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# Superiority in Humor Theory

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SHEILA LINTOTT

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## Superiority in Humor Theory

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I consider the standard interpretation of the superiority theory of humor attributed to Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, according to which the theory allegedly places feelings of superiority at the center of humor and comic amusement. The view that feelings of superiority are at the heart of all comic amusement is wildly implausible. Therefore textual evidence for the interpretation of Plato, Aristotle, or Hobbes as offering the superiority theory as an essentialist theory of humor is worth careful consideration. Through textual analysis I argue that not one of these three philosophers defends an essentialist theory of comic amusement. I also discuss the way various theories of humor relate to one another and the proper place of a superiority theory in humor theory in light of my analysis.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

There are, it is said, three traditional theories of humor: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory. However, as some have pointed out, the theories are not true rivals because they are not theories of the same thing (Zamir 2014; Shaw 2010; Smuts 2006; Levinson 1998). As Jerrold Levinson observes, superiority and relief theories “seem more concerned with the concomitants or mechanisms of the humorous reaction than with its conceptual core. Thus, these competitors of incongruity theory are currently seen as even less able to provide an adequate answer to the basic question” (Levinson 1998, 564). The incongruity theory purports to define the formal object of comic amusement, which it locates in certain kinds of incongruity. The superiority theory is concerned with the affective response that often accompanies comic amusement, which it maintains is an enjoyable feeling of superiority to the object of amusement. Finally, the relief theory focuses on the expression of comic amusement in laughter, which it considers a welcome release of pent up tension and energy. We might say that the incongruity theory focuses on the cognitive aspects, superiority the emotive, and relief the physical of comic amusement. So, just as my

heart quickens (physical) and I am fearful (emotive) when I judge (cognitive) a car is about to hit me, it is likely that the experience of comic amusement often includes some or all of these aspects. Perhaps a disjunctive account, according to which humor aims to satisfy one or more human interest, as Tzachi Zamir (2014) suggests, offers the most comprehensive way of capturing the nature and value of comic amusement.

Some presentations of the superiority theory are more measured than others. David Monro says, “According to any superiority theory of humor, the laughter always looks down on whatever he laughs at, and so judges it inferior by some standard” (1988, 349). Others give the theory a more limited and more reasonable scope. For example, Eva Dadlez states: “Superiority theories ally humor principally with ridicule and the enjoyment of one’s own superiority in pinpointing the foibles or weaknesses of another” (2011, 2). In her discussion of offensive humor, Jeannette Bicknell explains: “There is an element of malice in much humor. (That slipping on a banana peel is funny does not make the fall any less painful, after all.) A good deal of our laughter in comedy is directed at misfortune, presented in such a way as to elicit amusement rather than outrage, tears or compassion” (2007, 458).

As these latter construals suggest, the superiority theory is not best understood as a stand-alone theory, but better as a way of describing *a sort of* comic amusement we may have to *a certain kind of* humor. Rather than defining humor per se, the superiority theory explains the nature and value of some humor, allows us to distinguish among the experiences of different kinds of humor, and articulates some issues and debates concerning the ethics and etiquette of some humor. But despite how obvious the proper role of the superiority theory is upon contemplation, the theory is often presented as a stand-alone, comprehensive theory of humor. A counterargument or multiple counterexamples then follow; set it up and knock it down. For the sake of clarity, in the following, I lay bare the myth of the superiority theory as an essentialist theory of humor by which I mean a stand-alone theory that aims to articulate the necessary and sufficient conditions of comic amusement at the humorous. Undoubtedly, some readers are already convinced an essentialist version of the superiority theory of humor is unacceptable and some are likely skeptical of claims that the likes of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes thought it acceptable. However, it may not be obvious to everyone that an essentialist or similarly strong version of a superiority theory of humor is implausible. Roger Scruton, for example, currently defends a version of a superiority theory of comic amusement as “attentive demolition” (1987, 169). Furthermore, given the frequency with which the theory is presented as essentialist and attributed to Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, it is worth considering the textual evidence for an essentialist interpretation of the superiority theory.

My plan for the remainder of this essay is as follows. In Section II, I survey some presentations of the superiority theory of humor as it is traditionally construed. I then argue, too easily as we shall see, that construed as such, the theory is wildly implausible. In Sections III, IV, and V, I consider the relevant texts of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, showing that each is misinterpreted when said to defend an essentialist version of the superiority theory. In the cases of Plato and Aristotle, I show definitively that neither held such a view; in the case of Hobbes, I raise serious skepticism about how to interpret his comments on laughter and comic amusement. Given the implausibility of the superiority theory as a theory of all and only humor,

in Section VI I discuss the contributions a non-essentialist version of it can make within humor theory.

## II. SUPERIORITY THEORY: THE STANDARD ACCOUNT

Typically, the superiority theory is cast as an attempt to account for all cases of humor. For example, Adrian Bardon says “The superiority theory is the theory that the humor we find in comedy and in life is based on ridicule, wherein we regard the object of amusement as inferior and/or ourselves as superior” (2005, 463). Although she admits that many so-called theories of humor are “actually descriptions of conditions under which humor may be experienced rather than attempts to explain humor,” Patricia Keith-Spiegel puts it like this: “According to the principle of superiority, mockery, ridicule, and laughter at the foolish actions of others are central to the humor experience” (1972, 5–6). In other words, the superiority theory maintains that ridicule and feelings of relative superiority are essential components of humor. This theory is standardly attributed to Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, and Hobbes’s thoughts on laughter are considered its paradigmatic articulation. John Morreall, the prolific philosopher of laughter and humor, construes the superiority theory in this same way: “The oldest, and probably still the most widespread theory of laughter is that laughter is an expression of a person’s feelings of superiority over other people. This theory goes back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle, and was given its classic statement in Hobbes” (1982, 243–244). Morreall admits that the superiority theory can account also for self-deprecating humor, as when he characterizes the superiority theory as a theory of laughter: “psychological theory articulating the view of laughter that started in Plato and the Bible and dominated Western thinking about laughter for two millennia. . . . Simply put, our laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves” (2013).

But, understood this way, is the theory even remotely plausible? Is it plausible to believe that all laughter is derisive? In the introductory philosophy course I teach on the philosophy of laughter, it takes students about ten seconds to amass numerous counterexamples to the superiority theory, such as laughing at a pun, laughing with joy at another’s accomplishment, laughing at an

innocent joke, laughing with a person who makes a witty remark, laughing at an incongruity, laughing in surprise, and laughing out of nervousness. Some of these counterexamples might miss their mark if the superiority theory is meant to capture only cases of humorous laughter, but this is surely a mistaken concession. In any case, most of the alleged counterexamples, such as laughing with a witty person or at an innocent joke, are clearly legitimate counterexamples to the superiority theory as a comprehensive theory of humorous laughter. The theory then cannot account for the distinction we make every day between *laughing at* and *laughing with* others. As an essentialist theory of humor, the superiority theory fails terribly.

It is strange, then, that thinkers as astute students of human nature and human life such as Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes apparently held such an obviously flawed and extreme theory. However, it is not the theory that is at fault; rather, it is the commentators who have offered hasty and overly simplistic caricatures instead of charitable and careful interpretations of the works concerned. As Aaron Smuts points out, “Neither Plato nor Aristotle makes clear pronouncements about the essence of humor, though their comments are preoccupied with the role of feelings of superiority in our finding something funny” (Smuts 2006). I agree with Smuts that neither Plato nor Aristotle, and I will add Hobbes, espoused superiority theory as an essentialist comprehensive theory of humorous laughter.

In the next three sections, I show that not one of the three can be said to hold or defend a superiority theory of laughter if such a theory is taken to claim that superiority is either necessary *or* sufficient for laughter, let alone if it is taken to claim that superiority is both necessary and sufficient for laughter. The textual evidence, when considered in context, shows that *at most* each can be said to hold *only that* superiority explains some humor. Reading anything stronger into their theories is an error. I proceed here chronologically, beginning with a consideration of Plato’s, then Aristotle’s, and finally Hobbes’s thoughts on humor. Hobbes, as we will see, is the most difficult case for my thesis, which is that the superiority theory is not best understood as a theory of humor but rather as a tool for understanding one particular kind of humor and its social, ethical, and aesthetic implications.

### III. PLATO ON HUMOR AND LAUGHTER

Plato discusses humor and laughter in several places, most extensively in a short section of the *Philebus*, but also in the *Republic*, and he mentions laughter in passing in a several works including the *Symposium* and *Lysis*. In addition, in the *Euthydemus*, Plato notably employs much humor. Plato’s theory of humor is taken primarily from his *Philebus*, as the linguist Salvatore Attardo states:

The passages that concern humor (48c/50a) are taken from a review of various emotions like anger, pity, etc. Plato puts humor in the field of the “ridiculous.” Whoever does not follow the Delphic Oracle’s admonition “Know thyself,” or in other words, lacks self-knowledge, is defined as ridiculous. Without doubt, the ridiculous is seen by Plato as belonging to the category of *πονηρία* (perversion, evil). (1994, 19)

Plato’s *Philebus* is a difficult dialogue about the nature of pleasure and whether the best life is one of intellectualism or hedonism. In it, Plato uses the pleasure of laughter, specifically laughter at the ridiculous, to illustrate how some pleasures are tainted with pain. Laughter at the ridiculous, he claims, is tainted with the pain associated with the disharmony malice wreaks on the soul. When we laugh at a ridiculous character portrayed in comedy, Plato contends, we are laughing at that person’s self-ignorance. Self-ignorance, for Plato, is an evil; it is a serious vice, as Socrates tells Protarchus. Obviously, given the importance he affords self-knowledge, Plato does not take this matter lightly.

Although in the *Philebus* the focus of the discussion is initially on comedy, the scope of Plato’s concern expands to encompass laughter at friends, and so Socrates concludes:

Our argument leads to the conclusion that if we laugh at what is ridiculous about our friends, by mixing pleasure with malice, we thereby mix pleasure with pain. For we had agreed earlier that malice is a pain in the soul, that laughing is a pleasure, and that both occur together on those occasions. (1993, 50e13–16)

This passage is often referred to in discussion of Plato’s theory of humor and laughter. In *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Morreall sums up Plato’s ideas:

What we laugh at, in Plato's view, is vice, particularly self-ignorance, in people who are relatively powerless. Our amusement is a kind of malice toward such people, he thought, and this should make us wary of amusement, but so should the fact that amusement is an emotion in which we tend to lose rational control of ourselves. (1987, 10)

Noël Carroll claims "for Plato, amusement contains an element of malice" (2014, 6; see also 2003). Simon Critchley tells how Plato's view that enjoying humor entails viciousness led him to forbid laughter "to the virtuous guardians of Plato's imagined philosophical city" and "dominates the philosophical tradition until the eighteenth century" (2002, 3). Bardon says:

[Plato] explains that the object of laughter in comedy is the "ridiculous." The ridiculous, more specifically, is the self-ignorance of others when they falsely believe that they possess wisdom. In other words, laughter results from a feeling of pleasure at seeing others suffer the misfortune of being deluded about their own wisdom. Socrates argues, however, that the soul experiences both "pleasure and pain" when amused by the ridiculous portrayed in comedy: one can feel pleasure and laugh when presented by such fools in comedy, but to feel pleasure at others' misfortunes is to feel malice, which he considers a "pain of the soul." The laughter and pleasure, then, that we experience when enjoying comedy is mixed with malice and pain. (2005, 463)

Despite the commonness of this interpretation, interpreting Plato as equating laughter with malice is a mistake. First of all, Plato cannot believe superiority is sufficient for laughter because he contrasts the ridiculous and the odious or hateful on the grounds that while both are judged flawed for their self-ignorance, the ridiculous is relatively weak, and the hateful is relatively strong.

For ignorance on the side of the strong and powerful is odious and ugly; it is hurtful even for their neighbors, both the ignorance itself and its imitations, whatever they may be. Ignorance on the side of the weak, by contrast, deserves to be placed among the ridiculous in rank and nature. (1993 49c)

Thus, our hatred of self-ignorant yet powerful people involves a feeling of superiority due to their self-ignorance, but, due to their strength and perhaps their related capacity to harm through

ignorance or retaliate against mockery, it does not provoke laughter. Moreover, although perhaps not consistent with all of his philosophical views, and perhaps in a case of Socratic irony, Plato appears to reserve malicious laughter for our friends when he denies "any injustice or malice" when we "rejoice about evils that happen to your friends" (1993 49d).

But does Plato even think superiority is necessary for laughter? He never directly says that we laugh *only* at the ridiculous, although he does admit that we sometimes do. Admittedly, the Greek work for 'ridiculous' is understood in terms of something being laughable, so all ridiculous things are laughable, but are all laughable things ridiculous? In his analysis, Mitchell Miller suggests that Plato's discussion of laughter in the *Philebus* does not amount to a wholesale moral condemnation of laughter:

Should we be disturbed that Socrates identifies *ψθόρος* [the feeling of malice] at the heart of this pleasure? If we focus on his purpose in surveying various pleasures, not at all. He is at work collecting all the kinds of pleasure in preparation for the later task of selecting some of them as ingredients in the good life. He is doing a non-judgmental phenomenology, and it is appropriate that he acknowledge pleasure wherever he finds it; the moral-critical work of separating the ethically good pleasures from the ethically bad ones will come later. (2008, 268)

All that can be inferred from the *Philebus* argument regarding laughter is that laughing at the ridiculous is malicious and is thus explicable in terms of superiority. This leaves open the possibility that sometimes we laugh without maliciousness or feelings of superiority.

Moreover, Plato does appear to think that some laughter, laughter at enemies, may not be malicious:

Socrates: Now, if you rejoice about evils that happen to your enemy, is there any injustice or malice in your pleasure?

Protarchus: How should there be?

Socrates: But is there any occasion when it is not unjust to be pleased rather than pained to see bad things happen to your friends?

Protarchus: Clearly not.

Socrates: But we just agreed that ignorance is bad for everyone?

Protarchus: Right. (1993 49d)

When we laugh at our enemies' ignorance, then, it is not malicious. The pleasure of such laughter it seems is mixed with pain according to Plato, seemingly because it is appropriate, rather than malicious, to enjoy bad things happening to one's enemies. Although the Socrates of the *Philebus* generally seems "devoid of any touch of Socratic irony," this may be a bit of Socratic irony that goes undeveloped (Jowett 1871, 130). However, even if so, it, in fact, is an instance of nonmalicious humor.

Is there room in Plato's theory for nonmalicious or nonridiculing laughter? Nothing he says in the *Philebus* rules out this possibility, but is there textual evidence for it here or elsewhere? Is there evidence, for example, that Plato is aware of the difference between *laughing with* and *laughing at*. The superiority theory is usually interpreted as leaving no room for *laughing with*. It reduces all laughter, including apparent instances of laughing with, to *laughing at*.

Plato is aware of the distinction between *laughing at* and *laughing with* as is evidenced in Aristophanes's post-hiccupping speech in the *Symposium*.

You are quite right, said Aristophanes, laughing. I will unsay my words; but do you please not to watch me, as I fear that in the speech which I am about to make, instead of *others laughing with me*, which is to the manner born of our muse and would be all the better, I shall only be *laughed at* by them. (1892c, 189b, my emphasis)

The distinction drawn is between *γέλοιοσ*, which means mirth provoking or amusing, and *καταγέλαστος*, meaning ridiculous or inviting ridicule.<sup>1</sup>

We also see the notion of the amusing in the beginning of Book V of the *Republic*. Socrates admits to Glaucon that he sometimes enjoys what he calls "innocent laughter":

That, I replied, is a sorry consolation; I shall destroy my friends as well as myself. *Not that I mind a little innocent laughter*; but he who kills the truth is a murderer. (1892b, V, 451a, emphasis added)

Finally, in the *Lysis*, Plato depicts the friends laughing together, not *at* each other, but *with* each other:

That is a matter of dispute between us, he said. And which is the nobler? Is that also a matter of dispute?

Yes, certainly.

And another disputed point is, which is the fairer? The two boys laughed. (1892a, 207c2–6)

Obviously, Plato is aware that not all humor involves the ridiculous and not all laughter at the humorous is malicious.

Just as Plato's inquiry into poetry leads him to conclude that the vast majority of poetry should be banned from the ideal city-state, likewise his considerations of laughter take aim at a problematic kind of laughter: ridicule. In the *Philebus*, Plato discusses laughing in ridicule as a case of mixed pleasure, which does not entail that all laughing is ridiculing. Stephen Halliwell makes the case that Plato's conceptions of humor and comic amusement are complex and cannot be properly understood from the *Philebus* alone: "For example, the connection between laughter and *phthonos* in the *Philebus* does not recur in any other Platonic text. . . . There is no contradiction here but a concentration on different aspects of comedy/laughter in different contexts" (Halliwell 2008, 301). Regarding art, Plato's attention, we are well aware, is frequently drawn to the most ethically and epistemologically suspect. When he discusses laughter and comedy, he sometimes focuses on the ways comedy and laughter can provide guilty pleasures or distance us from one another. Yet, it is a mistake to conclude that he saw all laughter this way.

#### IV. ARISTOTLE ON HUMOR AND LAUGHTER

Defending Aristotle from the claim that his theory of laughter insists superiority is necessary or sufficient for laughter is a relatively easy task. Aristotle discusses laughter in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Rhetoric*, and in his *Poetics*.

Most commentators, from Francis Hutcheson to John Morreall, mention in passing that Aristotle's discussions of laughter include elements of incongruity. For instance, in the *Rhetoric*, he discusses the pleasure of apprehending incongruity and the skill at presenting it in a humorous manner:

And the greatest number of elegant effects are the result of metaphor combined with misdirection. For it becomes more evident in what respect one learns something when it goes against a disposition toward the opposite, and the soul seems to say "How true, and yet I missed it." In the

case of quips, the elegant ones result from not meaning what one is saying. . . . And well-made riddles are pleasing for the same reason, for learning and metaphor are involved, and what Theodorus calls speaking in innovative ways. This happens when something is paradoxical and not, as he puts it, “by our prior” opinion, but like the turns of phrase in things that make us laugh (which jokes are capable of doing even by a turn in a letter, since it surprises us) and in poetic verses. (2009, 1412a19–30)

Morreall suggests that Aristotle does not fully pursue the question of how incongruity factors into laughter because by the time it occurred to him in the *Rhetoric*, he already committed himself to a superiority theory in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Poetics*: “The incongruity theory was first hinted at by Aristotle; though because it did not fit neatly in with the superiority theory of his *Poetics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, he never developed it” (Morreall 1983, 16).

The *Poetics* may give us the most insight into Aristotle’s theory of humor. The text as we have it is more informative about tragedy and epic poetry than it is about comedy. Whether Aristotle never wrote a treatise on comedy or he did and it is lost to us, we can lament the fact that we do not have access to his full thoughts on the matter. What we do have access to in Book I of the *Poetics* does not support an essentialist interpretation of Aristotle’s discussion of superiority in comic amusement, although it also does not rule out such an interpretation.

But there is evidence that Aristotle was not offering a superiority theory as an essentialist theory of humor in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, given that in it he discusses the mean between the vicious extremes of laughter. In Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle does describe a form of laughter that distinctively involves ridicule and derision, that of the vulgar buffoon: “Now those who go to excess in making people laugh seem to be crude buffoons, greedily eager to do anything for a laugh, and aiming at causing laughter rather than at speaking gracefully without causing pain to the one who is made fun of” (2002, 1128a4–7).

Immediately prior to this remark, however, Aristotle also points out that not all laughter is of this sort and explicitly describes how the pleasure of laughter can be harmoniously enjoyed:

But since in life there is also relaxation, and in this there is a playful way of passing the time, here too there seems

to be a harmonious way of associating with people—sorts of things that one ought to say, and a way of saying them, and likewise a way of taking what is said. (2002, 1127b35–1128a3)

Aristotle reiterates the idea that not all laughter is derisive again when characterizing the charming or virtuous way to amuse: “Those who are playful in a harmonious way are called charming, as being readily flexible, for such acts seem to be motions that come from one’s character” (2002, 1128a9–11).

The tasteful person will amuse and be amused without bringing pain or disharmony. This person has scruples and knows when, and about what, not to joke: “Someone with a gracious and generous spirit will hold himself to such limits, being like a law to himself” (2002, 1128a33). If, therefore, Aristotle’s theory includes recognition of the role of incongruity in laughter and of the rhetorical skills needed to employ it harmoniously, then he cannot be said to hold that superiority is either necessary or sufficient for humorous laughter.

Finally, it is worth briefly considering the mysterious text called the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, usually associated with Aristotle, although in different ways by different scholars. Richard Janko (1987) argues it is notes on Aristotle’s (believed by most to be) lost writing on comedy. Lane Cooper maintains “the most natural explanation is that the *Poetics* once included an explicit inquiry into the sources of comic effect—something analogous to, or possibly in essentials identical with, the analysis of the sources of laughter in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*” (1922, 8).

Whether it is a work of Aristotle’s or in some way related to it, the *Tractatus* is clearly influenced by Aristotelean theory. So, it is not without interest that in it, three possible sorts of comic characters are listed: “The characters [ethe] of comedy are (1) the buffoonish, (2) the ironical, and (3) those of the imposters” (Cooper 1922, 226). To my mind, none of these sorts of characters *requires* a feeling of superiority to evoke comic amusement. The buffoonish is the most likely candidate for derision, yet are all buffoonish people thereby judged inferior? Consider, for example, Robert Solomon’s discussion of the *Three Stooges*, buffoonishness if ever there were any.

No one, to my knowledge, has advocated what we might call the *inferiority theory* of humor, laughter as the great

leveler, beyond contempt or indignation, antithetical to pretention and pomp. Sitting on the sofa watching *Malice in the Palace* for the twenty-seventh time, we allow ourselves to fall into a world of miniature mayhem in which we feel as foolish as they are. (Solomon 1992, 146)

We may or may not believe that all buffoonery can evoke comic amusement involving feelings of inferiority or self-censure. But we can, perhaps, admit with Solomon that comic characters, even when acting fools or confessing their faults, as many stand-up comedians make careers of, can make us feel likewise implicated or even inferior rather than superior.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the *Tractatus Coislinianus* does not isolate buffoonery as the whole of comedy. Characters who are ironical or imposters, perhaps exemplified today in the political humor of Jon Stewart in *The Daily Show* or Stephen Colbert in *The Colbert Report* and in comic impersonations such as Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* or Dave Chappelle's of Prince on *Chappelle's Show*, need not, although in some cases they may, make anyone feel superior to the performer or to the target(s) of the humor.<sup>3</sup>

#### V. HOBBS ON HUMOR AND LAUGHTER

Hobbes is the philosopher most wholly and confidently associated with the standard version of the superiority theory. And for good reason, given that most of what he says about laughter (and much else!) is pretty negative. Michael Billig explains, "Hobbes puts ridicule at the centre of humour and thereby questions the goodness of laughter. He is telling us to look behind the smiles and the jests. If we do so, then we will see something not too pleasant" (2005, 52).

Yet, to interpret Hobbes's remarks about laughter as articulating an essentialist superiority theory of humorous laughter is, in the first place, uncharitable. Although his thoughts on laughter are often said to amount to a theory of laughter, this interpretation is derived from his explicit contemplation on laughter limited to two brief reflections in the *Leviathan* and *Human Nature*, about 550 words in total (1839b, IX, 13; 1839a, VI). When Hobbes discusses laughter it is in the context of exploring and illustrating the passions in light of his overall picture of human beings as basically

competitive, self-interested creatures and his related views on the justified and necessary system of government.

The passage most frequently cited in the context of presenting Hobbes's so-called theory of laughter comes from *Human Nature* when he asserts that: "the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly" (1839b, IX, 13). With attention to the phrase "nothing else but," it seems reasonable to interpret this as a claim that laughter can be wholly identified with the feeling of superiority. In other words, and according to the most common interpretation of Hobbes on laughter, he holds a strong essentialist version of the superiority theory according to which feeling superior is always necessary *and* sufficient for laughter.

However, is Hobbes really committed to the view that superiority is necessary and sufficient for laughter? Francis Hutcheson, for one, reads Hobbes this way: "If Mr. Hobbes's notion be just, then, first, there can be no laughter on any occasion . . . where we do not observe some superiority to ourselves above some other thing; and again, it must follow, that every sudden appearance of superiority over another must excite laughter when we attend to it" (Hutcheson 1750, 7). There are times when it seems that Hobbes is presenting the sort of theory Hutcheson attributes to him, again, such as when he tells us that laughter is "*nothing else but* a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves" (1839b, IX, 13, emphasis altered). However, when considered in the context of everything Hobbes says about laughter, his statement that laughter is *nothing but* an expression of superiority stands out as hyperbole.

Maybe Hobbes does believe that literally *any* feeling of superiority is sufficient for laughter and comic amusement. After all, he denies wit is necessary for laughter when he asserts that laughter is often aroused in absence of wit: "laughter, which is always joy. . . . That it consisteth in *wit*, or, as they call it, in the *jest*, this experience confuteth; for men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lieth no wit or jest at all" (*Human Nature*, IX, 13). In other words, Hobbes denies wit or jest is always present in that which evokes our laughter and thereby maintains that feelings of superiority alone *can be* sufficient for laughter.



However, not only does he deny wit is enough, he also denies superiority alone will suffice, insisting that novelty is also needed. For example, when he elaborates on the joy that laughter is an expression of, he insists its cause *must be* surprising and incongruous: "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*" (1839b, IX, 13). "Must be new and unexpected"; in other words, superiority is not sufficient for laughter given that, in the absence of novelty and incongruity, superiority will not evoke laughter. Thus, Hobbes believes there is more to laughter than superiority and appears to hold a theory of laughter that places novelty and incongruity in a central position. Hence, just as it is wrong to conclude that incongruity, even novel incongruity, is always sufficient for laughter according to Hobbes, it is likewise wrong to conclude he maintains that superiority is always sufficient.

If not sufficient, perhaps Hobbes thinks superiority is necessary for laughter? Admittedly he does speak of derisive laughter, as when he mentions the disposition to laugh when another falls, "to see another fall, is disposition to *laugh*" (1839b, IX, 21) or the dishonor of mocking, "to revile, mock, or pity, is to dishonor" (1839a, X, 25). However, if Hobbes makes the distinction we find in Plato between *laughing at* and *laughing with*, we have reason to question whether he makes a claim to necessity as well. Hobbes does distinguish between cases of ridicule and something akin to shared amusement, as we see when he explains why men hate being laughed at and opens the possibility of laughing in an unridiculing manner, "where all the company may laugh together": "It is no wonder, therefore, that men take it heinously to be *laughed at* or derided, that is, triumphed over. *Laughter without offence*, must be at *absurdities* and infirmities *abstracted* from persons, and where all the company may laugh together" (1839b, IX, 13).

Noting cases of communal laughter where no one is derided, Hutcheson sought to object to Hobbes on the grounds that we often admire and sometimes seek to imitate people who amuse us. Hutcheson points out "laughter often arises without any imagined superiority of ourselves" and "laughter in those who may have the highest veneration . . . and also admire the wit of the person who makes the allusion" (Hutcheson 1750,

7–8). He then wonders, "what sudden sense of glory, or joy in our superiority, can arise from observing a quality in another, which we study to imitate, I cannot imagine" (8). Morreall follows Hutcheson in interpreting the claim of necessity into Hobbes's writing on laughter, arguing that "the proper way to criticize the Hobbesian theory, I think, is to show that not all cases of laughter involve feelings of superiority, and hence that the expression of "sudden glory" cannot be the essence of laughter" (Morreall 1982, 244).

However, insofar as Hobbes allows for non-derisive laughter being evoked by a clever mind via fancy or wit, the target of Hutcheson's admiration counterexample evaporates. We find evidence that Hobbes agrees with the admiration Hutcheson describes for some who are able to make us laugh when, in the *Leviathan*, he expresses his admiration for wit and its products: "All actions, and speeches, that proceed, or seem to proceed from much experience, science, discretion, or wit, are honorable" (1839a, X, 42). This suggests not only that Hobbes agrees with Hutcheson's case of admiring rather than feeling superior to an amusing performer or writer, it also shows that Hobbes does not think superiority is necessary for laughter. Consider further the admiration he expresses for wit in *The Elements of Law*:

That *quick ranging* of mind . . . which is joined with *curiosity* of comparing the things that come into the mind, one with another: in which comparison a man delighteth himself either with finding unexpected *similitude* of things otherwise much unlike (in which men place the excellency of *fancy*, and from whence proceed those grateful similes, metaphors, and other tropes, by which both *poets* and *orators*<sup>4</sup> have it in their power to make things please or displease, and show well or ill to others, as they like themselves), or else in discerning suddenly *dissimilitude* in things that otherwise appear the same. . . . For to judge is nothing else, but to distinguish or discern: and both *fancy* and *judgment* are commonly comprehended under the name of *wit*, which seemeth to be a tenuity and agility of spirits, contrary to that restiness of the spirits supposed in those that are dull. (1839b, X, 4)

Wit, for Hobbes, *may* be a virtue or ability of mind employed in detecting and expressing superiority, but there is no textual evidence to believe this is its only domain. It is more reasonable to read

Hobbes as referring to the noting of differences and making of comparisons generally; in other words, wit is skill and ability in detecting and expressing incongruities. Apprehending incongruity generally is at the heart of wit for Hobbes: wit is evidenced in “finding unexpected *similitude* of things, otherwise much unlike” and “discerning suddenly *dissimilitude* in things that otherwise appear the same.” If so, it is reasonable to question whether Hobbes really does advance a strict and essentialist theory of laughter or whether, for him, comic amusement may sometimes be the result of apprehending incongruity without any relative judgments of persons.

Finally, the logic of the oft-quoted passage on laughter in the *Leviathan* warrants scrutiny. Hobbes tells us: “*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” (1839a, VI). Hobbes’s claim that laughter is caused by superiority is usually taken to mean that superiority is necessary for laughter. But, of course, a causal claim like this one has several possible interpretations. “Superiority causes laughter” could mean that laughter is sufficient for superiority, as in “weight loss is caused by ingesting fewer calories or increased physical activity.” This claim may mean that these are the only ways to lose weight, but that would be an implausible causal claim; for example, severe illness in the absence of decreased caloric intake or increased physical activity can also be sufficient for weight loss. In other words, Hobbes’s oft-cited “definition” of laughter in the *Leviathan* might merely amount to the claim that one, but not the only, way to evoke laughter is through evoking feelings of superiority. If so, Hobbes is committed to the claim that superiority *can* cause laughter and the joy it is often an expression of, but *not* that it is always (or the only thing) involved in said joy.

Like Plato and Aristotle before him, Hobbes’s views on laughter are more nuanced than is often admitted, and this nuance is missed when the comments are considered independent of their context. Whereas Plato and Aristotle spoke of humor and laughter largely in terms of ethical considerations, Hobbes spoke of humor and laughter in terms of his views of human nature and the social and political arrangements best suited to it. In this

context, it is not surprising that Hobbes is most interested in laughter involving superiority and evidencing our competitive tendencies. However, as his comments on jest and wit make clear, it is a mistake to read Hobbes as insisting that laughter always or only involves the particular satisfaction felt in one’s perceived superiority.

#### VI. CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF SUPERIORITY IN HUMOR THEORY

Despite received wisdom, neither Plato nor Aristotle nor Hobbes can be said to be superiority theorists if by that we mean, as per Monroe, the view that “the pleasure we take in humor derives from our feeling of superiority over those we laugh at. According to this view, all humor is derisive” (1988, 350). This is not to say that these philosophers denied that feelings of superiority are sometimes, perhaps even often, involved in laughter. I have attempted to show that these philosophers did not hold a superiority theory of laughter, although they each did think of superiority laughter as an important and common species of laughter. Indeed, my analysis suggests that Plato and Aristotle were most concerned about, and Hobbes was most interested in, derisive laughter.

If we take the superiority theory as the view that superiority is necessary and sufficient, or even merely either necessary or sufficient, for laughter, it is an implausible theory, a straw-man that, instead of providing insight into the nature and value of humor and comic amusement, stands as an easy target for counterexamples. People often laugh without any feeling of superiority, and feelings of superiority often fail to evoke laughter. It does not take much reflection to realize this. It is strange then that *anyone* has ever espoused this theory as a comprehensive theory of the essence of laughter, let alone philosophers of the caliber of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes. Their thoughts on humor and laughter are presented in the context of other discussions, which means that interpreting their musings about humorous laughter calls for heightened adherence to the principle of charity. To my mind, this is not the approach that has been taken in interpreting these philosophers’ thoughts on the topic.

Given this, it is also difficult to understand why anyone ever accepted this interpretation of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes. When and why did the interpretation of the superiority theory as an

essentialist theory become received wisdom and why has this interpretation gone unquestioned for so long. Here I can merely speculate. Perhaps one factor is too heavy a reliance on secondary literature. For example, without blaming him, Smuts traces the “oversimplification” of seeing three main theories of humor as mutually exclusive to David Monro:

The standard analysis, developed by D. H. Monro, that classifies humor theories into superiority, incongruity, and relief theories sets up a false expectation of genuine competition between the views. Rarely do any of the historical theorists in any of these schools state their theories as listing necessary or sufficient conditions for something to count as humor, much less put their views in competition with others. (Smuts 2006)

Moreover, none of the philosophers traditionally credited with an essentialist superiority theory offered a full treatise on laughter or humor (and we do not have Aristotle’s if he did) and, in many cases, this is similarly true in today’s philosophy of humor. Often theorists come to the topic of humor with an interest that leads them to focus on issues and problems other than the nature of humor per se; therefore, the taxonomy of three main theories, each essentialist (which is also suspect), is the starting point for, rather than the object of, inquiry. For example, Ronald de Sousa (1990) discusses humor and laughter in the context of working out a theory of emotion; Merrie Bergmann (1986) in attempting to articulate the nature and harm of sexist humor; Dadlez (2011), Cynthia Willett (2008), and Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett (2014) in interrogating subversive humor; Luvell Anderson (2015) in theorizing racist humor; and Carroll (2014), Bicknell (2007), and David Benatar (2014) in investigating the ethics of humor. Like Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, many philosophers interested in humor theory today are focused on certain aspects of some kinds of humor less so than on the very nature of humor as such.

As Smuts says,

Rather than clearly offering a superiority theory of humor, Plato and Aristotle focus on this common comic feature, bringing it to our attention for ethical considerations. . . . However, if we evaluate the weaker version of the superiority theory—that humor is often fueled by feelings of superiority—then we have a fairly well

supported empirical claim, easily confirmable by first hand observation. (2006).

Given how easily confirmable this empirical claim is, it is worth asking whether we should continue to theorize in terms of “the superiority theory” at all. I believe that, although not as an essentialist theory, the superiority theory can still play an important role in humor theory. It is obviously, and perhaps trivially, true that superiority sometimes plays a key role in some cases of humor and comic amusement at it. However, it is worth thinking through different versions of the superiority theory, understood as a theory of *some, not all*, humor, whether it is Plato’s concern about how our laughter can express complicity with others’ (and our own!) self-ignorance, Aristotle’s view that laughter can serve as a social corrective, or Hobbes’s emphasis on the agonistic aspects laughter can involve. These different theories, understood correctly, can help us articulate the aesthetic successes and failures of and related ethical issues raised by some cases of humor. Not all humor involving superiority is funny, yet some very much is; and not all humor involving superiority is ethically problematic, yet some very much is. For example, there is rule among comedians that “punching up” is generally (always?) permissible whereas “punching down” is generally not (always?). Thinking of the superiority theory along with considerations of agents and targets of humor, context, power relations, and other dynamics and in conjunction with other theories of humor can help us better track the aesthetics and the ethics of humor.

Indeed, all of the traditional theories humor—superiority, relief, and incongruity—are somewhat accurate and very interesting in their own right; some comic amusement is enjoying a certain kind of perceived incongruity that gives one a feeling of superiority reducing psychic and/or bodily energy via expression in laughter. Such a conjoined account explains a great deal about a great deal of comic amusement. For example, it tells us what is so enjoyable about the cluelessness of the character Michael Scott, the regional manager of a small paper company, played by Steve Carell in the U.S. version of the NBC television series *The Office* (2005–2013). We find Scott’s behavior incongruous with our expectations of professional and even personal life, and we enjoy feeling that we are more self-aware than he appears to be, which results in an expression of laughter

releasing some of the stress and tension of our everyday lives. Admittedly, I would not maintain that every case of comic amusement would fit this conjoined characterization. For example, not all cases of comic amusement involve perceiving incongruity, as for example when I am comically amused when a well-known stand-up comedian such as Dave Chappelle responds to a heckler in a way that is “so him,” “so Chappelle.” Likewise, not all cases of comic amusement involve feeling superior, as when I revel in the wisdom and cutting insight the decidedly feminist stand-up comedian Janeane Garofalo shares in her comedy. And not all cases of comic amusement involve relief, either psychic or physical, as when I thoroughly enjoy the intelligent wit delivered by Grammy-nominated stand-up comedian Steven Wright in his characteristic deadpan, slow, and monotonous style, but am not moved to sudden bursts of laughter or anything of the sort by it. Each of the three mutually consistent theories of humor and comic amusement help us understand the nature and experience of different cases of comic amusement by illuminating their cognitive, affective, social, ethical, and psychological aspects.<sup>5</sup>

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1. This distinction is drawn in various translations. Joyce translates the passage in question as follows:

Aristophanes laughed. You are quite right. Eryximachus he said. I take it all back. But don't be too hard on me. Not that I mind if what I'm going to say is *funny*—all the better if it is; besides, a comic poet is supposed to be *amusing*. I'm only afraid of being *utterly absurd*. (1960, 189b, emphasis mine)

Fowler as follows:

At this Aristophanes laughed, and "Quite right, Eryximachus," he said; "I unsay all that I have said. Do

not keep a watch on me for as to what is going to be said, my fear is not so much of saying something *absurd*—since that would be all to the good and native to my Muse—as something *utterly ridiculous*." (1925 189b, emphasis mine)

The original Greek:

Καὶ τὸν Ἐρυξίμαχον, ὠγαθέ, φάναι, Ἀριστόφανες, ὄρα τί ποιεῖς. γελωτοποιεῖς μέλλον λέγειν, καὶ φύλακά με τοῦ

λόγου ἀναγκάζεις γίνεσθαι τοῦ σεαυτοῦ, ἔάν τι γελοῖον εἴπῃς, ἐξόν σοι ἐν εἰρήνῃ λέγειν.

Καὶ τὸν Ἀριστοφάνη γελάσαντα εἶπεῖν Ἐὐ λέγεις, ᾧ (Burnet 1903)

2. This is certainly the nature of the brilliance of Louis C.K., whose self-deprecating humor invites us to see ourselves in him and in his failures and foibles.

3. Perhaps this is in part why satirical news shows such as the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* are able to get so many public figures to appear on their programs, why 2008 U.S. vice-presidential hopeful Sarah Palin happily appeared on the sketch comedy program *Saturday Night Live* with Tina Fey whose impersonation of Palin is uncanny, and Prince, a musician praised for his seriousness, originality, and dedication to his art, featured comedian David Chappelle (as Prince) in the art for his recent single "Breakfast Can Wait."

4. Today's stand-up comedians, I believe, are often orators in this tradition.

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