

Stephen Halliwell

Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity.

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Modern, and especially contemporary, great philosophers haven't paid very much attention to laughter, humor, or comedy. But that was not the case in ancient Greek times: (almost) every Greek philosopher has something to say on one or all of these related themes. Some (Aristotle, Theophrastus) didn't hesitate to write books on comedy. Quite paradigmatically, irony—whatever its precise meaning—plays a central role in Plato's figure of Socrates. Less known (and generally by-passed by commentators) is that Aristotle even makes laughter a virtue. Indeed, it is a fact (which provides some explanation for that interest) that laughter played a central role in many venues of ancient Greek culture. Especially worth mentioning are the institution of the symposium, where a real cultivation of playful and benevolent laughter took place, and certain forms of ritual laughter which took place in religious festivals. Not to forget the importance of satiric poetry and comedy.

Stephen Halliwell's huge book on Greek laughter seeks to be neither a work on Greek philosophical theories of laughter, nor a systematic, and comprehensive, history of Greek laughter. Rather, it aims at presenting some quite extensive bits of a huge 'mosaic', as Halliwell himself says. Each of his nine chapters, besides the introductory first chapter, focuses on one aspect or (in one chapter) on a couple of main authors having something to say on this wide-ranging theme: he deals with laughter in the Homeric world, Symptotic laughter, ritual laughter, aischrology (shameful, or offensive speech), the ethics of ridicule, the absurd, the *mélange* of laughter and tears in Menander's world, the laughter of life and death in Lucian, and the anti-gelastical tendencies of early Christianity.

This decision to dip quite profoundly into certain specific aspects and writers, rather than to provide a systematic construction of Greek laughter, is philosophically motivated, arising from the book's two related, central claims: 1) laughter is not a unified phenomenon in itself, but an essentially 'volatile' and 'elusive' phenomenon that resists any such complete unification; and 2) laughter must be studied in its historically, culturally, and psychologically multiple facets. Whenever they have addressed laughter, modern and contemporary philosophers have vigorously tried to universalize and unify laughter, be it through the concepts of relief, incongruity, or aggressiveness (or superiority). However, Halliwell argues, these three schema and others (like playfulness or sociability) only apply in contexts that are culturally and historically loaded. A little like the different sorts of music Aristotle describes in *Politics* 8 as having various aims, there are different, irreducible sorts of laughter, with various aims. And yet—contrary to

what Aristotle seems to be claiming for music—these ‘aims’ are not to be taken as unified either: Halliwell never tires of repeating that these schema very often significantly overlap one another, and that most instances of laughter are fundamentally ambiguous in kind and/or paradoxical (these words are repeated again and again as a sort of methodological leitmotiv).

It is only fair to say that Halliwell has written an extraordinarily rich book which exactly corresponds to his methodological contention: his incisive, fresh, and thoughtful analysis of well-known texts and of lesser known ones too, as well his close attention to unexpected interpretative possibilities, should make this book a classic which everyone interested in laughter—classicists certainly, but also philosophers and even anthropologists and psychologists—should read, a classic, that is, which aims at providing a firm yet open-minded basis for any serious further research on laughter. Still, one may raise some doubts about the (rather extreme) anti-constructivist way Halliwell presents what Greek philosophers had to say on laughter. It is certainly true that neither Plato nor Aristotle (nor any other Greek philosopher) actually leaves us with a full, comprehensive, theory of laughter in the way Bergson or Freud do. But contrary to Halliwell’s suggestion, this need not be interpreted to mean that they decided not to do so out of respect, as it were, for the ambiguity, or paradoxical nature of laughter itself. After all, Plato never does offer us a full fledged theory of any other theme in his dialogues (probably precisely because they are dialogues), and the second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (where he might have offered such a theory of laughter, or at least of comedy) is now lost. It may be true that Plato did not intend to offer any theory of laughter in the famous Philebus passage, and that therefore we should not be allowed to use that passage to interpret other passages on laughter, or on irony (*eironia*); but in fact Halliwell does not attempt to provide any detailed reading of that passage, which leaves us without any strong argument for his contention.

The case of Aristotle is quite the opposite, as Halliwell does in fact give us such a very detailed interpretation, but there his arguments seem to go against his own grand, anti-unifying view. In this excellent chapter, which is the best I know on laughter in Aristotle, Halliwell rightly argues against Quentin Skinner’s famous article that laughter cannot be ‘always an expression of contempt’ (Skinner’s formula): there is a virtuous laughter (*eutrapelia*) which is the right and virtuous way of socializing with humor and playfulness. This is to be read contextually as the philosophical way of understanding and promoting a right sense of humor and laughter, which is described by other writers to be at work in the symposia. But Halliwell adds to this that such a moral ideal ‘cannot have anything substantial in common with full-blown hubris’ (324)—that is with the hubris causing pain to the person mocked, as is the case in comic satire or in Aristophanes’ comedy (where contempt and disdain are the basic emotions involved). To be sure, *eutrapelos*, amiable and friendly laughter, is not to be confused with harsh, contemptuous laughter, and their consequent pleasures are not the same either. But Aristotle also explicitly says that even friendly jokes are ‘a sort of abuse’, while *eutrapelia* is defined as ‘an educated hubris’, from which Halliwell himself concludes that Aristotle is not far from adumbrating later ethological theories that interpret laughter as ‘a transmuting of aggression into play’ (323). In other words, everything here seems to indicate that

Aristotle was very aware that aggression is to be seen as the natural basis of (much) social laughter, and this is quite probably the reason why he put so much emphasis on eutrapelia in order to control that aggressiveness. In other words, everything seems to indicate that Aristotle did have a pretty comprehensive and—certainly in his own eyes—universal theory of laughter.

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