emotion, while others have insisted that laughter is incompatible with emotion. While it seems correct to say that, properly speak-

*Can There Be a Theory of Laughter?*

ing, laughter is a piece of behavior and not an emotion, it is obvious that laughter is not a behavior like yawning or coughing, which is to be explained only physiologically. Somehow laughter is connected with emotions—we laugh with glee, with scorn, with giddiness, etc. But just what is this connection?

There are difficulties, too, in trying to relate laughter to human action. Fear leads to flight, but there seems to be no action that laughter leads to. And studying animal emotion and behavior does not help here, for only a very few animals exhibit behavior that is even roughly similar to human laughter, and then it is only in reaction to such simple stimuli as tickling.

If we ask about the survival value of laughter and how it might have evolved, we also run into problems. Indeed, many have suggested that laughter does not have survival value and that it could only be disadvantageous to a species in which it evolved. Laughter often involves major physiological disturbances. There is an interruption of breathing and the loss of muscle tone; in heavy laughter there may be a loss of muscle control—the person's legs may buckle, he may involuntarily urinate, etc. If the traits that are preserved in a species are those which have survival value, how could something like laughter have been preserved in our species?

As we set out to understand laughter, then, we stand forewarned not only of the great diversity of situations in which it occurs, but of the anomalous character of the behavior itself.

We will start our examination by considering the three traditional theories of laughter. Each lacks comprehensiveness, as we shall see, but each is valuable in calling our attention to a kind of laughter which must be accounted for when we try to construct a comprehensive theory.