**JOHN MORREALL – Philosophy of Laughter and Humor – 1987**

**>>**Preface

-Professional philosphers rank well below hairdressers and football coaches in social influence. But a good deal of the problem lies in the willful obscurity of our work. In choice of topics, style, or language, we seem determined to be unhelpful.

-A good deal of the philosophical neglect of humor…can be attributed to a longstanding prejudice that began with Plato and Aristotle.

-In the history of thought about laughter and humor represented here, three dominant theories emerge:  
 1. The Superiority Theory  
 2. The Relief Theory  
 3.The Incongruity Theory

-…relation between humor and aesthetic experience.

-When is seriousness called for, and when isn’t it?

>>Introduction

1-“Philosophy, beginning in wonder, as Plato and Aristotle said, is able to fancy everything different from what it is. It sees the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar.”

1-In both philosophy and humor we shift from mental gears and look at things in new ways.

2-For both the philosopher and the humorist, nothing is to be taken for granted: everything can be looked at with a questioning, experimental, even irreverent eye.

2-To think philosophically or to enjoy the humor in our experience, we must be without urgent practical concerns. To have cultivated a philosophical spirit or a rich sense of humor is to have a distanced, and, at least potentially, a more objective view of the world.

3-Both humor and philosophy can become stale, of course, as when writers of TV “sitcoms” simply rework the same jokes over and over, or when a certain body of philosophical thinking is treated as a rigid system to be learned and applied. When humor becomes rigid, it is rather easy to tell, for people stop laughing.

3-But if I am right about this close affinity between humor and philosophy, how are we to explain the traditional neglect of humor as a philosophical topic?...In Greek thought a theory of laughter became entrenched that made humor ethically suspect. This was the so called Superiority Theory, held by Plato and Aristotle, according to which, laughter is always directed at someone as a kind of scorn.

4-A more complex stimulus for laughter, but again one which is not humorous, is a sudden change in one’ perceptual field…What makes humor different from the cases of non-humorous laughter is the mental state we call “amusement”.

4-“Humor” [oxford dictionary] “that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement.”

4-In the narrow sense of humorous amusement – with which we are concerned – we are amused when our attention is agreeably occupied in particular way.

4-It is essential to distinguish between amusement as a mental state and laughter as a bodily phenomenon, and to notice that not all laughter is caused by amusement.

5-According to superiority theory [Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes] we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, or over our own former position.

6-Relief Theory takes a more physiological approach to laughter as the venting of the excess nervous energy.