

## Book review

**Roberts, Alan (2019) *A Philosophy of Humour*. Palgrave Macmillan - Pivot.**

The first impression about the text *A Philosophy of Humour* is that it is undoubtedly written in a concise, yet comprehensive way, and is organised in a rather user-friendly way, enabling the readers not only to navigate it smoothly but also to memorise all the main concepts in an effective fashion.

The book gives us an overview of the development of philosophy of humour and introduces some new phenomena pertaining to humour and amusement. Given that the book does not assume any prior knowledge of the subject matter, it introduces all the relevant terms step by step, encouraging the readers to digest the basics before moving further. At the same time, the author offers a significant amount of more complex concepts, aimed at those who are already knowledgeable about the matter. These include, but are not limited to, numerous philosophical stands, as well as arguments related to humour, coming from different areas of human endeavour, which speaks in favour of the view that humour is a multi-layered concept.

The distinction among amusement, funniness, and humour is one of the most prominent conclusions of the text, as it is not an uncommon occurrence that these are interchangeably used and mixed up. In a similar vein, the author highlights the differentiation between a normative and a descriptive background to funniness, shedding additional light to how we interpret and exhibit humour.

While some of the chapters serve for setting the scene, some other chapters, coming at later stages, introduce some refinements to the previously laid theories/philosophical stands. The chosen views, along with the selected examples, help readers understand the amusement, funniness, and humour distinction in detail. Furthermore, they shed light on and further clarify the cognitive and affective components of these phenomena.

Apart from being a good choice for those who are both more or less knowledgeable about the matter, the book, taking into consideration its style, language, and organisation, could also be a good teaching/learning resource used for either guided or self-study processes in a number of courses or areas. In this regard, the readers can rely on abstracts, summarising sections, as well as frequent repetitions and reflections on something already mentioned in the text.

Each of the six chapters is organised in the same way: chapters start with laying out the issues covered via brief abstracts supported by keywords; they continue with elaborating it all through chapter bodies, filled with descriptive examples, digested theoretical components, and relevant references; each of them, but for the first one, ends with a well-versed and very useful chapter summary. Chapters are followed by comprehensive reference lists, enabling the readers to find it all *in situ*, without looking for the needed sources at the very end of the book. It is also a worthy note that, apart from providing a great balance between theoretical foundation and practical examples, the text is rich in the author's footnotes, helping the user to navigate through not only the book components but also humour-related concepts *per se*.

Chapter 1, "Introduction", opens up, one could say, in the most adequate way possible – with the joke voted the funniest in the world. The first part of the text goes back to the roots of philosophy, both as a term and a concept, highlighting, at the same time, the significance of

humour in the lives of human beings, and pointing to the relationship between humour and philosophy. The chapter is undoubtedly laying down the book's foundations by posing several key question related to humour, funniness and amusement, thus giving us a hint about what the very text will mostly focus on, and suggesting the humour, funniness and amusement differentiation. It introduces the pattern which later on will be followed throughout the book: setting the scene and guiding the reader through it via helpful abstracts, section summaries, and isolated key words. It is followed by a comprehensive list of the references used. At first, given the chapters' length (referring to all the chapters of the book), it might seem unnecessary, but as you dive into the depths of the text, it becomes clear that this fashion comes in very useful and encourages autonomy in book navigation and usage, as well as autonomy in extended work on humour-related literature.

Chapter 2, titled "Amusement, funniness and humour", aims to answer the previously posed questions *vis-a-vis* humour, amusement and funniness, differentiating among them and isolating some prominent characteristics, relevant to both those already acquainted with the phenomena, and those who introduce themselves with the subject matter for the very first time. It sheds additional light on selected theories, supporting them by illustrative examples. As stated, the main goal of the section is to differentiate among three concepts which might be seen as interchangeable and potentially misused – funniness, amusement and humour. The chapter first defines amusement in detail, its narrow and wide sense included. The author specifically highlights the fact that the concept of amusement is characterised by both a cognitive and an affective component, and shares his definition of the phenomenon – in the form of the *Theory of Amusement*. The very definition (which is elaborated at later stages of the book) helps the author further define funniness and humour; apart from recalling the views of some prominent authors with regard to both the former and the latter (among them – Cohen, Clark, Carroll, Wright, etc.), the author proposes his own *Theory of Funniness*, as well as the *Theory of Humour* in this chapter.

"Early theories of amusement", the next chapter of the book, is dedicated to amusement exclusively; it further elaborates on the developmental stages of amusement through selected theories: essentialist approach, theories of superiority, theories of incongruity, as well as early release and role play theories. First, it talks about the prerequisites that should be met by theories aimed at taking the essentialist approach, reminiscing, at the same time, about the stands of Cohen, Clark, Wittgenstein, etc. Second, early superiority theories are elaborated, highlighting the bond between superiority and amusement in the form of laughter. In this section, the author reminds the readers of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Hobbs, Hegel, and other acknowledged thinkers who wrote about the superiority-laughter relationship. Third, the chapter continues to shed additional light on early incongruity theories. While Aristotle and Cicero find their place here as well, the views of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Bergson (to mention but a few) support the process of illustrating the incongruity and laughter link. Next, relying on the ideas of Shaftesbury, Spencer, Dewey and Freud, early release theories are depicted, elaborating on the mental energy release and laughter connection. Last, whether the atmosphere of play is a prerequisite for laughter and/or amusement is examined, which is accompanied by the stands of theorists like Kant, Eastman, Aristotle, and Darwin, who observed the phenomena among apes. Via its form and content, this rich chapter thoroughly prepares the readers for the next two book parts aimed at a critical approach to some of the claims given here.

"The cognitive component of amusement" is centrally examined in the fourth chapter bearing the very same title. Relying on the previous part, the chapter is focused on the phenomenon of incongruity, which, from the author's perspective, is very much needed for the nature of amusement but is in need of modification. The chapter opens with questioning the necessity of incongruity via a number of illustrative examples coming from different walks of

life, including, but not limited to, *The Simpsons* episode, joke interpretation among different cultures, a caricature of Margaret Thatcher, a nonsense poem by Lewis Carroll, etc. While some early theories proposed that incongruity is a prerequisite for amusement, the author assesses the view in detail via a number of counter-claims, both personal and those coming from recognised theorists, to mention but a few – Bain, Gimbel, Davies. With the goal of making the link between incongruity and amusement stronger, the author analyses some of incongruity refinements, that have failed from his point of view. In this regard, expectation violation, norm violation, erroneous conceptualisation, and error detection are mentioned here. Supported by some practical examples, the chapter argues that amusement is not always characterised by expectation violation. Also, by opposing the views of Cochrane, and Kotzen (*inter alia*), the author argues that norm violation is not a feasible refinement, as it fails to make norm more understandable and to untangle the concept of incongruity. Furthermore, the idea that erroneous conceptualisation is an integral part of incongruity is opposed via some vivid examples and experiments (some of them suggested and conducted by Oscar Wilde, Kyhle and Lynch). Finally, while Hurley et al. do believe that error detection is an inevitable part of incongruity, the author agrees with Oring and claims that this does not always hold true. To further unwrap incongruity and its bond with amusement, he continues the chapter by proposing some refinements of the concept of *bisociation*. Koestler, Apter, and Raskin are listed to support the illustration of bisociation here. The author then comments of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as some potential counter-examples to this refinement, concluding that none of them are actually of standing nature. Apart from the bisociation refinement, a refinement of the concept of *resolution* is also proposed in this chapter: the ideas of Suls and Shultz are mentioned, as well as assessed and challenged with some counter-examples. Upon contrasting both supporting and opposing stands, the author concludes that no counter-examples to resolution refinement hold true. These two refinements, at the very end of the chapter, merge to form a definition of the *cognitive component of amusement*.

Superiority, release and play theories are analysed in Chapter 5, titled “The affective component of amusement”. The author isolates some key concepts resulting from the mentioned theories that merge into the *affective component of amusement*. This chapter is another one stemming from the third one – and continuing the story pertaining to the early posed theories. The author contrasts early and modern theories, focusing on their potential. Early superiority theories are the first to be illustrated in the chapter – with the support of some counter-examples to the necessity of superiority for defining amusement, mainly stemming from Hutcheson. The author continues by confirming that there still exists support for superiority theories, in the form of the modern ones (the one proposed by Gruner being at the forefront), but also that just like the early theories, these face a number of counter-examples. After a comprehensive insight into both arguments and counter-arguments *vis-a-vis* superiority theories, it is concluded that they do shed some light on the link between amusement and aggression: relying on some experiments, the author proposes his own view of this bell-curved relationship (amusement tends to rise with aggression but its levels drop when aggression becomes excessive). The next section is dedicated to release theories, both early and modern ones; the readers are reminded of the theories laid out in Chapter 3 and then informed about some counter-examples to these theories. With regard to modern release theories, the notion of arousal is emphasised instead of the one of mental energy. In the conclusion, the role of arousal suggested via release theories is supported, and embodied via the author’s proposal of the *arousal linear* (talking about how the levels of amusement can go up due to arousal-increasing content; whether it is, e.g., aggressive or dangerous, it is on the increase as well). Then, early and modern play theories are elaborated on in the chapter. Taking into consideration both the arguments coming from prominent thinkers and counter-examples coming from different spheres of life, the author acknowledges the

significance of play for amusement and claims that it can become even more relevant if modified, so the concept of *paratelic necessary* is isolated (confirming the link between amusement and the paratelic state). Last but not least, the isolated concepts of *paratelic necessary*, *bell-curved relationship* and *arousal linear* merge in the final section of the chapter to define the affective component of amusement.

The final chapter titled “A theory of amusement” aims to combine some of the conclusions drawn in the previous chapters. This chapter develops the theory set out at the beginning, in Chapter 2, and enriches it with the redefined cognitive and affective components of amusement (previously illustrated in Chapters 4 and 5). In order to elaborate on some initial ideas, primarily the cognitive and affective components of amusement, the author first proposes *cognitive dissonance*, concluding (and supported by similar views of other theorists like Croyle and Cooper, Elkin and Leippe, Etgen and Rosen, etc.) that *cognitive dissonance*, i.e. cognitive component of amusement leads to increased arousal, thus confirming the bond between cognitive and affective component. As a result of the bond, a completed theory of amusement is proposed. To cap it all, the author lists some strategies for making the levels of arousal, i.e. the levels of amusement, higher – them being *expectation and norm violation*, *attitude alignment*, as well as *dissonance accentuation*. Combining some new examples with the ideas from Chapter 4, the author dives into each of the strategies, highlighting the fact that their list is an open one, and that there might be many more ways to increase arousal and amusement. He ends by putting it all in nutshell, in compliance with the style introduced at the very beginning, and by reminding the readers of some major ideas and the main humour-funniness-amusement differentiation from the very beginning of the book.

Despite the fact that the very text is not a very long one (on the contrary, it is rather concise), it includes enough information and illustration, as stated earlier, even for those not previously acquainted with humour and the related philosophical background. Also, the author did put significant effort in answering many of the questions which might arise among both amateurs and scholars from the field. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that some of these conclusions will be opposed, reanalysed, questioned, and further developed in the future (either by the author himself or other authors examining related issues).

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