



Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind (MIT Press)

By Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, Reginald B. Adams Jr.

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Some things are funny -- jokes, puns, sitcoms, Charlie Chaplin, *The Far Side*, Malvolio with his yellow garters crossed -- but why? Why does humor exist in the first place? Why do we spend so much of our time passing on amusing anecdotes, making wisecracks, watching *The Simpsons*? In *Inside Jokes*, Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams offer an evolutionary and cognitive perspective. Humor, they propose, evolved out of a computational problem that arose when our long-ago ancestors were furnished with open-ended thinking. Mother Nature -- aka natural selection -- cannot just order the brain to find and fix all our time-pressured misleaps and near-misses. She has to bribe the brain with pleasure. So we find them funny. This wired-in source of pleasure has been tickled relentlessly by humorists over the centuries, and we have become addicted to the endogenous mind candy that is humor.

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Editorial Review

Review

Ever since Plato (who thought we laugh at vice), thinkers as serious as Kant and Freud have put forth theories of our giggles and guffaws. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams go at the problem with the ingenuity of first-rate scientists and the timing of first-rate comics. Not only do they have the riches of evolutionary psychology from which to draw, but they're even funnier than Hegel.

(Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, author of *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*)

The deft use of humor can win a mate, persuade an audience, or make a tyrant quake in his jackboots. Yet no one really understands why the human brain should respond so forcefully to that cocktail of anomaly, indignity, and rhythmic vocalization we call a joke. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams offer a sophisticated analysis of this important phenomenon using high standards of evolutionary explanation -- and no, it is not a turgid academic disquisition, but written with clarity, good cheer, and, of course, wit.

(Steven Pinker, author of *How The Mind Works*)

[O]ne of the most complex and sophisticated humor theories ever presented.... The authors should be lauded for their thought-provoking and original work.

(*Evolutionary Psychology*)

The theory [the authors] elaborate is a detailed and sophisticated descendant of incongruity theories.... The learned and even-handed stance adopted by [them] regarding problem cases is... upbeat: they regard their theory as a provisional staging post, and a prompt to further empirical enquiry into these open-ended issues. On balance, that is probably the right attitude to take.

(*The Times Literary Supplement*)

Inside Jokes is the most persuasive theory of humor in the centuries that scientists have been trying to explain why we crack up. Extra bonus: unlike most such research, which is about as funny as a root canal, Hurley's analysis is -- and I don't think I'm going out on too much of a limb here -- the funniest thing the MIT Press... has ever published (in a good way).

(Sharon Begley *The Daily Beast*)

Science advances by asking new questions, and Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams raise a lot of them.... Some of these questions have been asked before, but no previous attempt succeeds in answering so many so well.

(Walter Sinnott-Armstrong *Science*)

Hurley and his crew cross the road to not just explain a joke, but explain all jokes. Before this book the only comedy that had been peer reviewed and replicated in double-blind experiments was the theory that there's nothing funnier than a smoking monkey. I'm so glad smart people outside of comedy are taking comedy seriously.

(Penn Jillette of "Penn & Teller")

MIT Press has come up with a page-turner, a book you can't put down. That is no joke! The authors have dissected the mental state of humor and, instead of dismissing it, instill awe about the beauty of the evolved human mind. Humor at its various levels cleans up our act and plays a magnificent role in making us who we are.

(Michael Gazzaniga, Director, Sage Center for the Study of Mind, University of California, Santa Barbara)

What's so funny about a robot with a sense of humor? In this highly original analysis, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams try to locate the holy grail, the essence of a joke, by using a variety of tools (from computer science, cognitive science, linguistics, philosophy, and even evolutionary psychology) to dissect why we laugh. This powerful team of authors goes a long way to explain why and when we laugh, and in doing so uncover insights about how the mind works. But like the proverbial millipede who, trying to analyze how he lifts each of his legs in the precise sequence, starts tripping over, readers should beware that getting inside a joke risks dehumorizing it!

(**Simon Baron-Cohen**, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology and Director, Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University)

About the Author

Matthew M. Hurley is researching emotions and creativity under Douglas R. Hofstadter at the Center for Research on Concepts and Cognition at Indiana University. Daniel C. Dennett is University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University. He is the author of *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness* (MIT Press, 2005, 2006) and other books. Reginald B. Adams, Jr., is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Penn State University.

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