



Why Are You Laughing?

by Ashley Montagu

- ¹ The human is the only animal that laughs. Why is this true? What makes us respond as we do to pleasurable experiences? What is the history of this "happy convulsion," as someone once termed it, and just what is its function?
- ² We are not short of theories to explain the mystery; for centuries, biologists, philosophers, psychologists, and medical doctors have sought a definitive explanation of laughter. One writer theorized that its function is to intimidate others or to gain stature over them by humiliating them. Another took the opposite view: that we laugh in order not to cry. A psychologist offered the explanation that laughter functions as a remedy for painful experiences, and that it serves to defend a person against what the psychologist termed "the many minor pains to which man is exposed." In the seventeenth century a writer set forth the theory that we laugh when we compare ourselves with others and find ourselves superior; in effect, we laugh at the infirmities of others.
- ³ Virtually every theory has been concerned with either the structure or the function of laughter, whereas relatively few have been devoted to the question of its origin. I propose to offer a theory which, so far as I am aware, has not previously been set forth: that only those animals capable of speech are capable of laughter; and that therefore the human, being the only animal that speaks, is the only animal that laughs.
- ⁴ Those of us who have observed chimpanzees closely feel quite confident that the chimpanzee occasionally exhibits behavior that looks very much like a primitive precursor of human laughter. This behavior, however, has been observed only in a human context; whether or not it occurs under natural conditions is dubious; but the very fact that under any conditions an ape is capable of such behavior is of more than passing interest—for does it not indicate that early man had the rudiments of laughter?
- ⁵ Laughter is defined as an emotional response, expressive normally of joy, involving characteristic sounds of the voice and movements of the features and the body. The joy may take the form of mirth, amusement, ridicule, and so on. Why should laughter be as intimately associated with the power of speech as I have suggested? Speech is the verbal, or vocal, expression of

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symbols and the relations between symbols. Probably at about the same time speech evolved, laughter originated, too, as a kind of semiverbalized social expression of pleasure. With the development of speech, the number of occasions producing sudden experiences of pleasure increased, and, since laughter was closely associated with speech, people had this means of expressing pleasure. Having broken the "sound barrier," as it were, they could express with laughter what other animals could not. Since the lower animals had no speech, they encountered fewer pleasurable situations and, furthermore, were unable to laugh no matter what was the stimulation.

6 Once the first laughter had been laughed by primitive people, with such apparently pleasurable effects all around, laughter began to take on an intrinsic value within society. The person possessing the ability to communicate pleasure in a loud laugh began to enjoy social advantages over more serious colleagues and became a "good mixer," socially selected and liked by society. Thus the process of natural selection (the survival of the fittest) would tend to operate in favor of those able to express their pleasurable states in laughter, as compared with those not so able. Throughout the course of evolution, laughter would become established throughout the human species as a function of sociological and psychological value.

7 Thus laughter gradually became established as a capacity among virtually all human beings. In addition, laughter's infectious quality helped distribute it as a characteristic common to all humans. Laughter was advantageous; therefore it survived.

8 Everyone likes good laughers; they bring good cheer with them wherever they go; the very thought of them makes life more bearable. Even today our most highly paid entertainers are not tragedians but comedians. Laughter is infectious, and most of us go out of our way to acquire the infection. We cannot think that it was otherwise in the earlier days of human evolution, and if that was indeed so, then it would follow that the capacity to laugh would tend to become increasingly distributed as a trait common to all people.

9 In society, laughter became a characteristic that served to "humanize" because it is essentially a social phenomenon, largely controlled by the civilization in which it takes place. The times change, and the situations about which laughter is acceptable change correspondingly. A few

hundred years ago it was socially acceptable to laugh at the infirmities of others; today it is not so. In the Western world it is not customary to smile at the reprimands of others, as it is in Japan. Movie personalities should smile or laugh in their photographs, but college professors should look serious. Each of these examples underscores laughter's social function.

10 Let us now consider a second stage of our hypothesis: that nature favors those capable of expressing their pleasure in laughter. It is well known that laughter has a tonic effect on the mind and body, suffusing the body with a feeling of well-being that few other activities are able to provide, refreshing, relieving, enlivening, and involving the whole body in its "happy convulsion." The action of the trunk and diaphragm accelerates the intake and output of air to and from the lungs. The freshening effect follows as the blood receives more oxygen and circulation becomes more efficient.

11 The effects experienced during laughter are likely to overflow into many segments of the body, resulting in reflex changes in muscles and glands, such as tearing of the eyes and secretion of moisture from the nose. Such changes have definite functions—to assist in more rapid respiration and to prevent dehydration of nasal and throat membranes as a result of the more rapid respiration.

12 These effects of laughter, which scientists term its "psychophysiological" effects, appear, then, to be nature's method of conferring "survival benefits" upon those individuals capable of laughter. This presumably embraces the vast majority of people; should there be those incapable of laughter, it may be conversely assumed that nature's dole of "survival benefits" to such individuals is proportionately smaller.

13 What is the explanation for the loud, distinctive noises that are characteristic of hearty laughter? Possibly cave dwellers were uninhibited about expressing their pleasure at times of sudden happiness, and the loudness of their laughter enhanced it for persons who heard it. Even today our inhibitions seem to dissipate when we are convulsed in laughter, and often the volume of genuine laughter makes it more infectious to individuals around us.

14 There remains one matter with which we should deal: the relation of the smile to laughter insofar as it bears upon our theory of the origin of laughter. The smile comes before laughter, as demonstrated by infants who can barely smile after six days, but who sometimes laugh at

twelve weeks. By the twelve-week stage they become comparatively sophisticated creatures, although not much differently equipped physically than they were at six days. At twelve weeks, although they cannot speak, they begin to understand the general meaning and tone of uttered human sounds, and the dawn of the smile becomes the bright noonday sunlight of audible laughter. Consequently, we may again connect the origin of laughter with the origin of speech, as indicated by the gradual development of these two capacities in the human infant.

¹⁵ The development of speech undeniably is an indispensable factor in the development of our capacity to think and establish a mastery of our environment; it was also, I theorize, the basic condition in the development of laughter. You laugh because we learned to speak and therefore to laugh, and because nature confers benefits on the animal capable of laughter.

HOW WELL DID YOU READ?

Did you see the point?

1. This theory is most unusual for
 - A attempting to explain the function of laughter
 - B attempting to explain the origin of laughter
 - C defining the laughter response
 - D connecting laughter with speech

What does the writer think?

Some of the following statements reflect the author's beliefs as expressed in this selection, and some are contrary to his beliefs. If the author would agree with the statement, write A. If he would disagree, write D.

2. Laughter and speech evolved at about the same time.
3. Laughter is a completely human means of expression.
4. Babies probably first laugh at unusual sounds or funny faces that their parents produce for their enjoyment.
5. Laughter is valuable for its effects, but has little or no intrinsic value.
6. It is invalid to make assumptions about the cave dwellers' society based on our knowledge of modern people.

What did the writer say?

7. The process of natural selection operated in favor of those able to laugh, because laughter
 - A stimulated speech
 - B was healthful
 - C was a social advantage
 - D both B and C

How carefully did you read?

8. The social function and characteristics of laughter seem to
 - A change with changing times
 - B remain constant through the ages
 - C vary from individual to individual
 - D be inflexibly interrelated

Can you draw the right conclusions?

9. Many explanations of laughter are mentioned in the article; the one thing they have in common is the idea that we laugh
 - A to gain the advantage in a situation
 - B for our own good
 - C in self-defense
 - D because of an awareness of psychophysiological benefits

10. The fact that chimpanzees indulge in something resembling laughter conclusively proves
 - A that even undomesticated animals can laugh
 - B that laughter and speech are twin traits
 - C nothing definite about the origin of laughter
 - D that early humans were endowed with the ability to laugh

LEARN ABOUT WORDS

A. Often you can tell the meaning of a word from its context—the words around it.

Directions: Find the word in the paragraph that means

1. final; complete (2)
2. weaknesses (2)
3. forerunner (4)
4. undeveloped forms (4)
5. inherent; essential (6)
6. reproofs (9)

7. tentative explanation (10)
8. overspreading (10)
9. added to the value of (13)
10. be driven completely away (13)

B. A word may have more than one meaning. Its meaning depends on the way it is used.

Directions: Decide which meaning fits the word as it is used in the paragraph. Write the letter that stands before the meaning you choose.

11. happy (1)
 - A joyous
 - B fortunate
 - C suitable
12. stature (2)
 - A height
 - B attained growth
 - C prestige
13. function (6)
 - A duty
 - B normal action
 - C ceremony
14. tonic (10)
 - A invigorating
 - B of tones
 - C mentally stimulating
15. capacities (14)
 - A abilities to contain
 - B aptitudes
 - C positions

C. The roots *lev* and *grav* come from the Latin words *levis* and *gravis*.

levis (light; slight; trivial)

gravis (heavy; weighty; serious; important; severe; grievous)

Directions: Use the root *lev* or *grav* to complete each word so that it fits the definition. Write the word.

16. ____e (requiring serious thought; of a threatening nature)
17. al____iate (lighten; make less hard to bear)
18. ____itate (rise in the air because of lightness)
19. ____ity (trifling gaiety; unseemly frivolity)
20. ____imetry (the measurement of weight)
21. ____ity (solemnity; enormity)
22. ag____ate (make more burdensome)

D. **Synonyms** are words that have the same or nearly the same meaning; **antonyms** are words that have opposite or nearly opposite meanings.

Directions: Of the three words in each line, two are related, either as synonyms or as antonyms. The third word is unrelated. Decide which of the words are related and what the relationship is. Write S or A.

23. reprimand, rebuke, restrict
24. unnecessary, indispensable, indiscriminate
25. satisfying, gratifying, grateful
26. eloquent, expressive, impressionable
27. humiliating, frightening, shaming
28. painful, painstaking, pleasurable
29. therefore, consequently, regardless
30. clearly, intimately, closely
31. evolution, revolution, development
32. verbose, verbal, mute
33. diversely, familiarly, similarly