… humour is like explaining a joke, for an experience that has such an inscrutable subjective quality, to ask how it works suggests you don't get it. But psychologists can't ignore humour. It's fundamental to our mental and social lives, and so with philosophers and anthropologists they've taken on the challenge of explaining the inexplicable.

The Theories

Many have tried to capture what all funny material and experiences have in common. An idea championed since Aristotle, and endorsed by Thomas Hobbs, is that humour is expressing one's superiority over another person or group. This chimes with the content of many stand-up acts, and it received support recently from the observations of a retired unicycle …