

Does God Have a Sense of Humour?

Having a sense of humour is one of the character traits we most appreciate in people. But then doesn't God, who is perfect in all regards, have a great (in fact, the best) sense of humour? Clearly, Jesus outwits the Pharisees time and again, which suggests that God has a good sense of humour. On the other hand, though, one might think that having a sense of humour conflicts with God's holiness. And how could God be amused at things if, being omniscient, he is simultaneously aware of all the suffering in the world? So, does God have a sense of humour or doesn't he? And if he does, what does that mean for us?

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I. Why Does It Matter whether God Has a Sense of Humour?

1. Greek philosophers have been rather critical toward humour and this has *negatively influenced* the views of later theologians and theistic philosophers. Time for reconsideration.
2. It might be part of what it is to be created in the *image of God* to have a sense of humour.
3. Whether or not God has a sense of humour might make a difference to liturgy and prayer.

II. Four Theories of What It Is to Have a Sense of Humour

1. *Superiority theory*: Aristotle, Baudelaire, Roger Scruton. Especially Thomas Hobbes:
“I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour. It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over.”
2. *Relief theory*: Herbert Spencer, John Dewey. Especially Sigmund Freud:
“Humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts

itself in their place. The conditions for its appearance are given if there is a situation in which, according to our usual habits, we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and if motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect *in statu nascendi*.”

3. *Incongruity theory*: Cicero, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Michael Clark, John Morreall. Arthur Schopenhauer:

“In every case, *laughter* arises from nothing other than the sudden perception of an incongruity between a concept and the real objects that are, in some respect, thought through the concept; in fact laughter itself is simply the expression of this incongruity. (...) All laughter is occasioned by a paradoxical and hence unexpected subsumption, irrespective of whether it is expressed in words or deeds.”

4. *Play theory*: Max Eastman, Conrad Hyers. Thomas Aquinas:

“Now such like words or deeds wherein nothing further is sought than the soul’s delight, are called playful or humourous. Hence it is necessary at times to make use of them (...).”

III. Three Arguments against the View that God Has a Sense of Humour

1. What one finds humourous or funny is entirely subjective. But if whether or not something is humourous is merely subjective, then why would we think that God, who is perfectly good and omniscient, has a sense of humour?

Two replies.

2. We are amused at things only because we can temporarily focus on funny things, while our knowledge and memory of terrible experiences and all the evil in the world are not on our minds. But God is omniscient, so he will be constantly aware of all the suffering in the world. How, then, could he ever be amused?

Two replies.

3. If God is omniscient, he cannot be surprised by any incongruity. Morreall:
“(…) the Christian God could have no sense of humour. He knows fully every thing and every event in the past, present, and future, and so nothing that happened could surprise him. He could not discover something he did not already know about, nor could he adopt a new way of looking at anything. For these reasons, and because he is a changeless being, nothing that happened could amuse God; he could not experience the psychological shift that is behind laughter.”
Three responses.

IV. Four Biblical Arguments for the View that God Has a Sense of Humour

1. There are a few passages in the Bible that say *expressis verbis* that God laughs at something or someone. Most famous is Psalm 2:1-4:
“Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.” The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”
A problem.

2. Key figures representing God use humour, even in highly serious situations, and there is no indication in the Bible that God disapproves of that.

1 Kings 18: 26b-27:
“But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said.
“Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”

- Acts 26: 29:
“Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

Gal 5:11-12:

“Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!”

3. God himself also performs certain actions that seem to express a sense of humour.

1 Sam 5:1-5:

“After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the ark into Dagon’s temple and set it beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained.”

Jonah 4:6-11:

“Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, ‘It would be better for me to die than to live.’ But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?’ ‘It is,’ he said. ‘And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.’ But the LORD said, ‘You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh (...)?’”

4. Jesus sometimes makes fun of his conversation partners. Mat 23:24:

“You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

Mat 7:3:

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”

The problem with arguments 2-4.

V. Three Philosophical Arguments for the View that God Has a Sense of Humour

1. God meets the conditions of the main theories of having a sense of humour.
 - Relief theory
 - Play theory
 - Superiority theory
 - Incongruity theory

2. It is a *good* thing to have a sense of humour and God is perfectly good.
 1. It is good for human beings to have humour.
 2. If something is intrinsically good for one thing, then it is intrinsically good for anything else that can have it.
 3. It is intrinsically good to have a sense of humour.
 4. God can have a sense of humour.
 5. If God *can* have a sense of humour, he *will* have a sense of humour.
 6. Hence, God has a sense of humour.

3. Humans are created in the image of God.
 1. Humans have been created in the image of God.
 2. To be created in the image of God is to share certain properties with God.
 3. Normal adult human beings have a sense of humour.
 4. If normal adult human beings have a property and their having that property is not a consequence of their finiteness or their sinfulness, then their having that property is part of what it is to be created in the image of God.
 5. To have a sense of humour is not a consequence of one's being finite or sinful.
 6. Human beings share with God the property of having a sense of humour.
 7. Hence, God has a sense of humour.

VI. What Difference Does It Make that God Has a Sense of Humour?

1. It changes the *face* of God (God's *character*). Also our *relationship* with God (image of God).

2. In explaining certain features of the universe, we can now not only appeal to God's desire to bring about moral goodness or God's intention to make something aesthetically beautiful, but also to God's simply being amused by it: ourselves, the animal kingdom, and the universe.

3. Liturgy and prayer:
 - a. God is to be worshiped not only as loving, majestic, and so forth, but also as someone who has a (great) sense of humour.

 - b. Humour and laughter may play a role in liturgical gatherings.

 - c. Jokes in prayers?

Suggested Readings:

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