

# THE MORALITY OF LAUGHTER

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As Given at Shimer College

October 6, 2009

My book had its origin in an elevator at the University of Chicago Law School, where I was a visiting fellow. On the elevator with me was Nobel laureate Ronald Coase, a founder of the law and economics movement associated with that school and with the law school where I now teach. The elevator stopped on the way down, and a U of C. fundraiser stepped aboard with a donor in tow. “This is Ronald Coase,” she enthused. “He invented the Coase Theorem!” Smiles and a shaking of hands all around. “This is Frank Buckley...,” she continued. And in the embarrassed silence which followed I resolved to have a theorem too.

But where to theorize? The areas in which I taught were already well-stocked with theories, so I had to move on. And I settled on laughter. And here I offer a tip for future scholars. If you’re going to write a boring book, at least pick a fun reading list. And then—the icing on the cake—my theory of laughter would require me to mock people I dislike.

I will describe my thesis in what follows, but let me note that I shall drop—like heavy weights—four names, people from whom I have unashamedly borrowed: Hobbes, Bergson, Aristotle and Nietzsche.

I do this because, when beginning a talk, it’s always useful to intimidate an audience. If pressed, I can drop a good many other impressive names. Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Britney Spears. Names which have nothing to do with my book, but which serve the same purpose.

Back to my theory. There’s a name for it—the superiority thesis. In every laugh there’s a jester and a butt, and the jester’s laughter signals his sense of superiority to his butt.

That’s not a novel idea. Hobbes said something very like this. Hobbes famously thought that we are engaged in a perpetual struggle for power. When we experience that sense our power, when we see that we are superior to another person, we laugh in the triumph. Our laughter is “sudden glory.”

Tertullian had a similar idea. One of the particular joys of Heaven, it seems, will be the ability to peer down from on high and observe the sufferings of the sinners in Hell.

One can think of possible objections to the superiority thesis, and if you’d like I can consider them later. Is there such a thing as innocent laughter? What about self-deprecatory laughter—the joke told on oneself?

For now, however, I will stick with the superiority thesis, and add another idea: not only does laughter signal superiority, but oftentimes the butt really is inferior.

More often than not, our laughter communicates a true superiority and that the butt is truly an inferior person.

That’s why I called the book *The Morality of Laughter*. I suggest that laughter identifies comic vices, things risible in themselves, things we should want to avoid. At the same time, our laughter identifies comic virtues, ways of behaving that shield us from laughter.

Something like this was said by Henri Bergson, the second person to whom I refer.

Bergson was a turn of the century philosopher and diplomat, and the winner of a Nobel Prize in literature.

He lived at a time when planners had unbounded confidence in their ability to plan our world for us. Rather like today. Bergson opposed this, as he thought that their plans would inevitably be rigid and narrow, and that such rules cannot possibly do justice to the endless variety of opportunities that life offers us for joy. They are machines rules, and the more they treat people like machines the more they are risible.

Bergson thought that this was the key to our laughter. He defined the risible as a rigidity of body or character. Consider the simplest of butts, the man who clumsily slips on the ice. He falls because he sought to walk after his grip gave way. A more agile man might have kept his balance by standing still, but the butt lacks the alertness to change gears quickly. So down he goes, to our great amusement; and in him Bergson saw the very type and model of all our laughter.

The butt who cannot navigate the obstacles erected by social customs is like the man who cannot navigate a patch of ice. Both are comically inadequate to the dexterity society requires of us. Like machines, their actions follow a determined program. They keep on walking when their feet have left the ice, and that is why we find them comic.

What the machine-man has forgotten is how complicated a thing it is to plan one's life, and how misleading an overly-simple code of conduct might be. For major sins, and minor ones too, the commandments will suffice. But society expects something more than this, since we might follow all of the commandments and still be dull, priggish, and pretentious. We might observe all of the laws and still be vulgar, clumsy, and thick. "Society requires something more: it is not satisfied with living, but wants us to live well."

Let us now talk about laughter's message about the good life. As Bergson noted, laughter demands suppleness from us. It asks us to be alive to the many experiences of joy that life has to offer, experiences that are missed by mechanistic rules.

But I think we can say something more about comic norms. Just what are the comic virtues and vices? Like Aristotle, I see virtue as a middle way between extremes of behavior. For each comic virtue, there are two correlative vices that represent opposing deviations from the norm's golden mean. Laughter strikes a balance between two extremes, one an insufficiency and the other an excess of a comic virtue.

At the extremes of fortitude: cowardice and foolhardiness. At the extremes of moderation: moral sloth and priggishness.

I shall pause for a moment over one comic virtue—integrity—and its correlative comic vices: hypocrisy and misanthropy.

Integrity is an adherence to a rational life-plan, one that is reasonably chosen in pursuit of sensible ends.

The well-integrated person is at ease with his life-plan. It reflects his deepest and most complete desires, and offers him the greatest happiness of which he is capable. Such people give off an aura: they are comfortable in their own skins.

Hypocrisy the principal comic vice. Laughter is never so fierce as when it mocks the hypocrite. To be comic, the hypocritical butt must be unaware of his comic vice. The self-deluding are risible, not the self-aware. The self-conscious hypocrite might be an amiable rogue. He might also be the villain, like Molière's Tartuffe. As he knows full well that he is false, however, Tartuffe is not comic, and the play, which succeeds wonderfully as a melodrama, fails as a comedy.

Tartuffe poses as a Puritan, but schemes for the naive's Orgon's wealth even as he tries to seduce his wife. There is no moment when Tartuffe does not know what he is about. Only Orgon is self-delusional and comic. Returning from a trip he is told that his wife is ill. His mind is elsewhere, however. "Et Tartuffe?" He keeps asking. "Le pauvre homme!"

By contrast, the self-deluding hypocrisy of the villain who thinks himself moral is of greater psychological interest, and stands in greater need of ridicule.

Le Tartuffe was a satire on the Jansenist religious revival that condemned lax morals at the court of Molière's regal patron. Ironically, one of the most amusing satires of self-deluding hypocrisy came from the pen of a devout Jansenist, only eight years before Molière's comedy. In his Provincial Letters, Pascal ridiculed the Jesuits as purveyors of cheap grace and easy absolution for their noble patrons. When Pascal described the Jesuit doctrine of "sufficient grace" as a grace that does not suffice, a court that could not understand theological disputes did know enough to laugh.

The ability to sin and think well of oneself is, of all sins, the greatest. I once asked a colleague to do something which, while a little inconvenient, would have been a great kindness. It was to help another colleague organize a paper he was writing. He was a great friend of hers, a gentle and sweet-hearted person, but of modest analytical skill. Several of us were pitching in. Would she help? "I will give it prayerful consideration," she answered sincerely. And of course she never did help him.

If an insufficiency of integrity is hypocrisy, an excess is misanthropy, the man who sets his standards so high that no one can possibly meet them. The Ur-misanthrope is Umbricius in Juvenal's Third Satire, seen again in the imitations the satire fathered: Boileau's First Satire, Pope's Imitation of Juvenal, and Johnson's London. Most famously, the misanthrope is Molière's Alceste, the protagonist of *Le Misanthrope*.

If misanthropy is the satirist's besetting sin, then *Le Misanthrope* is a satire upon satire. Written during a black period, after Molière discovered his wife's infidelity, the play describes a modern Umbricius who seeks to quit the French court and his flirtatious lover.

Unlike Boileau's and Johnson's misanthropes, however, Alceste's ire is wildly excessive. Were the court as false as Boileau made out, or London as noxious as Johnson claimed, one would reasonably wish to leave it. But Molière's court is merely polite, and the courtiers are no more duplicitous or empty-headed than people generally. In the debate over misanthropy and polite manners, it is always his friends and never Alceste who speak for good sense.

Misanthropy is often a pose, however. The man who yearns to be rescued by the person he has walked out on is not a misanthrope but a narcissist. He holds one hand out to keep the world at bay; but with the other hand furtively beckons you to him. "Do not believe me," he pleads. "Come rescue me."

The misanthrope does not hate all mankind, for he does not hate himself. While he may despise others, his self-love does not flag, and the difference makes him a misanthrope. I am a liar and a cheat? Fine. What do I care if others share my vices? The secret is deeper, then. It is that the world betrays me. It does not love me, esteem me, worship me, as I deserve to be loved, esteemed and worshiped. As my mother did, for example. And I will never forgive the world for my psychic wound. The misanthrope's great secret is narcissism.

Let me turn now from Aristotle to the fourth big name I want to drop—Nietzsche.

What's so good about happiness, asked George Jesse. It can't buy you money. Nietzsche also excoriated the ideal of happiness as a moral ideal.

Happiness is a minimal goal: it plays it safe; and a life spent in the pursuit of happiness may be banal. By contrast, the quest for joy is heroic: it takes risks. It is willing to give offence, to court a rebuff, to play with fire, and has the deepest contempt for those who are too easily satisfied with more tepid pleasures. I feel sorry for you, wrote Baudelaire to a critic, that you are so easily happy

Let me tell about one of my colleagues, the happiest person I know. He is intelligent, though not as intelligent as he thinks he is. He works hard, but not as hard as he thinks he does. When he tells a joke he laughs hard. Sometimes others laugh with him. Is there not something contemptible in his happiness, this banal creature, who so closely resembles you and me?

Nietzsche called such people the "last men." They aim for little, they make everything small. We're apt to see Nietzsche as a revolutionary figure, the atheist who proclaimed that God is dead, the immoralist who condemned the slave morality of Christianity.

In place of democratic pity, Nietzsche celebrated his superman, whose badge of superiority is laughter. His hero, Zarathustra, is a dancer and comedian, whose laughter is a badge of superiority. "One does not kill by anger but by laughter. Come, let us kill the Spirit of Gravity!" "I am enemy to the Spirit of Gravity," he said, "and truly, mortal enemy, arch-enemy, born enemy!"

Laughter demonstrates the superior person's triumph over life's vicissitudes, as well as his contempt for moral theories that kill laughter by demanding gravity and pity for the plight of inferiors. "This laughter's crown, this rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, do I throw this crown! I have canonized laughter; you Higher Men, learn--to laugh!"

Nietzsche is sometime thought to stand above history, without antecedents and with only the members of a political bestiary as descendants. It's not so simple, however. In his rejection of liberalism and the 18th century morality of happiness, Nietzsche wrote within the 19th century counterrevolution against the Enlightenment project. He was, to be sure, the most important member of the counterrevolution, but one need not strain to see parallels to other nineteenth century figures:

- the aesthete's response to the banality of liberalism; Baudelaire, the dandies, Young England, Pugin, Poe
- Chateaubriand and Newman's discovery of religion as an answer to liberalism
- Schiller, Arnold and Ruskin, who saw in art a cure for the wound of modernity

What had all these in common? Like Yeats' Seven Sages

All hated Whiggery; but what is Whiggery? A leveling, rancorous, rational sort of mind that never looked out of the eye of a saint or out of drunkard's eye.

All sought the sense of transcendent joy that is almost entirely absent from Aristotle, but which is perfectly captured in laughter. One doesn't find much mention of joy-chara-in Aristotle. For a celebration of joy in the ancient world, one must turn from philosophy to laughter or religion, to the comedies of Aristophanes or to the Psalms and the Gospels.

The special quality of Heaven is not pleasure or happiness but joy. News of the Savior is tidings of great joy (Luke 2.10), and the reward of the faithful servant is entry into the joy of the Lord (Matt. 25.21-23). "And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you" (John 16.22).

The earthly experience of joy, even in sensual pleasure, permits a glimpse of higher joys, like the spiritual ecstasy portrayed in Crashaw's Hymn to St. Teresa.

O how oft shall thou complain?

Of a sweet and subtle pain?

Of intolerable joys?

Of a death in which who dyes

Loves his death and dyes again,

And would for ever so be slain.

There is no mistaking the message in Bernini's sculpture of St. Teresa in Sta. Maria della Vittoria's Cornaro chapel. On viewing the sculpture, in which an angel repeatedly penetrates St. Teresa's side with a flaming golden arrow, a Spanish diplomat observed "if that is spiritual ecstasy, then I too have known it."

In its intense physicality, laughter is also rooted in the world, like bread and wine. It partakes of the divine without losing its human nature. For those who laugh, there is no abandonment, no distance from God. Our laughter also erases distances between people, in the communion between teller and listener, and we cannot imagine true companionship without laughter.

There are two religions, which cut across denominational lines. One is a therapeutic religion of immanence, that seeks to heal ills which do not ascend to the level of sins. The other is a redemptive religion of transcendence, a religion of saints and sinners, whose goal is personal salvation. One is a religion of happiness and the other of joy. At its worst, the religion of immanence is casuistic and emotionally flat; at its best, in Tolstoy's later stories, it celebrates solidarity and ministers to corporal needs. At its worst, the religion of transcendence is dismissive of purely human concerns; at its best, it answers to spiritual needs that are elsewhere ignored. A humanistic theology must harmonize both impulses.

The joy of laughter is both immanent and transcendent. Laughter is imminent in the sense that it is directly experienced through intuitive comic norms and unites jester and listener in a bond of solidarity. But laughter is also an experience of conversion that reveals a hidden reality and gives us a new way of looking at the world. After sharing in laughter's joy we see with a foreign eye the dull world of heavy seriousness. We are put in touch with secret and forgotten sources of joy, and what was previously great now seems unimportant. The great god Pan yet lives.

And yet we live in a world of immanence, where the transcendent has disappeared. We are surrounded by machine art, machine scholarship, and machine politics. Perhaps, in the realm of politics, that is the best we can hope for. Fiume. Yet where the entire world is politics, where we never ascend beyond the quotidian, the reasonable, the boring, where we entirely lose sight of anything more noble or joyful.

I end then, without false hopes that I have convinced the determined butt to abandon his comic vices. For the rest of us, however, especially those who shrink with horror before dour, humorless, rationalist nightmares, we have an answer to Lucky Jim's question: what can be done to slow the progress of the pathology I have described. Sound policy analysis and artistic criticism can identify the costs and ugliness of machine life, but cannot arrest the progress of the malady. Can anything further be done? As it happens, there is.

We can laugh.