

## 3.2: Why You're Not Worthy: The Superiority Theory of Humor

There are few theorists of humor today who hold the view that whenever we laugh at someone or something, it is because we feel superior to the person or situation who is the target of the joke or humorous narrative. But people are stupid and of course we laugh at their stupidity; in doing so we elevate ourselves, if even a little, in our laughter. The superiority theorist of humor would argue that we laugh precisely because we recognize the stupidity or even the incongruity of the situation and we have this sudden “vainglory” as Thomas Hobbes famously described it—that feeling of confirmation that we are in some sense better than the target or butt of the joke. Plato describes it as a sudden pleasure and pain in the soul, these mixed feelings are due to the malicious person’s pleasure at the misfortunes of his neighbor. The nature of the laughable, according to Plato’s Socrates in the *Philebus*, then, is about laughing at the misfortunes of others, rightly rejoicing about the evils that happen to the enemy and unjustly laughing at the bad things that happen to our friends. Of course, one could very well argue that not all laughter can be said to be caused by feelings of superiority. No right-minded philosopher of humor would reduce all the various kinds of humor and causes of laughing to a single mechanism, though I will make a feeble attempt at the end of the chapter.

First, we’ll go through some examples for illustration and analysis of when we do laugh out of feelings of superiority or sudden vainglory. Then we’ll address some current objections to the theory and how these objections are misguided. Finally, we’ll end with being totally convinced that the **Superiority Theory of Humor** is the superior theory and why it is the favorite whipping boy of all other theories.

Let’s begin with our examples. Think about when Sacha Baron Cohen, disguised as a bluegrass artist, performed a racist singalong at a right-wing militia rally, the “March of our rights 3” in Olympia, Washington in the summer of 2020. According to *Rolling Stone Magazine*, an analysis of one of the videos from the rally shows Baron 32 Cohen singing the offensive racist lyrics, apparently having the audience gleefully joining in:

Obama, what we gonna do? Inject him with the Wuhan flu. Hillary Clinton, what we gonna do? Lock her up like we used to do. Fauci don’t know his head from his ass. He must be smoking grass. I ain’t lying, it ain’t no jokes. Corona is a liberal hoax. Dr. Fauci, what we gonna do? Inject him with the Wuhan flu. WHO, what we gonna do? Chop’em up like the Saudis do. (*Rolling Stone Magazine Online*, June 28, 2020)

You can choose any theory you want to analyze the humor in the prank but it is only the superiority theory of humor that could adequately and sufficiently explain why the Three Percenters laughingly, gleefully sang along and why, in turn, those of us who are not of the militia ilk, also laughed. While we are laughing because of different targets we are nonetheless laughing for the same reason: that feeling of superiority we have over a target whose views we oppose. Baron Cohen’s song is rather simple yet brilliant. His choice of ill-formed grammar “gonna do”, “ain’t no jokes”, “chop’em up” speaks to the anti-intellectualist, anti-expert stance that seems to compliment the anti-government and Second Amendment gun loving worshippers. A clear disregard for grammatical rules signposts to the audience a clear disregard and a (perceived) disregard for political correctness and cosmopolitanism. The participants gleefully sang along because Obama is the first black president because they agree that Hillary Clinton should be locked up, because they disagree with Dr. Fauci’s mask-wearing and social distancing, because they do think that the numbers reporting illness and death in America is a liberal hoax to discredit President Trump so that the Democrats can replace him in the next election. All of these targets deserve to be laughed at because the Three Percenters believe they are politically and morally superior to these targets. And these white participants clinging to their values and perceived moral and political superiority as they laugh and sing to these lyrics that Baron Cohen has masterfully constructed to play both sides, is also very funny to liberals. The cosmopolitan liberals who tend to be over educated and over read, the deniers of liberal-bias in academia, laugh at the laughs and those that joined in the singalong. They laugh because the singalong confirms the belief that the racist, pro-white, pro-America, anti-expert, anti-intellectualist ideologies infecting America is precisely what is wrong with America, further degrading democracy and contributing to the social and racial inequalities that are entrenched in every aspect of 33 society. This white ideology necessarily is inferior to an all-inclusive ideology and it is the feeling of superiority to this white ideology, the feeling of superiority to the Three Percenters participating in the singalong, that cause the liberal to laugh. As you can see, laughter is aggression in the theory of superiority of humor. There is no room for harmless entertainment.

Even in cases where one might find apolitical, entertainment for entertainment’s sake, there will still be laughter caused out of feelings of superiority. Jerry Seinfeld is a comedian who is known for clean, apolitical and non-racist humor, but if we examine his targets, which are mostly stupidity and ignorance, (stupidity distinguished from ignorance in that stupidity is a qualitative state of the mind and ignorance is the lack of knowing in the mind), we’ll see that it is mostly educated audiences who find him funny and they laugh because of their intellectually superior position to the target of Seinfeld’s jokes.

I got married late in life, I was forty-five. I had some issues. Was enjoying those issues quite a bit as I recall. When I was single, I had married friends and I would not visit their homes. I found their lives to be pathetic and depressing. Now that I am married, I have no single friends. I find their lives to be meaningless and trivial experiences. In both cases I believe I was correct. Whichever side of marriage you are on you don't get what the other people are doing. I can't hang out with single guys. You don't have a wife; we have nothing to talk about. You have a girlfriend? That's whiffle ball, my friend. You're playing paintball war while I'm in Afghanistan with real loaded weapons. Married guys play with full clips and live rounds. This is not a drill. Single guy is riding on a merry go round blowing on a pinwheel. I'm driving a truck full of nitro driving down a dirt road. (Netflix is a Joke, published May 5, 2020)

It is important to note here that not everyone will find Jerry Seinfeld's bit funny because they in fact, feel inferior. Undoubtedly there will be single men in the audience who are not single by choice but single by happenstance. Perhaps a man is single because he is down on his luck, unable to find a job or is working at a low wage and can barely afford rent. He may be unattractive or without style or under or over weight, and because of these temporary conditions, he may find that his life is filled with trivial and meaningless experiences. Here is a case where it is not funny because it is true. Another way to put it, is that the single man may identify with the target of the humor and cannot laugh, and therefore would not find the difference that Jerry Seinfeld is making between single and married men, funny. Seinfeld admits that he is correct in both ways, 34 the first he was correct when he was single thinking that being married was pathetic and depressing and he was correct when he was married thinking that being single was a life filled with meaningless and trivial experiences. In both cases, he admits, in a way, to being superior to the other side. The audience laughs at their feelings of superiority to Seinfeld's disclosure of contradiction, showing his ignorance of being a hypocrite.

In their book *Inside Jokes*, Hurley, Dennett and Adams suggest that the Superiority Theory is perhaps the second most popular, the second most used theory of humor because much humor is about debasing one's opponent. They are right that there are instances of humor, such as those enjoyed by infants and toddlers that do not fit within a superiority theory of humor. But this is not a reason to throw the bath water out with the baby. Let's keep the bath water. Their critique is that the Superiority Theory lacks a mechanism that explains why we laugh and they give four criteria that a Superiority Theory of Humor would need to meet in order to be a viable, legitimate and convincing theory. But the mechanism is quite simple for why we laugh, it is that momentary elevation in ourselves at the target of our laughter. But to Hurley, Dennett and Adams, this is not enough. They argue that there are still four points of explanation needed for why we laugh:

How we come to the realization that someone or something is lesser in some way. How we distinguish the humorous instances of these value comparisons from the others.

What purpose is served by our normal enjoyment of such discriminations.

What purpose is served by communicating this through laughter. (p.58)

This is a common method of criticism new theorists of humor employ to serve their own theory. Old theory x does not explain y, therefore, x is invalid. New theory explains y and therefore is better than x. Adopt new theory. The first two of these explanations we don't need for the Superiority Theory of Humor. The second two can easily be explained by the theory. However, while it is true that the Superiority Theory doesn't explain how we know our biases and it doesn't explain how we distinguish the value comparisons from other non-humorous instances. We don't actually need these for the Superiority Theory of humor to be convincing. I'll argue why this is so.

The first criterion requires that the person laughing can explain why they feel superior or why they think that the target of laughter is inferior. But humor is instantaneous, there is not a single reflective moment, a supervening meta-awareness 35 on why something is funny, when we laugh because something is funny. Can you even imagine what that would even look like? You must say why you are laughing and report all of your social and political and moral biases in order to legitimize your laughter, before you laugh. No. That's silly. The realization that we have a bias or that we are superior, comes \*after\* we laugh, if ever at all, when we reflect about why we laughed. And likely we are wrong or mistaken. Many people would deny that they are racist or sexist or hold some other unpalatable view while all the while holding those views. Let's take the following joke for example:

How do you get Martha Stewart to cry? You masturbate in front of her and then you wipe your dick on her curtains.

If the superiority theory is true, then men and women will laugh for different reasons, different targets of inferiority. The men may laugh at the inferiority of the man who masturbates publicly and not privately. The women may laugh at the proper decorum Martha Stewart displays with meticulous attention to home improvement, and the working woman who is an academic who has no time to emboss her own curtains (nor has any interest in doing so) may laugh disproportionately to the stay at home woman who enjoys curtain work. There are some who won't even think that the joke is funny, offended by the raunchiness of the joke, and

some will laugh at those prudish folks, too. Joiners of the singalong at the Three Percenters rally weren't thinking or reflecting at all as they were laughing and singing, because if they had, they would have discovered that they, in fact, were the joke. The sentence, "It ain't no jokes, Corona is a liberal hoax" is so outrageous that anyone stating it, especially singing it on stage, couldn't be serious: it's funny because it's true that it is not true. The failure to realize that the Three Percenters themselves were part of the joke, evidenced by their joining in the singalong, reveals ignorance and perhaps stupidity on their part, which of course, elevates feelings of superiority in everyone else watching the event. In fact, one need not have a liberal bias to find Sacha Baron Cohen's prank funny, one just needs to tap into one's own intellectual superiority to laugh.

The second criterion is also bogus and related to the reason why we rejected the first criterion, because not everyone laughs at the same thing for the same reason as not everyone shares the same targets of inferiority. There are just as many reasons for why 36 we laugh as why we don't laugh, that 'many' being uncountable. If superiority theory were true, then according to Hurley, Dennett and Adam's second criterion, whenever we felt superior to a target, we'd laugh, but because our experience shows that we don't always laugh when feeling superior, the theory needs to explain the difference for when we do laugh and when we don't laugh. But we could not laugh out of dissidence, or that we are too tired or annoyed or that it just wasn't funny, such as a poorly formed joke. If we go back to Plato's description of the ridiculous, mere feelings of intellectual or moral superiority are not enough, our target needs to do something stupid, something contrary to his own good, for us to laugh. And it is only those who are weaker than us that we should laugh at. If our enemy is strong and holds power over us and does something stupid, Socrates says we should fear for our lives.

The last two criteria, that the theory doesn't articulate the purpose of enjoyment in such discriminations, nor the purpose of communicating this pleasure to others, were actually answered by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Keep in mind that the name humor didn't arise in our understanding as it related to the comic until after the Enlightenment, and so whenever Aristotle is discussing comedy, we need to interpret the comic as part of humor, recognizing that today we treat them separately. Both purposes lie in the art or technē, of humor, that comedy is an art of imitation, where art imitates life. Because imitation is one of two causes that lie deep within our nature to create, and we first learn by imitation, the purpose of our enjoyment and the purpose of communicating this pleasure to others for humor are one and the same: a social corrective. While tragedy imitates men better than we are, comedy imitates men lesser than we are.

One of the reasons why the Superiority Theory is often mentioned in tomes about humor is because it happens to be the oldest articulated theory explaining why we laugh in western thought. Any theorist writing about humor must include a discussion of the Superiority Theory, hence the reason it is the most favored whipping boy of all other theorists of humor. We could argue that Plato was not articulating a theory of humor but simply the nature for why we laugh in the *Philebus*. We could argue that Aristotle was articulating a theory of art, for which comedy is a species, and what he says about comedy we cannot apply to humor. Nonetheless, even if we agreed that the first articulation of the Superiority Theory is to be found in Hobbes, it is still the first theory of humor in western thought. That sudden feeling of vainglory arising in us and causes 37 us to laugh may simply be indicative of an intellectual superiority to the target and which may or may not come with additional feelings of moral, political or social superiority. If we agree that all humor requires some cognitive recognition, then it is easy to say that all humor includes some kind of identification with intellectual superiority to find the humor funny.

The Superiority Theory has one thing going for it that the other theories don't. Not only can it explain why people can laugh at the same event but for different reasons (i.e., they are laughing at different targets they feel superior to) it can also explain why some people laugh and some people don't at the same event. If the person identifies with the target and feels lowly in response to the ridicule, they may cognitively understand why others find the humor funny but nonetheless they will not, taking offense at the joke or the humorous situation: "you shouldn't laugh at that." "Yes, but you saying that is pretty funny." "F@%# off."

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