

# Laughter: Concept, approaches and reflections\*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to define laughter and reflect on it. It is intended to inform and raise awareness about the importance of laughter for health and life as well as the little thought that has been object to date. Something as mundane and generally favorable for our existence, which has not been taken into consideration, currently, its study and also more importantly its practice are beginning to pave the path.

**Key words:** Laugh, works, authors, reflection

## La risa: Concepto, enfoques y reflexiones

### Resumen

El objetivo de este texto es definir la risa y reflexionar en torno ella. Se pretende informar y sensibilizar sobre la importancia de la risa para la salud y la vida, así como la poca reflexión de que ha sido objeto hasta la fecha. Algo tan cotidiano como en general favorable para la existencia, que si bien no ha sido tomado suficientemente en cuenta, en la actualidad tanto su estudio –como y lo que es más importante– su práctica, se están abriendo camino.

**Palabras clave:** risa, obras, autores, reflexión

## Riso: Conceito, abordagens e reflexõe

### Resumo

O objetivo deste texto é definir o riso e medite sobre ele. Que visa informar e sensibilizar sobre a importância do riso para saúde e vida, bem como a pequena reflexão que submeteu-se à data. Algo como todos os dias como amplamente favorável à existência, que embora não tenham sido tomados suficientemente em conta, atualmente ambos estudar –como e o que é mais importante– sua prática, você está abrindo a nova perspectiva. Definições, obras, autores e perspectivas de uma forma geral são aqui analisadas. Também os tipos de riso e sua aplicação.

**Palavras-chave:** Risos, definições, obras, autores, risos, reflexão

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## Introduction

The human being can be described as an “animal that laughs” –as said by Aristoteles– or an “animal who makes someone laugh” as expanded by Bergson (2008). While we currently know that laughter is part of our innate communication inherited from primates and that several animals have it as well. However, what is not known is if it represented a sign of triumph, aggression, relief, or group interconfidence. In any case, it is an evolutionary and genetic conduct. Babies laugh before talking or walking, some say that 40 days after birth, others 4 months after. In any case, they laugh and smile before their parents or when they are tickled.

It is said that laughter is the “absence of the ego”, that it humanizes, is a sign of intelligence, or even a prayer. Osho says that “laughter gives you strength” and adds how medical science affirms that it is a medicine from nature, brings out internal energy and puts it in motion, “When you truly laugh, during those little moments you are in a deep meditative state. Thoughts stop. It is impossible to laugh and think at the same time (Osho, 2006, p. 4). It is how to stop the world, suspend everyday life, to be in another dimension as said by Berger (1999) and summarized in *promesa de redención*.

## Works, authors, perspectives

Plato –in *El Philebus*– and Aristoteles –in *Poetik*– had fixed on laughter and its offensive and mocking character. Thus, in the middle ages it was considered, according to some, that laughter was something of fools or even the devil (Bajtin, 1995; Fernández-Castiblanco, 2008).

Emmanuel Kant in his Critique of judgement (2003) stated that “laughter comes from a wait which eventually resolves in nothing” (cited in Bergson, 2008, p. 65). From this, the incongruity theory arises (Raskin, 1985), one of the theoretical approaches of humor and laughter –along with superiority, relief and games (Carbelo-Baquero, 2006). Regarding jokes, the philosopher affirmed that they are a game of thoughts which goes to the sensitive body, loosening it and moving organs restoring balance and health. He characterizes laughter as an emotion born out of frustration in an expectation (cited in Fernández-Castiblanco, 2008, p. 2). Hegel, his disciple, in the art of Philosophy relates laughter and success when understanding a riddle (Fernández-Castiblanco, 2008).

Arthur Schopenhauer and the world as will and representation (2012) enters the incongruity theory (Raskin, 1985)-, the derisory of the opposition and inadequacy, the

paradoxical and unexpected subsumption. The irruption of the absurd, the paradoxical or deceitful discourse –according to Kant–, the incoherence of what is apparently coherent. Laughter emerges from the perception of the incongruity between a concept and a real object and what is thought about it. “Thus, laughter always emerges from a paradoxical subsumption, because of that, unexpected, as long as it is expressed in words or with facts (Fernández-Castiblanco, 2008, p. 3).

On the other hand, Thomas Hobbes aims toward the superiority theory and the dangers of laughter (Berger, 1999; Carbelo-Baquero, 2006). In his work *Elements of law, natural and politic*, this author points a treatment about laughter and notes that “the individual glorifies itself when laughing”. The same is pointed out in *Leviathan*, when affirming that laughter is a “sudden glory” making the person feel superior, the one who laughs underlines its superiority.

It is not possible to think and talk about laughter without recalling the bergsonian metaphor in which laughter is the foam of a wave spilling on the shore, undoubtedly a beautiful and precise comparison. “laughter is born just like this foam. It shows out of social life the superficial rebellions. It instantly draws the unstable way of those commotions. It is also a foam made of salt. It bubbles like foam”. On emotions he adds: “it is joy. The philosopher who tastes it will sometimes find a certain dose of bitterness in a quantity so small of matter (Bergson, 2008, p. 139).

Among other theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the one where humor and laughter are considered a *relief*, as an emotional catharsis, when psychic, physiological, mental, emotional and also including social and cultural tension is released. In this sense, Sigmund Freud (2008) lights the release of nervous energy expressed and released through laughter, be it because of the release of energy repressing something, what is being repressed, laughter itself as a relief. He points out the plasticity of the words and the speech in his research on the joke, the time saving of the psychic wear facing the limiting power of the coercive thought, the critical judgement. Humor, according to him, disinhibits, reestablishes the good mood, in the end it produces pleasure. Above all, it points toward novelty, surprise, the unexpected, short-circuit as part of the displacement that unleashes humor and laughter.

## Anatomy and chemistry of laughter

Laughter “is a reflex-type process controlled by ‘ancient’ areas of the brain (the thalamus and hypothalamus),

which control other reflexive activities and behaviors purely emotional, and not in the cerebral cortex which controls the cognitive faculties” (Berger, 1999, pp. 88-89). For Konrad Lorenz it is a “reflex of surrender” as an accumulation of tension freeing itself in a harsh way, a lack of surrender to laughter. “This physiological process can be unleashed by purely physical stimulations, the most known being tickles” (Berger, 1999, p. 89).

Laughter physiologically unites three systems: neurochemistry, muscular and respiratory. On the first one, he points out that laughter lies in the nervous system, a part of the cortex – conscious brain–, the limbic system –emotional center–, the chemical mediators, the receptors of the nervous system, endogenous opiates and the autonomous nervous system –sympathetic and parasympathetic– losing control of one’s willingness, have a lot to do with laughter. Thus, this neurochemical system will initiate laughter which will be perceived more through the respiratory and muscular system and facial gesticulation.

Cerebral cartography is yet to be completed, however, it is possible to place laughter in the right hemisphere where the artistic activities and emotional responses are found. In particular, before a pleasing or gracious stimulus the prefrontal cortex of the right hemisphere activates, as does the temporal lobe and other areas related with memory. “Therefore, when removed from the experiences deposited and the correct answer to this stimulus arises, when this is identified in this “card” stored in the memory: laughter, smile, or guffaw” (Rodríguez-Cabezas, 2008, p. 51).

It is said that the neurochemical complex of laughter produces endorphins, a good sense of humor increases the immunological system, NK lymphocytes –also called killer cells– that attack viral or cancerous cells and destroys them, making it possible to talk about laughter as a prevention of cancer (Rodríguez-Cabezas, 2008).

Finally, on the respiratory system, it seems clear how it is linked to the muscular system in the phenomenon of laughter “when we laugh: inspiration is deeper, the respiratory pause much more extended than when resting, and difficult, prolonged and broad breathing almost emptying the lungs of their reserve or residual volume (RV) air which they hold in a resting state” (Rodríguez-Cabezas, 2008, p. 59).

## A bit of history

We make a brief parenthesis to comment some considerations of sociological and anthropological character

of laughter. It seems that one of the hypotheses is that laughter has a sacred origin and dates back to the first hominids in the supposed beginnings of humanity. Some cultures cultivated ritual laughter as a sacred and magical element. Further on, it is part of the popular culture “which preserves and claims the original sense of the ritual party destined to evoke a utopic time-space, capable of symbolizing the cosmic unit between the community and the universe” (Bubnova, 2000, p. 142).

For example, in China, Taoists teach that a self-dedicated smile improves health, happiness and even longevity and a proverb says “to be healthy you have to laugh at least 30 times a day”. In fact, apparently more than 4.000 years in the ancient Chinese empire there were temples where people gathered to laugh in order to balance health, and the same is also said about India, where laughter was practiced in some of their temples (Berger, 1999).

In Japan there is a story about the mystical Honei or the “laughing Buda”, who never spoke but just laughed, he gathered with people and he laughed and everyone else started laughing. He is considered to be a respected wise man (Osho, 2006).

It is said that in childhood we laugh an average of 300 times a day before turning 6, while adults who laugh a lot do it between 100 and 15 times a day (Jáuregui, 2012). A research points out that infants between the age of 7 and 10 laugh 300 times every 24 hours and adults do it at the most 80 times (Rodríguez-Cabezas, 2008). Over the years the capacity of laughing starts diminishing, maybe because of education or life itself, social conditionings or believing to be someone important, serious and responsible. Fear of losing composure, of being judged by others, shyness or shame, the what would people say or think. We leave this reflection here to move to other topics.

## Body and mind

There are many types of laughter, however, those which have to do with its origin are basically two: the one that comes from the body and the one that comes from the mind. In fact, laughter includes everything, body, mind and spirit, in a manner of speaking, of course the physical, intellectual, cultural, emotional and energetic, as we have been pointing out in this text. When laughing, all systems are involved and all the organismic being not just the physical body or the thought mobilize, as seen in the brain the receptor field of laughter moves from one side to the other. The complete being –body, mind and spirit– we say, is involved, once we are involved with other

people, with the world and life, while we feel ourselves, we momentarily disconnect from ordinariness and connect to another level of reality.

Nevertheless, there is a laughter which comes from naivety and conjugates the intellectual and emotional intervention in a way provoked by what is known as –what we say– naivety, and there is another laughter which arises at the beginning for no apparent reason stimulated from the body just from the fact of starting to laugh or from a contagious laughter reaching, or being able to reach, a “no mind” state, is considered from some approaches as the best one, in terms of health and therapeutically speaking.

Laughter from the body comes within, it is our internal laughter, we can provoke it by imagining things, even create a provoked or physically simulated laughter, can arise from a contagious laugh or simply comes out, it does not require victims or external stimuli –no movies, jokes, or someone falling–, it is laughing just for the sake of it, because of having a good time, because one wants or feels like laughing. It is to surrender to fun, games and life, when flowing from the existence of the present time. They say that learning to laugh is learning to live. Boys and girls laugh without reason and this comes from their nature. It is a model of laughter coming from the body to the mind, laughter is in the body and everyone reaches it at will, among other things, moving the body. In this type of laughter, the person is active and triggers it, as long as the person also participates in it.

*Laughter of the mind* comes from the outside, stimulated by surroundings, for example, a joke is told and the brain processes it, it goes to the body and then laughs. It is true that in general the guffaw arises while parallel to this the intellectual part rationally elaborates the reason of the laughter, it is no less true that the impulse comes from the exterior and something intellectual having to do with naivety and unconscious as Freud (2008) would say in this case.

It can also be something we see, feel or live, not only something we hear. Adults need or commonly use laughter from the brain with a type of intellectual or mental humor. One of the stimuli of this type of laughter is jokes, the funny part is the speck and act of telling it, humor is the perception of the funny thing, which is perceived from outside of the body and according to the cognitive and emotional capacities of each person, as well as the space time and cultural context. The person appears, at

first, as a passive being and will laugh according to how the person interprets what is told, which is supposed to be funny, but the person must decipher to understand. It is a model of humor which works from the mind to the body. It is also a laughter conditioned, in a way, we repeat, to an external stimulus and the decipherment in the brain activity.

### Applied perspectives of laughter in Mexico

Moving to the field of the applications of laughter in life and in a panoramic way we are going to look at some current perspectives. There are several schools or approaches of laughter in a sense where it is taught as a balm of physical and emotional pain, a lack of exercise or parallel therapy in its case, as long as it is accompanied by other medical treatments occasionally.

*Laughter therapy*, apparently has more followers by the day, founded by Patch Adams in the 70s. Hunter “Patch” Adams’ contributions are very important, with his Salvador Dalí-type moustache, his bright colored tie, and above all helping people who are feeling down, he “proved that when a patient finds him/herself in a relaxed and fun atmosphere, he/she improves his/her state of mind and, thus, improves his/her health, because his/her defense system strengthens” (Galarza-Vásquez, 2010).

*Laughter therapy* are the so-called “doctors of laughter” which may not be doctors but are trained to be in hospitals with sick people and provoke laughter. “miracles are not needed, red noses are” says the founder of laughter therapy in Mexico, Andrés Aguilar a.k.a. Doctor Romanok<sup>2</sup>. He is a clown artist going around hospitals spreading laughter. “with a little more than a decade in Mexico, the Laughter therapy civil association has as a goal “to promote love, joy and laughter in society”

It is said that there are already more than 800 doctors of laughter who in their white robes and red noses go around hospitals in all the country. The preparation consists of a workshop on learning clown laughter techniques combined with improvisations and games, controlling their emotions and playing with patients they will visit, learning to ridicule themselves and to look silly, among other things. The mission of laughter therapy is to “de-dramatize the atmosphere in health centers and supply these little patients with the mood stimuli usually not received in their treatments, which aims to help them recover faster” points out Aguilar in an interview. And Cecilia Madrigal from the same association adds: “we play

2. Suele decir que es bueno visitar a los infantes por parejas o grupos de tres ya que “Dos o tres cabezas piensan más tonterías que una” recuperado de [www.risaterapia.org](http://www.risaterapia.org).

a lot with the auscultation of the “little bone of laughter”, injection of smiles, chocolate milkshake transfusion and a clown nose implant”

On the other hand, just like there is an organization “Doctors without borders” there is also “Clowns without borders”, they say that a doctor from the first once told one from the second organization: “We, who have been treating epidemics worldwide, have learned that the most contagious thing is laughter” (Rodríguez-Idígoras, 2008, p. 16).

*Laughter yoga* is another one of the current trends in the world, in our country and our time. Dr. Madan Kataria –mentioned above–, in 1995 wrote a paper on laughter, describing it as the best medicine. Inspired by Cousins and Berk, that year he created a Laughter Club in a public park in his town. Five people got together back then, giving place to a space which would later be internationally known as Laughter Yoga. His main contribution, from our point of view, is that the human brain does not distinguish simulated from genuine laughter, as the first conducts to the second, this is laughter without reason. This type of laughter which comes from the body and does not require external stimuli nor brain work, complemented with yogic-breathing practices from pranayama and stretching and movements come from the creation of a ludic and happy spirit (Escuela Mexicana del Yoga de la Risa, 2008).

This is important, as we mentioned in the sense that laughter does not need to involve rational or cognitive thought, naivety, it does not precise a reason or external stimuli as images or phrases, which is why it does not become aggressive, hurting nor offensive as some sexist jokes or political cartoons.

There are some that say that “it is too soon to affirm that laughter is “the best medicine”... not all medical research support the thesis of a therapeutic effect, sometimes these studies show methodological deficiencies, most of them have been on a small scale” (Carbelo & Jáuregui, 2006, p. 22). If this is correct, it is no less true to affirm that no one has died of laughter, just in extreme cases for very solid reasons, meaning that having more or less solid data on the importance of laughter in health, intuition indicates that it helps and reason indicates that there are few drawbacks.

## As a conclusion

We finally conclude moving back to one of the initial ideas on how impressive it turns out on how it has been

experimented through time the therapeutic benefits of laughter and have barely been studied “this situation calls back to the paradox that generates the lack of almost universal conscious between human beings and such vital or familiar activities like breathing, heartbeat and laughter” (Fry, 2001, p. 272).

Lastly, according to the previous cite we show a landscape on laughter to sensitize and to be aware of its presence and importance for people, groups and life. Moving from one to another author, works and reflections, we emphasize from basic definitions to deeper reflections, from physiological to spiritual, going through the mental and emotional. We review a bit of its history, forms and applications.

We hope to have reached the initial objective of knowing and recognizing the importance of laughter in our lives. Beyond concepts, approaches and theories, to think and feel what good does it do us, how we use it, how we live it and what can we do with it. Laughter as a healer –although sometimes momentarily and circumstantially– of wounds in our body and soul, mental obsessions and trapped feelings; laughter as a balancer of interpersonal conflicts and tense group relationships, functional in violent or unfathomable situations, physical, mental, cultural and emotionally speaking. If we have managed to get your attention in this text, renewed ideas, moved hearts on the importance of laughter in personal and social life, we have accomplished our mission and the objective of the design of this writing.

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