

Book review

Roberts, Allen. (2019). *A Philosophy of Humour*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Throughout time, it appears that establishing a far-reaching explanation of humour has often proved to be a more demanding task than providing it with recognisable features. While many scholars, philosophers, and researchers endeavoured to advance a definition of the concept of humour, many studies pursued a critical-descriptive approach that focuses on specific aspects such as feelings of superiority (Aristotle 1987), mental energy release (Freud 2014), mechanical rigidity (Bergson 2008), sociological aspects (Davies 2002, 2007) rather than on a standard algorithm that would actually answer the question of “What is humour?” In this respect, *A Philosophy of Humour* may seem at first sight both provocative and ambiguous, as it is not the first book whose title alludes to the ambition of a comprehensive approach to the notion. However, by employing a methodical treatment of humour in each of the six chapters, the author’s aim is to offer an insightful and chronologically organised overview of the evolution of humour throughout history and to develop a new theory based on amusement. The first three chapters, “Introduction,” “Amusement, funniness and humour,” and “Early theories of amusement,” offer brief forays into the history of humour by merging relevant facts and light-hearted jokes, thus ensuring a comfortable read not only for specialists in the field, but also for those unacquainted with the fundamentals of humour. Chapters 4 and 5, titled “The cognitive component of amusement” and “The affective component of amusement,” are analytical surveys of early incongruity theories, bisociation theories, and resolution theories, as well as superiority theories, release and play theories, all providing key insights and serving as milestones for the further development of the author’s new theory of amusement in Chapter 6.

In the opening section titled “Introduction,” Alan Roberts addresses the fundamental question of “What is humour?” while defending humour as a philosophical topic. In the author’s view, humour as a philosophical topic features three characteristics: universality, importance and efficiency (p. 2). These traits are far from being elements of novelty, as they have previously been tackled by scholars such as Berger (2014), Lefcourt (2001), or Lippa (2007). In his pursuit of terminological clarity, Roberts resorts to dictionary entries for the concepts of *humour* and *amusement*, which highlight an apparent correspondence between *funniness*, *amusement*, and *humour*. However, the author dismisses their theoretical interchangeability by claiming that the three are “closely-related but distinct concepts.” (p. 4). Moreover, this distinction is clarified in the last chapter of the book, which contains the author’s own theory of amusement, thus also enhancing the circular structure of the study.

In Chapter 1, Alan Roberts develops his argument by means of assessments and observations concerning the elements and distinctive features of amusement and funniness. To begin with, he states that amusement requires a subject and an object of amusement, while further noting that the concept bears two components: a cognitive component, related to knowledge, and an affective component related to emotions (p. 8). In this regard, the author revisits certain theorists who highlighted the sole existence of the cognitive component, such as Henri Bergson (2008), only to disagree with them by arguing that there is a plethora of attitudes that fall under the affective component, therefore assessing Bergson’s theory as incomplete (p.

10). With respect to the notion of *funniness*, the author establishes that there is no identity between one's amusement and funniness as the latter seems to be a normative concept as opposed to the former, which is mostly descriptive. According to the author, this clear-cut distinction between the two concepts escaped the theoretical views of renowned scholars like Noël Carroll (2014) or Aaron Smuts (2010) (p. 15).

Chapter 3 delves more into the theoretical background of humour by reassessing essentialist approaches, as well as early superiority theories, early incongruity theories, early release theories, and early play theories. As expected, the Chapter exhibits a predictable blend of different perspectives subserving a better understanding of the author's theory of amusement stated in Chapter 6. Although Roberts' focal points admirably range from essentialist studies, superiority theories (Aristotle 1987), (Hobbes 2008), and incongruity theories based on unexpected disproportions between elements (Morreall 1987; Bergson 2008; Kant 2009), to Sigmund Freud's (2014) three-party structure of the human psyche and Eastman's (2009) play theories, this Chapter merely paves the way for a more penetrating investigation carried out in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Chapter 4 outlines the cognitive component of amusement in an attempt to critically assess incongruity under two different headings: necessity and sufficiency. While Roberts argues that the necessity of incongruity is intuitively acceptable, he infers that incongruity is necessary but not sufficient. Hence, the following subchapters centre on what the author calls "refinements," where he returns to Koestler's (1964) and Apter's (1982) theories which he claims are not rigorously defined. Roberts introduces the idea of an "inconsistent interpretation" referring to people, objects, and situations, which assigns either a positive-truth value or a negative truth value (p. 63). Furthermore, by combining the bisociation and resolution refinements, the authors advances his own theory according to which "If subject S is amused by object O, then S activates two inconsistent interpretations via unsound reasoning because of O" (p. 75), thus opposing the views of Shultz (1972, 1974, 1976) and Suls (1972), whose resolution theories are based mostly on consistency, while also presenting a solution for partially resolved incongruities.

The theoretical development around the affective component of amusement in Chapter 5 begins with a critical assessment of superiority, release, and play theories from which the author extracts key insights meant to define the layout of the affective component. Roberts concedes that superiority is neither necessary nor sufficient for amusement, although some theorists such as Gruner (1978, 1997) or Koestler (1964: 51) conjecture that an aggressive tendency remains one of the underlying mechanisms of humour. The author's insight regarding superiority theories is the existence of a bell-curve representation of the relationship between aggression and amusement according to which amusement increases along with aggression until the latter "crosses the line" (p. 106). Although this insight is not one of extreme relevance for Roberts' theory, one possible weakness would be the proper definition and understanding of this "line." In other words, who establishes what is acceptable or not? As far as release theories are concerned, the author dismisses the Freudian concept of mental energy (p. 35) by focusing on Berlyne's (1960, 1972, 1979) views on *arousal* instead, as it will further bear a theoretical relevance in the author's demonstration. Hence, Roberts maintains that increased arousal, a state of alertness, is connected to increased amusement.

While reviewing modern play theories and ascertaining that play is not sufficient for amusement, the author turns to Michael Apter (1982) and his definition of the play state as a *paratelic state* (Apter 1982: 6, 7), which implies amusement for amusement's sake, experienced in a safe environment with a non-goal directed mindset. Additionally, amusement, arousal, and a *paratelic state* are interconnected, as amusement is triggered by arousal. However, one failing point in Roberts' claim that a non-goal directed state is necessary for amusement (p. 101) is the fact that goal-directedness does not necessarily preclude amusement in all circumstances.

Consequently, one aspect to consider is that an interesting broad spectrum of political humour is left out.

The final chapter of the book is dedicated to the author's new theory of amusement that will further lead to the core question of the study, namely "What is humour?" By merging the key insights resulting from the critical review of the affective and cognitive components of amusement, the author states that amusement requires a *paratelic state* experienced by the subject, within a certain degree of arousal triggered by two inconsistent interpretations via unsound reasoning. Further, as regards his theory of funniness, an "object O is funny if and only if O merits amusement" (p. 127). Finally, in respect to humour, "Object O is humour if and only if O is intended to elicit amusement." (p. 127)

In an overall rigorous study, *A Philosophy of Humour* displays a progressive approach to humour, rendering it suitable for readers who also wish to catch a glimpse of the quintessential issues related to humour studies throughout time. Although slightly rigid and technical at times, the book features a balanced distribution of effort directed towards critical examination and discursive witticism in the attempt to refine existing concepts and to provide a new theory of amusement. The lack of a contextual frame encompassing the socio-political implications of humour vividly captured by scholars such as Christie Davies (2007) or Peter Berger (2014), might have entailed a more engaging tone overall, but would have probably overshadowed the analytical intentions of the study. Nevertheless, the book brings forth a thought-provoking interpretation that challenges any reader to (re)visit a dynamic and evolving concept.

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