

interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

January 1985

Volume 13 Number 1

- 1 David Bolotin Socrates' Critique of Hedonism: a Reading of the *Philebus*
- 15 Arlene W. Saxonhouse The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*
- 33 Marlo Lewis, Jr. An Interpretation of Plato's *Euthyphro* (Part I, Section 4, to end)
- 67 Donald J. Maletz An Introduction to Hegel's "Introduction" to the *Philosophy of Right*
- 91 Joseph J. Carpino On Laughter
- Discussion*
- 103 Angelo M. Codevilla De Gaulle as a Political Thinker: on Morrissey's *Reflections on De Gaulle*
- 113 Will Morrissey Reply to Codevilla
- Book Review*
- 119 Nino Langiulli *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by Richard Rorty

interpretation

Volume 13 number 1

Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin

Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz • Howard B. White (d.1974)

Consulting Editors John Hallowell • Wilhelm Hennis • Erich Hula • Arnaldo Momigliano • Michael Oakeshott • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d.1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson

Associate Editors Fred Baumann • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Derek Cross • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela K. Jensen • Will Morrisey • Charles Rubin • Leslie Rubin • John A. Wettergreen • Bradford Wilson • Catherine Zuckert • Michael Zuckert

Assistant Editors Marianne C. Grey • Laurette G. Hupman

Design & Production Martyn Hitchcock

Annual
subscription rates individual \$13; institutional \$16; student (3-year limit) \$7. *INTERPRETATION* appears three times a year.

Address
for correspondence *INTERPRETATION*, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A.

Authors submitting manuscripts for publication in *INTERPRETATION* are requested to follow the *MLA Style Sheet* and to send clear and readable copies of their work.

Copyright 1985 • Interpretation

On Laughter

JOSEPH J. CARPINO

Infants laugh for the same reason adults do: their nature permits it and the terrors of existence demand it.

Throw a baby up into the air and catch him a couple of times and you will notice after the first fright, peals of laughter, uncontrollable giggling and asking for more, when he realizes that he's not going to fall. (Of course he will change his tune if you let him hit the floor even once; but then we're involved in *education* and not just having fun.) The initial terror is instinctive, the primal fear of arboreal animals, and the happy expectation is quickly learned, but the neural surprise remains and the laughter is repeated each time—unless the game goes on too long and the fundamental precariousness of his position is reappropriated by the baby's nervous system . . . and he begins to cry.

Risibility, as the ancients noted, is a property of man. By this they must have meant that laughter occurs in function of the discursive character of human awareness. Thinking takes time. Not much time, in many cases, but never is it the all-at-once or timeless apprehension of angels or of disembodied intellects of any stripe. We learn and we forget, we remember and we foresee. Pure intelligence ought not do that and, we are told, angels don't; they simply *know*—or so the tradition runs. They might even learn, coming to know as they come to be, so to speak. But they are never surprised, and surprise is essential to laughter.

To be surprised requires a set of neural expectations, which "set" is then falsified by events. When the "disverification" is sudden *and* pleasant a relaxation supervenes, laughter breaks out, and a kind of neural joy *splashes* through the organism. (Sudden and *un-*pleasant surprises, on the other hand, are the stuff of which heart attacks are made!) A pleasant but *slow* surprise, a "dawning awareness," if it's private, can bring about a "secret grin," but smiling is not the same as laughing, however much both may require a body and Cheshire cats to the contrary notwithstanding.

Laughter comes when what happens is suddenly not as bad as we expected it to be. Tickling is a friendly poking, comedy is failed tragedy. Wisecracks and ribbing are insults uttered with affection and even as expressions of respect. The listeners and even the object of the ribbing suddenly realize (what they half-expected all along; we do not kid a stranger) that the hurt did not happen, that an essential component of insult, the intention to *wound*, is missing, and their tension is released in laughter, chuckles from the bystanders (ribbing is seldom done in private), perhaps a smile from the ribbee, and a straight face on the ribber, to maintain the illusion.

Human awareness comes in pieces, and the new pieces have to be fitted onto the old in terms of some kind of precedent expectation. (The well-known *Ahah!*

Erlebnis is in effect a new framework suddenly permitting previously unconnected *bits* to become *parts* of a whole, and although a tension is relieved it is not the tension of fear.) This habit of anticipation, life being what it is, soon becomes a matter of *steeling* ourselves for what is to come so that we are *not* taken completely unawares. But if it all turns out well, if the roof at last does *not* cave in, then we are relieved and the nervous system relaxes; and if the relief is sudden, the relaxation is spasmodic. And those spasms may well constitute *the* rational pleasure, laughter. (There are other spasmodic pleasures, to be sure, but there is nothing rational or even specifically human about them. If there be no pleasure in it for them, the congress of hippopotami, for example, must be attributed to a truly awesome sense of duty towards their species.)

Temporality, then, as the “structure” of human awareness, and fragility as an abiding part of its *content*, are both essential to laughter. This means that destruction must be foreseen, or seen as a possibility. Two things would immediately cancel such an awareness: when the terrible event actually happens (when the baby hits the floor), and when we *know* it cannot happen. If the absolute impossibility of the tragedy is foreseen, or when it has become a reality, laughter is impossible. Thus the veneration of professional comics for “timing” and their concern for precise wording; the possibility *and* the unreality of tragedy must both be given *and* hidden in the words *as* they come out of his mouth; to “telegraph” the resolution by careless wording, or to give us time to *deduce* it, would be to kill the laugh.

Comedy, it is often said, requires a tragic vision and a deep moral concern, and if this is so it explains what is also often said, that comedians are hard to live with. Clowns must also be difficult, because the true clown never *stops* “clowning around,” and that can be very annoying at times. But professional comedians are a little different: they “crash” at home, we hear, and that must be awful. But it fits, and not merely because, with all entertainers, they are paid to please people. The bitterness of comedians may have a deeper spring.

If laughter entails seeing, suddenly, that things are not as bad as they had threatened to be, then the ability to make people laugh must require a deeper awareness than most of us have of *how* bad things might be and of our utter helplessness, our absolute fragility, in the face of that awfulness. Thus the tragic *vision* and the moral *concern* of comedy.

Humor requires not so much an articulated comprehension of the “content” of the moral as it does a clear eye on the moral *dimension*. The primary form of humor is a perception of the contrast between what has happened (as bad) and what might have happened (as even worse!) in such a way that the resulting realization permits a more or less spasmodic “release of tension” within the nervous system. So much for received generalities.

But the really primal contrast and the ultimate tension is between what is and what ought to be. The really funny makes a moral point.

When we see that what people have done is not really wicked, that they have

acted foolishly or through ignorance (or through a small vice, like vanity), and thus have *not* compromised the moral order as such, then we can laugh, because things are still all right; the “ought” is still intact.

If “the moral order” were to fall apart, if the ought were to dissolve into nothingness, then we would have no ultimate contrast, no thing finally to be relieved about. Even the “physical” oughts, like “we ought not to be in pain,” and “we ought not to be humiliated,” as basic as they are among fears, are subclasses and derivatives of the absolutely primary order, namely the moral, in terms of which rational animals must operate.

The most fearful thing, then, is a compromising of the moral order, to repeat a nostrum. Certain kinds of behavior, most specifically *wickedness*, put the reality of that order into question. (The Holocaust occasioned more atheism than all the blandishments of comfortable assimilation put together.) But when the behavior before us suddenly manifests itself as not wicked but merely foolish, then we can laugh, because all is still as it should be.

Pomposity, for example, apes arrogance, and arrogance is not funny. But pompousness is grounded in a weakness (stupidity, if nothing else) and is inherently *not strong enough* to be wicked and thus to challenge the moral order. And so we are safe, and, within the ideal context of jokes and comedy, can laugh when confronted by it. Of course *real* pomposity is occasion for pity, as with all the lesser immoralities.

There are theoretical positions which theoretically deny the moral order as such—relativisms in general and moral relativism in particular—and if these positions were taken seriously they would make laughter as impossible as they make indignation meaningless. But the viscera do not *allow* us to take relativism seriously. We fear possibilities and we become angry over states of affairs, so to that extent skepticism and nihilism can never be appropriated by the nervous system.

Ultimately, of course, we fear the disappearance of order as such, and some of the most cerebral of jokes manifest the precariousness of our *hold* over chaos. Puns, for example, bespeak the fragility of univocal understanding, the one-for-one correlation between sound and meaning on which logical thought depends.

Laughter, to put it in a word, is the *extra* of human reason, and it may well constitute *the* specifically human pleasure.

Music, for example, may be viewed as the pleasure of a temporal *intelligence*, remembering and anticipating the members of a tonal sequence and rejoicing in its neural appropriation of the *right-ness* of the sequence. This capacity is probably innate to intelligent animals, varying with their intelligence and perfectable through training. But music is never *about* anything, it does not compare or contrast possible states of affairs; for that, reason is required, and usually words. Music can be sad or gay or even majestic, but never tragic or funny or wrong. And music can quite properly be enjoyed alone, where laughing by oneself is a very lonely business indeed. Thus the social character of laughter which, though

not absolutely essential to it, is in keeping with the social character—or at least the social derivation, up 'til now—of human existence in its “natural” condition.

The negative counterpart to laughter would have to be tears, weeping, the expression of sorrow suddenly realized. (There can be joyful tears, but they are a special case. Like hysterical laughter at the dreadful, they are an inversion of the usual neural reaction and have a law of their own.) Sorrow also has a temporal dimension, the awareness that things *will* never be better—at least for us, so far as this loss is concerned. Ordinary pain is present, *now*, and if its end can be foreseen it can be borne. Sorrow is another thing, and though the higher animals can pine at the loss of a beloved master (or even at the death of another animal), weeping is specifically wordless, when “words fail” a worded organism.

Animals don't burst into tears at a sudden awareness that things have gone wrong, and angels can't weep at all. They may, so to speak, “gnash their teeth” in a kind of anger and remorse, but that is very figurative language with no “angelological” import; laughter and tears imply an anthropology.

Laughter, however, is pleasant, and the dynamics of it befit the human condition. In addition to a body, to do the laughing, laughter requires intelligence (to permute the possibilities) and an awareness of our fragility (to have something to laugh *about*). But it also requires something else, which we shall call the “theoretical mode”; a consciousness *sunk* in praxis cannot laugh.

By intelligence we mean here the *speed* with which words and other symbols can be logically rearranged, and comedians and schoolteachers have long been aware of the correlation between intelligence and a sense of humor. No conscious human being is so unintelligent as to be absolutely incapable of laughter, but some “get the point” more quickly than others and this not always only in terms of the knowledge (in the sense of “information”) necessary to the joke, although that is a consideration. And there are some very intelligent people who seem to be almost totally lacking in a sense of humor; but this may be due to other factors, temperamental impediments as it were.

Related to intelligence, and often confused with it, is knowledge, information, acquaintance with the material. However intelligent one may be, and however willing to laugh, real chuckling over puns in Aristophanes presupposes a fairly thorough immersion in ancient Greek. Comedy doesn't “travel” well in space or time, mainly because the things we fear are not all universal; and when puns and wordplays have to be laboriously worked out with the aid of a lexicon there can be no *surprise* in the nervous system. The mind concedes the joke, but the stomach muscles do not quake beneath the lungs.

Ignorance can preclude laughter but so too can knowledge if there's too much of it. Be it only a prior knowledge of the punch line or a generalized and sometimes stuffy polymathy or even a real omniscience, laughter is not possible for those who already know “how it comes out.” Perhaps a friendly effort, as with the perennial jokes of children, or a benign smile so as not to alienate before we

go into our own “topper,” but no real laughs are possible when you know too much.

Sometimes the things feared, the tragedy avoided in the comedy, are simply no longer a matter of major concern. Consider the role, in Terence, of rediscovery of parents and of release from slavery, at the end; or more recently, the fears and anxieties of “situation comedies,” which quickly become quaint as reality just as quickly catches up with them. Slapstick, however, precisely because its “gnoseological” requirements are so minimal and the fears it calls into play are so primitive, is much more universal.

Slapstick, perhaps because of its simplicity, manifests most clearly the “awareness of our fragility” moment in the dynamics of laughter. That we can fall or be knocked down, that we can be humiliated and destroyed, is *given* in slapstick and for all to see, even children. As we get older the crude indignities of circus clowns become more distant, and as pratfalls become more dangerous and less funny (the bones are getting brittle) we turn for our amusement to more cerebral fragilities. But the essential perception is there, already, in slapstick.

Contradictions in terms, paradoxes, and absurdities are nothing less than the monstrosities and horrors of thought, and the mind cannot confront them without discomfort, frustration, and in fact a kind of *panic*. Sanity cannot for long survive in a context of real and radical disorder, and homonyms *hint* at a possible failure of the conjunction between meaning and sound on which our thinking depends. But when after further inquiry, or under a more general classification, the contradiction is seen to be only contrast and the absurdity only a paradox (still not the best state of affairs but better than falling flat on your face!), then the mind is once again at ease and can proceed—or be at rest.

Now if such a resolution is sudden, sometimes having been built into the very terms of the tension, as with puns and wordplays, and if the threat to reason as suddenly evaporates, the rational organism can relax as suddenly and laughter is possible, however wry and begrudging it may be.

Logic itself of course is never threatened, and in the more cerebral explorations of the human mind there is little laughter even though they confront and resolve contradictions and paradoxes daily. However intelligent mathematicians may be (and most of them are), the things they talk about simply do not *impinge* upon our nervous systems, and their demonstrational failures do not remind us of our own fragility but only of the finitude of our thought processes. In a symbol system which *depends* on univocity, where sound is *only* a place-holder for meaning, there can be terminological checking, counterchecking, and even a kind of checkmating, but little fear and few real puns. (How long is it since Hippasus was put to death for revealing the mysteries of incommensurability!)

At the other extreme, when the matter is too real, the sensibilities still too tender, there is also no joking. There can be laughter at a wake, but not about *everything*. Fragility is a poised thing, a possibility, not an event; and when the roof

has caved in, when the worst has *happened*, we cannot laugh about it. Survival itself keeps some possibilities open, and with the passage of time “we may one day laugh about this,” but for now we can only sit and wait. The ways of Providence provide some ground for hope at any point, but they are little cause for laughter as the box is being lowered in the earth.

Real indestructibility, on the other hand, excludes laughter. In this regard Epicurus was right about the gods. “Immortal nature” takes no offence and is not pleased by anything we do, but even more: it cannot laugh because it cannot die. To speak of “the laughter of the gods” at our weaknesses is clearly an anthropomorphism, a projection onto the gods (who may or may not care for us, in fact), of one of the cruelest forms of human laughter, laughter at the misfortunes of others. Laughing at the contortions of puppets or at the “anguish” of characters in a comedy is conceivable, because they are not real and the context is eminently “theoretical.” But *really* to laugh at the misfortunes of others is so monstrous an inhumanity as to approach genuine mystery, in this world.

Of course “awareness of our fragility” can be *veiled*. Wine will do it almost every time, but wine can bring its own hilarity. (That also was noticed by the ancients.) And besides, the “indestructibility” that drunkenness offers soon dissolves into its own peculiar opposite: the head of glass and a brain like mud the morning after clearly signify the lack of even Epicurean immortality.

Sometimes an “idea” can be appropriated in such a way as to give the illusion of transcendence; one can lose sight of one’s own particularity in the vision of a cause and be so caught up in its seriousness as to forget, or more properly, to *despise*, one’s own fragility. “We are as nothing in the light of the Movement.” And nothings, of course, are indestructible. There is no laughter in crusades.

The main practical impediment to laughter, however, is not seriousness but *praxis* itself, the doing of something, and this not in terms of the objective importance of what is going on (consider the ribaldries of medical students) but in function of the level of involvement of the nervous system. Laughter is the primary mode of *theoria*, even before grammar, and it requires not so much leisure as *distance*, or the capacity of a neural consciousness to separate itself from its own contents. Consider for example the humorlessness of politicians—or rather, the very *careful* humor of political rhetoric. Politicians can handle hecklers if they are nasty; but when they’re funny they make of the speaker and his proposals an object to be *looked at*, and no politician can tolerate that.

And sometimes work itself can make laughter impossible. Drudgery *means* work that allows for no “fooling around,” not because of the intensity of concentration required, as in brain surgery (we hope!), but because the labor involved precludes any relaxation of the viscera (as in a laundry). Let’s finish the job and *then* we’ll laugh.

There is one case, however, in which “awareness of our fragility” is quite properly hidden and laughter impossible because the future is essentially known

to the neurones. As it is impossible to tickle oneself—because we know exactly where the poking finger is going to go—so too is it impossible to tell oneself a joke. People laugh at their own jokes, and can even chuckle as they repeat them to themselves, but to *surprise* oneself by one's own turn of phrase can evoke laughter only in and in terms of the company of others. (It is also, by the way, impossible to be tickled by one's own children when they are small. How could one be *afraid* of pokings by such short and lovable, essentially helpless little creatures?) But here, in the case of self-tickling, foreknowledge and a contextual indestructibility go hand in hand to make surprise impossible. In this regard, our inability to tickle ourselves, we are as divine as any Epicurean god.

So much for the practical impediments. There are, however, “theoretical” objections to laughter, “anthropologies” which, if ever the viscera were to take them seriously, would make laughter humanly impossible. And there are “cosmologies” which would make *sane* laughter metaphysically impossible by reducing *all* laughter to a cosmic aberration.

The way we have characterized laughter so far, as a *mixed* event where the rational-theoretical and the neural-bodily meet in a radically temporal arena (“sudden” means a *little* time, not no time at all, and surprise is never absolute), would seem, on the face of it, to call for a more or less traditionally “dualistic” (you should pardon the expression) understanding of human nature, with mind and body interwoven in experience precisely because neither is a mere function of the other. This idea—of a “composite nature” to man—was subject to question almost from its first appearance, and in our own time it is in bad taste even to mention such a thing in enlightened circles. But anthropological dualism doesn't go away, and as refractory as it may be for the understanding (“two is the number of analysis, never of being”), it is the only anthropology that provides any leverage in explaining the phenomena of laughter.

Of course a Cartesian or “Platonistic” dualism is no help at all. A mind to which a body has been *affixed* at some one or even at several points has no more cause for laughter at tickling than we have for smiling in a car wash. Even if a Cartesian consciousness *could* be understood in a nonmechanical way it would still be too *other* to its body to *feel* any danger to it. And while it might “get” a pun or even a wisecrack, deducing the point, it would be too *spent* in the analysis itself to laugh. There are no chuckles in Descartes.

Plato on the other hand is not without humor, although here, as we move away from the person of Socrates, we approach more closely an Olympian mentality for which conviviality is something to be observed, not entered into, and its participants *graded*, as it were, on their rationality. Not a bad exam, it must be said, for future rulers of imprisoned souls, but only bodiless men could administer it without some arrogance.

Entitative or “unmitigated” dualisms, in other words, don't explain laughter because they must regard the body as an appendage to the soul, as an “also” to be

sloughed off at the first available opportunity (at death or in science). Monistic materialisms would seem to take the body more seriously and thus perhaps to account more readily for the pleasures of risibility.

Pleasure of whatever sort, the Epicureans would insist, is bodily. Or, as we might say, pleasures of the mind are neural through and through. Intelligence is neural, tickling is neural, and animals respond to tickling. And any supposed distinction between physical and verbal tickling or between intelligence and rationality simply mistakes quantity for quality, since the human being's capacity to laugh at jokes is a function merely of the greater complexity of our neural apparatus and not of any essential *differentia*. Or so the argument would run.

The trouble is, animals don't laugh. They react to tickling and some of the "neurally more complex" species even engage in a kind of horseplay (not horses, of course). But there is no laughter, no giggling, no guffaws, no characteristic human *release* in a specific and otherwise useless sound.

Materialism is burdened, in our time, with a concept which caused an absolute minimum of trouble for Epicurus, the notion of evolutionary utility, the contribution which a biological process makes to the survival of a species. The universality of laughter in human beings, preceding even speech, is an index of the level at which it would have to have offered a competitive advantage; but there is no way in which the capacity to laugh could give one group of primates an edge over another. They might well be more fun to *be* with, but that comes after the hunt and never during the battle. At most, laughter might be an evolutionary side-effect, a by-product, like the chin or the Adam's apple, indeed an extrusion following upon the development of other, biologically more useful abilities, like speech or rationality.

But setting aside evolutionary considerations, if thinking is to be viewed as only a kind of calculating, the activity of a specialized group of "command atoms" in their regulating of all the other activities of our grosser parts, then most of what we think and think about could conceivably be accounted for, even the subtlest of syllogisms and perhaps, so far as pleasures are concerned, the enjoyment of music and design. There are after all olfactory pleasures and tactile pleasures. Why shouldn't there also be visual and aural pleasures, sounds and sights which, when ordered through some sort of "sensus communis" (intelligence) can occasion the enjoyment of music and design, where a sequence of sounds or a display of color constitutes the object? Thus pleasures of intelligence; why not then a "rational pleasure," reason being, for materialism, the *name* for "great intelligence"?

But laughter goes beyond the powers of a rationality reducible to calculation. In laughter the mind flips over, it *tricks* the nervous system, something which it could not do if it were the same as that nervous system. ("Epiphenomenon" is just a roundabout way of saying "the same as"; it gives the appearance of otherness but it denominates no real difference.) This kind of language, "flipping," and "tricking," like "theoretical modality," is admittedly quite figurative, per-

haps even vague, but it is not for that, invalid. Laughter should not *be* there if we are but animals, however intelligent, or if thought were merely neural activity.

At the other extreme, among the classical anthropologies, Stoicism offers a philosophical understanding of human nature which is dualistic but not unmitigatedly so. The body is taken seriously enough to require a certain theoretical gritting of the teeth, if nothing else. Here the union of body and soul is not a mere Cartesian systematic isomorphy, but the real in-formation of a manifold by a structure, a logos, which otherwise would have no place to *be* and which, when finally released from the body (“restored” as they say), becomes indistinguishable from intelligibility as such. In such an anthropology the body is essential to man, but pleasure and pain are only the *condition* of particular existence and neither good nor bad in themselves. The real polarity for Stoicism is between “focusing” and “dispersion” (to speak again in metaphor), and the preference of pleasure over pain becomes a matter essentially of indifference. There is no cause for laughter in such a man, no delight in the body, no sorrow even at death. Children are allowed to laugh, and there is for the Stoic himself a certain stern satisfaction in the exercise of his will (the “focusing”), but “rational pleasure” is here most clearly a contradiction in terms. The Stoic *knows* that tears and laughter are the pointless side-effects of ignorance and lack of self-control. The universe is serious; it has nothing to fear and knows no remorse, and there can be no pain or pleasure in reason-ing—which is what, if anything, a proper Stoic *does*.

Thus in broad outline the “theoretical” objections to laughter inherent in the basic extremes of philosophical understandings of human nature. Epicureanism permits it but cannot explain it (how could neural events “trick” themselves?); Stoicism can explain it (as a weakness based in ignorance) but does not permit it. Of course not even philosophers take philosophy that seriously, and there was doubtless laughter in the Garden or no one would have stayed for long, and probably a smile or two even on the Porch, if only in memory of Diogenes’ plucked chicken, “Plato’s man.”

All that would be required “anthropologically” for laughter to be theoretically possible is a theory of man which accounts for the “but” in human speech. Not all jokes have a “but,” but they all do presuppose the stepping back and overview entailed in the adversative. The “but” is not a logical operation, it is not the work of “understanding” in Kant’s sense. Rather, to stretch things just a bit, the “but” is precisely the primordial rational function to which the “Ideas of Reason” stand as specifications. The “but” gives a total picture, and when that total picture is suddenly not as bad as it promised to be *and* the diaphragm picks it up, laughter breaks out. Whatever understanding of human being explains that interplay of thought and the body in time makes laughter possible and grounds its pleasure in reason.

Sane laughter is another matter. Grounded though it may be in reasoning, the *rationality* of laughter, its accord with what is, would have to be in function of

something beyond human nature. For this we must move from anthropology to “cosmology.”

Looked at “structurally,” the central organizing theme of laughter and of a sense of humor in general is *hope*, “danger’s comforter,” as Thucydides puts it. If there is no hope there can be no laughter. It’s as simple as that. And the problem now becomes the “ontological status” of hope.

On the level of the individual human being, of course, hope can be blotted out by “appearances” (the Stoic term for just about everything that can happen to people). And it may be the case that in a given course of events there *is* no hope—or at least no rational hope. The limb is lost, the beloved is dead; there is nothing to laugh about in that regard. But these are individual circumstances, particular contexts, and not what is at issue here, namely, the “ground in being” for the presence in man of the “species phenomenon” called hope.

Hope is not planning, though despair can effectively cut off any projective effort at its roots. Hope is not desire or wishing (although “wishful thinking” is a kind of foolish hoping). Taken at its barest, hope is a kind of confidence that things need not necessarily go completely wrong or, a little more positively though no less bleak, that we shall survive—somehow. There is no laughter in the hold as the ship is going down.

In addition, therefore, to an awareness of our fragility, laughter must *also* presume somehow upon our indestructibility, our survival, and must somehow expect that the end is *not* essentially tragic. The continued existence of human consciousness in others, the perdurance of the species, is something of that sort, a *kind* of survival to look forward to: “There will be others to carry on.” And as close as this may be to simple resignation it has served as hope for men and nations through the years. In our own time, unfortunately, an awareness of the Second Law of Thermodynamics along with other productions of modern scientific consciousness have put it somewhat in question. But in any case, for all its Pollyannaism, “survival of the species” was never the basis of belly laughs but only a block to absolute despair.

The “metaphysical” question at issue here—“What must being be for laughter to make sense?”—is perhaps more conveniently formulated in “cosmological” terms: “What kind of *cosmology* would permit a rational animal to hope?” Here again the ultimate alternatives are few and far between.

Hope is not, generally speaking, a philosophical term. Philosophers know or they don’t know, and their “specialty,” if we may put it that way, is knowing *that* they don’t know. Socrates was a philosopher *and* hopeful, but his particular hopes (for his personal survival) were grounded, as he says, in tales and traditions “worthy of belief,” and not in what he *knew*. Philosophy is very careful about hope and its classical extremes pretty well cover the range of possibilities.

Stoicism, for example, with its affirmation of the objective reality of Reason in the universe, seems to offer a basis for a kind of hope, *via* the eternity of intel-

ligibility, for a perdurance of the rationality of man. But there's nothing personal about it, no ground for any "subjective" hope. The Logos is not any one of us, it is not even itself a someone. Human reason has a *kind* of transcendence over time; and the universe itself, through all its cycles, will never be annihilated—of that we can be sure. But the human individual is never anything more than a fleeting mortal instantiation of rationality. Hope, for such a thing in such a universe, can be no more than just another case of shortsightedness, useful perhaps for the accomplishment of certain limited goals, but with no cosmic significance at all. And laughter, in such a context, is *essentially* insane, ontologically "out of touch" with what is real.

How does hope accord with Atomism, then? Its treatment here is even more brutal (as might be expected from sightless Giants). Epicureans, like the intelligent animals they are, can hope from day to day and even laugh at times (although there's no accounting for it), but in the end there is *nothing*. When Epicurus says, to allay our fears of death, that "whatever is without sentiency is nothing to us," he must be taken at his word and understood to mean that *to be* is in function of sensation. This is the solipsistic Berkeleian worm sleeping in the heart of all radical materialisms. For all its vaunted "realism," a consistent materialism must regard "the world" as no more than a projection, a *construct*, of individual consciousness; and when we die, "the universe" *ceases to be*. To suppose anything else would entail an inference beyond the evidence of our senses (which are at once the ground *and* limit of all that we can know). In such a cosmology there can be no hope at all, and laughter becomes, at best, one of the "natural but not necessary" pleasures, like sex and other vulgar amusements.

Thus the fundamental cosmological alternatives offered by reason at its purest. At neither extreme is any "ontological status" provided for hope. (There can be no "salutory mean" in these matters but only compromise, a watering down.) And laughter, for all its momentary release, is *essentially* insane, an unhealthy modality. Like "a little wine," it might aid digestion—but you can't live on it.

Laughter is insane in such a view because the human condition, seen from the inside, is itself absurd. Mortal self-consciousness is necessarily tragic: nothing good can come of it. And the reality of laughter is itself the joke, a mad refusal to face the horror of contingent rationality. And of course, if "it's all a joke," then nothing is funny. "A tale told by an idiot . . . signifying nothing," is after all an appraisal of the human condition uttered by a man facing Hell.

"But on the other hand," as the Rabbis say, "but on the other hand," there is another possibility—which is *all wrong*, so far as "philosophical cosmologies" are concerned, but which might be useful even so. In any case, it's all that's left to us total-picture-wise, namely, what could be called the Biblical tradition.

The cosmology of Scripture is not philosophical (what philosopher would ever propose a creation *ex nihilo* or even more impossible, a resurrection), and

it's not even a cosmology (because its "members," Creator "and" creation, cannot be included *in* any larger category and cannot even be connected by a proper *and*), but it does suggest an "ontological status" for hope.

The very fact, of course, that Scripture provides grounds for individual human hope, grounds pressed down and spilling over, is itself enough for a skeptical consciousness to reject it out of hand, regarding it as the very model of a cosmological anthropomorphism, a blatant projection of overblown human desire, a *type* of metaphysical arrogance, and the ultimate in philosophical naiveté. Such a rejection, indeed a mere shrugging-off in most cases, is easier when we disregard the parts Macbeth could not forget, however much he tried. But quite apart from all of that, there is a difficulty here, without even *mentioning* the total absence, in Scripture, of anything which could, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, be called "comic relief." In spite of all the hope that "the Biblical tradition" seems to offer most of us, there is a kind of technical problem which must be faced in any attempt to base the sanity of laughter on its "cosmology."

Laughter, we have said, is denied the gods of Epicurus by virtue of their immortality, their essential indestructibility: they can have no *experience* of fragility. How much *more* must a Creator God, with all His Omniscience and Omnipotence and just plain all-round on-top-of-it-ness be necessarily incapable even of a *smile*, much less of laughter? And if the nature of the "first thing" defines all lesser things (that's what Measures do; they define other things even when they don't make them), then how could a "ground of being" Who is constitutionally incapable of being surprised make of our laughter anything more than, at most, an aspect of our condition *in via*, a property of human beings on the way to God and never of the saved *at rest* "in the bosom of Abraham"? (A less appealing metaphor, by the way, for union with God, can scarcely be imagined.) And besides, *as a group*, Old Testament prophets are among the least amusing the world has ever seen . . . and St. Paul is no barrel of laughs either. There is a problem here. Hope, yes; but laughter: forget it.

And yet, and yet, when all is said and done, it's not impossible. When once the lion has lain down with the lamb, and after all the tears were wiped away, why may we not expect, within that sure and certain hope, that when it finally sinks in that everything's all right, the novelty of happiness will bring forth, in all the somber surety of Justice in the end, a peal of joy and an *ocean* of laughter that need never cease?

For after all, that same eternal Creator, that same unblinking God, of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, has *laughter* as His middle name.*

*Or just about! Cf. Genesis 18:12–14, and 21:3,6. (And Exodus 3:15 of course.)