



## UNDERSTANDING HUMOR: FROM ANCIENT THEORY TO MODERN INTERPRETATION

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19625176>

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the evolution and functions of humor from philosophical and psychological perspectives. Originally linked to ancient medical theories, humor has developed into a complex human capacity for interpreting and coping with reality. Drawing on ideas such as Freud's theory, humor is presented as a way to transform difficult situations into sources of relief and pleasure. The study also explores the relationship between humor and laughter, as well as different forms such as irony, sarcasm, and self-deprecation. It highlights humor's positive role in reducing tension, fostering communication, and supporting emotional well-being. Ultimately, humor is understood as an essential human tool for resilience and meaning-making.*

**Keywords:** *humor, laughter, psychology, philosophy, human condition, coping mechanism, irony, sarcasm, self-deprecation.*

The origin of the word humor reveals a complex semantic evolution. As early as 1771, the first edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica defined it indirectly by referring readers to the terms “fluid” and “spirit.” The word itself comes from the Latin humor, which was later anglicized and widely adopted in its modern form.

Initially, humor belonged to the field of medicine, where bodily “humors” were believed to determine human temperament. Over time, however, its meaning expanded. It came to describe a particular attitude toward life—one that can be understood as the paradoxical triumph of pleasure over unfavorable reality. In this sense, humor represents a

way of coping with difficult circumstances by transforming them. From a psychoanalytic perspective, especially in the work of Sigmund Freud, humor can be seen as the victory of the pleasure principle over the reality principle. It reflects the ego's ability to resist adversity, protect itself, and even derive enjoyment from challenging situations. Despite its importance, humor remains difficult to define, and its interpretation varies widely across cultures.

A central, though incomplete, definition might describe humor as a state of mind that reshapes lived reality by personalizing and transforming it, often with the intention of provoking laughter.



Humor and laughter are closely connected, although laughter itself has been studied since ancient times. Aristotle, for example, considered laughter a uniquely human trait, distinguishing humans from animals and marking the boundary between nature and culture. Laughter is generally associated with joy, pleasure, and psychological well-being. However, this has not always been the case. In the Middle Ages, laughter was often viewed negatively—linked to vulgarity, sin, and even the diabolical. Religious authorities, such as Saint Benedict, encouraged its suppression, associating it with bodily and even erotic pleasures.

At the same time, laughter has also been seen as a tool for spiritual and intellectual liberation. In *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco presents laughter as a force that frees individuals from fear and dogmatism. In this sense, laughter becomes a form of wisdom, challenging rigid beliefs and encouraging doubt. Thus, laughter is inherently ambiguous. It can be perceived as crude or subversive, but also as noble and liberating. During the Enlightenment, for instance, laughter became a powerful instrument of critique, supporting rationalism and challenging authority. Later, in the late nineteenth century, as moral certainties collapsed, a new form of humor emerged—one rooted in absurdity, nonsense, and the loss of meaning.

Understanding humor requires recognizing its historical roots in laughter and comedy. Philosophers like Nietzsche

argued that humor allows humans to endure the tragedy of existence itself: “Man suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter.” From this perspective, humor becomes a response to existential uncertainty—the awareness of life’s fragility and apparent lack of inherent meaning. Human beings, suspended between birth and death, are compelled to create meaning in an uncertain world. Humor may arise from this condition, serving as a way to cope with the tension between rational thought and the inevitability of mortality. It enables individuals to distance themselves from reality, reinterpret it, and make it more bearable. Humor is often associated with both the body and the mind. Its origins in the concept of bodily humors suggest that it is not purely intellectual but deeply embodied. Today, humor encompasses various forms, including irony, cynicism, sarcasm, and mockery. These forms can be positive—encouraging connection and shared experience—or negative, reflecting power dynamics or hostility. In this discussion, humor is understood in a positive sense: as a means of fostering relationships and creating connection. Other forms, such as sarcasm or mockery, are seen as deviations when they involve domination or harm.

Derision, for example, involves distorting reality to make it more acceptable. It can function as a defense mechanism, allowing individuals to process difficult experiences and extract meaning from them. Self-deprecation operates similarly but focuses on oneself.



By humorously acknowledging personal flaws, individuals create intimacy, demonstrate self-awareness, and invite connection with others.

However, self-deprecation is often selective; people reveal only those weaknesses they feel comfortable sharing. Even so, it remains a powerful relational tool, requiring emotional maturity and openness. Comedy, traditionally associated with theater, includes various forms such as character-based humor, situational humor, verbal wit, physical comedy, social satire, repetition, and behavioral humor. While humor often operates through these forms, it extends beyond artistic expression into everyday life. Irony, for instance, involves saying the opposite of what one means, often with a hidden intention. It can range from playful teasing to sharp criticism. When used carefully, it can stimulate reflection and enrich communication. Cynicism,

originating in ancient Greek philosophy, challenges social norms and authority, though today it often carries a darker tone. Sarcasm, on the other hand, can be either playful or hurtful, depending on its intent.

Ultimately, the kind of humor emphasized here is grounded in kindness and connection. In social and professional contexts, humor can strengthen relationships, reduce tension, and promote well-being. Through laughter, it creates a cathartic effect—helping individuals gain perspective, release stress, and experience shared joy. Humor thus exists at the intersection of body and mind, forming a complex and inseparable relationship. Exploring this connection—through activities that engage both physical and intellectual dimensions—can enhance understanding and practice, particularly in relational and social work contexts.

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