

SOME MARGINAL NOTES ON LAUGHTER.

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Amico: I do not quite understand Professor Scott's contention that Henri Bergson's theory of the comic is tainted by "ethical pessimism." Professor Scott is molested by the thought that Morality may become a target of clever sharpshooters with a penchant for comic effect. To be laughed at for one's sincerity is, I submit, not an altogether pleasant experience. Why should there be a contradiction—a hostility—between customary morality and a sense of humor?

Amicus: That's a very nice point you raise. Let us begin with some general truths about personal conduct. Everyone knows that to laugh at a neighbor is easier and more congenial than laughing at one's self. Does everyone surmise why? I suppose the simplest explanation of the problem may be summed up in one sentence: Man takes himself more seriously than he does his neighbor. In other words, he feels more keenly for himself than he does for his neighbor. Laughing at himself would pain these personal and serious feelings. Laughing at his neighbor wounds no such feelings. The inference seems to be that laughter has its roots in callousness. A drunkard's reels and gyrations do move to laughter—but not if the drunkard happens to be your father. Dirty jests about sex do make men leer and giggle—but not if the jests are about their sisters or mothers. We all enjoy laughing—at somebody's else expense. Laughter is a species of callousness. Laughter, rooted in callousness, is a weapon of advantage in the struggle for prestige. Those who laugh gain a tremendous sense of power; the

power to confound, bewilder, diminish, hold aloof. Laughter is a mode of self-glorification. For example:—Our laughing at the foreigner, especially if he be dressed queerly or speak unintelligibly is due to our veiled sense of superiority to him. Perhaps we really do not laugh at him! We laugh, perhaps, only at his predicament. It's a kind of advantage-taking we are guilty of when we laugh. Note how true to fact this hypothesis as a distinguished, upper-class personage, we no longer feel provoked into unholy laughter. Respect in lieu of derision becomes our stereotyped reaction. In some way, subtle or obvious, laughter, in a majority of cases, I believe, is interconnected with a feeling of advantage. The gods are the best laughers.

Amico: Let me read you a brief powerful excerpt I have saved from a book review by a distinguished young writer: "In his theory of escape from the strain of civilized thinking, Professor Patrick has found a clue to some long-discussed mysteries. Why do we laugh at a man who slips on a banana peel, especially if he was just lifting his hat to a lady? Why do we laugh at Sir Isaac Newton for boiling his watch while holding the egg in his hand? Why does an audience always laugh when any character on the stage says 'Damn'? It is the spontaneous outburst of joy whenever the old and natural suddenly appears amidst the restrained and artificial." It is 'the sudden or momentary escape from the constant urge of progressive forces. It is release from the decorous, the proper, the refined, the fitting, the elegant, the strict, the starched, the stiff, the solemn. The mind runs riot for a moment in the old, the familiar, the instinctive, the impulsive and the easy, knowing that the inevitable claims of civilization must soon force it into servitude again. Laughter represents a momentary and spasmodic rebellion against civilization, just as play and sport represents more deliberate periodic efforts to escape from it by resting a while before resuming the burden.'" What do you think, Amicus, of this explanation?

Amicus: The theory, as stated, is too broad for specific accuracy and specific verifiability. The loose terms "old and nat-

ural," "restrained and artificial," "civilization," "rebellion," need re-defining, clearer points of fixation. For my part, I shall continue to believe that laughter, whether "civilized" or savage or barbarous, is grounded in a specific theory of torture. The specific experiences of the race have produced in our brains (what Dr. George W. Crile calls) "Action-Patterns" of malicious delight, released and expressed whenever a human—not of our own flesh-and-blood—is in torture. Laughter is always, I believe, an enemy-delight.

Amico: Don't you believe that we often laugh good-naturedly, without malicious intent? It seems so to me.

Amicus: Yes, but you must remember that laughter originated among semi-human progenitors, crude, cruel, incorrigible. Do you believe that they laughed at a tortured victim good-naturedly? The wholesome laughter you refer to is a comparatively recent invention. There is very little of it in the world (as we intimately know it). When the stress of primitive aspirings has become softened by security and sweet philosophy, laughter may become good-natured. In the company of equals (economic or intellectual) laughter tends to be rather genial and benign. Even in such homogeneous groups, the chances are that laughter has become apparently good-humored only because the whole confraternity is laughing at a competitor or rival, or at an "outcast" against whom they all harbor a common grievance or for whom they all have a sprightly contempt. Laughter is, say what you will, shot through and through with maliciousness. No doubt of that. Wholesome laughter is very rare—even in the recreations and frivolities of mankind.

Amico: You are too hard in your judgments, Amicus. When people laugh convulsively at a play, do you mean to say that they are behaving maliciously? You know that, after all, they *are* aware of the mock-serious nature of the drama. When people laugh boisterously at the sight of a fat man chasing his hat with gusto and concentrated fury, are they really laughing malevolently? Do they intend any harm to the hapless fellow?

Amicus: If you were willing to realize that the mind of the adult is as childish and cruel in its pleasures as is the mind of the five year old child, you would not find my judgments so unpalatable. The more heart-rending the predicament, the more intense the laughter. Note that fact. Only superstitious fear can choke off malicious laughter. People laugh never so uncontrolledly as when a person makes a trivial mistake in the midst of a profound utterance! Any little eccentricity or irrelevant gesture will move an audience to laughter though the speaker be all sincerity and eloquence and wisdom. So it is at the theater. The laughter is really an outlet for pent-up joy at the sight of bewilderment and bafflement. That the actor does not suffer the consequences of the outburst is beside the mark. For all we know he is suffering in his inner self. Perhaps the light and scoffing laughter reminds him of other days when he was "seriously" laughed at for slips of the tongue or for some left-handed gesture. Perhaps he is impersonating a character very like himself. Oh, yes, all laughter is a little vindictive, a bit malicious, a trifle supercilious, somewhat derisive. Suppose at the moment you were laughing your heartiest at the rain-swept lady struggling against the driving wind with umbrella, hat, skirts and bundle as impedimenta, you should suddenly behold a vitagraph picture of her confusion, her sense of shame, her impotence and her resentment? Do you believe you would still continue laughing at her? . . . All laughter tends to be mean and callous. I hope I'm not pleading for a world of solemn-faces. Oh no! On with the dance: let joy be unconfined! Let there be peals and peals of laughter. We are human beings, not saints. . . . Tell me, good Amico, why God and the good men (like the saints) are never pictured as laughers, nor ever thought of as such? Why not? . . . Oh, I know, there is virtue in laughter. Laughter steels the mind against spiritual timidity. In laughter there is strength.

Amico: Don't you believe that a man can laugh at himself good-naturedly? I do.

Amicus: Well, sometimes, when I'm off my guard (as it were). I do. Always, after digging down deep into the experi-

ence, I find that laughing at one's self is not without its malicious intention. I am convinced that too often a brilliant satirist laughs at himself only because in the fulness of his bitterness he finds sardonic pleasure in biting at his own heart. You, the dear spectator, enjoy his predicament. You laugh with him at himself. He wantonly pounced down upon you, abused you for your shallowness, turned the jest against you, laughed at himself only to laugh the more wickedly at you. He has caught you unawares. He who laughs last laughs best. The satirist will see to it that he gets the best laugh first and last. Beware of the man who can laugh at himself. He will tear the heart out of you with a double pleasure. If you begin by laughing at him, you will end by laughing (and weeping, too) at yourself.

Amico: As usual, we have indulged in mind-wandering. Let us retrace our steps. I do not see the necessary connection between customary morality and humorlessness. Why should a man who behaves in prescribed modes on ordained occasions be an object of ridicule to the satirist or to the philosopher of the comic? If it were quite universal, that attitude would convince me of the baseness and callousness of laughing men. From my experience I know that on solemn, conventional occasions people look serious, and, I trust, actually are so. I can't believe that the seriousness is a mock solemnity, a mask worn for the occasion in order to conceal grinning wit and sly humor. That conviction would make life seem grotesque and horrible. Think of a face congealed in laughter haunting you on your wedding day. Ugh! It would be like kissing a skull. Ugh!

Amicus: To those who accept its sincerity, conventional morality is not laughable. It is ludicrous only to the non-participants. Do you recall what I said about Man's taking himself more seriously than he does his neighbor?... Laughter is the contribution of the detached, of the unrelated, of the unsympathetic. Seriousness is the attitude of the sympathetic, the related, the closely attached. The satirist is engaged in objective judgment; he observes from a distance. He laughs at solemn routine and at

pompous repetition (the mode of all moral conduct), because they appear so lifeless and mechanical, likely at a moment's notice to go wrong and to involve the whole unresourceful company of practitioners in side-splitting contradictions and humorous impotence. The essence of conventionally-moral conduct is stereotypy. The procedure is formularized. . . . Laughter is fed by the emotion of doubt. The laugher doubts whether stereotypy can maintain its rigidity without cracking under the strain. The least slip or mishap may render the whole "Dumb Show" ludicrous. Confusion! Non-preparedness. Suppressed laughter! Solemnity, standing rigid and impotent, not knowing what to do or what to say! How fill in the breach? What to do to continue the illusion of solemnity? Sympathy is on the wane. Humor comes to the rescue. Laughter winks maliciously and enjoys the spectacle hugely. The desire to "find" fun at another fellow's expense is simply irresistible. I am certain that elaborate ceremonials are the funniest dumb shows in the world—to the satirist. You mustn't forget the part cynicism and natural pessimism contribute to ironic laughter. In our hearts we know people for what they are:—irritable little creatures, stuffy, sensational, wicked, moody, quixotic. How can we suppress the mocking laugh when they pretend to be as *perfectly* solemn as the Christian God and as rigidly proper as sculptured saints? The contradiction is devastatingly funny. Without the quaint relief of unholy laughter, even the formalists would have perished under the insupportable strain of their pompous poses! The retaliation of the formalist is torture. The reply of the informalist is laughter. Both modes are soaked in malice.

Amico: As I recall Professor Scott's critique in the *International Journal of Ethics*, it may be summarized as follows: According to Bergson's view there is the closest affinity between the Comic and the Moral. Professor Scott says: 'The pessimism of this doesn't need to be labored. To rule out the mechanical, the rigid, from the life which society wants is plainly to withdraw the good from out of the reach of common men and make it the aristocratic privilege of the few. According to Bergson, the good

life is transmuted into a piece of high art, or into a game of skill in which the winners are they who possess the gifts and have cultivated the skill.—The moral imperative does not even say 'be good.' It only says 'be adaptable.'" I gather from these interesting criticisms that Professor Scott perceives an irreconcilable hostility between the good and the comic. I suppose he voices the deep-felt attitude of a majority of moral persons who see puritanism in solemnity and in informality something akin to wickedness. There is no doubt that the greater part of mankind privately believes in the superior noble grandeur of formality as keenly as it believes in the quite inferior ungrandeur of informality. These distinctions arise undoubtedly from a repressed-theory of man's original depravity; the feeling that the "natural," spontaneous, informal man is lax and loose and trivial, possibly indecent and scoffing. On the other hand, any rigid excavation of facetiousness and of too candid bonhomie is sure to leave at the cleansed bottom of personality the fine sediment of repose, formality, good behavior. Artificial, fixed poses moralize depraved man, so it is tacitly assumed by the formalists.

Amicus: You know how contemptuously I spurn pose and formalism and uncritical conformity. Wax uniformity I simply abhor. Individuality, informality, uniqueness, freedom, originality, differentness—these more creative modes I love. I hate mechanism; I adore spirit—certainly in human conduct. You will understand how unsympathetic I feel toward any view of life, however democratic that view may appear to be, which by ousting informality champions and celebrates formality. If the democratic ideal is to be measured by arithmetical units, I fear there will be a heap of unlovely idealism passing current for worthiness, simply because the undifferentiated many subscribe to it. If the majority are routineers, lovers of wax uniformity, devotees of regimentation, victims of monotony and sameness, let us pity the majority; but for wisdom's sake, let us not emulate or worship the poor blind beasts. I know of no finer or more liberalizing ideal than Bergson's: "The good life is transmuted into a piece of high art." Every creative idealist, looking toward the deeper

fulfilment of to-morrow, loving his fellowmen for what they may yet be (not for what they are!) will gladly embrace the Bergsonian philosophy of morals. To live artistically—what more beautiful or more worthy aspiration? I have worked out a more elaborate criticism of Professor Scott's ethics which you may care to consider.

Amico: There can be no subject more important than morality. As Professor Dewey says: the plane of a man's thinking is measured by his attitude toward the problems of conduct. I shall be glad to follow your analysis of creative morality, especially in its bearings upon the conventional theory of good conduct, as expressed by Professor Scott in the article already alluded to. Why does Bergson the more adequately express your own conception of conduct, of what the Greeks would call, the good life? Be as definite as possible, for clarity's sake.

Amicus: All right. Let me play Socrates to my dear Theaetetus . . . Paraphrasing Bergson, Professor Scott says that "it is comical to act according to fixed habit." To which I humbly add: Of course it is—in a *new situation*. Now the intellectual impotence of your habitualist lies in his mal-adjustability exactly. He assumes the eternal validity of his conformity. How then can he anticipate or prepare for a novel situation? The answer is simply that he can't. Hence his ludicrous plight in an emergency. Habitualism breeds unawareness. Slaves of habit—moral or immoral or unmoral—are hopeless in an evolving society. Alertness is the touchstone of preparedness. Preparedness guarantees adaptability. Education is, creatively viewed, a research in anticipations. Habitualism has nothing to anticipate. Why worship it as a moralizing force (in a society increasingly self-conscious and purposive)? As soon as moral conduct has become habitual, it is no longer quintessentially moral: it is only mechanical. For the very core of creative morality is readiness to reinterpret one's conduct in relation to *new* situations. Truly moral men are not rigidly moral. So many humans turn rigid in their morality because the pose of self-righteousness is easier to achieve than a genuine righteousness. In fact, rigidity in conduct encourages posing and imposing. Why cele-

brate it? . . . "It is comical to be like another mind," says Professor Scott, aiming a poisonless arrow at Bergson's "ethical pessimism." So it is, if your emulation or imitation is pure pretence. Who's the silliest creature on earth if he be not the parrot-disciple of genius? Some of our cleverest dramas are woven about this human weakness for pretence and pretentiousness. Being like another mind is comical as the voice of the ventriloquist is comical. The absence of the human element of individuality reduces man to mechanism and renders him a megaphone, or at best, a mood, not a mind. The assumption of mind where no mind is, *is* comical, precisely because pretence takes the place of reality: to the critic eye, always a humorous substitution. . . . "It is comical to repeat and insist" . . . *Naturally*, when repetition and insistence evidently fall upon deaf and obtuse ears. Is there any person more comical—and strangely self-deluded—than the professional preachers, dinning solemnly-grand unlivable platitudes into the souls of benighted poor wretches ill-equipped to eke out a bare hand-to-mouth existence? The preacher is portrayed in drama as the cunning simpleton because he never does anything (except repeat and insist) to make his highfalutin ethics live and *realize* itself. He is intellectually blind to the irrelevancy of his good intentions. His folly is,—measured by realistic standards.—ludicrous.

Amico: To be sure, the most distinctively human attribute which neither animal nor god shares with man is the comic spirit. Perhaps it is just as well for us to recognize its high value as a spiritual purgative. I recall the delightful comment of Romain Rolland apropos of the function of humor among a self-adoring mankind. He says: "Intelligence of mind is nothing without that of the heart. It is nothing also without good sense and humor—good sense which shows to every people and to every being their place in the universe—and humor which is the critic of misguided reason, the soldier who following the chariot to the capital reminds Caesar in his hour of triumph that he is bald." Indeed, it is worth while inquiring what there is in the nature of customary morality to make it so hostile to the comic spirit.

Amicus: The comic spirit, rooted in callousness (that is, in a sense of detachment), achieves a mighty analytic purpose. It laughs to scorn those prevalent human poses and pretences which make of life a torpid dumb show, an unanimated panorama, a procession of automata. The cosmic spirit cleanses the soul of its duplicities. It annihilates shams and poms and vacant ceremonies. From the lusty exuberance of the comic spirit, creative morality will suffer small hurt. Customary morality, conceived in fear and herd-imitation, perpetuated in habits of self-approval and customs of self-glorification, will undoubtedly suffer from the malicious ravages (so they must appear to the afflicted) of the comic spirit. . . . And the primary problem for ethicists is: Shall life be a work of art or a polished mechanism?