

## Taking the History of Philosophy on Humor and Laughter Seriously

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### ABSTRACT

I challenge the imprecise, stereotyped, and at times erroneous ways in which major philosophers' attitudes toward laughter are presented in manuals of humor research and other influential manuscripts on humor, and analyze the reasons that account for their origin and perpetuation.

**Key-Words:** Philosophy, Antiquity, Renaissance, Modern Times, Laughter, Humor.

### Introduction

In his otherwise excellent *The Psychology of Laughter* (2007), Rod Martin draws on cultural historian Daniel Wickberg (1998) to sum up philosophy's relationship with laughter:

Prior to the eighteenth century, laughter was viewed by most authors almost entirely in negative terms. No distinction was made between "laughing with" and "laughing at," since all laughter was thought to arise from making fun of someone. The philosophical conception of laughter as essentially a form of aggression can be traced to Aristotle... (Martin 2007, 21-2)

Similar ideas are voiced in John Morreall's essay on "Philosophy and Religion" in *The Primer of Humor Research* (2008): "If we consider all that was written about laughter and humor before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the consensus is negative." This is so, Morreall explains, because "lacking the concept of humor, it is not surprising that early writers did not distinguish between laughter at something funny and other kinds, such as laughing on winning a contest or laughing on being tickled" (Morreall 2008, 217, 211). Finally, in an essay titled "Historical Views of Humor" in the same book, Amy Carrell sums up 2500 years of laughter in a short paragraph:

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So how has humor been perceived through the ages? Plato held that people laugh at others' misfortunes, and Aristotle, who used the term *comedy*, said that humor was "an imitation of men worse than the average; worse... as regards... the Ridiculous ["a mistake or deformity"] which is a species of the Ugly." In addition, Aristotle called "people like satirists and writers of comedy... a kind of evil speakers and tell-tales." Cicero concurred, restricting humor to the "unseemly or ugly." Thomas Hobbes followed in these footsteps ... Nineteenth-century scholars and theorists were no less dour in their views of humor. Georg W. F. Hegel, for instance, called laughter "an expression of self-satisfied shrewdness" ... (Carrell 2008, 306-7)

Carrell characterizes these opinions as "the Ancients' grim views of humor and laughter" and finds them today in teasing (ibid, 307).

I argue that the statements quoted above from Wickberg, Martin, Morreall, and Carrell perpetuate a sketchy and ultimately inaccurate view of philosophy's relationship with laughter and humor, especially before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the first part of the article, I identify various recurrent misconceptions, over-generalizations, and errors that plague the depiction of philosophy's relation to the comic, and in the second part, I attempt to explain the reasons for their origin and perpetuation.

### **I. Over-Generalizations, Misconceptions, and Mistakes**

I challenge every assertion in the above quotes, from the contentions about the sweeping negative approach to laughter before the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Ancients' grim attitude toward it, to the lack of differentiation between forms of laughter. I find proof of humor and self-laughter in Antiquity as well as evidence of positive attitudes toward laughter in Antiquity, the Renaissance, and the 17<sup>th</sup> century. I advance a more nuanced view of the attitudes toward the laughter of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Hegel than portrayed in the texts referred to above, and supplement them by attention to the views on laughter of Xenophon, Cicero, the Cynics, the Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy, Renaissance philosophers, and 17<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers. I skip the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

because it is common knowledge that a positive attitude toward laughter along with a benign form of humor is characteristic of the Enlightenment.

### 1. Forms of Laughter in Antiquity

It is not accurate that “prior to the eighteenth century... no distinction was made between ‘laughing with’ and ‘laughing at,’ since all laughter was thought to arise from making fun of someone” (Martin 2007, 21); even less exact is stating that “lacking the concept of humor, it is not surprising that early writers did not distinguish between laughter at something funny and other kinds, such as laughing on winning a contest or laughing on being tickled” (Morreall 2008, 211).

To the contrary, in “The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture” (1991), the prominent classicist Stephen Halliwell suggests that the rich trove of descriptive terms available for describing and assessing laughter in Ancient Greece can be arrayed along a continuum characterized by playful laughter at one pole and consequential laughter at the other (Halliwell 1991, 280-81). Playful laughter is essentially laughter “as a mechanism for release or relaxation,” laughter that is “exempt from the sphere of practical effects and repercussions.” Consequential laughter aims at a definite result, and in the classical Greek context, that result is intended to control human behavior by “causing embarrassment or shame, signaling hostility, damaging a reputation, contributing to the defeat of an opponent, delivering public chastisement.” In other words, “arousing feelings which may not be shared by all concerned, and which typically involve some degree of antagonism” (ibid, 283). Halliwell voices similar thoughts in a more recent publication: “Greek representations of laughter revolve around a sense of its unstable association with both positive (amiable, cooperative) and negative (hostile, antagonistic) emotions, with (innocent) “play” and socially disruptive aggression, with the taking of pleasure and the giving of pain, with the affirmation of life and the fear of death (archetypally thought of as the kingdom of the “unsmiling” and the laughter-less)...” (Halliwell 2008, 11).

However, in his essay "Laughter and the Greek Philosophers: a Sketch," Zeph Stewart explains why the Greek and Roman philosophers and rhetoricians were constantly influenced by a particular sense of laugh – the laugh of contempt or the laugh of superiority – "even though they recognized cases of other kinds of humor" (Stewart 1994, 34). Discussion of the phenomenon of laughter in ancient times has been severely handicapped by two confusions, Stewart maintains. On the one hand humor or the comic does not necessarily result in laughter, and on the other hand, laughter is not always caused by humor or the comic. Moreover, the Greco-Roman ideas of the laughable (*geloion*, *ridiculum*) are somewhat different from our own. The Greek word for laugh (*geloin*) and most especially its compounds and associated adjectives are generally used not in connection with humor, but to express disparagement, contempt, or criticism. In literature, laughing that is not contemptuous is often differentiated by the use of a "gentle" adverb. Finally, the act of laughing, like the public display of weeping, is generally considered inappropriate in the philosophic tradition for a reasonable and self-controlled person.

For the Greeks the adjective related to "laughter" and the abstract neuter noun "laughter" refer almost entirely to a laughter that is contemptuous, mocking, or disdainful:

Plato in the *Philebus*, the *Republic*, *Laws* (Book 7) and elsewhere, and afterwards Aristotle in the *Poetics* (5. 1440a), define the laughable (*geloion*) as a deformity or defect, Aristotle making the important qualification that it is a fault or defect that is not painful or injurious to others. So by a kind of linguistic accident, this single conception of laughter controlled the early Greek theoretical discussion of the laughable and the semantics of *geloion* – the idea that laughter was always looking down on something that was imperfect. This restricted meaning of *geloion* was inherited linguistically by the Romans and also in the modern languages: *ridiculus* in Latin and the romance languages, "ridiculous" and "laughable" in English, "lächerlich" in German... This is a linguistic situation which severely limits the discussion of humor by Greek writers; *for the Greeks in fact used the verb* [that corresponds to "to laugh"] *in a variety of meanings and situations, but they*

*could not recognize these other meanings and situations when they discussed or described geloion ... (Stewart 1994, 33-4; emphasis added)*

That is the reason, Stewart explains, that Quintilian passes quickly over the cause and “ratio” of *risus* and proceeds to concrete examples (Quintilian 1920-1922, 6.3. 7-8); it is also why Cicero in *De Oratore* first defines the laughable, *ridiculum*, as relating to a fault and deformity (*turpitude* and *deformitas*), thus faithfully following the Peripatetic tradition, but then hastily brushes the matter aside (Cicero 2001, bk. 2, 236).

The situation Stewart describes is slowly ameliorated when attempts are made to explain humorous effects in rhetoric and in comedy, which bring in new terms that tend to avoid the simple *geloion*. “This explanation of ‘types of *geloion*’ mentioned in [Aristotle’s] *Rhetoric* Book 3 (1419b), which appears in the lost Second Book of the *Poetics*, would have provided many of these new terms,” Stewart asserts (Stewart 1994, 34). He mentions Aristotle, and before him, Plato, as thinkers that have affected changes in the thought on laughter (Stewart 1994, 34). In the same vein, the classicist Bracht Branham maintains that “there seems to have been an important shift in Greek thinking about laughter and the comic in the fourth century” (Branham 1989, 52).

In order to follow this shift and revise the opinion that “the Ancients” held “grim views of humor and laughter” (Carrell 2008, 307), we cannot confine our study to definitions of laughter, as we have seen how they have been restricted to a certain kind of laughter. Nevertheless, Stewart emphasizes that while the Greek and Roman philosophers and rhetoricians are consistently influenced by the laugh of contempt or the laugh of superiority, they recognize cases of other kinds of humor. Similarly, he notes that “the whole tradition of popular Greek philosophy and ethics, from the earliest times to the Roman Empire... cautioned against laughter,” but he adds that “there were some interesting countertrends” (Stewart 1994, 34). If we are interested in the countertrends to which Stewart enigmatically points, a more thorough knowledge of the texts and practices than required for definitions of laughter is needed. Hence, attitudes toward jests, jokes, self-laughter, and cheerfulness must be included in the search for kinds of laughter other than

“laughing at.” In the remaining sections of the first part of the article, I indicate the most obvious cases of laughter that are not necessarily cases of “laughing at.”

## 2. Humor in Antiquity

Various scholars who have studied ancient theories of laughter maintain that the discovery of benign humor is not an 18<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon (Grant 1924, 148; Cazamien 1952; Haury 1955). Not only do Ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophers differentiate between kinds of laughter, they argue, but they also favor the mild and good-natured laughter as exemplified by Xenophon’s, Aristotle’s, Cicero’s, and the Stoics’ preferred choice of the comic.

Xenophon (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) makes several distinctions between the ill-natured and the good-natured jest: the former is characterized by insolence, shamelessness, and a desire to inflict pain, or to raise a laugh for the jester’s credit; the good-natured jest partakes of the opposite qualities, and has as its purpose the amusement of the entire company. He discusses in *Cyropaedia* the proper control of laughter and praises Cyrus for saying that “those who provided laughter for a company, neither for their own gain nor for the disadvantage or injury of any one present, would be considered witty and refined men, rather than boasters” (*Cyropaedia*, 2.2.12-14). The absence of personal injury is stressed, as it is also in 5.2.18, where Gobryas admires the Persians for pleasantries that are far from injury or insolence. At the court of Cyrus, Xenophon says in 8.1.33, one would never see anyone taking pleasure in injurious laughter.

Aristotle considers the correct use of laughter a social virtue, thereby making laughter a part of the good life. In the middle way between the excess of laughter (buffoonery) and its deficiency (boorishness) lies *Eutrapelia*, the “true wittiness” characteristic of an honorable and free person (Aristotle 2000, 4.8. 1127b). Before further discussing Aristotle’s views in section 7, I would like to pursue first his influence on philosophers who favor the mild and good-natured laughter. Indeed, we have evidence from Diogenes Laertius that Theophrastus, Aristotle’s follower, wrote a treatise on laughter, which has unfortunately not been preserved. Theophrastus’ own ideas are advanced by at least two writers on laughter: by

Demetrius Phaedrus (1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.) in some sketchy fragments and by Plutarch, who quotes Theophrastus in his discussion of the suitable jest in his *Quaestiones convivales* (1967-1984). Plutarch defines quite closely the requirements of the liberal (or the free man's) jest: it must give pleasure and not pain; it must observe the proprieties of time and place; it must not be forced, or frigid, but spring naturally from the conversation. One should ridicule innocent "hobbies" rather than serious faults, and slight physical defects rather than grave ones. The jester should show his good will by laughing, sometimes at his own expense, and should never show a bitter spirit in his jesting (Frazier 2000).

Cicero clearly shows a theoretical preference for good-natured humor: his "*hilaritas*" as well as "*festivitas*" imply a kindly spirit of jesting (Grant 1924, 107). Indeed, by the time of Cicero a concept of humor very close to that of the Aristotelian *eutrapelos*, yet modeled surprisingly on Socrates, has experienced a resurrection (Pavlovskis 1968, 28). It is the Stoic Panaetius (c. 185–109 B.C.), whose views are best preserved in the adaptation of his work *On the appropriate* by Cicero in the latter's *De Officiis*, who is responsible for that. Incorporating Aristotelian tenets into Stoicism to make the school more palatable to the Romans, Panaetius takes virtue to be a mean between two vices, and this doctrine, alien to true Stoic principles, forms the basis of the treatment of laughter in Cicero's *De Officiis*. Moreover, Panaetius fuses the Aristotelian ideal of the *eutrapelos* with the ideal of Socratic irony: Socrates becomes for Panaetius the ideal embodiment of Aristotle's *eutrapolos* or Cicero's liberal joker (his coining for Aristotle's free man), according to Converse Fiske; this kind of humor Panaetius found to be the most appropriate for the plain style his teacher Diogenes of Babylon developed; assailing the aesthetic and moral coarseness of Cynic speech with its vulgar and frank humor as a sin against social propriety, Panaetius favors instead Aristotle's definition of the liberal jest (Fiske 1920, 17; 1919). Not only did Panaetius and other Stoics favor a mild form of laughter, the Roman Stoics used laughter as a potent device for achieving their aims. I address their views in section 9 as part of the Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy.

### 3. Laughing Philosophers

Apart from the tradition of the liberal joke, which favors mild and good-natured laughter, another tradition makes laughter its hallmark. Beginning with Democritus (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), the tradition of the laughing philosopher features philosophers whose final judgment of life is expressed in laughter. The tradition derives its importance from Democritus' nickname while alive, "wisdom," because it points to a fundamental association between wisdom and laughter. The following remarks about laughter can be found in the remaining ethical fragments from his treatise *On Cheerfulness (peri enthumies)*: "A life without festival is like a long road without an inn to rest in" (Diels 1901, 426, 8) and "Do not laugh at the misfortunes of men, but pity them" (ibid, 405, 15, frag. 107a). Along the same lines, Democritus severely condemns those who find faults with their friends (ibid, 405, 19) and says that it is better to reprove one's own faults than one's neighbors' (ibid, 405, 15). Some fragments concern cheerfulness, such as "best for a person to live his life as cheerful and as little distressed as possible. This will occur if he does not make his pleasures in mortal things" (Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.1.47; Diels and Kranz 1972, 68 B189).

Stephen Halliwell interestingly refers to Democritus' laughter as "existential laughter" (Halliwell 2008, 363), and points to the possibility that Democritus' laughter represents a component of cheerfulness or peace of mind (*enthumie*). Moreover, Jessica Berry makes a good case for *enthumie* being more "cheerfulness" than "tranquility," associating thus Democritus' ideal with laughter (ibid, 353; Berry 2004). It is in the *testimonia*, however, rather than in the fragments of Democritus' extant writings that a justification for the name "the laughing philosopher" can be more easily found. The following legend has been associated with Democritus: The famous sage laughed so much that the people of Abdera believed he has gone insane and called Hippocrates to heal him. But when Democritus explained to the renowned doctor that he was laughing at the folly of humankind, Hippocrates concluded that Democritus was truly wise and earnest, and that he was laughing to make a serious point. Democritus has been referred to as "the laughing philosopher"



ever since, and has had an immense influence on Western philosophy and literature.<sup>1</sup>

Democritus' laughter has been identified as scornful; yet even for those who think of laughter as an expression of scorn for certain vices, it is still possible to think of it as valuable and worthy of being encouraged. One reason has been put forward by the medical writers in the Renaissance, for whom a disposition to laugh at the follies of mankind is taken to be a valuable means of preserving one's health. As Laurent Joubert explains in detail, the encouragement of this kind of mirthfulness is exceptionally valuable in the case of certain temperaments (Joubert 1579, 251-4, 258-9, 81-3, 273-6). The example to which the physicians constantly return is that of Democritus, whose bilious temperament makes him so impatient and irritable that, Robert Burton reports in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, he eventually becomes almost suicidally depressed (Burton 1989, 2). Democritus' decision to cultivate the habit of laughter provides him with a remedy for this dangerous predicament (Joubert 1579, Appendix, 363). By making himself a constant spectator of human absurdity, Quentin Skinner explains, he is able to overcome his splenetic disposition by laughing at everything that excites his contempt (Skinner 2002, 165).

Michel de Montaigne, Desiderius Erasmus, Thomas More, and Robert Burton, who refers to himself as Democritus junior, can be counted among the laughing philosophers, as well as Pierre de Besse, who publishes in 1615 le *Démocrète Chrétien* (*The Christian Democritus*), and later, Friedrich Nietzsche and George Santayana.

#### 4. Self-laughter as Sympathetic Laughter

Democritus' laughter has been identified as scornful; yet whoever laughs at humankind cannot but include himself in that lot, as indicated by Democritus' admonition, "You people do not laugh at your own stupidity but each laughs at another's" (Hippocrates 1990, Letter 17, line 5). Self-laughter is humorous, I believe, because laughing at oneself necessarily involves the same sympathy that humor does. Since Democritus' admonition, however, it is expected that laughing philosophers laugh at themselves: "No one is a laughing-stock who laughs first at

himself," says Seneca (1995, *On Firmness*, 16.3–17.4). Self-laughter is also advocated by Montaigne (1965, bk. I, chap. 50, 503) and by More, according to Erasmus (Epistle 999, 4; 1906-58, 16) and after the 18<sup>th</sup> century, by Nietzsche and Santayana (Nietzsche 1954, Part IV, chap. 12, sec.18 and 20; Santayana 1948, 44-5).

The fame of the laughing Democritus has been enormous and the influence of Seneca on the Renaissance and the Enlightenment makes the latter's views important. Self-laughter is certainly exemplified by Socrates, another influential philosopher, as we shall shortly see.

### 5. Socrates' Humor

Socrates' attendance at the performance of the *Clouds* so that the Athenian audience could judge how well Aristophanes had captured his likeness attests to his sense of humor, as do his descriptions by his students Plato and Xenophon. The latter's Socrates is fond of laughter, dancing and word-play. "When he [Socrates] was joking," Xenophon reports, "he was no less profitable to those who spent time with him than when he was serious" (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, bk. IV, chap. 1, sec. 1); similarly, Xenophon begins his *Symposium* with the following assertion: "To my mind it is worth while to relate not only the serious acts of great and good men but also what they do in their lighter moods."

The Platonic Socrates is characterized by "self-mockery," according to Stephen Halliwell. The motif of internalized ridicule is mentioned fleetingly near the end of *Phaedo*, but is also glimpsed in several passages where Socrates offers a critique of arguments that he has previously endorsed, such as the end of *Charmides* and at *Protagoras* 361a. Self-laughter can be found also in the famous speech of the Laws in *Crito* and in the laughter that Diotima, Socrates' alter ego, directs at Socrates in the *Symposium* (Halliwell 2008, 291-2). Socrates' humor is different from his irony, as the Ancients do not associate irony with jest (Knox 1989, 102). If in Plato's dialogues Socrates is deemed ironic in the Greek sense of irony (saying the contrary of that which is true), he is no less humorous (jesting in a good-humored way, also about himself). Indeed, Socrates' humor has been noted by many modern philosophers, Karl Popper among others (Popper 1969, I, 194).

## 6. Plato

“So how has humor been perceived through the ages? Plato held that people laugh at others’ misfortunes...” Amy Carrell writes (Carrell 2008, 306). We do not normally think of Plato as a great joker. And yet, terms for laughter, jeering, ridiculousness appear on the whole more often in Plato’s works than in any other ancient author whose works we have, not even excepting Aristophanes. Plato does not employ these terms merely in order to deprecate the activity, but often to show his interlocutors laughing. Aakash Singh notes how a disproportionately high share of the laughter occurs rather surprisingly in Plato’s *Republic* (Singh 2004).

Indeed, there is a tension in Plato between his theoretical pronouncements, in which he has little use for the comic, and the extensive and powerful use he makes of humor, irony, and wit in the dramatization of Socrates. In the character of Socrates, Plato articulates a far subtler understanding of the comic than he ever attempts to formulate explicitly. M. Mader (1977) has attempted to explain the apparent discrepancy between Plato’s practice and critique of comedy. Plato’s Socratic dialogues – the conversation, character, and irony of Socrates combined with the laughable element Plato introduces in the format of parody and myth – can be seen as philosophical comedies: some of his works are tragi-comic (*Symposium*, *Republic*) while others are infused with a spirit of comedy so pervasive that they become burlesque (*Cratylus*, *Euthydemus*) (Griswold 1987, 87-8).

While all of Plato’s works reflect actual comic drama and use comic techniques (Brock 1990, 39-49), Plato’s broad attitude to comedy is straightforward enough: in the *Republic* comedy is banned both as a deceptive mimesis and for its adverse emotional effects (338E-339A, 395E-396A, 606C). In the *Laws*, however, comedy is permitted in the Magnesian colony to be practiced by non-citizens under restrictions which, while strict, are less rigorous than those applying to tragedy (*Laws* VII, 816D-817D, 935D-936B), both because it serves as an object lesson (816D9-E5) and perhaps because it is in the nature of comedy to expose pretension, including the false claim to knowledge on the stage and in life (*Philebus* 48A-50B).

Moreover, the Athenian stranger asserts in *Laws VII* that it is not possible to learn serious things without comic things, or any one of a pair of contraries without the other, if one is to be wise (816D-E). Kevin Corrigan explains that the idea that serious and comic, even ridiculous, things are crucial to the development of wisdom itself “has not received the same attention” as seriousness has, “perhaps because it involves a rather profound puzzle in Plato’s thought” (Corrigan 1997). In one way, the statement seems unexceptionable, for laughter, certainly irony, and occasionally the ridiculous, are fundamental components of all Plato’s early and middle dialogues. The *Symposium* is just about the ideal form of these dialogues, for it appears to be the perfect fusion of laughter and serious philosophical pursuit (Clay 1975). Socrates – the new paradigm of the comic-serious figure – ends the dialogue by arguing with Aristophanes, the comedian, and Agathon, the tragedian, that the skilled tragedian could also be a comedy maker (*Symposium* 223D)

The proper aim of comedy is to unmask ignorance and pretension, making it thus an important tool for furthering the moral aim of self-knowledge (*Philebus*, 48A-50B). This defines as comedies all of Plato’s dialogues. Moreover, moderate laughter is advocated in *Laws V*, 732C. Halliwell insists that there is “no unqualified deprecation of laughter *per se* to be found anywhere in the Platonic dialogues. The psychological, social, and ethical significance of *gelōs* is always evaluated according to cause and content” (Halliwell 2008, 302). Along the same lines, the excellent work of Cameron Shelley on Plato (2003) and of Lisa Glebatis Perks on ancient roots of humor theory (2012) shed light on the complexity of Plato’s attitude toward laughter. Shelley calls for a reform in the modern account of Plato’s view of humor, as Modern scholars have attended mostly to Plato’s negative evaluation of comedy and his emphasis on the malicious and aggressive aspects of humor. He argues that Plato held a more nuanced view of humor and its relation to a person’s character. In particular, when enjoyed moderately, the playful, incongruous quality of humor could benefit a philosophic person like Socrates. Apart from offering a more balanced account of Plato’s views than is customary, Perks’ work is helpful as well in regard to Aristotle’s, Cicero’s and Quintilian’s views of humor.

## 7. Aristotle

Following Daniel Wickberg, Rod Martin explains that “the philosophical conception of laughter as essentially a form of aggression can be traced to Aristotle, who believed that it was always a response to ugliness or deformity in another person, although he thought it would not occur if the object of laughter aroused other strong emotions such as pity or anger ” (Wickberg 1998; Martin 2007, 21). True. Yet Aristotle is credited also with the incongruity theory, for appropriate laughter must come neither from envy, nor from invective, but from the observation of faults and mistakes that do not cause great pain. Moreover, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he considers wit a virtue, thus making it a necessary element of the good life as exemplified by the gentleman. Halliwell clearly asserts that “Aristotle remains the representative *par excellence* of a philosophical tradition which accepts laughter as fully human and occupying a justifiable place in a good life, but nonetheless as a behavior whose potential disruptiveness requires modification by upbringing and social constraints” (Halliwell 2008, 307). The role of Aristotle seems to be different, then, than the one attributed to him by Wickberg and Martin.

Moreover, Aristotle’s name should not be associated with the sweeping conclusion that “if we consider all that was written about laughter and humor before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the consensus is negative” (Morreall 2008, 217), or that “prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, laughter was viewed by most authors almost entirely in negative terms” (Martin 2007, 21). For even for those who think of laughter as invariably an expression of scorn for certain vices, it is still possible to think of it as valuable and worthy of being encouraged. One reason is given by Aristotle himself when he insists that the vices deserve to be reprovved, and therefore, that laughter, as one of the most effective means of reprovving them, has a moral role to play in our lives. This view on the role of laughter is taken up by Aristotle’s follower, Theophrastus, whose *On Comedy* may be lost, but whose *Characters* (2004) depicts moral vices or Aristotelian excesses in a way that lays the ground for most moral comedies up to Molière’s masterpieces.

Finally, in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle approvingly records the sophist Gorgias’ use of laughter: “Kill your opponent’s earnestness with jesting and his jesting with

earnestness" (Aristotle 1970, III, 18, 7, 1419B3). This advice, developed by Aristotle, leads to an entire branch of Greco-Roman rhetoric exemplified by Cicero and Quintilian (Grant 1924), which later influences the Renaissance. "Following the long tradition of Aristotle, the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw laughter as being based on a feeling of superiority," Martin writes (Martin 2007, 21). It is this part of Aristotle's view of laughter and this part only, however, that, through its impact on further rhetoricians, is taught at the 17<sup>th</sup> century English grammar schools that Thomas Hobbes attended, and which influenced him (Skinner 1996, 211). This fact has not been missed by John Lombardini, who, in his outstanding "Civic Laughter: Aristotle and the Political Virtue of Humor" (2013), does justice to the complexity and variety of Aristotle's views on laughter and humor.

## **8. The Cynics**

The Cynics justify the comic on moral grounds by integrating into philosophy the promising alliance between humor and moral teaching used by Aristophanes and other comic poets and playwrights. Their literature is serio-comic (Giangrande 1972), but their philosophy is remembered as physical comedy: tradition is unanimous on the remarkable powers of ridicule and repartee of the Cynic Diogenes and the notorious eccentricities undertaken to expose the artificiality of convention – entering a theatre when everyone else is leaving it, going about in broad daylight with a lighted lantern while looking for an honest man (Navia 1996). The philosophic wit introduced by Diogenes is further developed by Crates, who, purporting to cure human confusion with gentle discourse accompanied by much joking, laughter, and merriment and the example of his life, "passed his whole life jesting and laughing, as though on perpetual holiday" (Plutarch 1948, 4. 226E). That his sense of humor is "humorous" rather than harsh can be inferred from his philanthropy, the love of all human beings – a concept we owe to Crates.

## **9. The Hellenistic and Roman Schools of Philosophy**

Lasting well into the Roman empire the Hellenistic schools of philosophy such as Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skeptical Pyrrhonism have been fashionable for 600

hundreds years and had an immense influence on thinkers of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Following the Cynics' practice, all Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy used humor in their exoteric teaching. In particular, Epicureans and the Stoic Seneca explicitly praised laughter.

A. **Epicureanism** is named after Epicurus, who seems to have regarded laughter as the hallmark of his philosophy; he says in one of his aphorisms: "We should simultaneously laugh, philosophize, look after our households... and never cease disseminating the utterances that arise from correct philosophy at the same time..." (Epicurus 1940, Fragment 41). Also impressive is the following fragment: "The wise man often laughs at the extreme of bodily sickness" (Usener 1887, Fragment 600). Metrodotus of Lampsacus, Epicurus' closest associate, speaks of the need for the Epicurean "to laugh an authentically liberated laughter" at everyone, but at political philosophers in particular (Körte 1890, Fragment 32). There is evidence of keen awareness of the value of satirical laughter in the writings of several other members of the school, among them Colotes, Polystratus, Zeno of Sidon, and the acidulous Philodemus; the Roman heir of Epicureanism, Lucretius, brings in satire wherever possible in *On the Nature of Things* (Godwin 2004).

B. **Pyrrhonian Skepticism** is presented through lampoons of the dogmatic philosophers: Pyrrho of Elis, who initiates the school called after his name (Pyrrhonism), writes nothing himself, possibly to avoid giving the impression of dogmatizing. Some fragments of his follower, Timon of Phlius, survive as quotations of later writers (Diels 1901, 9). The majority of his fragments belong to the *silloi*, "squint-eyed verses" or "lampoons," a hexameter poem in three books, which satirizes the whole range of dogmatic philosophers from Thales down to the Stoics, Epicureans, and Academics of his own day, with the purpose of exalting Pyrrho (Long 1978).

C. It is the **Stoics**, heirs to the Cynics, who put a special emphasis on laughter's role in attaining to their goal. The eminent Hellenistic scholar, Martha Nussbaum, notes that in Epictetus' brusqueness "we glimpse a sense of humor" that follows the practice of the founder of Stoicism, Zeno, and of his follower, Cleanthes (Nussbaum 2001, 84, 88). Laughter "is a well-developed practice in Roman Stoicism,"

she explains, as “Stoic writers often deliberately cultivate in their reader a type of laughter that promotes detachment from the sources of anger, fear, grief” (ibid, 85). Stoic laughter arises from the contrast between a Stoic perspective of detachment by distancing the laughter from ordinary valuations and the fear and anger they entail. It is about coming to terms, gently or harshly, with the real values in things, and the reality of one’s condition. It is a laughter of acknowledgement rather than distraction, that represents a progress beyond the grief, or fear, or anger that would otherwise have been the person’s response to the tragic or ominous events described (ibid, 90).

Apart from the comedies of Plautus, Seneca writes the funniest work in the Latin language, the *Apocolocyntosis* or *Pumpkinification of the Divine Claudius* (ibid, 93-112). And, in his philosophic writings Seneca recommends self-directed humor, “in order that man may not have to live his life in disquietude, fearing everybody’s laughter, everybody’s tongue” (1995, *On Firmness*, 19.2); “and so sneerers and those who point their wit with insult,” he explains, “are robbed of an excuse if you anticipate it with a move on your part. No one becomes a laughing-stock who laughs at himself” (ibid, 16.3-17.4).

Seneca takes as examples Socrates and Antisthenes, Socrates’ student and founder of Cynicism, whose use of laughter as a means to secure or express endurance Seneca admires (ibid, 18.4; 1995, *On Anger*, 3.11). He follows their example in recommending laughter as a means to “bringing composure to the mind; it either does not feel anger, or is superior to it” (ibid, 3.39.1): “With what laughter should we attend the things that now draw tears from our eyes!” he exclaims (ibid, 3.34.1); we should “step back quite far and laugh! (*recede longius et ride!*),” both in order to secure detachment from slights to one’s own reputation and from the serious public crimes and injustices that Seneca enumerates (ibid, 3.36, 2.10; see *On Firmness*, 10.4, 14.1).

Indeed, the dichotomy humor/anger has been known in philosophy since the 1<sup>st</sup> century. We have evidence through Stobaeus that Sotion used it, and it was made famous through Seneca, the latter’s renowned student. Seneca contrasts laughter and anger several times in his work: initially, he prefers laughter or tears to anger

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(1995, *On Anger*, 2.10.5), but Seneca's sympathies, like those of his fellow Stoics, lay ultimately with Democritus and laughter while the weeping philosopher, Heraclitus, is gently ridiculed for his tearful response to the human condition. As in Horace (1989, *Letter 1*, 154ff), it is the spectacle of the world that is the source of Democritus' laughter. Seneca urges us to imitate Democritus rather than Heraclitus, for it is kinder to laugh at life than to weep over it (1995, *On Anger*, 2.4.4-7; *Of Peace of Mind*, 155.2-3, 15.3).

"When you laugh, you are not just expressing a Stoic revaluation already formed; you are advancing toward the goals of Stoic therapy," Nussbaum explains (Nussbaum 2001, 87). It is not the sage who laughs, as he already detached from ordinary valuations; rather, it is the person making progress: Seneca laughs at himself precisely because he catches himself out in a non-Stoic moment, and the laughter emerges from the juxtaposition of his residual ordinary valuations and those that Stoicism would recommend. The laugh is a kind of movement away, and it relies for its genesis on the fact that the personality is still to some degree in movement. The laugh is itself a separative movement: "Step back and laugh" is not two distinct stages, according to Nussbaum, it is one stage, because in laughing, one changes perspective and steps back (ibid, 88).

This sort of distancing laughter is frequently in evidence in Stoic texts, often with a strong satirical side, mocking the pretensions of worldly goods. Epictetus, who is closer to the Cynics than Seneca, employs it constantly. Yet Stoic laughter comes in two different varieties, the harsh and the gentle, Epictetus being harsher and Seneca gentler. The difference is made to some extent by the personality of the writer (Seneca believes that mercy is appropriate for all-too-human failings), but also by the nature of the object: if the object of laughter is a fool, the laughter may be harsh; if it is the philosopher himself, or some earnest progressing person, the laughter is often gentler. Following the practices of the founder of Stoicism, Zeno, and of his follower, Cleanthes, Epictetus typically addresses fools, real or fictional. Seneca's letters address both himself and Lucilius, a serious student of philosophy (Seneca 1969). For example, Letter 12 is a very rich case of Stoic laughter: the theme of the letter is old age; the laugh concerns the discrepancy between Seneca's proud irascible denial of

age and the real facts; the laughter is a gentle mockery of Seneca's vanity and irascibility, and his reluctance to accept age in a properly Stoic spirit, which then becomes the theme of the rest of the letter.

Stoic laughter is a remedy that helps achieve firmness of mind, liberty, and tranquility. Seneca had an enormous influence on the Renaissance, notably on the laughing philosophers Montaigne and Erasmus, and on the neo-Stoic Justus Lipsius.

## 10. The Renaissance Philosophers

In contradistinction to the laughter of scorn, a number of medical writers in the Renaissance mention the innocent laughter of infants as an expression of unalloyed delight. Laughter can be a pure expression of *joie de vivre* for such humanist writers as Lodovico Castelvetro, Paolo Beni, and Louis Guyon (Skinner 2002, 160-4). Moreover, all major Renaissance philosophers – Machiavelli, More, Erasmus, Montaigne – use or praise laughter, as do many other thinkers in that period (Ménanger 1995, 7-11).

A. “The first author of stature to write stage comedies in the classical tradition was **Niccolo Machiavelli**,” writes Erich Segal in *The Death of Comedy* (Segal 2001, 261). Machiavelli begins his theatrical career with an adaptation of Terence’s *Andria*, and concludes with *La Clizia*, “an extremely vulgar adaptation of Plautus’ *Casina*” (ibid). But Machiavelli’s masterpiece transcends both his Roman predecessors. This is the *Mandragola* (*The Mandrake*), for which Voltaire claims he would sacrifice all the plays of Aristophanes. The author of *The Prince*, the famous manual of political machinations, uses the outward form of Roman comedy to compose a biting satire on the Florence of the Medici, a corrupt society he knows well from the inside.

B. **Sir Thomas More**, together with his friend Erasmus, translates into Latin the work of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. philosophical satirist, satirist of philosophy, and inventor of the laughing philosopher Menippus, Lucian of Samosata. Lucian influences both Erasmus’ *Moriae Encomium* or *The Praise of Folly* and More’s *Utopia*. More sees in Lucian an antidote to superstition and religious quackery; thus, the *Utopia* makes its case through a prose style strongly chafed with Socratic irony, jests, and even outright laughter – a mixture of “merry tales” with serious matters that More must defend.

Erasmus refers to More as a laughing philosopher in a letter to Ulrich von Hutten (Epistle 999, 1906-58, 4, 16, lines 121-30) and in the introduction of the *Praise of Folly* which he dedicates to More: by making fun of the ordinary lives of mortals, he writes, “in the whole course of your life [you] have played the part of a Democritus” (Erasmus 1971, 2). The 17<sup>th</sup> century clergyman, Jean-Baptiste Thiers,

singles out Thomas More for exemplifying appropriate Christian raillery: he has a malicious temperament yet “his railleries are not bitter but rather sincere, gentle, and honest, without anything rude or shocking about them” (Thiers 1686; quoted in Minois 2000, 279; my translation). Barry Sanders adds that More loved to goad and tease like a fool with his incredibly sharp wit, and that he was the first English writer to convert the word “geste” (“story”) into the word jest in its modern, funny sense (Sanders 1995, 210).

“He himself was oftener laughed at than his jests were,” notes Keith Thomas (Thomas 1977, 79), as is fitting for a humorist. In the above mentioned letter to von Hutter, Erasmus notes about More that “any remark with more wit than ordinary always gives him pleasure, even if directed against himself.” In histories of laughter, More is cited as the first example of the modern use of humor (Minois 2000, 279). The source of his humor lies in the union of opposites brought about by his cheerful temper allied to his awareness of the inherent weaknesses of human nature. Finally, More is the only leading humanist in this period to have found moral objections to contemptuous laughter, and especially to its use (in accordance with Cicero’s instructions) to mock other people’s weaknesses and infirmities (More 1965, 192).

C. **Desiderius Erasmus** carries the torch of the tradition of the laughing philosophers (Kallen 1968, 92). He writes ironic and satirical dialogues about ancient worthies easily replaceable by equivalent contemporaries. His *Moriae Encomium sive Stultitiae Laus*, better known as the *Praise of Folly*, flows from a deep awareness of how factitious and costumed are the accepted differentiations between person and person; how much they are masquerades designed to enclose the laughter, so near to tears in the nature of things as the private property of the community’s actual and would-be mighty persons, who claimed it by right of inheritance from God. It is these claimants whom Erasmus’ Lady Folly unmasks while she points her finger at the honest fools and their dupes, exposing both to laughter. She does it by means of a sermon she preaches on the subject of her immortal self. In his *Humanist Play and Belief: The Seriocomic Art of Desiderius Erasmus*, Walter M. Gordon analyses the layers of Erasmian comedy in the *Praise of Folly* (Gordon 1990).

Appended to *The Praise* is Erasmus' "Letter to Martin Dorp" (1515), however, which explains that the mock encomium has been written "under a laughable persona" in order "to call the world back to true Christianity" (Erasmus 1971, 147, 156): "All I have done is to recount what is comic and absurd in man, not the unpleasant, but in such a way that in passing I often touch on serious things and give advice which it is important for people to hear," Erasmus explains (ibid, 220). He argues that it has the same serious purpose as his explicitly serious works but it is nevertheless only a piece of foolishness that we do not have to take seriously.

Erasmus also publishes a joke collection, "Concicium fabulosum," as part of his *Colloquies* in 1524. His book contains ten stories of jokes told in a lively symposium by nine friends, all of whom have names suggestive of laughter, such as Gelasinus and Eutrapelia. He brings laughter unequivocally into the world of politics, in seeing *festivitas* as an essential attribute of the solid humanist and arguing for laughter as a controlling attribute of the prince.

Erasmus' bent for comic expression led to misunderstandings that draw him into controversy with both Catholic and Protestant theologians at the time of the Reformation. However, Johan Huizinga believes that "only when humor illuminated that mind did it become truly profound" (Huizinga 1957, 78), an insight which is confirmed by M.A. Screech in his *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (1980).

D. **Michel de Montaigne**, following Cicero, dedicates an entire essay to Democritus and Heraclitus. Montaigne prefers "the former temperament," "not because it is more agreeable to laugh than to weep," as Seneca has suggested, "but because it is more disdainful and condemns us men more than the other – and it seems to me that, according to our deserts, we can never be despised enough" (Montaigne 1958, bk. I, chap. 50). In "How We Weep and Laugh of the Same Things," Montaigne maintains that when we weep or laugh "nothing has changed, but our mind contemplates the matter in a different light and sees it from another aspect: for everything has many angles and many different sheens" (ibid, chap. 38).

Attesting to a hatred of sadness (ibid, chap. 2), Montaigne associates wisdom with sadness' opposite: "The surest sign of wisdom is constant cheerfulness. She

makes it her business to calm tempests of the soul and to teach hungers and fevers to laugh, not by some imaginary epicycles, but by natural and palpable reasons” (ibid, chap. 26). And supreme humor, which attests to true wisdom and authentic detachment, is to die while joking, as Montaigne exemplifies through a collection of jokes attributed to death penalties (ibid, chap. 40).

The richness of Montaigne’s treatment and use of laughter has not escaped the keen eye of Sammy Basu (2012). In his study of Montaigne’s pedagogy of humor, Basu highlights his reflexive use of modes of didactic humor, such as incongruous disposition, subversive superiority, and leveling embodiment. The use of humor is a crucial feature of the role of pedagogue that Montaigne modeled in his *Essays* as a mode of discursive engagement in provoking the capacity for reflective judgment. Basu shows how in some striking textual moments Montaigne resorts to humor, both as a matter of communicative effectiveness and more fundamentally, as an existential stance he wishes to affirm. For the former, following ancient sources such as Socrates, skeptical Pyrrhonists and Lucian, and, I suggest, preceding the third Earl of Shaftesbury’s thoughts on conversation, Montaigne makes “bantering and joking wittily and keenly with one another” a form of “discussion and communication” no less “keen and ingenious” as “high-pitched and serious” conversation (bk. III, chap. 8, 717 [917]). The latter, which Basu calls “philosophical humor” (Basu 2012, 7), I consider especially important. Citing Erasmus and Seneca as sources of our propensity to be blind about ourselves (bk. III, chap. 8, 709 [907-908]; bk. II, chap. 25, 522), Montaigne proposes to exchange the laughter of superiority at others with self-laughter, because “a hundred times a day we make fun of ourselves [nous nous moquons de nous]” “as comically as justly” “in the person of our neighbor” (bk. III, chap. 8, 709 [907-908]). Montaigne’s self-directed laughter (“if I have a mind to laugh at a fool [rire d’un fol]’ I do not have to look far for one, I laugh at myself [ris de moi-mesme]” (II.25:522 [669]) follows from the understanding that “absurdity is an evenly distributed property” (Basu 2012, 10), as “our own peculiar condition is that we are as fit to be laughed at as able to laugh” (Montaigne 1958, bk. I, chap. 50, 221 [292]). Thus, laughter with others at others and at oneself is a crucial instrument

of self-knowledge, which is the way to the freedom that characterizes the Mountainian good life.

### 11. The 17<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophers

All major 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers consider laughter an important philosophical subject. Moreover, it is often overlooked that they all have something positive to say about it, even Thomas Hobbes; that he and René Descartes cannot have a totally negative attitude toward laughter, even when they define it as mockery, as they use mockery in their writings; and that the most important defense of laughter comes not from an 18<sup>th</sup> century thinker, but from the Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Baruch Spinoza.

A. **Thomas Hobbes** is renowned for the superiority thesis of laughter: “Following the long tradition of Aristotle,” Rod Martin explains, “the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw laughter as being based on a feeling of superiority, or ‘sudden glory,’ resulting from some perception of inferiority *in another person*” (Martin 2007, 22; emphasis added). Hobbes is fascinated by laughter and the kinds of wit and humor that provoke it. He is preoccupied with the range of emotions laughter may be said to express. He initially raises the question in anatomizing the passions in *The Elements of Law*, subsequently developing essentially the same line of argument in Chapter I of *De Cive* and in the definitive presentation of his theory of the passions in Book I of *Leviathan*.

Hobbes defines laughter as “nothyng else but a suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others, *or with our owne formerly*” (Hobbes 1969, 42). Hobbes declares his theory original (ibid, 41), but apart from the element of surprise that Hobbes adds following others in the Renaissance, his theory is overwhelmingly indebted to Ancient theories: as Skinner notes in his *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, it amounts to little more than a summary of Quintilian’s argument (Quintilian 1920-1922, XI. 1, 22, vol. IV, 166; Skinner 1996, 393). Hobbes follows the Roman rhetoricians, whose body of thought is adopted without alteration by the rhetoricians of the Renaissance. It is ultimately based on the sophists’ use of humor, *Israeli Journal for Humor Research, June 2014, Issue 5*

recorded approvingly in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, as we have noted above. This view makes of the talent for provoking laughter a lethal weapon of debate.

Hobbes repeats his definition of laughter in *Leviathan*, adding that "much laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity. For the great minds, one of the proper workes is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able" (Hobbes 1996, chap. 6, 43). People who laugh a great deal at others are conscious of many deficiencies in themselves, and thus, laughter is the mark of the weak. Hobbes initially declares himself very much opposed to the habit of laughing at others, and maintains this attitude in *Leviathan* (ibid, 106, 205-6, 213).

There is a certain tension between Hobbes' precepts about the provocation of laughter and his own rhetorical practice, however. As Hobbes becomes more and more convinced of the need for rhetoric to supplement reason, the tone of *Leviathan* correspondingly differs in comparison with the studiously scientific neutrality of his earlier works. Following the Renaissance's list of vices worthy of attacks (vainglory, avarice, and hypocrisy) Hobbes makes extensive use of satire in his attack on clerical avarice, on the Church's hypocrisy, and on the egregious Schoolmen (Skinner 2002, 170-71; 1996, 395-425). So much so that Hobbes' contemporaries object to the style of the English version of *Leviathan* (1651) that Skinner deems "a masterpiece of satire and invective, embodying as it does a systematic application of the techniques evolved by the theorists of rhetoric for speaking with ridicule and contempt" (Skinner 1996, 395).

Indeed, Hobbes is deemed a dangerous scoffer (Skinner 1996, 211). But his sense of humor is much more varied than his use of satire and invective shows. John Aubrey tells us that he possessed an exceptionally quick wit, not only being "of a cheerful and pleasant humour," but "marvellous happy and ready in his replies," so much so that "if trueth (uncommon) delivered clearly and wittily may goe for a saying, his common discourse was full of them" (Aubrey 1898, I, 340, 348, 356). Hobbes himself tells us that he liked to joke in company (Hobbes 1839, xxi).

Hobbes explicitly refers to laughter at one's own past foibles. He does not interpret it as sympathetic, however; rather, it is a form of superiority that "put the rest into jealousy and examination of themselves" (Hobbes 1996, chap. 6, 43).



Nevertheless, the Hobbesian theory of laughter includes self-laughter, an important proviso that is missing from Martin's and others' renditions. Moreover, in the same text in which he proposes the now famous superiority theory, Hobbes also writes: "Laughter *without offence* must be at the *absurdities* and infirmities *abstracted* from persons, and when the Company may laugh together" (Hobbes 1969, 42). As Stuart Tave observes, it has been said that for Hobbes, "laughter that rises from incongruity, not from a sense of superiority, is, then really the only legitimate kind." But this is certainly not the 18<sup>th</sup> century reading of Hobbes (Tave 1960, 69) inasmuch as the Enlightenment reading of Hobbes aims to attack the theory of human nature upon which his view of laughter is founded. Nor is this the contemporary reading of Hobbes, for reasons that are less obvious.

B. **René Descartes'** view of laughter is close enough to that of Hobbes, so much so that David Heyd has questionably suggested that the former directly influenced the latter (Heyd 1982, 289). This is not so, however, because Hobbes' first discussion of laughter in *The Elements of Law* (1640) precedes by eight years the publication of Descartes' *Les passions de l'âme* (Skinner 2002, 147, n. 52). Descartes is remembered for his physiological description of laughter that shows the influence of the theory of humors (Descartes 1991, Art. 126). Bearing the mark of Plato's view of laughter as a mixture of emotions, Cartesian laughter is also remembered as a passion that should be condemned; it is Descartes' mind-body dualism and his rationalism, which favors the mind, which are regarded as responsible for his denigration of laughter.

But a closer look shows that it is *derision or mockery* that Descartes discusses in *The Passions of the Soul*:

Derision or mockery is a kind of joy mixed with hate which comes from perceiving some little misfortune in a person whom we think worthy of it. We have hate for the evil, we have joy in seeing it in him who is worthy of it, and when that happens unexpectedly, the surprise is the cause of our bursting out laughing. (Descartes 1991, Art 178)

Moreover, derision or mockery is not even categorically condemned, as Descartes immediately exalts a “gentle mockery” as an attribute of the virtuous:

When a person shows up vices in their proper light by making them appear ridiculous *without laughing at them and without showing any hatred* for those who have them, he engages in that gentle mockery which *is not a passion, but rather the trait of a good man*. It bears witness to the cheerfulness of his temper and the tranquility of his soul, which are *signs of virtue*; and it often shows the quickness of his mind, in his ability to put a pleasant gloss on the objects of his mockery. (Ibid, Art 180; emphasis added)

Descartes practices this kind of mockery in his writings, for example in the sixth part of his *Discours de la méthode*. Still, Descartes believes that the philosopher prefers greater joys to the joy produced by laughter, and those are generally somber and serious. His attitude toward joy is rectified in the same century by his dissident follower, Baruch Spinoza.

C. **Baruch Spinoza** maintains that joking and laughter are “a pure joy”; thus, in practicing them one partakes in God’s perfection (*Ethics*, IV, P45, Cor. 2, Schol.).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Spinoza characterizes “cheerfulness” or gaiety (*hilaritas*) (*Ethics*, III, P11 Schol.) as never excessive and always good, and its opposite, melancholy, as always evil (*Ethics*, IV, P42, and Dem; P44, Schol.). In the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, he maintains that “laughter is not related to another, but only to the man that notices something good in himself,” and anticipates the *Ethics*’ view of laughter in writing that “because it is a kind of joy, there is nothing to say about it which has not already been said about joy,” that is, it is always good (Part II, chap. XI, 115-16).

In his essay on “Philosophy and Religion” for *The Primer of Humor Research*, John Morreall quotes Spinoza without referencing the passage: “Spinoza, Descartes’ contemporary, said simply, ‘A man hates what he laughs at.’” Morreall mentions Spinoza again in his discussion of the relationship between humor and the emotions: “Virtually everyone writing about this topic... has thought of laughter as... expressing some emotion... for Spinoza, [it is] hatred” (Morreall 2008, 220, 235). It is mockery or ridicule, however, that are forms of hatred and therefore of sadness, both in *Israeli Journal for Humor Research*, June 2014, Issue 5

Spinoza's *Ethics* and in his *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*. Spinoza is careful to differentiate between mockery and ridicule, on the one hand, and laughter, on the other. He denounces the former as evils in both texts and sets the goal of his philosophy in the *Ethics* and in the *Political Treatise* as an alternative to the Laughing philosopher, Democritus, who mocks human nature, and the Weeping philosopher, Heraclitus, who laments it. Thus, he begins the *Political Treatise* with the remarkable statement, "I have laboured carefully, not to mock, lament, or execrate, but to understand human passions," lest instead of ethics, he will write a satire by deriding the passions, as most philosophers and theologians have done (*Political Treatise*, I, 4). He who rightly knows that all things follow from the necessity of divine nature and happen according to the eternal laws and rules of Nature, will surely find nothing worthy of hate, mockery or disdain, nor anyone whom he will pity; instead, "he will strive, as far as human virtue allows, to act well, as they say, and to rejoice" (*Ethics*, IV, P73 Schol.).

## 12. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Beyond

Because the 18<sup>th</sup> century is notorious for its embrace of benign humor, I leave it out in order to address the 19<sup>th</sup> century's view of humor. In her essay on "Historical Views of Humor," Amy Carrell asserts, "19<sup>th</sup> century scholars and theorists were no less dour in their views of humor. Georg W. F. Hegel, for instance, called laughter 'an expression of self-satisfied shrewdness' (Hegel 1920 [1835], 302)" (Carrell 2008, 307). This is all that is said about Hegel's views of laughter, humor, or the comic.

Hegel does indeed describe laughter in that way, but he restricts this characterization to a certain case of laughter:

The flattest and most tasteless things can move people to laughter, and they often laugh all the same at the most important and profound matters if they see in them only some insignificant aspect which contradicts their habits and day-to-day outlook. *In such a case* their laughter is only an expression of a self-complacent wit, a sign that they are clever enough to recognize such a contrast and are aware of the fact. There is also the laughter of derision,

scorn, despair, etc. (Hegel 1975, II, 1200; emphasis added)

The passage continues with a careful differentiation of this kind of laughter from “the comical as such”:

On the other hand, the comical as such implies an infinite light-heartedness and confidence felt by someone raised altogether above his own inner contradiction and not bitter or miserable in it at all: this is the bliss and ease of a man who, being sure of himself, can bear the frustration of his aims and achievements. (Ibid)

Contemporary eulogies of humor have nothing to envy, I suggest, to Hegel’s impressive vindication of “the comical as such.”

Nor are most 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars and theorists dour in their views of humor, as Carrell maintains. Carrell cites Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and James Beattie as if they were exceptions (Carrell 2008, 308-9). The post-Hegelians Friedrich Theodor Vischer, Kuno Fisher, Karl Rosenkranz, Moriz Carriere, and Adolf Zeising, however, are basically uniform in defining humor as a sense of reconciliation that is nonetheless aware of still unresolved tensions in reality; for these thinkers, humor is tolerant of human foibles and inadequacies, for it views them *sub specie aeternitatis*. This elevation of humor can also be seen among later German humanists, such as Eduard von Hatmann, Theodor Lipps, Johannes Immanuel Volkelt, Herman Cohen, and Arthur Kutscher, whose orientations are not in any literal way Hegelian.

From the twenty-five or thirty definitions of humor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this much of common agreement can be extracted: there is “an absence of scorn in humor, a presence of emotion, and... humor is an excellent thing” (Eastman 1972, 169). Thomas Carlyle’s view, describing the humorist and aesthete Jean Paul, is characteristic: “True humor springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love”; the bloom and perfume of a deep, fine, and loving nature, which is in harmony with itself, humor has its essence in sensibility, in “warm, tender, fellow-feeling with all forms of existence” (Carlyle 1827, 169). An equally elevated view of humor can be found in Jean Paul himself and in the German philosopher and psychologist, Moritz Lazarus, who makes humor a religion of the

mind (Eastman 1972, 174).

Humor is raised upon the wings of German philosophy almost to the height of devotion, and also outside of Germany, the 19<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by the praise of humor: Ralph Emerson eulogizes the comic (1843); following the Enlightenment philosopher, the third Earl of Shaftesbury and his many devotees (Francis Hutcheson, James Beattie, and Johann Georg Hamann), Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are noteworthy for their endorsement and pervasive use of humor and laughter, respectively, the former in particular for his complex theories of the comic and of humor.

Later, 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such as George Santayana, Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, Clément Rosset, and Post-modern philosophers who follow Nietzsche celebrate laughter and the comic.<sup>3</sup>

### 13. The Tradition of *Homo Ridens*

Finally, it is difficult to imagine a totally negative attitude toward laughter existing before the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the presence of a well-established tradition of laughter that views the phenomenon as the mark of the human. Originating in an extrapolation of Aristotle's phrase "man is the sole animal that laughs" – an empirical observation of the human physiological reaction to titling – this tradition of *homo ridens* reaches its apogee in the Middle Ages, when scholars identify rationality with the capacity to laugh, and in the Renaissance, when laughter is considered fit for a world that is not a valley of tears and for a being made of contradictions.

This tradition emphasizes philosophy's special interest in laughter, as it reveals the essence of the human, either by its affinity with the rational, or otherwise. Julius Pollox, Galen of Pergamon, Porphyry of Tyre, Marcius Capella, Boethius, Alcuin of York, Notker Labeo, Laurent Joubert, Michel de Montaigne, François Rabelais, Giacomo Leopardi, Charles Baudelaire, Voltaire, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, belong to this tradition.

I hope that the information and the arguments advanced in the first part of the article have contributed to the formation of a more nuanced view of the Western history of laughter than the one voiced in the following statements: "Prior

to the eighteenth century, laughter was viewed by most authors almost entirely in negative terms"; "If we consider all that was written about laughter and humor before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the consensus is negative." The Ancients held "grim views of humor and laughter..."; "No distinction was made between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at,' since all laughter was thought to arise from making fun of someone"; or, "Lacking the concept of humor, it is not surprising that early writers did not distinguish between laughter at something funny and other kinds, such as laughing on winning a contest or laughing on being tickled." It remains to be seen whether we can find an explanation that accounts for the origin and perpetuation of these inaccurate views.

## **II. Origin and Perpetuation of Generalizations, Misconceptions, and Mistakes**

I suggest that four reasons together are responsible for the origin and perpetuation of the over-generalizations, misconceptions, and mistakes listed above as well as other inaccuracies that are beyond the scope of this article. The first reason is a disregard for the historical dimension necessary for explaining laughter and the comic that is characteristic of analytic monographs on laughter. The second reason is the tendency of scientists and scholars to label the villains of the story: in humor studies, they are identified as those who do not endorse the incongruity theory and a benign view of humor. A third reason may be a lack of thorough knowledge of complex philosophic theories on the comic: it is necessary to take into account not only descriptive views of the comic, but also prescriptive views. Finally, at first sight the nature of philosophy seems inimical to humor or laughter: philosophy's image does not lead one to believe that the extra effort needed in order to find meaningful relations between the comic and philosophy may be fruitful.

### **1. The Historical Dimension**

The ahistorical approach used by many philosophic studies on laughter does not shed light on the relationship of philosophy with laughter and humor. As heirs of analytic philosophy, these studies are characterized by a careful analysis of concepts and arguments in abstraction from everything else. Accompanying information such as the thinker's biography or historical context is not regarded as germane to this kind of study. Thus, philosophers are not treated as figures situated in a specific time and place in the history of philosophy, and no attempt is made to contextualize their work or to understand them in a broader social or historical milieu.

Moreover, if philosophers are thought to be in dialogue with anyone at all, then it is with great names in the history of philosophy. These great thinkers are perceived to be engaged in an ongoing dialogue in an ahistorical forum of ideas. In his *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Jon Stewart remarked that "it is thought that to be involved in seemingly petty polemics with little known Danish contemporaries would be unworthy of Kierkegaard's genius" (Stewart 2003, 628). This comment can be applied to other philosophers and their polemics with little known Greek, French, English or German contemporaries.

When considered in the context of the study of philosophers' views on laughter and humor, these general remarks about the problematic approach of ahistorical studies to the history of philosophy are especially pertinent. This is because laughter is a social phenomenon, and the attitude toward it is often a matter of political concern. Ingvild Gilhus explains, for example, that "given the chaotic potential of Greek laughter it is perhaps not surprising that from within the rich laughter culture of Greece, voices were raised in favor of keeping laughter strictly under control" (Gilhus 1996, 42). Georges Minois points to the possibility that 17<sup>th</sup> century laughter has been more violent than today's laughter: in accordance with some Flemish paintings of that epoch, laughter is described in the 50 pages on laughter written by Cureau de La Chambre, the king's counselor and first doctor, as an incredibly violent crisis, a sort of delirium, hysteria, epilepsy, which leaves one depleted if not dead (1663, vol. 1, chap. IV, "Du ris," 230-31; Minois 2000, 379-80).

Moreover, laughter may be found in every society and at all epochs, but, as monographs on its history indicate, it evolves and changes (Sanders 1995; Minois

2000). Its different uses yield derivative forms, requiring ever new definitions and creating new problems of demarcation. This means that the problem of tackling the historical dimension of the comic does not simply require differentiating among laughter, humor, irony, and wit, for example; rather, it requires following the history of each of these terms. To take an example familiar to most readers, Ancient irony is different from Romantic irony, whose difference from Post-modern irony is being currently debated.

Monographs that attempt to define humor as an ahistorical phenomenon are thus liable to mistakes. In his monumental *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*, Halliwell maintains that:

The “canonical” modern triad of laughter theories... all fail as monolithic explanations of the full gamut of data to be accounted for, however illuminating they may be where subsets of the data are concerned. They fail not because of their totalizing ambitions, but because they isolate psychology from culture... Greek representations of laughter revolve around a sense of its unstable association with both positive (amiable, cooperative) and negative (hostile, antagonistic) emotions, with (innocent) “play” and socially disruptive aggression... But even these powerfully dialectical contrasts, which offer a corrective to sometimes one-sided modern models of the relationship of laughter to aggression, do not exhaust the compass of Greek thinking on the subject, let alone the numerous inflections which that thinking exhibits in a specific cultural context. (Halliwell 2008, 11)

As noted above, most of the information that is relevant for understanding the complex attitude toward laughter in Antiquity lies beyond definitions of laughter. If we are looking for an attitude we currently call “humor,” further information about laughter and related concepts rather than one definition or reference is needed.

## 2. The Villains of the Story

Giselinde Kuipers explains that “after many centuries in which humor and laughter had had a bad reputation, modern humor studies have tended to stress the beneficial character of humor, both for society and for the psyche” (Kuipers 2008,

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382). Partly because of that, I suggest, monographs on laughter and its history can suffer from a phenomenon Thomas Kuhn describes in his *Revolution of Scientific Theories*. It is part of the sociology of science, Kuhn argues, that whenever a new paradigmatic scientific theory is presented, history books are rewritten from the point of view of the (current) victors, who exalt precursors and demean or dismiss proponents of other theories. In humor studies, the precursors of the incongruity theory are hailed, while the proponents of the other theories are dismissed as mistaken, often without doing justice to the richness and variety of thought on the comic those philosophers held.

### 3. The Peculiar Situation of Philosophers

Philosophers are the intellectual products of the epoch in which they live, but at the same time they attempt to transcend their times. This peculiar situation is evidenced also in their relation to the comic. Their task in relation to the comic is threefold: first, the philosophers' task is descriptive, as they define and characterize the comic; second, it is both descriptive and prescriptive because their assessment of the ethical and political worth and dangers of the comic (prescriptive) is based on the uses of the comic in their society (descriptive); finally, at another level, the philosophers' task is solely prescriptive, as they often propose a commendable use for the comic.

The descriptive part of the task fits the use of the comic in the philosophers' society. This is the part most scholars have concentrated on at the risk of ignoring the philosopher's real import on the comic, that is, the prescriptive part of his task or his view of how the comic should be used in such a way that its power is best exploited. The prescriptive view cannot be rightly understood, however, if torn from the philosopher's worldview. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ludovic Dugas rightly commented that "every theory of laughter bears the imprint of a philosophy" (Dugas 1902, 138); even more so, I suggest, if it is a prescriptive view of laughter.

To take one of many examples, Plato defines *true* comedy as that which unmasks self-ignorance. This makes the comical a concern for Socratic philosophy and explains the comedic devices we find in most of Plato's dialogues. *True* comedy,

however, does not have to correspond to the comedy the Athenians attended at their theatre.

Another example is Aristotle, who makes *wit* (*eutrapelia*) a social virtue, therefore a part of the good life, and the virtuous man a law for the right use of laughter. Consider, however, the following description of Aristotle's view: "Aristotle, who used the term comedy, said that humor was 'an imitation of men worse than the average...'" (Carrell 2008, 306; emphasis added). Aristotle may be right in his description of Athenian theatre, but "humor" cannot be an imitation, nor is his prescriptive view of *eutrapelia* an imitation and certainly not of "men worse than the average": Aristotle emphasizes both that the gentleman's use of wit (humor) differs from the slave's and that the former sets the tone for the right use of humor.

Further prescriptive views of laughter, among many given above, include an injunction by Epicurus to laugh while philosophizing, which I take to be a special kind of laughter, and Seneca's repeated pleas to use laughter instead of anger and tears as a means to distance oneself from attachment to the values of the non-Stoics, which are also represented in the use of laughter that is current in Seneca's culture.

#### 4. The Nature of Philosophy

The accepted view is that philosophy has little in common with humor. What could have given rise to this erroneous view, and is there something intrinsic to philosophy that perpetuates it despite evidence to the contrary? I believe that two traditions beginning in Antiquity, the one of the Philosopher who does not laugh (*agelastos*), and the second of the Mocking Sophist of the rhetorical tradition, are responsible for this flawed impression.

Beginning with Pythagoras (6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), the first to call himself a philosopher, the tradition of the Laughless Philosopher features the philosopher too preoccupied with lofty ideas to be engaged in such earthly matters as laughing (Laertius 1925, 8.20). This figure is mocked on the Greek scene, yet the ideal of the perfect human being who never laughs (the *agelastos*) is shared by Greek philosophers, Egyptian priests, Jewish ascetics, and Christians. Augustinian and then Calvinist and Lutheran Christianity have a dour impact as a behavioral or aesthetic

matter on much western philosophy. Along the same lines, Lord Chesterfield in a now famous letter to his son cautions him against laughter (Chesterfield 1901, Letter 144, 9 march 1748).

Beginning with the Sophist Gorgias Leontinus (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) and recorded approvingly by Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, 3.18.7), the tradition of the Mocking Sophist recommends laughter as a rhetorical device meant to destroy the opponent's argument, and has led to a whole branch of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Although rhetoricians in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are advised to control their wit lest their character be damaged, through Cicero's and Quintilian's influence on later generations, wit becomes a weapon in modern rhetoric (Sanders 1995, chap. 4). Since Plato's Socrates, however, most philosophers denigrate rhetorical wit (Plato, *Gorgias* 473e): John Locke's and Immanuel Kant's objections are representative of philosophers' desire to differentiate themselves from rhetoricians (Locke 1984, vol. 2, bk. 3, ch.10, sec. 34; Kant 1952, sec. 53). The latter circumvent reason by appealing to the emotions, while philosophers address reason. Thus, within the accepted view that differentiates between rhetoric as a persuasive enterprise and philosophy as a rational endeavor, humor and laughter do not have a role to play in philosophy. This is why Kant does not use the comic in his writings, although he is renowned for his cheerfulness, his jokes, and his sense of humor as noted by Kierkegaard (Green 1992, 12, 75), as well as his conviction that laughter is a therapy sent by the Heavens to counterbalance the multiple sorrows of life, worthy of being listed along with the gifts of hope and sleep singled out by Voltaire (Voltaire 1901, *Henriade* 7; Kant 1952, sec. 54).

The combination of the Mocking Sophist and the Laughless Philosopher traditions explains the origin and tenacity of the view that philosophy is inimical to the comic. However, there are additional traditions that can be found – when sought – that indicate a positive relation between philosophy and the comic. A more comprehensive explication of these traditions is beyond the scope of this paper, but can be found elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

Humor and philosophy have enjoyed a long and positive relationship. The various forms of laughter found in Antiquity go far beyond the narrow view of aggressive laughter represented in the over-generalizations, misconceptions, and frequent errors found in influential publications on humor. A revised examination of the views of Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Cicero, the Stoics, and of Socrates' humor provides rich evidence for a more inclusive understanding of this relationship. Benign humor is certainly not a phenomenon confined to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the self-laughter of laughing philosophers is indeed humorous, as clearly indicated by the two traditions of laughter begun in Antiquity that continued through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to modern times – the Laughing Philosopher and Laughter as the Mark of the Human. Moreover, while laughter may be perceived as an expression of scorn for certain vices, it is nevertheless possible to think of it as a valuable practice worthy of encouragement, either as a useful means to preserving one's health (as the medical writers in the Renaissance believed) or as one of the most effective means of reproofing moral vices (as Aristotle and his followers, along many others, held) or again, as an important means of delegitimizing intellectual foes (as evidenced by Hobbes' and Descartes' satiric use of it). In fact, this positive attitude toward laughter can be seen in the main schools of philosophy: not only do the Cynics give a prominent role to laughter in their practice and writing, but the Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy (Epicureanism, Pyrrhonism, and Stoicism), especially Epicurus and Seneca, praise laughter as well. In the Renaissance views of benign laughter and extensive uses of laughter are found in such philosophers as Machiavelli, More, Erasmus, and Montaigne. The writings of the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers Hobbes and Descartes show a much more nuanced view of laughter than is usually recognized, and Spinoza's view is nothing less than revolutionary. Hegel's description of "the comical as such" is a eulogy of humor and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century laughter is elevated to a position of prominence that only rises in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Many of the misconceptions, sweeping generalizations, and sometimes plain mistakes about the relationship between philosophy and humor can be traced to the

dominance of four main factors: a disregard for the historical dimension characteristic of analytic monographs on laughter, an over-zealous identification of the villains of the story as those who do not endorse the current theory of humor, a lack of knowledge or interest in philosophers' prescriptive accounts of the comical, and finally, philosophy's *prima facie* inimicality to humor or laughter that may be explained through two isolated traditions of the comic in philosophy – the Laughless Philosopher and the Mocking Sophist.

The quotes from Martin, Morreall, and Carrell that inspired this article are representative of a much wider phenomenon. I hope the task I have set to myself in this article has not come across as an *ad hominem* attack. As many teach on the basis of this literature, and rightly so, it is important to emphasize that a more nuanced view of philosophy's attitude toward the comic may be more faithful to the history of laughter and humor.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. The laughing Democritus is found in a Greek anonymous legend of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., the *Novel of Hippocrates*, composed of a collection of 27 apocryphal letters of the renowned 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. doctor. See Hippocrates 1990, Letters 10-17. In the Latin testimony, at the latest in Horace's days, also in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., Democritus is referred to as "the laughing philosopher." For the laughing philosopher's legend, see Salem 1996. For his influence throughout the centuries, see Muller 1994, 39-51.
2. The references to Spinoza's *Ethics* are as follows: Roman numerals refer to books, "P" to "proposition," "Dem." to the short form of Demonstration, "Schol." to Scholium, and "Cor." to Corollary.
3. For the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* (2014) and *Laughter and the Good Life* (work in progress). For the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Amir, *Nietzsche's Laughing Followers* (work in progress).
4. See Amir 2013 and Amir 2012.

5. I would like to thank the anonymous referee for his helpful comments and references.

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