

# APPRAISAL

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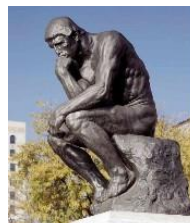
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## NOTES ON THIS ISSUE'S AUTHORS

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## EDITORIAL

This is a delayed and thin joint issue consisting of two full papers from our Zoom conference in June, by Giorgio Baruchello and Ársæll Már Arnarsson on humour with two responses to it, and Henrieta Serban's article on Emile Cioran, who cheerfully wrote books, first in Romanian and then in award-winning French, on despair. Then comes my Discussion item, the fundamental 'problem' of modern philosophy, that philosophers think that philosophy has 'problems', followed by my review of an important book, 'The Priority of the Person'.

In Vol. 13 next year we hope to have special features on Hispanic personalism which has its own and distinctive contributions to personalist thinking. If you can contribute to them, please do so, and please use our Blank Page and Style Guide to compose them. As Acting Editor, I have no help at all and in future shall have to return any submissions which do not meet our requirements. We also welcome suitable articles on our topics.

If our Forum and *Appraisal* are to survive and flourish, then we need help from our members, especially for members prepared to serve as Editor, or Assistant Editors or Chairman. Some of these responsibilities can be fulfilled from anywhere via the internet. Help with the website and finance would also be welcome, plus volunteers to publicise the Forum, *Appraisal* and conferences.

The World Conference on Personalism will be held in Mexico on August 1st to 5th in Mexico. For further details and the Call for Papers go to <https://www.personalismo.org/mexico2022/>, which is in Spanish. Further details will be circulated later.

Finally, please reply to my Discussion item and to anything else in this issue.

*R. T. Allen*

# GLORIA VICTIS IN *THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN*

*Henrieta Anisoara Serban*

*Why people who suffer don't get bored?*

*Emil Cioran*

## **Abstract**

This approach relates closely to paradox as a central philosophical method in Emil Cioran. The main argument unfolds from an exegesis of the phrase 'the invincible victims', analysed from various perspectives using a selection of aphorisms from Emil Cioran's *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, published by Gallimard in 1973 and translated into English as *The Trouble with Being Born*, a highly appreciated translation. The study emphasizes the subtle irony and the turmoil beneath a phrase that seems to capture faithfully the pain and the crusade of Emil Cioran (1911-1995) 'the invincible victims' in relation to another phrase, 'No deeper worth beneath anything'—a phrase that I have formulated to capture the gist and context of his philosophical discourse and which covers, in our view, a *Gloria victis* plea. In this study the core concept is 'existence'. Nevertheless, the investigation follows several major philosophical concepts such as 'truth', 'consciousness', 'time', 'existence', 'reality', in correlation with other concepts, such as 'meaninglessness', 'fear', 'religious belief', 'disappointment' and 'suffering'. One purpose is to emphasize in detail that lack of worth and the tragedy of existence are, in the light of *The Trouble with Being Born*, meaningful and, paradoxically, victorious. This seems only appropriate for a very impressive work, which would be great literature if it were not philosophy. Discovering the *Gloria victis!* plea, brings the reader closer to a deeper philosophical understanding of Emil Cioran, appreciating more a paradoxical and original metaphysical construction, in our view, 'house of horrors' dedicated to human existence, which sets in motion thought and emotion alike, describing philosophically and metaphorically the nature and scope of human victory.

## **Keywords**

Existence; 'invincible victims'; Emil Cioran

## **1. Introduction**

Emil Cioran (1911-1995) is a Romanian-born French language philosopher, Bergsonian at first, then Nietzschean, considered also a great stylist of French language. He authored about two dozen intriguing books. His writings are philosophical, aphoristic and playful—unsystematic and fragmentary. He is famous for introducing himself as '*un homme de fragment*' and 'the patron of the defeated'. The fragment, the detail, the exceptional, the secondary or the local are the stars of his ontology. He did not produce a philosophical system. His first book, written in Romanian, under the title *Pe culmile disperă*, in 1934 was later translated in English, *On the Heights of Despair*, in 1992, by Richard Howard, who was the translator in English of most of his works. This book was published when Emil Cioran was only 23 years old and suffering from a terrible crisis of insomnia. The typesetter, a traditional person and a God-fearing man, was shocked of the blasphemous contents and refused to touch it, so Cioran had to take it to be published elsewhere as *Dying for Ideas: The Dangerous Lives of Philosophers*. Folklore has it that in a conversation with the Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater, Cioran said at one point: 'If I didn't write, I could have become an assassin. 'Writing' is for this philosopher a matter of life and death. Human

existence, at its core, is endless anguish and despair, and writing can make things a bit more bearable. ‘A book’, said Cioran, ‘is a suicide postponed’.

Emil Cioran was not a philosopher interested in conceiving a philosophical system; he considered the system ‘the worst form of despotism (...), in philosophy and in everything’. However, there is a noticeable (strange) unity of his work, built around the idea that reality is downright ‘lunacy’ and that knowledge cannot elevate man from his petty and limited condition. This guiding idea is clearly present too in *The Trouble with Being Born*, his first work published in French, in 1987, under the title *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, by Gallimard. The quotation displayed on the back cover of the French edition emphasizes the main idea of this perplexing philosophical endeavour ‘*Aucune volupté ne surpasse celle qu'on éprouve à l'idée qu'on aurait pu se maintenir dans un état de pure possibilité. Liberté, bonheur, espace—ces termes définissent la condition antérieure à la malchance de naître.*’, which we can translate, as following: ‘No pleasure exceeds that which one feels at the idea that one could have maintained oneself in a state of pure possibility. Freedom, happiness, space—these terms define the condition prior to the bad luck of being born.’

Our approach comprises the paradox, the subtle irony and the turmoil beneath a paradoxical phrase that seems to capture faithfully the pain and the crusade of Emil Cioran’s ‘invincible victims’, associated with another phrase that I consider expressive, capturing the context and the gist of his philosophical discourse, ‘No deeper worth beneath anything’, the two phrases opening, in our view, a paradoxical *Gloria victis* plea. This phrase about the ultimate lack of worth is not a quote though, it is not taken from any of his works, but it serves as virtual and all-encompassing dictum that might very well stay next to the intriguing title phrasing, *The Trouble with Being Born*, above the entrance into an ‘Emil Cioran Library’, if there has ever been one.

As we have shown in a conference early this year, the preoccupation with the paradoxical exclamation *Gloria victis!* is consonant with the interest for the centrality of the paradoxical meaning, relevant in human culture and for human life: ‘*Gloria victis!*’ or, ‘Glory to the victim!’ is a very interesting puzzle, first and foremost due to the fact that, as far as we studied, this is among the very few Latin idioms without an associated context, without an explanatory narrative. For comparison, in the expression *ab ovo* we have both its meaning, from egg, that is, ‘from the beginning’, and the contextual explanatory narrative regarding the Roman feast starting with eggs and finishing with the fruits (apples). Therefore, in what concerns *Gloria victis!*, it is as if this is a universal truth; as if man captured through this expression a fragment of truth, a crumb of reality. This study represents one of the first results of a complex research dedicated to the centrality of meaning and paradox within the human ontological mode. These two main characteristics are also the keys to the understanding the nature and the complexity of the singularity of the human ontological mode. ‘

We discuss the ‘invincible victims’ and the paradoxical dimension of Emil Cioran’s philosophy considering the paradox a self-contradictory statement, with a more important role in literature and philosophy than simple wit, capturing the complexity of existence. The definitions of the paradox indicate as main characteristics, contradiction and self-contradiction, antinomy, a co-existence of contradictory logical elements in a statement. In culture, a central reference is found in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* where the witches describe the battle lost and won at the same time (‘When the battle’s lost and won’, says the second witch in the first scene of the play, 1. 1. 4). In other words, the effects of a victory may be far too costly and, eventually, ruinous. In logic, the contradiction underlines the complexity of knowledge, the clash between knowing and believing, the limits of human knowledge etc.. One may recall the famous paradox mentioned by G. E. Moore in a conference, ‘Outside it is raining but I do not think it’s raining’. Bertrand Russell’s paradox relates to set-theoretical paradoxes: considering in its entirety the set of all sets that are not members of themselves it (that all-encompassing set) appears to be and not to be a member of itself: this is a paradoxical situation. In political philosophy, for instance in Derrida, the notion of ‘unforgivable’ is crucial in founding new forms of forgiveness.

However, the purpose of this interpretation is to emphasize that lack of worth and the tragedy of existence are, in the light of *The trouble with being born*, on the contrary, meaningful and, paradoxically, victorious. In this study, each of the fragments chosen and presented in the selected

quotes bear witness to the fact that Emil Cioran confronts philosophical thought with a paradoxical ontology. This seems only appropriate for a very impressive work, which would be great literature if it were not philosophy: almost a philosophical system, but only if seen as a house of horrors dedicated to human existence, which sets in motion everything else.

At the very beginning of the book titled '*The trouble with being born*' we find out that existence is bound to the realm of worthlessness, to futile things, while reality is downright 'lunacy' and that knowledge cannot elevate man from his petty and limited condition: 'There is a kind of knowledge that strips whatever you do of weight and scope: for such knowledge, everything is without basis except itself. Pure to the point of abhorring even the notion of an object, it translates that extreme science, according to which doing or not doing something comes down to the same thing, and is accompanied by an equally extreme satisfaction: that of being able to rehearse, each time, the discovery that any gesture performed is not worth defending, that nothing is enhanced by the merest vestige of substance, that 'reality' falls within the province of lunacy. Such knowledge deserves to be called posthumous: it functions as if the knower were alive and not alive, a being and the memory of a being. 'It's already in the past,' he says about all he achieves, even as he achieves it, thereby forever destitute of the present. 'Unmaking, de-creating, is the only task man may take upon himself, if he aspires, as everything suggests, to distinguish himself from the Creator.'

We should capture and emphasize this terrible, glorious arrogance of the human being: the whole philosophical discourse unfolds from this perspective of man vindicating to 'distinguish himself from the Creator', not in the sense that man does not want to be a Creator, but he aims to be original (to be more than a modest resemblance of a Creator) and fails, his works being rather acts of unmaking, while his creative, astute and conscious relation to everything else is both lucid and disappointing.

Everything is profoundly thought and everything is profoundly felt, to the point that thought meets poetry. After all, artful expressions signal *Holzwege* towards startling thought. It is for us unsurprising that Emil Cioran wrote with unrestrained admiration about a poet such as St John Perse (Alexis Leger, St Leger, 1887-1975) developing the 'film' of the whirlwind of the plenitude of which Cioran himself was no stranger, whenever he described the metaphysical downfalls of existence. In turn, the poet famously called him 'the greatest French writer to honour our language since the death of Paul Valéry.'

## **2. *Glory? What glory?***

Existence is unbearable and one 'cannot live otherwise than dying'. This is the representative image for Emil Cioran works. This is truly a thinker embraced by myriad shades of pain ... any attempt to delineate the keywords of his works sends us into the vicinity of failure, disease, futility, agony, alienation, absurdity, illusion of change, decay as a main law of the tyranny of history, awareness as curse and cruelty of divinity, reason as plague and even boredom as a symptom of the meaninglessness of life. The human beings are the 'invincible victims' who have to constantly face these dire straits of meaninglessness, absurdity, decomposition etc. and overcome them moment by moment in a crucially trying ontological becoming.

As we cannot approach here the entirety of his works, then to describe in which ways existence is unbearable is to relate to the aphorisms gathered in *The Trouble with Being Born*. Which is this trouble? The cruelty of being cast into existence offers a quick and substantial answer. The Trouble with Being Born is the following: existing does not entail existence and existence is, in a few words, tragic, painful, futile, illusive, alienating, sickening, disappointing and meaningless. Obviously, these attributes only cover partially the perspective of Emil Cioran and we need to bring to the fore several various relevant aspects, selected 'illustrative moments' in the sickening, painfully excruciating human ontological becoming of these 'invincible victims', which are the human beings.

Emil Cioran emphasizes that everything is a game, which has its metaphysical relevance: 'Everything is a game: without such a revelation, the sensation we haul through our usual lives would not have that characteristic stamp our metaphysical experiences require to be distinguished from their imitations, our discomforts. For every discomfort is only an abortive metaphysical experience. 'It is clear that for Emil Cioran all human beings are defeated beforehand at this deceitful game of existence. There no 'winning

hands'... This is one reason why he writes: "Ever since I was born"—that since has a resonance so dreadful to my ears it becomes unendurable.' Birth is an indictment, one so terrible that whoever understands it will not catch much sleep. However, at a closer investigation we discover that a sort of *Gloria victis!* vibe lies beneath all tragedy and existence, luring man back in, despite lucidity, reason, thought, with despised emotion and hope.

*The Trouble with Being Born* stays in the fact that existence is a tragic and beautiful (the same way death is so beautiful for the Romantic thinker) pirouette into the paradox. It relays on a deeper understanding of the self—conflictual impression left by lucidity into human life. Human *existence* unfolds between the various, inconsequential, human developments landing either in meaningless vanity or in failure. As in a deep meaningless and serene sleep and, at the other extreme of existence, as in the perfect existential nightmare, human life has the co-ordinates of a self-deceiving highly mediated meaning and lucid tragedy, that is, we move between tragedy and more tragedy.

Only that tragedy, along with the accompanying suffering, is always interesting and glorious. In this interpretational perspective, we identify and emphasize here probably the clearest set of thoughts describing what the mysterious Latin phrase *Gloria victis* means, understood in a philosophical perspective. Emil Cioran explains it: 'Since we remember clearly only our ordeals, it is ultimately the sick, the persecuted, the victims in every realm who will have lived to the best advantage.' The others—the lucky ones— have a life, of course, but not the memory of a life. Even more, the philosopher talks about 'invincible victims', a very surprising phrase not because it is oxymoronic and paradoxical, which it is, but because it is not consistent with the bleak tone of his aphorisms in *The Trouble with Being Born* (and in his work, as a whole, since *The Trouble with Being Born* could be considered as a metonymy for Emil Cioran's work).

At the same time, one may notice that it offers a solution to the whole trouble of existence, which is even more surprising: 'The only way of enduring one disaster after the next is to love the very idea of disaster: if we succeed, there are no further surprises, we are superior to whatever occurs, we are invincible victims.' Thinkers! Such opportunists of 'collapses' and 'miracles': 'A poor wretch who feels time, who is its victim, its martyr, who experiences nothing else, who is time at each moment, knows what a metaphysician or a poet divines only by grace of a collapse or a miracle. 'There is glory in living; against the ripples of disasters, suffering, sickness, decomposition, absurdity or meaninglessness'.

### **3. *Everything exists; nothing exists***

One of the aphorisms included by Emil Cioran in *The Trouble with Being Born* underlines the reversibility of meaning in relation to existence. Human beings have to overcome the illusory dimension of their existence: '*Everything exists; nothing exists*'. Either formula affords alike serenity. The man of anxiety, to his misfortune, remains between them, trembling and perplexed, forever at the mercy of a nuance, incapable of gaining a foothold in the security of being or in the absence of being.'

The philosophical discourse is criss-crossed by time related despair; here is a troubled relationship with time, a present but despised anxiety for security, the past always taking hold of the present and the future conspiring to make everything as futile as it is uncertain.

As following, we may delineate the main dimensions of existence, according to Emil Cioran and thus we identify more illustrative moments for the facets of meaningful –meaninglessness of being and its associated 'Gloria victis' perspective.

Man is an arrogantly inquiring being and when he is lucid, he is bound to suffer. From these aspects unfold all the other characteristics of human existence. We identify a recurrent preoccupation with truth, a rather destructive ingredient, though: 'We can endure any truth however destructive, provided it replaces everything, provided it affords as much vitality as the hope for which it substitutes.' The status of knowledge and science are obviously related to this vision of truth: 'Nescience is the basis of everything, it creates everything by an action repeated every moment, it produces this and any world, since it continually takes for real what in fact *is not*. Nescience is the tremendous mistake that serves as the basis of all our truths; it is older and more powerful than all the gods combined. 'Thus, we should also emphasize 'corruption': 'Every phenomenon is a corrupt version of another, larger phenomenon:



time, a disease of eternity; history, a disease of time; life, again, a disease of matter. Then what is normal, what is healthy? Eternity? Which itself is only an infirmity of God.'

The consequence is disappointment, provided that truth itself has this gift. 'As a general rule, men expect disappointment: they know they must not be impatient, that it will come sooner or later, that it will hold off long enough for them to proceed with their undertakings of the moment. The disabused man is different: for him, disappointment occurs at the same time as the deed; he has no need to await it, it is present. By freeing himself from succession, he has devoured the possible and rendered the future superfluous. (...) Illumination, that lightning disappointment, affords a certitude which transforms disillusion into deliverance. 'And also: 'My faculty for disappointment surpasses understanding'.

Besides, 'occurrence', as modest as it seems conceptually in comparison to 'truth', reveals a limitation, illustrates determination, partiality and, thus, on the one hand a theft, in terms of freedom, and a deceit, in terms of the illusive idea that existence implies manifestation linked somehow to worth. Occurrence is merely a stopping point, a sort of marsh, a purposeless prison. Existence harvests its tragic quality from the disconnection from origins and purposefulness alike; so that existence leaves man suspended, alone with oneself. Since being born is to occur amidst the world, man is destined to the whole symphony of the already mentioned litany of attributes and derivatives of tragedy: anxiety, disappointment, failure, 'ne-science', discontent, suffering, alienation etc.

Then there is torment. 'Existence = Torment. The equation seems obvious to me, but not to one of my friends. How to convince him? I cannot lend him my sensations; yet only they would have the power to persuade him, to give him that additional dose of ill—being he has so insistently asked for all this time.'

Finally, there are conscience and a consciousness, troubled, alive, recreated and renewed, which are truly sizing existence: 'Fear creates consciousness: not natural fear but morbid fear. Otherwise, animals would have achieved a level of consciousness higher than ours', and, 'We are not afraid to accept the notion of an uninterrupted sleep; on the other hand, an eternal awakening (immortality, if it were conceivable, would be just that) plunges us into dread. Unconsciousness is a country, a fatherland; consciousness, an exile. As a consequence: 'We dread the future only when we are not sure we can kill ourselves when we want to.'

#### **4. A few unexpected aspects of confluence**

We came across a few interesting, yet unexpected confluences of the ideas present in the aphorisms from *The Trouble with Being Born* with certain aphorisms in Lucian Blaga, the first of those, regarding logic:

Logic suffers from a great vice of logic: it believes reality itself to be logical. If it comes up against something that cannot be understood logically, it will maintain that such something does not exist, that it is mere appearance.<sup>1</sup>

In our view, even the tone, not only the meaning and sense of the phrase, are very similar to what Emil Cioran has to say about logic. For instance, when Emil Cioran says, 'Getting up in the middle of the night, I walked around my room with the certainty of being chosen and criminal, a double privilege natural to the sleepless, revolting or incomprehensible for the captives of daytime logic', he captures this volatile quality of logic, about which Lucian Blaga is meditating as well, in other terms. The same goes for the following aphorism:

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Lucian Blaga, 1895-1961 is Romania's leading philosopher and second most important poet. This aphorism is in the collection *Stones from My Temple*, 1919. The following one is in *The Élan of the Island*. Both can be found in *Lucian Blaga: Selected Philosophical Extracts*, eds. Angela Botez, R.T. Allen and Henrieta Anisoara Serban, pp. 143 and 147 respectively.

Destruction and explosion of syntax, *victory of ambiguity and approximation* [our emphasis]. All very well. But just try to draw up a will, and you'll see if the defunct rigor was so contemptible. An aphorism? Fire without flames. Understandable that no one tries to warm himself at it.

Indeed, we have here a contradiction: the victory of approximation is nearing the idea about the necessity of rigor and the self-irony about the futility of aphorisms. All these have the quality to sum up indicating the relativity of reason, knowledge and logic itself, while precisely this relativity, irony and self-irony trigger a fertility of thought.

However, in another aphorism, when Emil Cioran talks about the meaninglessness of the term *being*, he talks more or less along the same significant lines, for the relativity of logic represents the foundation for the relativity of meaning, or lack of meaning altogether: 'Whether it is spoken by a grocer or a philosopher, the word being, apparently so rich, so tempting, so charged with significance, in fact means nothing at all; incredible that a man in his right mind can use it on any occasion whatever.'

Another fascinating similarity appears in an aphorism dedicated to truth: 'That truth may also have disastrous influence upon us does not disprove its ideal value, it only proves our weakness: we are like the sick one who cannot stand the fresh, brisk air of the mountains.'

Emil Cioran proved a persistent preoccupation with authenticity of existence, and involvement with one's own existence, too, at occasions explicit, other times, implicit, to be found in Lucian Blaga's aphorisms, too. For illustration, we mention the following:

Truth abides in the individual drama. If I suffer authentically, I suffer much more than an individual, I transcend the sphere of my selfhood, I rejoin the essence of others. The only way to proceed toward the universal is to concern ourselves exclusively with what concerns ourselves.

Lucian Blaga expressed his similar view in the following aphorism:

Those who in order to live need a theory of living, those who in order to be enthused need a theory of enthusiasm, those who in order to become passionate need a theory of passion, those who in order to exist need a theory of existence— ought to leave living, enthusiasm, passion, existence in the hands of the others.

In our interpretation, if Lucian Blaga was ever to comment on the topic of the human being and existence in Emil Cioran (or, specifically on the troubled relation with existence entertained by the philosopher), would have said: 'So many trees, which ruthless winds cannot break, do break under the load of their own fruit.' And, if Cioran were to relate to Blaga he might have mentioned:

Once we step into a cemetery, a feeling of utter mockery does away with any metaphysical concern. Those who look for 'mystery' everywhere do not necessarily get to the bottom of things. Most often 'mystery,' like 'the absolute,' corresponds only to a mannerism of the mind. It is a word we should use only when we cannot do otherwise, in really desperate cases. *The Trouble with Being Born*).

Returning to *The Trouble with Being Born*, we may consider the following aphorism as an indication for what Emil Cioran himself, found in a self-reflective mood, might have said of his work:

We get a better hold of ourselves and of being when we have reacted against negating, dissolving books— against their noxious power. Fortifying books, actually, since they provoke the very energy which denies them. The more poison they contain, the more

salutary their effect, provided we read them against the grain, as we should read any book, starting with the catechism.

### **5. *God Is Nowhere; God Is Everywhere***

*Gloria victis* turned more obvious in the struggle of the philosopher with faith, religion and God, within an impossibly difficult relation with Divinity, in the discontent full of resentment with the destructive sense and the lack of meaning assigned for creation. The 'invincible victim' is vocal and strong, not at all perplexed or really defeated by the existential puzzle. The victim rises to fight meaninglessness times and again, often attacking God, 'the unbearable paradise', the fellow believer ('What right have you to pray for me?'), albeit hopeless and quasi-disarmed by the limits of reason, human illusions, human appetite for deceit, 'nescience', futility, meaninglessness etc.

Evoking here several aphorisms is enough to capture the principal traits of Emil Cioran's religious turmoil. First, we need to highlight the vicinity of the religious turmoil (integral part of the existential turmoil) with suffering, since suffering is an exceptional promoter of understanding:

Suffering opens our eyes, helps us to see what we would not have seen otherwise. Hence it is useful only to knowledge and, except for that, serves only to poison existence. Which, one may add in passing, favours knowledge further. 'He has suffered, hence he has understood.' This is all we can say of a victim of disease, injustice, or of any kind of misfortune. Suffering improves no one (except those who were already good), it is forgotten as all things are forgotten, it does not enter into 'humanity's patrimony' nor preserve itself in any way at all: it wastes itself as everything is wasted. Once again, it serves only to open our eyes. *After certain experiences* [our emphasis], we should change names, since we ourselves are no longer the same.

Suffering is a wide path to 'certain experiences' which trigger philosophical thought. Thus, 'In classical India, the sage and the saint were combined in one and the same person. To have any notion of such a success, we must imagine, if we can, a fusion between resignation and ecstasy, between a cold stoic and a dishevelled mystic.' And when he talks about 'certain experiences' the only considerable ones are personal; he stands alone in his quest for God and a prefiguration or clarification of faith and he is unimpressed by the example of others:

Even if I were to lose my reason, I could never bring myself to that 'uninterrupted prayer' advocated by the Hesychasts. All I understand about piety is its excesses, its suspect outrages, and askesis would not interest me a moment if one did not encounter there all those things which are the lot of the bad monk: indolence, gluttony, the thirst for desolation, greed, and aversion for the world, vacillation between tragedy and the equivocal, hope of an inner collapse...

Emil Cioran rejects convenience in religious matters: 'Appealing, that Hindu notion of entrusting our salvation to someone else, to a chosen 'saint', and permitting him to pray in our place, to do anything in order to save us. Selling our soul to God...'

The paradox is central to this lane of religious existential investigation, as well; in the following aphorism Cioran indicates the impure path toward purity: 'He who is inclined to lust is merciful and tender-hearted; those who are inclined to purity are not so' (Saint John Climacus). It took a saint, neither more nor less, to denounce so distinctly and so vigorously not the lies but the very essence of Christian morality, and indeed of all morality.

Emil Cioran's anti-dogmatism entertains an endless quarrel with God. As we have previously mentioned, in another paragraph 'eternity is an infirmity of God', he thinks that 'the jealousy of the gods survives their disappearance', that '[w]e long since ceased to believe in the gods, and we no longer offer them sacrifices. Yet the world is still here and stands up to God and 'well-behaved' faith in all occasions, he does not approve of anything, not even the kindness of Jesus Christ, mostly in thoughts such as,

The ancient gods ridiculed men, envied them, hunted them down on occasion, harried them. The God of the Gospels was less mocking and less jealous, and mortal men did not even enjoy, in their miseries, the consolation of being able to accuse Him. Which accounts for the absence or the impossibility of a Christian Aeschylus. A good God has killed tragedy.

In a distinct investigation of Emil Cioran's 'anti-theology', Marius Dobre provided a comprehensive interpretation of textual resources found in Cioran's work and of the influences received by Emil Cioran, for instance, from the sceptic philosopher Pyrrhon, in terms of anti-dogmatism, criticism, negativistic attitude and discontent with most facets of religious certitude. Another important influence is considered his professor at the University of Bucharest, Nae Ionescu, although he understood the religious act was a generally human one. The influence of Gnostics (most of all Marcion, emphasized Marius Dobre) is also mentioned and it appears explicitly in the aphorisms in *The Trouble with Being Born*. Their solution to the problem of evil is especially appealing to Cioran: there is 'a primordial Demiurge who failed the act of creation, alongside the idea of a supreme God, entirely good, willing to repair as much as possible the work of his predecessor'. The researcher discusses the similarities and differences between Cioran's anti-theology and Nietzsche's anti-theology, mentioning that Cioran himself had reservation for this comparison. Indeed, we also consider that in Cioran's case the relation to Christianity is much more complex and not simply a 'religion of the weak, of slaves, with a moral built in the detriment of real people, of supermen'. At the same time, we want to emphasize along with Marius Dobre that,

The two must be placed next to each other at least for the fact that they present their ideas in the same essayistic-literary manner. But, the Nietzschean vision of the religious phenomenon, at least that from the Antichrist, constitutes, from my point of view, another case of anti-theology.

This brings us to the next interesting observation concerning the complexities of the relation entertained by Emil Cioran with (Christian) religion and faith. Having emphasized the 'anti - theology' present in Emil Cioran's work, any interpreter is going to be puzzled by the prayer that he wrote and included in 1936 in his *Book of Delusions*. It is important to render it in its entirety:

Prayer in the wind: Protect me, Lord, from the great hatred, of the hatred from which worlds (might) spring. Appease the aggressive trembling of my body and free me from the grip of my own jaws. Let vanish that black dot that lights up in me and spreads in each and every one of my limbs, giving birth to a deadly flame in the endless black burning of hatred. Save me from the worlds born of hatred, set me free of the endless blackness beneath which my heavens die. Open a ray within this darkened night and let rise the stars (once) lost in the thick fog of my soul. Show me the way back to myself, open my path in my thick grove. Come down within me along with the sun and let my world begin.

In the light of this prayer, the relationship with God is direct open and warm, characterized by complete trust. God is the deliverer, the saviour, from the "grip of my jaws", which is a metaphor for sins and He is the hope and the light. He *can* end any darkness and provided that the prayer is fervently requiring for delivery from hatred and darkness, we also easily deduce that God is love and light, that is, salvation, ('Come down within me along with the sun'), spreading 'the thick fog of my soul' and 'my thick grove' (again, the sins and the disbelief). At the same time, He appears as the only guarantor for '(my) heavens', my salvation, rendered as well through the metonymy of a shining soul.

The major significance of the fact that an author like Emil Cioran wrote a prayer is paramount and the contents of this prayer perfectly capture the image of the religious (Christian) attitude and being. In the article published the following year, 'Emil Cioran-between Prometheus and Sisyphus', capitalizing on this paper, the accent was placed on the discovery of the hypostases of the philosopher as believer: either a Promethean image of the daring believer rising against God in search of the authentic meaning of God, believer, religion and, at an extreme, the Sisyphus image of believer, happy fulfilling

his omen, while carrying up the hill his boulder of faith, as heavy, rough, futile and temporary as it might be.

### **6. *Gloria victis!***

The interpretations underlined so far and the selected quotes prove from various perspectives the fact that Emil Cioran brought paradox (and inconsistency) at the higher rank of method. The paradoxes with their included contradictions and antinomies explain how existence is the ultimate trial and the meaningful ontological effort necessary for the human being to keep on living. Living is creation of meaning and struggle with powerful meaninglessness at the same time. Cioran was not someone to think that philosophy transforms “chaos into cosmos/order and meaning”, or that ontology was cosmology’s highest aim and dream. However, he is facing in his works the puzzling manifestations of truths in the forms of existentially accessible meanings, brought up in dialogue with his own accusations of meaninglessness against existence and everything else. Space is not the final frontier, so to speak; the final frontier for man is meaning, which is, paradoxically, man’s dazzling and victorious contribution to a meaningless and brief existence.

Existing does not necessarily entail existence. Nevertheless, being born casts one into existence and for those cursed with the metaphysical core, it is something always bigger than life, cruel and glorious, it is doomed to failure, yet, in glorious symphonic harmonies. Whenever Logos is exhausted, or overcame, or failed, it gets transformed in Melos.

The “patron of the defeated”, as Cioran referred to himself in one occasion, was as much provoked by meaning as well as by meaninglessness; and this bleak vision of human life described mostly by lack of meaning proved to be eventually absolutely necessary for the renewal of the endless quest for meaning, found beneath his own metaphysical lament about meaninglessness of the being and of the human universe. From this perspective, metaphysical turmoil is the entire hope for a meaningful existence, since there (in the midst of metaphysical turmoil) all meaning is present in nascent form. As a consequence, meaninglessness is still meaningful. Thus, meaning is inescapable and it is the genuine source of suffering, salvation and victory. Quite probable, this represents the paradoxical affirmation of the philosophical privilege, if there ever was one, and this is, truly, “Gloria victis”.

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# SOPHISTICATED AND SUPERIORITY: AN APPRAISAL OF ‘TRUE HUMOUR’

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we address *true humour*, which three luminaries in Western thought have already sought to resolve. They were, respectively, Joseph Addison in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain, Arthur Schopenhauer in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Germany, and Luigi Pirandello in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Italy. First, we present their reflections about humour in general and their specific conceptions of ‘true humour’ in particular. Second, we offer a concise rendition of the three main theories of humour in Western philosophy, i.e., superiority, incongruity and relief. In the third and last place, we discuss true humour in the works of Addison, Schopenhauer and Pirandello, indicating how it constitutes an instance of the superiority theory of humour, despite this theory being, in modern times, the subject of extensive criticism. We conclude with some reflections on how the three main theories of humour can be combined.

## **Key Words**

Addison, incongruity, Pirandello, relief, Schopenhauer, superiority

## **1. Introduction**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the great French novelist Victor Hugo stated peremptorily that ‘[f]un is (like cant, like humour,) an exceptional, untranslatable word’. In all likelihood, only the Britons knew what all these strange words actually meant. Ironically, the Britons of Hugo’s day were also quite unsure about this matter, or at least about ‘humour’, to be precise. For one, the prolific author and Protestant dissenter, Edwin P. Hood, noted: ‘No doubt, we feel better what humour is than we can describe it’; even its ‘etymological sense’ can be of little help *vis-à-vis* finding a clear definition, although it points interestingly toward ‘good humour’ and ‘the incessant play of lively and natural feeling... which extends its sympathies to all be. The passing of time did not help much, in Britain and elsewhere. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the great G. K. Chesterton could still write:

Humour, in the modern use of the term, signifies a perception of the comic or incongruous of a special sort; generally distinguished from Wit, as being on the one side more subtle, or on the other side more vague. It is thus a term which not only refuses to be defined, but in a sense boasts of being indefinable; and it would commonly be regarded as a deficiency in humour to search for a definition of humour.

In the second half of the last century, the famous Italian writer and semiologist Umberto Eco observed, a tad sarcastically:

The greatest thinkers have tripped on the comical. They managed to define thought, being, God, but not why we laugh madly at a gentleman who is walking down the stairs and suddenly trips and falls. When they came to explain this, the greatest thinkers got entangled in a vast net of contradictions, whence they emerged, after huge efforts, with very thin answers.

In our brave century of computerised models and big data science, some researchers have, quite simply, given up. For instance, having found this ‘folk category’ too semantically frustrating, the linguists Phillip Glenn and Elizabeth Holt prefer dismissing it altogether as ‘a particularly useful, analytic category’, focussing instead on artificial yet more easily-measurable terms.

## 2. True Humour

It is therefore somewhat puzzling, and somewhat amusing, that there may have been thinkers who believed that they could determine not just what sheer 'humour' was, but indeed 'true humour' itself. They are not many, truth be told. Maybe just three and four, to be precise.

### 2. 1. Joseph Addison

Piling paradox upon paradox, the first recorded voice in this small yet distinguished 'true-humour' chorus is that of Joseph Addison, the father of the London's 18<sup>th</sup> Century *Spectator*, who admitted that it was 'much easier to describe what is not Humour, than what is'.

Nevertheless, Addison gave his best shot at this seemingly hopeless task by listing the 'Qualifications' of the 'Genealogy' that should apply to 'Humour', were humour ever to be conceived of as 'a Person' in flesh and blood. 'Truth' would then be 'the Founder of the Family', 'Good Sense' its son, who would beget in turn 'Wit, who married... Mirth, by whom he had Issue Humour.' *Qua* child of such an 'Illustrious Family', 'Humour' is said to have to be able to please the various relatives by adapting to their 'different Dispositions': 'sometimes' it should be 'grave' and 'solemn', 'sometimes airy... and fantastick', other times 'serious' or 'jocular'. Under any and all such circumstances, humour 'never fails to make his Company laugh'.

Addison also drew two parallel genealogical tables, opposing and distinguishing between 'True Humour', which 'generally looks serious, whilst every Body laughs about him', and 'False Humour', which 'is always laughing, whilst every Body about him looks serious.' The proof of the authenticity of humour would therefore be, as it has been proverbially the case for pudding, in the eating. False humour laughs aloud and ceaselessly but leaves its audience unimpressed. 'True humour', instead, makes people laugh while feigning gravity: 'Ridicule is never more strong, than when it is concealed in Gravity'.

Unfortunately, even eating the pudding may not be good enough a standard for appraisal. As Addison's collaborator Richard Steele observes: '(I)n Elections for Members to sit in Parliament', one can witness shrewd individuals who parade most successfully a degenerate 'Capacity for prostituting a Man's Self in his Behaviour, and descending to the present Humour of the Vulgar'. Among uneducated and unsophisticated sorts, unrefined 'Raillery' that 'is full of Motion, Janty and... Impertinence' does 'commonly pass, among the Ignorant,' as 'Humour.' And as Addison concedes, in a mirror-like reflection: 'It must be confessed that good Sense often makes a Humourist; but then it unqualifies him for being of any Moment in the World, and renders him ridiculous to Persons of a much inferiour Understanding.'

### 2. 2. Arthur Schopenhauer

The second voice in the tiny chorus is that of Arthur Schopenhauer, who thus went to show the world that Germans, *pace* much malign prejudice, might know a thing or two about humorous matters. Specifically, in his hefty masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer pens a definition of 'humour' (Germanised into *humor*) by way of opposition to 'irony': 'if... the joke is concealed behind seriousness, then we have irony. [...] The converse of irony is accordingly seriousness concealed behind a joke, and this is humour. It might be called the double counterpoint of irony'.

Britons had got it all wrong. Addison's earlier intuitions on 'True Humour' are turned upside down. It is now irony that makes fun by feigning seriousness, e. g., 'Socrates' *vis-à-vis* 'Hippias, Protagoras, Gorgias, and other sophists, and indeed often to his collocutors in general.' Humour, instead, is seriousness feigning fun.

Schopenhauer's distinction between irony and humour does not stop here, however. As he writes: 'Irony is objective, that is, intended for another', whether it is the audience or the adversary, so that they may eventually learn something. 'Humour', on the contrary, 'is subjective, that is, it primarily exists only for one's own self', who is 'in a serious and sublime mood', but at the same surrounded by an inescapable and inescapably silly or obnoxious 'external world... to which [the self] will not give itself up' and therefore retort by casting something deep and often gloomy in a 'joke'. Whereas '[i]rony

begins with a serious air and ends with a smile', the opposite is true of 'humour', e. g., Hamlet saying to the annoying Polonius, who was taking his leave from his prince with all sorts of pompous apologies: 'You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal, except my life, except my life, except my life.'

The sublime seriousness, or serious sublimity, lurking behind 'humour' and the work of the 'true humourist' are also said to be rooted in the very etymology of the term, insofar as 'humour depends on a special kind of mood or temper (German *Laune*, probably from *Luna*) through which conception in all its modifications, a decided predominance of the subjective over the objective in the apprehension of the external world is thought. 'Nevertheless, Schopenhauer complains that 'at the present day the word humorous [*humoristisch*] is generally used in German literature in the sense of comical [*komisch*]', so that cheap jokes and vulgar comedies are given 'a more distinguished name than belongs to them.' Yet, as he insists, 'humour is borrowed from the English to denote a quite peculiar species of the ludicrous,' namely one that 'is related to the sublime, and which was first remarked by them.' In Schopenhauer's view, 'it is not intended to be used as the title for all kinds of jokes and buffoonery, as is now universally the case in Germany, without opposition from men of letters and scholars.'

Whether this opposition ever emerged and got adequately discussed by Teutonic *literati* and academics, it is not clear. Certainly, the ordinary, unsophisticated use of 'humor' to refer to all sorts of funny things continues to this day, *pace* Schopenhauer's protestations. The history of natural languages, German included, is evidently full of ironies.

### 3. Luigi Pirandello

Having completed his doctoral studies in Germany and coming from the country that had civilised the Britons in the first place, Luigi Pirandello felt well-suited to tackle the issue of 'true humour' a third time, in a lengthy essay entitled *L'umorismo*. In point of fact, in the puny chorus that has been identified hereby, Pirandello is the voice who gets the longest and most articulate bits to sing solo.

Echoing Schopenhauer, Pirandello claims that it is possible to distinguish between 'humour understood in a broad sense, as commonly done, and not just in Italy;' and 'a narrower and particular sense, with well-defined and peculiar characteristics, which is for [Pirandello] the right way to understand it.' On the one hand, the 'much broader sense comprises... the comical in its various expressions'. On the other hand, there can be, as Addison had already written, 'true humour'. This more sophisticated and authentic version of humour is not confined to either modern or Anglo-Germanic literature, but it can be retrieved 'in the ancient as well as modern literature of every country, ... but in considerably lesser amount; indeed, in only few exceptional instances'.

The entire second part of Pirandello's essay is about the characteristics of 'true humour'. However, already in the first part, Pirandello anticipates a number of these characteristics or, at least, some instances of 'humour', if not 'true humour' proper. Thus, for one, Pirandello follows the German philosopher Theodor Lipps' lead in exemplifying 'humour' by reference to 'Socrates attending *The Clouds* at the theatre and laughing with the audience at how [Aristophanes] ridicules him'. For another, Pirandello highlights in a quote from Antonio Panizzi (an Italian literary critic who had lived and worked in England for many years) the description of Francesco Berni's Renaissance poetry as marked by 'the peculiar benevolence whereby [Berni] looks, with indulgence, ... upon human errors and ills.'

Well aware of its geo-etymological origins, Pirandello mentions the archetypally 'English... humour', i.e., 'the facetiousness of those who keep a grave demeanour while joking.' In its 'true' form, this 'humour' is then distinguished from 'art in general, as this was taught by rhetoric', because of its 'intimate, inaccurate, essential process that, inevitably, de-structures, dis-orders, dis-accords'. In particular, the medieval poet Cecco Angiolieri is singled out for the sharp contrast between his conspicuously light-hearted tone and the clear perception by the reader that 'Cecco never truly enjoys [, as he declares,] his torment, though he casts it in a clever and lively shape' that, according to Pirandello, is typical of 'Tuscan... popular' culture.

Humour is not 'irony', Pirandello claims, since the latter 'is almost always comical yet without pathos'. Instead, citing *verbatim* the literary critic Momigliano, Pirandello underlines how 'humourists' make fun of their own 'melancholy', thus displaying a 'painful dualism', which is 'the true consolation



of desperate people.' Above all, 'Don Quijote' is celebrated as an astounding specimen of 'humour's laughter', such that, 'the comical is overcome, not by the tragic, but through the comical itself.' As a result, when reading Cervantes' famed novel, '[w]e commiserate while laughing, or laugh while commiserating'.

'[T]rue humour', finally, is said explicitly and expressly to consist of 'the feeling of the contrary' [*sentimento del contrario*], i.e., sensing 'how every ridiculous event... is followed by deep bitterness, like shadows follow each and every one of our steps'. Thus, the personal credo of the Italian monk, philosopher and cosmologist Giordano Bruno is claimed to be nothing less than 'humour's motto': *In tristitia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis* ['Happy in sadness, sad in happiness']. (Condemned as a heretic, Bruno was burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1600. Despite his motto, he did not laugh while being set ablaze.)

This deep psychological spring of humour is the reason why, in the second part of his essay, Pirandello can explain the enormous disagreement among philosophers, *literati* and psychologists about the exact characteristics of humour. According to Pirandello, this pivotal 'feeling of the contrary' can be elicited in all sorts of ways, by reference to all kinds of human circumstances, under all varieties of stylistic constructions, and by burrowing into all manners of 'contradiction', or incongruity, such as: melancholy and forgiveness; melancholy and resentment; ridiculousness and seriousness; illusion and reality; morality and calculation; intimate feeling and social convenience; habit and logic; consciousness and substratum (i.e., the unconscious); justice and injustice; hope and fear; our past selves and our present selves (as discussed by Pascal); busy daily life and life's emptiness or meaninglessness; genius and insignificance; etc.

Psychologically, the first step in the whole 'feeling of the contrary' is observing a person's 'alertness to the contrary', e.g., when we meet an old lady covered in 'make-up' and 'youthful clothes' in the vain attempt to look much younger. Such an odd sight is laughable and it is the very essence of 'the comical'. The second step takes place when the same person starts reflecting, however briefly, on the reasons why the old lady may be doing that, e.g., 'to pitifully convince herself that she may be able to get her much-younger husband to keep loving her'. At that point, the person at issue steps beyond the initial simple alertness, and well into 'the feeling of the contrary'. That is where 'the humorous' resides, according to Pirandello.

Artistically, as Pirandello comments on Russian, Italian, French, Spanish, German and British literary sources, 'reflection' seems to play a fundamental role in 'humorously' breaking, or interfering with, the 'spontaneous' imaginative inertia and compositional 'harmony' of the fictional creation, e.g., by way of 'intrusion', 'variations and digressions', but only as long as this 'reflection' is as 'spontaneous' and organic to the fictional creation as the original inertia and harmony.' [G]enuine humour' cannot arise from 'mere verbal contradiction', 'rhetorical decoy' or conceptual 'contrast between ideality and reality', but requires an 'immediate doubling' of any 'feeling' or 'thought... into its contrary', as though the feeling or thought immediately reflects back onto itself and traces in its opposite its own very point of origin.

According to Pirandello, this crucial 'doubling' [*sdoppiamento*] of feeling and/or thought does not occur in 'the comical, the ironic, the satirical', while it reveals itself in the creations of sophisticated 'humourists', who are artists possessing, within their heart, the bittersweet duplicity which allows them to create 'that which looks like them'. Unlike 'comics and satirists', humourists are not cold or stern judges, even in the face of 'theft' and 'murder'. Unlike 'sociologists', they grasp objectively the sad and troubling truths about living people, but also empathise with them. Unlike 'epic or tragic poets', humourists do not present 'heroes' facing bravely life's 'contrary and repugnant elements'. Indeed, humourists may 'dislike reality', experience all the painful contradictoriness of 'Being' and the meaninglessness of 'the naked life', and even enjoy 'unmasking' human mendacities and inconsistencies; but they are not 'angered', distanced, or ennobled by any of this, about which they say, humbly: 'that's life!' That's all that, *au fond*, 'humourists' can state in their 'deconstructing' works of 'humour'.

### *Digression*

A completely different interpretation of 'true "humour"'—the adjective being cast tellingly between quotation marks—was suggested by humour scholar Simon Critchley in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Specifically, Critchley equates "'true' humour' with personally and/or socially 'radical' or 'critical' forms of humour, e.g., corrosive comedies, biting satires and scathing jokes that are not 'reactionary' and that can lead to progressive 'change', whether individually or collectively.

### *Three Theories*

Back in the enlightened century of Addison and *The Spectator*, the British physician and philosopher David Hartley had already compiled many interesting observations on, *inter alia*, the fun that most people have at noticing the errors of unsophisticated 'children, rustics, and foreigners when yet they act right, according to the truly natural, simple, and uncorrupted dictates of reason and propriety, and are guilty of no other inconsistency, than what arises from the usurpations of customs over nature'.

Seemingly innocent, this widespread form of fun recalls a well-established tradition of philosophical characterisation of laughter *qua* mockery, derision, ridicule, or scorn. This tradition underlines the fun that we have, implicitly, whenever taking delight in our being better than someone else, or in being better at something than someone else, or at least in thinking that we are so. As a child uttered naughtily in a Scottish primary school in the mid-1980s: 'Keep Scotland clean; throw your litter into England.'

Implying a superiority of the Scots with respect to their southern neighbours, this childish joke is just one of countless instantiations of the so-called 'superiority' theory of laughter and, of late, humour. The superiority theory is however only one of three recurrent philosophical theories of laughter and humour, all three of which we are going to summarise concisely in the next few paragraphs.

## **1. Superiority**

The superiority theory focuses on the evil that laughter and, most probably, humour, seem to contain on many occasions, insofar as they pivot around temporary or lasting forms of social inclusion/exclusion, hierarchical separation, and/or outright disparagement. Examples of this sort of laughter are legion, whether we look at current literary sources or ancient ones. They include, for instance, schoolboys' pranks, soldiers' practical jokes, ethnic and group-based jokes, such as Austrian jokes in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany (and *vice versa*), blonde and Polish jokes in 20<sup>th</sup> century USA, *carabinieri* jokes in today's Italy, and Danish jokes in contemporary Iceland. Albeit somewhat *passé* and frowned-upon in polite circles, every nation has had its own recurring target/s and every mentally able, adequately socialised person can understand these jokes. Clearly, they would not count as 'true humour' *à la* Critchley.

The characterisation of laughter as mixing good (e.g., pleasure) with evil (e.g., humiliation) and its centring on mild or even forceful mockery of another, if not of oneself at times, have been predominant in the history of Western philosophy. Though short and sparse, many major thinkers have uttered comments on these negative connotations of laughter, e.g., Plato (*Philebus*), Aristotle (*Poetics*), Cicero (*De oratore*), Hobbes (*Leviathan* and *Human Nature*) and Descartes (*The Passions of the Soul*). In particular, Plato wrote of *phthonos* [envy] *qua* necessary malicious ingredient of all laughter. It is, however, Thomas Hobbes' much-later notion of 'sudden glory' arising from 'comparison' between the enjoyer of a joke and the butt of one that has become the scholarly shorthand for this theory of laughter and, in times closer to us, humour, which acquired its present meaning only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## **2. Incongruity**

As proud and as 'superior' to his fellow humans as the notoriously misanthropic Schopenhauer may have felt in real life, the definitive 1859 edition of his already-cited *World as Will and Representation* contains a chapter devoted to 'the ludicrous' articulating a very different theory of laughter and, nominally too, humour. Specifically, Schopenhauer formulated therein a version of the so-called 'incongruity' theory, which he explains as based on 'the opposition... between perceptible and abstract ideas'. Such an opposition generates 'paradoxical, and therefore unexpected, subsumption[s] of an object [or more] under a conception which in other respects is different from it. Accordingly, the

phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it,' e.g., juxtaposing a piccolo and a tuba as 'musical instruments'.

Concerning the birthplace of the incongruity theory itself, most scholars agree that it is probably a brief set of reflections penned by Francis Hutcheson in 1750, whereby Hobbes' idea of 'sudden glory' is forcefully criticised and 'laughter' is reconceptualised as a positive instrument that allows people to feel good with one another, reduce mutual 'resentment', and find ways to 'reconcile' after quarrels. Moreover, Hutcheson supplies instances of amusing association of contrasting ideas, e.g., puns and witticisms, all of which do not seem to imply any comparison or denigration. Though often cited in the literature about humour, it should be noted that Hutcheson's work focuses on 'laughter' alone and mentions humour solely *qua* 'humourists', and only once in the whole text.

Today, the incongruity theory enjoys much currency. Noël Carroll claims the incongruity theory to be the most popular today among philosophers. To boot, Terry Eagleton's reduces most contemporary 'minor' or alternative theories to it: 'the play theory, the conflict theory, the ambivalence theory, the dispositional theory, the mastery theory, the Gestalt theory, the Piagetian theory and the configurational theory.' In addition, linguists, not just philosophers, are keen to describe incongruity as a 'violation' of Grice's 'principle of co-operation' between speaker and audience, i.e., saying as much as needed of what is believed to be true and relevant, while avoiding 'obscurity... ambiguity... prolixity' and disorder. In other words, the heart of laughter and humour is to be found in a conflict between a normal mode of communication and an intentionally abnormal, hence funny, mode. Indeed, the normal mode is said to be presupposed also when 'mode adoption' occurs, i.e., when a person's 'first humorous remark' is followed by another's 'additional indirect humour'.

### 3. Relief

18<sup>th</sup> century Britain was also the birthplace of the third and most common theory of laughter and humour. Here we must recall the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, who was probably the first thinker to pen a substantial essay carrying explicitly in its title the fully de-medicalised, modern notion of 'humour'. In this so-called 'letter' of his, or 'essay on the wit and humour', Shaftesbury did not provide any exact definition of 'humour', but wrote repeatedly about it in conjunction with his defence of the willingness to 'rally with good grace and humour', i.e., to debate freely, fairly and frankly, but also respectfully, calmly and kindly, on any subject, not least the 'grave and solemn' ones related to religious 'bigotry'.

This sort of sophisticated, 'urban[e]' conversation is, according to Shaftesbury, an admirable but difficult art, which requires time and practice so as to 'refine itself' and turn into a conversational instrument of 'humour' that is 'agreeable' and worthier than mere 'play on words', 'puns' or 'scurrilous clowning.' As Shaftesbury states in his essay: 'It really is hard work learning to temper and regulate the humour that nature has given us so that it works as a more lenitive remedy against vice and a kind of specific against superstition and melancholy delusion.'

Nevertheless, Shaftesbury believed this learning effort to be a valuable and rewarding one, for mastering how to 'rally with good grace and humour' can teach us the 'big difference between trying to raise a laugh from everything and trying to discover in each thing what there is that can fairly be laughed at.' Engaging frequently in duels by 'wit and argument' is said to sharpen the mind, cause 'reason' to be 'tested' candidly and carefully, and condemn the intolerant 'zealot' to show his or her true colours in the end, namely 'harsh severity on one side and awkward buffoonery on the other.'

Refined raillery was also described as conducive to better health than its persistent avoidance. In what constitutes the first expression of what is known today as the 'release' or 'relief' theory of humour, Shaftesbury states that 'the natural free mental spirits of clever men, if they are imprisoned and controlled, will discover other ways of acting so as to relieve themselves in their constraint.' One way to seek relief is by speaking 'ironically', which Shaftesbury assumed the reader to know how to do (i.e., saying one thing but meaning another). Another way, if irony is not cautious enough a solution, is to 'redouble their disguise, wrap themselves in mystery, and talk in such a way that they'll hardly be understood' by their persecutors.

Either way, 'bantering' will go on, for it has been 'aroused' by the 'persecuting spirit' of the enemies of freedom. These foes, according to Shaftesbury, may force 'raillery' to 'go to extremes', such as irony and apparent nonsense, but they cannot extinguish it altogether, analogously to what happens to a living body that has been imprisoned and restrained:

What happens here is like what happens in strong and healthy bodies that are debarred from their natural exercise and confined in a narrow space. They are forced to use odd gestures and contortions. They have a sort of action; they do still move; but they do it utterly ungracefully. That happens because the animal spirits in such sound and active limbs can't lie dead, i.e., unemployed.

The relief or release theory of laughter was further developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Herbert Spencer, who argued that psychic energy, pretty much like any fluid, can build within a body, up to a certain limit, and thereafter seek release through particular physical pathways and related mental phenomena. Laughter, and the related mental experience of fun or amusement, is one of the channels whereby this discharge takes place. This theory was additionally enriched and made famous by Sigmund Freud, who argued that 'the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity.' In short, we enjoy laughing because it spares us anger, embarrassment, or having to be polite, dutiful, reasonable, or even logical.

### 3.1. Three Reasons

Addison's account of 'True Humour' does not hide its elitist character at any point. Indeed, in an influential discussion of 'Mr Hobbs' theory of laughter, Addison acknowledges the many good reasons for upholding such a theory, while also distinguishing between sophisticated and unsophisticated versions of our 'secret[ly]' prideful laughter, and cautioning his readers *via* a cleverly selected quote from Martial, the so-called Roman 'father of the epigram', i.e., 'ride si sapiis' [laugh if you are wise].

It is, however, the case of Schopenhauer and Pirandello that we want to focus on in this section. Both, in fact, are routinely associated with the incongruity theory of laughter and humour. The former because, as we have seen, states 'incongruity' to be the core-element of humour. The latter because, in addition to expressing and emphasising the many forms that the 'contradiction' originating the 'feeling of the contrary' can take, exemplifies extensively such forms in his plays, novels and short stories, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934.

#### 3.1.1. A Modicum of Callousness

Concerning the many cruelties of life, 'true humour' is deemed capable of arising in the face of all kinds of accidents, fatalities, errors and horrors, by both Schopenhauer and Pirandello. Indeed, the seriousness of these horrors is precisely that gloomy depth which feeds the sublime mood of the true humourist, insofar as these horrors furnish him or her with the pathos that, combined with superficial comicality, generates the 'incongruity' (Schopenhauer) or 'contradiction' (Pirandello) required for 'true humour' to emerge.

Significantly, Schopenhauer's chosen quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* deals with death in one of its most terrible modalities, i.e., suicide, which the titular character is contemplating before a baffled Polonius. In parallel, Pirandello's exemplification of 'true humour' refers to a desperately made-up and provokingly overdressed old lady, whose age conspires against her prospects of keeping her younger husband attracted to her. Besides, *Hamlet* is itself a tragedy, while dramatic age-uneven romances are far from unfamiliar, real as well as fictional. How can anyone even smile in amusement, not to mention laugh, when confronted with such tragic aspects of the human condition?

The answer to this question is, simply, a modicum of callousness. Indifference in the face of someone else's suffering is part of the picture, necessarily. In the realm of fiction, to which both *Hamlet* and Pirandello's oeuvre belong, the playwright or writer at work, if s/he wants to be successful in achieving 'true humour', must engage in conscious acts of active brutal cruelty, which consists precisely in creating adequate diversions to the depicted sufferings by way of comical counterpoints, so as to facilitate the lowering of compassion in his/her audience or, if compassion needs no lowering, its keeping it well where it is. In what is possibly the most famous philosophical work on laughter of

all times, Bergson's *Le rire*, 'The Comical' is said to necessitate nothing less than an 'anaesthesia of the heart'.

On their part, the spectators and/or readers must also engage in such an 'anaesthesia' to be able to enjoy the humorous piece as humorous. In other words, they must be willing and capable of going along with the humourist's strategy and allowing a personal departure from, or diminution of, one's own sympathetic feelings in the face someone else's suffering.

### 3.1.2. *A Modicum of Ferocity*

Perhaps unrecognised, sadism remains part of the picture too. Insofar as the comical component is pursued, even the most refined humourist is going to be actively sadistic, to some degree. On their part, all humorous persons enjoying the former's work are passively sadistic, since they find the comical component funny. Enjoyment of someone else's suffering, in other words, must be present as well. It is true that 'true humour' stresses sympathetically the sorrowful plight of the humorous character, or real person, more than the corresponding 'false' humour, which is concerned with laughter alone and, consequently, does not have to perform the same sympathetic operation. However, while there may be much tension or ambiguity between comicality and tragedy, the latter element is never allowed to triumph, lest humour, especially *qua* 'true humour', disintegrates.

Are you still unconvinced? It may be apt to reflect on the observations about these matters penned by a contemporary of both Bergson and Pirandello, namely four short paragraphs on 'the comical', 'wit', 'humour' and 'the grotesque' that lie buried inside a much larger work of aesthetics authored by the Spanish-American philosopher, poet and novelist George Santayana.

Superficially, Santayana endorses the incongruity theory of humour *de facto*, i.e., by finding 'juxtaposition... tension... complication' at its very heart, as well as *ipso dicto*, i.e., by calling laughing matters the offspring of 'incongruity'. Additionally, Santayana observes how 'humour' can be separated from 'laughing' by increasing 'the sympathy with which we are expected to regard' other people, or the 'reason' whereby we try to understand their 'foibles or absurdities'. If we proceed too far along the path of 'sympathy', we can change 'satire' into 'pathos' and fall 'out of the sphere of the comic altogether'. If we pursue the path of 'reason' too much, we end up doing something completely different than comedy or parody, e.g., psychology, which would simply stop 'amusing us'.

According to Santayana, humour *qua* artistic technique tries to strike a balance between the 'agreeable' yet unsympathetic observation of people's irrational behaviours (i.e., 'the satirical', which 'is closely akin to cruelty' *tout court*) and 'the luxury of imaginative sympathy,' i.e., 'the expansion into another life', which we find aesthetically rewarding, albeit 'painful' at times. As Santayana explains, the former 'satirical' element is quite simply necessary in order to preserve the 'sensuous and merely perceptive stimulation' lying at the heart of anything that is 'ridiculous', comical or funny. The latter element, instead, is required for the sake of ennobling the fun that we have, seeking 'touches of beauty and seriousness' and the 'aesthetically good'. As Santayana writes: 'The juxtaposition of these two pleasures produces just that tension and complication in which the humorous consists.' Therefore, 'the essence of what we call humor is that amusing weakness should be combined with an amicable humanity... We are satirical, and we are friendly at the same time'.

In acknowledging the 'cruelty' of 'satirical delight', which enjoys other people's '[d]efect and mishap' in the same way as 'blood and tortures excite in us the passions of the beast of prey', Santayana pays due credit to the superiority theory of humour. Consistent with this tradition, he claims something 'vulgar' and 'bad' to reside within 'the comic' at large, which gives us some degree of 'pleasure' by way of 'novelty... freedom... shock' and whatever intense 'stimulation' may be at work thereby, such as 'attracting our attention,... stimulating passions, such as scorn, or cruelty, or self-satisfaction (for there is a great deal of malice in our love of fun)'.

There may be a deep and unsettling truth to 'the suggestions of evil' associated with humorous fun because the bonds of sympathy are sometimes simply too strong, too profound and too entrenched within a person's bosom and self-understanding for any gaiety whatsoever to emerge. As Santayana writes: 'we never enjoy seeing our own persons in a satirical light, or any one else for whom we really feel affection.'

### 3.1.3 *De haut en bas*

On the one hand, Schopenhauer's humourist is a Romantic soul, a proud token of superiority. Hamlet and his select spiritual peers are capable of experiencing and grasping sublime, profound truths, which the common people around them cannot begin to fathom. It is only insofar as the superior types are forced to interact with the inferior ones that the serious truths grasped by the former come to be expressed in facetious words. The latter find these truths puzzlingly amusing or, as Polonius in Shakespeare's tragedy, amusingly puzzling. 'True humour' is, according to Schopenhauer, gloomy seriousness dressed deceitfully in gleeful levity, *pace* Addison's claims to the opposite—what an irony! The sublime soul, by performing this duplicitous operation, is actively ridiculing the people surrounding him or her, while the spectator or reader is invited to participate in the sophisticated act of clever denigration that is being performed. In this manner, the latter group can be reassured about the fact that they are not, as Addison would write, 'Persons of a much inferior Understanding'.

On the other hand, Pirandello's 'true humour' is also based upon a modulation of interpersonal superiority. The Sicilian dramatist is not so openly dismissive as Schopenhauer of those souls who cannot experience the same complex mixtures of emotions and thoughts that the sensitive, cultured humourist grasps instead. Nevertheless, Pirandello's humourist and, in all likelihood, the readers and spectators who can follow the humourist's subtle art, must necessarily apprehend the comical component at play, which requires recognising the obvious inferiority of the joke's butt, whom is then pitied, in a further instantiation of hierarchical positioning: *de haut en bas*. Pirandello's 'true humour' does not deny the hierarchy established by grasping the immediate comicality of another. Quite the opposite, his conception of humour requires hierarchy for 'true humour' to be possible and to commence unfolding. On top of it, it adds the implicit spiritual hierarchy whereby the same insightful person can also commiserate the comical 'other', whose inferiority is consequently twofold.

## 4. *Concluding Remarks*

'[T]he works of Freud' had made the relief theory of laughter and humour very popular in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the second half of the same century, the 'relief' theory and Freud's very status as a respectable, significant scientist lost considerable ground. As the curricula of most Western universities easily attest, psychoanalysis is rarely taught these days in mainstream psychology and medical schools. When it is taught, it is as part of a historical account of psychology, rather than as a valid scientific approach.

At the same time, the superiority theory has had very few supporters in the last few decades. Charles R. Gruner's 1997 book, *The Game of Humor: A comprehensive theory of why we laugh*, is possibly the most articulate case to be mounted in its favour in recent years. As Gruner argues, *pace* Hutcheson and his heirs, the seemingly innocent incongruities of puns and witticisms are said to exemplify superiority, at least historically, for they arose within social games implying winners and losers. Moreover, taken in their pragmatic context, all comic incongruities entail a hierarchy between the clever jokester and the not-so-clever recipients, e.g., possible competitors, the targeted laughingstock, and/or the awed audiences. This is, in short, the argument that Gruner presents.

However, we believe that we do not have to choose one theory and discard the others. Rather, we should realise that each approach has its own focus, and a single jest can be explained by all of them at the same time: superiority regarding how the jest plays out in the social context; incongruity about the logical, physical and/or verbal clashes of the jest; and relief with regard to the way in which the jest is experienced by some, or all, of the participants. The three theories are by no means mutually exclusive and have been continuously mingled by thinkers who have dealt with laughter and humour. Understood as ideal types of humour, they can establish nonetheless a useful frame of reference, which can help students and artists to approach and analyse the biological, cultural, social, ethical, linguistic, logical and psychological factors that are relevant to humour.

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## TWO RESPONSES TO BAUCHELLO AND ARNARSSON

### 1. 'True' Humour

*Richard Prust*

My guess is that most of us who have read Baruchello and Arnarsson's informative paper didn't bring to it any firm convictions about what, if anything, makes humour 'true humour'. But having read the paper, we can now see that the top contenders for that criterion— superiority, incongruity and relief— all seem plausible across a range of cases but leave out others that would also strike many as humorous. In the end, I found myself agreeing with the authors that we ought to look for a way to negotiate among the three, perhaps even a way to combine them.

There are those who would find this goal misplaced. They might advise us to think of 'humour' as a sort of basket-term, following Wittgenstein's advice to look for 'family resemblances' among examples of humour, not for some 'true' genus-difference definition. Yet, if we simply turn back the question that way, we miss the chance to explore something distinctive about human agency. Consider: we are the only species defined by having a 'true' sense of humour. That is, for us, having a sense of humour enables us to be fully who we are. We are being 'true' to ourselves most fully when we are in good humour.

How humour marks agency as personal should put discerning its nature high on the agenda of any philosophical anthropologist, so, as one such practitioner, let me venture an answer. I trust that we can all agree on two anthropological givens. First, we are multi-intentioned agents; we do many things at a time. These various actions of ours are all 'present' in the present-continuing sense of 'present'. I'm writing this sentence, I'm teaching a course in the philosophies of human nature, I'm functioning as a power-of-attorney for someone with dementia, I'm writing a book on how we characterise our actions, I meet weekly for dinner with an old friend. Second, not all of the various present-continuing involvements, undertakings, habits and relationships are for public consumption. The ones I listed are, but, for me as for you, there are elements of my active life that remain shielded from public view. It might be interesting to try to diagnose the cause of bifurcating our lives like that, but that is not our challenge here. Whatever the cause, it does seem true that we all feel the need to maintain a zone of privacy, and we resent intrusions into it. It's as though, by some logic elusive to us, there are incongruities among our public and private lives, and if we revealed too much of the latter, we'd undermine our public persona. In one of his journal entries from 1836, Søren Kierkegaard ponders this complexity in personal identity.

It almost seems as if it takes two individuals to form one whole man; this explains the enthusiasm for the prince or lord which the fool often displayed. When I say that it takes two to make one individual, I of course do not mean the knight's relation to his squires, for they did not play any independent role, but to the fool, who represented intelligence.<sup>1</sup>

The medieval fool in an English court was given leave to entertain the prince and his guests by revealing and revelling in matters usually shielded from polite society. When the fool played his part well, he added to the general good cheer of the party. The honesty of his humour made his audience laugh at themselves and their incongruities. The targets of the fool's humour, like the targets of humour today, are all walking contradictions. Kierkegaard played the fool as a philosopher to reveal the contradictions besetting us all. We are wise and foolish, resolved and dissolute, *simul justus et peccator*, aesthetic and ethical, religious and rational. It's these contradictions that would make our public self ambiguous if they were entirely known, so we hold back from manifesting the odd bits that confound

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<sup>1</sup> Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds., Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, vol. 2 (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press), 1970, p. 249.

simple projection. We are walking mysteries, each of us masquerading as a simple, truthful, sincere identity.

Let me suggest that the fool's humour can be taken as a paradigm for 'true' humour.' When it was true, what it was true to were incongruities in the life of its target; it disclosed the universally confounding complexity in human agency, including that of the prince. The fool's humour disclosed personal truth, the truth that some of every person's intentions are incongruous with what he gives others to know.

The effect of the fool's humour—to give a glimpse of what makes his target truly human—enlivened the party. How so? By affirming to the butt of the joke that he was accepted in that company for who he was. In that sense, the fool's humour could be called a loving act, since only love accepts the entirety of someone's intentional life. In that sense, 'true' humour is divine comedy, the acceptance of others that engenders in them the courage to be the incongruous beings that they are. Defining true humour as what affirms and enlivens people defines false humour by exclusion; it's the kind that lays bare the incongruities to demean the person bearing them. Kierkegaard called that kind of disclosure 'demonic' humour.<sup>2</sup>

If we bear in mind both the positive function humour can have and the demonic edge it can wield, the traditional contenders for 'true' humour can be put into a synthesizing perspective. The view that 'true' humour always involves the incongruous is clearly congenial with ours. In fact, it expresses the fundamental insight into human agency our view is premised on, that the multiplicity of our tangle of intentions include some that are incongruous with others. Relief is just as plausible. Laughter relieves us in the sense that we feel a loss of tension. That loss can be so great that we 'double over,' unable to maintain our public posture. What Kierkegaard bids us to see is that the relief humour provides is not just the loss of tension but the loss of the contention that causes the tension. Some of our incongruous actions, if left unacknowledged, can tear us apart. Think of the tragedies of Euripides and how they derive their pathos from this strife. The only help for a tragic hero is the humour of a holy fool, for when the incongruity is accepted by another, in that interactive moment at least, there can be relief from the pretence.

This brings us to the third proposed essence of true humour, the sense of superiority the humourist is said to have over the target of his wit. I suggested above that the fool's humour accepts the target's foibles as a way of accepting him for who he is. This does not make him superior to his target. Quite the opposite, by presenting the incongruities displayed as part of the human condition, the fool puts everyone on the same level, for a moment at least. That's how he can make even the person of the prince intelligible.

But it must be admitted that not all humourists are creators of shared mirth. Some, perhaps most, do claim superiority by demeaning their targets. In fact, so much run-or-the-mill humour has a demonic edge that it sounds only faintly cynical to claim that it's the defining attribute. Being truly humorous is a touchy business. The court fool had to have his wits about him in both senses. His job was to amuse the prince's guests. To do this well, he was relieved of the usual protocols of court and courtesy and allowed to 'break the ice' by being funny much the way the master of a celebrity roast might today. But woe to that jester who steps over the line and hurts the guests. He then ceases to amuse, for then he plays at being superior rather than playing at being the fool.

You may be inclined to think that Kierkegaard's vision of humour as a divine comedy is too parochial to be the basis for a general theory. But his depiction is based on an insistence on the many-faceted and incommensurable structure of human agency, and that's an insistence personalists tend to share. That our incongruities need to be accepted by ourselves and others is not only the insight of Christian existentialists but of wise counsellors of many traditions. Acceptance of incongruity, to the relief of a troubled soul, is a healing and loving act, the emblem of divinity in action.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 263.



## **2: Animals and Practical Jokes\***

*Richard Allen*

Someone said that man is the animal that laughs. Biologically that is true, because animals lack the muscles needed for making facial expressions, except that of baring their teeth, and have few abilities to make sounds with the mouth and throat. But does that mean that none of them can have something like a sense of humour expressed in practical jokes? The only evidence that I have for affirming that they can, is my encounters with our now deceased and much-loved cat, Plato, whose mother was a pedigree Abyssinian (yes: their ancestors were worshiped as gods) while his father was a local black tom. While he was still a young kitten, I noticed that sometimes when I had reached the top of the stairs in our house, I found him under my feet. One day when I appeared at the bottom of the stairs, I saw him poke his little head around the banister and then quickly withdraw it. Ha! Now I knew what he was doing. So, when I neared the top of the stairs I leant over the banister and said 'Boo' to make him jump.

More tellingly, when he was a fully grown cat and slept all day in the house and then went out between 5pm and 7pm, returning about 9pm for his saucer of milk-less tea (they can also tell the time), at 7am we heard miaowing outside our bedroom window. I tried to shoo him away but he wouldn't move. So I went to bathroom, filled the tooth-mug with water, opened the window, stuck my arm out and tipped the water on him. But he saw it coming and ran out of the way. The next morning he did the same but this time I threw the water at him and he didn't escape it. On the third morning he miaowed again. I looked out of the window and saw him sitting on the low wall on the far side of the front garden. He could not smugly grin at me but he surely felt some feline analogue of our success at playing a successful practical joke. He didn't do it ever again, nor anything like it. Thus, I conclude that we human beings are not the only intelligent beings who can at least play practical jokes.

*\* This is a revised version of my response.*

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***For Discussion***

**THE PROBLEM WITH MUCH MODERN PHILOSOPHY IS  
IT ASSUMES THAT PHILOSOPHY HAS ‘PROBLEMS’**

***R.T. Allen***

My argument is that from Descartes and Locke onwards, distinctively modern philosophy has tried to deal with ‘problems’ such as those of an external world, knowledge, knowledge of others’ minds, free will and determinism, and the ‘queerness of value’. These ‘problems’ are never resolved because they are ‘pseudo-problems’, self-generated by philosophers who hold to inappropriate presuppositions which they never examine. Here are some examples:

1. The fundamental one: the ‘problem of an external world’. This stems from both Descartes and Locke. Descartes’ attempt to doubt everything cannot be carried through, because it requires the confident use of a language in order to articulate his thoughts, and so he never doubts the meaningfulness of the Latin and French which he uses. Nor does he really doubt that he lives, perceives, thinks and acts in a world that exists independently of himself, but pretends to himself and the reader that he does.

As for Locke, once he, and all the pseudo-empiricists, idealists and phenomenologists, assumed that we perceive only images, phenomena, *sensa*, sense-data and the like, then there was no way out of their predicament and solipsism, either the one finite self of the philosopher for whom other people could be only such images, phenomena, etc., i.e., ‘subjective idealism’, or the ‘objective idealism’ of the Absolute idealists in which we are only ‘appearances’ of the one Absolute. But of course, if we are locked with a system of perceptions, ideas, phenomena, etc., how could we know that and have perceptions, etc., of other minds? Kant is confident that ‘presentations’ are ones of ‘noumenal things-in-themselves’, but how does he know that, let alone that they are not all of one just the one existent Being?

2. From the above necessarily issues also the ‘problem of other minds’. Another route to it is the presupposition that the infant first interprets the world only in terms of physical reality, then apprehends some items as alive and finally some of those in personal terms like himself. But the truth is that we have no such ‘problem’. Babies respond to persons as persons and treat others as they treat them. Thus, they treat everything in the same way until they learn otherwise, as anyone who has had any contact with them will know. And so, in real life no one ever has a ‘problem of other minds.’ All this was proved in detail by the studies of children by Piaget and his associates. He was also aware of Lévy-Bruhl’s studies of ‘the savage mind’, tribes whose members are ‘animists’, the stage of treating everything as living. But for some philosophers and psychologists, other people are alien beings whose ‘behaviour’ we have to ‘explain’. But the reality is otherwise. It is the ‘I-Thou’ relationship that is primary, especially that of child and mother, and not the distant third person, ‘I-Him over there’, or, even worse, ‘I-It’. True we can have particular problems in understanding other people, and also ourselves. Indeed, that may be the harder. But there is no general problem of ‘other minds’. Even animals recognise each other as being able to act, in friendly or hostile ways, across species and very different forms of animate life.

3. ‘The problem of knowledge’, in addition to those inappropriate presuppositions mentioned in (1) and (2), also results from two other mistaken presuppositions: that genuine knowledge must have a stem of necessary axioms and necessary deductions from them, as in mathematics, and not merely probable; and that there must be a clear line between knowledge and mere true belief.<sup>1</sup>

The general answer to any proposal that knowledge itself is a problem, all knowledge whatsoever, is like that to the foregoing pseudo-problems, that we could never know this because our knowing that

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<sup>1</sup> e.g., B. Russell, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1912.

A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, London, Penguin, 1956.

N. Williams, *Problems of Knowledge*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

all knowledge is problematic would itself be problematic. There can be problems within our various forms of knowledge: partial, contradictory or corrupt texts in history, and the seeming contractions in natural science such as the differing accounts of quantum physics. Likewise, some proposed forms of knowledge such as astrology, Mesmerism and its explanation by ‘animal spirits’, Freudian or Behaviourist psychology, can be dismissed as deluded wholly or in part, rightly or wrongly, but that is rationally possible only on the basis of belief in certain principles and presuppositions.

As for rationalism, it is obviously a dead duck except that there is tendency to turn everything into propositions in formal logic. But the necessarily true universal propositions that it needs from which to make necessary deductions are scarce in any empirical science.

As for clearly distinguishing knowledge from ‘mere’ true belief, the unresolved and unresolvable ‘Gettier problems’ show it is a vain pursuit. In addition, the persisting ‘standard’ definition of knowledge, ‘true belief supported by reasons or evidence’, leads to an infinite number of infinite regresses because the reasons or evidence must be both true and supportive, i.e., are either mere true belief at best or themselves items of knowledge. And thus, the regresses multiply and have no terminus in a self-evident truth from which true and supportive inferences can be strictly deduced, i.e., a return to rationalism.

4. ‘The problem of value’, that values are ‘queer’ and do not fit into any category, results from the presupposition that the category or form of existence is physical in some way or other. Thus, to be real and not illusion they must have some physical existence, such brain states and processes for thoughts. But consider meaning. Physical objects such as inscriptions, documents, enamel signs, sounds, gestures and bodily symptoms have, or can be given, meanings, but their meaning, if any, is itself not physical, although it is carried by physical means, such as sound waves when we speak. Now meaning is a value or disvalue, either by itself or in relation to something else. Hence values are not ‘queer’ for we recognise them every moment in our life: toothache as meaning in signifying that something is wrong with our teeth. It has disvalue in being painful but value in alerting us to do something to cure it or to have it extracted. When buying we add up the monetary value of goods and services and compare them with those of others, including, if we are wise, the ‘opportunity cost’ of not be able to spend our money also on something else, like a new car but not on improvements to the house, a recurrent neglect of impulse buyers. Monetary value is carried by bits of paper, metal or plastic or ‘0’s and ‘1’s on banks’ servers, but its real worth is what it can be exchanged for. We also recognise objects as beautiful or ugly; actions as helpful or harmful, just or unjust, obligatory or permissible or not to be performed, or people as reliable or unreliable, honest or dishonest, responsible or irresponsible; and we could not live or act without so doing.

5. Finally, ‘the problem of free will’ results from presupposing that all systems, especially the purely physical one of atoms and subatomic particles, are ‘closed’ and cannot be affected by others, i.e., that ‘downward causation’ is impossible. But again, at every moment of life we act, react or do nothing as we choose, with deliberation or acquired skill that needs no stopping to think about what to do, or from mere habit or impulse. We know the difference between pushing and being pushed, choosing and being overcome by desires and fears that we do not or cannot resist. Even domestic cats recognise the difference between their tails being accidentally and deliberately trodden on, and thus they respond, respectively, with a sharp *mrrrow!* or either by running away or by turning to attack with open claws. Any degree of intelligence gives some degree of choice.

But if philosophical ‘problems’ really are ones resulting from inappropriate presuppositions, is philosophy then redundant once we have exposed them, as with Wittgenstein and the exposure of mistakes of language? I suggest otherwise, and what it’s task should be is the practice of a genuine empiricism of reflection upon all our experiences starting, as the Delphi Oracle said, with ourselves, because it is obvious that all those who think that the above pseudo-problems are genuine ones, do not actually believe what they profess to believe, as shown by their actions and responses in life. Moreover, my experience includes my experience of others’ experiences so that both can enlarge, modify and correct the other.

From the above follows one particular task for philosophy, the articulation of not only the presuppositions of the particular sciences, human and natural, but also those upon which we all tacitly and acritically rely because any attempt to justify or criticise them necessarily involves reliance upon them: our basic and fundamental powers of perception, induction, memory and judgement. Thus, to try to distinguish true memory images from false ones requires the ability correctly to remember some of each and what distinguished them. These presuppositions upon which we can only acritically depend when testing particular cases, are what I call, extending Collingwood's account, 'Global Absolute Presuppositions'.<sup>2</sup> In turn that entails a fallibilist and fiduciary philosophy in which faith and belief are the basis of knowledge. It also suggests that philosophy, although it depends on the special sciences, human and natural, is concerned with what is universal and necessary: e.g., we all have some ideas about the past, our own and that of others, and thus a basic form of history in individual and collective memory; and some notions of what is the product of human action and what is not, and thus an embryonic natural science.<sup>3</sup> Not being an empirical special science, it follows that philosophy does not add to the body of empirical knowledge but aims to bring to consciousness and to articulate what we already know but usually do not know that we know it or do so only partially and confusedly.<sup>4</sup>

In turn it is a task of philosophy to consider how the objects of these forms of knowledge can fit together in a coherent world around us. Older philosophers did do that, as have more recent ones such as Michael Polanyi with his 'dual control' of a higher level's operations controlled by its own autonomous operational principles, but subject to the limits, the boundary conditions, set by the next lower level and to dislocations and breakdowns caused by the lower.<sup>5</sup> Errol E. Harris, in several books and especially *The Restitution of Metaphysics*,<sup>6</sup> used Collingwood's 'scale of forms' of levels of existence and an evolutionary and an Hegelian framework to show how the findings of special sciences from physics to theology can form a coherent universe. Far from being made redundant by the exposure of its self-induced 'problems', philosophy can return to these and other productive pursuits.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Philosophy as the Articulation of Absolute Presuppositions', *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2016. pp. 41-61.

Collingwood, R.G., *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940, Revised ed. with additional material, 1998. Chaps. IV and V.

<sup>3</sup> See Collingwood, 'Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XXV, 1924-5; and his pamphlet, *The Philosophy of History*, Historical Association, and London, G. Bell, 1930.

<sup>4</sup> See Collingwood, *Essay on Philosophical Method*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1933, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Polanyi. M., *The Tacit Dimension*. London, Routledge, New York, Doubleday, 1966, pp. 40-3.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, E. E., Amherst NY, Humanity Books, 2000.

## BOOK REVIEW

**David Walsh: *The Priority of the Person: Political, Philosophical, and Historical Discoveries***  
Notre Dame, IN. University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. 372 pages.  
ISBN: 9780268107406 pb, 9780268107430 ebook.



This is a very important book which builds upon the author's *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being* (2015). It is so rich in content and detail, that it would need at least a lengthy critical study to do it justice.

The argument of the book is that thinking about the person must begin and remain with the person, and not think *about* persons but *from* them. The person is more than what he is now, can transcend his present self, is inexhaustible, unique with his own dignity, and cannot be defined. Indeed, no adequate definition of a person can be formulated. Hence, we can know more of a person than we can say about him. But this requires a return to its roots in the Christian conception of the distinctive interiority of the person and the notions of 'soul' and 'mind', itself developed from Greek thought and drama, but all this has been forgotten. Yet a revival is possible with modern, i.e., present-day philosophy, and within the liberal democratic state and its basis in human, personal rights, despite the latter's ignorance of its own foundations, and its priority of theory over practice, which are self-destructive. Therefore, assertions of rights, as in the Declarations of them, tacitly appeal to their foundations but the only ones now current are those of the isolated person.

Part 2 shows modern philosophy going beyond but completing, Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Heidegger to Levinas and Derrida, and finally to Kierkegaard as, before his time, the culmination of that progress from consciousness to subject to person and the demands of the other. Finally, in Part 3, literary art and history, as in Solzhenitsyn, can reveal deeper truths of history, Popes Benedict and Francis open the way to the secular world via charity and justice as the basis of rights, science as a personal endeavour, and hope pointing the way to success when all hopes have lost.

I shall now list Chapter headings, and those of the three Parts into which they are divided, in order to show the many themes and topics treated in this book, and then add some comments of my own.

Chap. 1 The Priority of the Person as the Modern Differentiation

*Part 1 The Political Discovery*

Chap. 2. Are Freedom and Dignity Enough? A Reflection on Liberal Abbreviations

Chap. 3 The Unattainability of What We Live Within: Liberal Democracy

Chap. 4. The Person and the Common Good: Toward a Language of Paradox

- Chap. 5 John Rawls's Personalist Faith  
 Chap. 6 Dignity as Eschatological Concept  
*Part 2 The Philosophical Discovery*  
 Chap. 7 Voegelin's Path from Philosophy of Consciousness to Philosophy of the Person  
 Chap. 8. The Turn toward Existence as Existence in the Turn  
 Chap. 9. The Indispensability of Modern Philosophy  
 Chap. 10 The Turn to the Subject as the Turn to the Person  
 Chap. 11 Why Keirkegaard Is the Culminating Figure of the Modern Philosophical Revolution  
*Part 3 The Historical Discovery*  
 Chap. 12 Epic as the Saving Truth of History: Solzhenitsyn's *Red Wheel*  
 Chap. 13 Art and History in Solzhenitsyn's *Red Wheel*  
 Chap. 14 The Person as the Opening to the Secular World: Benedict and Francis  
 Chap. 15 Science Is Not Scientific  
 Chap. 16 Hope Does Not Disappoint

I wholeheartedly endorse, as any genuine personalist would, all that he has to say about the priority of the person which is prior to a person's existence because no definite time can be given to exactly when it begins, and throughout the ages care has been owed to the deceased person's mortal remains. As some contemporary Analytical philosophers have realised, any tight definition of personhood, such as having rationality and self-responsibility, raises problems about infancy, severe mental disorders, dementia and comas. Yet, as the author says, each person is more than we can say about him, both what he may reveal about himself in future in word or deed (i.e., his inexhaustibility), and what we may have glimpsed about him now without knowing that we now know this.<sup>1</sup> Try writing a reference for someone that conveys what he is really like.

The only fault I can find in the book is that while 'personalism' is mentioned a few times, Max Scheler is the only personalist mentioned, and that briefly. Indeed, these otherwise unmentioned personalists are said to use the language of things and not that of persons (p. 13). I have never come across any such error in the several strands of personalism with which I have become acquainted. And the modern differentiation did not begin in the 20th C. but at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th with Jacobi and Schelling.<sup>2</sup> Of course we cannot read nor say everything and selections have to be made. It would have been nice if in Chapter 16 the author had mentioned Gabriel Marcel, the great philosopher of hope.

Lastly, I am more sceptical about Declarations of Rights and other lists and Acts of 'human rights' because they are abstract and thus vague and exploitable by claimants and lawyers, often contradictory as the right of free speech and that of a fair trial, while those which are entitlements to something, such as paid holidays for the self-employed, never specify who is to provide them. Consider also Article 25.1 of the UN's Declaration of Universal Rights, which states that everyone has a right 'to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family'. Especially if someone cannot do that by his own efforts, who is to do it for him? And the underlying fault of all of them is that they are irresponsible, because the only duties are those imposed by them on other persons. The old theories of Natural Law were about duties first and foremost and only secondarily about rights, to act justly and then claim for justice when we experience injustice. Somehow in the 18th C. Natural Law became Natural Right.

All in all, I heartily recommend this book to all readers of *Appraisal*.

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<sup>1</sup> pp. 12ff. Here, as also with the internal problems and contradictions of Liberalism, and the defence of the market economy and the necessity of government, and at the end of Chap. 16, he converges with Michael Polanyi

<sup>2</sup> See, Jan Olof Bengtsson, *The Worldview of Personalism: Origins and Development*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.