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Learning to laugh

Erica Fudge ^a

^a Middlesex University

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Erica Fudge

Learning to laugh: children and being human in early modern thought¹

To laugh at every thing, betokeneth a foole: neither maist thou laugh a lowd at any thing: nor stirre and shake thy body in laughing, in a cause of great laughter, thou must smile and shewe a modest ioyfullness. But, beware thou laugh not at any ribawdrie or filthie knaverie, nor once smile thereat. Too earnest & violent laughter, is seemly for no age: but most unseemly for children.

(W.F., *The Schoole of good manners*, 1595)

This essay examines the role of laughter in the formation of the human being in early modern thought, and looks particularly at the formative years of the human; at the reason why, for W.F., the violent laughter of a child was the most unseemly laughter there could be. Looking particularly at the question of the nature of the child under Calvinism, I hope to show not merely that Reformed writers were interested in children, childhood and education in ways that previous generations of writers had not been (others have already done that extremely clearly)² but that the concept of the child and its capacity to laugh formed under the influence of Aristotle and Calvin allows us to think about the status of children in some new ways.

The first question that must be asked is an apparently simple one: What, in early modern England, is a child? The obvious answer is that a child is an immature human being, but this statement creates problems, problems that require another question. What is a human? This essay will answer that question in the first instance with the application of some Aristotelian logic; that is, it will examine what it is that makes a child – and I am thinking initially about the infant – a human. It will then trace the ways in which an answer to that question might allow us to think about the ways in which children were educated and trained in the Reformed culture of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, and about the role of laughter in that construction of the human.



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Middle terms

Jonathan Barnes offers a brief, and useful guide to one form of Aristotelian logic, the logic of causes: 'the fact that we are trying to explain,' he writes, 'can be expressed in a simple subject–predicate sentence: S is P. The question we ask is: Why is S P?' He turns to what he calls the 'middle term' (M) that offers the link between S and P, and that allows for the statement S is P because of M.³ Thus, if we take the infant as the subject (S) and the human as the predicate (P), what we are looking for is the middle term that offers the causal link. We look, in fact, to what are termed the 'properties' of humanity. The question why is S P becomes then: What qualities does an infant share with the adult that would allow us to think of the infant as human? In early modern England a list of properties of humanity could be drawn up: it would include speech, reason, memory, judgement, dreams, prophetic powers, all of which are presented as proper only to humans.⁴ But the focus here is on the early modern child – or more particularly at this point, the infant (the infant matures as the essay progresses) – so it will begin with some of these properties of humanity to see to what extent they form a middle term between infant and human.

In 1631 Daniel Widdowes wrote: 'All Creatures are reasonable, or unreasonable. They which want reason, are Beasts, who live on Land or in Water. Those which live on the earth, moove on the earth, or in the ayre.'⁵ This is clear and to the point. There are two sides to this debate: reason and unreason, human and beast. Widdowes' designation of difference is not, of course, new in the mid-seventeenth century: classical thought was premised, in many ways, on the fact that reason was the property of humans. Or, to put it another way, that humans were unique in their ability to reason abstractly.⁶ Animals, on the other hand, could only reason simply, relying on the presence of immediate stimuli. What this distinction allows for is the easy and apparently unquestionable demonstration of the superiority of humans.

But, if the human is defined as a 'rational animal', an infant displays none of the qualities that might be understood to come under the heading of reason in early modern thought – intellect, memory, judgement; therefore it cannot be said, following this, that an infant is a human. Likewise, it is hard to assume that an infant can communicate through speech, or experience prophetic dreams, the nature of which could be expressed only through speech.⁷

Perhaps the simplest way of representing the deficiency of animals is to turn to the issue of temporality. Widdowes wrote, following convention, that 'Memorie calling backe images preserved in former time, is called Remembrance: but this is not without the use of reason, and therefore is onely attributed to man.'⁸ In similarly conventional terms Thomas Wright

argued that ‘beasts regard only or principally what concerneth the present time, but men forecast for future events; they knowe the meanes and the end, and therefore comparing these two together, they provide present meanes for a future intente.’⁹ Animals have only a present; they cannot conceive (remember) a past, and they cannot imagine (forecast) a future. The world of the non-human is always materially present, always limited, always driven by urges that the human can transcend.

However, the distinction of human from animal is not always as simple as it might appear to be in these texts. According to William Kempe, writing in 1588, and following classical convention, ‘youth is forgetfull, not greatly moved with regard of things past, or things to come, but wholly caried away with that which is before their face.’¹⁰ Eleven years later Thomas Wright wrote of children that ‘they lacke the use of reason, and are guided by an internall imagination, following nothing else but that pleaseth their senses, even after the same maner as brute beastes doe’.¹¹ Like animals, children are concerned only with what is in front of them, with what is present, and not with the past or the future, or what is absent or remembered. A sheep, according to discussions of memory, can recall that it is scared of a wolf only when the wolf stands before it; it cannot actively recall a wolf in its absence and scare itself by imagination.¹² Active recall – reminiscence – is the property of humanity. Kempe is saying the same thing of youths, and if, following J.A. Sharpe, we see ‘youth’ in the early modern period as the stage between 14 and 28 years of age, the issue of present-mindedness may well be even clearer when thinking of infants and children.¹³ These are creatures who live only in the now.

So how can the first question – What is a child? – be answered? If a child fails to display the so-called properties of humanity, is a child human? The answer might have to be ‘no’. But there is one property, deliberately ignored in the discussion so far, that does offer an answer: laughter. In *De partibus animalium* Aristotle wrote that man is ‘the only animal that laughs’,¹⁴ and this argument became a commonplace for two millennia, repeated by, among others, Porphyry, Galen, Boethius, Erasmus, Vives and Castiglione.¹⁵ Here the subject–predicate relationship finds its middle term: a child is a human because laughter is proper only to humans, and a child laughs. An infant, whose language capacity or ability to exercise reason is limited, is able to laugh, and is therefore revealed as human. A dog (even an adult dog) can never laugh – dog laughter is something I come back to – because a dog is never ever human.

Laughter, then, provides a middle term between human and child. It also, in Reformed discussions in early modern England, offers a link between mind and body; between the immaterial and the material.

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Belly laughs

According to M.A. Screech, Aristotle's writings on laughter are 'the pillar on which whole edifices of thought were raised'.¹⁶ And in *De partibus animalium* Aristotle sets out the basis for all early modern interpretations. He turns to the midriff. This, he writes, is present in all 'sanguineous animals' and divides 'the region of the heart from the region of the stomach'. As such, this 'partition-wall and fence' separates the 'nobler from the less noble parts': the heart from the liver. As well as having this vital physiological function the midriff also serves as a site of a further and more generally important division. Aristotle argues '[t]hat heating of [the midriff] affects sensation rapidly and in a notable manner is shown by the phenomena of laughing. For when men are tickled they are quickly set a-laughing, because the motion quickly reaches this part, and heating it though but slightly nevertheless manifestly so disturbs the mental action as to occasion movements that are independent of the will.' The shared physiology of man and animal with which Aristotle begins this section breaks down with the impact of heating the midriff. He writes, '[t]hat man alone is affected by tickling is due firstly to the delicacy of his skin, and secondly to his being the only animal that laughs.' What also breaks down is the importance of the human will in the establishment of the human as a separate and particular being. Will – an immaterial, reasoned capacity – is overwhelmed by the body.¹⁷

In early modern versions this bodily power of laughter is frequently repeated. The focus here is initially on a French Catholic text – Laurent Joubert's *Traite du Ris* (*Treatise on Laughter*) of 1579 – but what I hope becomes clear is that many of the preoccupations of this, the fullest discussion of laughter in the period, are also found in Reformed English writings. What differ are the conclusions the Catholic and the Reformed writers draw from their classical sources.

Following classical convention, Laurent Joubert argued that laughter 'is common to all, and proper to man'. He outlines the physical effect of laughing:

Everybody sees clearly that in laughter the face is moving, the mouth widens, the eyes sparkle and tear, the cheeks redden, the breast heaves, the voice becomes interrupted; and when it goes on for a long time the veins in the throat become enlarged, the arms shake, and the legs dance about, the belly pulls in and feels considerable pain; we cough, perspire, piss, and besmirch ourselves by dint of laughing, and sometimes we even faint away because of it.¹⁸

Pissing oneself, it seems, is proper to humans.¹⁹

He goes on, and looks beyond the apparent, visible manifestation of laughing on the body to its internal operation. The pericardium, 'the sheath or cover of the heart,' he writes, 'pulls on the diaphragm to which it is thoroughly connected in men, quite otherwise than in animals. . . . And this is (in my opinion) the reason, or at least one of the principal ones, why only man is capable of laughter.'²⁰ The diaphragm is moved via the convulsion of the heart in the pericardium, and it is this that causes what Erasmus terms a kind of 'fit', otherwise known as laughter.²¹ Once again, it is the human anatomy, this time the fact that in humans the pericardium is connected to the diaphragm, that causes laughter.

But of course, laughter that is due to mere anatomy is limited. Being tickled does provoke laughter, but this is termed 'bastard laughter' as it is a purely bodily response, requiring no operation of the mind. The other 'untrue' version of laughter is 'dog laughter', or the '*cynic spasm*' as Joubert terms it.²² This is false, and emerges either through willed contortion of the face ('angry and threatening dogs have this look'), or injury (a knife to the diaphragm): it is therefore potentially both reasonable (willed) and unreasonable (bodily). In the English *Schoole of good manners* (1595) by W.F. the distinction drawn by Joubert is reiterated. W.F. writes: 'some laugh so unreasonably, that therewith they set out their teeth like grinning dogs.'²³ The lack of reason, and the overwhelmingly bodily response turn a man into an animal. The belief in the possibility of such a metamorphosis, it seems, transcends religious difference.

There is, however, for both Joubert and Reformed writers, an alternative form of laughter that is based upon physiological factors – the possession of the link between pericardium and diaphragm – but that goes beyond the merely material. The true laugh (as opposed to the bastard or dog laugh) calls upon the workings of the immaterial, the mind, and it is this laugh that is truly the property of humanity. Joubert writes, following Aristotelian convention, that all passions – the appetites of the mind, such as joy, hate, anger and so on – 'proceed . . . from the sensitive appetite'. He goes on:

This [sensitive] faculty necessarily precedes the movement of the heart. And yet we say that one does not covet the unknown, for in imagining an object, and judging it good or bad, the humors, agitated by our noticing it, affect the heart, which as though hit and struck, is moved, desiring or disdaining the object.²⁴

Likewise, in England, Thomas Wright proposed:

Passions and sense are determined to one thing, and as soone as they perceive their object, sense presently receives it, and the passions love

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or hate it: but reason, after she perceiveth her object, she stands in deliberation, whether it bee convenient shee should accept it, or refuse it.²⁵

What follows this natural, and inevitable movement (from eye, to brain, to heart), for both Joubert and Wright, is a struggle between rationality and physicality. The danger is that the will will be overwhelmed by the motions of the heart; that the rational soul will be taken over by the sensitive. Joubert's image to illustrate this point comes from Plato: the will's relation to the heart, Joubert writes, 'is like a child on the back of a fierce horse that carries it impetuously about, here and there, but not without the child's turning it back some, and, reining in, getting it back on the path'.²⁶ He goes on to emphasize that, despite this battle, reason can rule the heart through something akin to 'civil or political [power] where with authority one points out obligations'. (This is opposed to another form of power that is used by reason as a last resort wherein it 'simply commands'.) The will, therefore, is 'free . . . to choose or refuse the right thing'.²⁷ Robert Burton, too, repeated this image: 'Wee are torne in peeces by our passions, as so many wild horses, one in disposition, another in habite, one is melancholy, another mad.'²⁸ However, the power of movement, which is voluntary, is always at the command of the will, but the power of the sensitive appetite, in Joubert's conventional terms, 'does not obey immediately, and often contradicts the will, employing long arguments and various thoughts, after which it sometimes happens that the diverted will yields to the emotions'. The fact that laughter can resist the will, that we can laugh – and sometimes feel we *have* to laugh – in spite of ourselves, shows that laughter cannot be 'under the rational . . . faculty': that it must be of the 'sensitive faculty' which humans share with animals.²⁹ This sharing of a form of perception has wider implications, however. As Thomas Wright notes, in the

alteration which Passions woorke in the witte, and the will, wee may understand the admirable metamorphosis and change of a man from himselfe when his affects are pacified, and when they are troubled. *Plutarch* said they changed them like *Circes* potions, from men into beasts.³⁰

It is because of the conflict between mind and body that is innate to laughter that it becomes an important aspect of being human. In fact, a true laugh becomes a necessary exhibition of human-ness.³¹ Quentin Skinner has recently shown in great detail a key understanding of the nature of laughter in Renaissance thought.³² Again, the precedent is classical, but this time Socratic rather than Aristotelian: according to Quintilian, laughter 'has its source in things that are either deformed or

disgraceful in some way'.³³ In this Quintilian is following Socrates who proposed that laughter is a 'combined' emotion. Socrates argued: 'when we laugh at the ridiculous qualities of our friends, we mix pleasure with pain.'³⁴ But Joubert, bringing these different classical schools together, goes even further: in the experience of joy, he argues, the heart expands, while in the experience of sorrow it shrinks. One can die of joy (the heart can burst), but one cannot die of laughter, because laughter is a dilation and contraction of the heart, it is a movement between joy and sorrow. For this reason laughter is perceived to proceed from 'a double emotion': 'laughable matter,' Joubert writes, 'gives us pleasure and sadness.'³⁵

This innately contemptuous quality of laughter uproots any links to joy that might be assumed to be inherent in this human expression, and the scornfulness is repeated by numerous early modern thinkers including Baldessare Castiglione, Thomas Wilson, Robert Burton (who of course takes on the persona of Democritus, the laughing philosopher in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*), Sir Thomas Browne and Thomas Hobbes.³⁶ Joubert writes, 'inasmuch as laughter is caused by something ugly, it does not proceed from pure joy, but has some small part of sadness.'³⁷ The link between joy and sadness gives the laugher a particular sense of themselves: as Hobbes put it, 'the passion of Laughter is nothyng else but a suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others, or with our owne formerly.'³⁸ In laughing, humans simultaneously acknowledge an exterior failure and their own success. Laughing as such is a moment of self-reflection as well as self-aggrandizement. It is where, as Screech has shown, the dictum *nosce teipsum* – know thyself – is put to work.³⁹ Without self-knowledge how could one recognize the deformity of others?

This is where we shift from viewing laughter as a purely bodily (and therefore unwilled) phenomenon to laughter as something that invokes and requires the will, and it is where early modern texts shift from purely Aristotelian to Socratic thought. To laugh is to perform an act of judgement, it is to discriminate, and this is yet another reason why animals cannot laugh. Not only is the pericardium not linked to the diaphragm in any animal other than the human, but only the human has the judgement required to truly laugh.

So the 'true' laugh is simultaneously of the body and of the mind. One of the crucial things about it is that it cannot be faked; a true laugh is always true – of the body, not quite willed (and therefore unfalsifiable), but it is also, paradoxically, willed and therefore of the mind. A good laugh is a laugh in which mind and body agree: in which what the intellectual faculty regards as 'deformed' is in parallel with the bodily movement.⁴⁰ A *loud* laugh, however, does not show the absolute agreement of body and mind: quite the contrary. Richard Greenham writes: 'a foole when hee

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laugheth liftes up his voice, but the wise man is scarce heard.’⁴¹ A wise man exercises control over his body; his almost silent laugh reflects the power of his mind. Plato, like Christ, never laughed.⁴²

For this reason laughter becomes a vital property of humanity. It is a place where mind and body are brought into potential conflict. True laughter, it might be said, is when the mind takes control of something that is potentially and powerfully out of its control; it is when judgement is not overwhelmed by the animal-body, but actually overwhelms it. This is evidence of powerful reason. The laugh may be of the body, but the true laugh is certainly of the mind.

The laughter of a child

This dangerous conflict between will and body that is central to laughter, however, makes the laughter of a child somewhat problematic. According to Aristotle and, following him, Pliny, an infant laughs only after its fortieth day (Charles Darwin observed his children and found that they laughed on their forty-fifth and forty-sixth days).⁴³ Until that point, according to my logic, the infant is not human, it is a mere animal being: it does not have the discrimination to laugh, and so we get something else. Having cited Pliny and Aristotle, Joubert writes that, not only are the muscles of infants incapable of the kinds of convulsions necessary to laughter, but they ‘do not conceive the laughable in their minds since they only know during the first months what is necessary for life, just as do animals’. With time, however, the infant does begin to laugh, but, as Joubert notes, there are still problems: ‘the laughter of small children is counterfeit and illegitimate, like dog laughter.’⁴⁴ There seems to be some confusion here between Joubert’s categories of bastard and dog laughter: dog laughter implies fakery (a willed state), whereas bastard laughter involves nothing more than the body. To say that a child can fake a laugh is to imply, I think, that a child can produce a true laugh, something that Joubert would want to deny.

However, if we accept that the child’s laugh (whatever else it is) is not a true laugh we can begin to trace a logic. If true laughter is about making judgements – Laurel L. Hendrix has called laughing ‘an act of reading’⁴⁵ – then a young child cannot truly laugh. An infant does not judge the world around him or her: in Aristotelian terms, the fact that the world is completely new means that a judgement beyond the ‘that’s new’ is impossible and therefore concepts of good, bad, true, false, are problematic. An infant lives, in fact, in a world of the immediate, and of wonder – it is incapable of judgement, and therefore is merely astonished by its new place.⁴⁶ This wonder may cause the heart to convulse, and therefore cause

a form of laughter, but the lack of will involved means that this is not laughter in its true sense: Joubert writes, 'astonishment does not cause laughter, but only holds the mind in suspense.'⁴⁷ Albertus Magnus, following Aristotle, argued that this suspension is not the end, rather it is the beginning of philosophy: 'wonder is the movement of the man who does not know on his way to finding out.'⁴⁸ Astonishment precedes laughter, which is evidence of discrimination.

Joubert's representation, then, is the more positive model of the child's laugh. It is a laughter of innocence that proclaims the purity of the child itself. Adam and Eve, of course, did not learn the distinction between good and evil until they ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. A child, laughing in wonder, is like the first parents, conversing naked without shame. Dressing oneself, for Jacques Derrida, is one potential property of humanity;⁴⁹ it is a property that emerges only after the Fall, only after the need to discriminate, and therefore only after the possibility of laughter. An infant, like its pre-lapsarian parents, does not dress itself, nor can it judge beyond its natural instincts. Discrimination has not yet entered to change joyous wonder into scornful cackling.

But there is, of course, another way of interpreting the laughter of a child, and this is the one that is held by most of the writers in early modern England whose work I am looking at here. While they follow key aspects of Joubert's theory they differ on one particular issue: the status of the child. The Fall, again, plays its part. For Robert Burton it was the cause of human misery and lack of innate self-knowledge. On page 1 of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* he wrote:

But this most noble Creature . . . O pittifull change! is falne from what he was, and forfeited his estate, become *miserabilis homuncio*, a cast-away, a catiffe, one of the most miserable creatures of the World, if he be considered in his owne nature, an unregenerate man and so much obscured by his fall (that some few reliques excepted) he is inferiour to a beast. *Man in honour that understandeth not, is like unto beasts that perish*, [Psalm 49:20] so *David* esteemes him: a monster by a stupend Metamorphosis, a beast, a dogge, a hogge, what not?⁵⁰

In this Burton is following a well-established Reformed tradition in which emphasis is placed on human corruption and closeness to the beast. Thomas Morton, writing in 1596, argued that post-lapsarian humans are 'carnal and worldly minded men' who, 'beholding the glorious creatures of God, are no more affected then are the brute beastes, which never once lift up their eies to heaven.'⁵¹ Leicester divine John Moore proposed 'mutability' as a quality innate to man, going on to argue that, where God was truly immutable, man had both the 'power of standing, and the possibility of

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falling; power of standing he had from God his creatour: possibility of falling from himselfe, being a creature'.⁵² We can will our own destruction; this is a product of the Fall.

It is not only that 'man', the adult, is judged differently in Reformed theology, however. Calvin's infamous denigration of the child (a being previously held by the Roman church to be incapable 'of mortal sin until the age of seven')⁵³ gives the infant's laughter a new meaning. The 'depravity'⁵⁴ (Calvin's term) of the infant means that its laughter is merely revelatory: it shows the infant's innate and unexceptional sinfulness. In fact, it shows the infant to be controlled by the body. There is no judgement (no act of reason) – this is in agreement with Joubert's more positive (Catholic) model of children's laughter – there is only body. And the only source of astonishment for a Reformed thinker would be that adults might think that the infant is innocent. It is that lack of judgement which reveals a mind held in suspense; reading Calvin, we could argue, offers the route from suspension to belief. How to acknowledge the corruption of the child, the need for judgement, and moderation of the bodily response, is central to conceptualizations of children and forms a cornerstone, I believe, of many Reformed attitudes to education in the period.

Christian laughter

According to William Perkins, the first stage in parental care of the infant is baptism,⁵⁵ and here godparents make declarations on behalf of the child, declarations that the child, as it matures, is expected to make for him or herself. The reason for the intercession of the godparents is simple: Richard Jones asked 'Whether maie fooles, mad men, or children bee admitted to the Supper of the Lord?' His answer is clear: '*No, for they cannot examine themselves.*'⁵⁶ The godparents stand in to examine the child on his or her behalf.⁵⁷

Following baptism, parents are expected to continue with their children's godly education, and the catechism – the rote learning of key religious questions and answers – emerges as a primary form of indoctrination. C. John Sommerville has noted that catechitical 'memorization . . . was to make orthodoxy the child's second nature'.⁵⁸ What had been external is made internal: what was culture begins to appear as nature. As well as this, the catechism is a display of key properties of the human – memory and speech. And the latter, according to John Dod and Robert Cleaver, could precede the former: 'let him have the words taught him when he is able to heare and speake words, and after, when he is of more discretion, he will conceive & remember the sense too.'⁵⁹ Parrotting precedes speaking; animal, as ever, comes before human. In learning the catechism

(parents were fined if the child had not learned it by the age of 8)⁶⁰ the child was displaying its entry into the human community as well as into the Christian community: in fact, the two – human and Christian – seem inseparable in this context. But speech, like Reformed doctrine, needs to be overseen with care. W.F. advises his boy reader that, on hearing ribald speeches by superiors, he should ‘make semblance, as though [he] heard them not’.⁶¹ Feigned ignorance (an act of will) is more appropriate than bastard laughter, as bastard laughter gives priority to the body, and returns the human to its (dangerously natural) animal status.

But laughing itself – whether true, bastard or dog – is also problematic. For divines the Scriptural evidence would seem to point away from laughing at all. Christ never laughed: ‘he wept three times,’ wrote William Perkins, ‘at the destruction of Jerusalem, at the raising of *Lazarus*, and in his agonie: but we never reade that he laughed.’⁶² As if this were not warning enough the Old Testament also presents laughter as dangerous. II Kings 2:23–5 records the story of the children who laughed at Elisha’s baldness. Verse 24 reads, ‘And [Elisha] turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.’ Screech writes of this, ‘God intended to fix irrevocably in men’s minds the respect due to elders and to his ministers, who are in *loco parentis*. They must not be laughed at.’⁶³ He is, of course, right; but an even more general warning is also recorded in this passage: laughter itself is dangerous. In 1595 W.F. noted that ‘Too earnest & violent laughter, is seemly for no age: but most unseemly for children.’⁶⁴ Richard Greenham – referring, perhaps, to Psalm 111, ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom’ – states ‘When a man is most merrie, he is nearest danger. . . . The way to godlie mirth, is to feele godlie sorrow.’⁶⁵

Yet these Reformed writers did not refuse laughter altogether. William Perkins wrote, somewhat pragmatically: ‘As for laughter, it may be used: otherwise God would never have given that power and facultie unto man.’ By implication, it is the property of humanity and should therefore be used to express that humanity. Perkins goes on, however, to speak what is a Reformed commonplace: ‘but the use of it must bee both moderate and seldome, as sorrow for our sinnes is to be plentifull and often.’⁶⁶ So, even as Elisha’s curse seems to call for silence, there is a place wherein laughter may be used. Following Thomas Aquinas’ belief that ‘sparing’ laughter works as a useful relief to the mind (and revealing, once again, how indebted the Reformed interpretation of laughter was to its Catholic predecessors),⁶⁷ Perkins proposes that two kinds of jesting are ‘tolerable’ to Christians: the first ‘is moderate and sparing mirth, in the use of things indifferent, in season convenient, without the least scandal of any man, & with profit to the hearers. The seco[n]d is that which the Prophets used, when they jested

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against wicked persons, yet so, as withall they sharply reprovved their sinnes.’⁶⁸ Religious laughter requires self-examination. A sin is risible only if the laugher recognizes it as a sin. In doing this, the laugher not only distances him or herself from the sinner, but from the sin as well. Scorn, once again, is self-awareness, and it is this that the child must gain. A Christian education must therefore include teaching the child to laugh.

Learning to laugh

In *The Education of a Christian Prince* Erasmus argued famously that morality should be ‘pressed in, and rammed home’ through parables, analogies, epigrams, and should be placed constantly before the child by being ‘carved on rings, painted in pictures, inscribed on prizes’. He goes on: ‘When the little pupil has enjoyed hearing Aesop’s fable of the lion being saved in his turn by the good offices of the mouse . . . and when he has had a good laugh, then the teacher should spell it [i.e. the moral] out.’⁶⁹ Laughter here precedes learning; it is, in fact, the means by which the lesson is learned. The bitter pill of education is sweetened with pleasure.

This sense of the importance of laughter – and pleasure – in the classroom may be traced in the vast majority of Reformed English writings on education in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁷⁰ In his dialogue on the correct forms of godly learning, Bartholomew Batty states simply that ‘pleasure & delight’ are key.⁷¹ And Perkins, too, proposes that ‘the first instruction of children in learning and religion, must be so ordered, that they take it with delight’.⁷² W.F. takes the link between learning and pleasure into slightly different territory, writing: ‘learning is but sport and play to such as have willing minds.’⁷³ Play itself is often regarded as outside of rather than a part of education: William Gouge warned, ‘Too much sport maketh [children] wilde, rude, unfit to bee trained up to any good calling, and spendeth their spirits, and wasteth their strength too much.’⁷⁴ What was called for, here as in so many other things, was moderation. Perkins’ laughter – indifferent, lacking in scandal and promoting morality – was the ideal.

But it is not only as the sugaring of the pill of learning that laughter operates in Reformed writings. It has a more significant role to play than that. If laughing is, as I have argued, a moment when body and mind are in potential conflict, and if one of the properties of being human is the exhibition of reason (the control of the mind over the body), then laughing must be brought under control as part of the process of becoming human. There are two elements to the Reformed education, then – learning doctrine, and learning human-ness – and these are both addressed in the notion of ‘pleasurable’ learning. The fact that the infant laughs at so early

a stage in its development signals not only, as Aristotle had said, that laughter is natural – of the body – but that it needs to be modified, controlled: rationalized. The rationing of laughter – making it modest and directing it at things indifferent – was not merely mannerly nor, I would argue, a part of what Norbert Elias termed ‘the regulation of instinctual life’.⁷⁵ Its function was part of a wider, and potentially even more significant process: not that of becoming civilized, but that of becoming human. Now, of course, civilization and human are often interchangeable terms in the early modern period: what lacks civilization – a New World native, for example – lacks human status. Robert Gray, for one, argued: ‘The report goeth, that in *Virginia* the people are savage and incredibly rude, they worship the divell, offer their young children in sacrifice unto him, wander up and downe like beasts, having no Arte, nor scie[n]ce, nor trade, to imploy themselves, or give themselves unto.’⁷⁶ In this context, the perceived ‘beastliness’ of the natives allows for the civilized (Christian) English to lay a claim to the land: it is not theft if that which is taken is never owned. However, the missionary endeavour, the fact that one of the claims of the Virginia Company was the need to spread the Christian doctrine in the barbarous New World, meant that a concept of ‘monogenesis’ must be in place.⁷⁷ If the natives were not always-already human, how could they be converted to the true faith? Underlying Gray’s apparent species distinction persists a recognition of sameness.

In distinction from Gray and others writing about the encounters with the natives, I am using ‘human’ here in what might be termed more of a species than a civil sense: I am arguing that the human as a species being was being made, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, in the process of the regulation of laughter.⁷⁸ In this sense, John Dod and Robert Cleaver’s short, sharp dictat – ‘it were better for children to be unborne than untaught’ – signals a very real understanding of the status of the child.⁷⁹ It might sound like puritanical overstatement, but I think that it frames a fear, a fear that the infant, the child, even the youth may not after all become human without help. Learning to laugh is learning to give the mind dominion over the body, and this is why a child’s laughter is important.

What can be traced in early modern theories of laughter, then, is not only scorn (a mixture of joy and sorrow) but also self-knowledge. If children cannot receive the sacraments on their own behalf because, in Richard Jones’ phrase, ‘*they cannot examine themselves*’, then a true laugh – a regulated, learned laugh – represents evidence of self-examination. So learning with ‘delight’ may be interpreted as being a double-layered entry into human status. Not only are moral and religious truths of society made natural, alongside this pleasure itself is a control of the body by the mind, is a learned enculturation of the body, and this is central to the process of

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becoming human. In this sense, the reinsertion of Aristotle in the Renaissance canon, and the predominant inclusion of his ideas within theories of laughter, and Calvin's new assessment of the child, means that when we look at the conceptualization of the human in many early modern English texts, not only do we find those texts peopled with animals, we also find that those animals may actually be children, children who are being taught to laugh.

Middlesex University

Notes

- 1 A version of this essay was delivered at the conference 'Seen and Heard: The Place of the Child in Early Modern Europe 1550–1800', Cotsen Children's Library, Princeton University, in April 2002. I am grateful to the conference organizers, Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore, for inviting me, and to delegates at the conference for their papers and questions.
- 2 See e.g. Patrick Collinson, 'The Protestant family', in his *Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religion and Cultural Change in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 60–93; Ian Green, '“For children in yeeres and children in understanding”: the emergence of the English Catechism under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37:3 (1986), pp. 397–425; Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child Rearing, Religious Experience and the Self in Early America* (New York: New American Library, 1979); Christopher Hill, 'The spiritualization of the household', in his *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964, reprinted Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 429–66; Leah Sinanoglou Marcus, *Childhood and Cultural Despair: A Theme and Variations in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978); John Morgan, *Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes Towards Reason, Learning and Education, 1560–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Robert V. Schnucker, 'Puritan attitudes towards childhood discipline, 1560–1634', in *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy McLaren*, ed. Valerie Fildes (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 108–21; C. John Sommerville, *The Discovery of Childhood in Puritan England* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1992); Keith Thomas, 'Age and authority in early modern England', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 62, (1976), pp. 205–48; Thomas, 'Children in early modern England', in *Children and their Books: A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie*, ed. Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 45–77.
- 3 Jonathan Barnes, *Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 53.
- 4 Jacques Derrida has argued that such a list reveals one thing: 'it can attract a non-finite number of other concepts, beginning with the concept of a concept.' The unsatisfactory infinity of this list leads Derrida to propose an alternative property of humanity: bestiality. This, he writes, 'can never in any case be attributed to the animal or to God.' It need not be expressed here what would happen to the status of humanity if its position as the 'bestializing animal' was

- to become a commonplace. Jacques Derrida, 'The animal that therefore I am (more to follow)', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2002), pp. 374 and 409.
- 5 Daniel Widdowes, *Naturall Philosophy*, 2nd edn (London, 1631), p. 64.
 - 6 Richard Sorabji has argued that Aristotle's denial to animals of 'reason (*logos*), reasoning (*logismos*), thought (*dianoia*), intellect (*nous*), and belief (*doxa*)' was 'not peripheral, but central to Aristotle's concerns'. Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (London: Duckworth, 1993), pp. 14 and 15.
 - 7 On prophetic dreams and humans see Artimedorus, *The Judgement, or exposition of Dreames* (London, 1606), The Epistle Dedicatory, n.p.
 - 8 Widdowes, *Naturall Philosophy*, pp. 51–2.
 - 9 Th. W. [Thomas Wright], *The Passions of the Minde* (London, 1601), p. 312.
 - 10 W.K. [William Kempe], *The Education of children in learning: Declared by the Dignitie, Utilitie, and Method thereof* (London, 1588), sig.Fr.
 - 11 [Wright], *Passions*, p. 12.
 - 12 See Aristotle, *De memoria et reminiscencia*, in *Aristotle on Memory*, ed. Richard Sorabji (London: Duckworth, 1972). An early modern version of this argument is in Gulielmus Gratarolus, *The Castel of Memorie* (London, 1562), sigs.Fvv–Fvir.
 - 13 J.A. Sharpe, 'Disruption in the well-ordered household: age, authority, and possessed young people', in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, ed. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 188.
 - 14 Aristotle, *De partibus animalium*, Book III, ch. 10.
 - 15 See Helen Adolf, 'On Medieval laughter', *Speculum*, 22 (1947), p. 252; M.A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. 1–3; M.A. Screech and Ruth Calder, 'Some Renaissance attitudes to laughter', in *Humanism in France at the end of the Middle Ages and in the Early Renaissance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), p. 219; Juan Luis Vives, *The Passions of the Soul: The Third Part of De Anima et Vita*, trans. Carlos G. Noreña (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 59; Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 155.
 - 16 Screech, *Laughter*, p. 13.
 - 17 See Katherine Park, 'The organic soul', in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 464–84.
 - 18 Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter* (1579), trans. Gregory David De Rocher (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), pp. 17 and 28.
 - 19 This begs the question: Where would it be deemed inappropriate for an animal to piss? The answer, inevitably, is that it is inappropriate for an animal to piss within the domain of the human. This is a capacity that must be learned, and which the animal may often fail in, and therefore reveal itself as animal. By implication, a wild animal can never evacuate inappropriately.
 - 20 Joubert, *Treatise*, pp. 46 and 47.
 - 21 Cited in Screech, *Laughter*, p. 216.
 - 22 Joubert, *Treatise*, p. 76.
 - 23 W.F., *The Schoole of good manners* (London, 1595), sig. B8r.
 - 24 Joubert, *Treatise*, p. 32.
 - 25 [Wright], *Passions*, p. 15.
 - 26 See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246A–247C and 253D–254E.
 - 27 Joubert, *Treatise*, p. 33.
 - 28 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, 1624), p. 31.

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- 29 Joubert, *Treatise*, pp. 34 and 35.
- 30 [Wright], *Passions*, p. 100.
- 31 I hyphenate the term human-ness to signal the separation of the quality (in this instance, laughter) from the species being, and to highlight the fact that in many discussions from this period – as with others – the quality comes to stand for the species. It is, in Derridean terms, the true ‘supplement’. See Jacques Derrida, ‘... That Dangerous Supplement ...’, in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 141–64.
- 32 Quentin Skinner, ‘Why laughing mattered in the Renaissance: the second Henry Tudor Memorial Lecture’, *History of Political Thought*, 22:3 (2001), pp. 418–47.
- 33 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, cited in Skinner, ‘Why laughing mattered’, p. 428.
- 34 Plato, *Philebus*, 50A–B, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Loeb Classical Library) (London: Heinemann, 1962), p. 339.
- 35 Joubert, *Treatise*, p. 44.
- 36 All are cited in Skinner, ‘Why laughing mattered’, *passim*.
- 37 Joubert, *Treatise*, p. 39.
- 38 Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, cited in Skinner, ‘Why laughing mattered’, p. 423. On Hobbes see R.E. Ewin, ‘Hobbes on laughter’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 51:202 (2001), pp. 29–40.
- 39 Screech, *Laughter*, p. 69.
- 40 As Screech has shown, deformity is not limited to the physical – although this is certainly an unpleasant possibility – it is also intellectual deformity. Erasmus’ laughter, Screech notes, was often directed towards theological ignorance. Screech, *Laughter*, p. 161ff.
- 41 Richard Greenham, ‘Of joy and sorrow’, in *The Workes* (London, 1601), p. 350.
- 42 Plato’s lack of laughter is according to Diogenes Laertius, cited in Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, ‘Gracious laughter: Marsilio Ficino’s anthropology’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 52:3 (1999), p. 717.
- 43 J.Y.T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1923), p. 25.
- 44 Joubert, *Treatise*, pp. 114 and 119.
- 45 Laurel L. Hendrix, ‘“Mother of laughter, and welspring of blisse”: Spenser’s Venus and the poetics of mirth’, *ELR*, 23 (1993), p. 119.
- 46 Writing of Columbus’ wondering, Stephen Greenblatt says, ‘European culture experienced something like the “startle reflex” one can observe in infants: eyes widened, arms outstretched, breathing stilled, the whole body momentarily convulsed.’ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 14.
- 47 Joubert, *Treatise*, p. 96.
- 48 Albertus Magnus, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, cited in Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p. 81.
- 49 Derrida, ‘The animal that therefore I am’, p. 373.
- 50 Burton, *Anatomy*, p. 1.
- 51 [Thomas Morton], *A Treatise of the threefolde state of man* (London, 1596), p. 34.
- 52 John Moore, *A Mappe of Mans Mortalitie* (London, 1617), p. 7.
- 53 Schnucker, ‘Puritan attitudes’, p. 114.
- 54 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke, 1949), Vol. II, p. 215.

- 55 William Perkins, *Of Christian Oeconomie* in *The Works* (London, 1616–18), Vol. III, p. 694.
- 56 Richard Jones, *A Briefe and Necessarie Catechisme* (London, 1583), sig. Cvir.
- 57 See Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 40–6.
- 58 Sommerville, *Discovery*, p. 136.
- 59 John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A Treatise of Exposition Upon the Ten Commandments* (London, 1603), sig. 8r.
- 60 Sommerville, *Discovery*, p. 145.
- 61 W.F., *Schoole of good manners*, sig. D5r.
- 62 William Perkins, *A Direction for the Government of the Tongue According to Gods Word*, in *Works*, Vol. I, p. 448.
- 63 Screech, *Laughter*, p. 35.
- 64 W.F., *Schoole of good manners*, sig. B8r.
- 65 Greenham, 'Of joy and sorrow', p. 348.
- 66 Perkins, *Direction*, p. 448.
- 67 Screech, *Laughter*, p. 136.
- 68 Perkins, *Direction*, p. 448.
- 69 Desiderius Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, ed. Lisa Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 10 and 12.
- 70 Richard Mulcaster is an exception here. When he discusses laughter in *Positions* he takes it as a form of exercise. He writes: 'can there be any better argume[n]t, to prove that it warmeth, then the rednesse of the face, and flush of high colour, when one laugheth from the hart, and smiles not from the teethe?' In his terms laughter is a medicine – 'it must needs be good for them to use *laughing*, which have cold heades, and cold chestes, which are troubled with melancholie, which are light headed by reason of some cold distemperature of the braine, which thorough sadnesse, and sorrow, are subjecte to agues.' These people, he suggests, should 'suffer themselves to be tickled under the armpittes, for in those partes there is great store of small veines, and litle arteries, which being tickled so, become warme themselves, and from thence disperse heat thorough out the whole bodie.' Mulcaster, *Positions* (London, 1581), p. 63. What is clear in Mulcaster's representation of laughter is that this is not 'true' laughter in the sense outlined by Joubert. Indeed, the laughter that Mulcaster promotes is bastard laughter, purely bodily, from the heart, and due to the tickling of the armpits. What Perkins and other writers recognize, and what Mulcaster does not, however, is the powerful and reasonable work of laughter. In a sense, the difference between Mulcaster and the other thinkers is not only about the place of laughter in the classroom. It is about the conceptualization of the child itself. On Mulcaster's place in humanist education, see Alan Stewart, "'Traitors to boyes buttocks': the erotics of humanist education', in his *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 84–121.
- 71 Bartholomew Batty, *The Christian mans Closet* (London, 1581), sig. 8r.
- 72 Perkins, *Of Christian Oeconomie*, p. 694.
- 73 W.F., *Schoole of good manners*, sig. C5r.
- 74 William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1634), p. 536.
- 75 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (1939) trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 140. Skinner argues that the 'civilizing process' had an impact upon laughing which was 'an obvious instance of an uncontrolled reaction that needed, in polite society, to be governed and preferably eliminated'. Skinner, 'Why laughing mattered', p. 445.

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- 76 Robert Gray, *A Good Speed to Virginia* (London, 1609), sig. C2v.
- 77 See Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), especially pp. 207–53.
- 78 Anthony Fletcher has made a similar argument about masculinity: ‘Gender, in other words, was not finally determined at birth. The baby’s penis merely indicated a potential for the attainment of a masculinity which it needed to be socially inculcated.’ Fletcher, ‘Manhood, the male body, courtship and the household in early modern England’, *History*, 84:275 (1999), p. 421. I am going beyond his discussion of gender positions and thinking about the creation of the human itself.
- 79 John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A Godly forme of Houshold Government* (London, 1603), sig. R2v.