

# WHY WE LAUGH: A NEW UNDERSTANDING

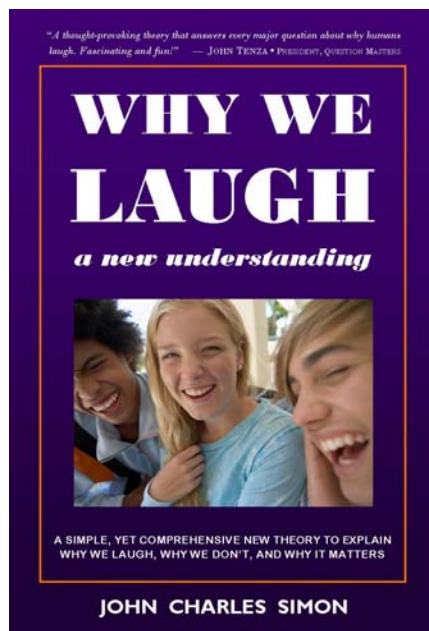
SOLVING A 2,500-YEAR-OLD MYSTERY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

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## WE SEEM TO HAVE AN ENDLESS FASCINATION WITH LAUGHTER ( AND THE HUMOR WE USE TO INSPIRE IT )

BOTH HELP US COPE with difficult and anxious situations, tackle sensitive subjects in our dealings with others, and communicate a sense of playfulness, joy, and relief. They also have a somewhat darker side when used to ridicule and disparage individuals and groups, and to ostracize those who are different. Even the laughter and humor we offer with good intentions can be misinterpreted in such a way as to strain relationships with family, friends, or coworkers for days, weeks...even years.



LAUGHTER, IT TURNS OUT, is both familiar *and* mysterious. Most of us laugh, and inspire others to laugh, with considerable ease. We all seem to instinctively know what is and isn't funny. And we certainly realize how important laughter is in our lives, emotionally and socially. But exactly *what* it is that makes something seem amusing to us and *why* we should make this rather peculiar noise in response—these are different matters altogether. Indeed, there has never been a clear understanding of why it is that humans engage in laughter. Every scientific theory to explain this wonderful, if rather odd, vocalization has been less than comprehensive.

IT'S NOT FOR LACK OF TRYING. Since the time of Plato, some of history's most notable thinkers (Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, Darwin, Spencer, and Freud, to name a few) have sought to determine the critical factors which make some thing or event amusing, and why for certain individuals, or at certain times, or in certain contexts, and not others. Today, if you research laughter at the library or on the Internet, you will find several scientific theories attempting to make sense of it all. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, but the simple fact that there are multiple accounts means that no single explanation has proven complete.

FORTUNATELY, THAT HAS CHANGED. There is now an elegantly simple and universal new theory to explain the human laugh response — every human, every laugh, every context, and every reason. *Why We Laugh: A New Understanding* proposes an entirely new conceptual model with which to understand laughter, and by extension, the humor that tries to solicit it. By redefining laughter, we begin to see how it can be appropriate in so many circumstances, why it can be a both welcomed and feared response by others, and why it performs such an important role in our social interactions throughout our lifetimes.

### BOOK SUMMARY

#### Chapter One: FIRST LOOK

We all, at various times in our lives, wonder about laughter. Granted, most of these moments are fleeting, but they are not infrequent. We think about it when we compliment a friend on his or her ability to make us laugh, and when we stop to consider a supervisor's wonderful, or unusual, or infuriating sense of humor. We think about it when we try to reduce another's anxiety with a self-deprecating comment or amusing observation. And we think about it when we debate when to tickle a child, recommend a comedy film, or include a friendly insult in someone's birthday card. All these moments are ones in which we ponder, however briefly, laughter and its importance in our lives.

Occasionally, though, we are obliged to examine laughter more deliberately. Perhaps our playful banter is interpreted instead as insulting and cold-hearted. Or we are teamed up at work with someone who doesn't seem to take anything as seriously as we think they should. Or we are a mediator or judge who has to decide whether or not a string of practical jokes is more reasonably interpreted as harassment. Advertisers, comedians, television producers, speech writers, and book publishers...many of us actually spend a good deal of our professional careers trying to understand what makes people laugh.

Since the time of Plato, philosophers, physicians, natural historians, psychologists, and sociologists—some of history's most celebrated thinkers—have attempted to unravel the mystery of laughter.

Chapter One will introduce the reader to humanity's best attempts to explain this completely natural, and yet rather odd, behavior. It will also reveal how every major theory has fallen well short of its objective.

#### Chapter Two: REDEFINING LAUGHTER

What is laughter? It seems at first to be a very simple question, one that should spark an equally simple answer. Ask it of most people, however, and the first response you'll get is a look of confusion (sometimes accompanied by laughter, no less). Who doesn't know what laughter is? Still, give them a few moments to reflect and, if you're persistent, they will eventually provide you with a perceptive response. "It's a series of *ha-has*, *ho-hos*, or *hee-hees*...or giggles...or snorts," they'll offer. Or they'll say, "It's what people do when they see something funny...or when they're being tickled...or after they've stolen someone's lunch money...or when they're anxious...or really happy...or relieved...or want others to be..." Laughter, you will quickly learn, may consist of many different sounds, is offered in varied circumstances, and can express a lot of different feelings for a multitude of reasons.

It turns out that a comprehensive theory of why we laugh requires something that's been, until now, wholly elusive—a single, universal *definition* of laughter. Not what it sounds like, what inspires it, nor what we hope to accomplish by expressing it, but rather what laughter actually *is*. Chapter Two presents just such a definition!

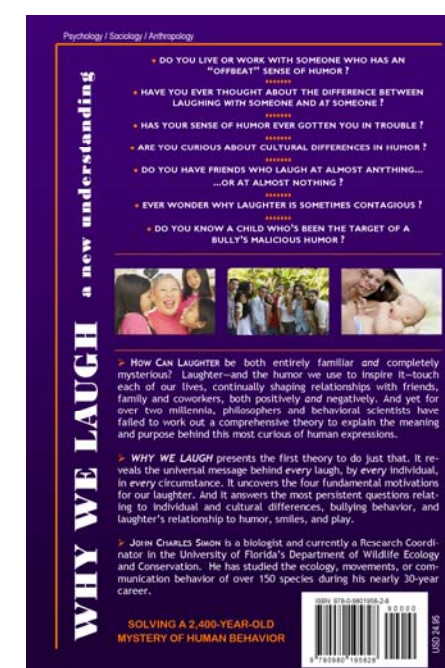
#### Chapter Three: A CLOSER LOOK

Is it possible that a single quality links every thing and every event that inspires laughter? Can a theory as simple as this one explain laughter's dual nature—the gentle, welcomed laughter of friends and family, and the sardonic laughter of bullies and killers? Can any one conceptual model account for all the variation we see in the laugh response among individuals and even cultures—or within a single person over the course of his or her lifetime.

This chapter provides an in-depth look at this new definition of laughter. It looks at the difference between laughing "with" others and "at" them. We'll discuss the motivations behind our laughter, as well as why sometimes our motives are misinterpreted. We'll also discuss why people sometimes laugh at themselves, even when they're alone.

#### Chapter Four: HUMOR

People need not understand exactly why we laugh to solicit the laughter of others, or offer up billions of dollars to those who inspire their own. Humor, both



spontaneous and well-planned, is all around us. We recognize it in a double entendre, a funny face, and a mocking impersonation. We put it in speeches, commercial advertisements, and on the editorial page. And we appreciate it at parties, on TV, in the movies, in books and magazines, and in our music.

But why?

Why do we insult, mock, and deride both others and ourselves, and why is it so often found endearing? How does sarcasm work? Why do we enjoy watching the unfolding of practical jokes? We go to a lot of trouble to make others laugh and to be with those who make us laugh; friendships, business relationships,



and political elections can all be decided by a person's ability to inspire feelings of amusement. Humor influences our lives tremendously. It does so when it works as expected, and perhaps even more so when it doesn't.

Chapter Four will describe the process by which we intentionally motivate laughter and how such actions benefit individuals and societies. It will explain how it is you can find your friend's broken arm amusing, but not the pimple on your own nose. It will reveal the common elements within physical, emotional, cognitive, and social forms of humor. It will compare and contrast informal, spontaneous types with more formal, premeditated types. And it will explain why we often laugh during activities not usually thought of as humorous: sports events, magic tricks, and spelling bees, to name a few.

#### Chapters Five & Six: VARIATIONS & GROUP DYNAMICS

As useful as it may be, an understanding of why we laugh turns out to be only half of the equation. Chapter Four will provide the reader with something every bit as significant, something which other books on the subject rarely address, let alone shed light on. It will reveal why we *don't* laugh—or more accurately, why we don't all laugh at the same things, to the same degree, throughout the entirety of our lives. In short, it will explain variations in the human laugh response.

We take some of these differences into consideration all the time. We don't solicit laughter from our uncle in the same way as we solicit it from our two-year-old nephew because the things individuals find amusing change somewhat as they mature. We also find that men and women differ slightly in the sorts of things they find funny. Then, too, people with very different personalities often have very different senses of humor—reserved, boisterous, animated, dry, crude, droll, biting, and so on.

There are many factors that appear to affect whether we find something amusing or not. In addition to age, sex, and personality, such influences include personal history, religion, national identity, health, current emotional state, who we're with, how we feel about them, and how they feel about us.

Chapters Five and Six will clarify how all these variables modify our laugh response and explain how seemingly spontaneous and uncontrollable bursts of laughter have both unconscious *and* conscious motivators.

#### Chapters Seven & Eight: ORIGINS & EVOLUTION

Who we are as individuals is obviously affected by our personal histories. But, by the same token, our range of our behavioral options is determined, in part, by our genetic history. Why we look for certain foodstuffs or seek out certain ambient temperatures relates to our species' ancestry. An understanding of why we act in certain ways always requires a broader evolutionary perspective. And this includes the behavior we call laughing.

At its most personal level, laughter has a distinctive vocal signature, unique in the same way that we all have our own speaking voices. At the same time, laughter is universally recognized throughout our species. It has an acoustic signature we identify almost automatically. Why, one might ask, does laughter take the form it does? Would it be, as some have suggested, "just as logical to stick our thumbs in our ears and wiggle our fingers" when we find something amusing? Well, not really.



Chapter Seven will resolve this question with a look at our closest living relatives: the nonhuman great apes. Orangutans, gorillas, common chimpanzees, and bonobos have all been described as exhibiting laugh-like vocalizations; what has not been determined is whether or not they come about for the same reasons and serve the same function. Yes, they "laugh" when tickled and during rough-and-tumble play just as we do. However, most theorists would argue that these are simple, reflexive responses and not equivalent to the laughter we exhibit in response to amusing anecdotes, subtle satire, and complex practical jokes.

This chapter will challenge that contention by looking at the subject of non-human laughter from an entirely new perspective. It will go on to examine laughter's possible progenitors—behaviors from which it may have evolved. It will discuss laughter's relationship with the smile.

And, finally, Chapter Eight will explore a possible scenario for the nature and evolution of humankind's sense of humor.

#### Chapters Nine & Ten: IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Theories that deal with fundamental aspects of human nature will necessarily have broader implications. These chapters will help place everything the reader will have learned about our ability, need, and desire to laugh into its proper context.



They will begin with the important task of reconciling previous laughter theories with this new, universal theory. Nearly all the research done on laughter and humor has been predicated on earlier assumptions about their meaning and functions. So, if existing data are to be appreciated for the insights they provide, we will need a way of integrating them into the new laughter paradigm.

Then, they will set out to answer the questions that have been ignored or incompletely answered by other laughter theories. The first question involves the use of laughter and humor by bullies. The second deals with one of the more unusual properties of laughter, its contagious quality. The third relates to the question of laughter's and humor's relationship to personal health. The fourth addresses the sense of humor—how it is graded, the factors influencing its development, and why is it so important to our social relationships.

Finally, Chapter Ten will look at laughter in the broadest possible context by asking what our laughter says about us as individuals and, perhaps more importantly, as human beings.

**If you have questions about laughter or humor, WHY WE LAUGH has the answers.**

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