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Understanding Humor: Four Conceptual Approaches to the Elusive Subject

Abstract: This article discusses four ways of understanding the concept of humor: 1) in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, as 2) a cluster concept, 3) an interpretive concept, and 4) a dual character concept. We peruse both historical and contemporary research on humor, but instead of asking "What is humor?," we draw conclusions regarding what humor research tells us of the ways to conceptualize humor. The main merits and shortcomings of different approaches are explicated. We suggest that the increased awareness of conceptual options will help the field of humor research to construct ever better theories on the elusive subject matter.

Keywords: Philosophy of humor, necessary and sufficient conditions, cluster concept, interpretive concept, dual character concept

1 Introduction

In this article, we will analyze the *concept* of humor philosophically. The field of humor research is full of insightful *theories* of humor: some consider humor as a competition (e. g., Gruner 2000), others approach it from a linguistic perspective (e. g., Attardo and Raskin 1991), and there are those who stress the benevolent nature of humor (e. g., Morreall 2009; McGraw and Warren 2014) to mention but a few conceptions. Various theories are often seen to exclude each other; supporters of one theory tend to criticize, neglect, or disregard alternative theories of humor. We believe that an analysis of how to properly conceptualize humor helps to overcome at least some of the theoretical tensions. For that purpose, we will explore how the concept of humor can be understood 1) from the perspective of necessary and sufficient conditions, 2) as a cluster concept, 3) in terms of having an interpretive function, and 4) as a dual character concept. Given our objective, it is not necessary to cover the entire field of humor research; for instance, *humor techniques* and comparisons between *humor genres* are beyond the scope of this article.

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It is important to stress that the concept of humor is *not* an answer to the question "What is humor?" which is properly a question asked by a humor theory. Theories and concepts are often needlessly conflated. This is probably due to the fact that concepts are needed in the first place for identifying objects and phenomena under scrutiny as what they are; in light of this it is conceivably possible to view concepts as theories, notwithstanding one's operative theory of concepts.[1] Nevertheless, it makes sense to think that by possessing the concept of humor one can thereby accurately identify instances of humor, i. e., that which is humor. From this perspective, it is imperative to possess the concept of humor on the path to knowing what humor is; there is no alternative route of first getting to the bottom of what humor is, and only afterwards adopting one's first concept of humor. Researchers of every stripe should be aware of the conceptual choices that are made in the background: a concept adopted directs one's thinking right from the start.

For the present purposes, we assume a broad perspective on concepts. Concepts can be either abstract or mental entities; we also remain noncommittal about conceptual internalism or externalism. What matters for our purposes is that it must be possible to speak of a concept without anyone actually or necessarily entertaining that concept, or perhaps even that type of concept. Concepts mediate between thought and language on the one side, and referents on the other. When concepts are entertained by persons, those concepts basically inform those persons what things there are in the world and what properties those things have. Concepts are thus indispensable in differentiating things from other things and getting one's bearings in the world. Concepts are similar to categories (or classes), yet concepts can be distinguished from the latter by treating a category as a collection of instances which are treated as if they were the same, while a concept refers to all the knowledge that one has about a category (Machery 2009, 14).

1 One can adopt a theory of concepts commonly called the theory-theory (see e. g., Laurence and Margolis 1999), but we are not referring to that possibility here. Furthermore, it should not be taken for granted that the purpose of analysis of the concept of humor is the acquisition of knowledge about humor. To keep things in order, it is sensible to think that concepts can serve as building blocks of statements, and statements can serve as building blocks of theories; only the latter two are capable of being true or false (cf. List and Valentini 2016, 534). We largely ignore both practical and theoretical complications arising from the distinction between theories and concepts in the current paper. Instead of the concept of humor we could talk of specific uses of the term "humor" that are connected to particular theories and that express the respective concepts of humor. In other words, given that terms refer to conceptual contents, what we say here of the different criteria for the concept of humor could apply equally to different conceptual contents that are attached to the term "humor" in a specific way, in connection to a theory in question. However, we feel that the increase in precision that is gained this way is not worth the stress it puts on the communicability of our points.

Concepts may thus hold information that exceeds that which determines category membership alone concerning, for instance, relations to other concepts. Furthermore, we assume that concepts can be put to different uses, e.g., in various cognitive competences such as reasoning, decision-making, evaluative and creative thinking, and categorization. Functional differences do not necessarily imply ontological differences that mark different kinds of concepts.[2]

Our theoretical commitments are relatively loose for two reasons. First, we believe that a broad perspective makes it easier to respect the liveliness of the phenomenon of humor as a dynamic social practice. This is also practically advisable as far as theory-application is concerned: working with theories of humor that are based on a limited or one-sided conceptual understanding of humor may lead to skewed or biased applications (in addition to being somewhat limited or one-sided theories).[3] Second, as our current theoretical standpoint is rather unique in contemporary philosophy of humor, we think that it is best to start the present discussion by offering alternative ways to approach the concept of humor, and by differentiating their advantages and disadvantages. It is possible to represent that which is in myriad ways, and we believe this holds especially for humor. In this paper, we do not ask "What is humor?" but "In which ways do different kinds of concepts represent that which is humor, and what are the benefits and burdens of adopting one or another type of conceptualization?" A researcher can make progress by working from both ends: by constructing a better theory with the benefit of more apt conceptualization.

We will begin by giving the lay of the land of contemporary humor research as regards theorizing and defining humor (§ 2). The main theory families in the field —the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory[4]—and some of their historical and contemporary representatives are briefly introduced. After

2 Practically all philosophical claims about concepts are controversial (Peacocke 2009, 427), and disagreements about the nature of concepts often reflect opposing approaches; some identify concepts with mental representations, others with abilities, and still others with abstract (e.g., Fregean) senses (Margolis and Laurence 2014). Philosophers and psychologists typically employ the term "concept" differently (Machery 2009, ch. 1–2), as do many other scholars in fields that closely relate to human thought. As things currently stand, there is no one theory that fares clearly better than others in different areas of inquiry—or in meeting all relevant expectations for a general theory of concepts (Laurence and Margolis 1999).

3 For instance, when developing a sense of humor for artificial intelligence, a conceptual and theoretical basis of humor is decisive (see Hempelmann 2008; Hietalahti 2021a).

4 One can classify over 100 theories of humor (see, e.g., Fedakâkar 2020) but it is impossible to go through them all here. Thus, we have chosen to focus on the three main theory families of humor (see Hempelmann 2010; Plester 2016). We believe this decision respects the field of humor research as well as being sufficient for the present purposes.

that we turn to examine the pros and cons of defining humor in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, i. e., according to the classical view of concepts (§ 3). Although there is convincing empirical evidence that the classical view does not provide us with an accurate picture of how we actually conceptualize things, there are still good reasons for a humor researcher to adopt it as a starting point. Next up is a view according to which the concept of humor is best conceived as a cluster concept (§ 4), which stands as a (much needed) corrective of the classical view in the case of certain kinds of concepts. Nevertheless, both the classical view and the cluster concept view assume that (at least some) concepts are best understood as criterial, or as lists of features that are then considered as conjunctive or disjunctive.

By contrast, understanding humor as an interpretive concept or as a concept that has primarily an interpretive function (§ 5) represents an entirely different approach. The concept of humor can now be seen not only as open-ended (as a proponent of the cluster concept view could perhaps allow) but also in terms of what endows it with that open-endedness, i. e., employment of the concept connection to a human process of interpretation and by extension to cultural, social, and political spheres and the values that manifest within them. An alternative and theoretically promising way of connecting the concept of humor to a sphere of values is to understand humor as a dual character concept which is represented via both a set of descriptive features and some underlying abstract value (§ 6). Dual character concepts and their associated values have been strongly linked to the ways various social roles are perceived in a society, which provides a researcher of humor a fruitful terrain with which to work. Both the view that understands at least some concepts as interpretive and the dual character concept view mark a shift from simply assuming that what one needs to do as a researcher is to define or list salient characteristics of humor as comprehensively as possible. In the last section we present our main conclusions (§ 7).

2 Theories and Definitions of Humor, Lay of the Land

As a relatively young academic discipline, humor research has taken huge steps in recent decades. The progress has been achieved "through theoretization," i. e., various philosophical theories of humor have been suggested and theoretical shortcomings have been highlighted based on counterexamples and empirical testing (see Ruch 2020). The main theory families in the field are the so-called superiority

theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory of humor[5] (e.g., Critchley 2004; Billig 2005). First, we turn to discuss the three theories.

Various classical philosophers (see Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes in Morreall 1987) are typically considered as representatives of the superiority theory of humor. However, they mention laughter merely in passing and formulate hardly a theory at all (see Smuts 2010). Furthermore, Conal Condren (2021) points out that the term humor was not used in antiquity in its modern connotation, so one should not be too eager to interpret that every instance of laughter is related to humor even in the most canonical texts about laughter. In opposition to a general understanding about humor (especially against Carroll 2014; Nilsen and Nilsen 2018; Eagleton 2019; Attardo 2020), Condren argues that the very well-known and oft-cited conceptualization of laughter, namely that of Thomas Hobbes, is not about humor. Hobbes writes that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly" (Hobbes 2008, 54–55). Condren makes a valid point; Hobbes does not mention humor. However, it is reasonable to think that a similar phenomenon, i.e., humor, has existed over time even if the term has not had a stabilized meaning, or did not at Hobbes's own time. In fact, Hobbes discusses "a passion which hath no name" (Hobbes 2008, 54) and calls it laughter. As we can gather from the above, this passion has a connection to sudden conceptions and comparisons, so it is possible that it, too, has a connection to humor in its more modern connotation that is related to amusement—especially as Hobbes mentions jests and the wit in the same passage.

The basic assumptions behind the superiority theory have been challenged early on. For example, Francis Hutcheson (2009) argued against Hobbes's views directly by observing that if Hobbes was right, then there would be no greater joy to a wealthy individual than seeing the suffering of the poorest people; yet instead of laughing at human suffering, people are generally more prone to feel sorry for the unfortunate.[6] That being said, a position that understands humor in terms of establishing or affirming power hierarchies between people—those who laugh at others are signaling superiority over the ridiculed target—is not very uncommon today. For instance, Charles Gruner (2000) claims in his controversial theory that in order to enjoy humor an element of winning must be included in the situation. Gruner summarizes his idea through six sub-theses:

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5 Victor Raskin (1985) and Salvatore Attardo (2008, 103) make a similar threefold distinction, but they designate the theory families as incongruity, hostility, and release.

6 It is however possible that Hutcheson has not read his Hobbes too carefully as Hobbes does discuss laughter between friends in a more affirmative and positive light elsewhere (see Skinner 2004).

1. For every humorous situation, there is a *winner.*
2. For every humorous situation, there is a *loser.*
3. Finding the "winner" in every humorous situation, and what that "winner" *wins*, is often not easy.
4. Finding the "loser" in every humorous situation and what that "loser" *loses*, is often even less easy.
5. Humorous situations can best be understood by knowing *who* wins *what*, and *who* loses *what*,
6. *Removal* from a humorous situation (joke, etc.) what is won or lost, or the suddenness with which it is won or lost, removes the essential elements of the situation and renders it humorless. (Gruner 2000, 9)

Here Gruner describes, along the lines of traditional superiority theory, that humor is a game of winning and losing, and that these elements are necessary for something to be considered humorous. Obviously, these elements are not to be thought of as sufficient conditions for humor because there are, for instance, various kinds of games and sports that lack humor even though they involve winning and losing.

As regards humor, Gruner argues that humorous competitions are based on simple evolution: "But why must we experience sudden superiority in order to laugh? It's because of the kind of animal we humans have become. (... we are) the most successful combination of aggression, competitiveness, curiosity, and resourcefulness of any of the planet's living species" (Gruner 2000, 16.) The theory, then, rests on the assumption that human beings are curious, competitive, aggressive and egoistic creatures who enjoy beating others and whose laughter reflects this anthropological position (Gruner 2000, 25). In the end, amusement triggered by the failure of others is the only necessary condition for feeling humorous amusement as Gruner sees it. The argument has been rightfully criticized on the grounds of evident empirical observations: there are humorous situations in the world that do not demand any kind of superiority towards or over anything (see Hurley et al. 2011, 60; Hietalahti 2016; for more general criticism Bregman 2019). Yet for the present purposes, it is enough to make note of two aspects of Gruner's approach: (i) humor (or, a humorous situation) is characterized in terms of necessary conditions; (ii) what is considered humorous follows directly from the characterization of humor in terms of its necessary conditions. Furthermore, despite the criticism the superiority theory family has attracted, its theories seek to accurately describe what may reasonably be regarded as one aspect of the multi-faceted phenomenon of humor.

The second classical theory of humor, i.e., the relief theory, examines humor and laughter in relation to bodily reactions and their being relieved. For instance, Lord Shaftesbury (1709) claims that humor and laughter are certain kind of venti-

lation systems that release built up pressure. Therefore, we may add, the suffering of others would not in itself be funny but people sometimes try to ease their own stressful situation with the help of humor and laughter, and may thus find some humor or laughter in it. According to Herbert Spencer (1860) laughter releases nervous energy, and Sigmund Freud (1968a) builds his theory on humor and laughter on this very idea.[7] Freud criticizes the superiority theory sharply by arguing that people often laugh because their inner tensions are released in one way or other; and this process does not necessarily involve any kind of superiority towards anything. Assuming that Freud is right, superiority is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for humor(ous amusement). Be that as it may, Freud's own theory of humor can be challenged, the toughest problem being his incapability to plausibly identify the energy flows and explain exactly how they relate to laughter function.[8] Despite their flaws, early versions of the relief theory, especially that of Freud's, can be seen as a groundwork for modern psychological theories on humor; for instance, Willibald Ruch (2020) and Rod Martin and Thomas Ford (2018) have developed psychological positions on humor to deepen our understanding of the cognitive mechanisms related to processing observations that are deemed funny by an observer (see also Hurley et al. 2011).

A large part of contemporary humor research is variously based on the incongruity theory that relinquishes the assumption of a fixed social relation or (bodily) process that grounds humor while favoring an approach that focuses on a particular logic that manifests in humorous content. Especially in the early formulations of the theory (see, e. g., Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard in Morreall 1987), humor is based on paradoxes. Nowadays it is more common to think that humor is present when there is a clash between cultural categorizations or—to formulate the same idea another way—there is a cognitive dissonance between expectation and what actually happens in the world. According to Simon Critchley's definition,

7 Freud uses the "comical" as the umbrella term, and gives *humor* a very specific meaning in his article "Humor" (1968b), yet here we somewhat crudely interpret Freud's uses of the comical, laughter, jokes, etc. to refer to the phenomenon of humor as the term is commonly used in the Anglo-American research tradition. Freud's original distinctions between, say, jokes, puns, and comedy as products of humorous cognitive work and humor as a lens of interpretation are much sharper (see Freud 1968a; 1968b), and they certainly deserve more attention in the future articles. Unfortunately, we are presently limited to merely mentioning this possibility given that we have no space for a more intricate presentation that is not absolutely necessary for illustrating our basic points.

8 Freud's somewhat mechanical idea of humanity falls short in general, and particularly when explaining humor and laughter. A similar fate has befallen Henri Bergson's (1913) famous theory according to which humor is always about mechanical rigidity upon flexible and lively creatures (i. e., human beings).

"humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented (...), between expectation and actuality. Humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves" (Critchley 2004, 1). We find Critchley's definition an excellent starting point for a balanced incongruity theory although it still needs to be complemented. By itself, incongruity is not a sufficient condition for humor as there are plenty of surprises in the world that can really frighten people or make them sad. John Morreall (2009, 73) compares humorous incongruity to other similar phenomena, e.g., the tragic, the grotesque and the horrible. The main difference between humor and other similar cognitive shifts is that humor is good-hearted and amusing: "Humorous amusement, by contrast [to other similar], is by itself a positive state with no negative emotions." (Morreall 2009, 74.) We interpret that in Morreall's understanding of humor, a paradox (or conflict, or contradiction, or incongruity) is a necessary condition for humor, but not sufficient. What distinguishes humor from other similar incongruent phenomena is good-hearted amusement.

Various scholars have offered more precise formulations to strengthen the basic theoretical position of incongruity. According to Jerry Suls (1972), it is necessary to resolve the perceived incongruity; if the incongruent element remains too absurd or strange and it cannot be resolved, there is no humor but only distorting puzzlement. In short, humor must be familiar enough. A similar idea has been presented by Elliott Oring who develops his appropriate incongruity theory by which he refers to "the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous" (Oring 2003, 1). The good-heartedness highlighted by Morreall is fuel for the benign violation theory of humor formulated by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (2014), according to whom the humorous incongruities cannot be, say, violent or maleficent, but there must be a certain grain of kindness in the process. This is not to say that there are no other, more detailed positions on humor which distinguish various pivotal elements in humor (e.g., in Attardo and Raskin 1991: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy, language). However, present remarks are enough for us to move on.

3 Necessary and Jointly Sufficient Conditions for Humor

In this section, we examine the advantages and disadvantages of defining humor according to what is nowadays known as the classical view of concepts. This view

represents concepts through definitions and it has four central elements: (i) object or membership categorization is determined by necessary and jointly sufficient features; (ii) those features are binary; (iii) categories or classes have clear boundaries; (iv) all members of a category [or class] have an equal standing as a member (Taylor 1995, 23–24; see also Laurence and Margolis 1999, 8–10). Categorization according to the classical view is very straightforward: "something is judged to fall under a concept just in case it is judged to fall under the features that compose the concept" (Laurence and Margolis 1999, 11). This makes the classical view enticing for those who seek to grasp what humor is: when one finds a correct definition *for* humor in the form of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, one is also able to accurately categorize things *as* humor.

The superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory can now be seen as (involving) attempts to pinpoint what feature or combination of features is sufficient for something to be called "humor." The classical view is enticing partly because it agrees with logic and especially with the law of the excluded middle, and partly because it helps in the hierarchical ordering of concepts that enable transitive class membership and nested sets (cf. Murphy 2002, 15, 27). Ideally, the process does not allow borderline cases of concept application without there being some sort of mistake. Something is humor or it is not humor; there is no gray area between.

There are a few complications, though. To begin with, Sheila Lintott (2016) convincingly argues that it is misguided to read the classical philosophers from the perspective of necessary/sufficient conditions of humor. Lintott claims that this type of approach to the concept of humor is a very modern trait which is also highly common among philosophers of humor. However, to presume that the same approach was present centuries or millennia ago is to misinterpret what was going on. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle were not interested in the sufficient/necessary conditions of humor[9]; instead, they described the peculiar phenomenon (of humor) they witnessed.

More importantly, the shortcomings of the classical view are not limited to its anachronistic application to historical interpretation but can be divided into two categories: (a) weaknesses as a general theory of concepts; or (b) failings as a preferred method of grasping the nature of humor, specifically. The flaws of the classical view as a general theory of concepts are well-known nowadays. Gregory Murphy summarizes the main deficiencies as (i) extreme difficulty to find definitions for most natural categories, and even more so when attempting to find plausible psychological representations that persons of various ages would likely use; (ii) in-

9 See also Condren's criticism on using the term "humor" in § 2.

ability to predict certain psychological phenomena like typicality and unclear membership; (iii) incompatibility with the existence of intransitive category decisions (Murphy 2002, 38).[10] Nevertheless, it may be argued that uncovering as accurate a definition as possible for humor is exactly what a humor researcher *as a scientist* should do in order to better explain the phenomenon of humor and its relation to related phenomena.

Conducting an inquiry on the concept of humor from the standpoint of the classical view seems to be partly motivated by what may be termed "the scientific-ideal framework" (Adcock 2005, 19). Key to that framework is the claim that the thinking and language-use of scientists is distinctly different from ordinary use: even if the classical view was originally meant as a "description" of human thought in general, the classical view can now be seen as a methodological ideal (Adcock 2005, 19). Avoidance of ambiguity, logical clarity, and communicability (along with more general epistemic virtues) are the hallmarks of such enterprise. It is distinct from a more language-focused take on concepts where the concepts are understood as linguistic and cultural artifacts, and whose features are identified based on linguistic usage (Adcock 2005, 23). Within the scientific-ideal framework that accepts the classical view as a methodology, an ordinary linguistic usage might point a researcher in a fruitful direction but that is the end of it. Ultimately, the researcher needs to produce a precise definition which disambiguates from the multiplicity of meanings that comes with the plurality that is likely inherent in any folk view. According to the scientific-ideal framework, that definition presumably accords with how things are by clearly demarcating between what is humor and what is not.

There are good reasons to think that the classical view is not a preferable way to represent the multifaceted social phenomenon that is humor. First of all, previous attempts to define and theorize humor (cf. § 3) contradict each other when they are understood as attempts to grasp the concept of humor in terms of the classical view. Each maintains that its preferred criterion (i. e., superiority, relief, or incongruity) is a necessary although not perhaps a sufficient criterion for something to be humor. Each also makes an implicit or explicit claim that one of the other criteria is not necessary. Be that as it may, since there is no contestability or ambiguity in concepts according to the classical view, one must conclude that each theory of humor provides us with a different concept. For the sake of convenience, we may want to present them *as if* they were concepts of humor, but they are distinct concepts nonetheless and certainly not all could be accurate represen-

10 Murphy's criticism is grounded mostly in empirical psychological studies; for a similar criticism in clearly philosophical terms, see e. g., Laurence and Margolis 1999.

tations of the same phenomenon. As a result, it would be somewhat pointless to compare the respective merits of the three theories; they simply concern different phenomena. This is a counterintuitive conclusion.

Second, there simply are too many counterexamples of humorous situations in which one or two of the three main criteria for humor are missing. For example, it is very hard to prove that every humorous situation is based on the feeling of superiority. The burden of proof is on those who claim that a child laughing at their parents' silly faces would actually feel superior to them. There are much more plausible explanations of this kind of phenomenon. Probably, the child notices something different in comparison to the ordinary and laughs at this humorous anomaly. But even incongruity is not the sole explanatory power when it comes to humor. Let us consider a joke:

> Three logicians went to a bar. The bartender asked whether all of them will have a beer. The first one replied, I do not know. The second replied, I do not know. The third replied, yes!

Typically jokes involve a twist of logic or a surprising ending that turns expectations around. The joke above follows a general form of joke, but it is ultimately meant as a short story in which nothing illogical happens. We may assume that the first customer wants (a beer) but s/he cannot speak for the others, and that the same holds for the second customer. After hearing the first two replies and taking note that they are all thirsty, the third customer is in a position to conclude that they *all* are having a beer and thus s/he can finally answer "Yes!" One can certainly argue that we need to consider what element in the joke is incongruent in relation to the expectations; for instance, that the three logicians do not behave like people usually do in that situation. However, looking for one criterion in all presumed instances may come with a cost: if formulated very broadly, the incongruity may indeed cover all humorous occasions but loses its explanatory power. Adding conditions to complement incongruity, like good-heartedness (see § 2), is no surefire solution either. In the concentration camps, there was plenty of laughter targeted at the inmates by the guards (and by other inmates) and finding anything benign in this type of humor is difficult indeed (see Hietalahti 2021b). Furthermore, it is very hard to find any kind of relief in, say, the darkest forms of humor by a self-destructive individual who aims to do as much damage as possible to oneself and others.

We do not wish to take anything away from the established theoretical findings that concern humor's characteristics; they are necessary steps to understand the various nuances of the phenomena of humor. Whether incongruity truly is a (practically) necessary condition of humor, is not a matter that can be legislated by conducting a priori conceptual analysis. Philosophical answers are typically

given by following a method of cases (see Kölbel 2023, 30), which usually means presenting examples and counterexamples, even imaginary ones that serve as thought-experiments that are meant to pump intuitions about how things really stand. Personal intuitions tend to vary a lot, however, and what is offered as the most intuitive belief may simply be rejected by someone else who intuits differently based on the same cases. In the joke above, maintaining that the joke's humor value results (or does not result) from a perceived incongruity is something that is better established empirically rather than with philosophical arguments. This is a two-way street: to say that one or more of the cases that we have covered here are not instances of humor because they do not fit with one's preferred definition seems like unwarranted legislation of what is humorous and what is not. A priori conceptual analysis can go only so far.

The contemporary discussion leans towards the idea that some kind of incongruity is necessary for humor (see e.g., Weaver 2022, 2) whereas relief and superiority are more accidental features that occur more or less often in humorous examples. That said, it seems plain that none of the offered criteria are sufficient individually or jointly. And to state the obvious: all three criteria cannot be necessary if one of them is missing in the exemplary instances of humor—even if one were to not find those instances that funny.[11] Although the proponents of the classical view may maintain that a correct definition has simply not yet been found, and we should perhaps be on the lookout for yet further criteria, the classical view of concepts appears a somewhat unsuitable starting point for conceptually grasping such a multifaceted human activity as humor.

4 Humor as a Cluster Concept

The motivation for considering humor as a cluster concept stems directly from the failure of the classical view that requires one to provide a set of conjunctive conditions that are necessary and jointly sufficient for something to be X. On the contrary, there appears to be a variety of factors that are applicable in different instances of humor. If there is no single set of conjunctive criteria for determining a thing as humor, or humorous, what about a set of disjunctive criteria, not all of which must be pertinent at the same time? In this section, we present the idea

11 One should differentiate between humor as a human phenomenon and humor as a personal taste (regardless of whether the same taste is socially/collectively shared or not), and researchers of humor need either a theory of humor or a concept of humor that recognizes and respects that difference (see also e.g., Hietalahti 2016).

of a cluster concept and evaluate its applicability in grasping and representing humor.

A cluster concept exhibits a specific organization for tackling the following situation: suppose that the attributes P_1, P_2, ... P_n go to make up what is represented by the concept. Now it may be asked whether there can be an object to which the concept applies without P_1 or, if P_1 and (most) other attributes are present, perhaps without P_2 or P_3? One is dealing with a cluster concept when one is comfortable in replying "Yes" in such cases. For instance, it would strike us as absurd to claim that the term or expression "human being" would not be meaningfully applicable to a person[12] in a vegetative state, even if we were to normally attribute cognitive capability as a defining feature of "human being" (see Putnam 1962, 378). As Putnam presents the matter:

> That is, we say that the meaning in such a case is given by a cluster of properties. To abandon a large number of these properties, or what is tantamount to the same thing, to radically change the extension of the term 'man,' would be felt as an arbitrary change in its meaning. On the other hand, if most of the properties in the cluster are present in any single case, then under suitable circumstances we should be inclined to say that what we had to deal with was a man. (Putnam 1962, 378)

A cluster concept or term typically has a broad and variable set of criteria which admit instances to the extension of the concept, those instances which do not necessarily meet with all the relevant criteria of the concept. Because of this, the idea of a cluster concept seems a suitable remedy for what we identified as ailing attempts to capture humor in terms of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: all main theories of humor pinpoint different yet salient properties but there are still instances of humor in which one or more of those properties is absent. In other words, employment of the concept of humor appears to be governed by a cluster of criteria—the notable candidates for which include a sense of superiority, a sense of relief, and incongruity in content—and for this reason it seems that the concept of humor is best conceptualized as having a cluster structure. Even if incongruity were to be accepted as a necessary criterion for humor, there would still be plenty of room for disjunctive criteria within the incongruity theory (e.g., benign violation, appropriate incongruity, resolvable incongruity, or such).

12 There is an ongoing debate on whether the term "human being" should be replaced by "person," and what the requirements of personhood are (see Laitinen and Ikäheimo 2007); we leave these considerations aside and use the terms as synonyms.

However, there are some scholars who problematize the role of incongruity in explaining humor. For instance, Robert Latta (1999, 1, 4–6) challenges especially incongruity theory and essentialist views on humor and suggests that perhaps humor is not in the end just one thing, but several. Condren similarly mentions how elusive the phenomenon of humor is and how diverse its definitions are: "The differentia of what we now call humour vary, leaving us with a universality that is best seen as a matter of family resemblance between overlapping notions and configurations of vocabulary justifying the reliance on humour as a loose classifier" (Condren 2020, 22). Condren acknowledges the pros and cons of this approach when he mentions that finding interconnections is valuable occasionally, yet it can be very misleading sometimes; especially in historical studies it is questionable to interpret humor as always related to superficially similar things like laughter.

Nevertheless, there is some reason to believe that humor is not best captured by a cluster concept. To see why, one should observe that the cluster concept view is a natural and conscious generalization of, or extension to, the notion of family resemblance proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Putnam 1962, 378; see also Wittgenstein 1958, § 67). Wittgenstein's examples of threads that make up the rope, or family members who share some characteristic features while no one has them all, point toward a cluster structure. The boundaries of such "family concepts," however, remain fluid in that new instances can be introduced to the category that matches with the concept analogical to new family members. A family has a temporal continuity and thus a continuous identity that may undergo gradual changes as new members come to exhibit new characteristics that may become the family's "defining" characteristics. It may be argued that this feature is absent in cluster concepts at least in their simplest form and that both the cluster approach and the classical approach to concepts list conditions or properties that objects referred by concepts match. Any change in the overall listing may be taken to imply a different concept.

Georg Henrik von Wright observes that "[o]ften symptomatic of the family-nature of a concept is a bewilderment as to whether something 'really' falls under this concept" (von Wright 1993, I: § 7; cf. § 3). As regards humor, it is undeniable that people are often bewildered as to whether something really is humorous or not. People differ in their sense of humor, i. e., they find different things funny, but they also may have different senses for humor, i. e., they take different things to be humor and thus possess different concepts of humor. A theory of humor can be understood to grapple with a bewilderment of both sorts: it seeks to explain why certain things tickle one's funny bone or what is common to those instances. The constants that have been proposed offer only a loose guidance with respect to what people *identify* as humorous, and clearly there is no unchanging set of either

conjunctive or (partially) disjunctive criteria without manifest diachronic or interpersonal differences. For example, it is reasonable to think that there are people whose sense of humor is displayed predominantly in cases in which they can feel superior to others while others may find that attitude distasteful and certainly not funny. This variety in views can be partially[13] explained by presuming that humor is an evolving thing both as a personal taste and as a human practice. A multiplicity of things is found amusing by different people and at different times, that much is certain. By contrast, from a logical standpoint this multiplicity presents no problem as we can always presume that differences in people's judgments reflect significant differences at the conceptual level, i. e., that there is no *single* concept of humor but rather *multiple* concepts of humor (which are qualitatively distinct). The reason why the classically oriented conceptual methodology —or for that matter, any attempt to present a unified and fixed conceptual structure for humor—would fail is that there is no single concept, and thus no single definition, to be had in the first place.

To simply state that the concept of humor has a cluster structure does not yet relay what a theorist or researcher of humor wants to know. Even if the cluster concept of humor were considered open in that new criteria of humor could be added to a previously existing cluster (or removed from it), the point is to also explain why that is the case. For those who are not content with simply stating that there *may be* a variety of criteria present in tentative instances of humor, the challenge is to adequately represent the diversity by a single concept of humor.

5 Humor as an Interpretive Concept

In this and the next section, we present two alternative ways in which the concept of humor suitably understood can handle and represent diverse judgments concerning what is humorous. Again, these approaches come with theoretical advantages and disadvantages. We start by laying out the case for why many humor researchers would do well to consider humor as representable by an interpretive

13 This can be complemented in various ways. For instance, Giovannantonio Forabosco (2008) states that incongruity is perceived when a stimulus diverts from the cognitive model of reference. Cognitive models may vary from one individual to another, and they change with experience. For Forabosco, the employment of the term "cognitive model" is meant to highlight the comparative and interpretive aspect of the subject's relationship with the reality (Forabosco 2008, 48–49). It is also perfectly possible that the full elucidation of how the term "humor" is applied involves accounting for how the related judgments or evaluations are more generally made. Such wider issues, however, go beyond the scope of the present article.

concept. We then briefly address a couple of objections before turning to discuss dual character concepts.

Ronald Dworkin (2011) develops the idea of *interpretive concepts*, i. e., concepts whose "correct use is a matter of interpretation, and people who use them disagree about what the best interpretation is" (Dworkin 2011, 120). The substantive idea behind interpretive concepts is that they are employed by people in order to understand themselves and what they are doing in addition to categorizing the world. These concepts are used to interpret practices in which the concepts themselves also figure, and they are treated as identifying a value or disvalue, even if people disagree on how to identify that value (Dworkin 2011, 160, 164–75, 180). For people to share an interpretive concept, they must sufficiently agree on what they take to be paradigm instances of the concept, but it cannot be said in advance "just how much or what detail of agreement about paradigms is required in a particular community to justify treating a concept as interpretive for that community" (Dworkin 2011, 160–61). The concepts of law, justice, morality, politics, and the like which are closely tied to activities and practices that are central to our way of life appear to have the kind of interpretability of which Dworkin speaks built into them.[14] At one point, Dworkin hints that it could be sensible to approach humor as an interpretive concept (Dworkin 2011, 178) but does not elaborate on the matter.

We have found three main reasons for thinking that the concept of humor is interpretive. First, there is no doubt that the concept of humor figures in at least some judgments in which a thing is both categorized as humor and evaluated as humor. This may be taken to suggest that the concept is not only descriptive nor is it purely normative/evaluative—as looks to be the case with the concept of good, for instance—but its descriptive usage is intimately connected to an evaluative usage. Second, there are evident disagreements on what is properly humorous. The line between considering something as bad humor (because one is offended, repulsed etc.) but humor nonetheless and considering something as not humor at all (because one is offended, repulsed etc.) is thin in practice. There is not much that one can say here, in general terms or by producing a set of criteria concerning where that line is drawn by different individuals, groups, cultures, or at different times. With enough abstraction it may be possible to identify some plausible, seemingly stable features like incongruity, but no one identifies a thing as humorous based on incongruity alone. As we see it, holding that the concept of humor is in-

14 The account of interpretive concepts has drawn its fair share of criticism. For an argument that Dworkin mistakes the nature of disagreement on which he bases the notion, see Plunkett and Sundell 2013. For an argument that interpretive concepts cannot be distinctive concepts based on their conceptual nature, see Baruah 2017.

terpretive is compatible with taking some features or criteria as necessary but not sufficient while presuming that what is sufficient is ultimately a matter of interpretation.

The third reason for understanding the concept of humor as interpretive leads to a specific conception of what role humor has in human life. Philosophical issues that relate to conceptual identity are difficult to settle, generally speaking, and it may very well be that there is no telling in advance how much agreement on paradigms of humor is required in a community so that the members of that community can be said to share the same concept of humor. Here, the interpretive concept's potential as the best representation of humor is evident because, following the above characterization, the boundaries of the concept's application are shaped by community members who interpret a given practice or activity and their own relation to that practice/activity. When humor is understood as a changing social and cultural phenomenon, it makes sense to track that phenomenon with a conceptual device that promises to account for different changes—including almost inevitable disagreements concerning what exactly is humorous and what is not. Yet the true test for the viability of any of the approaches that we consider here is not that one is able to match one's preferred conception of humor with a definition of an interpretive concept beforehand. The idea that humor is an interpretive concept requires that humor is quintessentially tied to changing or ever-evolving social processes. Whether that is really so is a question for humor research to answer.

Given that disagreements about humor offer some support for the claim that humor is an interpretive concept, it is worthwhile to reflect further upon the matter. Controversies around humor are endless, and we believe some of them stem from the different interpretations that people make. It is not unheard of to claim that some phenomena or topics are never funny. For instance, in 2012, according to several media sources (e. g., McGlynn 2012; Bassist 2012), stand-up comedian Daniel Tosh was performing in Hollywood and telling several rape jokes.[15] A female member of the audience stood up and shouted that rape jokes are never funny. According to media, Tosh responded by stating: "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like, five guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her…" The stunned woman left with her friend. Afterwards, she reported how humiliating it was, especially as Tosh's response made the audience laugh even more. Later on, anti-sexual assault groups questioned

15 Similarly controversial cases are, for instance, the Muhammad cartoons (see Hietalahti et al. 2016) and the debate on how Dave Chappelle jokes about transgender people (see, e. g., Bayley 2021, Chow 2021, Belle 2021).

Tosh's sense of humor (Emery 2012) and some other comedians defended him by appealing to freedom of speech (Holpuch 2012). These kinds of humor controversies reveal how intimately humor intertwines with values, and therefore requires, in some cases, ethically sensitive interpretation (in addition to more technical definitions). For the woman in the Tosh case, rape is such a hurtful and deeply offensive subject matter that it cannot be found amusing in any possible light; Tosh himself and those laughing do not view that topic as being out-of-bounds. Both sides display (implicit) ethical positions. The first might lean towards the idea that it is morally problematic to joke insensitively about damaging and/or potentially traumatic things. The second could be based on the ideals of free speech and amusement which are considered so important that even if someone gets offended by a joke, the person telling the joke should not be reprimanded or restricted. The fact that these and other similar reasonings are in accordance with our ordinary expectations of what may be taking place—or so we assume—suggests that ethical convictions can reasonably influence one's understanding of what is funny, and at least in some cases, of what kind of examples should be included in or excluded from the very category of humor.[16]

Generally speaking, there is no doubt that controversial cases are found humorous by some. It is even less difficult to accept that different things have been found funny at different ages or in different societies (cf. Critchley 2004). Neither does it appear controversial to claim that finding something humorous is intimately tied to changing social and cultural processes (see Hietalahti 2016). The clear merit of regarding humor as an interpretive concept is that the interpretive concept of humor promises to be sensitive to interpersonal and cultural, synchronic as well as diachronic, differences. For instance, this would also give a fruitful viewpoint on the recent societal and very problematic debate on the "cancel" or "woke" culture that has frustrated comedians like Ricky Gervais (Nugent 2020) and John Cleese (Newman 2022); if humor *is* a matter of interpretation, then it is understandable how and why the borders of humor are constantly discussed, contested, and evolving.

Does all this mean that the concept of humor is necessarily interpretive? One can make two mutually related objections. The first one casts doubt on the coupling of a concept's character and different evaluations that are made by using that concept. Concepts are needed to identify things as what they are, and one could argue that those things are further evaluated only afterwards. We find

16 One should note that it is possible to find a joke both humorous and offensive (see Facca et al. 2022). We also stress that, here, we do not take a stand concerning the ethics of the situation; we merely want to say that one's ethical convictions may lead one to adopt a certain conceptualization of humor.

this objection basically sound. It may be argued that people are not (always) discussing and testing the borders of humor but they are offering judgments on what is *good* or *proper* humor both in a moral and aesthetic sense. One cannot deduce a concept's structural characteristics with certainty by analyzing judgments in which the concept presumably figures. However, given the elusive and controversial nature of concepts, basing one's conclusions on such judgments is often the only recourse available for obtaining information on concepts. Furthermore, interpretive concepts may be identified by their function, not based on their having a definite set of criteria of application. The insight that the concept of humor is interpretive finds support in the dynamic nature of humor as a deeply embedded social practice or human activity. A part of that practice/activity is the conceptual practice of humor, i. e., how we humans as social beings identify different things as being humorous. The fact that we are employing the term "humor" in a certain way—namely both to describe and evaluate in the above-mentioned fashion—is part and parcel of the conceptual practice of humor. When that is taken as a distinguishing property of the concept of humor, the concept can be understood as interpretive from a functional point of view.

The second objection takes an issue with a dynamic that we have largely overlooked so far. Does the interpretive approach display a confusion between the question "what is humor?" or what the fundamental or essential nature of the phenomenon is, and the question "what is humorous?" or what the proper content is of humorous acts and events? One possible answer is that, although it is analytically important to distinguish between these questions, they need to be discussed together to grasp the nature of humor as the complex human activity it is. Understanding the concept of humor as interpretive makes that possible as it enables identifying a completely new instance of alleged humor as humor, when a relevant community deems the instance humorous, even if the instance does not meet with the well-established criteria of humor (e. g., incongruity). The claim that humor is an interpretive concept can thus stand as the frank recognition of the fact that humor is an open human phenomenon that is inescapably tied to human determination, a fact to which the interpretive approach is sensitive. If one seeks to grasp humor as an evolving human activity or social practice, adopting a conception of the concept of humor as interpretive seems a promising start.

Still, there is a trade-off in viewing the concept of humor as wholly interpretive instead of considering it somehow criterial. Determining the nature of humor from a synchronic point of view by fixing the conjunctive or disjunctive criteria (of the concept of humor) is far from a useless enterprise. The history of science attests to the importance of finding both immutable constants (compare with necessary and jointly sufficient conditions) and the expected variance within certain limits (compare with a cluster of [partially] disjunctive criteria). Furthermore, on

the presumption that the content of a concept is encoded information with the help of which one can apply it correctly, it is not clear what sort of information is encoded in the interpretive concept of humor.[17] If *my* concept of humor is not interpretive but rather a quite well-determined one, but *our* concept of humor is subject to interpretation, does the interpretive approach to the concept of humor really capture *the* concept of humor, or only key features of how we collectively appear to make judgments about something being humorous? A humor researcher needs to carefully consider this before adopting the interpretive approach.

6 Humor as a Dual Character Concept

In this section, we consider the possibility that humor is best understood as a dual character concept. The distinctive feature of dual character concepts is that they encode both a descriptive dimension and an independent normative dimension of categorization (Knobe et al. 2013). These concepts have two sets of criteria for category membership that match with the two dimensions: a given object can be a category member in either or both senses. Dual character concepts have been distinguished by testing how a person responds to statements that have a particular form; for instance, "there is a sense in which she is clearly not a scientist, but ultimately, if you think about what it really means to be a scientist, you would have to say that she truly is a scientist" (Knobe et al. 2013, 242). With dual character concepts, one can expect there to be cases in which a concept-user may think that an object is clearly "X" but it is not "true X," cases in an object is not "X" but it is "true X," and cases in which an object is both "X" and "true X."

Objects deemed as "true X" are not necessarily particularly good at being X. One may be deemed "a true scientist" because one is open to change even one's deepest-held beliefs in the light of empirical evidence, yet that person is not "a good scientist" if he or she does poorly at analyzing data, conducting experiments, writing papers *et cetera.* Based on their seminal early experiments, Joshua Knobe, Sandeep Prasada, and George Newman concluded that dual character concepts "support two types of normative judgments ('good' and 'true') whereas the control

17 Pritam Baruah (2017) has presented a convincing argument to the effect that Dworkin's notion of interpretive concept is not compatible with any established psychological theory of concepts, which arguably means that the notion is not compatible with current psychological literature on concepts. That does not mean, however, that the basic idea is without any use for researchers of humor or that it would not be sound as a philosophical abstraction.

concepts support only one of these types of normative judgment ('good')"[18] (Knobe et al. 2013, 245). The notion of dual character concept is therefore not reducible to a conception that category membership can come in degrees. That is because dual character concepts are "represented via both (a) a set of concrete features and (b) some underlying abstract value," even if the two sets of criteria for category membership can be derived from the same set of concrete features (Knobe et al. 2013, 243; see also 246–49, 253). Regarding descriptive criteria, concept-users check to see whether a given object has the proper concrete features; as for normative criteria, they identify the abstract values that are realized by those features after which they check whether the object in question displays the right values. Different concrete features cohere by virtue of being ways of realizing the same abstract value(s) (Knobe et al. 2013, 254–56).

There is reason to think that the concept of humor has a dual character. Dual character concepts are often associated with social roles (Leslie 2015; Del Pinal and Reuter 2017) yet abstract concepts that represent value(s) much like humor have also been identified; for example, *love* (Knobe et al. 2013) and *art* (Liao et al. 2020). In psychological literature, dual character concepts are identified by empirical tests but here it is enough to ask the following two questions: (i) are there instances in which one is ready to think that "there is a sense in which that is humor, but when you come to think about it, it is not really humor"; (ii) are there instances in which one is ready to think that "that is not humor, but when you come to think about it, that is truly humor." We argue that the way the concept of humor is employed admits affirmative answers to both questions.

Starting with the first question, by assuming that the concept of humor has a dual character, one can explain many ordinary as well as academic squabbles over what is "truly" humor. Even if a particular instance satisfies the descriptive criteria of humor—for instance, think of a joke that is clearly meant to be funny or humorous due to the incongruity with listeners' expectations—it can be sensibly claimed that it is not a true case of humor because it does not exhibit an abstract value that is associated with humor (by a person or by a group). André Comte-Sponville (2001) claims that neo-Nazis' jokes do not belong to the sphere of humor because they are so distasteful. Marie Collins Swabey (1961) argues in a similar manner that offensive jokes are not humor. The dual character of the concept of humor provides us with an explanation of why one might think this or that way. This explanation is analytically independent from a personal sense of humor, i. e., from the determina-

18 In the experiment (one of the total five in the article) that involved the judgments "good" and "true," participants were instructed to rate the sentences "That is a good x" and "That is a true x" with dual character concepts and control concepts substituted with "x" as to how natural or weird they sounded. One of the candidates for having a dual character was the concept of comedian.

tion of how *good* some alleged instance of humor is (in contrast to being *truly* humor). In practice, the line between true and good can be very thin; still, even ascriptions like distasteful or offensive may display one's personal taste *or* values that are understood as antithetical to the underlying abstract value of humor.

We do not intend to rule out comparative judgments about what humor is good (or better than some alternative), and many ordinary disagreements about humor are quite adequately explained as instances of just that. However, a genuine comparative disagreement requires a common standard of evaluation whereas disagreements that can be fruitfully explained by the dual character of the concept of humor instead require the right kind of discrepancy between the criteria of a concept's application employed by disagreeing parties. The latter sort of disagreement may easily get mixed up with the former because both involve normativity, albeit in different ways. Normative purchase in categorizations of humor that are grounded in a concept's dual character derives from the abstract value(s) that the instances of humor are expected to display, or that concrete features of humor are expected to realize. It leaves room for judgments of humor that are based on descriptive criteria alone, and that are then challenged not on descriptive but on normative grounds. This importantly complements our understanding of what types of disagreements one may expect in ascriptions of humor.

Concerning the second question, think of an accident in which a person slips on a banana peel. There is a sense in which that is simply an unfortunate event and therefore not humor, but the comical side of things is not very far off, especially if the individual makes a silly face, grunts in an exaggerated manner *et cetera.* One can now claim that such banana peel humor is true humor despite the fact that one is quite concretely dealing with an unfortunate incident. The identification of an abstract value that the sequence of events realizes is what matters. *Mutatis mutandis* in the case of a person who does not find the situation humorous. However, it is not evident on this basis what we should think of a very likely scenario in which people are contesting each other's ascriptions of humor based on *mutually diverging values* and not because one of them is employing descriptive criteria and the other normative. Does attaching a different value to the concrete features of humor mean that the concept-users are employing a different concept? Are those concepts still concepts of humor, or what exactly determines the identity of the dual character concept? We cannot simply assume that we are dealing with the same concept when the same word or expression is used.

According to the dual character concept view, concepts are used to categorize objects with the help of criteria that can, in principle, be presented beforehand, yet there is also room for interpretive disagreement as to whether a given object "truly" belongs to a class that is denoted by a term or concept. The conception may thus be viewed as a sort of amalgam of the other alternatives discussed in

this paper. The downsides of approaching humor as a dual character concept stem partly from a fact that the notion originally emerged in psychological literature that is almost solely concerned with categorization. Concentrating on the (alleged) dual character of the concept of humor may offer us an interesting perspective on a (psychological) process in which people categorize different things as humor/humorous. It does not tell us much about what humor is, what the descriptive criteria of humor should be or how they are conceptually organized, or even what value or values are associated with the concept of humor or how one should go about identifying them. Even so, the merits of analyzing humor in terms of dual character concepts are noteworthy, because doing so may shed light on certain possibly unrecognized aspects of humor categorizations.

7 Conclusions

In this article we have discussed the merits and shortcomings of four different conceptual approaches to humor. The prevailing scientific way of conceptualizing humor is based on the idea of necessary and sufficient conditions. In line with it, humor research has taken huge steps in recent decades, but still, as we have shown, it is not guaranteed that this very complex and lively human phenomenon is always best captured in those terms. Other ways of conceptualizing humor offer advantages that can be decisive as far as specific research objectives go.

The first alternative that we considered is to understand humor as a cluster concept. It bestows a concept of humor with open-endedness that admits a great variety of humorous instances in the past, now, and in the future. The main danger is that, by refraining from the search of features that are present in all instances of humor, one may settle for a multiplicity of features that should be kept apart conceptually. If this happens, one is dealing with a confused concept.

In social reality, humor is a contested matter, and there are different judgments regarding humorous events. If humor were an interpretive concept, we should expect debates over what humor is rather than presume that someone has made a mistake. Evaluation of humor is guided by ethical and aesthetic norms which explains why the concept of humor seems so open-ended: there are as many potential judgments as there are moral, cultural, political *et cetera* norms on which those (value) judgments are based. However, the interpretive approach might focus on *judgments* too much, thus losing sight of a *concept.*

Building on the idea that values have an important role in the conceptualization of humor, humor could be understood as a dual character concept. If corroborated by further empirical research, this standpoint would improve our understanding of how people categorize objects as humorous as well as open a new type

of disagreement over (the concept of) humor. In a sense, the notion of the dual character concept draws from other ways of approaching concepts that we have presented, yet it does not offer much in terms of how especially the descriptive criteria of the concept of humor should be organized and understood.

We have not offered any external standards for deciding which one of the four concept types best represents humor. That is by design: it might be possible to make use of all four approaches coherently and productively in one's research if one were only to make sure that there were no confusions when alternating between different standpoints. That said, humor researchers may also reasonably hold that one of these approaches is more useful than others for their own purposes. In the current paper, we have sought to present key points about different approaches, and to suggest that there is always a trade-off whichever way one might go.

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