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BENIGN VIOLATION THEORY

Humor is a psychological state characterized by the positive emotion of amusement and the tendency to laugh. Humor can be evoked by a broad range of circumstances, from a simple pun to a devastating tragedy. Most attempts to create a theory of humor begin by explaining when a specific circumstance, such as a scripted joke, put-down, or play fighting, is amusing. Theorists identify the conditions and apply them to other circumstances with the hope of extracting a more general explanation of when humor will occur. A problem with this approach is that it often produces a theory that does a good job explaining humor appreciation in certain circumstances (e.g., jokes), but not others (e.g., play).

This entry describes a relatively new theory designed to explain humor across a broad range of circumstances. The theory builds on the idea that humor involves positive emotion and laughter. In general, positive emotions tend to occur in situations that feel safe or OK (i.e., benign), but laughter doesn't occur in all benign circumstances. Most of the time there is no value in communicating to others that everything is OK, but it is valuable when the circumstance otherwise might seem threatening or wrong (i.e., a violation).

The theory proposes that humor occurs when (1) a circumstance is appraised as a violation, (2) the circumstance is appraised as benign, and (3) both appraisals occur simultaneously. (See Figure 1.)

A violation refers to anything that threatens one's beliefs about how things should be. Humorous

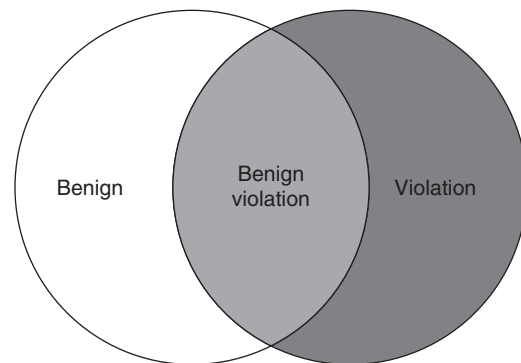


Figure 1 Visual Depiction of the Benign Violation Theory

Source: A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren.

violations likely originated as threats to physical well-being. Indeed, laughter in nonhuman primates and babies often results from behavior that feigns aggression, such as rough and tumble play and tickling. As humans evolved to develop a sense of self, culture, language, and a system of logic, violations likely expanded to include threats to identity (e.g., insults), social norms (e.g., flatulence), cultural norms (e.g., awkward greetings), linguistic norms (e.g., puns, malapropisms), logic norms (e.g., absurdities), and moral norms (e.g., disrespectful behavior). In sum, violations include anything that seems threatening or departs from a norm in a potentially negative way.

Most violations do not amuse people and make them laugh. For a violation to produce humor, it also needs to seem OK, safe, acceptable, or, in other words, benign. Just as there are many types of violations, there are many factors that make things seem

benign, including a playful motivational state, cues that a situation should not be taken seriously, the presence of an alternative norm or explanation suggesting the violation is acceptable (i.e., resolution), a safe environment, psychological distance (i.e., the feeling that the violation is far away physically, temporally, socially, or hypothetically), or a low commitment to the person or norm threatened by the violation.

Finally, both the appraisal that there is a violation and the appraisal that everything is benign need to occur simultaneously. This explains why timing, brevity, and surprise are so important in comedy. If humor occurs when there is both something that seems wrong and something that seems OK, removing either appraisal will cause a humor attempt to fail. Sometimes people don't perceive a violation, in which case they tend to feel fine (or possibly bored). Other times people don't perceive things to be benign, in which case they tend to feel confused, offended, or disturbed.

Consider the following examples:

- Puns and other wordplay break one linguistic norm, convention, or rule (violation), while simultaneously adhering to another norm, convention, or rule (benign). It is no surprise that bookish people like puns, as bookish people are both threatened when language is misused, yet they possess the knowledge to recognize the alternative norm or rule that allows for a correct interpretation.
- Sarcasm involves saying one thing but meaning the opposite. Saying the opposite of what you mean violates a common conversational norm (violation), but often the person saying the sarcastic comment is able to communicate the intended meaning through other cues like an obviously exaggerated tone (benign). Sarcasm isn't funny to people who don't detect the speaker's true intention. Nor is it funny to people who don't approve of the speaker's true intention.
- Setup or punch line jokes work either when the setup that seems illogical or incorrect (violation) is resolved or explained (benign) by the punch line, or when an innocent observation (benign) is succeeded by a disparaging answer (violation). Jokes that lack a violation sound like normal sentences. Jokes that are not benign don't make sense or seem stupid or offensive.
- Tickling and rough and tumble play are physical attacks (violation) that don't hurt or cause

harm (benign). Tickling oneself doesn't elicit laughter because there is no threat of an attack (i.e., no violation). On the other hand, tickling and aggressive play also don't produce laughter if the victim (i.e., the one being tickled or chased) doesn't trust the aggressor. There is nothing benign about being tickled by a creepy stranger.

- Slapstick creates painful circumstances (violation) that are not painful (benign), at least for the person who experiences humor. The victim who is crushed with an anvil or slips on a banana peel is not actually hurt (it is often just an act) or the viewer does not care about the victim's well-being, or both. When an audience cares about the person who is hurt, the situation doesn't seem benign and probably won't elicit laughter. On the other hand, casually walking past a banana peel is unlikely to provoke laughter because there is no violation.

Finally, the benign violation theory can help explain individual differences in what people find funny. Both what seems wrong and what seems OK depend on people's physiological vulnerabilities, desired identity traits, values, cultural background, language, and understanding of logic. This is why a baby farting at a fancy dinner might seem normal to the baby, hilarious to the ram-bunctious older brother, and embarrassing to the mother who wants to make a good impression on others.

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See also Appreciation of Humor; Laughter, Psychology of; Play and Humor; Psychological Distance

Further Readings

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BERGSON'S THEORY OF THE COMIC

Henri Bergson's theory of the comic, set out in *Le Rire* (*Laughter*, 1899–1900) and other texts, has not been highly regarded in humor scholarship and is often misinterpreted as either a theory about incongruity or about superiority. It is however an important contribution to the understanding of comic mechanisms and in particular stage comedy. To understand it correctly, it needs to be seen in the context of his life, work, and historical circumstances. Although chiefly known as a French philosopher, Henri-Louis Bergson (1859–1941) was the 1927 Nobel laureate in literature. He also played a major role between 1921 and 1926 as a cultural diplomat for the League of Nations, forerunner to the United Nations. Despite his strenuous efforts to coordinate the League's new Commission for Intellectual Cooperation, the structure fell victim to Franco-German tensions. In particular—much to Bergson's disappointment—his efforts to retain Albert Einstein as the sole German member of the commission were frustrated, partly by an intellectual dispute between the two men.

Bergson's career was nevertheless remarkable in that era, given that his father was a Jewish musician and his mother English. After graduating from the Parisian *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS) in 1881, he was a schoolmaster, but in 1898 gained appointment to the ENS itself and in 1900 (on his second attempt) was elected to the chair of ancient philosophy at the prestigious *Collège de France*. He became a member of the *Académie Française* in 1914.

In his presentation speech, President Per Hallström of the Swedish Academy's Nobel Committee described Bergson's principal work *L'Évolution créatrice* (*Creative Evolution*, 1907)—better known at the time than *Le Rire*—as “a poem of striking grandeur, a cosmogony of great scope and unflagging power . . . a sort of drama.” Hence his literary prize. Hallström praised Bergson's support for the

mental aspirations of all humans toward freedom and toward experiencing “living time” (also called “duration”) where cause and effect are fused and thus cannot be foreseen. Bergson saw this state of experiencing time as a way to escape the control of mechanically measured time that brought the experience of something being uniquely produced or felt, never to be repeated in quite the same manner, and affording free choice and creativity.

Thus, for Bergson, the world is bifurcated into Matter and Life, with life embodying the innate sentiment of freedom and its accompanying creativity. He called this *l'élan vital*—the human spirit that transcends servitude imposed by matter and makes possible idealism. With such beliefs, it is not surprising that, during World War II, Bergson refused the dispensation granted him from compulsory registration as a Jew and demonstrated his opposition to the French Vichy regime. Ailing for many years, he died in the harsh winter of 1941, possibly of pneumonia, after lining up in the Paris streets to register. Since memoirs and papers were destroyed by his wife in accordance with his will, many details of his passing remain unverified.

During his lifetime, Bergson's ideas proved popular but controversial. The Roman Catholic Church placed his books on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (List of Prohibited Books) in 1914. British philosopher Bertrand Russell, with typical bombast, ridiculed him as a “cosmic poet” who sought to displace rational intelligence with a “heaving sea of intuition” (1914, p. 36), claiming that “instinct is seen at its best in ants, bees, and Bergson” (p. 3). After the war, Hegelianism (“the rational alone is real”) soon displaced his ideas from French universities. Einstein himself denounced the way in which Bergson's *Durée et simultanéité* (*Duration and Simultaneity*, 1922) dealt with relativity—although recent reevaluations suggest that the jury is still out between the two men on at least some points.

Reappraisal

Starting with Gilles Deleuze (1966/2004), Bergson has come to be seen as a precursor of poststructuralism who also offered “re-engagement with the concreteness of the real” (Guerlac, 2006, p. 4). In scientific thinking, recent advances in cognitive psychology and the theory of mind, memory, and consciousness also favor Bergson's ideas, as demonstrated in studies such as Stephen E. Robbins's