**Introduction**

In this paper I will argue that humour is best considered as a social practice. I will proceed as follows. First, I will argue that current analytic theories of humour are best understood as what I will term “internalist” theories, which is to say that they understand humour as something that primarily happens within the person. Second, I will look at the historical circumstances of the development of humour discourse and argue that there is reason to be suspicious that what are taken to be paradigmatic cases are in fact paradigmatic cases. Third, I will engage historical examples of humour and argue that the historical practice of humour is more expansive than standardly considered by internalist theories. Fourth, I will argue that the historical examples and contemporary practice suggest that humour is best understood as a practice centred around the provocation of laughter, and that while this account does not contradict or make impossible internalist accounts, it does suggest that humour practice is heterogeneous in a way that makes internalist accounts unlikely to be true.

At the start, I would like to clarify a couple of important terms. The language of humour is both highly informal and a relatively recent development. Accordingly, I want to make clear two things: the first is that when I refer to some instance of humour as being funny or not funny, I mean nothing more than that the instance of humour is either successful or unsuccessful. The second is that this is a stipulation for my talk, and not meant to reflect the way that other philosophers use the term. The same goes for the word “amusement,” which I will take to refer to the positive reaction one may have towards humour.

**I**

The past decade has seen three philosophical theories of humour come to the fore in analytical philosophy — those of Noel Carroll, John Morreall, and Matthew Hurley. These are what I will term internalist theories of humour, which is to say that they define and understand humour by something that happens within the person. For the sake of time I am going to compress these theories by listing their common features. I will then present an alternative way of thinking about humour — as a social practice — that does not necessarily contradict these approaches but that I believe is better suited to discussing humour.

I believe that the internalist theories are comparable as follows: each argues that humour is essentially in the response to some stimulus. Carroll and Hurley take this response to be an emotional one, but Morreall does not.[[1]](#footnote-1) All three accept that while laughter is typically an expression of feeling humour, there is no necessary relation.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is because humour does not necessarily result in laughter — research by Robert Provine shows that laughter occurs much more frequently in social settings — and that laughter is not necessarily in response to humour — research by Provine again shows that as much as 80% of everyday laughter is unrelated to humour.[[3]](#footnote-3) Since humour may not be defined by laughter, the internalists instead define it by some particular internal process. According to Carroll, this process is that of a cognitive emotion. This is to say that humour is directed, it has a formal object, generates a mood, and is contagious.[[4]](#footnote-4) While he takes humour to have a standard of correctness — incongruity on his account — the essence of humour is not in the incongruity, but rather in its being perceived by the subject who reacts in a certain way. Hurley, like Carroll, identifies humour with an emotional response, in his case mirth.[[5]](#footnote-5) Mirth, like humour, finds its origin for Hurley in a cognitive process for filtering out incorrect committed beliefs.[[6]](#footnote-6) Over time, through the processes of evolution, this mental system has developed into modern humour where something is understood as funny if it triggers this mental system under sufficiently normal circumstances.[[7]](#footnote-7) But while Hurley allows for mirth to be triggered in different ways, it is nevertheless this triggering of the mirth reaction that makes humour humour. Morreall, for his part, offers the cognitive shift theory. The experience of humour comes from a cognitive shift — a shift from one cognitive state to another — with the additional qualifications that this shift is enjoyable, and expressed (when it is expressed) in laughter.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Against the internalist story, I want to provide an account of humour as a social practice. The strength of this approach is that it is better able to account for how humour actually works in society. Humour is not just about what a person feels, but a thing that a person does, often involving other people. To support my account I will provide examples of humour practice throughout history. The purpose of these examples will be to show that humour practice has been highly varied, and that there have been multiple standards for success in humour practice.

To be clear, the historical account I am giving does not contradict the internalist accounts. It cannot since it does not provide the right sort of evidence to do so. It is strictly possible that there is a single internal phenomenon and phenomenology underneath all of these humour practices.

**II**

Both Carroll and Morreall recognize that “humour,” as it is currently used, is a historical development of the Enlightenment period.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, since both of them offer internalist theories, neither of them interrogate the context of the development of the language of humour and what baggage this context could have placed upon the language. As Michael Billig details in *Laughter and Ridicule*, this is a relevant omission. Billig situates the development of humour discourse alongside the development of the incongruity theory of humour in the early colonial era, which brought about the advent of coffee-houses and cocoa-houses.[[10]](#footnote-10) These were a new class of social space, public but definitely bourgeois and male.[[11]](#footnote-11) Accordingly it was these values which influenced the original articulations of humour, values which, argues Billig, positioned humour as the proper laughter of the bourgeois and against the uncouth laughter of the lower classes.[[12]](#footnote-12) The effect of the division was to identify proper laughter as being an appreciation of wit and other intellectual virtue as opposed to the uncouth laughter of ridicule and domination. The laughter of humour was quieter and more restrained than the raucous laughter of lower-class baudiness.[[13]](#footnote-13) As Billig identifies in the writing of early humour theorists like Francis Hutcheson and Lord Shaftesbury, the laughter of humour was identified as being “relaxing” and “innocent.”[[14]](#footnote-14) While there is positional jockeying in humour, it is important that one is “quick, clever and cheerful, not a point-scoring bully.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The importance of this history of the development of the term humour is to identify that “humour,” as it originated in 18th-century Britain, did not track the same sort of thing that contemporary humour theorists attempt to track. Hutcheson and Shaftesbury were not identifying a basic phenomenon common to all humans, but were rather rendering what was fundamentally a moral evaluation of a human practice.

**III**

In this section, I give a brief overview of different humour practices from antiquity to the present day. I do not mean to contend that each and all of these detailed practices are paradigmatic accounts of humour. Rather, I just wish to put forward that these are ways that humour has been practiced and, consequently, they are data points for which a theory of humour must account. Accordingly, my goal is to show the breadth of humour practice across time. The historic-mindedness of my approach is to try to avoid the trap of presentism. As Billig notes, philosophical and psychological studies of humour and amusement unquestioningly take current-day instances of humour, usually jokes,[[16]](#footnote-16) to be the paradigmatic examples of humour that must be explained.[[17]](#footnote-17) However, that these examples are paradigmatic may be challenged on two grounds. The first ground is that current-day paradigmatic instances of humour may be determined by material circumstances or even just historical coincidence — some humour practice being dominant now does not necessarily mean that this practice is timeless or representative of all possible practices. The second ground is that what is taken as a paradigmatic example of humour may be prefigured by theory, thus amounting to a subtle form of question-begging.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is most evident in the work of Noel Carroll when responding to a challenge to his incongruity theory of humour.[[19]](#footnote-19) He articulates incongruity theory by appealing to what he considers to be paradigmatic examples of humour and then claiming that incongruity is what they have in common.[[20]](#footnote-20) Against the challenge that the incongruity theory does not capture instances of humour that trade on recognition or familiarity, he claims that these instances of potential humour do not trade on incongruity, so they are therefore not real instances of humour.[[21]](#footnote-21) Recognition-based humour is ruled out because it is not considered to be a paradigmatic form of humour that has to be explained, and the incongruity theory is able to stand because only incongruity-supporting examples are considered to be paradigmatic examples that have to be explained. Altogether, then, my goal is to present a historically-minded overview of different humour practices for the purpose of getting an idea of the range of possible humour practices, and, following from the previous subsection, it is these varied practices for which a theory of humour would have to account.

The three eras from which I will draw examples are classical Greece, medieval Europe, and early-modern Italy. These cases are by no means exhaustive of historical practice, but are enough to establish a range of humour practice. There are two points of interest in Greece. First is the character of the *gelotopoios* — literally, the “laughter producer.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The *gelotopoios* would make their living by getting invited to the dinner of a rich patron in exchange for making the patron and the guests laugh.[[23]](#footnote-23) Surviving materials, in the form of accounts and guide materials, suggest that the *gelotopoios* did three main things to make the host and guests laugh: they told jokes, they engaged in mimicry, and they flattered the host.[[24]](#footnote-24) What is relevant here is that all three activities were considered to be part of the same practice, which was making the host and guests laugh. By contemporary standards, only the jokes would fall under the category of “humour,” but in the ancient Greek context, all of joking, mimicry, and flattering were part of the same practice of producing laughter. Greek antiquity also saw various festivals which were characterized by insult humour. The *Lenaea* and the *Anthesteria*, for instance, were festivals in honour of Dionysus and were characterized by the suspension of social mores.[[25]](#footnote-25) In particular, men would stand on wagons and mock passersby.[[26]](#footnote-26) Accordingly, insults can be added alongside jokes, mimicry, and flattery as things that could be part of humour practice in the context of ancient Greece.

Medieval Europe offers two distinct examples of humour practice, one for the nobility and one for the peasantry. Amongst the ruling classes there was the concept of the *Rex Facetus*, or the king who laughs.[[27]](#footnote-27) The laughing king was a theoretical construct made in light of the idea that humans should be understood as *homo risibilis*, or the man who laughs.[[28]](#footnote-28) In elite circles, laughter was deemed either moral or immoral based on the status of the one who was laughing and the one who was generating the laughter.[[29]](#footnote-29) Laughter, in general, was considered ethically risky since it was a loss of control in the face of subservience to God.[[30]](#footnote-30) The *Rex Facetus* was entitled to joke, and thus laugh, because they were in a position of authority relative to all other humans. The king sought to generate laughter, and by laughing his subjects demonstrated their social relation (of inferiority and servitude) to the king. Subjects were not permitted to joke to the king. In peasant circles, humour played a similar role in social structure, but amongst equals. Specifically, there was the practice of the “gab,” which is a trading of banter and tall stories for the sake of generating laughter.[[31]](#footnote-31) While the laughter of the king was his special prerogative, owing to his status, peasants were of equal status and so would be laughing together. Accordingly, the gab pursued laughter similarly to the *Rex Facetus* with the key difference being that one practice used laughter to signal a stratified hierarchy — between king and subjects — whereas the other one used laughter to signal a flat hierarchy — between equals.

Early-modern Italy featured the practice of the *beffa*, a sort of practical joke.[[32]](#footnote-32) The goal of the *beffa* was to lure someone into a vulnerable position and take advantage of them, usually in a way that involved covering the victim in bodily fluids of some sort.[[33]](#footnote-33) *Beffe* worked as a sort of competition between nominal equals in a civilian society with the goal being the schadenfreude the executor of the joke would feel at the suffering of the victim.[[34]](#footnote-34) In this sense, the *beffa* has a kinship with the laughter of medieval Europe in that both are keenly interested in structuring the social order. However, whereas the gab and *Rex Facetus* were justified along already-existing social lines, the *beffa* worked as an exercise in creating social power by the joker over her victim.

While these different humour practices are quite varied — varied in form and varied in social role — what they have in common is that they pursue the reaction of laughter. The *gelotopoios* pursued the laughter of the host, the gab pursued the laughter of the peer-group, and the *beffe* pursued the laughter of the joker at the expense of the victim. This suggests that the practice of humour, varied as it is across time, has been to one degree or another oriented towards evoking laughter. Whose laughter is supposed to be evoked may change, but laughter in one way or another is always the end goal. Accordingly, a theory of humour as social practice should look at humour as a practice or set of practices centred around provoking laughter.[[35]](#footnote-35)

To be clear, this approach does not contradict internalist accounts. There is nothing in an account that holds humour to be a historically-developed social practice aimed at producing laughter that makes an internalist account impossible — it is possible that there is a unifying mental process or unifying phenomenology that all instances of humour have in common. All the current internalist accounts allow that humour is something that tends to be expressed in laughter, which fits with a historic development of humour centred around provoking laughter. I argue, however, that this historically-minded account gives a reason to strongly doubt the efficacy of internalist accounts. Remember that internalist accounts involve a distinction between laughter that is and is not associated with humour. What the historical account suggests is that humour developed by pursuing laughter *simpliciter*. There is no evidence to suggest that the laughter of the *beffa*, the gab, or the *Lenaean* mockery was evaluated to be specifically humour-associated by the standards of the internalists.

I speculate that the pursuit of laughter *simpliciter* should be predicted in a historically-minded theory of humour. This is because humourists seeking an audience, irrespective of whether their audience is themselves, peers, or patrons, would not have any complex internal theory by which to judge the laughter of others. They would simply evaluate their practice by whether or not it generated laughter. This is speculative, but can find evidence in the contemporary practice of stand-up comedy. Comedians evaluate and develop their performances, and central to this development is recording and listening back to how the audience reacted. Laughter is taken as a sign that a performance is funny, lack of laughter is taken as sign that something needs to be corrected or improved.

**Conclusion**

In this essay I have argued that the historical practice of humour is more expansive than generally allowed for by internalist theories of humour. I have drawn upon histories of humour practice to show that humour practices have been heterogeneous over time. This heterogeneity suggests (but does not prove) that humour has developed around the pursuit of laughter *simpliciter* and, since laughter may have various causes and does not necessarily result from any one particular emotional reaction, internalist theories are too narrow to capture the full phenomenon of humour.

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1. Noel Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014): 4; Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams, Jr. *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Camrbidge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011): 66; John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Carroll, 48; Morreall 45; Hurley et al, 23-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York, NY: Viking, 2000): 40; Robert Provine and Kenneth Fischer, “Laughing, Smiling, and Talking: Relation to Sleeping and Social Context in Humans,” *Ethology* 83, no.4 (1989): 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carroll, 55-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hurley et al, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Morreall, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Carroll, 5; Morreall, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is worth noting that Billig focuses specifically on the British context. Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London, UK: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2005), 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Billig, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A frequent target of the Enlightenment Humour Theorists was a book titled *Joe Miller’s Jests*, a compendium of jokes and witticisms centred around the basic humour elements of sex and shit. The *Jests* were uncouth and therefore not humour. Ibid, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Billig, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Berys Gaut compares the narrow focus of humour studies on jokes to literature studies focussing near-exclusively on advertising slogans. Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Billig, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Marshall Sahlins identified this general trend in 1971 when he wrote of sociobiology, “Ever since Hobbes placed the bourgeois society he knew in the state of nature, the ideology of capitalism has been marked by a reciprocal dialectic between the folk conceptions of culture and nature. Conceived in the image of the market system, the nature thus culturally figured has been in turn used to explain the human social order, and vice versa, in an endless reciprocal interchange between social Darwinism and natural capitalism." The crucial idea being that the idea of “nature” that was being appealed to was itself already heavily the product of cultural influence. Marshall Sahlins, *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1976), xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Carroll, 48, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jan Bremmer, “Jokes, Jokers and Jokebooks in Ancient Greek Culture” in *A Cultural History of Humour*, eds. Jan Bremmer and Herman Rodenburg, 11-28 (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bremmer, 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Bremmer, 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jacques LeGoff, “Laughter in the Middle Ages” in *A Cultural History of Humour*, eds. Jan Bremmer and Herman Rodenburg, 40-53 (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. LeGoff, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid, 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Peter Burke, “Frontiers of the Comic in Early Modern Italy, c.1350-1750” in *A Cultural History of Humour*, eds. Jan Bremmer and Herman Rodenburg, 61-75 (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Two examples: “In a story told by Sabadino (no.16), a craftsman goes to the barber to be shaved and sees that the barber’s shoes are very large. ‘He felt an urge to piss in them’ (*li venne voglia de urinarli dentro*), and he does so. In a story by Bandello (1.35), Madonna Cassandra has an affair with a friar, the husband discovers, dresses as the friar, takes laxative pills and shits all over her in the bed.” While these are stories, and not accounts, they may be taken as representative of the spirit of the *beffa* even if they may be more extreme than any practical jokes that were actually executed. Burke, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It is worth noting that Jerrold Levinson speculates something similar in an encyclopedia entry, but only as a refinement to the incongruity theory. It does not seem to have caught on, only being mentioned and then quickly dismissed by Noel Carroll. Jerrold Levinson, “Humour,” in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998): 566. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)