

RELEASE THEORY OF HUMOR

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Philosophy of Humor

Proponents: Sigmund Freud (Primary), Herbert Spencer (Precursor)

1. Core Principles

The **Release Theory of Humor** posits that laughter serves a vital function in the psychological economy of the individual, acting primarily as a mechanism for the discharge of pent-up psychic energy. Rooted deeply in Freudian psychoanalysis, the theory suggests that much of the mental effort expended daily is devoted to the suppression or repression of unacceptable, often taboo, thoughts and desires--chiefly those relating to aggression or sexuality. This suppression requires a constant mobilization of "binding energy" to keep these impulses relegated to the unconscious mind, maintained by the internal censor or **Super-Ego**. Laughter, in this context, is the sudden, explosive release of this energy when the psychological necessity for its deployment is momentarily circumvented or negated by a joke or comedic situation.

Freud's most detailed articulation of this model is found in his 1905 work, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, wherein he systematically mapped the relationship between mental processes, pleasure attainment, and the comic. The core idea relies on the principle of psychic energy conservation: when the mind prepares to engage in a strenuous mental activity, such as sustaining repression, the required energy is mobilized. If a joke successfully bypasses the critical scrutiny of the censor, the energy mobilized for repression suddenly becomes superfluous. Instead of being reinvested or dissipated slowly, this unnecessary energy is discharged violently and pleasurably through the physical act of laughter, resulting in the feeling of relief.

Crucially, the release theory distinguishes between three types of pleasure derived from the comic: **wit (jokes)**, the **comic**, and **humor**. In wit, the energy released is the energy saved from having to suppress aggressive or sexual impulses (tendentious jokes). In the comic, the energy saved is effort in thought--for example, when we recognize a disproportionate expenditure of effort by another person, we save the energy we would have used to make that same misjudgment. In humor, the energy released is the mental investment used to sustain painful or pathetic emotions, such as anxiety or sympathy, which are suddenly dismissed or transcended. Therefore, laughter is fundamentally an economic process, translating potential psychic strain into physical relief.

2. Historical Development

While the release theory is most famously attributed to **Sigmund Freud**, its historical lineage traces back to earlier philosophical and physiological models of tension and discharge. The most significant intellectual precursor was **Herbert Spencer**, who, in his 1860 essay, *"The Physiology of*

Laughter," proposed a mechanism where nervous energy, having been stimulated to a high degree but finding no appropriate outlet, overflows into unused motor channels, thereby causing convulsive movements like laughter. Spencer's model was purely physiological and focused on general nervous energy, setting the stage for later psychological refinement.

Freud adopted Spencer's structural model of energy flow but fundamentally transformed it from a generalized neurological concept into a specific **psychoanalytic concept** of repressed desires and psychic tension. Freud's innovation was tying the discharge mechanism directly to the structure of the mind--the interplay between the pleasure principle (Id), reality principle (Ego), and the moral censor (Super-Ego). By framing laughter as the saving of energy that would have been used for psychic defense mechanisms, Freud successfully integrated humor into his overarching theory of the unconscious mind and neurosis.

The development of the theory positioned humor not merely as a pleasant social activity, but as a critical psychological defense mechanism. Within the Freudian framework, the tendency of jokes to express themes related to sex (the "dirty joke") or aggression (the "hostile joke") provided empirical support for the idea that laughter facilitates the temporary, socially acceptable expression of impulses that society, and thus the internal censor, normally prohibits. This perspective cemented the release theory as the dominant psychological explanation for humor throughout the early to mid-20th century.

3. Key Concepts and Components

The Release Theory relies upon specific psychoanalytic concepts to explain the mechanism by which laughter occurs:

Psychic Energy (Libido): This refers to the non-physical, yet functionally measurable, energy required by the psychic apparatus to perform tasks, including repression and defense. Laughter is the conversion of this mobilized psychic energy into somatic, physical energy.

The Repression Mechanism: The process by which the Ego unconsciously pushes threatening or unacceptable thoughts, desires, and memories out of conscious awareness. The maintenance of repression demands a constant expenditure of psychic energy.

The Censor (Super-Ego): The internal moral authority that enforces societal rules and taboos, requiring the Ego to repress inappropriate material, particularly those related to aggressive or sexual urges. Jokes succeed by momentarily deceiving or neutralizing the Censor.

Tendentious Jokes: Jokes that serve a specific purpose or "tendency," usually the expression of hostile or sexual impulses. These jokes are particularly effective at generating release because they successfully subvert the energy designated for the repression of these strong, taboo desires.

Laughter as Economical Discharge: The core function of laughter is to provide immediate, often violent, relief from the energy that has become suddenly redundant. The pleasure derived from

laughter is equated with the relief of this psychic saving.

4. Applications and Examples

The Release Theory provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding why certain types of humor, particularly those involving social taboos, are often perceived as the funniest. For instance, the theory explains the mechanism behind **hostile humor**. When a joke directs aggression toward a powerful or protected figure (e.g., a political leader or a social group), the energy normally required to suppress one's own aggressive impulses towards authority is suddenly released. The joke provides a cognitive loophole, allowing the repressed hostility to be safely discharged through laughter rather than acted upon.

Similarly, the theory is often applied to **sexual or "dirty" jokes**. Society places significant constraints on the open expression of sexual desire. The energy deployed to maintain this sexual inhibition is substantial. A well-constructed sexual joke momentarily suspends the need for this inhibition, allowing the accumulated energy of repression to be discharged in the form of laughter, resulting in a feeling of illicit pleasure and relief. The successful joke is therefore characterized by its efficiency in bypassing the Censor with minimal conscious resistance.

Beyond wit, the concept of release is central to understanding **gallows humor** or humor used in moments of extreme stress or pathos. In these applications, the individual is mobilizing massive psychic energy to deal with anxiety, grief, or fear. A moment of unexpected humor releases the energy bound up in this painful emotion, allowing a brief, stabilizing reprieve. This application highlights the therapeutic function of humor, providing temporary mastery over overwhelming emotional states by converting them into harmless physical discharge.

5. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its historical influence, the Release Theory faces significant criticisms, particularly from modern cognitive and empirical psychology. The primary limitation is its dependence on the concept of **psychic energy**. This concept, central to classical psychoanalysis, lacks empirical testability and is largely rejected by contemporary neuroscience and psychological models, which prefer explanations based on information processing, incongruity resolution, or expectation violation. Critics argue that reducing laughter to a hydraulic mechanism of energy discharge oversimplifies the complex cognitive and social nature of humor.

Furthermore, the theory struggles to account for forms of humor that are not "tendentious" or related to the release of repressed taboo impulses. Much of **absurdist humor**, spontaneous laughter, or jokes based purely on linguistic play (puns) does not necessarily involve the expression of repressed hostility or sexuality. If laughter is purely a discharge mechanism for repression, it should not occur when the content is innocuous or purely intellectual. Critics argue

that the theory is overly reductionist, trying to force all humor into a sexual or aggressive framework.

A final critique involves the distinction between the experience of humor and the act of laughter itself. While the theory explains the mechanism of energy release (the laughter), it does not fully explain the **cognitive pleasure** derived from understanding the joke structure or resolving the incongruity that triggers the release. Modern theories often emphasize the cognitive work of discrepancy detection, suggesting that the pleasure stems from successful mental processing, rather than merely the relief from repression.

Further Reading

[Sigmund Freud | Wikipedia](#)

[Theories of Humor | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious \(1905\)](#)