

Humour and Superiority

JOHN LIPPITT

This is the second in a series of articles on the philosophy of humour and laughter. This article looks at the attempts which are made to explain humour in terms of superiority.

INTRODUCTION

Humour is generally viewed as a positive phenomenon. If you woke up one morning with an uncontrollable urge to make yourself highly unpopular, a good way of achieving this would be to accuse as many people as possible, whenever the opportunity arose, of having no sense of humour. This is often viewed as the most grievous of insults. As one writer has commented, 'men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humor?'¹ However, theorists in the tradition which has aimed to link humour and laughter to superiority have tended to challenge this benevolent view of humour and laughter, drawing attention to their negative side. This tradition can be traced back to Plato. The guardians of Plato's ideal state in the *Republic* should not be 'too fond of laughter' (III, 388e), and no literature portraying gods or other reputable characters as overconle with laughter can be permitted. In the *Philebus*, the true character of the comic is held to be selfignorance (48d). Those who view themselves as being wiser or otherwise more virtuous than they really are can be dangerous, if they are able to revenge themselves on those who laugh at them; but those who cannot 'you may truly call *comic* figures' (4gb). Comic figures, then, are *inferior* in this important respect of being self-ignorant. Superiority is essential to Bergson's view of laughter too.² For Bergson we all dislike - even fear - being laughed at, precisely because we associate this with being in a position of inferiority. Laughter can therefore act as a very powerful 'social corrective'; a weapon society can use to restrain those insufficiently flexible to adapt to whatever it demands of them.

Thomas Hobbes and 'sudden glory'

The most commonly mentioned superiority theorist, however, is Thomas Hobbes. It is he we will consider in detail. In the *Leviathan*, two possible causes of laughter are mentioned: *Sudden Glory*, is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.³ This leads Hobbes, like Plato, to have strong reservations about laughter:

it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper workes is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able.⁴

Hobbes's other main passage on laughter expands on these two quotes:

There is a passion that hath no name; but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance which we call laughter, which is always joy: but what joy, what we think, and wherein we triumph when we laugh, is not hitherto declared by any. That it consisteth in wit, or, as they call it, in the jest, experience confuteth: for men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lieth no wit nor jest at all. And forasmuch as the same thing is no more ridiculous when it groweth stale or usual, whatsoever it be that moveth laughter, it must be new and unexpected. Men laugh often, especially such as are greedy of applause from every thing they do well, (1) at their own actions performed never so little beyond their own expectations; as also (2) at their own jests: and in this case it is manifest, that the passion of laughter proceedeth from a sudden conception of some ability in himself that laugheth. Also men laugh (3) at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated. Also men laugh (4) at jests, the wit whereof always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another: and in this case also the passion of laughter proceedeth from the sudden imagination of our own odds and eminency:

far what is else the recommending of our selves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity? For when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonour we participate, we never laugh thereat. *I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly:* for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance except they bring with them any present dishonour. It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over. Laughter without offence, must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and when all the company may laugh together: for laughing to one's-self putteth all the rest into jealousy and examination of themselves. Besides, it is vain glory, and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmity of another, sufficient matter for his triumph.

Critique of Hobbes

Hobbes's view of laughter is, of course, exactly what one would expect from someone with his view of human nature. As one commentator observes: 'Laughter is an emotion whose analysis typically reflects the general Hobbesian conception of man's nature as a social creature: the ceaseless competition for positions of power, the unrelenting struggle for self-preservation, and the purely egoistic nature of man, who continuously strives for superiority over others'.⁶

But how reasonable a view of laughter is this? Let us consider, through a careful consideration of the last quote from Hobbes, points both for and against his view.

As a preliminary, note that Hobbes is not concerned exclusively with laughter at humour. Of the four causes of laughter which he mentions, cause (1) parallels the first cause given in the passage from the *Leviathan*. Little need be said about this: here his notion of 'self-glory' is most obviously evident, and there is no doubt that people do sometimes react to a personal achievement by laughing. There is no reason to suppose, though, that this is always the result of a conscious comparison of oneself with, and feeling of superiority to, others.

Causes (3) and (4) can be considered together. Again, people often *are* amused by 'the infirmities of others'. As late as the 18th century, it was common for the wealthy to visit lunatic asylums to laugh at and taunt the inmates for fun. Countless jokes involve as their butts a person with some genuine or supposed defect, be it physical ('sick' humour about the deformed, say), or mental (remember that the 'fool' is a stock comic character). Racist and sexist humour, too, fit this category. Such jokes essentially set up an 'us against them' situation, often playing upon some defect or inferiority which 'they' are supposed to have ('thick' Irishmen; mean Jews).

This suggests how a broadly Hobbesian objection to laughter could make sense. One of Hobbes's key points is that laughter is only needed to bolster one's self-esteem; were one sufficiently convinced of one's genuine superiority, the 'sudden glory' afforded by laughter would be unnecessary. A plausible case could indeed be made for the claim that it is essentially insecurity, and a lack of self-esteem, that lie at the heart of sexist and racist humour. So there are, perhaps, types of humour which can credibly be explained in Hobbesian terms. However, we do not have to look far to see problems with his view.

The object of amusement

In cause (2), the ability Hobbes claims that one perceives in oneself when laughing at one's own jests is presumably the ability to have thought up the jest. But while pleasure may indeed be derived from a sudden realization of one's ability as a jest-maker, Hobbes is surely wrong to put all, or even the predominant, emphasis here. He overlooks the fact that an essential part of the pleasure of making a joke comes precisely from enjoying what one perceives as the humour content of the joke itself; we can enjoy a joke *for its own sake*. Hobbes thereby relegates the quality of the joke itself to something of secondary importance; like those aesthetic theories which put all the emphasis on the audience's response to an artwork, completely ignoring the artwork itself. He thus fails to give an account of what we might call the 'object of amusement'. Whatever feelings of superiority may be involved in humour, it is not these feelings themselves which are the object of our amusement; and it is often the object of our amusement, rather than any feeling of superiority, which inspires laughter.

To expand on this: by no means all feelings of superiority inspire amusement or laughter. Hobbes realizes this; hence his claim that the realization of superiority must be *sudden*. But even if this were true, it would be insufficient. We may feel morally superior to the disgraced politician of whose gross corruption we suddenly learn, but our reaction is more likely to be contempt than amusement. So what is it about those instances of feeling superior which do amuse us, that *make* us amused? Hobbes pays no attention to any additional factors present. In cause (4), regarding laughter based upon 'some absurdity of another', he puts all the emphasis upon superiority over the other. But the actual *object* of our laughter is the absurdity; and it is this - *the absurdity itself* - which is the predominant cause of amusement. When a loving parent laughs at the linguistic blunders committed by small children ('chish and fips'; 'par carks'), one can accept that there is a definite sense in which the parent is superior to the child, without accepting that this is *why* he or she is amused. D.H. Monro raises a similar point. He asks why, by most adults, bare-faced insults are denied the status of wit, but a 'veiled' insult, one masquerading as a compliment, is regarded as witty. (For instance, 'You're the kind of person Rev. Spooner would have called a "shining wit"'.) Monro's claim is that the whole point is that 'a complimentary form of words has been twisted to convey an insult... The insult no doubt reinforces the joke by appealing to our malice, but the distinctively witty thing about it is precisely this twisting, this discrepancy between the concept and what is subsumed under it'.⁷

And, furthermore, no feelings of malice need *necessarily* be involved: it is perfectly possible

to be amused at 'put-downs' such as the above even if they are made against people towards whom one feels no particular antagonism. This is possible precisely because it is possible to be amused *at the wit itself, for its own sake*.

For Hobbes, presumably the only reason that one obtains greater pleasure from thinking of an excellent rather than a mediocre joke, is that one perceives in oneself a greater ability in doing the former than in doing the latter. Getting greater pleasure from an excellent joke rather than a mediocre one simply because the former *is* better than the latter seems to play no part in Hobbes's explanation.

Hobbes's oversight as the opposite of Schopenhauer's

It is worth pausing at this point to remember one of our conclusions about the incongruity tradition. We argued that concentrating entirely upon incongruity involved putting too much emphasis upon the structure of jokes and the cognitive side of humour - on the intrinsic details of the humour analysed and ignoring such factors as the attitude and feelings of the laugher. Hobbes, we now see, makes precisely the opposite mistake. In his exclusive emphasis upon the feelings of superiority of the laugher, the fact that some initial stimulus is required to spark off this laughter is ignored, and no consideration at all is given towards the nature of this initial stimulus. Any theory with ambitions to be comprehensive - something which both Hobbes and Schopenhauer seem to be claiming - must take into consideration both aspects of the object of amusement (which Schopenhauer does but Hobbes doesn't), and aspects of the feelings of the laugher (which Hobbes does but Schopenhauer doesn't).

The importance of playfulness

As this last claim makes clear, I am not denying the importance of the feelings of the laugher. But why assume that these feelings are always superiority-based? Hobbes fails to consider the spirit of sheer playfulness which is so often involved in the appreciation of humour. James Sully remarks that sometimes we laugh because of the satisfaction of 'something within us akin to the child's delight in the gloriously new and extravagant ... something of the laughing joy of the infant at the sudden invasion of his nursery wall by a dancing sunbeam'.⁸ Something of this spirit remains with us into our adult lives: consider the pleasure the adult can still derive from re-reading classic children's stories such as *Winnie the Pooh*; from such scenes as the one in which Pooh attempts to steal honey from a bees' nest at the top of a tree, by disguising himself as a small black cloud against a blue sky by covering himself in mud and holding on to a blue balloon. One is able to laugh at this to the extent that one has managed to retain a degree of this spirit of playfulness. But the importance of such a spirit can explain far more than just children's humour. It can help to explain the adult's enjoyment of word-play, and absurd and nonsense humour; all of which we can take pleasure in for their own sake. Where is the superiority in P.G. Wodehouse's 'He spoke with a kind of what-is-it in his voice, and I could see that, if not actually disgruntled, he was far from being grunted'? Or in ridiculous riddles: 'What's purple and lies at the bottom of the ocean? Moby Plum'. Are we so hard up for self esteem that we enjoy seeing whales or plums made the butts of jokes? To anyone who answered this in the affirmative, we might feel psychiatric help appropriate.

Ludovici and 'superior adaptation'

Some followers of Hobbes have offered a revised view of 'superiority', where what is meant by the concept is wider than Hobbes's 'sudden glory'. For Anthony Ludovici, all laughter is the expression of 'superior adaptation'; situations in which one has some sort of advantage over others.⁹ Ludovici uses this notion to aim to explain kinds of humour which it appears not to fit. We laugh at absurdity, for instance, because it liberates us from 'rigid laws of reason and logic ... All nonsense comes under this head, and leads to the order of laughter which Hobbes, in his explanation, says arises from "absurdities" and "infirmities abstracted from persons" , (p. 77). A momentary escape from reason and logic constitutes 'superior adaptation'.

Ludovici claims that 'superior adaptation' is merely Hobbes's definition under a 'new wording' (p. 88). But in fact he is using the term to cover a much wider range of sensations than Hobbesian 'sudden glory'. This becomes evident when he is forced to admit that in 'laughter over mere surprises, incongruities or absurdities ...no conscious superiority enters into the matter at all' (p. 63). Moreover, any feeling of pleasure seems worthy to be described as 'superior adaptation'; in explaining the effects of laughing gas, Ludovici is quite happy to report that many who have breathed it report a very pleasant sensation, and 'pleasure has from the beginning of time been rooted in feelings of superior adaptation' (pp. 76-77).

Ludovici appears to have shot himself in the foot. By using his term over so wide a range, he is able to account for considerably more than Hobbes; but at the expense of robbing 'superior adaptation' of any significant explanatory value. In using the same term to cover experiences so diverse as both amusement at jokes and the physical pleasure of inhaling nitrous oxide, Ludovici explains these experiences by nothing more than what Monro calls 'an ambiguous verbal formula' .¹⁰ The reservations expressed in the previous article about the range over which the term 'incongruity' was used apply even more strongly to the vast diversity of experiences Ludovici attempts to subsume under his formula.

Laughing at oneself

Another objection to superiority-based theories is provided by our ability to laugh at ourselves. Hobbes places strong limitations on our ability to do this: we may laugh at the follies of our former selves, but only if they do not bring with them 'any present dishonour'. Moreover, in laughing at ourselves we must be conscious of some 'eminency' in our current self compared to this former self. It is clear that for Hobbes, we must, in laughing, have become superior to the self at which we laugh in the respect in which we find it laughable. The problem with this - and a similar explanation, from Ludovici, in terms of 'superior adaptation' - is that they both exclude the possibility of finding something about one's current self genuinely amusing. But it is surely possible to do so. A former acquaintance of mine was a highly intelligent but very absent-minded mathematics postgraduate. One Christmas, back home from university, he wandered into the kitchen, where his mother was about to dry up, only to find that the tea-towel was dirty. 'Go up to the airing-cupboard Steve, and see if there are any clean tea-towels', she requested. Disappearing upstairs, Steve returned a little later, empty handed, and reported: 'Yes, there are'. It had genuinely not occurred to him that the reason for his mother's enquiry was that she wanted him to fetch a clean tea-towel if he found one. When his highly amused mother pointed this out to him, Steve too was able to see the absurdity of the situation, and also found it funny. Whatever is funny here - perhaps the incongruity of someone of considerable academic ability not possessing the common sense to interpret the most simple of requests - there is no need to doubt Steve's sincerity in claiming to have found this genuinely amusing. And yet he alone is the butt of the joke. In Steve's laughing there and then, it cannot be claimed, along Hobbesian lines, that it is a former self at whom he is laughing, as,

say, we might laugh when recalling an error we made as children. Here, no change in Steve's character has taken place which would guard him against making a similar mistake in the future.

A modified claim to that made by Hobbes is made by Albert Rapp. This concerns not the difference between a present and a past self, but rather claims that the person we laugh at, and to whom we feel superior, is a view of ourselves as someone other than the person who laughs. Rapp maintains: 'What happens, in effect, is: a person learns to regard himself as though he were someone else ...He then proceeds to smile amiably and objectively at the antics and predicaments which accrue to his *alter ego*'.¹¹

But *do* we make a conscious distinction between our laughing self and the self at which we laugh? Or is it not more plausible to agree with John Morreall that we often laugh all the more heartily at our blunders because it is indeed 'our very selves - the ones who are laughing - who made the blunder'?¹² It is true that in such circumstances we cultivate a certain distance from ourselves; stepping back and thereby attaining a more objective view of our situation. But this does not mean that in so doing we are in any way denying that the person that we step back and look and laugh at is ourselves.

A new interpretation of 'superiority': the 'god's eye view'

However, the above idea connects with a new twist brought to the notion of superiority by Monroe, who remarks that 'in humor at its best we are conscious of surveying the whole human scene from some godlike level at which all men look pretty much alike: all weak, all lovable, all transparently obvious in their petty pretences'.¹³

Monroe is making an important point. There *is* such a thing as what might be called the 'humour of recognition', in which one is reminded of what it is to possess the weaknesses and foibles of a human being. This is, of course, a very long way from superiority in the sense of Hobbesian 'sudden glory'; the constant comparison of oneself with others, and the glorying in the fact that one does not share the slightest fault one notices in another. But this 'god's-eye view' sheds light upon one of the great rewards which humour can offer: the ability to stand back and, at least momentarily, transcend the world through laughter. This idea has certain parallels with Nietzsche's view of laughter, which will be discussed in the fourth and final article in this series.¹⁴

Summary and conclusion

In conclusion, then, we have denied that superiority is a necessary ingredient in humour, but it is certainly true that it is sometimes a factor. Much humour has a 'victim' and involves, in one way or another, laughing at 'the infirmities of others'. The superiority tradition goes some way towards explaining why we dislike being laughed at. Is this not offensive to us precisely because to be the butt of a joke involves being treated as inferior in some sense? One can feel offended even if the laughter is not derisive or malicious. The parent who laughs lovingly at his or her child's errors in getting to grips with language may be surprised to see the child burst into tears on being laughed at, though no malice whatsoever was intended. This is explicable in terms of the child's associating being laughed at with being in a position of inferiority, and indeed, the adult *is* superior in that he or she has a superior command of language. Hobbes's emphasis is surely wrong in examples such as this: the adult's laughter is not explicable in terms of his 'sudden glory' over the child, nor in that the adult recognizes and glories in superiority over a former, childish, self. But this should not obscure the fact that the object of laughter can experience a feeling of inferiority in comparison to the laugher even in examples as devoid of derision or *intentional* degradation as this.

However, just as the incongruity tradition puts all the emphasis upon the structure of items of humour at the expense of the feelings or attitude of the laugher, so Hobbes makes the opposite mistake: he considers only the feelings of the laugher, largely ignoring both the fact that there must be something to spark off this laughter, and the qualities of the joke itself. Also, the feelings and attitude of the laugher are by no means always those of superiority: an attitude of playfulness is vitally important to the enjoyment of much humour, and it is perfectly possible to be amused at something for its own sake, without feelings of superiority. Superiority-based explanations of nonsense and absurdity, such as Ludovici's, involve stretching the notion of 'superiority' so far that it becomes almost meaningless, in the same way as we saw, in the previous article, the term 'incongruity' being stretched. Finally, the superiority tradition cannot explain an important aspect of laughing at oneself: one's ability to be genuinely amused at one's own current weaknesses. Having discussed incongruity and superiority, then, we need, next time, to consider the third main humour-theoretical tradition: that of which Freud is the major exponent, and which relates humour and laughter to the release of energy.

Notes

1. Frank Moore Colby, quoted in Edmund Bergler (1956) *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, title page, New York, Intercontinental Medical Book Corporation.
2. See *Le Rire*, translated as *Laughter*, in: Wylie Sypher (ed.) (1956) *Comedy*, pp. 61-190. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
3. Thomas Hobbes (1981) *Leviathan*, p. 125. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
4. *ibid.* Others have joined with Plato and Hobbes in taking a low view of laughter. For instance, Lord Chesterfield's famous letter to his son, in which he says: 'I am sure that since I had full use of my reason, nobody has ever heard me laugh' - Lord Chesterfield (1901) *Lord Chesterfield: Letters to his Son*, p. 58. London, Dunne. In an extraordinary book, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling* (1877) (London, J. Burns), George Vasey aims to show that laughter is objectionable both morally and aesthetically, and is also medically harmful. Finally, there is Umberto Eco's (1984) novel *The Name of the Rose* (London, Pan), in which the monastery librarian Jorge is prepared to kill in order to suppress Aristotle's lost treatise on comedy, because he sees laughter as a threat to religious faith and the dignity of man. For a review of further anti-laughter sentiments, see Richard Boston (1974) *An Anatomy of Laughter*, pp. 167-176. London, Collins.
5. Thomas Hobbes (1840) *Human Nature*, in: *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vol. 4, pp.

45-47. London, John Bohn. I have inserted the numbers myself, and will refer to these in the subsequent discussion. The emphasis has also been added. This part of the passage is particularly important, and will be referred to in what follows as 'Hobbes's conclusion'.

6. David Heyd (1982) The place of laughter in Hobbes's theory of the emotions, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43, no. 2, p. 286.

7. D.H. Monro (1951) *Argument of Laughter*, p. 152. Melbourne, Carlton University Press.

8. James Sully (1902) *An Essay on Laughter*, p. 140. Landon, Longmans, Green and Co.

9. Anthony M. Ludovici (1932) *The Secret of Laughter*, Landon, Constable and Co.

10. Monra, *ibid.*, p. 106.

11. Albert Rapp (1951) *The Origins of Wit and Humor*, p. 67. New York, E.P. Dutton.

12. John Morreall (1983) *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 12. Albany, State University of New York Press.

13. D.H. Monro (1967) Humor, in: Paul Edwards (ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3, p. 91. New York, Macmillan and the Free Press.

14. Or, if you cannot wait that long, see John Lippitt (1992) Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the status of laughter, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32, no. 2, pp. 39-49.