WHY FLATULENCE IS FUNNY

James S. Spiegel

Toot. Pass gas. Break wind. Cut the cheese. Float an air biscuit. Burp from behind. Blow the brown horn. The backfire, bant, bucksnort, booty bomb, colon cologne, drifter, fanny bubble, gasser, gurgler, moon beam, nether belch, pants puffer, pooh tune, rip-snort, sphincter whistle, thunder dumpling, tush tickler, and trouser cough. These are synonyms for a bodily function that is as natural as breathing, eating, or sleeping. Yet unlike other physiological functions, the 'flatus' is a source of endless humor – perhaps more so than any other subject in human experience. But *why* are farts funny? That is a question that is both serious and philosophically interesting.

A Brief History of Flatulence

Flatulence has figured prominently in literary history. In a work entitled *Apocolocyntosis*, attributed to the ancient Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, we find this satirical tribute to the Emperor Claudius:

> At once he bubbled up the ghost, and there was an end to that shadow of a life… The last words he was heard to speak in this world were these. When he had made a great noise with that end of him which talked easiest, he cried out, "Oh dear, oh dear! I think I have made a mess of myself."

In the Middle Ages flatulence played a central role in the plot of one of the tales of the *Arabian Nights*, entitled 'The Historic Fart', which recounts how a young man on his

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wedding night 'let fly a fart, great and terrible', which startled his many wedding guests and brought him considerable shame. He left in disgrace but years later returned to find that his untimely emission had become so renowned that it was referenced as a calendar marker.

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* there appears one of the most celebrated references to flatulence. In the ribald 'Miller's Tale', Nicholas decides to humiliate his rival, Absalom, who seeks the affections of his mistress. When Absalom goes to her window to steal a kiss, Nicholas is ready. He sticks his buttocks out the window, just as Absalom romantically beckons, 'Speak, sweet bird. I do not know where you are. At this Nicholas let fly a fart with a noise as great as a clap of thunder, so that Absalom was almost overcome by the force of it.' Unfortunately for Nicholas, Absalom also was ready – with a red hot iron 'and he smote Nicholas in the middle of his ass'.

Also, in Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, there occurs a subtle but unmistakable double pun about flatulence, as Dromio of Ephesus declares, 'A man may break a word with you, sir; and words are but wind; Ay, and break it in your face, so he break it not behind.'

In philosophical history serious concerns about flatulence emerged among the pre-Socratic philosophers. Many of them associated the human soul with air or breath, so perhaps they feared that passing gas might threaten one's life, or at least one's rational capacities. Thus, the Pythagorean philosophers forswore the eating of beans because of the flatulence this would produce. Following the Pythagoreans, Empedocles declared, 'Wretches, utter wretches, keep your hands from beans!' This ethical worry over flatulence continued up through Plato. Centuries later the Roman orator Cicero would provide some explanation, observing that 'Plato bids us go to our beds with our bodies so composed that there is nothing that brings distraction of disturbance to the mind. That, it is thought, is why the Pythagoreans are forbidden to eat beans which

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cause considerable flatulence and are thus inimical to those who seek peace of mind.'

And theological history is not without its exemplars of flatulence. Well known for his struggles with constipation, Martin Luther cheerfully regarded his emissions as metaphorical blasts against the Devil, whom he explicitly blamed for his intestinal tortures. Luther wrote, 'I resist the devil, and often it is with a fart that I chase him away. When he tempts me with silly sins I say, "Devil, yesterday I broke wind too. Have you written it down on your list?"'

Theories of Humor

These are humorous tales of flatulence, to be sure. And we all have our own tales to tell (or dare never tell) regarding the passing of gas that are likewise funny, even if embarrassingly so. What is it about the flatus that evokes laughter? There is an old idiom that says some things are so obvious they're invisible. In this case, we have a social phenomenon that is so commonplace that even philosophers – whose vocation it is to ask 'why?' of everything imaginable – have overlooked it, at least as something worthy of *philosophical* attention. So why is flatulence a source of humor? To answer this question we must first inquire as to what causes laughter generally.

Theories of humor are divided into three main categories – superiority theory, incongruity theory, and relief theory. While contemporary philosophers have defended nuanced or hybrid versions of these, it will be sufficient for the present purpose to review the essential features of each view.

One of the earliest accounts of humor appears in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where we find hints of what is now called the superiority theory. Aristotle analyzes the comical as a portrayal of 'men worse than average', though only in some particular respect, not in their entirety. The essence of comedy, Aristotle says, is the ridiculous, which he

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defines as 'a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others'. Thomas Hobbes is the most well known proponent of the superiority theory of humor. He notes that people laugh because of a sense of 'sudden glory'. Laughter, says Hobbes, is 'caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves'. We laugh, in other words, because some situation or turn of events makes us feel superior to the other. An obvious strength of Hobbes' account is its capacity to explain slapstick humor. The man who gets the pie in the face or slips on the banana peel is someone who suffers dramatic humiliation and in comparison to whom we feel sudden superiority. Whole genres of comedy are premised on the appeal of this sensation, and comic figures from the Three Stooges and Lucille Ball to Jim Carrey and Homer Simpson make us laugh, Hobbes would insist, precisely because they give us that sudden sense of superiority to them... over and over again.

Incongruity theorists insist that the essence of humor consists in a surprising juxtaposition of some kind. Immanuel Kant says, 'Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd... Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.' A few generations later another German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer offered a more detailed version of this account. While agreeing with Kant that all laughter regards the unexpected, Schopenhauer argued that the object of laughter must involve something incongruous. 'In every case', he says, 'laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity'. This account provides a ready explanation for many classic instances of humor, from the talking dog to the woman with a mustache. In ordinary life, dogs don't talk and women are not mustached, so when such things are depicted, we laugh.

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The last of the three major theories of humor is really not so much an account of humor or what makes things funny so much as an attempt to causally explain laughter from a psycho-physiological standpoint. The nineteenth century writer Herbert Spencer proposed that laughter is a way of expending pent up nervous energy. He says that 'nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular motion' and laughter, which is an otherwise purposeless behavior, is one way we do this in response to jokes and humorous situations. Later, Sigmund Freud refined this 'relief theory' through his psychoanalysis of nervous energy and release in laughter. According to Freud, nervous energy is built up as a person represses feelings of hostility, anxiety, or sexual desire where such is socially inappropriate. A witty remark may prompt a release of that energy through laughter, particularly if the witticism pertains to the person or situation that prompted the hostility, anxiety, or desire. While the relief theory fails to explain, or even attempt to explain, what makes the objects of laughter humorous or comical, it does account for situations in which people commonly laugh where there appears to be no humor involved. For instance, while playing a game of hide-and-seek, one might be inclined to laugh when the seeker is very close but somehow fails to see the person hiding. It also explains why we are inclined to laugh when witnessing a good illusion or magic trick. There is nothing comical about such situations, but if laughter releases nervous energy, then doing so in these instances makes sense. Moreover, relief theory explains the popularity of racial, sexual, and religious jokes. They are more likely to elicit laughter because of the social taboos associated with these subjects.

So which among the three standard accounts of humor should we accept? While many philosophers of humor have planted their flag firmly in one camp or another, I see no reason to do so. It seems to me that each theory fastens on a significant insight with regard to what makes us laugh. In this regard, I am in agreement with John Morreall who sees a common core to each of the major

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views, namely the notion that laughter always results from a 'pleasant psychological shift' of some kind. Incongruity theorists focus on the cognitive forms that this shift often takes, while superiority and relief theorists emphasize affective dimensions. But for there to be true humor, and ultimately laughter as a physical response, this psychological shift must be *pleasant*.

An obvious advantage to Morreall's approach is that it happily affirms the insights of each major account of humor. But it boasts a further virtue not shared by any of the standard theories and that is its capacity to explain laughter that results from tickling, particularly in the case of infants and young toddlers. Clearly, the superiority and incongruity theories fail to explain such laughter. Infants and young toddlers are cognitively too immature to perceive incongruities or to have a genuine sense of self, much less to compare themselves to others so as to have the capacity for a feeling of superiority. And, in any case, it seems implausible to suggest that tickling could produce a sense of incongruity or superiority even in adults, let alone infants and young toddlers. As for the relief theory, again, infants and young toddlers are too immature to have the social awareness necessary to produce the nervous energy requisite for laughter on this account. So whatever prompts laughter in these cases must be physical or purely perceptual in nature. Here Morreall's base concept has a lot of explanatory power. Whether tickling or making faces at an infant or young toddler, the child surely experiences a 'pleasant psychological shift', so the consequent laughter is easily accounted for.

Given the merits of Morreall's inclusive approach, and his insight about the common core shared by the major accounts of humor, I will proceed on the assumption that his view is at least approximately correct. Accordingly, I will also assume that each of the standard accounts have important insights about particular ways in which a pleasant psychological shift inducing laughter often occurs in various contexts.

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Why We Laugh at Flatulence

We are now in a position to answer the question posed at the outset. Flatulence is funny because it satisfies the psychological conditions for humor. In other words, it makes people laugh because it produces the pleasant psychological shift to which Morreall refers. But this is not to say that flatulence is always humorous. Indeed, flatulence fails to be humorous to someone, or stops being funny if it was initially, when he or she is offended by the smell of it, at which point the psychological shift is no longer pleasant but unpleasant and thus is perhaps even a cause for anger or rebuke. Thus, it is common in such circumstances for the offended person to respond to others' laughter by declaring, 'It's not funny' or retort with a scolding instruction (e.g., 'Show some manners' or 'You shouldn't do that at the dinner table').

But *when* flatulence *is* funny, it is because its occurrence produces the pleasant psychological shift that Morreall correctly notes is the pre-condition for all humor and the laughter it induces. So now we may ask, why do people find flatulence *especially* funny, more humorous than most other comical phenomena, as evidenced by the fact that everyone has at one time or another laughed at it, and not just in our culture but apparently in all cultures the world over, and for all of recorded human history? As easy as the previous question was to answer, this question is very difficult and will require some conceptual groundwork before addressing it directly. Let me begin by stating an important assumption, specifically that some humorous things are funnier than others. This might seem obvious enough, but in fact it is potentially a contentious claim, and here is why.

Aestheticians differ over whether aesthetic features are real properties of things or merely subjective states or culturally shaped perceptions. And the comedic is, or so it seems to me, an aesthetic property. The aesthetic *realist* about comic qualities maintains that these are real properties of the world, as opposed to being simply in the eye,

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ear, or mind of the audience, as the aesthetic *relativist* would maintain. I am an aesthetic realist, committed to the idea that some things are more humorous than others and that this is, at least to some significant degree, an objective fact about the world. So my answer to the question why flatulence is especially funny will turn on this point. An aesthetic relativist would no doubt answer this question very differently, appealing to the unique personal psychologies of individuals and/or various cultural conditions that influence people's perceptions. As an aesthetic realist about humor, I would not deny the significance of such psychological or cultural factors or even some degree of subjective and cultural relativity when it comes to the comical. I simply reject the thesis that the comical is *entirely* a relative matter. And this will be decisive for how I respond to our question.

Now to answer the question, we must first consider what accounts for degrees of comic quality generally. That is, what are the objective reasons why some things are funnier than others? Once we get clear on this, we can address the specific query regarding flatulence. It seems to me that comic quality varies in degree because there are many ways in which something can be funny. And the more ways that something is funny, the greater will be its overall comic value. Consider an analogy with 'fitness' in biology. Fitness supervenes over a multitude of characteristics (e.g., having claws, thick fur, scales, sharp teeth, agility, speed, flight capacity, mimicry, etc.). And if an organism has many fit-making qualities, then we might say it is *more* fit or has a higher survival potential than those organisms that only have a few fit-making characteristics. Similarly, in the context of comedy an event or work of art may be more or less humorous depending on how many comic qualities it has, and the more such qualities it has, the greater will be its potential to induce laughter in those who experience it.

So now to answer our question. Flatulence is especially funny because, given the right circumstances, it is an event that features many comic qualities. Or, to put it in terms of

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the Morreallian inclusive approach, there are diverse ways to produce the pleasant psychological shift leading to laughter. And we can describe these vis-à-vis the major accounts of humor. So let us analyze the phenomenon in light of each of the individual theories. (And, to be clear, the following examples pertain just to those instances *when* flatulence *is* funny.)

First, flatulence is humorous because it produces a sudden sense of superiority. As a social taboo, passing gas signifies a lack of self-control and, thus, diminished dignity. This perception of the other's diminished dignity results in the psychological effect that Hobbes terms 'sudden glory'. The effect is most pronounced when the person involved holds a position of public prestige or high standing, since the equalizing effect of their flatulence represents a more dramatic shift of perception. This is why we are particularly humored by stories of U.S. Presidents who are fond of potty humor, such as when Bob Woodward reported in his book, *State of Denial*, that George Bush and Karl Rove 'shared an array of fart jokes' and even played flatulence pranks on one another during staff meetings.

Flatulence is also funny because of multiple incongruities it presents. One of these regards social context. Except for the bathroom, the socially designated area for excretory functions, flatulence is out of place. This is especially so at formal occasions such as weddings, academic lectures, or newscasts. We laugh at professors or reporters who pass gas because the sound of flatulence is incongruous with the formal setting or the seriousness of the issues discussed. Flatulence also often contradicts the dignity of social standing. The more public respect or notoriety someone enjoys, the more jarring it is to hear them pass gas (or represented as passing gas) and, consequently, the funnier it is.

Lastly, flatulence prompts laughter because, being socially taboo in most contexts, the phenomenon invites a release of nervous energy in the form of laughter among those who witness it. This nervous energy is attributable at

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least in part to the fact that we all share a similar fear – and perhaps some painful memories – of passing gas in a very public and therefore embarrassing way. Decent public appearance is something we naturally desire, and we expend considerable effort and resources to maintain it by good hygiene and dress. But since breaking wind is a daily reality in our lives, we face a constant threat to our public appearance. Consequently, we all must exert some effort to arrest, forestall, or silence our emissions, lest we undermine all our work to maintain a decent appearance. Doing so creates a build-up of nervous energy. So when someone slips and audibly passes gas in a public setting, this brings our flatulence anxiety to mind and our laughter serves, in part, to release our nervous energy about it.

Conclusion

To summarize, then, flatulence is funny for the same reason that anything is funny – because it causes a pleasant psychological shift. And, as we have seen, there are several factors that may give rise to this shift, which are the foci of the standard accounts of humor. If we take an inclusive approach and affirm the central insights of each of these theories, this helps us to see why flatulence is *especially* funny, in the sense that its humorous appeal is apparently universal – across cultures and historical epochs. For flatulence is a phenomenon that prompts a sudden sense of superiority, is incongruous with many aspects of human social life, and creates a constant exertion of mental energy from which we all need relief from time to time.

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