

## CUT TO THE CHEESE – REPLY TO SPIEGEL'S 'WHY FLATULENCE IS FUNNY'

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*In number 35 of Think, James Spiegel presents reasons for why flatulence is funny. In this article I will address five issues that I find problematic in his account:*

- (1) *His claim that laughter always results from a pleasant psychological shift is false.*
- (2) *His argumentative move from what makes paradigm cases funny to what makes flatulence funny is unwarranted.*
- (3) *His notion of a psychological shift is not specific enough and lacks explanatory power.*
- (4) *The claim that funniness of flatulence involves superiority is doubtful.*
- (5) *His talk about 'nervous energy' is questionable and has implausible implications.*

### Introduction

I am always happy when philosophers tackle phenomena that lie beside the trodden path of scholarly attention. Therefore, I was excited to encounter the piece by James Spiegel in *Think* (vol. 12, no. 35) that focuses on humour and flatulence. Upon close inspection, however, there are some problematic issues with his account of why flatulence is funny that I would like to address here.

I will start off by giving a short summary of Spiegel's arguments. Then, I will present five problems with his account.

## Spiegel's account

Spiegel's answer 'why flatulence is funny' has two parts. First, he elucidates what generally makes things funny. Second, he claims that there are several reasons why flatulence is *especially* funny. I will now briefly present these two parts.

### (1) What makes things funny?

Following Morreall's theory (Morreall 2009) of humour that is an amalgamation of insights from the major classical theories of humour, Spiegel claims that what makes jokes and other incidents amusing is a pleasant psychological shift that results in laughter. According to Morreall, the shift is a change of psychological states, whereas the shift is rather broadly construed as either cognitive, affective or perceptual. Spiegel concludes that it is a psychological shift that is also responsible for why flatulence is amusing to us (if it is amusing, that is).

### (2) What makes flatulence *especially* funny?

Starting from the claim that flatulence is more humorous than most other comical phenomena (a claim that I find doubtful but that I will not address further), Spiegel sets out to find an answer to why that is. Given that 'there are diverse ways to produce the pleasant psychological shift leading to laughter' (p. 23), flatulence (in contrast to things that are less funny) is especially funny because it has a variety of comic qualities that render it amusing. Spiegel identifies three comic qualities that are said to produce the pleasant psychological shift:

- (i) Flatulence produces a sudden sense of superiority in the observer in that it diminishes the dignity of the person who farts in public.

- (ii) Flatulence presents multiple incongruities at once. Incongruities can be all kinds of deviations, disturbances or contradictions of our concepts, expectations, norms or etiquette. One incongruity in the case of flatulence pertains to the social context because there are a limited number of contexts where flatulence is permissible. The sound of flatulence is incongruous with the formal setting of seriousness at a public presentation, for example. Another incongruity is that farting diminishes the dignity of the social standing of the person who farts in public, given that she or he has a high social standing (this point is obviously connected to the first about the dignity of the person).
  
- (iii) Flatulence is a social taboo. Because it is a social taboo, so Spiegel, nervous energy is released upon witnessing somebody fart. This nervous energy is then released in the form of laughter. For Spiegel the reason why the nervous energy is built up in the first place is because we all fear the embarrassment of farting in public. We value a proper public appearance and are anxious to come across as decent members of society. That in turn means, 'we all must exert some effort to arrest, forestall, or silence our emissions, lest we undermine all our work to maintain a decent appearance' (p. 24). To master all this, we build up nervous energy. So upon witnessing somebody fart in public, so the idea goes, we are reminded of our fear of public farting and our nervous energy is released as laughter.

After this short sketch of Spiegel's account, I will now point out and explore some challenges. Please note that it is not

my intention to argue that flatulence cannot be funny, I merely want to address some issues and pressing problems of Spiegel's account.

## 1. Shifts and laughter

First, I want to take issue with the point that 'laughter *always* results from a "pleasant psychological shift" of some kind' (p. 20; italics mine). If left unqualified, this claim is simply not true. There are instances of laughter that clearly do not result from a pleasant psychological shift. Inhaling nitrous oxide causes laughter and if you suffer from pathological laughter and crying (a condition that even has its own abbreviation, PLC) you experience uncontrollable bouts of laughter and crying without any stimulus that triggers it. Further, the laughter that sometimes overcomes us in uncomfortable situations is also not due to some pleasant psychological shift. It is more like a defensive gesture. Other kinds of laughter that are not due to said shift include socially beneficial laughter at the horrible joke of your boss, the pity laugh at the botched comedy performance of your friend and – I am following Henri Bergson (1914) here – laughter as an instrument to instil social discipline. So clearly, a pleasant psychological shift is not causally necessary for laughter.

## 2. Of shifts and amusement

Spiegel claims that whatever makes paradigm cases (like jokes) funny is also what makes flatulence funny. Flatulence is amusing, he says, because it triggers the pleasant psychological shift that is the condition of humour.

I want to contest the argumentative step that he makes from the claim that a psychological shift is responsible for many amusing phenomena to the conclusion that flatulence is amusing because it also involves such a psychological

shift. I think this step is more of a leap because it is unwarranted and requires additional justification.

Why should we believe that a pleasant psychological shift is produced by such diverse amusing episodes like the antics of a toddler and a joke? Only in the latter case would I be inclined to say that there might be a psychological shift of some sort because in the punch line an expectation is rendered void or some incongruity is resolved. It may very well be that what makes flatulence funny is something completely different from a psychological shift (whether cognitive, affective or perceptual), although a psychological shift is what makes jokes or slapstick funny.

It does not help that Spiegel states that Morreall's notion of pleasant psychological shift has a lot of explanatory power where incongruity theory, relief theory and superiority theory fail. He claims that '[w]hether 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' (p. 20). Why should we believe that the child 'surely' experiences a pleasant psychological shift? The reason for believing that there is a psychological shift cannot be because the child laughs, because that amounts to the claim that if there is laughter, then there is a psychological shift. A claim that is false.

Phenomenology and introspection are obviously not a proper guide here, because we cannot conclude from the same 'feeling' of two experiences that they are due to the same underlying psychological mechanism or cognitive process. The same emotional reaction can have a variety of underlying cognitive mechanisms. Just because flatulence and jokes sometimes share the same affective reaction that has a positive valence (i.e. amusement or mirth), does not mean that the underlying process is the same.

### 3. Explanatory power

Spiegel seems to make the following deductive argument:

1. All episodes of amusement involve a psychological shift. (Although he does not use the word 'amusement' but 'laughter', I assume that this is what he has in mind.)
2. Flatulence is amusing.
3. Therefore, flatulence involves a psychological shift.

Although this deductive argument is valid, it is also unsatisfying because the first premise is highly underspecified and in need of elaboration. Obviously, it cannot be that the notion of a psychological shift refers to all psychological and cognitive operations that bring forth amusement because then the argument would be trivial. There is always something cognitive and psychological going on before, during and after episodes of amusement. But the cognitive mechanisms responsible for the amusement we find in puns are certainly different from the mechanisms of funny cartoon captions or the mechanisms involved in slapstick. This means that as long as it is not specified what the notion of 'psychological shift' amounts to, the argument does not get any real traction.

My point is not that Spiegel's account is wrong but that as it stands right now it is rather uninformative. Simply to say that flatulence is amusing for the same reason that other things are amusing is like saying that the ball is red precisely for the same reason that other things are red and that this reason is some activity in the brain that brings about the experience of redness. The account is simply incomplete in that it does not provide an explanation of how the cognitive shift is said to cause laughter, let alone what the nature of this shift is. What is needed here is an account of how the mechanism underlying the psychological

shift is supposed to work (for an example of such an account see Hurley, Dennett and Adams 2011).

#### 4. Questioning the superiority claim

I also want to call into question Spiegel's claim that flatulence triggers a certain sense of superiority in the spectator. Why would it involve a feeling of superiority when at the same time, according to Spiegel himself, we all have a fear of passing gas in public, something that Spiegel calls 'flatulence anxiety'? I want to object here that the other person passing gas painfully reminds us that we are in fact not superior to him or her because it brings to mind that we also have a body that is sometimes not under our control (Ribeiro 2008, 140) and that farts always remind us of the presence of the body that makes itself known (Critchley 2002, 41 ff.). So we are not better or superior than the person who farts. This casts doubt on his superiority claim and is in need of clarification.

#### 5. Nervous energy

The last point I would like to address is Spiegel's claim that bearing witness to a fart invites the release of nervous energy that is exhausted in laughter. There are two problems here. First, this claim subscribes to a highly suspicious hydraulic account of the mind that involves some immeasurable nervous energy and defies falsification. Second, the claim also entails the implausible consequence that there is a built-up energy for all kinds of fears that pertain to public appearance. Because we are not only afraid of farting in public but also of burping in public or having a running nose in public, there should also exist built-up energy accordingly. Or maybe you are afraid of bumping into strangers on the subway, or you are afraid of

people watching you eat in public. There should be build-up nervous energy for these things all the time too.

Even if I were to adopt the assumption that there is something like a built-up nervous energy, I think it makes more sense to say that the energy is built up and the fear level rises when we are on the verge of passing gas ourselves because this is a potential situation in which our decent public appearance is on the line. When you are simply reminded of this fear there should not be any build-up of energy unless you are suppressing a fart yourself at the moment.

### Conclusion

I have presented five problematic points in the account that Spiegel gives of the funniness of flatulence. First, his claim that laughter always results from a pleasant psychological shift is false. Second, his argumentative move from what makes paradigm cases funny to what makes flatulence funny is unwarranted. Third, the nature of the psychological shift is not specific enough and lacks explanatory power. Fourth, his claim that the funniness of flatulence involves superiority is doubtful. Fifth, besides the problematic theoretical standing of 'nervous energy', the idea of a build-up of nervous energy has implausible implications.

Despite my critique, I think that Spiegel's paper is a valuable step towards understanding an interesting but neglected humorous phenomenon. My hope is that the critical points that I raised here help to clarify some of the issues so that we gain a better grasp of what really makes flatulence funny.

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