Why Do We Laugh?

The Evolutionary Root of Laughter: Why We Laugh at Embarrassment

We've all been there: witnessing someone trip and fall, make a social faux pas, or commit an embarrassing blunder. The immediate reaction is often laughter, sometimes uncontrollable. But why do we laugh at these moments? Traditional theories of humor, like the Superiority Theory, suggest we laugh because it makes us feel superior. While this holds some truth, it doesn't fully explain the phenomenon. A deeper look, incorporating an evolutionary perspective and focusing on the emotion of embarrassment, reveals a more nuanced and compelling explanation.

The Limitations of Old Theories

Historically, several theories have attempted to explain humor:

- Superiority Theory: This theory, championed by philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, posits that laughter stems from a feeling of superiority over those we perceive as inferior. We laugh at others' misfortunes because it elevates our own sense of self.
- Incongruity Theory: This theory, associated with Kant and Schopenhauer, suggests that humor arises from the perception of something unexpected or illogical. We laugh at the surprise of the incongruity.
- Relief Theory: This theory, proposed by Spencer and later adopted by Freud, argues that laughter releases nervous energy built up from tension.
- Bergson's Theory of the Mechanical: Henri Bergson, in his essay "Laughter," argued that comedy arises from situations where we perceive something mechanical imposed upon the living. We laugh when someone behaves like a machine, lacking the flexibility and adaptability of living beings. This "mechanical

inelasticity" can manifest in various ways, such as repetition, absentmindedness, or physical awkwardness. Bergson's theory focuses on the contrast between the fluidity of life and the rigidity of matter.

While these theories offer valuable insights, they lack a crucial element: a functional explanation. *Why* did these mechanisms evolve in the first place? What purpose do they serve? While Bergson highlights the contrast between life and matter as a source of humor, he doesn't fully explain *why* this contrast is funny or what social function laughter serves.

Embarrassment: The Key to Understanding Laughter

The key to unlocking a more complete understanding lies in the emotion of embarrassment. The situations that typically elicit laughter – falls, social blunders, unexpected mishaps – are also situations that evoke embarrassment, both in the person experiencing them and in those observing. This connection is crucial.

Embarrassment is a powerful social emotion. It signals a deviation from accepted social norms and expectations. It's a feeling of discomfort and shame that arises from the fear of social disapproval. And it's precisely this social violation that triggers laughter.

Laughter as a Social Corrective Mechanism

From an evolutionary perspective, laughter serves as a social corrective mechanism. It's a way of signaling to others (and to ourselves) that a social norm has been violated. By laughing at someone's embarrassing behavior, we're not simply expressing superiority; we're reinforcing the rules of social conduct.

This explains several key aspects of laughter:

- Social Function: Laughter helps maintain social order. It reinforces group norms and discourages behavior that deviates from those norms.
- Evolutionary Roots: Laughter likely developed alongside language as humans formed larger, more complex social groups. It provided a non-verbal way of communicating social disapproval and maintaining group cohesion.
- Contagious Nature: Laughter is highly contagious. This contagiousness reinforces social bonds. By joining in the laughter, we signal our understanding of social norms and our belonging to the group.
- Novelty and Repetition: We tend to laugh at things that are both embarrassing *and* unexpected. This explains why a joke loses its humor after repeated exposure – the surprise element is gone.
- Social Feedback Loop: Laughter acts as a form of social feedback. The person being laughed at may feel only embarrassment, indicating that their behavior places them lower on the social ladder compared to those who avoid such embarrassment. The progression from initial laughter at a minor infraction to annoyance or anger at repeated offenses further emphasizes laughter's role in social regulation.
- Progression of Social Responses: Upon first encountering embarrassing behavior, we laugh due to surprise. Repeated exposure leads to mere embarrassment, and if the behavior persists, we become annoyed or angry, indicating that the individual is unwelcome in the group unless they change their behavior.

Synthesizing the Old with the New

This theory synthesizes the older theories of humor into a more coherent framework:

- It builds upon the Superiority Theory by grounding it in the specific emotion of embarrassment. The feeling of superiority arises from recognizing a violation of social norms.
- It incorporates elements of the Incongruity Theory by highlighting the unexpected nature of embarrassing situations.
- It reframes the Relief Theory by suggesting that laughter releases the tension associated with witnessing a social violation.
- It provides a social and evolutionary context for Bergson's theory. The "mechanical" behavior that Bergson describes often constitutes a social faux pas, a deviation from the expected fluidity of social interaction, thus triggering embarrassment and laughter as a corrective measure.

Beyond Ridicule: Other Functions of Laughter

While this theory focuses on laughter in response to embarrassment, it's important to acknowledge that laughter has evolved to serve other functions as well. It can reduce tension, lighten the atmosphere, and serve as a form of entertainment. However, even these functions often have roots in social dynamics, often through the subtle and indirect ridicule of others.

Conclusion

By focusing on the emotion of embarrassment and incorporating an evolutionary perspective, we can gain a deeper understanding of why we laugh. Laughter is not simply about feeling superior; it's a complex social mechanism that helps us maintain order, reinforce norms, and strengthen our bonds with others. It’s a powerful tool that has shaped human social interaction for millennia.