

# There Are No Genuine Disagreements about Funniness

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**Abstract:** I argue that there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. My argument rests largely on the premise that something is funny only if someone experiences it as funny. The bulk of this paper is spent supporting this premise, primarily through an analysis of the meaning of “funniness.” The rest of the paper is spent demonstrating how my conclusion follows from this premise.

## Introduction

Funniness is a funny thing. At times, it seems to be relative; a joke that makes me laugh out loud might make you cringe, or vice versa. In everyday speech, “So-and-so’ is funny,” is often seemingly interchangeable with, “I find ‘so-and-so’ funny.” Nevertheless, we frequently also treat funniness as though it is an objective matter—an inherent trait of those things that make us laugh. It is very common for two people to argue over whether something *is* funny and not just whether one or the other finds it funny. But can we actually have a genuine disagreement about something that intuitively seems so tied to personal experience?

I argue that there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. By “genuine disagreement” I mean a disagreement between two or more people about the funniness of exactly the same thing. As an illustration, if Person A says, “X is funny,” and Person B says, “X is not funny,” then A and B are in a genuine disagreement only if X refers to the exact same thing in both statements. If X does not refer to exactly the same thing, then there is no genuine disagreement; A and B might be said to be merely “talking past” each other, using the same words to refer to different things.<sup>1</sup> My argument rests on the idea that we simply cannot experience exactly the same thing and that therefore we cannot experience the same funniness. My argument will be structured as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> A “non-genuine” disagreement might be described as the situation in which two or more people superficially appear to disagree about something but in fact do not hold conflicting viewpoints. As it will turn out, my argument will demonstrate that all apparent disagreements about whether something is funny are non-genuine in this sense.



1. Something is funny only if someone experiences it as funny.
2. More than one person cannot have exactly the same experience.
3. More than one person cannot have the same experience of something as funny.
4. If (3), then there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny.
5. There are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny.

In this paper, I focus on the strengths of the first premise by considering a contrasting “causal capacities” approach that I think is an inadequate account of funniness. I then reason through the rest of the argument and conclude that there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. Finally, I examine one relativistic account that seeks to provide “faultless disagreement,” showing how it supports my conclusion that there are no genuine disagreements while illustrating how my account can be reconciled with our intuitions about disagreement.

### **Something Is Funny Only if Someone Experiences It as Funny**

Theories of humor generally strive to explain what it is that makes something funny, but “funniness” is a difficult word to define.<sup>2</sup> Much of the difficulty that arises in trying to formulate an adequate account of what is funny is a result of the ambiguity of the term. To flesh out the ambiguity and to provide a full account of what funniness is, we ought to distinguish between different possible meanings of the term “funniness.” I distinguish between three types of funniness:

- Funniness as a quality,  $F_q$ , is something in the external world that is outside of all cognitive experience. It is “funniness” that is inherent in something. In other words, something can possess  $F_q$  even if no one experiences that thing.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of widely-discussed types of theories of humor are superiority theories, incongruity theories, relief theories, and ambivalence theories. For a review of the subject, see D. H. Monro, “Theories of Humor,” in *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, eds. Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen, (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Company, 1988), 349-55.

- Funniness as experience,  $F_e$ , is an experience we have (some sort of amusement or other "funniness" response) that we say is caused by "funniness"  $F_d$ .
- Funniness as a description,  $F_d$ , is an ascribed quality that we assign to that which we think is the cause of  $F_e$ .

I contend that there is no  $F_q$  and that this sense of "funniness" can be reduced to  $F_d$ .

It is important to make this distinction between  $F_q$  and  $F_d$  because it reflects different ways in which we talk about "funniness" in ordinary speech. Sometimes, "'So-and-so' is funny," is interpreted as, "'So-and-so' is (inherently) funny." Other times it is interpreted as something closer to, "I think 'so-and-so' is funny (because it amuses me)." The former is captured in the sense of  $F_q$  if we are talking about the extra-sensory world, and it is captured by the sense of  $F_d$  if we limit ourselves to only talking about our direct experience. However, only  $F_d$  captures the latter sense.

In our everyday discourse, we may often talk about  $F_q$  and  $F_d$  as if they are the same thing, but they are distinct in that  $F_q$  is outside of experience and  $F_d$  is in experience. In common usage, when something makes me laugh, I ascribe "funniness" to that thing, but that does not mean that that thing has some inherent funniness outside of my perception of it. What I am actually doing is ascribing "funniness" to an object within my experience.  $F_d$  belongs to my perception of that thing, not the thing in itself.  $F_d$  is not necessarily a conscious ascription, but it is necessarily tied to experience. You cannot have  $F_d$  without  $F_e$ , and vice versa, because you have  $F_d$  by virtue of your having a "funniness" experience towards it, and you have  $F_e$  by virtue of its being caused by some "funniness" in your experience, namely  $F_d$ .

For this reason,  $F_d$  appears closer than  $F_q$  to what we normally mean by "funniness." It captures both the idea that funniness can exist in a thing and the idea that funniness is experiential. But, in the case of  $F_d$ , "funniness" does not exist in an object outside our experience but in an object *of* experience. In fact, this feature of  $F_d$  provides further reason to accept  $F_d$  over  $F_q$ , since we only ever ascribe "funniness" to things we experience, anyway. We simply do not ascribe funniness to that which we do not experience. Thus, the best analysis of funniness seems to be that something is funny only if someone experiences it as funny.



This does raise the question of what it is that causes  $F_d$ . While we maintain that  $F_d$  is the cause of  $F_e$ , one may ask if there is something outside of our direct experience which causes us to perceive  $F_d$ . The most intuitive candidate for such a cause seems to be  $F_q$ . So, it is at least intuitively plausible that the ultimate cause of  $F_e$  is  $F_q$ . Such an analysis is tempting because it more directly reflects the way in which we talk about “inherent” funniness, i.e. when we say that *that thing* is funny.

However, in addition to my positive argument for dismissing  $F_q$ , there are some further problematic commitments that arise from accepting  $F_q$ . One problem with such an account is that we have no way of ascertaining whether the connection between  $F_q$  and  $F_e$  actually exists, since  $F_q$  by stipulation lies outside our experience. We cannot experience directly what is external to our experience, and thus we cannot know whether something outside of our experience is funny. Furthermore, if we cannot know directly that  $F_q$  is funny, and, since funniness is so tied to our experiential response to it, then it seems that  $F_q$  is not even what we mean by “funniness.” Instead, what we mean is something closer to  $F_d$ , since  $F_d$  better captures the seemingly inherent yet subjective nature of funniness. Funniness seems to be necessarily tied to our experience in this way.

Of course, this is at best an incomplete response to the alternative analysis; the fact that something is external to experience by no means proves that it does not exist. Determining that we cannot know that something outside experience is funny does not necessarily imply that it in fact is not funny. We can draw a parallel with the phenomenon of visual perception. Consider as a parallel to  $F_q$  the greenness of an apple as a physical quality. One’s perception of greenness as a sensory quality (parallel to  $F_e$ ) is considered to be causally related to the physical quality of the apple, even though the physical quality of the apple is not directly experienced. Most people have no problem accepting that there is such a thing as greenness as a physical quality—and that it is causally connected to greenness as a sensory quality. So, if these phenomena truly are parallel, what is wrong with postulating a causal connection between some quality  $F_q$  and our experience  $F_e$ ? The problem, again, is that it simply makes no sense to talk about funniness as something that exists independently of experience, and the same applies to the greenness of the apple. While we can accept that some quality external to our experience is the cause of our experience, this does not mean that the external quality resembles our experience. It is strange to talk about comparing the physical quality that causes a perception of

greenness to the perception of greenness itself because the two things are of different kinds. We would not say that the physical quality of the apple is the same sort of thing as the experiential perception of greenness, even if the two are closely related. Similarly,  $F_d$  is necessarily a different kind of thing than the thing in the external world that causes us to perceive  $F_d$ . And an extra-experiential thing that causes  $F_d$  would not be something we would truly want to call “funniness” because, as we have maintained, the notion of “funniness” is necessarily tied to experience. Maintaining that there is such a thing as  $F_q$  would entail that something can be “funny” even if no one ever experiences it, which seems absurd given our analysis thus far. The concept of  $F_q$  is difficult—if not impossible—to comprehend because “funniness” is so closely tied to experience in our language.<sup>3</sup>

### Causal Capacities

In the previous section I mentioned that, although we do not consider things outside our experience to be funny, we nonetheless can admit that our “funniness” experiences are caused by things outside our experience. This admission may lead one to attempt another rescue of  $F_q$  by proposing that “funniness” lies in causal capacities. Karl Pfeifer offers such an account.<sup>4</sup> As Pfeifer understands, a causal capacity is a capability of producing certain effects under certain conditions. He offers visibility as an example: “To be visible is a causal capacity to produce certain kinds of effects (visual experiences) in certain kinds of creatures (those with visual organs) in certain kinds of circumstances (appropriate lighting, etc.).”<sup>5</sup> To say that some object is visible, then, is to say that the object causes the viewer to have a certain sort of visual experience when one views the object in some set of standard conditions.

Funniness, Pfeifer thinks, can be explained in a similar way. On his account, to say that something is funny is to say that anyone satisfying certain conditions in relation to that thing would find it funny. Whether something is funny is independent of our actual experience of that thing, yet dependent on our potential experience of it. So, something is inherently funny by virtue of its having the potential to cause a “funniness” experience. In this case, using my

<sup>3</sup> I am greatly indebted to an anonymous reviewer for the ideas in this paragraph.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Pfeifer, “Causal Capacities and the Inherently Funny,” *Conceptus* 27, no. 70 (1994): 149-159.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.



terminology,  $F_q$  is defined by its potential to cause  $F_c$  under the right conditions. Thus, Pfeifer believes that something outside our experience can indeed be funny.

However, this account has two main problems. The first is what I mentioned in the previous section: it makes no sense to call something “funny” that lies outside experience. While Pfeifer perhaps provides a condition that will be met by most things that tend to cause people to have “funniness” experiences, this condition does not itself make something funny. Stemming from this is a second problem with the causal capacities account: it still allows us to have  $F_c$  that is not caused by Pfeifer’s  $F_q$ .  $F_q$  is said to always cause a “funniness” experience under the right conditions, but there is no reason to think that it is the only thing that ever causes “funniness” experiences. If “funniness” experiences are caused by extra-experiential things, then Pfeifer’s  $F_q$  is not even an exhaustive set of those things. He is committed to saying that someone can have a “funniness” experience without perceiving anything as funny, or perhaps as incorrectly perceiving something as funny. But this is problematic because, as I have established, people do generally ascribe a causal relation between  $F_d$  and  $F_c$ , and  $F_d$  by definition *is* funny. This provides further evidence that the best account of “funniness” is one that limits funniness to experience. Something is only funny if someone experiences it as funny, and all we experience as funny can be captured by the sense of  $F_d$ .

### **There Are No Genuine Disagreements about Whether Something Is Funny**

I will now sketch my argument for why there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. The first premise of this argument, as was discussed above, is that something is funny only if someone experiences it as funny. I have provided sufficient reason to believe this premise is true or have at least shown it to be the most plausible of the alternatives.

My second premise is that more than one person cannot have exactly the same experience. I think this is less contentious than the first premise, but it requires some elaboration. No two people can experience the exact same thing because an individual’s experience is essentially tied to that particular individual. While it is conceivable that two people could be made to have the same qualitative experience, I think it is fair to assume that under the normal circumstances of humor discourse this is not the case. All

that matters to my argument is that no two people involved in humor discourse have exactly the same experience. After all, if two people did somehow have the exact same experience, then they would be incapable of disagreeing with each other. With these caveats, I think this premise is uncontroversial.

It follows from these first two premises that more than one person cannot have the same experience of something as funny. Since something is funny by virtue of experience of that thing, and, because you and I have different experiences, the experiences and the funniness are distinct and unique to each of us. My  $F_d$  is necessarily different from your  $F_d$ , and my  $F_e$  is necessarily different from your  $F_e$ , even if these experiences have similar external causes. We both may think that a particular joke is funny, and we may even give the same reasons for thinking that it is funny; but really what I think is funny is my experience of the joke, and what you think is funny is your experience of the joke.

If more than one person cannot have the same experience of something as funny, then there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. Two people cannot disagree about the funniness of *exactly the same thing*. If you think the joke is funny and I think that it is not funny, then we are not actually in conflict. Your experience of the joke is that it is funny and mine is that it is unfunny. Similarly, if you think the joke is funny for one reason and I think it is funny for another, we are not in a genuine disagreement, despite having seemingly opposing views. If we were to actually have a verbal dispute on the issue, we would simply be "talking past" one another, each talking about something different, despite using the same terminology. And, if we do in fact specify that we are talking about the funniness of the joke independent of experience, then we are talking about something completely different. To talk about "funniness" as a cause of "funniness experiences" is a matter of equivocation. As I have shown, something that is external to experience cannot be "funny" in the basic sense of the word.

A consequence of this conclusion is that there is also no genuine agreement about whether something is funny. That is because, when we think we disagree about whether something is funny, we tend to use the inherent-funniness speak where, "So-and-so' is funny," seems to mean, "So-and-so' *is* funny." However, when we seem to be in agreement we use a sort of subjective speak where, "So-and-so' is funny," more accurately means, "I find 'so-and-so' to be funny." It is our intuitions about disagreement that are most in need of mending. In any event, the fact that we cannot



have genuine agreement about whether something is funny does not seem to be cause for alarm.

Still, the intuitions are tempting. Most accounts of disagreement in humor discourse seem to favor approaches that are able to reconcile our intuitions with the close tie between experience and funniness. Pfeifer's causal capacities account, for instance, implies that there is genuine disagreement about whether something is funny, and in fact that there is always potential for genuine disagreement. One may even attempt to give a relativist account of funniness that is similar to my own but that allows for disagreement. I shall consider one such account now and explain why it still does not lead to genuine disagreement. I will further explain how it can potentially be used to reconcile my account with our intuitions.

### Faultless Disagreement

Andy Egan provides what he calls a "*de se* version of a response-dependence account" that he thinks allows for disagreement about whether something is funny.<sup>6</sup> He believes funniness is a topic that allows for "faultless disagreement," where there is genuine disagreement about something yet no party is incorrect in the matter. When you say, "So-and-so' is funny," and I say, "So-and-so' is not funny," we are in fact disagreeing with each other, but both of us are also correct. The idea is that I cannot suddenly come to believe what you believe without undergoing some other changes in my experience.<sup>7</sup> He explains, "On a *de se*-ist view of thought about the comic, thinking something's funny is locating yourself in a certain chunk of a space of possible predicaments."<sup>8</sup> Egan offers this example:

When I believe [Steve Carell] is funny and you believe he's not, what I believe is incompatible with what you believe—nobody could believe both things. So there's a clear sense in which our beliefs are incompatible. Neither of us could believe what the other does without changing our minds.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Andy Egan, "There's Something Funny about Comedy: A Case Study in Faultless Disagreement," *Erkenntnis* 79, no. 1 (2014): 73–100.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



Egan is correct in saying that our beliefs are incompatible, and in this way his account has great explanatory power when it comes to figuring out why it is that we seem to have genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. However, even on this account, we still only *seem* to have genuine disagreements. This incompatibility of experiences is not genuine disagreement.

Egan concedes this fact. He does not argue for genuine disagreement, which we have understood to mean disagreement about the funniness of exactly the same thing. Rather, he offers a series of possible forms of non-genuine disagreement that may arise as a result of the incompatibility of our beliefs. He is able to obtain "faultless disagreement" in this way by appealing to non-genuine disagreements, which are directly caused by the incompatibility of our beliefs and experiences of whether something is funny. However, this disagreement is not genuine disagreement in our sense, although it again provides good explanations for what we do disagree about when it comes to funniness. Thus, Egan's faultless disagreement account reaches the same conclusion as my own: there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. More importantly, his account demonstrates that it is possible to reconcile my account with the intuition that we do in fact disagree with each other. Much like the nature of "funniness," our concept of "disagreement" has many possible meanings that fall short of full-fledged genuine disagreement. It is possible to construct an account that properly analyzes the concept of disagreement while staying in line with our intuitions.

## Conclusion

While it is difficult to assess accounts of "funniness" due to the ambiguity of the term itself, I have provided sufficient reason to conclude that there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. The topic still needs to be explored in much more depth before we can make especially strong conclusions about the nature of humor, but my account is compatible with any broad theory of humor, and thus it can lead to further development of such theories.

