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# ABSTRACT.

Much of Western Philosophy has overlooked the central importance which human beings attribute to the Aesthetic experiences. The phenomena of laughter and comedy have largely been passed over as "too subjective" or highly emotive and therefore resistant to philosophical analysis, because they do not easily lend themselves to the imposition of Absolutist or strongly theory-driven perspectives.

The existence of the phenomena of laughter and comedy are highly valued because they are viewed as strongly communal activities and expressions. These actually facilitate our experiences as inherently social beings, and our philosophical understanding of ourselves as beings, who experience passions and life itself amidst a world of fluctuating meanings and human drives.

I will illustrate how the study of "Aesthetics" developed from Ancient Greek conceptions, through the post-Kantian and post-Romantic periods, which opened-up a pathway to the explicit consideration of the phenomena of laughter and comedy, with particular reference to the Apollonian/Dionysian conceptual schemata referred to in Nietzsche's early works.

I will demonstrate how our understandings and experiences of the phenomena facilitate the *meaningful* nature of our relationships with human beings and the natural world as a whole, due to their ability to facilitate states of communal existence and to convey both linguistic and non-linguistic understandings of the meaning and value of life. Comedy and laughter also allow us to communicate integral human experiences which are highly resistant to purely linguistic expression and analysis.

I will also highlight the value of laughter as a Dionysian, communal phenomena and expression, which possesses many Apollonian qualities because its drive can be channeled (via the medium of comedy), into the expression of deeply philosophical and social issues, such as our moral beliefs, the nature of meaning itself and the nature of the interrelations between individuals and also of those between persons and their society.

# "On Laughter"

By Reuben Hind

The question of the role and meaning of the phenomenon of laughter in human life and its status in relation to the philosophic enterprise and the attainment of happiness, or the "good life", was taken to be a serious question with important ethical and political implications by the Ancient Greeks, yet was subsequently largely passed over in later Philosophical thinking[1], in deference to increasingly Rationalistic views of Epistemology and the relation between human understanding and reality. Much of the European tradition seems to have regarded the question in the light of Plato's seemingly hostile stance towards Poetry, espoused in *The Republic,* with laughter itself being seen as of little importance or even as an obstacle to the pursuit of truth, as related only to the common realm of the *vulgar* tastes of the masses and so as unworthy of any serious Philosophical consideration.

I will argue that the Philosophical exploration of laughter and its relation to both our understandings of *meaning* itself and to our subsequent *ability* to gain Epistemological and Existential insight is of central importance. The origin of such an explanation can be found in pre-Socratic thought and can be seen as embedded in the heart of the Socratic ideal and as inextricable from Plato's own Philosophical technique. Indeed, Plato's protégé Aristotle deemed the question of the status of

[1] As were most Aesthetic questions until the 18th and 19th Century and the rise of the Romanticist movement.

Comedy and of Poetry as a whole as of enough Philosophical importance to warrant his writing of *The Poetics*, as a response to his teacher's views and as an attempt to outline the proper content and place of Poetry in education and in society as a whole, giving the role of Poetry and Comedy in society an Ethical and Political dimension. Aristotle's views in this work have often been seen simply as a defense of the Aesthetic value of Poetry against Plato, however closer careful consideration shows that Aristotle himself also held a somewhat ambivalent view of the role which Comedy as Poetry could play in society and the Philosophic life.

I shall begin by considering the fundamental early Philosophical principles of some pre-Socratic thinkers and will show how the activity of Philosophy is inextricably linked with the critical recognition of the absurdly *Comic* nature of the Philosophic quest, and of human life itself.

Any student of Philosophy must be aware of the Socratic maxims of "Know Thyself!", which was inscribed above the entrance to the temple of the Oracle at Delphi and so is conceived of as being of fundamental and foundational importance to any Epistemological endeavor, and also of the maxim that "Wisest is he who knows that he does not know". At the very outset of our journey we are advised (or warned), that any attempt to understand life and the world must be conceived of as primarily relating to, of having *meaning* in relation to, our attempts to understand ourselves. Any understanding we may have can only ever be partial and not absolute due to the *finite* nature of human knowledge and existence and so the examination of Philosophical considerations necessarily entails a *critical* attitude which exposes ignorance and error: Firstly, in the self-understanding of the potential Philosopher, then in the proclamations of others and in the firmly-held pre-conceptions which

constitute everyday life and *understandings* of reality, meaning and life itself. I will argue that the phenomena of laughter can be seen as a basic response to, and as an indication of, the recognition of underlying *absurdity* in human speech and action and also in the expression of *finite*, human thought. Laughter intimates and reinforces the *recognition* of our finite Epistemological stance whilst simultaneously showing the need for a *critical* stance to all attempts at expressions, and the pursuit, of knowledge or intellectual authority, and so echoes the force of the central Philosophical edicts mentioned above. The actual *act* of laughing is recognized to be joyful, pleasant and to have a strongly communal character, making the development of the critical outlook and Philosophical understanding a *positive* activity, which may lead us to recognise the inter-subjective nature of human existence and also lead us away from pessimistic or sceptical conclusions regarding the value of life and the philosophical endeavor.

I believe that laughter and the comic *attitude* play a central role in the Philosophical outlook, as epitomised by Plato's dramatic portrayal of his revered teacher Socrates and his famous use of *Socratic-irony* and paradox, and as espoused even earlier in Heraclitus' cosmology. It can also enable us to comprehend and *embrace* the value of life itself in the face of the ultimately incomplete, partialistic and even *absurd* nature of meaning and subsequently of the Philosophical pursuit of *truth*, especially when regarded as purely Rationalistic, *absolute* knowledge.

When Socrates posed the ethical question of whether philosophy can constitute the good life, of whether it is better to be an "unhappy philosopher" or a "happy pig", he is outlining two extremes of a sliding scale where we must determine our own place: We must realize that we can never exist in an entirely animalistic way and so *must*

partake in philosophical considerations to some degree, and therefore may never be able to achieve complete happiness. The surface of the question seems to be itself *comically* absurd in respect to *both* extremes, yet it also exposes the comic problem at the heart of any exclusively theory-driven attempt to attain wisdom *and* happiness, of the inherent *tension* between the "realms" of the ideal and the actual, implying that the two may be negatively-correlated or even mutually exclusive.

The question itself, with its internal tension, points us towards *critically* considering the *value* of philosophy as the quest of finite human beings for meaning, understanding and knowledge in a fluctuating, changing world and towards contemplating the very value *of life itself* in response to the ultimately *incomplete* status of the search for meaning and truth. How we conceive of truth and knowledge, whether they can or need to assure us of *absolute* certainty or not, how we respond to the Epistemological question and its relation to the possibility of happiness and its Ethical implications must ultimately be a matter of *attitude*. We may shudder in pessimistic fear and bemoan our unhappy lot as finite beings tragically doomed to disappointment and misery for our hubristic grasping towards divine *absolute* knowledge, or we may *joyfully* embrace the pleasure of the *journey* in our recognition of the very value of the striving that constitutes the comedy of life and the comic status of philosophy, *despite* the fact that no absolute certainty can be attained. This recognition is then expressed in the appropriate manner; as laughter[2]. Thus laughter signals and affirms our critical understanding of the meaning of the seemingly paradoxical question, and so also affirms the *joy* and positive *value* of our own

[2] We may choose to respond to Socrates' paradoxical question regarding the absurdity of human understanding, and so to *our own* life, by adopting a perspective of Tragic pessimism and striving *against* what we fear to be the case, or we may recognise the question as a *seriously* philosophical joke and respond in the most appropriate way, with the pleasant joy of *laughter.*

existence and of the philosophic quest itself.

## Pre-Socratic Origins.

Plato's own philosophy should be considered within the context of its emergence upon the horizon of pre-Socratic Cosmological thought regarding the nature of reality, the relation to it of our attempts at philosophical understanding and the nature of meaning itself.

In *Philosophy In The Tragic Age of the Greeks* (1962) Nietzsche discusses various pre-Socratic thinkers, foreshadowing his conception of an *Artistic-Metaphysics*[3] as *against* absolute standards that "condemn *all* art to the realm of falsehood" and so are *hostile to life itself*, because for him "all life rests on appearance, art, illusion, optics [the] necessity of perspective and error" (Nietzsche, 1909 p.10), so that "the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (ibid, p.8). The origins of this dispute between Absolutist and Aesthetic perspectives[4], their roles in Philosophy and society and the legitimacy of their claims to knowledge, can be traced back to the

[3] In direct antithesis to Christian dogma, "Art – and *not* morality – is set down as the properly *metaphysical* activity of man" (Nietzsche, 1909 p.8). See also Danto (1965) Chapter 2; *Art and Irrationality* (pp.36-67) who states that, for Nietzsche "art has no less a claim than sense or science to objective truth…because neither sense nor science can make any stronger claim to truth than art" (ibid p.37). Both science and art consist in illusions, however where "the illusions of science and sense [make] life possible, the illusions of art [make] it bearable" (ibid p.38).

[4] A quarrel that which would become of central importance to Plato and subsequently Aristotle.

Cosmological philosophy of Heraclitus regarding the problem of change and strife as experienced in the world, and to subsequent thinkers' attempts to establish the superiority of the role of reason by enforcing a dichotomous distinction between appearance and reality, thereby *distorting* our understanding of the nature of meaning and our relation to the cosmos.

Nietzsche views philosophy as "both an art and a science" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.13); he considers artistic conceptualisations to be at the centre of Ancient Greek perspectives on life and of important influence upon early pre-Socratic thought, in the form of the two art-deities of *Dionysus* and *Apollo* as "artistic powers, which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*" (Nietzsche, 1909 p.28). These powers can be viewed as archetypal-configurations, cultural-patterns or as fundamental psychological experiences and the expression of basic drives, yet are initially introduced as two *tendencies* conceived of as "the separate art-worlds of *dreamland* and *drunkenness*"[5] (ibid, p.22). Dionysus' domain is a *dynamic* realm of ecstatic *self-forgetfulness,* orgy and revelry, epitomized in the Ancient Greek festivities of music, song, dance, sexual licentiousness and general intoxication: "He symbolises mankind's urge to shed itself of human individualities and personalities, to submerge or re-submerge in a single all-embracing current of libido" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.14). Dionysus is contrasted by Apollo, described as an expression of the *principle of individuation*, as "the god of all shaping energies …[symbolizing measure, form, civilized order …[whose] art consists of a dream-like series of visual images…[and whose] genius is plastic and architectonic, rather than musical and moving" (ibid,

[5] Nietzsche, 1909 p.22: I would argue that the translation of the German term "rausch" is more faithfully translated as "intoxication" in general rather than as "drunkenness" in particular, especially in the light of Nietzsche's own misgivings about the role and influence of alcohol in his own society (see ibid, p.12 and p.26 and Danto (1965) pp.48-49 & p.65 for further details).

p.14).

Already we can see which side Plato's affinity will lean towards, although the *interdependent* nature of the two deities which is highlighted in Nietzsche's thought indicates the deep problem that Plato experienced in the recognition that his own highly *Apollonian* philosophy was ultimately unable to relinquish its necessary relation to the *Dionysian* understanding of life and meaning, as presented in the form of mythical poetry, for "the drama is the Apollonian embodiment of Dionysian perceptions and influences" (Nietzsche, 1909 p.69). This *tension* is carefully harmonized in Plato's dramatic portrayal of the character of Socrates, the ironic, paradoxical, *playful* ideal-philosopher who attains and provokes deeper understanding through his dialectical dialogues with other citizens, some of whom become the butt of Plato's philosophical Comedy which reveals deeper, profoundly significant issues underpinning the surface tensions within and between their own and Socrates' viewpoints.

According to Nietzsche the pre-Socratic Philosophers of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE formulated their judgements as regarding *existence in general* and so expressed the same purpose which was the impetus for the enactment of Tragic Drama. Ancient Greek Philosophy and dramatic Poetry share a similar function, which the early cosmologies of Thales et. al. approached in a quasi-religious manner, describing the "primal origin of all things", and so contained the proto-philosophical, *Dionysian* intimation of the so-called *unity-concept*; that "all things are one" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.39). However, Philosophy attempts to do so "in language devoid of image or fable", and is meant both non-allegorically and non-mythically, which

also gives it the character of natural science (ibid, p.39)[6].

It is through this drive towards generalisation that Philosophy itself emerges by considering "the knowledge of the essence and core of all things, as ascertainable", and also how the Philosopher *as such* emerges by "viewing himself coldly as a mirror of the world"[7] (ibid pp.43+44). For the Philosopher, dialectical thinking serves the same purpose as verse does for the poet, as a *means* to communicate what has initially occurred as a mystic-intuition, yet in Nietzsche's eyes it is itself equally as problematic because it is "basically a metaphoric and entirely unfaithful translation into a totally different sphere and speech" (ibid, pp.44+45).

In the *topos* of the emergence of the Philosophical *perspective* we view Philosophy's close connection and *competition* with the outlook of dramatic Poetry, with both presented as a faithful Epistemological mirror of reality, and both media viewed as a suitable means for guiding the lives of human beings. Both attempted to ascertain the *meaning* of life and being as a whole, and thereby instigated the possibility of the Epistemological and Ethical education of the citizenry through generalised statements on the nature of reality and its relation to human life, and subsequently offered guidance on what can constitute the *good-life* for human beings. This would develop into a *struggle* in the writings of Plato, who attempted to draw a dividing line between the two fields in favour of Philosophy, yet which he eventually felt was only possible by the denigration of Tragic, Comic (and to a lesser extant

[6] Nietzsche describes Thales' drive towards such a *generalisation* as emerging from a "metaphysical conviction which had its origin in a mystic intuition", that he was "propelled by…an illogical power-the power of creative imagination" whose "special strength …is its lightning-quick seizure and illumination of analogies" (Nietzsche, 1962 pp.39+40).

[7] This is in a similar way to which the Ancient dramatic artist or poet was viewed and so was regarded by the Ancients as a suitable tutor for the education and moral-enlightenment of the polis.

Epic), dramatic performance-Poetry, *despite* his belief in the value of Myth, Poetry and allegory to philosophical dialectic.

Heraclitus' philosophy emerges as a direct response to the Ontological problem of change as posed by Anaximander, who assumed a Dualistic distinction between the physical world of *becoming* as the realm of *definite* qualities, and an indefinable and indefinite Metaphysical world of *being*, a distinction which Heraclitus condemned by denying the Metaphysical realm of *being* in his statement that "I see nothing other than becoming" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.51)[8].

For Anaximander the realm of becoming is viewed in quasi-moralistic, *pessimistic* terms "as though it were an illegitimate emancipation from eternal being, a wrong for which destruction is the only penance" (ibid p.46), because the definite qualities of the physical world are always perceived as *passing-away* in the flux of continuous change. Anaximander's search for the logical origin or *first principle* of all things was applied to his Rationalist, Dualistic dichotomy with the resulting assertion that "that which truly *is*…cannot possess definite characteristics, or it would come-to-be and pass away like all the other things" (ibid, p.47) and so *being* must be devoid of any definite qualities *if* it is to be conceived of as everlasting. The indefinite realm is described as *superior* to the physical realm, as an ultimate unity, yet it is *negatively* defined as something which cannot be described in any terms applicable to the world of *becoming*, and may be viewed as "the equal of the Kantian *Ding an sich*" or *thing-in-itself* (ibid, p.47).

[8] It should be noted that the quotations in this section which are taken from Nietzsche's own writings are not always direct translations of Heraclitus' et. al. but are often reworded by the author for greater narrative impact. An insightful commentary regarding the reliability and authenticity of translations attributed to Heraclitus' can be found in Kahn, C (1981) *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary.*

This logical schema led Anaximander to formulate the question of what was now the *problem* of change[9], and the question of the *origin* of the constant stream of *becoming,* experienced in this physical realm. Due to his postulation of the *absolute* superiority of the indefinite he concludes that the constant *becoming* of the physical realm must "have its origin only in eternal being" (ibid, p.50), yet how can the world of becoming originate from a realm that is *negatively* defined, as so radically *qualitatively* different?[10]

Heraclitus' denial of Anaximander's Dualist approach led him to declare that only the realm of *becoming* could be contemplated, that within this constant *flux* patterns of "lawful order [and] unfailing certainties" (ibid, p.51) could be discerned amongst the "everlasting…rhythm of things" (ibid, p.50), so denying the supposed realm of *being* altogether. In an intuitive leap, and supposedly against the Rationalist *law of non-contradiction,* he declared that "'Everything forever has its opposite along with it'" (ibid p.52), embracing both the changing world and the conditions of our experience of it, time and space, which for others (such as Kant), may be *intuitively* perceived without a definite content and so independently of all experience. In denying the eternal nature of a supposed Metaphysical realm of being Heraclitus posited that "everything which co-exists in space and time…has but a relative existence, that each thing exists through and for another like it" (ibid, p.53)[11]. This led Heraclitus to surmise that "the whole nature of reality…lies simply in its acts" (ibid), in the

[9] The question of how anything which has a right to *be* can *pass-away.*

[10] How could the ephemeral emerge from the eternal if the two are of such a distinct and dichotomous character?

[11] Such a proposition was "difficult to reach by way of a concept", but is "a truth of the greatest immediate self-evidence for everyone" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.53).

*relations* of cause and effect, and that everything actual is *impermanent* and in a constant state of *flux*, brought about by the changes which parts of matter produce in each other.

Anaximander's yard-stick or *crutch* of the superior and eternal Metaphysical realm as guarantor of immortal rational-order was thusly kicked-out from under him; all actual things were now considered to be *impermanent*, constantly coming-to-be and passing-away in the process of material *change* and environmental decay, as never existing as *being* as such. This process was now conceived as a *polarity*, an everlasting process of impermanence constituted by the "diverging of a force into two qualitatively different opposed activities that seek to re-unite" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.54), and it is this constant *contest* or *strife of opposites* which creates and sustains nature and all that comes-to-be, making the seemingly permanent and definite *logical* qualities of Anaximander (described as *absolute* opposites), merely the result of the apprehension of the "momentary ascendency of one partner" (ibid p.55).

Nietzsche describes Heraclitus' concept of the eternal *strife of opposites* as derived from the universal application of the Ancient Greek concept of the contest-idea (or *Agon*), which he saw as underlying their conceptions of the *relations* between city-state and individual, between political parties and between cities themselves, and as derived from the environment of the gymnasium and the poetic and artistic festival-contests of the day[12]. His cosmological unity-concept is expressed metaphorically by his declaration that "the world is the *game* Zeus plays" (ibid p.58), the game or *Agon*

[12] For Heraclitus "the one is the many" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.57) and the qualities which we perceive amongst the flux of continual strife are not mere illusions apprehended by the senses (as Parmenides would later suppose), nor are they rigid and autocratic eternal substances (as Anaxagoras would later declare).

that cosmic *fire* (as a cosmos-creating force), plays with itself as warmth, moisture and solidity through the *cyclical* transformation of various types of vapours into the forms of the four elements of the natural world.

Because this movement is cyclical and all parts of being have a *relative* form of existence (due to the unity of opposites), as *expressions* of the interaction of cosmic fire, there can be no *absolute* opposites in Heraclitus' Cosmology[13]. Yet the limited and *finite* human mind, with its partial perspective, attempts to discriminate amongst things in a rational and logical (*Apollonian*) manner to understand them (as *separated* binary opposites), and so perceives things as being divided and thus fails to recognise the *relative* status of the elements of the physical world and the ultimate cosmic connection of all things.

The *relative* relation between the elements of being extends to language and meaning itself for Nietzsche, with both the terms or categories of *being* and *non-being* conceived of as designating "only the most general relationship which connects all things" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.83); we cannot prove the existence of *things-themselves* nor attain any kind of *eternal verity*; concepts and words cannot pierce the *wall of relations* because, (in-keeping with the Delphic command), "it is absolutely impossible for a subject to see or have insight into something while leaving itself out of the picture" (ibid). In Nietzsche's opinion (contra Xenophanes) human beings must conceive of the existence of all other things anthropomorphically and with intuitive, *non-logical* projection via metaphorical analogies with their own existence. Words,

[13] See Nietzsche, 1962 pp.59-60: Cold is but a degree of warmth (or temperature), darkness is but a minimal degree of light and so on; the world itself exists in a phoenix-like way, eternally *recurring* by ending and being reborn anew out of its own ashes, as another world emerging from out of the all-destroying cosmic-fire, and so "all contradictions run into harmony" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.61).

concepts and meanings are bound in a *relational* context which can only make sense when viewed as necessarily involving and relating to the perspective of the individual as situated amongst this physical realm of flux and change.[14]

This dynamic *game* of cosmic fire is a constant work in progress, and this is a purely *Aesthetic perception* described by Heraclitus by way of the *sublime metaphor* of innocent, child-like and artistic, creative-play. This process exhibits change as a structuring and destroying, as an "ever self-renewing impulse to play…[which] forms its structures regularly, conforming to inner laws" and rules which are inherent within the struggle of the many (ibid p.62)[15]. Though human-beings have the capacity to be rational and tend to operate rationally they are still *finite* beings who are thus also able to be irrational and so are *generally speaking* irrational creatures. From this general perspective philosophical striving for insight can seem to be inherently *tragic*, as "forever dissatisfied and unsatisfactory" (ibid p.66), especially if we seek to hubristically gain any form of Rationalistic and logically-rigid, *absolute* knowledge of how reality operates *in abstraction* from our sensory, lived experiences within the physical world.

In Nietzsche's opinion, we have no justifiable grounds for setting-up the authority of reason via the denigration of sensation (and subsequently of Empirical and Aesthetic experiences of the lived-world itself), for the sake of establishing a

[14] For Nietzsche, words themselves "are but symbols for the relations of things to one another and to us" and their meanings are of a relative, dynamic and metaphorical nature (having no essential definitions, nor absolute truth value), and so must also be conceived of as part of the creative game that Zeus plays (Nietzsche, 1962 p.83). This view would go on to inspire the influential theory of *language-games* espoused in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

[15] This process is exemplified in the activity of the artist and the creation of art-objects, where random-play and necessity combine in oppositional harmony and *tension* to create the art-work, where law can be seen to operate within *becoming* and where *play* can be discerned within necessity.

Dualistic world-order which attempts to split the universe and the mind itself into two separate capacities (as Plato would attempt in *The Republic*), nor by arbitrarily employing absolute terms or distinguishing between different types of qualities via a principle of negation, as did Anaximander[16]. Such concepts are posited as *directing* as well as measuring reality and so are used to *condemn* reality itself if it is seen to be at odds with the laws of logic, but we cannot erroneously engage in the *reduction* of truth to generalised abstractions of *existence* and *non-existence* or the separation of *being* (as the "emptiest concept of all" ibid. p.80) from *non-being*[17], but must understand that this life and universe is inherently a game[18], and must therefore restrict ourselves to the realms of possible experience[19].

The universe itself is an artistic or *Aesthetic* object and human existence *can* be seen as valuable and desirable because (in the words of Anaxagoras) it enables us to sensuously experience the "'whole order of the cosmos'" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.113), though this apparent order is viewed as Anaxagoras' stated, as merely being the direct

[16] Neither can we valorize the role of reason through the myopic application of the principle of non-contradiction based on the *assumption* of the identity of thinking and *being* (which cannot be ever be corroborated by sensory, empirical experience); the *assumption* that our capacity to reason is an organ of knowledge which "reaches into the essence of things and is independent of experience" and that the source of the content of such thought is independent of the empirical realm as an "additive…from an extra-sensory world to which we have direct access" (Nietzsche, 1962 p.82), as Parmenides would later attempt. This would lead him to express problematic, counter-intuitive statements against the possibility of *change* itself (See Nietzsche, 1962 pp.69-90 for further details of Parmenides' cosmology and its implications).

[17] As if we could ever possibly know or *meaningfully* speak of such a negatively-defined conception.

[18] I would argue that it follows that it is therefore not to be conceived of or experienced in any *absolutely* serious manner, but must instead be engaged with in the spirit of a game; that is creatively, *playfully* and joyfully.

[19] "The existent should therefore not be sought outside the world and beyond our horizon. Right here before us, everywhere, in all coming-to-be, there is contained an active something which is existent." (Nietzsche, 1962 p.72).

outcome of the blind mechanical movement of matter and the cosmos as a whole[20].

From Nietzsche's perspective, Heraclitus can be seen as approximate to the status of the *Dionysian* philosopher, stating the essential *unity* of all things and the inextricably *relational* nature of all meaning and language, whereas Anaxagoras' comments on the role of *Nous* or Mind (which would be heavily influential upon Plato's philosophy), can be viewed as expressing the *Apollonian* aspect of the cosmos and of our own status as cognitive beings[21]. The disciplines of Philosophy and Poetry share the same originary purpose and the language they use shares the same *metaphorical* relation to reality or the cosmos, however the Philosopher's approach is directed towards the *critical* expression and exploration of general relations through less explicitly mythical language. In Heraclitus' thoughts we glimpse the possibility of a *positive* evaluation of life, of the realisation of the "eternal *delight* of becoming [my gloss]…the affirmation of transiencey *and annihilation*…the yea-saying to antithesis and war, *to becoming*" (Nietzsche, 1909 p.193).

We must turn away from the desire for Metaphysical reassurance through the unjustified positing of the realm of *being* as dichotomously separated from this realm of *becoming*, which valorizes the role of reason at the cost of our sensory lived-

[20] For Anaxagoras the Ancient Greek mythic explanations of *being* and *life* are seen as being expressed in a *symbolic* form regarding the rule of *nous* (usually translated as cosmic spirit, mind or perhaps even the cognitive self-aware subject), and the battles and laws of physics. The concept of the mythical origins of language (as an attempt to understand the world through anthropomorphic metaphors) would go on to influence the Poetry of Euripides, who viewed Tragedy as a means to communicate the *Agon* of the cosmos and of human-life to the masses, whilst also enabling them to be freed from Pessimism regarding the value of existence (See Nietzsche, 1962 pp.112-117 for further details), yet it can be seen as equally applicable to the activity and function of Comic Poetry and its creators.

[21] This Apollonian aspect, as an *individuating* dreamlike process, attempts to discern possible order within this realm of change and flux by applying cognitive, structuring schemata to them.

experiences and the relational and *situated* nature of language and meaning. As Philosophers we must examine into *ourselves* as beings thrown amidst the *only* realm of existence, the realm of *becoming,* and so adopt a sceptical attitude towards any form of Metaphysics, and we may choose to respond to this predicament with despair because we no longer have an *Apollonian* Metaphysical, absolute guarantee of order and justice in the cosmos. However, we may instead choose to embrace the fluctuating nature of the cosmos with a *Dionysian, joyful* laughter which acknowledges and affirms the fact that there can be no ultimate Metaphysical standards by which we can validate our life, yet by the same token that there can therefore be no ideal standard in comparison to which human existence can be considered to be unjust and ultimately worthless. *Joyful* laughter (rather than the tears of despair), is the *appropriate* and fitting human response to the Ontological nature of the cosmos and we must "first of all learn the art of earthly comfort, ye should learn to *laugh* my young friends if ye are at all determined to remain pessimists: if so, you will perhaps, as laughing ones, eventually send all metaphysical comfortism to the devil- and metaphysics first of all!" (Nietzsche, 1909 pp.14 -15).

## **Plato's *The Republic.***

Plato and Aristotle's thoughts on the relation of language and concepts to reality

would emerge as having a large impact upon their conceptions of the relative values of the disciplines of Poetry and Philosophy, and their efficacy as means for Political and Social education regarding the nature of the good-life. Two similar conceptions of the nature of the *relation* between sensory-appearances and reality, as between the word or image and what it represents as a form of *Mimesis* or *imitation*, lie at the heart of their Epistemological considerations of the legitimacy of any claims to sensory knowledge, and their consequent conceptions of the value of and relation between the two disciplines.

Both critically addressed the Ancient Greek view which regarded the function of poets (especially of Homer and Hesiod), to be analogous to that of the mystic seer, as divinely-inspired via the muses and therefore as providing *educational* images of moral and religious virtues and also as expressing hidden, profound *truths* via allegory and symbols in their poetic imitations of human action and speech, thus intimating ways of life and character-types, upon the stage[22]. This critical approach would fuel Plato's own fascination with the problem of the educational status of poetry and its influence upon society.

Both Plato and Aristotle begin by distinguishing *creative* from acquisitive crafts (or trades), with Poetry being defined as a form of *Poesis* or *making*, which brings into existence something which has not existed before, and with all productive intellectual work viewed as following a plan throughout its process of creation, towards a goal (Beardsley, 1966 p.32).

[22] Heraclitus had already expressed reservations regarding the educational role of the Poets of his day and their lack of thorough *critical* thinking because, although the ancient Greeks are sure that Hesiod "knows very many things [he] continually failed to recognise day and night: for they are one" (Beardsley, 1966 p.26).

The term *Mimesis*[23] had a wide field of application in Ancient Greece; in a general sense all production is a kind of imitation in the sense of *representation*, yet the Arts are *mimetic* in their own way, and in the narrow sense it is the crafts which produce *images* which are viewed as the strictly imitative. *Mimesis* is used to refer to a kind of *relation* between the image and its archetype, with conceptual thought being capable of imitating or even intimating reality and with language and the names of various things as imitating the true *essential* nature of objects, in relation to their functions and to the ideal condition they might have if they were to fulfill their functions perfectly (*The Republic* 595-597)[24]. The imitator in general may produce a *genuine likeness* containing the *actual* properties of his archetype, in the way that the craftsman produce the tools of various trades, yet the *creative* artist may only produce a *semblance* of his archetypes due to his partial and insufficient understanding of them, which only replicates the way an object or action appears to be from his own *finite* and partial point of view. Both the Poet and Painter are seen as creating *deceptive* and illusory superficial semblances which actually *misrepresent* both reality and actuality[25], choosing to pursue *flattery* instead of truth and so their creations are conceived of as belonging to the same class as perceptual or optical illusions and dreams (Beardsley, 1966 pp.35-38)[26].

[23] See Beardsley (1966) pp.24-67 for a study of the term Mimesis and its role in the works of Plato and Aristotle.

[24] As such Plato views all physical objects and the physical realm as an *image* of the ideal realm, as analogous to the way that representational pictures of everyday objects lack the physical function and qualities of the objects they portray because they leave out the most important, defining properties which make the object represented what it truly is (Beardsley, 1966 pp.34-35).

[25] This is usually for the purpose of making their creations *appear* to be better than the originals, for the sake of pleasing the beholder.

[26] The artist is described as exploiting the use of perspective in order to fool our minds into taking their representation as the original itself, thereby engaging in the *deliberate distortion* of the objects

It is this tendency for pandering to the indiscriminate tastes, desires and emotions of the ignorant masses of society (which is especially prevalent in Democratic states), via the use of illusionary representations, which ultimately leads Plato to denounce the vast majority of Poetry from his thought-experiment regarding the constitution of the ideal state, as it is espoused in Book X of *The Republic*[27].

This narrow sense of *mimesis*, as *Apollonian* dream-like image-making, was used by Plato to produce his Reductionist conception of Poetry [*The Republic* Book X], which was seen as functioning in a similar way to the plastic arts of sculpture and painting[28]. This Epistemological failing combined with the Poets' aim of mass-appeal has dangerous Ethical implications for society at large because the majority will mistakenly believe that the Poet has actual knowledge, whereas in Plato's schemata he does not even possess true opinions about the subjects he represents [*The Republic 598*-602][29]. The poet is *out of his senses* and merely works himself up into an aroused state to enable him to emote effectively, his mimesis is merely a "form of play, not to be taken seriously" [ibid 602b] and all Poetry "consists in representing a semblance of its subject…with no grasp of the reality" [ibid 600c] (Beardsley pp.38-39).

The ocular bias which runs throughout much of Plato's works and analogies was combined with his narrow conception of mimesis and used to support his contention

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and actions that constitute the human, physical realm.

[27] See Beardsley 1966 pp.30-37 for further details of the Ancient Greek and of Plato's conceptions of *Mimesis*.

[28] An analogy which he would exploit for the purpose of denigrating the Epistemological status of *all* artwork (and consequentially the educational status of all artists), as a form of *uncritical* and uninformed *copying* which is irrationally inspired and therefore not guided by any general knowledge, and is exemplified by the Poets inability to give any *rational* account of how he operates.

[29] This point is also further discussed in *Phaedrus* 248e and *Ion*.

that any artwork must be inferior to Philosophy, because any form of imitation must be inferior in status to the original which it copies by its very definition *as* an image[30]. It is now only the Philosopher who functions as a mirror of the true reality which only Philosophical dialectic and meditation can provide insight into, whereas the Poet only communicates his own distorted, uninformed impressions of how mere *semblances* of reality appear to him from his own individual perspective.

Though the artist or Poet may have some level of Apollonian insight into the nature of Beauty and may be able to create works of aesthetically-pleasing proportion and symmetry[31], the Dionysian nature of his *irrational* creative inspiration as a form of *possession* (or madness brought about), by the muses debars him from being a reliable guide to the *true* nature of reality, which lies behind and informs the physical realm of sensory appearances (Halliwell, 1988 pp.3-4)[32].

Even worse, the Poet is involved in the portrayal of Ethical falsehoods[33], and so disrupts the teaching of virtuous activity for the purpose of emotive, mass-appeal

[30] This echoes his Metaphysical distinction between the sensory realm of appearances and the *ideal* rational realm which Philosophy affords an insight into and which the physical, sensory realm imperfectly *partakes-in.*

[31] The artist or poet imparts unity and regularity to his representations by establishing a relation of balance amongst the elements he manipulates.

[32] The Poet may be able to grasp the underlying *meanings* of words, and perhaps thereby approximate towards the ideal essences of the things which the words denote, so that it is not impossible that Poets may indeed have some ability to enlighten us regarding truth. However the criteria of *critical* enlightenment and understanding is that of the Philosopher not the Poet, because the latter's chief objective is merely to give *pleasure* to his audience (whatever their level of sophistication or vulgarity) without any judgement regarding the *appropriateness* of what they regard to be pleasurable (See Beardsley, 1966 pp.39-46).

[33] Such falsehoods mainly consist in the representation of divine-enmity and of heroic figures behaving in non-virtuous ways, as evidenced in the works of Homer, (see *The Republic* 377-392, pp.71-89).

pleasure. The performers of Poetry (especially of Tragic poetry), also engage in an *imaginative identification* with the character they are portraying which is initially (in *The Republic* Book III), seen as being harmful *to the extent* that the behaviour thus portrayed is flawed. This becomes hardened (in Book X), to a general declaration that *all* Poetry is a *parasitic imitation* involving sympathising with the characters, and that all the emotions which are thereby provoked have a permanent *psychological* effect upon both the audience and the performer (Halliwell, 1988 p.4 & pp.7-11)[34]. Because *The Republic* posits that only the Just-man whose life is governed by rationality can be truly happy, the Poet is seen as counter-productive because he encourages us to succumb to *injustice* as a form of *slavery* to our animalistic emotions and desires and so cannot possibly be considered as a suitable educator of the young, because his activity must actively *prevent* us from becoming pursuing the good-life and so from becoming happy[35].

It is ultimately the Poets' tendency to encourage (and so reinforce), the unrestrained sympathetic outpourings of the desires and emotions of the audiences in various types of *imperfect societies* (including contemporary society) [*The Republic* Books VIII & IX; 543-591], that give precedence to these *lower elements* of the soul which actively obstruct the rule of the rational part to various extents (Halliwell 1988 pp.11-12)[36]. It is the correspondingly imbalanced and degenerate psychological states

[34] Because Plato conceives of the emotive *lower element* of the soul as standing in a dichotomous and largely Agonistic relation to the power of reason, he believes that the Poets arousal of our sympathetic emotions damages our minds and infects our everyday lives, making us disposed towards giving preference to emotive reactions over and against critical, rational understanding which can provide us with true knowledge of the issues at hand.

[35] See Halliwell 1988 pp.1-16 for further details.

[36] See Plato's analogy of the *Tri-Partite Soul,* [*The Republic* Book IV, Sections 2 & 3, 435-444] which describes the soul as a winged-chariot directed by a charioteer, representing the rational part of the soul, which is drawn by a white *spirited* horse and a black *ignoble* or *appetitive* horse. This analogy is

and character-types that these societies foster that prevent the attainment of the self-control necessary for the pursuit of the good-life and human happiness. This leads Plato to declare that Poetry must become a hand-maiden to Philosophy and its criteria of both *moral* truth and truth as *correspondence* to actuality, and must facilitate our habituation into rational self-control if it is to be prevented from perpetuating and increasing the social-degeneration of the members of such societies[37]. The Poets must be evaluated by their contribution to the values and the common good of the whole of the society they occur in; they must encourage the fulfillment of the pleasures of the *right kind* of audience, of the "best men and the highly educated" [*Laws* 658e-659], and they must represent noble characters engaged in admirable activities, presenting Hero's and Gods as acting *appropriately*, thereby enabling them to function as moral guides or role-models.

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concerned with describing the various underlying impulses and motivations of human action. The winged-horses represent the potentiality for the irrational emotions to be allied with the rule of reason for the sake of psychological order and *self-discipline*, via the control of the *ignoble* part or drives (represented by the *black* horse). This is achieved by steering the black horse away from the indiscriminate pursuit of the fulfilment of desires, forcing it into being aligned with the spirited part of the soul (represented by the *white* horse), through habituating or training the black horse into the suppression of its animalistic instincts, and the pursuance of *moderate* desires which are guided by reason. The ideal balance of the various drives will lead to a form of harmony when all constituents play their proper role under the guidance of the rational element of the soul (represented by the *charioteer*), rather than through the complete subjugation and coercion of the ignoble element. The Tri-Partite analogy, with its emphasis on the description of its parts as the expression of *drives,* should be understood as describing an ideal alignment of tendencies, or an overall disposition of the soul as a *single* energy capable of being expressed in various ways under different ruling principles, rather than being seen as denoting three distinct and divided parts of the soul vying for complete control. The power of the emotive and appetitive desires must therefore not be *eliminated* but must rather be guided and utilised by reason to enable the pursuit and maintenance of a balanced, Justly-ordered soul and life.

[37] Because Tragic and Comic Poetry are seen as pandering towards the *unenlightened,* vulgar type of audiences and as encouraging the indiscriminate expression of desire and emotion they therefore are seen as having the power to corrupt the Philosophically inclined, even when presented in Plato's ideal-state. Plato's Utopian *Republic* must therefore legislate for the strict censorship and control of their content and must direct their creators towards the imitation of only virtuous, self-controlled, rational characters and actions.

The Poets must become agents for the dissemination of Philosophical, Political propaganda[38] for the sake of social-stability through the necessary character-formation and education of its members. If Poetry *can* be made a tool for moral improvement and so contribute to the *order* of society, it is difficult to envisage how any Comedy would be permitted in the ideal state, what it would be like if it were[39], and to what extent the demands of Comic mimesis could be made to coincide with Plato's Philosophical and Political requirements[40]. Must it necessarily be characterised as evoking *immoderate* and largely *negative*, "violent laughter" [*The Republic* 388e-389a], and as only appealing to the lower elements of the soul and of society, or can it also be a *harmless* pleasure commensurate with the demands of the good-life as guided by *rational*, self-controlled deliberation and *virtuous* social and political activity and involvement? The crucial concern is whether Comedy can stimulate good or virtuous behaviour, so making us better people, and whether it must

[38] It could well be argued that the Epistemological schemata that is presented in *The Republic* is a *metaphorical* philosophical tool, utilised to give a broad and allegorical *heuristic* outline of how Philosophy can allow us a deeper insight into the physical realm (and that the whole of *The Republic* is a myth or fictional account of the good which provides a "token of the truth" as pointed out by Halliwell (1988) p.17). I would add that it is thus ultimately intended as *propaganda*; as a "how-to" guide to convince the citizens of the ideal-state of the *legitimacy* of the rule of reason and of the guardian-class, as a more *rationalistic* presentation of the concepts espoused in the *noble-lie* of the Myth of Er.

[39] Whether it would even be effectively amusing and pleasurable by the standards of Comedy, and whether it could actually move us to *laughter*, especially if no artistic innovation is permitted in the ideal-state [*The Republic* 376e-411].

[40] Asmis 1992 (p.353) makes a similar point regarding the question of whether there can be any possibility of a morally beneficial form of poetry, especially if the poet's representations of virtue are to be regarded as *distortions* because their creator is ruled by his emotions (ibid p.356). It is questionable whether the genre of Comedy, and the *intoxicating* pleasure of the laughter which it aims at, can be used as a *positive medicinal* tool for ensuring social unity and cohesion through the character-education of the masses into social responsibility, and in the development of the critical Philosophical attitude and character.

do so *only* through the representation or imitation of *virtuous* action?[41]

These are especially problematic considerations for Plato, who regards all Poetic art as a form of inferior imitation in the sense of *copying* and therefore as inherently Epistemologically misleading, and also for the genre of Ancient Greek Comedy as it existed in Plato's lifetime. Plato saw this contemporary Comedy, which largely dealt in the portrayal of the irrational and often un-virtuous behaviour, actions and speech of unserious and flawed characters, as mainly consisting in *schadenfreude*. It frequently engaged in lampooning and largely *negative* satire, often employing rather vitriolic *invective* [42] against existing actual persons in prominent positions in society and against other Poetic artists, and even against the ideal-Philosopher Socrates himself (as exemplified in the works of Aristophanes such as *The Birds* and *Frogs)*[43].

It has become clear that in *The Republic* Plato's largely Apollonian conception of both Epistemology and Artistic Mimesis unjustifiably *reduces* Poetry to the level of visual, plastic arts and painting, thus giving Comedy only a minimal cognitive

[41] We must also decide if it is not only possible but also *desirable* for the state-control of artworks to facilitate the control of the thoughts of the citizenry of society.

[42] Invective targets and makes defamatory exclamations against particular individuals, thereby generating further desires for indulgence in immoderate and insensitive, violent laughter which takes pleasure in the misfortune of others.

[43] The emotively-intoxicating laughter invoked by these portrayals is itself regarded as a dangerous threat to the rule of reason; as capable of undermining the foundations of any society, especially when it is largely seen by Plato as taking the character of *Schadenfreude.* Plato often describes laughter as constituting a form of *schadenfreude*, as evoking pleasure at the misfortune and expense of the characters represented, characters who are not to be considered as being worthy of the status of role-models due to their involvement in largely non-virtuous or even licentious, vicious and anti-social behaviour and speech. Given Plato's description of the *Tri-Partite Soul* (see note 36 above) it would seem that there must at least in principle be the *possibility* of a balanced, rationally-guided yet artistically-effective form of Comedy which may be able to harmonise the demands of the individuating Apollonian drive towards critical clarity with the unifying, Dionysian *joy* of intoxicating laughter.

element through the exploitation of what is only a partially relevant and *incomplete* account of the full scope and function of Comic Poetry[44]. Plato's denigration of the Epistemological status of Poetry is based upon his highly Rationalist notion of the relation between art-work and reality, of *meaning* and of Epistemology, which hinges upon his underlying metaphysical *Dualist* distinction between the sensible, physical realm and the spiritual realm of the *ideas* or *forms* which are apprehended by the power of reason. This is a dichotomous Apollonian schema which posits a realm of ultimately real *being*, which is ultimately a logical-construct that is negatively-defined as opposed to the sensory, physical realm and therefore is a direct opponent to the *Relativistic* notion of meaning and the Ontological restriction of Philosophy to the realm of *becoming* espoused by Heraclitus[45].

Whether the social requirements of *The Republic* can be viewed as a *direct* representation of Plato's *own* attitude towards the acceptability of Poetry as a whole and its place in relation to the philosophical life is highly questionable [46]. We must be wary of merely applying his specialized comments upon the ideal education of the

[44] His conception of the predominantly Dionysian, intoxicatingly *emotive* character of Tragic and Comic Poetry with its *inferior* relation to reality has become almost the exact opposite of the *Creative-Nihilism* [Danto 1965] of Nietzsche, where the artwork *metaphorically* exemplifies and so intimates our understanding the dynamic qualities of the physical cosmos. See Halliwell (1988) pp.5-6 and Asmis (1992) pp.347-356 for further details on Plato's shift in his utilization of the term *Mimesis*, which occurs in Book X of *The Republic*, after his initial discussion in Book III.

[45] It is also especially interesting that *The Republic* is the main work of Plato's to espouse the so-called *Theory of Forms,* yet it is never explicitly *directly* defined and is always discussed in an allegorical and metaphorical fashion. It would seem that the use of the *Ideas* or "*Forms*" is closely tied to the status of *The Republic* as a thought-experiment into the possibility of the ideal-society and its educational requirements (see above note 38), and that we must again be wary of applying this schema too widely or uncritically to Plato's *overall* attitudes towards Comedy and Poetry as a whole.

[46] Especially in light of its exceedingly Authoritarian and Communitarian nature and its requirement of the state-regulation and censorship of the production of all artworks and comedy, coupled with its status as a *thought-experiment* into the possibility of the ideal society.

ruling *Guardian* class in what seems to be a largely *unrealisable* ideal society, to his view of the requirements of how Poetry may function in everyday life, or in *actual* societies. We shall shortly see how Comedy may not only have a *positive* role to play in the development of the philosophical attitude, but also how elements of Comic Poetic techniques may actually be useful and integral to the presentation of effective Philosophical ideas in the dramatic format, and *were* used in such a way by Plato himself.

It is questionable as to whether Plato's Philosophy *as a whole* calls for the death of Comedy as-he-knew-it or for a radical *evolution* of its purposes and subject matter[47]. If so Art-works, and Comic Poetry in particular, may be considered as distinct from the actions and ideas they represent, and may be able to enlighten us and so become a specialist source of guidance for the acquisition of the Ethical understanding which is germane to the pursuit of the good-life and ultimately human happiness (Halliwell, 1988 pp.8-11).

Though Plato's *The Republic* seems to represent its author as hostile to almost *all* dramatic Poetry to such an extent that *all* Comedy might be considered to be *inherently* opposed to the Philosophic endeavour, there are important indications of Plato's own attitude towards the *comic* nature of Philosophical activity expressed in his other extant works. I will show that such works, as *dramatic* dialogues, also rely heavily upon Comic techniques to illuminate the deep philosophical issues which

[47] Such an evolution might be able to invest the pleasure of laughter with some *cognitive* element and therefore enable it to possess Epistemological and Philosophical, or at least some form of Political, value.

underlie everyday conceptions regarding self-understanding, virtue and the good-life, and also to highlight the comic *tension* between such *unexamined* preconceptions and *theoretical* or *Metaphysical* approaches towards enlightenment, between the levels of the *ideal* and the *actual*.

## The Sophisticated Comedy of Plato's Dramatic Philosophy.[48]

Plato's works contain many allegorical and mythical elements which are used to illustrate his Philosophy[49], and the contention that the whole of *The Republic* itself, presented as a *dramatised* thought-experiment, can be considered as a fictional account or *myth* of the Just-society and the good-life, (which claims to provide us with a *token* of the truth), shows that Plato does indeed believe that dramatic Poetry and Myth can be useful and apt media for the espousal of Philosophical concepts and ideas[50]. But in light of Plato's view of the inherent moral danger of Poetry and Myth, we may ask what criteria we should use to measure the truth and ethical value of such symbolic myths. It is highly questionable as to how we should *interpret* Plato's myths and also how they relate to the superior status and value of reason and rationality

[48] The conception of Plato's work as a form of *sophisticated* Comedy, utilising dramatic techniques, is outlined in Greene's (1920) article *The Spirit of Comedy in Plato* and also in KASTELY, J.L. (1996): *Plato's Protagoras – Revisionary History as Sophisticated Comedy* (see Bibliography).

[49] Such as the allegory of the Tri-Partite soul (see above note 36), the Myth of Er, the Cave Analogy etc.

[50] See note 38 above.

(Halliwell, 1988 pp.17&18).

It would seem that, under *The Republic's* criteria, that particular dialogue itself and many of Plato's other works would be impermissible in the ideal-society because they represent many of Socrates' interlocutors[51] as characters who fall short of the ideals of *virtuous* action and speech, and who would therefore be disbarred from expressing their positions (even if just for the sake of being refuted)[52]. Much of the content of Plato's own works would appear to not meet his own criteria for truly Philosophical Poetry, and the *tension* caused by this problem leads us to question the extent to which the *ideal* of *The Republic* expresses its author's *actual* views on Poetry and on the possibility of a Platonic, *reformed* Comic-Poetry. We must enquire into the *rational* place of Art and Comic Poetry in society in general and in the life of the citizen of the Ancient Greek *polis*, and to what extent it can contribute to the good life (Beardsley, 1966 p.51).

The characterisation of Socrates' as the *playful* dialectician and the centrality of the

[51] Such as the initial character of Glaucon who sets up the premise of the whole of *The Republic* by insisting *against* Socrates that Justice merely consists in the wills and desires of the powerful being forced upon the rest of society. Consider also the deeply-flawed dramatic character of Alcibiades in *The Symposium* who illustrates the comically pitiful predicament of the *Dionysian* Poet, whose very existence is opposed to the ethos of the character of Socrates as the highly *Apollonian,* rational and self-controlled ideal-philosopher, and who is therefore tormented by his own love and unrequited desire for erotic communion with Socrates.

[52] These perspectives, and the characters who express them, are utilised as necessary foils for Socrates' own positions and also as illustrations of the many obstacles that *everyday* conceptions of the good-life present to the pursuit of Philosophical understanding. Whilst the early Platonic dialogues feature historical persons who enter into the Philosophical *agon* as individuals, his later works illustrate Socrates' engaging with interlocutors who represent different types of contemporary forces and attitudes as *opposed* to the spirit of true Philosophy, and often transition between addressing his comments against such particular individuals and towards making statements against the types of ethos or profession which they represent. See Greene (1920) pp.63-123 for a detailed study of the comic interplay between Socrates and his interlocutors throughout a wide range Plato's various dialogues.

tone of Socratic Irony within Plato's dialogues, coupled with the wide usage of humorous language and the *comic* representation of the various characters he enters into debate with, can enable us to view Plato's usage of comic techniques within his dramatic dialogues as an essential means towards the exposure of, and engagement with, deep Philosophical issues (Greene, 1920 pp.63-64).

Much of Plato's critiques are levelled against those who were regarded as the orthodox *teachers* of Ancient Greece and the author often uses Comedy as a means towards the "exposure of all *pretensions*" [*Philebus* 48-50; my gloss] of such types towards *authoritative* knowledge of their subject matter[53]. His comic portrayals even extend towards the playfully paradoxical character of Socrates himself, to Philosophers in general, and the *agonistic* and seemingly absurd nature of the philosophical endeavor as such[54].

It is in such a way that Plato can be viewed as dealing with ideal types in a realistic human manner, pointing out the logical-gap between universalistic theory and personified, individuated actuality (in much the same way as Comedy operates), and

[53] Such as the character of *Lysias* who is presented as the author of the initial speech which opens and shapes the direction of the consequent speeches and myths presented by Socrates in *The Phaedrus* [278b-c/279b]. Socrates often addresses Homer et. al. and the Sophists, who have only a superficial use regarding the practical needs of the city-state, with ironic-appreciation and mock-respect (Greene, 1920 pp.67-68). He even satirizes the extant Rhetoricians and Politicians of his day as *deceptive* word-smiths who are highly skilled in the art of the *persuasion* of the populous, through the manipulation of and *pandering* towards the uncritically-held opinions and desires of the ignorant masses (which is achieved via emotively presented arguments and the utilization of dramatic techniques), for the purpose of personal gain and public recognition (Greene, 1920 p.69)

[54] Especially in *The Protagoras* [361a] where the argument at hand is talked of as if it could be personified and is imagined to be "laughing at us" and the finite attempts to grasp the slippery essence of the subject matter at hand, and in the *Phaedo* where the argument is conceived of as game to be *hunted* [Greene, 1920 pp.69+70]. Also, we are given more than one depiction of the appearance and behaviour of the "Silenus-like" or satyr-esque Socrates, viewed and regarded as *absurd* from the perspective of everyday, non-philosophical Athenian citizens, most notably in Alcibiades' speech in *Symposium* [212c-223d].

even the Tragic setting of *The Apology* can provide us with a somewhat *Comic* justification of the Philosophic quest as "the life lived in the spirit of comedy" (Greene, 1920 p.72). The life of philosophic enquiry is necessarily dedicated to the "*exposure of all pretension"* [*Philebus* 48-50],(which is also the defining aspect of comedy for Plato), especially within one's self recognised as a *finite* human being, and thus in accordance with the Delphic command and the Socratic declaration of unavoidable human ignorance[55] (Greene, 1920 pp.63-72).

Along with *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, the central force of *The Republic* contains a rich scope for comedy in the recurring contrast drawn between the idealised realm of the imagination and the physical realm of endless change and decay, and both mythical and comical elements feature heavily in extending the Philosophical impact of Plato's descriptive abilities [56]. The utterances of extravagant apologies and the pretence of evasion and unwillingness to continue his argument (*Phaedrus*), the expectation and reception of ridicule at the hands of his interlocutors and the problematic, self-undermining Epistemological status of *the good* as a foundational and unanalysable subject (which is incapable of detailed exposition or certain knowledge), all point towards the comic *tension* between the ideal realm and the

[55] This intimates the fine line of differentiation and the fundamental closeness that characterises the overlap between the fields of Tragedy and Comedy, as dramatic representations of human actions and the meaning of such in relation to the life and attitude of the agent. This overlap is also highlighted in Plato's portrayal of the characters and speeches of Alcibiades [*Symposium* 212c-223d], (who's entry and speech can be seen as a form of comic relief which ironically establishes Socrates' main point of argument - [Greene, 1920 pp.88-90], and can be viewed as both Tragedy or Comedy depending on both the Poet's and reader's perspectival attitude towards its main thesis), and of Aristophanes in *The Symposium* [189c2-193d5], both of whom were actual extant Poets of contemporary Ancient Greece. See Neumann, 1966 pp.420-426 for an enlightening appraisal of Aristophanes' speech in light of the perspectival nature of the perception of such a poetic composition as either (or even both), Tragic or Comic.

[56] As exemplified in the allegories of the *Cave*, the *Ship of State* and the *Composite Beast*.

injustices of the actual, physical realm as experienced in everyday life (Greene, 1920 pp.97-101 & p.106)[57] .

In this light it would seem that the Platonic Socrates, who attempts to eradicate Scepticism by first unveiling the pretensions of those who have been set up as the pinnacles of Greek society (like many Ancient Greek and also modern comedians), can also be viewed as the corruptor of the youths of Athens leading to the eventual downfall of society through the inversion of traditional beliefs and values[58].

Aristophanes' speech in *Symposium* [189c2-193d5][59] can be seen as largely comical on the surface, due to the absurd physical nature of the proto-human beings which feature as its central characters[60]. However, Aristophanes' speech is ultimately *absurd* because its view of *Eros*[61] leads to a nostalgic rejection of civilization for the

[57] They also indicate the finite, partial nature of human philosophical understanding, which is a central presupposition of *The Republic.* From this perspective Book X (with its many inconsistencies when compared to the initial depiction of the Poetic art in Book III), can be read in the light of a *Comedy* playing upon the contrast between Poetry as it *actually* exists compared with the seemingly unattainable ideals of Philosophy and its demands upon dramatic poetry (Greene pp.97-100). There is a central tension between the character of Socrates himself as ideal-philosopher and the common perception of Philosophy as a useless endeavor pursued by those regarded at best as fools, or at worst as pernicious rogues bent upon questioning all pre-conceptions, and so as catalyzing the undermining of the very foundations of the institutions which constitute any society.

[58] This is the picture painted of Socrates by Euripides in *The Clouds* and epitomises the charge laid against the condemned Socrates in Plato's *Apology.*

[59] Aristophanes' speech characterises *Eros* as a *Dionysian* passion to transcend the limits of self-hood through a return to primeval unity and wholeness (lost due to retribution from the nature-deities for their hubristic transgressions against the natural order), and is set against an allegory of separation which illustrates an attempt to bridge the chasm between reality and the ideal.

[60] It also intimates the seemingly *tragic* nature of human striving towards unity and the inter-subjective nature of human existence, if we are willing as readers to comprehend the underlying drives of the proto-humans as accurate depictions of members of primitive, pre-civilized Greek societies and barbarous states, and also of *our own* primal motivations and utmost desires.

[61] Unlike Diotima's conception (which is retold by Socrates), who views Eros as a drive towards the *civilization* of human beings.

sake of a return to the origin of humanity as a form of primeval, barbaric integrity which may ultimately lead to Nihilism (Neumann, 1966 pp.420-425)[62].

Aristophanes' *Dionysian* account is therefore presented as based upon the *hamartia* (a *crucial* error, misconception, lack of information or ignorance) of its author, who is unaware of the essential nature of the original, proto-human beings[63]. The Poet's depiction of *Eros* as a nostalgic yearning for unattainable, primitive unity stems from his ignorance regarding human nature, because his conception of it is guided by emotive, symbolic myth which confuses the ideal with the actual, and not by *rational*, dialectical logic which can establish a desire for allegiance to *socially-unifying* ideals (as espoused in *The Republic*)[64].

Aristophanes has failed to first *critically* enquire into his *own* nature and his preconceptions regarding it, and thus has not recognised the Delphic oracle. This comic *hamartia* on behalf of the poet, set amongst a background allegory which illustrates the Comic *tension* between the ideal and the actual, is exploited by Plato for the sake of foreshadowing his Rationalistic, *Apollonian* doctrine of the role of *Eros*

[62] Popper declares that such a retrogressive return starts with the suppression of reason and truth (see Neumann, 1966 p.425 note 9).

[63] Aristophanes is ignorant of the true nature of primitive proto-humanity, as essentially *mortal* rather than as divinely-begotten beings, and misconceives of them by failing to recognize that they are only capable of obtaining self-sufficiency or happiness through physical, spiritual or artistic reproduction (Neumann, 1966 p.423).

[64] Whilst Aristophanes' Dionysian *desire* for an ideal union is seen as commendable, it has prevented him from rationally enquiring into his own self and his true needs; he has fallen under his own emotively-compelling spell which exposes his ignorance and makes his proto-human beings and also *himself* as creator of the story appear *ridiculous* [*The Symposium* 189b4-7]. The poet's *desire* for an impossible return to an *ideal* "lost Eden", rather than being seen as Tragic is actually *Comically* misinformed from the critical and enlightened Diotima's point of view, and leads to a *reductio ad absurdum* of not only its own argument, but also of its author because it is a reflection of his tragic *attitude* which is based upon his *ignorance in* regards to his own true nature as a human being (Neuman, 1966 p.420).

and its relation to human nature as Plato conceives of it. The result is that Aristophanes' pretensions towards an *authoritative* understanding of human motivations and behaviour has undermined itself[65]. The *joke* is on *him*.

Plato's other extant works also display a rich mastery of the Comic techniques of irony and paradox, which are utilised to highlight the *tension* between uncritically-held, *ideal* preconceptions and the underlying reality of interconnected meanings. Plato's use of Comic irony is particularly central to the argument in *Laches*, where it is used to reveal the paradox between the demands of prudence and courage[66], which ultimately results in the seemingly paradoxical declaration that courage (as it is *traditionally* conceived of) is *shameful* in battle because it is only *needed* when combatants lack the prudence necessary to adequately plan for and react to the events of war (Tessitore, 1994 p.119-p.120). The recognition of the deeply Comic dimensions of Plato's utilisation of paradox and irony unveils the difference between the seemingly apologetic surface of the dialogue and its underlying and "irreducibly problematic" teaching upon the nature of courage, which again turns out not to be what Socrates' interlocutors (both of which are well known historical generals and so considered as authorities upon the subject), had previously considered it to be (ibid, p.115-119). It also highlights the central problem of Liberal Democracy and its implications for the Comic and Philosophic ethos of questioning seemingly authoritative members of society; the need to perpetuate a way-of-life which holds as a central, defining good the *freedom* to *question* and criticise that way-of-life, which

[65] Greene (1920), points out (p.67) that for Plato comedy means "the exposure of all pretensions" [*Philebus* 48-50], and that Plato's *Apology* can be viewed as "a comic justification of the life lived in the spirit of comedy-the exposure of pretension" (Greene, 1920 p.72).

[66] Or the "enduring tension between political courage and the requirements of philosophic self-possession" (Tessitore, 1994 p.115).

may lead to the undermining of the institutions, ethos and preconceptions which facilitate the social-cohesion of that society (Tessitore, 1994 p.115-116, p.128, pp.132-133).

This tension between the concerns of preserving social order and protecting individual liberties has implications for the way Philosophy is taught in an Academic setting, and also for the way Comedy operates by critically exposing the *pretensions* of highly-regarded members of society and the government. The unrestricted search for truth which constitutes the pursuit of *intellectual freedom* is in tension with the Academic responsibility to transmit and preserve a certain way of life (because it must begin with a critical perspective regarding any particular Political regime and its values[67]), just as philosophical self-possession is presented as non-coextensive with civic-courage, yet as having some similarity with it (as an *agonistic* engagement). The Philosopher must be steadfast in the pursuit of elusive knowledge[68] regarding the true nature of the virtues, in the face of the social ridicule he will receive for disregarding common preconceptions, and the awareness that the self-knowledge such striving aims for must always be finite and incomplete, and this is illustrated by the inconclusive stalemate which constitutes the end of the dialogue (Tessitore, 1994 pp.132-133)[69].

[67] In this way we can see why Plato would almost certainly call for the removal of all Comic Poets from his ideal Republic, even though they might seem to be a necessary feature for the initiation of the critical *attitude* which facilitates the progression towards the *philosophical* improvement of any *actual*, extant *imperfect society.*

[68] Just as the General must assure the welfare of the city-state by his steadfast *deeds* which originate from his *unexamined* loyalty, which may be undermined by the *clever words* of Comics and Philosophers [Tessitore, 1994 p.132].

[69] See Tessitore, 1994 pp.120-133 for further details.

Plato's *Protagoras* has the similar character of a *Comic exploration* of Sophistic and Socratic difference in its discussion of the Political consequences of the empowerment of individuals through their education as able and powerful orators. This dialogue culminates in an even more comical situation where the speakers end in a state of inconclusiveness regarding the possibility of teaching virtue, and of *hamartia* due to the unrecognised exchanging of their positions, because Socrates' *apparent* victory over his interlocutor actually *proves* the correctness of his position, which leads us to question *both* characters claims to authority (Kastely, 1996 p.32 & p.37). This makes *both* the participants subjects for the laughter which results from our critically-engaged attitude, exposing the central problem of the *possibility* of the successful discrimination between appearances for the purpose of apprehending and pursuing what is genuinely good for us, of the nature of the *relation* between finite, fluctuating desire and *the good* itself (ibid). Plato once again outlines the tension and confusion which occurs when we attempt to assume a *direct identity* between the world and any purely theoretical interpretation of it, of the "naivety and foolishness of the [Rationalist] *desire* for a world which corresponds to our particular theories…[because] the only certainty is that all is not as it appears" (Kastely, 1996 p.38). *Here* the joke is on *Socrates*, who must learn to adjust his own attitude and so see himself as a subject for laughter to be able to move towards a self-critical approach to Philosophy (Kastely, 1996 pp.36-38, pp.40-41)[70].

The dialogue underlines the importance of approaching Sophistry (and dialectics in

[70] "In the comic chastisement of realising one that one has been ridiculous, one may be better able both to hear another and to listen to history in one's own voice…the *Protagoras* offers productive inconclusiveness and argues for the necessity of an on-going practice of revision as we continually find ourselves in the comic position of not being aware of how our language has shifted as we seek to engage and learn from human diversity." (Kastely, 1996 p.41).

general), with a discerning *attitude* and with *knowledge* of what is harmful or beneficial, and the inherent danger of the indiscriminate and *uncritical*, uneducated audience who are therefore unable to benefit from the potentially beneficial effects of public-speech, in all media (ibid, pp.36-37).

Our central concern is now to discern whether there can be any possibility, (outside of Plato's *ideal Republic)*, of an already sufficiently educated audience who is therefore capable of engaging with all public-speech (and so with Comedy), with the necessary *critical* attitude.[71]

We must learn to laugh at *ourselves*, to not take our own positions *too seriously*, if we are to become aware of our own *finitude* and ignorance as espoused by the declaration of Socratic-irony which is foundational for the Philosophic attitude and endeavor. This can itself be conceived of as an absurdly comical *or* tragic, hubristic striving towards absolute, certain knowledge and truth, especially when portrayed as being utilisable as an *absolute* moral guide as it is in *The Republic*[72].

Plato's *Phaedrus* is the most overtly comical of all of his dialogues, and it is the *playful* exploration of paradox that indicates its underlying, central message of the

[71] In *The Poetics* Aristotle claims this *is* possible and that Comedy could, and in his lifetime had begun to, transcend its origins as bitter, personal invective and satirical lampoons aimed against particular historical individuals, towards the facilitation of a *critical outlook* in its creators and audience, which could enable the imparting of universally-applicable general observations on the nature of human existence in general, and social and political life in particular. However, it seems that in his view such Poetry as *Comedy-proper* must be regarded as a *Political* phenomenon, and so as falling short of the status of actual Philosophy. The extent to which this is the case has been argued by various writers (see note 84 below for further details).

[72] In light of the teaching of *The Protagoras,* this interpretation lends support to the theory that the *doctrine of the ideas/forms* as the governing force behind the physical realm, which is *the* central principle behind the whole argument (and hence the foundation of the utopian state constituted by *The Republic* itself), is therefore the biggest "noble lie" or philosophically-serious *fiction* of all (as mentioned above note 38).

ultimately superior value of the Socratic, *dialectical* method and of the medium of living-speech over that of the written word which, (ironically) the whole dramatic dialogue is presented in. The character of Phaedrus himself is riddled with *hamartia* and *self-deception* due to his uncritical, fanatical love for powerful Sophistic speeches, and Socrates proceeds to expose the pretensions to knowledge of Lysias, the author of his newly-acquired speech, through a *disingenuous* construction of satirical speeches in a similar vein. Plato's emphasis on the finite human capacity for truth and the necessity of the dialectical method as a paradoxically *contingent* and indeterminate method for attempting to gain certain knowledge, against the mere acceptance of unchallenged dogmatism, once again underscores the problematic relation between the ideal and the actual [73].

Phaedrus' *hamartia* is displayed by his comic infatuation with Lysias' speech and his lack of self-knowledge; he is presented as a personification of the uncritical attitude of the masses and is such an ill-match for the character of Socrates that we are led to ponder Plato's motive for presenting such a dialogue, and to realise that Lysias' speech *does* present a legitimate challenge for Socrates. The verbal exchanges are saturated with playfulness and irony[74] and the set speeches of the whole dialogue consist in various amusing role-reversals[75] and in various imitations and deceptions

[73] See Greene, 1920 (especially pp.107-122) for further details of the conception of the comedy of Plato's works as consisting in a form of *Incongruity* between the levels of the ideal and the actual. We will examine a version of the Incongruity theory of laughter when we turn to an examination of 20th century theoretical approaches to laughter later in this paper.

[74] Such as when Socrates *interrupts* his own mimesis of Lysias' speech (given in a state of allegorical, visual self-concealment) to ironically declare his lack of self-control due to divine-inspiration, which indicates the disingenuous status of this speech in regards to Socrates own beliefs [Griswold, 1986 pp.51-55].

[75] This illustrates the inherently inter-subjective nature of the dialectical quest for meaning (the necessity of the existence of other human beings as a *mirror* for the attainment of self-knowledge, and for the social and political formation of self-understanding and self-identity), and these playful

which mimic the tone and premise of Lysias' original speech. However, the dialogue ultimately concludes with an explicitly mythical and allegorical account in the palinode to the spiritual realm of the so-called *hyperuranian-realm* of ideas, as a poetic *interpretation* of the assertion that only dedication to the life of Philosophy can lead us to true enlightenment and happiness in this life, the after-life and the next life[76].

This palinode can also be viewed as intimating that *life itself* resembles a Comedy if one does indeed choose ones own life before entering into it at birth (Kojeve, 1947)[77], and the nature of the imbalanced "friendship" and interplay between the two central characters throughout the *Phaedrus* (of Phaedrus himself as a *laughable imitation* of the Zeus-like personality), indicates the comic-tension brought out by this discrepancy, between the Palinode's *idealistic* mythical description of the pedagogical relationship between the philosophical lover and his beloved, and the *actuality* of Socrates and Phaedrus seemingly mismatched relationship[78]. This comic-tension causes us to laugh at the absurd behaviour of the mismatched-pair and their series of role-reversals and deceptions, a laughter which indicates our awareness of this discrepancy and which leads us to question why Plato has chosen Phaedrus as Socrates' interlocutor in this text if they are so mismatched. This *critical* question which is evoked by the recognition epitomised in our laughter leads us to a *meta-level*

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elements lead Phaedrus himself to declare that they must avoid being "forced to behave in the vulgar way we see on the comic stage" [263, c2-4].

[76] See Griswold, 1986 pp.1-24/29-33.

[77] p.522, note, 1 quoted in Griswold, 1986 p.264 note 42.

[78] This underscores the observation that the nature of our inter-subjective personal relationships, which constitute our self-identity and our understanding of what is meaningful in life, suggest that human life is indeed more akin to Comedy than Tragedy (Griswold, 1986 p.264).

reflection upon the possibility of any actual realisation of the *ideal*, pedagogical relationship as espoused in the Palinode. It also signals our awareness of the imperfect and finite, fallible nature of Phaedrus himself and of the relationship between himself and Socrates, of the inherent *tension* between any ideal depictions of human relationships and the education of younger generations (as espoused in *The Republic*) and the reality of *actual* individual persons and their relationships (Griswold, 1986 p.130).

The *Phaedrus* as a whole ultimately illustrates the inherently *comic* and laughable difference between our *ideal* conceptions of inter-personal and educational relationships, and the *actualities* of human, inter-subjective existence; the contingency and *precariousness* of the necessarily *mutual* (and so social and *communal)* character of the pursuit of self-knowledge. Such mutual-pursuits can often *absurdly* dissolve into the imbalanced, *agonistic* power-struggle for egotistical, intellectual mastery over the other which therefore, *paradoxically*, cannot lead us to true enlightenment and self-knowledge, but can only reinforce our own ignorance by preventing the further *critical* examination and re-evaluation of our own position and opinions. The inevitable breakdown of the illusion of such idealistic harmony between finite, *flawed* characters as portrayed in the *Phaedrus* also provides a rich vein for Comedy in general, as Aristotle would suggest in his definition of the types of actions which constitute the essential subject matter of comedy in his *Poetics*[79].

The questionable Epistemological *status* of the palinode to *the hyperuranian-realm*

[79] We will turn to Aristotle's conception of the essence of comedy shortly, on page 44.

as a (non-dialectical) myth, and the problem of the *relation* between Socrates as rational lover and Phaedrus as the passionate beloved, draws our attention to the same tendencies within the soul of the individual philosopher, to the question of the relation of reason and desire[80]. Both the *desire* for detached analysis and *logos* and the desire for beautiful *myths,* (which also facilitate enlightenment regarding the nature of the soul), are described as being regulated and combined by the medium of dynamic, spoken dialectic which can *cathartically* transform these drives and their media into quasi-homeopathic remedies for their own enchanting, narcotic qualities. Myth can only be beneficial for the Philosophically motivated good-life if it is supplemented and *critically* analysed by passionately engaged *dialectic* (*Phaedrus* 274c1-3, 258d7 & 242a-b), and Plato's usage of Comic irony and paradox elicits this conclusion because it forces us to consider the implications of his overt teachings upon the Comic relationship between the two characters and vice-versa (Griswold, 1986 pp.155-156).

Myth is akin to irony, as a form of fiction mixed with truth (as a *noble-lie* or a serious-game), which simultaneously reveals and conceals truth, and as the expression of an impassioned *drive* and desire which is embedded within the very nature of the human-being, and is epitomized in the *finite* nature of human self-knowledge.

The *Phaedrus* exemplifies Plato's recognition that Comic irony and Philosophical criticism are inextricably bound together, and that irony and myth (like sophisticated Comedy and Philosophy) require both the speaker and auditor to become critically *self-conscious* and to examine their own preconceptions. The view of Myths is that they *are* to be utilised and *valued* due to their inherent nature as vehicles for

[80] As hinted at in note 36 above regarding the nature of the relation between the "parts" of the unified *Tri-Partite Soul*.

instigating self-knowledge (Gundert, H 1949)[81]. The comically-flawed character of Phaedrus himself illustrates the importance of the self-knowledge which occurs from the critical attitude which he initially lacks, and also the necessity of desire and passion as the catalysts which also sustain the philosophic quest. Such drives must be harmonized with (rather than eradicated by), the requirements of rational self-reflection via the medium of dynamic, spoken *living* dialectic which can only be represented in the written medium via the dramatic mode of presentation (Griswold, 1986 p.241)[82].

Plato's philosophical use of irony and myth enables his dialogues to directly challenge the reader to "*know thyself!"* through the utilisation of complex images which function as *mirrors* of human reality, the interpretation of which must be guided by a standard of mutually acquired self-knowledge and instigated and sustained by a *desire* to unveil the truths they contain (Griswold, 1986 p239), in short by a shared *love* of wisdom. Consequently all truth or knowledge must be recognised as perspectival, partial and finite and as (*Dionysianally*) situated amongst the *relational*, communal and social interrelations which constitute our understandings of the *meanings* of things and concepts, and of the words and language used to express them.

Though *The Republic* would seem to characterise its author as hostile to all comedy

[81] Quoted in Griswold, 1986 p.156.

[82] Socrates' dialectical *art of conversation* as the *imaginative* play of the mind can be described as analogous to the *agonistic* nature of a contest or game, (such as a game of draughts), because *games* are ways in which we can lose ourselves in our very attempts to assert our desire for victory (Griswold, 1986 p.283 note 4), just as *logos* functions as a double-natured *Pharmakon* or medicine which can enable us to gain enlightenment or drug us into a recreationally narcotic state of self-forgetfulness (Griswold, 1986 p.228).

as a form of bitter *invective* (and so as directly opposed to the requirements of the philosophical ethos), the proposition that the dialogue is itself a form of myth or political-propaganda, and a closer examination of his other extant dialogues show that Plato frequently utilised *sophisticated* Comic techniques[83] (and also mythic techniques), and saw them as of central importance for evoking the *critical*, complex and *passionate* engagement which constitutes the living nature of the philosophic attitude. Plato *comically* utilized both irony and paradox and the mythic and dramatic modes of presentation, for the purpose of creating *dynamic* illustrations which provoke and facilitate the deeper exploration of Philosophical issues. He also emphasized the importance of the roles of desire, emotion and critical *laughter* in the inherently communal and mutual nature of the activity of Philosophy as a *love* of wisdom, and of the similarly *relational* nature of the underlying meanings which it seeks to unveil and explore.

We are now able to understand the careful balance between the *Dionysian* and *Apollonian* elements of Plato's philosophy in relation to the proper place of both dialectic and dramatic Poetry and Comedy, especially as they are epitomized in the *Phaedrus.* The evocation of the *tension* between theory/ideal and actuality, between the levels of the *universal* and *particular*, which is the hallmark of Comedy is a recurring motif throughout Plato's dialogues (and would also feature in Aristotle's appraisal of Poetry), and Plato's own *sophisticated* Comic approach to Philosophy. This approach, (in combination with his view of the importance of Poetry and Myth as a catalyst and rich medium for the critical, passionate philosophical attitude), was highly influential upon his protégé: Aristotle used these observations to formulate his

[83] As indicated by Kastely, 1996 and Greene, 1920.

own theory on the role of Poetry in society with a slight but important modification. Plato was "constrained by sheer artistic necessity to create a form of art…Platonic dialogue which…hovers midway between narrative, lyric and drama, between prose and poetry-the prototype of the *novel*" (Nietzsche, 1909 pp.108-109), yet his student would feel compelled to outline what he regarded as the proper place of poetry and philosophy in relation to each other, and also the normatively *proper* content of comedy, which would have important implications for Plato's innovative art form.

## Aristotle's *Poetics*.

The most striking feature of *The Poetics* is that it outlines the position of Poetry (Epic, Tragedy and Comedy) as a *separate* medium from that of Philosophy, which may yet serve as a *pleasant* preparatory activity for the development of the *critical attitude* amongst the citizenry of the polis, and which must occur *prior* to the development of the philosophical ethos and activity.

Although Aristotle did not have an explicit system of Aesthetics, he approached the writing of *Poetics* as an attempt to outline a theory of Poetry as a strictly *literary* genre, beginning by classifying the medium in relation to its essential features, and by studying it as to some degree independent from its political and moral connections[84].

[84] The extent to which this is the case has been argued by Bartky (1992), who believes Aristotle's view of Poetry to have more of a Political connection than is usually supposed by orthodox readings of the text.

What is of primary importance here is the Aesthetic value of Poetry or the *nature* of the poetic art; its ability to give us *pleasure*, the way this Aesthetic pleasure is evoked and the reasons why we find such representations pleasurable. However, the account given is not only descriptive, but also *normative* because Aristotle wishes to not only describe what poetry is in relation to the actual features of the extant works of his day, but also to outline what constitutes *good*, or the most Aesthetically effective, Tragedy and Comedy. So-called *proper-comedy* is defined in relation to its ability to achieve its end, or *final cause* which is the *motivation* of the creative poet - the evocation of pleasure[85]. This allows Aristotle to outline the basis of critical judgements and comparative evaluations of the effectiveness of Epic, Tragedy and Comedy (Beardsley, 1966 pp.54-55).

Whilst most of Aristotle's observations in the surviving first half of *Poetics*[86] are on the subject of Tragic poetry, he also talks of Comedy as being closely akin to Tragedy and describes its own defining characteristics to some extent, and it is these comments which I will focus upon, after some exposition of the outline of the definition of Poetry in general.

The point of departure from his tutor's conception of Poetry can be observed from

[85] This conveys Aristotle's approach as an *Apollonian* description of, and framework for, an *essentially* Dionysian activity with an explicitly Dionysian purpose and function.

[86] Most scholars accept that a second book or part was written by the author, but has either not survived or yet been recovered, and the contested closing statement of the whole of the surviving text, which may or may not be authentic, ends with the phrase "Now as to iambics and comedy….[1462 b20] (See Else, 1967 and Golden & Hardison, 1968). Janko's 1984 study, with its subtitle of *Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II*, attempts to outline a hypothetical study of what such a second part may have consisted in by reference to the surviving half of the text, to other Post-Aristotelian thinkers and to some other extant manuscripts (such as the *Tractatus Coislinianus*) whose authorship has also been highly contested by scholars. Whilst such an approach can never be regarded as having any *authority,* it does contain many insightful observations on Aristotle's thoughts as expressed in the main part of the text and upon the nature of Comedy in general.

the outset in Aristotle's alternate, *narrower* conception of an explicitly artistic *mimesis* as the defining characteristic of Poetry, which therefore has a fundamental position in the text because he emphasizes its *enactive* mode, and also Poetry's fictional *freedom* and autonomy in relation to Philosophy[87]. This enabled him to proceed by distinguishing the characteristics of Art from those of Philosophy and History, restricting the subject matter of the text to an explicit discussion of the creative activity of Poetry itself, via the narrower usage of mimetic *representation* as image-making in regards to the impersonation or *enactment* of human speech and other actions, and as displayed in direct speech and dramatic performance (Halliwell, 1986 pp.122-123)[88]. His re-conception of *mimesis* does not attempt to restrict the activities of artists to the transcription of material reality (as merely *copying* the visual appearances of objects), because objects of mimesis may actually be non-actual and ideal, in accordance with the conception of Poetry as truly *creative* making (or *poesis),* which brings into existence something which has not existed before [*Poetics* chapter XXV 1460b8-11]. In this field the status of mimetic-artist is restricted to the activity of the creative, representational *enactment* of human behaviour and activities, part of which is the *dramatic* mode distinguished from the *narrative* mode of performance. The narrative mode is exemplified in the works of Homeric and other Epic Poetry [*Poetics* chapter XXIV], and merely consists in the poet describing or arguing and speaking in his own person, whereas *enactive* dramatic mimesis is regarded as the only *truly* poetic mimesis (Halliwell, 1986 pp.124-126).

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[87] Despite the lack of any *explicit* definition of the meaning of his conception of Mimesis.

[88] The opening section closely parallels Book II of *The Republic*'s discussion of visual-arts as a group, though Aristotle does not view the model of image-making as a wholly adequate means for the explanation of Poetic works, importing considerations of the natural and psychological aspects of Poetic *mimesis* as analogous but *not* reductive to the activity of painting [*Poetics* chapter IV].

Aristotle expands upon the concept of Poetry as the mimesis of *men in action* [*Poetics* chapter II], before going on to declare that enactive Mimesis is a natural activity for human beings who are regarded as rational, *mimetic creatures* who *learn* about the meaning of concepts and existence through mimetic *play* and imagery, and hence experience a natural pleasure in the contemplation of, and the understanding generated by, mimetic and artistic works (Beardsley, 1966 pp.57-58)[89]. We can see an affinity here with the high regard that Plato held for the educational and critical impact of dramatic Poetry and *sophisticated* comic techniques. The *general* status of poetry in its relation to the world is considered to be that of mimetic image-making[90], but his comments upon the particular status of *enactive dramatic*-Poetry as one possible *mode* of Poetry (as the *manner* in which the Poet presents his material), are not intended to denote any particular form of relation to reality, and are especially not to be construed in the Platonic sense of an *iconic* one-to-one correspondence (Halliwell, 1986 pp.128-131).

The poet deals in creative *fiction*, not in outright falsehood, and the enactive mode is described as not being identical with the *performance* aspect of staged productions, because poetry (unlike music and dance), does not need to be acted-out on stage to be apprehended[91]. For Aristotle, the poet's function is one of *displaying* organically-unified[92] structures of human action as a series of causally-consequent events[93], with a

[89] On this basis it is not the actual object of imitation that gives pleasure, but the *recognition* or cognitive *inference* that the imitation is identifiable with the object imitated [*Rhetoric* 1, xi, 1371b].

[90] In-keeping with Plato's usage in Book X of *The Republic*.

[91] It should be able to be *read* without any loss of the coherency of its structure, nor of the pleasurable educational impact which it evokes.

[92] See Beardsley (1966) p.61 for a discussion of organic unity and its relation to Beauty. Organic unity and order is also an important criterion for literary works for Plato, as outlined in *The Phaedrus* (264c).

complete, *non-accidental*, fitting and appropriate, orderly arrangement of parts and size which exhibit a *higher* level of intelligibility than that which is usually found in everyday life[94]. Unlike the conventional Platonic view, the poet is free to represent things other than actuality, because the criteria of correctness in Poetry are distinct from those of Politics and other arts, and especially of Philosophy (Halliwell, 1986 pp.131-133).

In this allowance for the *autonomy* of standards of correctness in art we can see the origin of Aristotle's break with his teacher's criteria of mimetic success as *faithfulness* to appearances, which led him to divorce the genres of Poetry and Philosophy, yet Aristotle still enforced basic rational and ethical standards upon poetic creations[95]. Comic Poetry and Philosophy are no longer described as being interlocked in an irreconcilable rivalry or *ancient quarrel* [*The Republic* 607b], because Aristotle allows the same educational and critical impact for Comic Poetry [*Poetics* chapter IX], that Plato ascribes to general knowledge. This is the capacity to enlarge our understandings of existence by directing the mind from particulars to objects with higher, general and *universal* significance (Beardsley pp.57-58)[96], which Plato

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[93] As initially displayed in the works of *Crates,* who can be seen as one of the first poets to abandon the *iambic* approach (Heath, 1989 p.348).

[94] The poet thus creates an *imagined* world in which underlying *causalities* of human action can be manifested via the use of *direct* verbal representations, whilst still preserving the wholly *implicit* status of his own attitude towards his material.

[95] Especially in regards to *proper* Comic-poetry which Aristotle distinguishes from the traditional, satirical invective employed against actual *particular* persons by Aristophanes et. al.

[96] Poetry's concern with universals is used by Aristotle to distinguish it from his narrow conception of History as a "mere chronicle of distinct events", involving neither cross-reference nor considerations of causation, as being only concerned with *particulars* (such as events and the actions of individuals), and so to declare that Poetry is therefore more philosophical than History (Beardsley, 1966 pp.62&63).

attempted via his *mimetic* utilization of sophisticated comic techniques in his other extant works such as *The Phaedrus*[97]. Aristotle thusly restored the possibility of a form of knowledge and wisdom to the Comic Poets (and to dramatic-comedy as such), as being engaged in an activity conceived of as separate from, but with some relation to the *educational* impact of, Philosophy because the pleasure of laughter which comedy evokes is seen as of the same order as the pleasure of *coming-to-know* (Halliwell, 1986 pp.133-137).

The course of events (or *process*) displayed within the complete action represented by a piece of dramatic Poetry is described as the *soul* of work [*Poetics* chapter VI, 1450a39], the *unified* nature of which provides a single, condensed impact. The events within the play must follow each other with maximum inevitability, in accordance with necessity or probability [ibid, chapter X, 1452a19], so that the poet can describe the "kinds of things that can happen" [ibid, 1451 a36] in circumstances similar to those portrayed, and thus in life in general. This gives the poem its *universal* force because it represents the kind of things a certain person would probably, or necessarily do or say [ibid, 1451 b6], and so the poet shows how actions grow out of the *motivations* of agents, which in turn grow out of their understandings of the *meaning* of the circumstances which the agent finds herself in. This is only possible when presented in terms of *universals* or tested and applicable psychological laws, meaning that the poet must have some degree of critical awareness of human social life and a genuine and *true* general knowledge of basic *psychological*

[97] For Aristotle, the *generalizing* nature of the representations involved in Comic dramatic-poetry makes them especially direct and *vivid,* and therefore particularly able to communicate the mimetic significance of the concrete details of human actions, because such details signify *universals* which he sees as immanent within *particulars.* These are made explicit when they are presented in a *unified* structure of *meaning*, which can therefore enlarge our understandings whilst *also* pleasantly moving our emotions, thusly evoking our laughter with an *ethical* force (Beardsley, 1966 pp.57-58).

mechanisms, of how certain types of person are motivated and tend to act in certain circumstances (Beardsley, 1966 pp.62-64).

This makes it clear that Aristotle's *practical* universals are not to be identified with Plato's Metaphysical *ideas* or *forms*, *(*which are concerned with only *theoretical* objects), because human life and action belongs to the *practical* sphere of existence, to the human world of *contingency* and approximations, whose *non-absolute* principles are therefore only valid *for the most part*[98]. In this way, the Poet is *liberated* from Plato's requirement to study theoretical Philosophy as the only means to learning the truth, whilst being *restricted* to the practical realm and therefore unable to claim an understanding of the *ultimate* nature of life. In accordance with Heraclitus' and Nietzsche's Ontological outlooks (and in contrast to much of Plato's usage), Poetry has no Metaphysical dimension for Aristotle, and is tied to everyday life and the realm of human *choices*, (which constitute our self-identity and make us happy or unhappy), so allowing for the autonomy and existential responsibility of individuals (Else, 1967 pp.305-307).[99]

Consequentially, the cognitive dimension of the pleasure we gain from experiencing dramatic Comedy and Poetry is not derived from learning about the intrinsic or *essential* properties of an object, such as a concept or virtue, but is due to our learning about the *relative* meanings of things, about the *relationships* of such

[98] They are the general principles which the practical sciences of Ethics and Politics are concerned with expounding, so that Comic Poetry must be at least correlated with these sciences to the extent that it deals with such universals and so must have some Ethical and Political (as well as *pleasurable*), impact. However, the Poetic is not to be viewed as a science because it only offers a *typology* of human nature, dealing as it does with human *archetypes* used for the sake of representing the action and speech epitomised in the plot.

[99] That their own character and their own conception of what constitutes the good-life are the only systematic cause of *action*; of what they do and also of what happens to them.

objects to other similar, related objects[100], which enable us to "learn and conclude what each thing is" (Belfiore, 1985 p.351).

## Aristotle's *Poetics* on Comedy.

The criteria of universality and the centrality of the generalising process in Poetry[101] is also used in Aristotle's normative definition of *proper* Comedy [*Poetics* chapter V], as an "imitation of baser men" or "relatively worthless characters" [ibid, 1448a1-5], men who are characterized, (due to the nature of the actions they take part in rather than to their character-types as such)[102], as in some way *flawed* or not wholly *like us*, (or as *not* being *mostly good* or *noble*). Such actions are characterized by the

[100] Relationships of meaning are often expressed through the use of *metaphors,* which point out likenesses and relations of similarity, and for Aristotle the utilisation of metaphor is one of the most important *artistic* linguistic techniques, because it reveals similarities and in Aristotle's view "the ability to perceive similarities in dissimilarities is a sign of genius" (Golden & Hardison, 1968 p.251).

[101] The historical adoption of *generalised* plots is said to be the "vital step that differentiated comedy from [invective] *iambus*" (Janko, 1984 p.214), (*iambus* being the poetic meter used in satire which is said to be similar to the conversational meter of everyday speech and which lent its name to early forms of comedy, described as evolving from the improvisations "from those who led the phallic songs" [1449 a10-16]) because comic plots are to be created according to *probability* and *necessity* [*Poetics* chapter V, 1449 b5 a&9. 1451 b12]. However, "impossibilities and incoherence can be used for comic effect [and] in *Poetics* [chapter XXV] Aristotle allows the impossible or illogical provided that it achieves some higher purpose [1460 b22ff]" (Janko, 1984 p.215).

[102] "For tragedy is not an imitation of men, *per se*, but of human action and life and happiness and misery. Both happiness and misery consist in a kind of action" and "Poets do not, therefore create action in order to imitate character; but character is included on account of the action" [*Poetics,* 1450a15-25].

*laughable* or *ridiculous* and thereby evoke the pleasure of laughter[103].

The laughable is defined as "some error or ugliness that has no harmful effects" [ibid, 1449 a32-37], as a relatively minor form of *hamartia* which may threaten to be, but is ultimately *not*, destructive to life or painful. Such *hamartia* should ultimately be resolved by a *recognition* scene which is often accompanied by a *reversal* of fortune from bad to good or vice-versa, where the ignorance of *hamartia* is replaced by the enlightenment of knowledge[104]. He distinguishes this from the *invective*, satirical treatment and personal abuse of historical and particular individuals which informed Plato's view of Comedy as featured in the extant works of Aristophanes et al[105], seen as a *mixed* pleasure which is pleasurable as laughter but is mixed with the pain that comes from malice or envy, and indulges the ignorance and *vulgar* passions and appetites of the audience [*The Republic* Book X, 606c-d][106].

[103] This follows a hypothetical and theoretically determined consideration of the possible historical origins of Comedy [chapter III], in relation to the placing of early improvisations in Dorian culture and Megarian democracy and also the etymology of the words for *drama* and *comedy* (as deriving from either the word for *town,* because early comedic improvisers were said to have been nomadic wanderers who had been "driven in disgrace from the city" [*Poetics,* 1448a30-b5] or from the word for *revelling)*. For an in-depth study of the possible origins of comedy see Rusten (2006) and Dobrov (2007).

[104] Such recognition can be seen as the *punch-line* or *pay-off* of the increased comic tension, and the *hamartia* involved often consists in a case of a *mistaken identity* on behalf of the protagonists regarding the true identity of others (or of the true nature of their relation to the protagonist), or even of the protagonists own self-identity.

[105] However, Janko (1984) suggests that Aristophanes "actually constituted a mean for Aristotle between excessive buffoonery and plays that had become rather tame or serious" [p.206].

[106] In Plato's view the enjoyment we gain from Comedy is largely derived from seeing both our enemies and friend *suffer*, which nurtures our feelings of malice and so breeds a *painful joy* which can ultimately cause madness [*Philebus* 50b], as well as contributing to social instability. Although the Comedian is not necessarily driven by malice, his central motive is that of *envy* and an excess of bad temper as a form of *madness* which compels him into saying funny things *against* people, and should be prevented by law. Aristotle's response to his tutors view is that Comedy must therefore be redefined *normatively,* to exclude the negative or painful elements of early invective and satire (Else, 1967 pp.186-189).

Aristotle's concern with ethical propriety within Comedy is often taken to imply that the author held a comic ideal of "decorum and restraint" (Halliwell, 1986 pp.273+274), although it has been argued that the ethical standards of orderly social intercourse are not the same as those which are applicable to Comedy. Aristotle views the status of wit as a *mean* between boorishness and the *buffoonery* that Plato largely conceived Comedy as consisting in, meaning that the indulgence in Comic laughter may not necessarily lead to imbalanced and un-virtuous/vicious behaviour (Heath, 1989 p.344)[107]. Personal criticism and abuse are often laughable and *jest* is described as a laughable form of *insult*, meaning that the question of jesting *properly* becomes a normative, ethical consideration, that whilst Comedy need not necessarily exclude all abuse, such abuse *must* be laughable. Because of the potentially *negative* ethical impact of the experience of such dramatic comedy, Aristotle proposes the limiting of the *audience* of Comedy to sufficiently morally educated, mature males who would already be able to distinguish between morally correct and suspect types of behaviour (Heath, 1989 pp.344-347).

The main concern for Aristotle is that the Comic poets' aim of the evocation of laughter and its attendant pleasure through the mimetic, enactive representation of *the laughable* (in antithesis to the *tragic*), must exclude the portrayal of what is painful or destructive in a way that is fearful and pitiable [*Poetics* 1449 a 34-35], that the ethically *appropriate* pleasure that Comedy aims towards is achieved if those

[107] In *The Politics* [1336 b-23] the indecent language often employed by *invective* is excluded from most aspects of the state, though not from religious cults, iambic poetry and Comedy which deals with the actions and speech of characters who are therefore on the whole considered as somewhat morally inferior, as either *worse than* (in the sense of vulgar or ignoble), or merely *less serious* than the average citizen of the polis. This means that Comedy must, by definition deal in the representation of behaviour which *deviates* from social and ethical norms, though such behaviour may be seen as *trivial*.

portrayed as enemies are finally reconciled and "nobody is killed by anyone" [ibid, 1453a35-39]. However, depending on who suffers and *how* this suffering is portrayed[108], not all representations of painful and destructive events are necessarily inimical to laughter; the key criteria is the absence of the evocation of such *painful* emotions as *pity* and *fear*, (which is the aim of *tragedy*), and envy, anger, malice etc, and not the *complete* removal of any painful or destructive *acts* or speech (Heath, 1989 pp.352-353)[109].

Comedy in Aristotle's view is not as it is considered to be in modern conceptions, where a distinction is made between tragedy and comedy on the basis of the happiness or unhappiness of the ending of the dramatic work, because its significance lies in the stipulation that it should bring its audience to a conclusion which is conformable with moral equilibrium even though a "wide range of failings and deficiencies" [*Poetics*, 49a32-7] may find their place in the actions and speech of its flawed characters. Such actions display a certain level of *hamartia*, in the form of some kind of *inappropriate* behaviour[110], resulting from a cognitive *error* or character-flaw regarding the true nature of themselves or of their circumstances, which constitutes the overall character of the mimetic representation of the laughable (Halliwell, 1986 p.268 note 23). The cognitive dimension of the experience of Comedy need not necessarily carry an explicit moral lesson as such because, as Plato came to accept[111], such insight may

[108] See Aristotle's view of the "double-ending" as the appropriate plot structure for Comedy [*Poetics*, 1453a35-39].

[109] This allows us to see that Aristotle's account of proper-Comedy need not exclude the whole of the works of Aristophanes et al.

[110] Whether in the sense of not befitting the behaviour of more serious or noble men, or merely in the sense of not being the *appropriate* response to the circumstances at hand.

[111] In *Laws* [816d-e].

actually enable us to exercise our *practical* wisdom which is an essential constituent of a moral life[112].

For Aristotle, the truly Comic or ridiculous can be seen as historically evolving as a refinement of the iambic character of invective, though it still retains a degree of affinity with its forbear because both are concerned with the *critical* force of laughter which must be aimed at some object, and this accounts for the fact that iambic elements were still present in the comedy of Aristotle's day[113]. He accepts that some degree of *mockery* must be present in all laughter [*Rhetoric* 1381 a33-35], describing wit as a form of "*cultured insolence"* or *hubris* [ibid, 1389 b11], and the comic rationale as the portrayal of various faults, errors and deficiencies in men [*Poetics*, chapter V], though such weaknesses should be restricted to the *relatively light and harmless* and should exclude the extremities of *evil* and *threatening* behaviour (Halliwell, 1986 pp.268-270).[114]

Ultimately the main cause of the laughter which is evoked should be *cognitive*; it should arise from the structure of the play itself and the audience or reader's *recognition* of the consequent universal *significance* of such generalised behaviour for their own understandings of the actions and behaviour of themselves, and of their fellow citizens[115]. The crux of the impetus of the plot is centred upon a *reversal of*

[112] It may help us to understand virtue from observing its *opposite* in vicious, ignoble or merely *unserious* and *trivial* behaviour, and the pleasure derived from individual witticisms may be attributable to the *learning* and understanding we gain regarding the practical sphere of life when we experience such comedy [*Rhetoric,* 1412 a17-b23].

[113] For example, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* [1384 b9-11] describes comic poets as *slanderers* who publicise the faults or *hamartia* of their fellow citizens.

[114] This accounts for the tendency of Comedy to portray the escapades of so-called *lovable rogues,* rather than the outright morally reprehensible acts of villains or thoroughly evil persons.

[115] Rather than arising from mere comic spectacle, such as people falling-over or suffering other

*fortune (*from good to bad or vice-versa), which is strongly linked to the *recognition* scene, as the main part of the plot which exposes the central *hamartia* of the piece and so epitomizes the heightened intelligibility inherent in it, and is facilitated by the *universalising* process of the plot structure and its generalising mimetic nature[116]. This *enlightened,* pleasurable and *joyful* learning motivates us to gain a deeper awareness of our social and ethical nature and of the requirements of critical self-awareness, in preparation for the pursuit of self-knowledge and also for the upholding of social *norms* or standards of behaviour, which are necessary for both personal *and* social harmony and happiness.

We can now see that not only can Comedy enable the sufficiently educated, mature audience to develop their critical and moral attitude towards the speech and behaviour of others[117], but that Comedy can actually make light of, or even *resolve,* potentially serious matters which might be more problematic and unjust in everyday life, because it is (in direct contrast to Tragedy), restricted to the realm of the emotionally and morally *unthreatening* in its attempts to elicit our laughter. This laughter, by definition, cannot be compatible with *serious* ethical failings or other types of *hamartia* and their *unpleasant* consequences. For Aristotle, Comedy is an inherently *critical* (highly structured, *Apollonian*) dramatic presentation of various types of ignorance and human deficiency, which are represented for the sake of the *pleasure* of the resultant *intoxicating (Dionysian)* laughter, a pleasure which can be heightened by

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types of mild pain or being decked-out in ridiculous costumes or clothing.

[116] In Comedy this can be viewed as the main *punch-line* where the pleasure of laughter and learning are combined (see above note 104).

[117] By extension allowing them to gain a more *self-critical* awareness of their own existences, social-interactions and place in society.

our critically engaged yet emotively-charged sense of humour and the resultant increased intelligibility of existence. This heightened intelligibility results from the *unity* of the plot-structure and the *generalised* status of the event as mimetically represented, which gives universal significance to (yet emphasizes the triviality or *unserious* nature of), the *actions* which characterise the agents involved in them (Halliwell, 1986 pp.271-273).

Because of this characteristic restriction Comedy is largely divorced from the depiction and evocation of the emotions of pity and fear which characterise the *pathos* of Tragedy, and which appear in Comedy *only* for the sake of its end[118]. This leads us to ponder if there can be any possible role in Comedy for the widely discussed feature of *Katharsis* which lies at the heart of Aristotle's conception of Tragedy; as the description of the process which transforms the painful emotions of pity and fear which are evoked by the poem into a pleasurable experience. It is already clear that the *mimetic* experience is pleasurable *qua* learning, and that comedy is largely painless *and* innately pleasurable so that it seems difficult to apply to Comedy Aristotle's only comment upon *katharsis,* (which is *explicitly* linked to the Tragic mode), that *Tragedy* "achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents" [*Poetics*, Chapter VI, 1449b28-30].

The statement may be applicable to the limited extent that such tragic elements appear in comic poetry, given that Aristotle concedes that the two modes may overlap in their subject matter and his comments upon the *double-plot* which ends "in

[118] This end is the evocation of pleasurable laughter, which is accompanied by the attendant increase in intelligibility which arises from the causal structure of the dramatic poetic work.

opposite ways for the better and worse characters" [ibid, ch.XIII, 1453a33-34][119].

Given the context of Aristotle's employment of the term, this form of catharsis can only be associated to Comedy which displays tragic elements and (given that the clause is only mentioned in explicit regard to Tragedy), it would seem that catharsis is (for Aristotle) therefore an essentially Tragic phenomenon and only applicable to Comic works and experiences *in so far as* they contain tragi-comic elements[120]. It seems that, because Comedy is *by definition* essentially pleasurable, there is little need for the mechanism of *catharsis*, which seems to exist for the sake of *transmuting* the essentially *painful* emotions of Tragedy, and that the *reconciliation* of enemies which is facilitated by the *reversals* of the plot *itself* (and the attendant pleasure-of-learning from the higher-intelligibility which is facilitated by the reversal and recognition scenes)[121], and the *pleasant* nature of laughter itself, is sufficient for eliminating any residual negative elements and emotions[122]. It seems obvious that the *joyous* pleasure

[119] Aristotle states that the pleasure that the double-plot affords is alien to tragedy but is *customary* in comedy, because it involves sudden *reversals* in fortune and in the action of the plot where seemingly "implacable hatred suddenly dissolves into joyous reunion" [*Poetics*, 1453a36-40]. This seems to echo with modern conceptions of comedy as involving *happy-endings* (although this is not an *essential* defining characteristic of Comedy for Aristotle), as displayed in many romantic-comedies and so-called *buddy-movies*, and may provide justification for associating comic catharsis with the reconciliation of enemies as the *clarification* of the painful events it may portray into the "triumph of love over hate" [Golden & Hardison, 1968 p.188].

[120] See Halliwell (1986) pp.350-356 for an extensive discussion of 6 different interpretations of the possible meaning of *Katharsis,* and a refutation of the views of Else (1967) and Daniels & Scully (1992) who attempt a *reductive* interpretation of Catharsis by removing the consideration of the audience-experience and actually attempt to re-write what they think Aristotle *meant* to say. Paskow (1983) also provides an analysis based upon Freudian and psychoanalytic conceptions of *repression* and the *counter-ego* which are enlightening but I believe ultimately unnecessary.

[121] As the ultimate *punch-line* of the art-work which unveils the knowledge which has been hidden due to the *hamartia* of the central characters.

[122] Because the laughter and enlightenment of mimetic Comic-Poetry is *already* pleasurable there is no need in it for the mechanism of catharsis *as it is described* by Aristotle himself because, although we are not told which emotional basis the pleasure of comedy rests upon, the conception of *hamartia* (of error and failing), as the characteristic object of comedy does not seem to support a conception of

of our experience and expression of the phenomena of *laughter-itself* is sufficient to completely characterise and account for the specific pleasure of pure, *proper* Comedy as such[123].

Aristotle seems to agree with Plato that Poetry should not be divorced from its Political connections because for Aristotle the mimetic arts *are* an appropriate educational method if they appear within the *best* city [Aristotle's *Politics*, Books 7 & 8], where they ought to be aimed at the well-being of the city as a whole. However, he parts with his tutor in his belief that the *demos* taken as a whole *is* educable and *can* be reformed by dramatic poetry, that the citizens of a democracy can be educated into pursuing the good life (Bartky, 1992 pp.607-608), and that comic dramatic-poetry as *reformed* proper-Comedy *can* play an essential role in the development of the critical attitude necessary for political involvement.

For Aristotle, Comedy teaches us what kinds of action and speech are worthy of being laughed-at, ridiculed and trivilised, or of not being taken too seriously. It would seem that proper Comedy has a political function similar to that of Tragedy[124], and so makes *political deliberation*, (which encourages us to see that happiness depends upon the correct *ordering* of the city), possible, even though it does not direct the demos to the best end of life, which is the happiness of the philosopher (Bartky, 1992

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a possible comic *katharsis* as being a *counterpart* of Tragic catharsis (Halliwell, 1986 p.274-275).

[123] The main *punch-line* or moment of recognition is the *climax* of the pleasure of learning as increased intelligibility, in *synthesis* with the *direct* pleasure of the *Dionysian,* intoxicating nature of laughter, and this direct and *joyous* intoxication needs no catharsis if it is evoked according to Aristotle's guidelines for *proper* Poetic Comedy, without any tragic elements.

[124] This prepares the soul of the citizenry by teaching what is worthy of being feared and pitied.

p.608). Aristotle rejects his tutor's audience-*quality* distinction because he stipulates that the audience of Comedy must already be mature and sufficiently educated enough to discriminate between good and bad types of behaviour and actions, and so that proper Comedy, like Tragedy, does *not* require a vulgar and uneducated audience (ibid, p.612). It would seem that in its encouragement of the development of the proto-philosophical *critical attitude*, Comedy can actually serve to *further* the political education of the citizens of a society[125].

Both thinkers believe that the city requires a reformed, *critical* type of Poetry and Comedy, but Aristotle's fundamental point of departure is that he ultimately rejects Plato's reliance on poetic and mythical elements within *Philosophy* itself, and attempts to establish Philosophy and Poetry's as *disciplines* with a clear independence from each other, by clearly demarcating the boundary between the two. For Aristotle, Plato's constant resort to poetic myth and metaphor might stimulate the pre-philosophical citizen to become aware of and intrigued with the problematic status of *finite* human existence and cognition, the possibility of human happiness, and other central *philosophical* problems, but it prevents one from grasping knowledge of the *parts* which constitute the whole of human life, existence and meaning itself[126]. Comedy can *pleasantly* educate, and therefore also *encourage*, the pre-philosophic man into developing and refining a highly-critical *attitude* and so enable him to become politically aware and engaged, but it is not ultimately *essential* to the

[125] Due to its universalising, *mimetic* significance Comedy deals with actions that *might* happen, rather than with particular, historical actions that have already happened and so offers an *optimistic*, pleasurable conclusion which can therefore point towards the possibility of *happiness* as the good-life and therefore *towards* philosophic activity as the only true means to happiness (Bartky, 1992 p.615).

[126] This is a form of knowledge which he believes (in contradiction to Plato), *is* accessible to reason via the Philosophical observation and analysis of the *universal significance* of human, practical action and speech as displayed in, but not limited to, Poetry and proper-Comedy

Philosophical ascent and way-of-life which can attain knowledge of such parts without the resort to poetic and mythic techniques (Bartky, 1992 p.616-618). By making his examination of Comedy and Poetry in the form of a treaty which is mostly separate to his other explicitly Philosophical works, Aristotle displays his own attitude towards the relation of the disciplines, and so "seeks to rescue philosophy from poetry and in so doing rescue philosophy from the city and the gods" (ibid, p.619).

Aristotle's proper-Comedy is a carefully balanced synthesis of the *Dionysian* pleasure of laughter, as combined with and contained within an *Apollonian* structure, which gives the *absurd* and ridiculous an intelligibility which may enlighten us to the social and *political* significance of our own and others actions[127]. Comedy leads us to recognise the importance of examining one's self and the situations we find ourselves in and the significance of other people's behaviour within such circumstances, and so leads us towards a deeper understanding of our self and the *relativity* of meanings according to *circumstances*, which reflects the *relational* nature of meaning itself. Comedy *playfully* and *pleasantly* portrays complete-actions, and so intimates that the *life* of finite and imperfect *actual* human beings, who often fail to live-up to the expectations of moral *ideals* in general, can be viewed as reflecting the *tension* between the perspectives of the ideal and the actual and the *absurdity* of human existence, as as an essentially *laughable* or ridiculous *game*.

The *critical* force of comedy, which enables us to recognise the absurdity of

[127] It may also increase our understanding of the underlying conceptions and inter-relations of the *meanings* of words and actions, which determine our understandings of life and the circumstances we find ourselves in and so inform and motivate our behavior.

*pretensions* to absolute knowledge and virtue, can therefore also have a politically *harmonizing* effect. It equalizes the potential status of all citizens in relation to their ability to pursue the good life and gain happiness, and also specifically reinforces the individual audience member or reader's status as *mostly* better than the *baser characters* represented, who are in ignorance of the meaning of their actions and their own motivations (unlike the viewer) [128]. This increased feeling of social unity is especially invoked in the inherently communal and social environment of the theatre, which is generally viewed as having developed from Dionysian religious festivities, and reflects the nature of the phenomena of laughter as an inherently social phenomena which is displayed by the fact that jokes and comedy almost always have more impact, are *funnier,* when experienced in the presence of others.

It seems then that in the political sphere of highly-social, civilized societies "laughter is the best medicine" in Aristotle's view *if* it is pleasurable *and* guided by an intelligible *Apollonian* structure and basic, defining *ethical* requirements, and so it can be an effective *pharmakon* (or medicinal tool) for promoting social cohesion and political involvement and awareness, provided that society adequately educates its citizenry and restricts access to comedy to mature, discerning audiences.

On the whole, Aristotle's outline of Comedy seems to be in accord with most of Plato's general requirements for Poetry as an educational tool, and this is achieved by his *normative* definition of proper-Comedy and by removing it from the stipulation that it must be considered *only* in regard to its value for educating the young and

[128] Our ability to "get the joke" of the main process of the action reinforces the awareness of the self and fellow audience members as *mostly good,* and by extension of other citizens as both ethically and intellectually like oneself, resulting in the feeling that most people are fairly intelligent and morally good, which encourages one to feel that we live in a *mostly* good (or *civilized*) society.

philosophically inclined, as Plato treats it in *The Republic*. The main point of departure involves the definition of Poetic-Comedy as essentially a separate discipline from Philosophy, and of Comedy as *essentially* the imitation of *baser* (or slightly morally and intellectually deficient), men engaged in largely *trivial* actions and issues; in behaviour which Plato would see as *infectious* and would forbid in his *ideal* city-state. Aristotle manages to outline a way to create Comedy that protects against infection and encourages our critical attitude, and so actually *educates* our ethical character, because he emphasizes the *cognitive* dimension of *proper* dramatic-poetry and the requirement that the audiences of Comedy must be *already* educated and mature. Despite his emphasis upon the autonomy of Poetry, Aristotle's view of Comedy still has much affinity with his tutor's: His description of proper Comedy would fit Plato's Comic dialogues as mentioned above (especially as displayed in *The Phaedrus*), and he would demand an "eighteen-certificate" for *all* comedy, yet he values it for its Political and social impact which stops short of proper Philosophy. Comedy *can* be preparatory for the life guided by Philosophy but it does not *have to* be so to fulfill its function - to give us *pleasure* by making us *laugh* and *learn* from our recognition of the largely *ridiculous* character of human actions, behaviour and speech, which should be regarded with the correct perspective, as mainly trivial and so not worthy of being taken too seriously.

## Theoretical Approaches to Laughter - The 19th and Early 20th Century.

After Aristotle's *Poetics*, explicit Philosophical examinations of the phenomena of laughter and the role of Comedy in human existence were largely overlooked until the 19th century, which also saw the rise of specifically *theory-driven* approaches which attempted to define the essential nature of laughter as displayed in its many and varied forms.

Kant (1790) had already proposed a definition of laughter as "an affectation arising from a strained expectation being suddenly transformed into nothing"[129] which echoes Plato's usage of Comic techniques to highlight the *tension* between the expectations or perspective of the *Ideal* as being brought into conflict with, and often confounded by, the perspective and practices of *actual*, finite human existence and vice-versa. Hobbes (1840) had also defined laughter as arising from an awareness of a similar form of tension between perspectives, though in his case it was conceived of as a tension between our own present point of view, in opposition and as *superior* to that of other individuals, or of our previous selves; as a "*sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own formerly"[130]. It is in Hobbes' definition that we see the origin of the *Superiority* theory of laughter[131], as the result of the adoption of a certain

[129] KANT, I. (1790) - *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement (*p.199), quoted in Borch-Jacobsen (1998) p.161.

[130] HOBBES, T. (1840) - *Human Nature,* in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* vol.4, ch.9, Section 13, p.46, quoted in Prusak (2004) p.379.

[131] The stipulation that this laughter occurs due to the recognition of *infirmity* also recalls Aristotle's definition of Comedy as dealing with the exposition of *hamartia,* in the trivial actions of men considered to fall short of the ideals and *social norms* of ethical or *appropriate* activity in response to their situation.

*attitude* towards ourselves and our relation to the behaviour of other human beings, yet which also interestingly allows for the ability to laugh at our *previous* selves.

There is an important exception to the Superiority theory, which is the phenomenon of *joyous* laughter (as opposed to the derisive laughter of superiority), which is mentioned by Morreall (1982),[132] who also points to types of verbal humour such as puns and general word-play, and to the phenomena of "laughter at our very own selves as we presently are" (Prusak, 2004 p.380), the laughter that ensues from the joy of *self-recognition* (even in regards to the recognition of our own limits or finitude). These types of laughter do not seem to be accounted for by Superiority theories in general and Morreall points out that in the Ancient Greek and Hebrew languages there are two different words for derisive and joyful laughter which are subsumed within the meaning of the English and Latin singular words for laughter.

Morreall's criticism is applicable to Bergson's (1911) heavily *social* Superiority theory of laughter, which discusses what constitutes the comic or laughable element of human behaviour (rather than dealing with laughter itself directly), in opposition to *Incongruity* theories of laughter, such as that of Kant and Schopenhauer whose descriptions of the evocation of laughter are based upon the observation of a *reductio-ad-absurdum* of our expectations, of "a surprising *disproportion* between that which one *expects* and that which one sees" (Pascal, 1656 p.783)[133]. In Schopenhauer's theory laughter has its origin in the spectator as subject, and occurs due to a "suddenly *perceived* incongruity between a *concept* and the real [*actual*]

[132] MORREALL, J (1982) - *Taking Laughter Seriously* (pp.10-13), quoted in Prusak (2004) p.380 and p.387 note 17.

[133] Quoted in Prusak (2004), p.378.

objects that had been thought through it and [laughter] is itself merely the *expression* of this incongruity" (Schopenhauer, 1969 p.59)[134].

For Bergson, laughter has the Utilitarian function of preserving social order and unity, by acting as a *corrective* social gesture which represses the eccentric, abnormal and socially incongruous behaviour of individuals by inspiring the fear of ridicule from other members of society. Bergson points out that the *Incongruity* theory of laughter (as it had been formulated at that time), as a *logical* relation, is insufficient because it cannot explain why we don't laugh at all instances of incongruous behaviour (Bergson, 1911 p.7).

In his opinion we only laugh at those incongruities which need rectifying and improving in the eyes of society, and the sense of superiority evidenced in the drive to humiliate (and so instruct and correct the object of our laughter), is seen as an unconscious or "unavowed" intention (ibid p.123 & 153); it is a social *instinct* which responds to what is usually an *unwilled* gesture of disobedience (ibid.p23). Laughter simultaneously "punishes and heals" (Plessner, 1970)[135] these transgressions against social norms, and the actual physical manifestation of laughter can be viewed as being of the same character as the behaviour it seeks to rectify (as being fitting and appropriate to the occasion), because both are a "systematic parody of our ordinary

[134] SCHOPENHAUER, A (1969) - *The World as Will and Representation* (English translation) vol.1 p.59, quoted in Prusak (2004), p.378.

[135] PLESSNER, H (1970) - *Laughing and Crying - A Study of the Limits of Human Behaviour,* p.82, quoted in Prusak (2004) p.379.

functioning" (Moore, 1996)[136].

It seems that for Bergson the essence of the laughable in human behaviour is largely Aristotelian, it is a form of social *hamartia* on behalf of the individual who fails to act *appropriately* in accordance to the circumstances that they find themselves in, and so displays behaviour which transgresses social norms and ideals. Because Society demands that we must be flexible in response to our social environment to live well, such behaviour fails to display the necessary *elasticity "*of body and mind" (Bergson, 1911 p.21), it is a form of *inflexibility* to adapt to one's circumstances, a lack of awareness, a "certain *fundamental absentmindedness*" (ibid p.25) betrayed by misunderstandings and misuses of language.

Laughter has a *punitive* role as a socially-inflicted form of punishment against those who transgress against societies "sense of rectitude" (Prusak, 2004 p.378), and the sort of incongruities that we laugh at are those where living human behaviour fails to be sufficiently dynamic and so where human life *parodies* itself when it displays a sort of "automism established in life and imitating it" (Bergson, 1911 p.32)[137].

Bergson outlays what he sees as three necessary *conditions* of the comic which, according to Prusak (2004, pp.381-385), are actually *pre-suppositions* of Bergson himself and can all be seen as largely insufficient in characterising the full richness of the scope of laughter:

[136] MOORE, F.C.T. (1996) - *Bergson: Thinking Backwards*, pp.89-90 - quoted in Prusak (2004) p.379.

[137] Such individuals display a *tension* between their aspects as a living being and their mechanical behaviour, which gives them a *self-contradictory* appearance because they take on the appearance of something "mechanical encrusted upon the living" (Bergson, 1911 p.37) which occasions the appearance of the sudden and "momentary transformation of a person into a thing" (ibid.p57).

Firstly, the *anthropocentric* condition which claims that the human is not just the only "animal which laughs" but is also the only genuinely laughable animal, as the only "animal which is laughed at" and that we only laugh at other animals and at inanimate objects "because of some resemblance to man" and to human behaviour (Bergson pp.3-4). This is challenged by Plessner (1970) who argues that we often laugh at inanimate objects and animals (such as a two-foot tall miniature horse) not because of their similarity to human behaviour but because they appear to be "caricatures of animals" or parodies *of themselves* (Plessner, 1970 p.85), and so that such laughter cannot originate from a *corrective* drive. In his opinion what Bergson fails to recognise is the fact that what makes us laugh is the *appearance* of the object of our laughter, as a certain form of *ambivalence*, due to the violation of *norms* "which [the object] nevertheless obviously obeys" (ibid), in *both* animal and human behaviour, and that various standards of behaviour equally apply to both humans and animals[138]. Animals and inanimate objects cannot actually *be* comic or ridiculous, but can *appear* as such to the human perspective because only human beings are expected to be responsible in their behaviour, and so *only they* can meet or violate social, behavioural norms. We laugh at both humans and animals on the basis of *tension* between an *ideal* or "a conflict between an idea and a norm which we apply to the appearance" (Plessner, 1970 p.86), an *expectation* of how we think something ought to be, and what *actually* appears, and so laughter cannot be exclusively a corrective gesture nor merely a reaction to the appearance of mechanism.

Secondly, despite the fact that he sees laughter as occurring from a largely

[138] Prusak points out that such laughter can be viewed as an instance of the "purely joyful laughter" which provides an exception to the types of laughter which the Superiority theory covers, as mentioned above.

*unconscious* or inexplicit drive to assert our superiority over others to encourage them to conform with norms of socially-acceptable behaviour, Bergson defines laughter as a purely intellectual (as opposed to an emotional) gesture, which requires a certain level of "indifference", or emotional *distance,* from our sympathetic feelings towards others to prevent us from taking the situation *seriously*. This is the perspective or *attitude* of the *disinterested* spectator; "the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart" (Bergson, 1911 p.5) in relation to the object who displays behaviour which is a comical deviation from the norm. Prusak (2004) criticizes this condition because it only describes how we *observe* such behaviour and cannot account for why we would actually *laugh* at what we see, except to say that we do so for the purpose of correcting and instructing such behavior[139]. Prusak stipulates that we are both constrained and *enthralled* when we are overcome by laughter, we lose the intellectual distance from the powerfully comic situation which therefore disarms and disorganises us, leaving us *speechless* because we have been deprived of the conceptual or linguistic tools which we normally utilise to come to terms with our environment, and so we *lose control* of our bodies in the sudden explosion of laughter. Citing Plessner (1970, p.111) the *unanswerableness* of the situation is coupled with a constraint upon us via an "illusion of seriousness" (Plessner, 1970 p.141), which "must *appear* to respond to our expectations whilst simultaneously thwarting us" (Prusak, 2004 p.385); it enthralls us because we are unable to determine how to understand or respond to it in any other way than to "dispose of the appearance by losing control of ourselves" (ibid), in short by laughing[140].

[139] This contention has already been shown to be insufficient in characterising all forms of laughter in relation to the behaviour of animals as well as in relation to Morreall's criticism based upon the phenomena of *joyous* laughter (Prusak, 2004 p.385).

[140] Although this laughter depends on our *distance* from the situation, such distance is "necessary

Bergson's final condition of the comic (1911, pp.5-8) is that it is an inherently *social* phenomenon which always occurs within a group, where we laugh with others who share our sense of humour or outlook upon the world; "our laughter is always the laughter of a group…[and] it must have a *social* signification" (Bergson, 1911 p.6 & p.8)[141]. Prusak again criticizes this pre-supposition (Prusak, 2004 p.382) on the basis that, although our presence in a group *cultivates* our laughter in a sense of "the more the merrier", it does not necessarily mean that laughter must be *essentially* social, that others *must* be physically present with us for us to be able to laugh as Bergson implies, and he quotes Augustine's observation that we do still laugh when we are alone (such as when we read a comical novel), "if something *extremely* ridiculous is presented"[142] to us. The social environment may be the best for inducing our laughter, however it does not necessarily follow that "our laughter is *always* the laughter of a group" (Bergson, 1911 p.6).

Prusak concludes that Bergson's theory fails to be as all-inclusive as he believes it to be because laughter is not *essentially* a social, anthropomorphic, purely intellectual nor corrective, punitive gesture which asserts the superiority of the one who laughs over the object of their laughter. However, he states that laughter is linked to *relationships*; it is ultimately evoked by the *tension* and interplay between actual behaviour and the *norms*, or *common-sense* conceptions of society, and so "implicates

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only for laughter's full development" (Prusak, 2004 p.385) and the situation must first *constrain* us in a state of enthrallment and *Dionysian* intoxication *before* this is possible.

[141] This finds support in the common observation that we laugh most when we are in a circle of friends and tend to laugh very little when we are alone, that comedy is generally "funnier" when we witness it with others and that laughter can be seen as contagious; "Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo…it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another" (Bergson, 1911 pp.5-6).

[142] AUGUSTINE - *Confessions* (English translation pp.30-31), quoted in Prusak (2004), p. 382.

others" who share our common-sense conceptions and sense of humour. Man is the only laughable animal because humans are the only beings that cannot simply exist and behave in a *natural* way, but are constrained to live artificially in relation to *social norms*, and *appear* to be laughable to the extent that their behaviour indicates the tension between *actuality* and such artificially established pre-conceptions of acceptable or appropriate behaviour (Prusak, 2004 p.386)[143].

Ten years after Bergson's theory, Baillie (1921) presented his *Incongruity* theory of laughter and explicitly criticized the limited applicability of the *Superiority* theory to the complexities of social life, to the occurrence of laughter in relation to the emotions, motivations and ideas of individuals and the "comic element in words",

[143] Bergson's conception clearly echoes Plato's view of laughter as having a largely *negative* force because it is a *mixed pleasure*, yet it is now seen as almost the opposite of a pathological, socially-destructive form of behaviour. Bergson utilises Aristotle's view of comic behaviour and speech as involving a form of *hamartia* (mainly as self-ignorant *absentmindedness*) and the importance of the *critical force* of laughter and its application to behaviour that deviates from social norms, yet disregards Aristotle's *normative* distinction regarding the subject-matter of proper-Comedy to some extent, that it should exclude negative and painful satire and invective. Bergson's conception actually retains the *threat* of negativistic humour for a utilitarian purpose, as a *Sword of Damocles* suspended over the head of potentially socially-deviant individuals. Such individuals are therefore seen as being aware of the possibility of social-chastisement and are motivated (or constrained) to avoid social-deviancy by their own *fear* of becoming the object and butt of the jokes of their peers, however this alternate view of the possible social and political utility of laughter recalls Aristotle's view that the *critical force* of laughter can be utilised to promote social-cohesion. Bergson's main point of departure is that he takes the comic or laughable away from the dramatic setting where Aristotle saw its potential as an educational tool, and moves it into the realm of everyday, social interactions and discourses. There is some possibility that the *baser* or merely *trivial* actions of the *"*lovable rogues" of Aristotle's dramatic Comedy may not be regarded as completely separated from any possible actions the audience may have performed within their lives (or may perform in the future), that we may recognise ourselves as similarly imperfect, *finite* beings who are also sometimes subject to certain levels of *hamartia* regarding the good-life, and so learn to become better human beings by admitting that we share some of the faults of the protagonists and by actively working to improve ourselves. For Bergson, this cannot possibly be the case because the group laughs at the deviant individual precisely *upon the grounds that* they recognise their own ways of behaving and expressing themselves as inherently *superior to*, and so as necessarily *separate from*, the actions of the deviant whose ridiculous behaviour is therefore almost a form of (unconscious) *self-ostracism*.

rather than just the *behaviour* of socially deviant individuals (p.289). He observes that when life appears as a mechanism we are often *tragically* and *emotively* moved to experience pleasure and pain in response to such occurrences rather than always responding with laughter, and when mechanisms appear as living[144], we are even *terrified.*

Under Baillie's interpretation our laughter is the result of an *appreciation* of the *incongruity* of a certain process or its elements with an *end;* a *persistent* tension where the end envisaged nevertheless "holds its own" and still exercises its appeal to us despite the ongoing incongruity displayed by the *tension* between the end and the process chosen to achieve it (Baillie, 1921 p.289). On this account, our laughter is *justified* as appropriate and fitting by our *appreciation* of the situation, which is suggested by the situation itself, and Bergson's error consists in his mistaken characterisation of this *evaluative* appreciation (which must first occur for laughter to arise), as a form of intellectual *apprehension.* This is because Bergson sees comedy as arising from an *intellectual misunderstanding* of a situation (as a form of *hamartia*) on behalf of the object of our laughter, rather than from the nature of the *situation itself* and our subsequent response to it, which judges it in regards to the *end* which we are aiming for, and to which the process is recognised as having a *relation* of incongruity (ibid, p.290).

From Baillie's perspective, the end envisaged and the incongruity which occurs in relation to it are both *actual facts* of our relation to the *situation;* when we make a joke it is in regards to the nature of the situation itself, and not just an observation on

[144] For example, consider the case of deceptively accurate *androids* which have the appearance of humanity, which has been a staple feature of much 20th Century science-fiction literature and films.

the nature of our (*finite*) understanding of it. Apprehending a situation is distinct from *understanding* it, and apprehension is a *precondition* of the laughter which is based upon a *judgement* of value, and thereby contains a *cognitive* element and results from this judgement as a conscious, mental state. The apprehension actually *modifies* our perspective upon (and attitude towards), the situation by preparing us for an alternative way of looking at the situation; this apprehension becomes an *appreciation* when we relate the object to some *end*, and so our appreciation for it is *expressed* when we make judgements upon the *value* of the object (Baillie, 1921 pp.256-257).

Our experience of laughter is then intrinsically connected to the *perspective* or *attitude* of the observer, which results from "a *play* of imagination and a free manipulation of human purposes…everything has its humorous as well as its serious side, and even in the direst situations…we find men breaking the bounds of their constraint in a chuckle of spiritual *freedom*" (ibid p.258-my gloss)[145]. On Baillie's theory there can be no single end for the invocation of laughter, and in fact the range of ends is *unlimited*; the same end may or may not provoke our laughter according to the circumstances we find ourselves in, and our *spiritual freedom* is exercised in regards to the type of *relation* which we choose to adopt towards the end[146]. We must adopt *some* form of mental *attitude* towards the situation to be able to appreciate it, and our laughter is an *expression* of our appreciation of the essential nature of the situation. In this way, "a man's laugh betrays the kind of man he is…to himself as

[145] It is in this important observation of the connection between *attitude* and *freedom from constraint* in the phenomena of laughter that we can see the connection of the Incongruity theory to the Existential approach towards laughter, as it is espoused by Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which we will consider shortly.

[146] This *may* allow the absurd situation to emerge as laughable, or instead may be a form of resentment and disappointment in the face of the *incompleteness* of the end (which remains secure), and the *incoherence* of our relation to it, which throws that end into relief.

well as to others" (ibid, p.268), although the laughter is the result of the *judgement* made upon a certain incongruity and so a person's character has a bearing upon this only to the extent that it affects her judgement[147]. In accordance with Aristotle's observations, the laughable has an element of *universality*, because although it may not *always* make everyone laugh, "the situation may be *expected* to create laughter" (my gloss) and the possibility of the success of a joke then depends on the appreciation of the auditor because "a jests prosperity lies in the ear of him who hears it" (ibid, p.269).

There is then a variable *social standard* of what is laughable which is *relative* to the societies and periods in which it occurs, and most laughter is a result of social education, habit and imitation[148], due to the inherently social nature of human life, even though the experience of laughter need not be restricted to occasions when we are physically part of a group[149]. Laughter is now recognised as an explicitly *Dionysian* phenomenon, which has a communal, unifying force when it is shared. It is a phenomena of de-individuation which "breaks down the restraints of normal personal life" (Baillie, 1921 p.271), and so erodes hierarchical power-relations because "all rigid distinctions of privilege and person melt before the flame of

[147] Recall Aristotle's stipulation that laughter occurs due to the *behaviour* of the protagonists of comic-drama rather than as a result of their characters, which are never made explicit because we can only infer them from their behaviour, allowing for the fact that these so-called *baser men* may actually be like ourselves in general, and so we may be able to recognise an element or instance of our own behaviour in their *inappropriate* reactions to the situation they find themselves in.

[148] This recalls Plato and Aristotle's attempts to utilise comedy as an educative tool and Aristotle's age-restriction for the audience members of comic drama.

[149] This is why the "sharing of [laughter] acts as a bond of closer fellowship" (Baillie, 1921 p.270) which explains why we enjoy the company of those who laugh with us at similar things, who share our *sense of humour*, based upon a shared and so *strengthened*, judgement of appreciation in regards to situations, and ultimately to life itself.

laughter" (ibid). Laughter is then (in direct contradiction to Bergson's theory) the great leveller which undermines pretensions to authority and superiority, and making a joke enables us to *break the ice* and overcome "awkward situations in social life…[because] this at once reduces or raises human beings to their common humanity, and so smoothes away the lines of separation for the time being" (ibid, p.271)[150].

We can now see how Baillie's Incongruity theory, in contrast to the aforementioned Superiority theory is able to account for the phenomena which are not covered by those theory and especially that of the *joyous*, child-like laughter of *freedom* which undermines Bergson's theory. Such joyous laughter is described as emerging from the sudden, "unusually heightened sense of our well-being" which ensues upon the *unexpected* attainment of our end, or an attainment of the end which is "preceded by a period of restraint and mental tension" (ibid, p.262 note 1). It arises

[150] See also BORCH-JACOBEN, M (1998): *The Laughter of Being* IN BOTTING, F & WILSON, F: *Bataille, A Critical Reader* (pp.146-'65) for an appraisal of the deeply communal, *Dionysian* aspects of laughter in comparison to the existential angst which occurs in the individuals search for "an answer to the meaning of life…[when] brutally deposited before the abyss of his being-unto-death" (p.146). Bataille is described as seeing the *communal* aspect as being inextricable from the phenomenon of laughter as such, arguing that because laughter is a form of *communication* there cannot be a purely individualistic form of laughter because in laughing at death (or at being dead) we are laughing at *being* (or existence) as such. In this case we are no longer a wholly self-contained *ipse* (or *oneself*) because in laughing at being, "being [is] thus NOWHERE…neither in me nor in the other", and what this (Dionysian) *fusion "*introduces into me is an *other* existence (it introduces this *other* into me as *mine*, but at the same time as *other:* [that] in so far as it is a passage (the opposite of a state), the fusion, in order to be produced, requires heterogeneity" (BATAILLE V: 391 quoted in Borch-Jacobsen (1998) p.164). Such a discussion of laughter in relation to the central Existential concept of one's "being-unto-death" is a very fruitful area of study, which is therefore outside the broad scope of this paper in its attempt to give an overview of the roots, (or horizons of emergence), of modern conceptions of laughter which later Existential conceptions have drawn upon. This does however suggest the direction of a subsequent companion paper upon explicitly *Existential* theories of laughter as espoused in 20th Century Philosophy. The *origins* of views upon laughter's role in our being-towards-death are traced back to Ancient Greek philosophy in HALLIWELL, S (2005): *Greek Laughter and the Problem of the Absurd* (pp. 121-146), which would constitute an ideal starting point for such a paper, which I look forward to pursuing in the immediate future.

due to our development of a *cognitive awareness* of the relation of *discontinuity* or even "sheer *irrelevance* between the preceding experience and the end which has suddenly been made our own, and which, therefore, must have been waiting securely all the while. The laughter of children on *regaining their liberty* after school hours is a simple case of this kind" (ibid p.262-263, note 1 - my gloss)[151]. It is admirable that Baillie recognizes a need to account for such a form of laughter, however his characterization of it as occurring due to a *relief,* which is experienced *after* the tension which he sees as being at the heart of all forms of laughter has been *removed,* would seem to actually undermine the ability of his theory to account for the phenomenon of such joyful, child-like laughter upon the terms that the theory sets out.

Baillie concludes with the observation that many situations in life confront us with incongruities and we must adopt a "definite mental attitude" (ibid, p.290) to them to be able to adapt ourselves to our world and our experiences. Such incongruities may confound our attempts to put the details of our experiences into an *orderly setting*, in which case we must deal with them in an alternate way so that we can preserve our mental unity and balance and thereby "maintain a sense of security in the face of the confronting environment" (ibid, p.291) and the aspects of our experiences which we are unable to grasp in a intelligible and coherent fashion. Laughter is described as being expressed in an "inarticulate outburst of sound…[which] corresponds precisely to the admitted unintelligible character of the situation" (ibid), and because we must adopt some attitude to the *absurd* situation to enable it a place within our experiences,

[151] Such laughter recalls Aristotle's description of the double-ending which is customary though not essential to dramatic comedy, where the recognition scene reveals the *deferred triumph* of the end in view, and Baillie states that the tension which is necessary for the comic situation must be preserved by retaining and actively pursuing the end of our actions for such joyous laughter to emerge *after* a state of tension or restraint (Baillie, 1921 p.264).

we therefore laugh at the situation. Laughter is therefore characterized as a mental *attitude* that preserves our mental stability in the face of incongruous situations, and is conceived of as simultaneously expressing *value* whilst giving us a sense of *detachment* from the situation, thereby preventing the apparent chaos of our environment from causing chaos in our mental outlook. This formulation of the function of laughter leads Baillie to conclude that the "note of triumph which almost invariably rings through healthy laughter" is justified because such laughter marks a triumph "over the incoherent", due to the fact that we have retained our belief in the end which we have actively and steadfastly pursued and have "preserved ourselves in the face of the incongruous" (ibid, p.291)[152].

Baillie's Incongruity theory has many strengths, in that it is able to deal with a variety of types of laughter which Bergson's Superiority theory was unable to, and it also accounts for the overlap between the Tragic and Comic aspects of human existence, as two possible *responses* towards a situation, based on our apprehension of it in relation to our ends[153]. It is also therefore able to account for the presence of Tragic elements in Comedy, and explains why the *tension* and interplay between the Tragic response of *pathos* and the Comic pleasure of the laughter response can add to the impact of the laughter evoked in Comic or absurd situations. His comments upon

[152] In the light of these concluding statements we can now fully appreciate the relevance of the quote which opens Baillie's article, that "The size of a man's understanding might always be justly measured by his mirth" - which is simply attributed to *Johnson.*

[153] The overlap between the Tragic and the Comic has puzzled many philosophers and has defied attempts at a direct distinction between them, (which recalls our earlier discussion regarding the possibility of a Comic counterpart to tragic-catharsis), yet Baillie's theory allows us to understand them as *Dionysian* phenomena which resist simple demarcation, as two possible *attitudes* towards situations which need not be conceived of as mutually exclusive, and this observation recalls Heraclitus's statement that "everything forever has its opposite along with it" (quoted in Nietzsche, 1962 p.52).

joyous and triumphant laughter emphasize their child-like, innocent and positive, *life-affirming* force and their connections with the autonomous *play* and *creative freedom* which can result from our recognition of the *arbitrary* nature of finite human existence[154], and the *relativity* of all meanings & values[155].

The *freedom* to choose our attitude towards and our perspective upon incongruous and absurd situations (and to choose to *joyfully* laugh at the absurd), which Baillie's theory discusses can be seen as complimenting the triumphant laughter of the eponymous protagonist of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which is evidenced in the final parts of that text, as a response to and also a result of his *embracing* all aspects (especially the *suffering*), of his life with an affirmative, "yea-saying" attitude, and it is to this text that we will now turn our focus.

[154] That "the world is the *game* that Zeus plays" (Heraclitus - quoted in Nietzsche, 1962 p.58).

[155] See FEIBLEMAN, J (1938): *The Meaning of Comedy* (pp.421-432) for an alternative *Absolutist* and seemingly *Platonic* conception (on the basis of a strictly *orthodox* reading of *The Republic* which this paper warns against) of the Incongruity theory. He stipulates that Comedy is to be defined as always *ridiculing* or pointing out the dissatisfactory *limitations* and the illogical nature of the *actual* behaviour of finite human beings, in comparison with the unlimited *ideal* standards of the "logical order as the perfect goal of actuality" which aims towards the "final elimination of limitations" (p.421). This conception is clearly self-undermining because it highlights the inherent insufficiency of the *limited* understandings of *finite* human beings, that "what we are forever condemned to pursue are just those fleeting [rare] glimpses of infinite value" (p.431), yet it simultaneously posits that such beings are capable of understanding this *absolute* logical order sufficiently enough to condemn *actuality* from the perspective of such infinite values, which are only displayed in actuality *as* finite and *partial* understandings. If this is the case we could not possibly recognise and know infinite value, because it cannot be displayed in its true form (*as* infinite and *absolute*), within the realms of human experience, and so the radical distinction between the two realms which the theory depends upon is ultimately undermined. I would also argue that most critical comedy is indiscriminate, that it highlights the insufficiency of *both* the *actual* behaviour of finite human beings *and* of *ideal*, Absolutist and reductivist Rationalistic conceptions as conceived of by such beings. Comedy and laughter mock *both* the *perspectives* of the ideal and the actual *simultaneously,* in the inherently *absurd* relation and interplay of each as evidenced within *actuality* (as displayed in human behaviour and speech and our necessarily *imperfect* societies and lives), because comedy mocks human *finitude* (as *hamartia*), and so also criticizes *all pretensions* towards authority and *absolute* knowledge.

## The Existential Laughter of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Aristotle's conception of the critical force of laughter and the necessity of a *critical attitude* for comic understanding and appreciation, which enables us to be able to discern what is worthy of being laughed at or not taken too seriously in life (and which influenced Superiority theories' largely negative conception of laughter), prepares the way for the Existential concept of laughter as a response to the *relativity* of all meanings and values and the resultant *absurdity* of finite existence itself, which is without any form of *absolute* justification. For Aristotle, happiness is the end of human existence and consists in the *good-life* revealed by the philosophic quest for enlightenment. We are now led to consider the question of whether the joyous, *triumphant* laughter of the eponymous protagonist in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1888), (which constitutes the origin of *explicitly* Existential approaches towards laughter[156], and is expressed as a result of the perspective-shift enabled by Existential philosophical striving and his embracing of the principle of "eternal

[156] See LIPPITT, J (1996): *Existential Laughter,* IN *Cogito v10 n1* (pp.63-72), for an illuminating study of the role of laughter as espoused by Nietzsche in comparison with Kierkegaard's conception of the role of irony and humour, which highlights the phenomenon of laughter in relation to the closely interlinked natures of tragedy and comedy and the religious *redemptive* experience. On Lippit's interpretation Zarathustra's 'laugher's crown, this rose-wreath crown' (quoted in Lippitt, 1996 p.3) is seen as an alternative to Jesus's crown of thorns, and Zarathustra's laughter is described as a truly *redemptive* form of laughter in opposition to the Roman soldiers' *mocking humiliation* of Jesus immediately prior to his crucifixion [Matthew 27: 27-31 and Mark 15: 16-20]. The main similarity between the two views is described by Lippit when he states that "just as humour for Kierkegaard constitutes knowledge of the limitations of 'all temporal objects of desire', for Nietzsche laughter represents something very similar: the recognition of the limits of all *human* objects of desire" (Lippitt, 1996 p.8), so for both writers humour and laughter are *responses* to the recognition of our own, human *finitude*, to the "limitations of what is *humanly* possible" (ibid, p.9).

recurrence"), can constitute, or be seen as an expression of, a genuine attainment of a philosophically-pursued form of happiness. This radical change of *existential attitude* occurs due to a realization that even the most tragic aspects and the sufferings of our own finite existences are ultimately worthwhile, and that our own life as a whole should not be regarded in any *absolutely* serious manner.

Lippit (1992)[157] informs us that Nietzsche "awards laughter a status higher than that granted by any other philosopher" (p.39), giving it a central role in his existential world-view and in the need for existential *self-overcoming*, because his interpretation states that laughter "represents an attitude toward the world, toward life and toward oneself" (Kaufmann, 1968 p.422n)[158]. Nietzsche's philosophy is best known for its conception of the extraordinary *ubermensch*, conceived of as an ideal goal for human beings which is both "the *sense* [or meaning] of the earth" (Nietzsche, 2005 p.12), and also represents self-possession and an overpowering of the *herd instinct* of the common mass of humanity, which resides within *oneself*. The importance of the *redemptive* role of laughter within such an individualistic attempt at self-realisation indicates that Nietzsche's conception of laughter is an *existential* rather than a political interpretation, that laughter may enable only some *individuals* to pursue an existential form of the *good-life.* One of the main obstacles to the human pursuit of happiness is that "Ever since there have been human beings, they have enjoyed themselves too little: that alone…is our original sin" (ibid p.76), for "Life is a fount of pleasure; but where the rabble drinks too, there all wells are poisoned" (ibid, p.83). Human beings have historically been constrained by the *Spirit of Heaviness*, of

[157] LIPPIT, J (1992): *Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the Status of Laughter*.

[158] Quoted in Lippitt, 1992 p.39.

solemnity and existential *gravity*, which pervades our institutions and infects our existential outlook, however this mill-stone can be defeated by the joyous, life-affirming "laughter of the heights", (ibid, p.86) for "Not with wrath but with laughter does one kill. Come, let us kill the Spirit of Heaviness!" (ibid, p.36).

In opposition to the mocking and scornful, negative Bergsonian *laughter of the herd* which is expressed at the start of the text by the crowd in the marketplace in response to Zarathustra's attempts to share his wisdom with them, it is the *laughter of the height* (the meaning of which will be explained below), which we must strive to achieve and so express our unfettered affirmation of *both* the pleasure and joy and the inescapable *suffering* which life affords us, because whoever is able to do so "…laughs about all tragic plays and tragic wakes" (ibid, p.36), yet how is this redeeming laughter to be achieved?

The perspective of *the height* is reached by the protagonist at the end of the third part of the text when he affirms the "abyss-deep thought" (ibid, p.140) of the *eternal recurrence* of *all* aspects of his own existence, and so achieves the self-overcoming which constitutes the life of the *ubermensch*, which makes one's life "so joyous that he would be perfectly happy to live the same life over and over again, for all of eternity" (Lippit, 1992 p.40). It is at the beginning of the third part that the role of laughter in this affirmation is introduced when, after confronting the *pessimistic* spirit of heaviness, Zarathustra meets a young-shepherd whose throat has been bitten by a "heavy black snake" (Nietzsche, 2005 p.137). This serpent is a manifestation of the "great loathing for the human being…[of the view that] nothing is worthwhile, [that] knowing chokes" (ibid, p.191), which results from the *attitude* of the spirit of heaviness. It hangs from his mouth and the protagonist urges the young shepherd to

bite the head off of it. This meeting is described as a parable or premonition, as a "vision of the loneliest" (ibid, p.138), as a *riddle* which invites our interpretation and asks the identity of this young shepherd who now becomes "one transformed, illumined, who *laughed*! Never yet on earth had a human being laughed as *he* laughed…My yearning for this laughter gnaws at me" (ibid), and this urge propels Zarathustra forwards until it is finally sated in the final sections of part three[159]. The confrontation with eternal recurrence can be viewed as the "event for the sake of which the whole book exists" (Lampert, 1986 p.210)[160]. This realisation, that all that is negative in life, that all suffering and even the herd and "the small human being returns eternally" (Nietzsche, 2005 p.191), can lead to an attitude of defeatist *pessimism*, to the feeling that because of this nothing in our lives is worthwhile, and this casts Zarathustra into a week-long bout of inactivity and depression. This *tragic* pessimism can be, and *is*, overcome; for it is revealed at the end of part three that the young shepherd is none other than Zarathustra himself, who overcomes the abysmal aspect of the revelation of eternal recurrence by expressing the highest possible affirmation of existence, by saying a "joyous Yes to life despite its negative side, despite its horrors and suffering" (Lippit, 1992 p.41) when "there is nothing in life at which he cannot laugh the transforming, redeeming laughter of the shepherd" (ibid, p.42).

One's confrontation with eternal recurrence is conceived of as crucial facet of self-creation as a *continual* process, because for Nietzsche the self has no essence and consists of the sum total of one's desires, thoughts and actions, as a large number of

[159] Nietzsche, 2005, Part 3, Sections 13-16, pp.188-203.

[160] Quoted in Lippitt, 1992 p.42

*conflicting* powerful tendencies and drives which are in need of being controlled and harmonised[161]. Once Zarathustra has confronted and affirmed all facets of his life he is able to eliminate the spirit of gravity and the herd instinct within himself and so becomes capable of being more *playful* in his approach to existence. He offers to play the role of the Existential comic, the "sooth-laugher" (Nietzsche, 2005 p.257), for the *higher men* of the present who show a *potential* for the attainment of the status of the *ubermensch,* to be someone who can make them laugh and thereby "learn to laugh at [*themselves*] as one has to laugh!" (ibid, p.256) (Lippitt, 1992 p.42).

The higher men, who may be philosophers or spiritual leaders, have failed to recognise and live in accordance with Heraclitus' revelation regarding the nature of all of existence, they "have not learned to play and mock as one must play and mock. Do we not always sit at a great mocking- and gaming-table?" (Nietzsche, 2005, p.255). They have failed to realise that the true nature of existence is that it is a *game* without any absolute rules, that any rules or meanings we choose to construct must always conceived of in *relation* to our own lives and our own perspective upon our own life, that they are in constant flux and must be open to constant revision, destruction and re-creation[162].

The search for any *Absolutist* form of meaning is itself *absurd,* and from the *perspective* of the enlightened one who has reached *the height*, life is ultimately a *joke* and should therefore be treated with a corresponding, humorous *attitude*. It is *life itself* that requires us to become *laughing lions*, to existentially evolve into "superior,

[161] This recalls Plato's doctrine of the Tri-partite soul.

[162] They are guilty of taking existence as a whole, and their own individual lives and status in society, *too seriously!*

stronger, more victorious, better tempered [or more joyful] men" (ibid, p.247), and this is achieved by throwing-off the spirit of gravity, by relinquishing the herd-instinct to exist as beasts of burden stranded in the parched desert of pessimism towards life, to liberate ourselves by discarding our conception of ourselves as *camels* laden with the burden of *absolute* values. Because there are no universal, objective moral facts we are therefore free to create not only ourselves but also our own *values* and consequentially also our own morality; as *lions*, we may recognise that we have the potential to autonomously create our own *freedom* to construct our own values, by firstly removing all previously instilled values which we have been habituated and educated into. Only then may we be able to finally emerge as the *child* who continually tears-down and reconstructs the castle of her own evaluations and meanings, which are built upon the shifting sands of her own, evolving existence and self-awareness and so we may laugh (as children so frequently do when they play with a new toy), the triumphant, *joyous* laughter of an obstacle overcome, a laughter which also involves our laughing at the sheer comedy of all of existence, including our own (Lippitt, 1992 p.43).

It is clear that for Nietzsche human beings are not only the truly laughable animal but *must* also be the *animal that laughs* because it is the human being alone that "suffers so excruciatingly that he was *compelled* to invent laughter"[163] as a response to the sheer absurdity and the incongruities of human, finite existence. The liberation from all absolutes enables us to deal with the sufferings of life, because it extends to the absolute importance which we so commonly assign to our own current lives and desires, and if we are to laugh at all mistaken pretensions towards any form of

[163] NIETZSCHE (1909): *The Will to Power* p.74, quoted in Lippitt (1992) p.44.

absolute importance then we must learn to laugh at our own selves as we are now, to not take ourselves or our lives too seriously (Lippitt, pp.44-45). As Morreall points out, the difference between serious and humorous *attitudes* is a matter of perspective: The latter attitude involves the ability to be *flexible*, to regard oneself as being at a *distance* from the practical aspects of whatever we are regarding, (including our own selves) to realise that "what is important is relative to the situation someone is in and to his point of view. Nothing is important *simpliciter*" (Morreall, 1983 p.123)[164]. We must retain the ability to be *open* towards whatever may occur in the present and the future with a sense of *amusement*, for only then are we genuinely capable of laughing at ourselves, of laughing the *laughter of the height* which *relieves* the seeming burden of self-creation. This form of laughter is a result of our embracing the *eternal recurrence* of existence which brings the common element of *positive* humour, the spirit of child-like playfulness (which is able to view all things in life from a "fresh" perspective), to life itself.

Lippitt also mentions Nagel (1979) in relation to the difference between the serious and humorous attitudes as applied to the absurd and *tragic* aspects of life, that all human life is absurd because of the constant "collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary or open to doubt" (Nagel, 1979 pp.13-14)[165]. Such seriousness appears to be *gratuitous* from the simultaneously "sobering and comical" (Nagel, 1979 p.15), (or *tragi-comic*) elevated perspective of those able to "survey themselves…with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant

[164] Quoted in Lippitt (1992), p.45.

[165] NAGEL (1979) *Mortal Questions* pp.13-14, quoted in Lippitt (1992) p.46.

struggle up a heap of sand" (ibid). If we are able to "*appreciate* the *cosmic unimportance* of the situation " (my gloss) and of our own lives, that "*sub-specie aeternitatus* [sic] there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either" and so we can "approach our absurd lives with irony[166] instead of heroism or despair" (ibid, p.23). We need not adopt Camus' (1975)[167] "slightly self-pitying" (Nagel, 1979 p.22) attitude of *defiance* to the universe to be able to deal with the absurd incongruity of life which we perceive, when we may instead express our appreciation of this in Zarathustra's *laughter of the height* and the complimentary attitude of the Existential humorist[168]. However, this exceptional attitude is very difficult to achieve because it necessarily involves more than just an *intellectual* recognition of our own cosmic unimportance, for it is not an easy task to choose to react to the comic or ironic aspect of existence instead of the tragic aspect which can throw us into despair (Lippit, 1992 p.47). As Lampert (1986)[169] points out, the affirmation of eternal recurrence requires an unflinching and *continual* confrontation with a large degree of our most personal, *abysmal* sufferings which lie at the core of our being, and the *recognition* that such *tragic* sufferings are an integral and inextricable part of our existence, and have a massive impact upon our relations to ourselves and others, and therefore upon the formation of one's own identity.

Lippit (1992) concludes that Nietzsche's conception of laughter as espoused in

[166] Just as Plato portrayed Socrates' approach towards philosophy and life.

[167] CAMUS, A (1979) The Myth of Sisyphus p.109 quoted in Lippitt (1992) p.46.

[168] This recalls Baillie's concluding comments upon the need to choose a certain appreciation of, and attitude towards, the many incongruities which we are confronted by in life to retain our mental stability and unity.

[169] LAMPERT, L (1986): *Nietzsche's Teaching - An Interpretation of 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra* p.223 (quoted in Lippitt 1992 p.47).

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* has much value in comparison to the conceptions and theories of laughter which have been discussed throughout this paper because it highlights the phenomenon of the "laughter of the *free individual*" (p.47), rather than merely focusing upon the social context and group aspects of laughter, which it also accounts for in the alternative conception of the *laughter of the herd*. Zarathustra's joyous, life-affirming and liberating *laughter of the height* emphasizes the capacity which a fully developed sense of humour has to expand our world-view and to enable us, (from the child-like, re-creative and *recreational* "new beginning" which makes us open to perceiving all aspects of existence from a new perspective), to understand that there are many more ways of looking at the world and at our own lives than we had previously realised. Such is the attitude and existential *perspective* of the *humorist* or comedian, who enables us to achieve a sense of *distance* from the practical aspects of our everyday life, and even from our *present* selves, by facilitating this perspective-shift in her auditors who thereby may join the humorist in assuming this attitude of the "outsider" (ibid p.48). In the case of the humorist however, it seems that the process of bringing her audience into the perspective of the outsider, (or of the anti-authoritarian "iconoclast"[170] who challenges all preconceptions and pretensions towards authority[171]), has a *Dionysian* effect which may unite disparate, *critically inclined* and highly individualistic members of a society, by espousing many of the intuitions and explicit opinions which are not "common currency" for the herd-

[170] MINDESS, H (1971): *Laughter and Liberation*, p.41 (quoted in Lippitt (1992) p.48).

[171] The role of the iconoclastic comedian recalls the way that Socrates encouraged his interlocutors to challenge their own preconceptions, and challenged the rectitude and so the authority of the powerful and influential members of his contemporary society. He achieved this by assuming an *external* or *impersonal* perspective upon the issues which he discusses throughout Plato's dramatic dialogues, and by highlighting the *absurdity* of the consequences of those interlocutors', (and the contemporary attitudes which their views represented), ill-examined pre-conceptions.

members of that society, whilst also challenging them to *pleasantly* further explore the unexamined consequences of their own opinions and actions.

Ultimately, Zarathustra challenges us to discard all forms of personal *security-blankets*, not least of which is the group-membership which constitutes the herd-instinct and which actually constrains our behaviour and so our ongoing, dynamic personal self-creation, by compelling us to conform to social-standards of acceptable behaviour or risk the threat of being socially ostracized. Mindess (1971) points out that this Bergsonian aspect of *appropriate* behaviour extends to friendship groups, and that certain forms of behaviour may constitute a risk of loosing the friendship of others[172]. For Zarathustra there is nothing whatsoever in life that is so sacred, or so morally-objectionable or *offensive*, or so *tragic* that it may not be laughed at, and our fundamental desire for personal *security* (or *comfortism*, which Nietzsche sees as being at the root of all Religious and Philosophical Absolutism and Metaphysics) and "the fact that we crave security at all" (Mindess, 1971 p.31)[173] *collectively* stunts the full development of our sense of humour. Such *personal* and *communal* security-blankets (especially in the forms of organized Religions) prevent us from achieving our full, autonomous potential and so actually *prevent* us from being happy. The *playfully* iconoclastic attitude or perspective which is epitomised in Zarathustra's *laughter of the height*, is shared by (and practically *epitomizes* the role of), both Comedians and Philosophers, because it accounts for the overlap between the highly

[172]MINDESS, H (1971): *Laughter and Liberation*, p.31 (quoted in LIPPITT (1992) p.48). I would add that this often extends to the group sense-of-humour; that in most friendship groups certain closely-held or deeply personal topics or opinions (such as religious beliefs or moral convictions and deeply immoral activities) may be seen as "off-limits" in regards to their being possible objects of ridicule and laughter.

[173] MINDESS, H (1971): *Laughter and Liberation*, p.31 (quoted in Lippitt (1992) p.48).

critical perspectives and attitudes of both[174], and *especially* the highly individualistic and *anti-authoritarian* attitude of Existential Philosophy, as espoused in Nietzsche's works. The joyous and playful *laughter of the height* is a result of the recognition of, and also an *expression* of, the perspective-shift which facilitates the development of the humorous attitude: It is the highest possible affirmation of life as the ultimate joke and so necessitates the ability to *laugh at oneself* and to not take our own finite life too seriously. It is the *triumphant* expression of our own radical *freedom* to create our own meanings and values, and our recognition that Aesthetic experiences can be the only possible form of justification of one's own existence, and of life in general.

As Lippitt (1996) points out[175] when he compares Nietzsche and Kierkegaard's views upon laughter, for both philosophers humour and laughter are "expressions of the limits of human possibility" (p.9), of human *finitude*, and that for both, all specifically *human* endeavor is ultimately worthy of laughter, and in this light we can understand Bataille's (1985) claim that a burst of laughter is "the only imaginable and definitively terminal result... of philosophical speculation"[176]. On Lippit's (1996) view this is the reason why any theory of laughter, or any attempts at modifying any of the theoretical approaches towards laughter to account for their insufficiencies in explaining all forms of the phenomenon of laughter into a so-called "'super-theory' of humour or laughter would simply have been too laughable" (Lippit, 1996 p.9). Lippit (1996) also points out that Nietzsche's urge for us to strive for the *ubermensch* as an

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[174] As evidenced in the popularity of so-called Observational Comedy.

[175] LIPPITT, J (1996): *Existential Laughter*.

[176] BATAILLE, G (1985): *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings* 1927-1939, (trans. Allan Stoekl) MINNESOTA, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, p. 99 (quoted in LIPPIT (1996) p.9).

ideal of human existence is often described as contemporaneously (and may therefore *ultimately* be), *unattainable*, however in my view this does not necessarily mean that Zarathustra's laughter of the height is equally unattainable.

I would actually argue that Zarathustra's laughter may be seen as the crucial *preliminary* constituent for striving towards the *ubermensch*, that we can only approach this ideal through Zarathustra's *laughter of the height*. We can only become the *ubermensch* on the condition that we first learn to laugh as we *ought* to, in accordance with our status as *absurd* finite beings thrown into a consequentially absurd universe, and that we must learn not to take anything too seriously. We must first learn to laugh at *ourselves* and then at the lives of *all* human beings, at all the pretensions of finite human beings and philosophers towards *Absolutist* (and Rationalist or reductivist notions of) knowledge and other forms of authority. I believe that Zarathustra's laughter is very much attainable for those individuals who are willing to unflinchingly and continually confront their own existences and all its tragic sufferings (to constantly re-evaluate all values including their own), and that the attainment of the attitude and perspective of *the height* makes this process not only bearable but actually *enjoyable*, because it is always accompanied by the most *pleasant*, joyful and life-affirming laughter possible.

Even if this is not the case, as Lippitt (1996) points out, even "if we are unable to go beyond the 'human' in either of these ways; it may be that what we are left with is precisely humour and laughter" (p.9), and so laughter again reveals itself as the only response to existence as absurd, and is therefore both the first and final *given* of philosophy, and the truly appropriate *philosophic attitude* which transcends both Tragic-pessimism and willfully-blind, Absolutist-optimism.

# Conclusion.

It is now clear that Nietzsche's descriptions of the *laughter of the herd* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is able to account for the aspects of the phenomena which Bergson's Superiority theory focused upon, and that the *laughter of the height* embraces the central principles of Baillie's Incongruity theory, whilst also being able to give an account of the solitary and liberating laughter of the *free-individual* and the joyous, child-like laughter which expresses the sheer joy of existence, which Baillie was unable to fully account for upon his own terms. Both of Nietzsche's forms of laughter retain the *critical force* and the capacity for philosophical *enlightenment* that Aristotle observed in the *Poetics*, and it also seems that the central role which Nietzsche assigns to the confrontation with *eternal recurrence* can be seen as an Existential counter-part to Aristotle's dramatic *recognition scene,* that the heightened *critical awareness* that occurs in both of these functions in a similar way. In both cases it leads to a *reversal*; a reversal of fortune for Aristotle and a reversal of *perspective* and *attitude,* from the tragic attitude of resignation or defiance to the comic attitude of acceptance and joyous affirmation, for Nietzsche. The sense of existential *unity* that occurs due to the ongoing confrontation with *eternal recurrence* also seems to be a counterpart to the unity which the *course of events* imparts to the dramatic Comedy in Aristotle's *Poetics.*

Zarathustra's *laughter of the height* epitomizes the previously unaccounted-for

form of triumphant, child-like laughter, which also seems to have an existentially *cathartic* function in regards to the transformation from the tragic to the comic attitude and *appreciation* of existence that it signals and expresses. It is also able to account for the overlap between the tragic and the comic *as* a matter of the (sometimes simultaneous) adoption or recognition of the partially complimentary attitudes of both[177]. We can therefore laugh at the tragic aspects of life once we have embraced our sufferings, and if our sufferings have been accepted and *embraced* they can no longer be said to fully exercise dominance over us against our will[178], and so need not be responded to with *tragic* defiance or self-pity because they are no longer regarded as constraining us.

Nietzsche's crucial point of departure from Aristotle is that for Nietzsche the Poetic, Comic and Aesthetic approach to life is *inseparable* from the Philosophic enterprise, yet given the centrality of the comic approach and the humorist's *iconoclastic attitude* towards philosophical activity, and of the utilisation of sophisticated comic techniques which Plato grants in all of his extant works, it would seem that Nietzsche's conception of laughter and its philosophic consequences shares more with Plato's than either might have been comfortable to admit. The inseparability of dramatic and poetic techniques and of *Comedy* from Philosophy is demonstrated by *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* itself (which is after all written as a highly poetic text presented as a *spiritual* novel), and this is because, for its author, the Aesthetic experience of life *is life itself*, and so is the only possible justification for

[177] This again recalls Baillie's Incongruity theory of laughter as being the result of the evaluative *appreciation* of the *absurd* situations we often find ourselves in, yet is extended to the existence of the individual and the universe as a whole.

[178] This is consistent with the meaning of "suffering" as being acted upon against our will.

life for the *finite* human being. Comedy and laughter, as the ultimate *appreciation* of the Aesthetic nature of existence, are then inextricable from existence as a whole (as the *cosmic game*); from *finite* human life (as the ultimate *absurd* joke); and from the Existential philosophic quest which recognizes and *affirms* the inherent *absurdity* of all aspects of human life.

Consequentially, our examination of laughter reveals that we must recognise the necessarily *absurd* status of Philosophy as a whole (because it is concerned with discerning the true nature of human existence), which must focus upon this *realm of becoming* and our experiences of living in its attempts to *describe* the highly imperfect and ultimately arbitrary, *relational* nature of *finite* human understandings and conceptions of *meaning* and *actuality*. Both ourselves as individuals and Philosophy as a discipline must remain aware of the finite and absurd nature of all existence (in accordance with the Delphic command to "Know Thyself!" and the Socratic declaration that "wisest is he who knows that he does not know"). The individual as such and as a social, *communal* being (and *especially* as philosopher), must recognise that existence and philosophy are both a *game* and must learn to laugh at herself and to not to take herself too seriously. We must learn to become the truly autonomous masters of our own selves by throwing-off the security-blankets of Absolutist doctrines and Metaphysical philosophies, and to crown ourselves with Zarathustra's *Dionysian* "laugher's crown, this rose-wreath crown: I myself have set this crown upon my head; I myself have pronounced my laughter holy" (Nietzsche, 2005 p.257).

Nietzsche's conception of *the laughter of the height* as an intoxicating and de-individuating *Dionysian* phenomena shows that the fully developed comic attitude

can not only allow us to laugh at particular instances of incongruity and those beings who display socially deviant behaviour, but that its' evocation is inextricably bound-up with the *iconoclastic* approach to existence which depends upon the recognition of the inherent absurdity of life and the denial of all forms of absolutism and pretense towards authority. This attitude and type of laughter can reintegrate the individual with others who are capable of achieving the same perspective in the social setting, and the resultant *deviant,* Existential sense of humour, can also reintegrate us with our past, present and potential, future selves. It therefore enables us to eradicate the herd instinct, and *balances* the *Apollonian* structuring and individualizing drive, within the self in its joyful recognition of the *relativity* and ultimate *absurdity* of all meanings. It has a necessarily anti-authoritarian, *deviant* character which epitomizes and expresses the critical, iconoclastic attitude of both the Comedian and the truly Existential Philosopher, and so can be seen as the most truly *philosophical* form of laughter which *joyfully* reconciles us with the absurdity of existence and so enables us to fully *embrace* the universe as a whole and also the *finitude*, freedom and autonomy which constitutes our own lives.

To truly become ourselves and to understand the full nature of laughter in all its manifestations, we must learn to not only laugh critically and appreciatively, but must also learn to not treat any aspect of existence (nor of our own lives) with any ultimate seriousness. We must learn to laugh Zarathustra's *redemptive,* child-like and ultimately life-affirming, *joyous* laughter of the height in the face of the *absurdity* which constitutes our own existences as finite beings, and also the ultimate *meaning* of life and the whole of existence as we know it.

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