Humor as a Virtue: Pride, Humility and Humiliation

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ABSTRACT: Dignity is man's creation, not respected by nature or life. It is part of what has been sometimes considered as dangerous hubris or human pride. The inevitable fall from hubris leads either to humility or to humiliation – a middle stage between hubris and humility. When pride is hurt and dignity impaired by the very nature of indomitable, indifferent and secretive life, awareness of humiliation as a preferred stage is crucial. It is crucial because it permits to avoid humility, for all those who feel that humility is beyond their power or below their will, while keeping the fighting and ambitious spirit of hubris. Moreover, awareness of our humiliation enables us to apprehend an important, though painful, truth about the human condition.

I propose to characterize the human condition as humiliating. I then suggest that man's task, courage and wisdom lie in a full acknowledgment of humiliation as the core of the human condition. Humor is allotted a place of honor in this scheme: no more a mere entertainment, nor even a key to a better world, but a servant of truth. While reviewing the complex relationship of humor and humiliation, I will disclose some problems in using humor for coping with the human condition as humiliation, proposing thus a new challenge for theorists of humor. Humor will then appear as a potential vehicle of truth, a virtue more praiseworthy, in my view, than any of its additional assets, yet without any known theory to account for it. (1)

Dear Friends, this humiliation persists, it persists to this day. Man has much to suffer on earth. What horrible suffering! I hardly think of anything but that, brother – the humiliation of man". --Dostoievsky, The Brothers Karamazov

Hubris or Pride

Hubris, in ancient Greek, was used to denote spiritual pride: to be arrogant, to get above oneself, to lust or to set out to imitate the gods. "Do not try to become Zeus", the poet Pindar exhorted his readers. For, he continues, "mortal things suit mortal best" (2). By the fifth century B.C., it was established that to set oneself up as being godlike, whether in respect to happiness, power or any other respect, was the surest way to ruin (3). As a means to fight this tendency, man, in relation to the gods, was often enough represented as a mere victim: "Zeus controls the fulfillment of all

that is" wrote the poet Semonides of Amorgos in the seventh century B.C., and disposes as he will. But insight does not belong to men: "we live like beasts, always at the mercy of what the day may bring, knowing nothing of the outcome that God will impose upon our acts." (Dodds, 1951, p.303)

The tone changed with the great Greek philosophers. Like Plato before him, Aristotle put himself in direct and conscious opposition to the Greek tradition, as expressed by Pindar, that it is wrong for men to try to imitate the gods. "We ought not to listen", Aristotle admonishes us, "to those who counsel us 'O man, think as man should' and 'O mortal, remember your mortality'" (4). And thus, from Aristotle to Plotinus, the Godlike man was the advocated ideal.

Pindar and Aristotle are two eminent representatives of a controversy about Hubris or man's spiritual pride, which was to shape the history of human self-consciousness and run unresolved till this day. Of course, the pride of the Athenian tragedies is not the same as the pride which entered the penitential psalms of the Middle Ages, nor the same as Renaissance Pride of the various modern ways in which pride expresses itself: the pride of man changes and so do the habits of self-consciousness. Nevertheless, Robert Payne, who wrote an encompassing history of pride, thinks he can detect the leitmotiv of the continual development of pride: "Through the whole of Western history", he says, "there rings the continual implacable cry: Non Serviam", meaning the refusal to obey, to submit. (Payne, 1960, p. 305)

Robert Payne sees in this cry the cause of human tragedy and wonders if the virtue of humility has still any meaning. (Ibid. p. 309) "Pride rules us" he says "and pride must be abased"; man's "acute and anguished sense of solitude can only grow deeper", unless "the regimen of humility takes hold of us" (Ibid. pp. 311, 312). By no

means is Payne's attitude towards pride the sole possible or even sensible one. To cite just one example, John Passmore, another authority on this subject contends, in direct opposition to Payne, that 'Not Serviam', the refusal to obey, to submit, is "the great glory of humanity, the fount of human creativity, the guardian of freedom" (Passmore, 1970, p. 290). John Passmore could say this because he differentiates between kinds of pride and the one he advocates is "man's pride in what he is doing in his work, as distinct from pride in himself for having done it" (ibid. p. 289). This kind of pride is compatible, in his view, with humility.

With Pindar and Aristotle, we saw an ancient dichotomy, with Payne and Passmore – a modern controversy. But even a short survey of the history of pride cannot ignore the in-between influence of Christianity.

The Christian church had been interested in pride, as a form of sin, in the attempt by man to achieve that self-sufficiency and independence which the Greeks took as their ideal to become what the Lord God of Genesis describes as "one of us". St. Augustine sometimes spoke of pride as the root of evil, for Adam's sin originated in pride. (ibid. p. 342, note 65) To take two modern examples, for Niebuhr and Barth, hubris is the sin of sins and they partake in the traditional Christian view that pride is a vice, and that humility, resignation, self-surrender are virtues. (Neibuhr, 1945, pp. 266-270; Barth, 1970, pp. 4-7)

It is clear then that if we want to pass a judgment on human's pride and to understand its role in shaping both human condition and our attitude towards it, we should have a closer look at the complementary concept of humility.

Humility

Humility is defined as “humbleness, meekness; humble condition” (5). It is as a Christian concept that it had its most powerful influence, for, in Judaism, the equivalent word for humility has come to be considered as a virtue at a rather late stage, and at any rate, much less emphasis is laid on it than in Christianity. (Elitzur, 1987, chapt. 15) Let us then survey the main Christian interpretations of humility.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, humility is a moral virtue which consists “in keeping oneself within one’s own bounds, not reaching out to things above one.”(6) Catholic theology regards it as part of the cardinal virtue of temperance in that it represses inordinate ambition and self-esteem without allowing man to fall into the opposite error of exaggerated or hypocritical self-abjection. Hence, humility is considered the foundation and *conditio sine qua non* of the spiritual life, because it subjects reason and will to God. It was enjoined by Christ in His teaching (7) and especially by His example (8) and after Him by many of the saints, so that St. Augustine could write: *Tota Christina religio humilitas est* (“The whole of the Christian religion is humility”). St. Benedict in his “Rule” set forth 12 degrees of humility, and since then spiritual writers have systematically studied it and arrived at various enumerations, especially with regard to its development both in the life of the religious in general (9), and that of the mystics in particular (10). By Protestant theologians, humility has been variously defined. Martin Luther regarded it as the joyful acceptance of God’s will, and modern Protestant moralists (e.g. A. Ritschl) identify it as complete resignation to our unconditional dependence on God.

Pride and humility are two alternative ways of being in this world. Yet, not everyone can or want to be humble: humility can be conceived as a “broken spirit”, and as such, may not appeal to many people. For others, humility is an ideal which

they find very difficult to reach. As for pride, the non-theological case against it is that it inevitably brings sorrow, disappointment, suffering. Man's pride will necessarily be hurt, because life doesn't acknowledge it.

There is a third alternative of being in the world, but I am afraid that this one is not a matter of choice. It involves the concept of humiliation, which is etymologically related to humility through the Latin *humilis* (low).

Humiliation

Let me begin this section by some clarifications. Man's lot on earth is common knowledge; yet, what we call "the human condition" may be subjected to different interpretations, the content of which is no more than an attempt to seize and formulate the essence of man's lot. Awareness of human condition is an individual matter. Even if we could all agree about the right interpretation of human condition, we would differ in the degree of our awareness of it, and indeed, even in our motivation to be aware of it at all. As it is common knowledge, descriptive comments on man's lot will be avoided; I will suggest a tentative approach to human condition and will point out why it is important, in my view, to be aware of it.

One of the widely known characterizations of human condition is "frustration". According to this view, man's needs, demands, ambitions, ideals cannot be fulfilled for various reasons (e.g. a non-cooperative world, the clash with other men's needs, demands, ideals, the contradiction between man's own different needs) and the outcome of this failure is the feeling we call frustration. In an earlier paper (Amir, 1984), I described human condition in a similar vein. But since then, I realized that we use the same term, namely, frustration, for minor, well-delineated and specific cases (e.g. queuing for a movie ticket only to be told that the last ticket has just been sold) as well as for the accumulative effect of the total sum of frustrations.

The repeated use of the term frustration for the day-to-day disillusionments and defeats erodes its validity as a true description of human experience. We end up with a concept that must encompass more than its undermined meaning can bear. As human condition seems to be best described as a continuous, a chronic - if one may say so - frustration, I suggest that we will try to find a stronger concept to differentiate the chronic from the ephemeral, the inevitable from the contingent. In addition, there is more to human condition than chronic frustration: a feeling of helplessness, of impotence as regarding this frustration accompanies it. Finally, there is one more demand which is relevant to human condition: one has to be painfully aware of one's chronic frustration and one's helplessness with regard to it.

I propose to call the feeling that results from this awareness of chronic frustration and of the impotence regarding it - humiliation. By humiliation I mean “the state of being humiliated” (11); and “humiliate” is defined as “lower the dignity or self-respect of; mortify” (12). If man is aware of his chronic frustration and his impotence regarding it, he cannot but feel impairment in his dignity, a wound in his pride: human condition is humiliating, not just frustrating.

I don't know if we can talk about an animal as being frustrated in a given situation; but I think we cannot talk about a humiliated animal, because humiliation is a proper human emotion, as it involves self-consciousness - the awareness of the impairment of such human inventions as dignity or pride. It is because man has a sense of his dignity, that he can feel cheated, debased, insulted, in one word - humiliated, by the way life deprives him slowly but systematically of everything he values and cherishes: of knowledge, of power, of control, of his ideals, his health, of the love of his beloved, of life, finally. Man has invented for himself a dignity, a

pride, which life refuses to acknowledge. How did this happen? How could this happen?

It seems that man’s predicament stems from the development of his self-consciousness; this self-consciousness was the breaking point from his animal past and from then on, by further development, the source of his pride as well as the source of his alienation from the world and its lower inhabitants. This self-consciousness made him aware of an inward contradiction - the contradiction between his necessary activity as an active creature, on the one hand, and his passive and suffering existence, on the other. If activity is taken in the broader sense of all man's endeavor, we can find in this initial contradiction the seed of man's chronic and inevitable frustration (which will eventually result from his necessary activity) as well as the seed of his feeling of impotence (which will eventually result from his passive and suffering existence). At the same time, we can already detect in the contradiction the germ of the two alternative ways of escaping it. The awareness of his activity (in the broader sense proposed above) will lead to pride, and the awareness of his passive and suffering existence will be the root of humility.

These two alternatives - refined during the years - will not do if man wants to preserve his dignity; humility is a renouncement of it and pride will always lead to an impairment of it. The choices he must make are not satisfying and he cannot abide in one solution or the other. An understanding of the initial contradiction mentioned above leads to an understanding of man’s humiliating condition. Man seems to be climbing a pillar; he sometimes reaches almost the top, receives a blow, falls downward, stops a little higher than humility, feels the temptation, overcomes it (or alternatively, tries to be humble, fails) and climbs upward again to the middle-stage of humiliation - to rest a while and ruminate about his condition. And then he tries again.

One may wonder: what does all this have to do with humor?

Humiliation and Humor

Theories of humor made use of the concept of humiliation; in fact, the relationship between humor and humiliation is a long one and can be traced back to Plato. He is credited with founding the Derision/Superiority Theory with his observation that "at the sight of tragedies the spectators smile through their tears…even at a comedy the soul experiences a mixed feeling of pain and pleasure…pleasure of seeing other people humiliated" (13). To take a more modern example of this relationship, we may quote Henri Bergson, whose own theory of humor has affinities with the Derision/Superiority Theory. He writes, "Laughing always implies a secret or unconscious…an unavowed intention to humiliate…"(Bergson, 1928, p.135).

These views still enjoy a wide popularity to this day. Yet, the pertinent question is whether the relationship between humor and humiliation is a one-way relationship: plainly speaking, does humor "use" humiliation but cannot be "used" by it? And if it can, in what ways can humiliation use humor? At first glance, it seems that humor could be relevant to humiliation in three ways, the first two of which are contradictory to each other:

a) as a defense mechanism against the awareness of human condition as humiliating;

b) as a vehicle of the painful truth about man's humiliation, which otherwise will be unacceptable;

c) as a means of coping with the painful awareness of our humiliation.

I will try to answer the question of the relevance of humor to humiliation, by considering the major humor theories (in their classical formulations as well as in

their modern ones) (14). I propose to begin with a more detailed exposition of the still very popular Derision/Superiority Theory.

1) Derision/Superiority Theory

At first glance, this oldest known theory of humor seems a good candidate for answering our question, for as mentioned and quoted above, this is the theory that links humor and humiliation. To quote a modern exponent, though not an adherent of it: “Derision theory is based on the premise that we laugh down at others. Its basic drive is to humiliate, to subjugate, to disparage”; it sees humor as “an attack on the individual dignity” (MacHover, 1988, pp. 31, 34). According to this theory, finding something humorous necessarily involves a feeling of triumph and superiority, and this is why we laugh at human incompetence, clumsiness, clowning and misfortune. Thomas Hobbes gave this theory its classic statement, when he said that laughter expresses “a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.” (Hobbes, 1840, p. 46) (15)

Given the interpretation of human condition as humiliating, it may be possible to explain both why this theory is so popular and why some of us cannot find anything funny in, and even dislike utterly, humor that uses elements of humiliation. (if slapstick comedy doesn't make you laugh, and if you are the only sad and moved person in the cinema when watching a Charlie Chaplin movie, while everyone around you is laughing, you are one of those people). It seems that those who laugh all heartily use this kind of humor as a very strong defense mechanism against the awareness of their own condition as humiliating; those who don’t laugh, sense intuitively that receiving the cream cake right in the face is the best illustration of human condition. Thus, humor of this kind can also function in this context as a

vehicle of truth. And indeed, it has functioned as such, through some universal cinematic and literary anti-heroes. The different degrees of motivation for becoming aware of human condition - which I mentioned above - appear in the individual reaction towards such anti-heroes and their misfortunes - from the lowest kind of slapstick comedy misfortunes to a Charlie Chaplin, a Soldier Svejk and a Don Quixote. Thus, the Derision/Superiority Theory may be interpreted as providing two ways in which humor can be linked to human condition as humiliation, namely, as a strong defense mechanism or as a vehicle of truth.

Still, a most important question remains: can humor help us cope with our humiliation? Can this theory explain how humor could help us? According to Plato's formulation of the theory, I think the answer is negative: although he mentions pain, it is pleasure that is derived "from seeing other people humiliated". Now, if we take into consideration that as we partake in man's humiliation, it's also our humiliation we "see", I cannot figure out how we can derive any pleasure from this sight.
There is another possibility, though, namely, to try to see ourselves as if we were "other people", but I am afraid it will not do on a universal or cosmic scale, for we would have "to look down", so to speak, at ourselves - from where? We would need to place ourselves above or beyond human condition and in doing so, we would exclude ourselves from that condition.

Let's turn to Bergson's phrase that "laughing always implies…an intention to humiliate". When his phrase is applied to our purpose, we reach sheer absurdity, for if we succeed in laughing at our human condition, i.e. our humiliation, it will be, according to Bergson, with the intention of humiliating ourselves. But this absurd possibility is overruled by another phrase of Bergson: "Depict some fault, however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity; the mischief is done and it

is impossible for us to laugh' (Bergson, 1928, p.136). It is clear that when human condition as humiliation is involved, self-pity arises too, and thus laughter is impossible.

Hobbes seems to be most promising, for his description includes a comparison not only with others but also with ourselves, in a former state. Let us recall that laughter expresses "a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly". But imagine that we suddenly realize, in some situation, that our condition is humiliating; this realization would be the realization of our infirmity, and because we would now be in an emotionally worse state than before the realization, we would not be able to conceive and "eminency in ourselves" nor feel any "sudden glory". Perhaps we could recognize in the reversal of situations, namely, the sudden fall instead of the sudden glory, an old comic trick, and thus, might squeeze a smile at our human condition? I doubt it, because our sudden fall, i.e. the recognition of humiliation as human condition will be so painful that it seems unlikely that we could even notice the irony involved. Moreover, if we could detect some irony, we would have to play God, looking ironically at our fellow men, for if we include ourselves in that number, the ironical eye laid on us would just increase our humiliation.
Yet, there is another possibility: perhaps "the sudden glory" would arise because we would think our eminency consists of the very fact of perceiving the truth about our condition, and that the others' infirmity or our own's formerly, lies in their ignorance or in our former ignorance. This is the only interpretation that fits Hobbes' definition, because in at least one respect, we would have to judge ourselves as superior. But I think that the reaction to that superiority would vary much with individuals and physiologically, would not go further than grinning (or crying). In any case there

won't be any humor involved, for it seems that this is one of the cases of non-humorous laughter which Hobbes' formulation allows.

With the dismissal of this interpretation, it seems that the Derision/Superiority Theory doesn't provide a possibility of using humor for coping better with human condition as humiliation. Let us turn then to Relief Theories of humor.

2) Relief Theories

Aristotle referred to the power of laughter to relieve us of nervous tension in his comments on catharsis in comedy. We had to wait for Herbert Spencer for a more explicit theory of laughter as a release of energy (Spencer, 1911). According to Spencer, laughter occurs when some emotion has built up but then suddenly seems to be inappropriate (If I feel fearful because I think I hear someone following me, for example, then upon discovering that it was only the echo of my steps, I might break into laugher).

Obviously there is nothing in this theory that could account for the use of laughter at human condition as humiliating. Nor can it account for humor as a vehicle of truth, or a self-defense mechanism with regard to humiliation. The reason is simple: relief and humiliation exclude one another.

Spencer influenced, among others, Dewey and Freud (Freud, 1976). Freud's theory of humor will be just sketched here: in all laughter situations we save a certain quantity of psychic energy, which turns out not to be needed. Laughter is the discharge of this superfluous energy. We need not go into details to see that, whether the energy saved is normally used to suppress forbidden feelings and thoughts, or it is energy in thought or in emotion - the energies involved in, respectively, what Freud calls jokes, the comic or humor - this theory cannot explain how we may use humor for coping with human condition as humiliation. Nevertheless, if feelings of

humiliation or frustration are “forbidden feelings” in Freud’s sense, then his theory may link humor to humiliation both as a defense mechanism (against the awareness of this and similar feelings) and as a vehicle of truth, since the discharge in laughter of the saved energy (which is usually used to suppress those forbidden feelings) may allow for a momentary glance at truth, in this case, the humiliation involved in human condition.

3) Incongruity Theories

From some scattered comments in Aristotle, via Kant (1892) and Schopenhauer (1909), to contemporary refinements of it (by Michael Clark (1987), Mike Martin (1987) and John Morreall (1983, 1987, 1989, 1999) - this is the most widely accepted philosophical theory of humor today. The basic idea of the theory of the Humorous as the Incongruous is the following: because we live in an orderly world we have come to expect certain patterns among things, properties, events etc…When we experience something that does not fit these patterns, or that violates our expectations, we laugh.

Many cases of incongruity are not humorous. Alexander Bain collected a few. He wrote: “There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh. a decrepit man under a heavy burden, five loaves and two fishes among a multitude, and all unfitness and gross disproportion; an instrument out of tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May, Archimedes studying geometry in a siege, and all discordant things; a wolf in sheep's clothing, a breach of bargain, and falsehood in general; the multitude taking the law into their own hands, and everything of the nature of disorder; a corpse at a feast, parental cruelty, filial ingratitude, and whatever is unnatural; the entire catalogue of vanities given by Solomon, - are all incongruous, but they cause feelings of pain, anger, sadness, loathing, rather than mirth.” (Bain, 1875, pp. 282-3; Clark, 1987, p.144).

Human condition involves an incongruity; none of our expectations from the world is fully met: we expect intelligibility, justice, meaning or purpose and some compatibility between ourselves and the world. As Stephan Crane, in the Red Badge of Courage, put it: "A man said to the universe: 'Sir, I exist'. 'However', replied the Universe, 'that fact has not created in me a sense of obligation.'" (MacHovec, 1988, p. 31)

Our dignity as intelligent creatures with a scale of values is impaired by a silent and non-cooperative universe; we feel humiliated and thus The Great Incongruity (as I will call the lack of compatibility between man and the universe) cannot, as the incongruities listed by Bain, produce mirth.

The two other functions of humor which can be of any relevance to humiliation, are irrelevant according to the incongruity theory: neither a defense mechanism against humiliation nor humor as a vehicle of truth seem to be involved in this theory as presented so far.

The last hope of finding a theory that would explain how humor can be used in the case of the Great Incongruity lies in the modern refinement of the Incongruity Theory. Neither Michael Clark's refined theory, nor Mike Martin's, are of any help, though I cannot elaborate on this point in this paper. I propose, therefore, to concentrate on John Morreall's theory of Incongruity, which he consistently defends since 1983. (Morreall, 1983, chapt. 5-6; 1987, chap. 16; 1989; 1999, chapt. 3). I will probe the theory in some detail, for it will allow me to draw some general conclusions at the end of the paper. In one of his writings, he says: "According to the incongruity theory, the basic phenomenon to explain about humor is humorous amusement, henceforth simply 'amusement', and amusement is explained as the enjoyment of incongruity" (Morreall, 1989, p.7).

John Morreall is aware of the fact that there might be different reactions to incongruity: we may react by negative emotions, puzzlement or amusement. The obvious similarity between the first two reactions to incongruity is that they involve “an uneasiness or tension based on our dissatisfaction with things as they stand” (Morreall, 1989, p.7). “The first two”, as Morreall tries to show “are evolutionary continuations of the reactions of all higher animals to incongruity; the third, amusement. Is our uniquely human response to incongruity” (ibid. p.6). I would like to elaborate about the negative emotions. Negative emotions, says Morreall, “are such unpleasant or painful experiences as fear, anger, jealousy, regret and shame…In these negative emotions, what bothers us is some violation of what we see as the proper order of things, the order on which our expectations are based…In all negative emotions some situation that matters to us is judged, at least subconsciously, to be not as we think it should be, and we feel a practical concern about this incongruity”. (Ibid.)

Puzzlement and negative emotions as reactions to incongruities exclude amusement. But under the right conditions incongruities usually yielding negative emotions and incongruities usually yielding puzzlement, could be perceived as amusing. The example Morreall gives is finding an alligator in the bathtub or finding a saxophone in it. The former will probably yield fear and the latter puzzlement. But were the alligator small and the tub deep enough, or in the case of the saxophone, were I in a mood where I didn't need to figure everything out, I might find either the alligator or the saxophone funny to behold in the tub. “The important thing to notice here”, he sums up, “is how different amusement would be from the other two reactions - in amusement not one is everything acceptable just as it is, everything is enjoyable just as it is.” (Ibid. p. 9)

Morreall is quite aware of the importance “to see ourselves more objectively, ‘from the outside’” and to laugh at ourselves. But he restricts this self-directed humor and this objectivity to “a world of which we are not the center seeing ourselves as just one human being among many”, and fostering thus the development of morality. (ibid. p. 14) He links humor and aesthetic enjoyment; “when the world is too much with us”, he writes, “we can disengage ourselves, at least temporarily, in imagination, and enjoy the spectacle. Humor liberates us from practical and even theoretical concerns and lets us look at the world from a higher, less entangled perspective, as a kind of aesthetic field.” (ibid. p. 18) Moreover, he links humor and rationality and goes as far as contending that “the humorous vision of the world is the rational perspective par excellence. Not only is the rational animal the laughing animal, but its laughter may be the highest form its rationality takes.” (16)

When we try to find out whether on Morreall’s theory it is possible to apply humor to the Great Incongruity involved in the human condition, a royal famous phrase comes to mind: “we are not amused!”. Unfortunately, our reaction to the Great Incongruity is humiliation, which fits perfectly within Morreall’s category of negative emotions, and thus, excludes amusement. It appears, therefore, that we cannot meet the conditions set by Morreall for humor.

With this last failure in mind, we can reach some general conclusions about the theories we have probed. No attempt was made in this paper to verify whether any theory of humor is right or wrong. The interest lied rather in their potential possibility to explain how humor may help us cope with human condition. Unfortunately, we discovered that neither of them can even give a positive answer to the simpler question, namely, whether, on their terms, humor can help us cope with human condition. Even if there is disagreement about the description of human condition as

humiliating, and a milder term is preferred - frustrating, for example - the outcome will be the same, so long as a “negative” feeling or emotion will be chosen. Therefore, either our theories are too narrow or humor cannot help when most needed.
The question I would try to answer now is why our theories fall short of applying humor to human condition? I will try to do so through Morreall's theory, for my sympathy goes to the incongruity theory, and I find it more likely than other theories to be someday extended to cover human condition.

Morreall gives humor a role which is, at the same time, both too large and too narrow. Too large when he depicts as a matter of fact what seems to be a remote ideal. He can give humor such a role because of his faith in man's rationality, in his ability to be amused rather than alarmed by incongruities, and, “when life is too much with him”, in his ability to “enjoy the spectacle” as an aesthetic phenomenon.

This set of beliefs is not substantiated by facts; I am afraid that Morreall's demands might be too much for us. Something similar to what Morreall depicts as a fact, was longed for, as an ideal, by Nietzsche. We complain that reality is not to our taste, said Nietzsche, so let us develop a taste for reality. He longed for the laughter of the overman who would perhaps, someday, really enjoy life, in spite of its horrors, and overcome "the spirit of heaviness", which symbolizes for Nietzsche all the burdens of life. He sanctified laughter. He thought that life could be enjoyed (and justified) only as an aesthetic phenomenon. But he was aware of the fact that, meanwhile, we are not ready for these tasks, for, to use his own words, we are all-too human. (17)

Morreall gives humor too narrow a role because he doesn't extend humor beyond self-directed humor, beyond our relationship with our fellowmen, beyond his concern for morality, and beyond mere amusement or enjoyment of life. I am not

saying that Morreall fails to see the great qualities of humor - on the contrary - but he is silent about some of the most important characteristics of humor, as a means to promote truth, as a hindrance to truth, and as an aid to bear human condition.

In this he echoes the way in which contemporary philosophers address a different, though no less important, problem, namely, the meaning of life: instead of looking for the meaning *of* life, some of these philosophers decided that we should abandon that ancient and difficult question and look for the meaning *in* life (18). Morreall as a theoretician of humor is not alone in neglecting the potential humor *of* life and concentrating on humor *in* life - if one can express the parallel in a somewhat awkward language. Humor in life is a wonderful thing, but treated as a means to amusement, it is lowered to the level of other pleasures. Music, for example, is no less a blessing than humor and shares with it many beneficial effects. But in my view, we should not deprive humor of its unique characteristics, by ignoring them; and we should not oversimplify the problem of human condition by assuming that if life will be more agreeable - by using humor, for instance - human condition will change for the better. If we want humor to remain an instrument of survival, we would have to adapt it to the problem that stems from man's growing awareness of his condition. I am confident that eventually we will find a way to do so, for we are too proud to remain humiliated too long.

Meanwhile, it seems that we have discovered a new source of humiliation - after two thousand and five hundred years of thought, such scrupulous and dedicated research, so many fruitful congresses and such a wonderful collective sense of humor - we still are incapable of making any humorous sense out of our human condition. Thus, Hubris or human pride is hurt once again: Divine comedy is for the Divine,

Laughter - for the Overman, and we? We wait, more humiliated than ever, with a saxophone in our bathtub to amuse us.

Notes

1. Humor has been considered by some scholars as reveling a truth (in the Heiddegerian sense) about the universe. See, for example, Michael Gelvin, Truth and the Comedic Art, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000; and Hub Zwart, Ethical Consensus and the Truth of Laughter, Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996. As for humor and its relation to the virtues, the following works are worth mentioning: Robert C. Roberts "Humor and the Virtues" in Inquiry, 1988, vol. 31, pp.127-149; John Morreall "Comic Virtues", unpublished paper; Tragedy, Comedy and Religion, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999; John Lippitt, "Laughter as a Tool in Moral Perfectionism", in John Lippitt (ed) Nietszche's Futures, New York: St.Martin Press, 1999; and Andre Comte-Sponville, Petit Traite des Grandes Vertus, Paris: P.U.F., 1995.

2. Pindar, Isthmian Odes, V, Lines 14-16, quoted in E.R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951, p. 302.

3. As the chorus in Aeschylus' Agamemnon warns us: "In fame unmeasured, praise too high, lies danger: God's harp lightning fly to stagger mountains". Aeschylus, Agamemnon, lines 467-9, in The Oresteian Trilogy, trans. Phillip Vellacott, Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics, 1956.

4. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, X, 7, trans. J.A.K. Thomson, Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics, 1953, p. 305.

5. The Concise Oxford Dictionary, p. 52.

6. Thomas Aquinas, Suma contra Gentiles, IV, 55. Trans. Thomas Gilby. London: Blackfriars, 1972.

7. For example, Luke, 14.11; Matthew, 18.4.

8. Matthew, 11.23; Philippines, 2.7.ff.

9. For example, St.Ignatius Loyola in his Exercises. Cf. John Passmore, The Perfectibility of Man. London: Dustworth, 1970, pp. 292-3.

10. I refer to St. Bernard and J. Tauler. Cf. Etienne Gilson, The Mystical Theology of St Bernard. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940.

11. Webster Third New International Dictionary, p. 1101.

12. The Concise Oxford Dictionary, p. 52.

13. Quoted in M. Eastman, The Sense of Humor, Charles Scriber's, New York, 1922, p. 123. Cf. Plato, Republic, III, 388; Republic, V, 452; Laws, VII, 816; Laws, XI, 935-936; Philebus, 48-50. In The Collected Dialogues of Plato. Eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

14. The division follows D.H. Monro's (1951), J. Morreall's (1983; 1987), M. Clark's (1987) and others.

15. This quote is from Human Nature. Cf. also Leviathan, I, 6. In Thomas Hobbes, Works. London: Molesworth, 1840.

16. Ibid. For another relationship between incongruity and rationality, see George Santayana, The Sense of Beauty, New York: Scribner's, 1986, pp. 245-258.

17. Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Part IV, chapter 11; chapter 13, sections 14 and 20. But these thoughts are exposed in most of his writings. See Friedrich Nietszche, The Portable Nietszche. Trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking, 1954. See also Georges A. Morgan, What Nietszche Means, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1941, pp. 311-313. More specific works about Nietszche and laughter are: John Lippitt (op.cit.); Alexis Philonenko, Nietzsche: Le Rire et le Tragique, Paris: Librairie Generale Francaise, 1995; Kathleen Marie Higgins, Comic Relief: Nietzsche's Gay Science. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Francesca Cauchi, Zarathustra Contra Zarathustra: The Tragic Buffoon, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998; Sander L.Gilman, Nietzschean Parody: An Introduction to Reading Nietzsche, Bonn: Bouvier, 1976; Also innumerable articles, a list of which appear in any one of this books, among which I mention Lawrence J. Hatab, "Laughter in Nietzsche's Thought: a Philosophical Tragicomedy", in International Studies in Philosophy, 1998, Vol. 20/2, pp. 67-79; and Lydia Amir, "When Nietzsche Laughed: Tragic Philosophy and Laughter", paper presented at the 20th International Conference on Humor, The University of Maryland, U.S.A., 2001.

18. For example Kurt Baier, Richard Taylor, E.D. Klemke, in E.D. Klemke (ed.), The Meaning of Life, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

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