

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

AND THE COMIC.

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AFLOAT.

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION.

"Il n'est pas de fait plus banal et plus étudié que le rire, il n'en est pas qui ait en le don d'exciter davantage la curiosité du vulgaire et celle des philosophes, il n'en est pas sur lequel on ait recueilli plus d'observations et bâti plus de théories, et avec cela il n'en est pas qui demeure plus inexpliqué on serait tenté de dire avec les sceptiques, qu'il faut être content de rire et de ne pas chercher à savoir pourquoi on rit d'autant que peut-être la réflexion tue le rire et qu'il serait alors contradictoire qu'elle en découvrit les causes." (1)

The opening sentence of Dugas' "Psychologie du Rire" is scarcely an encouragement to one contemplating the pursuit of this nimble-footed Spirit of Laughter which flits lightly in and out of our daily life, and yet, so

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(1) Quoted by Dr. Sigmund Freud: "Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious" (T. Fisher Unwin Ltd, London, 1916) p. 224 from Dugas "Psychologie du Rire" (1902) p.1.

tantalizingly vanishes when we would ask it whence it comes and whither it goes. Inscrutable as the Sphinx it sits by the roadside, and puts to the traveller the eternal riddle "Whence and what am I?" and, whether he succeed in his answer or whether he fail, the penalty of his audacity is always the same -- "le reflecion tue le rire," and a good joke is ruined.

Undaunted by the threat of such a peril, hosts of distinguished travellers, from Plato onwards, have sought a solution of the riddle; but it would appear that, although many contributions to the subject have been extremely valuable, and many theories propounded that cover quite well a limited area of the realm of laughter, no Oedipus has yet arisen whose answer has been such as to rid the curious world of the taunts of the Laughter - Sphinx. The field is so wide and its limits so ill-defined that the theory must be comprehensive indeed under which every "quip and crank" from the uttermost confines of the laughable will naturally and easily fall.

While we dare not hope to succeed where the keenest intellects of all times have met with only a qualified failure, we may perhaps, during the course of our work, stumble upon some new scrap of evidence to add to the mass already collected; and, whatever

be the result, a short study of this subject can scarcely fail to bring to light facts about the working of the human mind, which must for ever elude those who study only the serious side of the life of the "laughing animal." The most common criticism one meets with in entering upon a study of laughter, is that it is too trivial a subject to engage really serious attention. To this it may be replied that Freud had to combat exactly the same objection, when he commenced his work upon dreams, which is now being discussed in University and drawing-room throughout the world; and, while not for one moment contending that the psychology of laughter can ever become the topic of the day in either Lecture-hall or drawing-room, we nevertheless hold that it is a subject that challenges, and amply repays serious treatment. Hazlitt, no doubt, exaggerates when he writes that "to explain the nature of laughter and tears is to account for the condition of human life," (1) but certain it is that such an explanation merits more than the five or six lines that the writers on general psychology sometimes grudgingly spare it.

It would be advisable before commencing a study of laughter to give simple preliminary definitions of the special terms that will be in constant use throughout this thesis. Much of the vagueness and confus-

(1) William Hazlitt: "The English Comic Writers" Introductory Lecture on "Wit and Humour" (World's Classics Series, London) p.1.

ion that has arisen in the treatment of this subject would appear to have flowed from the looseness and inconsistency of the terminology applied.

Laughter may, for the present, be defined as a movement of some or all of the muscles of the face, especially those of the lips accompanied by deep inspirations and interrupted expiration of air from the lungs producing intermittent vocal sounds of varying character.

The Smile is generally recognised as being a weakened form of the laugh, affecting chiefly the muscles of the mouth and the expression of the eyes.

The Laughable comprises any object, idea, person or event that by some appeal, however faint, to the intellect, provokes or tends to provoke laughter or a smile. It must not be confused with the purely physiological causes of laughter, such, for example, as the action of laughing-gas, which do not necessarily include any appeal to consciousness. This distinction is one that we shall treat of more fully at a later stage. For our purposes

"the Laughable" will be practically synonymous with

The Comic, which, unless otherwise stated, will be understood in this wide sense of any object that, entering consciousness, tends to produce laughter. Many writers give to the Comic a much narrower signification, which we may later be called upon to discuss; but we are follow-

ing here the usage implicitly adopted by Bergson⁽¹⁾ and other authorities, who have, however, never given any explicit definition of the term.

The Ludicrous connotes the same as the Comic and the Laughable, to the more extreme cases of which the term is generally applied. A distinction is sometimes drawn between the Laughable and the other two terms: the Comic and the Ludicrous, it is said, involve an implicit reference to a norm or standard which is not contained in the Laughable. It is doubtful, however, whether common usage would justify such a distinction, and, unless otherwise stated, we shall not adhere to it in this thesis.

The Witty, the Humorous, the Comic (in the narrower sense) Satire, Irony etc. are all species of the Comic.

(1) Prof. Henri Bergson: "Laughter" translated by Brereton and Rothwell (Macmillan and Co. London, 1921.)

CHAPTER 11.

THE PYHSIOLOGY OF LAUGHTER & TICKLISHNESS.

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF LAUGHTER.

It may rightly be supposed that such a subject as ours will provide matter for endless controversy; and it will be necessary to give short descriptive and critical sketches of some of the leading theories propounded, before entering upon our own investigation of the phenomena concerned. There is, however, a certain amount of common ground upon which all theories must meet, notably the physiology of laughter, which, however, the majority of writers have ignored; and, although it must be admitted that investigation has not proceeded very far in this direction, a short expenditure of time here may later be found amply to repay us for our trouble.

Our preliminary definition of laughter is little more than a crude description of its outward physical manifestations, which portion of our subject has been so closely dealt with by Darwin⁽¹⁾ as to demand no attention here. A knowledge of certain

(1) Charles Darwin: "The Expression of the Emotions."
(John Murray, London, 1872) pp. 198-212.

internal physiological concomitants of a hearty laugh, however, may enable us the better to understand laughter in all its forms. Laughter is an interruption of the normal functioning of body and mind, and, as such, is accompanied by unusual excitement of certain of the bodily organs. Spencer propounded the theory that "laughter is a display of muscular excitement."⁽¹⁾ Undirected surplus nerve energy, he maintains, tends to find expression, firstly through those channels most frequently in use, and later through those less frequently stimulated. The organs of articulation and the muscles of the face are the first to be affected; the next are those of respiration, whilst, if there is still an excess of energy, it sets in motion first the smaller and then the larger muscles of the head, limbs, and trunk. Correspondingly, we have the different forms of the laugh, from the flickering smile to the uproarious paroxysms of "laughter holding both its sides." He then shows that this surplus nerve energy usually results from strong feeling, mental or physical, which is thus the "general cause of laughter," and goes on to demonstrate that, whereas painful feelings may at first tend to excite the physiological reactions characteristic of laughter, they ultimately have exactly the opposite effect. Pleasant mental or bodily feelings are thus left as most general causes of laughter.

 (1) Spencer: "Essays" Williams and Morgate, London, 1883.) Vol.1. Essay IV on "The Physiology of Laughter." p. 200.

Not all pleasureable feeling, however, causes laughter; it would appear that a certain degree of strength or suddenness, or both, together with the absence of counter-acting causes, is essential. The element of suddenness is often emphasized as the most essential attribute of any state of body or mind that is to result in laughter, and was evidently uppermost in the mind of Hobbes when he dubbed the "nameless passion," of which laughter is the expression, "sudden glory." (1) As will later be shown, this element, although usually present, is not so all-important as has been thought, and, even at the purely physical stage, cases are fairly common in which a gradual "rise of spirits" accompanying a feeling of slowly increasing bodily well-being find expression in laughter, after reaching a certain point of intensity. A friend of mine, whilst sun-bathing on the hot sand after a strenuous half-hour in the breakers, will lie silent for a while, and then burst out with a low gurgling laugh of contentment, usually accompanied by the exclamation, "Oh, but it's good to be alive!" In such a case as this, the life-tide, slowly rising for a comparatively long time, at last flows over in a ripple of laughter expressive of a pure "joie de vivre." Generally, of course, this energy is turned into more useful channels of work or play as it arises, and only a comparatively sud-

(1) Thomas Hobbes: "Human Nature." Collected Works.
(John Bohn, London, 1840) Vol.IV p.46.

den accession of pleasant bodily feeling will show any undirected surplus of nerve energy to be dissipated in laughter.

It is unnecessary for our purpose to examine the contentions of those writers who, from Aristotle to the present day, have held that "pleasure is the furtherance of life," (1) but certain it is that laughter is in some way connected with pleasure, and that this same process of the furtherance of life, if slightly accelerated above its customary speed, is capable of causing laughter.

At this point it may be found necessary to meet the criticism of those who deny the possibility of laughter being the result of purely physiological causes, and who, accordingly, identify the "laughter-producing" and the "comic." This identification is one that may be found implicitly assumed in the attitude of many of the writers upon the comic; but it would appear to be entirely disproved by the examination of such a simple phenomenon as the behaviour of certain patients under "laughing gas," administered for dental operations. This gas quickens the vital functioning of the body, and produces a kind of transient intoxication, sometimes accompanied by uncontrollable laughter of which the patient is usually entirely unaware. Sully, in this connection, quotes the case of his son who experienced an irresistible desire to laugh

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(1) Quoted from Kant by Alexander Bain: "The Senses and the Intellect." p.674.

whilst riding a horse without a saddle. (1) This case, although not bearing directly upon our main contention, is nevertheless, an undoubted instance of laughter caused by purely physical means. To an inexperienced rider, without a saddle, the trotting of a horse would cause intermittent respiratory movements very similar to those of laughter. Sully also gives the case of his daughter who experienced the same impulse at the end of her first mountain climb. (2) Although it is possible that some mental element, a joyous idea of difficulties overcome, may have entered in here, a part of the laughter was undoubtedly due to a surplus of bodily energy resulting from an acceleration of bodily functioning by the strenuous exercise. This energy, no longer required for the actual work of climbing, gave rise to an otherwise inexplicable volume of laughter. Much of the laughter of the "jolly good fellow" who has been tippling either in moderation or to excess seems to result from the temporary speeding up of the whole system by alcohol. Professor Höffding quotes Ludovicus Vives (De Anima lib.iii) as relating of himself "that, on first tasting food after a long fast, he could not refrain from laughter." (3) Höffding mentions in this connection, the purely physiological laughter that accompanies the shivering resulting

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 (1) James Sully: "An Essay on Laughter" (Longmans, Green & Coy, London, 1902) p.42.

(2) Sully: op.cit. p.42.

(3) Harald Höffding: "Outlines of Psychology" tr by Mary E. Lowndes (Macmillan, London 1912) p.291.

from severe cold, and also recounts of Roman gladiators, wounded in the diaphragm, that they often died laughing. Such cases as the last-named, are, of course, extreme, and, resulting as they do, from a mere externally produced spasmodic twitching of the diaphragm, can find no place in any psychological theory of laughter. It is, however, but a short step from the dying gladiator, to the case of Gully's son riding bareback, and then to his daughter laughing at the completion of her first mountain climb. This series shows a gradual increase in the psychical element present, although the purely physiological causes still continue to act even after the addition of mental factors.

It seems natural to conclude that physiological causes are at work in producing laughter not only in those cases from which all mental elements are absent, but also as assisting or inhibiting agents where intellectual factors are apparently the sole causes. Your conventional laughter-loving type is the hearty round-faced, full-blooded man, bubbling over with good health and good spirits; whilst, on the other hand, any man finds it extremely difficult to appreciate a joke after suffering for two or three days from acute neuralgia. Laughter depends very largely upon bodily health, although we have here, of course, such glaring exceptions as - - - "Thomas Hood, who made more puns and spat more "blood than any other man."

We might, perhaps, in generalizing upon our very short treatment of the physiological pre-conditions of laughter, consider ourselves warranted in saying that, in so far as laughter results or tends to result, from purely physiological causes, it arises from a feeling of bodily well-being, usually generated with some degree of suddenness; but, before going so far as this, it would be advisable for us to glance at the other side of the picture, the re-action namely, of laughter upon the organic functionings.

It is a common belief, expressed in many maxims, mottoes and popular songs, that laughter is conducive to bodily, as well as mental well-being, and, unlike too many popular beliefs, this would appear to contain a large measure of truth, as is testified by recognised authorities. Sully here says, "Laughter may owe a part of its benign influence on our bodily state to the fact that it produces a considerable increase of vital activity, by way of heightened nervous stimulation." (1) In this he appears to follow Spencer, who, long before, had held that "there seems to be a good physiological basis for the popular notion (2) that mirth-creating excitement facilitates digestion." (3)

(1) Sully: Op.cit. p.36.

(2) Expressed for example, in the old music-hall ditty:-
"Laugh before your dinner, laugh before your tea, laugh
before you go to bed, and happy you will be."

(3) Spencer: Op.cit. p.207.

This quickening of the vital activity of the body is brought about largely as a result of the interference, by a hearty laugh, with the normal course of the respiration. "The sound of laughter is produced by a deep inspiration followed by short interrupted spasmodic contractions of the chest and especially of the diaphragm."⁽¹⁾

The deepened inspirations alone are sufficient, by reason of the resulting increased oxygenation of the blood, to produce many of the beneficial results that generally follow from actual physical exercise, and may even cause something of that momentary dizziness that often accompanies deep-breathing exercises. The respiratory movements of laughter, however, are such that they also have a most profound effect upon the circulation of the blood. Sully, in his excellent short account of this matter,⁽²⁾ follows an article on "Organic Processes and Consciousness" by Angell and Thompson in the "Psychological Review."

These investigators discovered that a hearty laugh is accompanied by a most sudden and marked increase of capillary blood-pressure resulting from accelerated circulation, which phenomenon they explained in the following manner. The intermittent sound of laughter is caused by alternate opening and partial closing of the glottis, so that the air leaves the mouth in short sharp blasts, somewhat similar to, although not as violent as those emitted in coughing, where the glottis is entirely closed.

 (1) Darwin: Op.cit. p.202.

(2) Sully@ Op. cit. p. 33.

The effect of these sudden stoppages of a strong current of air, is to increase the pressure within the chest, and so to check the flow of blood from the veins into the heart. This dammed-up venous blood, when the pressure is removed during the long inspiration that follows, rushes with increased force and rapidity into the chambers of the heart; and so the whole of the circulation is "speeded up" as a result of these temporary stoppages during expiration.

Without our stopping to deal with the minor benefits that must follow from improved digestion, as mentioned by Spencer, and the stimulation, by violent laughter of muscles seldom used, we may feel safe in asserting that laughter reacts upon the system in such a way as to produce an acceleration of its functions, and a consequent marked rise in the feeling of bodily well-being. In this way the close bond of connection between bodily well-being and laughter is still further strengthened. A rise in the vital energy of the organism tends to issue in laughter, which re-acts upon the bodily functioning in such a way as still further to intensify those pleasant feelings from which it sprang. The peculiar nature of this reciprocal action is still more clearly brought out when we are told that violent sobbing and the other expressions of bodily weakness or ill-functioning have exactly the opposite effect to

laughter. This "alliance for mutual benefit" between laughter and well-being is, from its very nature, one that must have undergone, and must still further undergo a process of gradual strengthening in the history of the individual and the race, although, as will be noticed later, strong counteracting influences are often at work.

TICKLISHNESS.

Many of the writers who have dealt with our subject, have commenced their treatment with a discussion of the laughter evoked by tickling, a phenomenon whose outward characteristics are too well-known and have been too fully discussed to demand anything but a rapid survey here. Tickling consists of the intermittent stimulation of certain tactual nerve-endings in such a way as to produce in the subject peculiar sensations, and muscular reactions in the form of laughter, shrinking and defensive movements. It has long attracted the writer on laughter as being one of the simplest means of inducing the phenomenon, and so the best starting-point for his observations. It has been closely studied also, because it is highly probable that the essential laughter-causing element in tickling may still be found to be present in those more intellect-

ual sources of laughter we usually call the Comic.

Theories of the causes of ticklishness and its origin in the development of the race have been many and varied: they range from the content-
 ion of Dr. Stanley Hall, quoted by Sully,⁽¹⁾ that it is a survival of a reaction of escape from bodily parasites made by our prehuman ancestors, to its complete reduction to a sexual basis of explanation by Havelock Ellis.⁽²⁾ The latter holds that it serves the double purpose of exciting erotic feelings, and of inducing the female to protect her body from the sexual advances of the male. Neither of these theories, of course, gives any account of the laughter which always accompanies successful stimulation of the ticklish areas. Sully himself, following a path first pointed out by Dr. L. Robinson, seems to have arrived much nearer to a true account of the origin of tickling and the laughter accompanying it, than have most enquirers.⁽³⁾ Tickling, he says, is originally a form of playful combat preparatory to the serious work of life, and the laughter of the mock-combatants is a necessary sign by means of which each lets the other know that he is only "funning." There is an undoubted element of truth in this theory, but it

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 (1) Sully: Op.cit. pp.178-9.

(2) Havelock Ellis: "Studies in the Psychology of Sex." (F.A.Davis Coy, Philadelphia, 1919) Vol.IV. Ch.II. on "Ticklishness."

(3) Sully: Op.cit. p.50ff.

would appear that Sully credits with too great a degree of intelligence, the pre-human ancestors who developed this habit of laughing during playful combat, which they have passed on to us, their heirs, in instinct. He fails to show how any such habit could have first arisen or acquired meaning, nor does he make it plain why laughter should have been chosen as the play-sign, and not one of a hundred other possible reactions.

Whatever flaws there may be in Sully's account of the origin of laughter during tickling, his explanation of the phenomenon as exhibited by mankind at the present stage of evolution would appear to be extremely feasible; but a statement of this theory should be preceded by a short survey of the facts that any theory of ticklishness must meet.

Writers are, with a few exceptions,⁽¹⁾ agreed that there is a distinct mental element in ticklishness and the laughter evoked by tickling. "The determining conditions include, in addition to a sequence of sensations, a higher psychical factor, namely an apperceptive process or assignment of meaning to the sensations."⁽²⁾ "The mental element in tickling is indicated by the fact that even a child, in whom ticklishness is highly devel-

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(1) Höffding; for example says, "These phenomena (laughter excited by tickling) must at once be set down as reflex actions." Op.cit. p.291.
(2) Sully: Op.cit. p.59.

oped, cannot tickle himself."⁽¹⁾ Darwin is noteworthy in that whilst referring to the laughter of tickling as "manifestly a reflex action," he admits that "the mind must be in a pleasurable condition."⁽²⁾ That this mental element is really the strongest factor in tickling may be seen by anyone who will take the trouble to compare the behaviour of a child in a "ticklish mood," when every movement of his father's hand towards him, results in peals of laughter, with that of the same child in a sulky or frightened state of mind, or when tickled by a too presumptuous stranger, whose approaches are met with tears and screams. It is a common thing also, to hear people say that they are ticklish "only when they like," that is when they give themselves up to the fun of it.

On such a basis as this, Sully built up his theory:⁽³⁾ tickling is a kind of good-natured playful attack, which, by reason of its uncertainty and unexpectedness, at first throws the child into a state of mild alarm. The first shock of the attack over, however, he perceives its harmless nature, and his relief finds expression in laughter. This explanation is made use of by Sully, in proving his general "play-theory" of laughter; but he makes little or no attempt

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(1) Havelock Ellis: Op.cit. p.13.

(2) Darwin: Op.cit. p.201.

(3) Sully: Op.cit. pp. 63-4.

to link the laughter of tickling, on to the laughter resulting from purely physiological causes. The two, as we shall see, are by no means so different in nature as would at first appear.

The laughter of tickling is, in reality, only a repetition on a slightly higher plane of the humble form. It results from a sudden realization of well-being, where one had momentarily half-expected bodily hurt. Our explanation has here taken a step upwards from the physiological sphere to a realm of intellect which is, however, still concerned with the preservation and enhancing of that bodily welfare which is the sole cause of laughter at a lower level. While life runs its even course, the pressure of the vital energy may not be intense enough to burst the bonds of seriousness, but, after the momentary depression caused by the approach of a superior and apparently antagonistic force, it rebounds with a new vigor, in peals of joyous laughter. Man is a kind of vital Jack - in - the - box, who does not realize the power of the spring within him until a big hand has pressed him down, and closed the lid for a moment. Laughter at the physiological stage, shows a striking resemblance to that accompanying tickling. The laughter expressive of the pure joy of physical life is seen to a marked degree, in the convalescent who is rapidly recovering from the effects of a long illness,

or even in the child whose aching tooth has suddenly and miraculously ceased to trouble him.

It is interesting, in this connection, to note that statement made by Dr. Drever to the effect that if the impulse to express either the instinct of self-elation, or that of self-subjection be baulked by any external agent, the emotion corresponding to the other of the pair will be set up, ⁽¹⁾ and to compare with this the case of tickling, where a state of depression, caused by a temporarily antagonistic and superior force, is succeeded by a period of elation when that force turns out to be utterly harmless, and, indeed, to be merely pandering to one's own pleasure.

Another sidelight, this time from the physiological side, is thrown upon this portion of our subject by Ewald Hecker, ⁽²⁾ who attempted to explain tickling and the laughter accompanying it, on purely physiological lines. The alternation of pressure and release that constitutes the act of tickling "has as a consequence, a reflex stim-

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 (1) Dr. J. Drever: "Instinct in Man", (Cambridge University Press, 1921), p.192. The two cases are not exactly parallel, of course, but I just touch upon the matter here in order to open up the way for a fuller treatment at a later stage.

(2) Whose work, "The Physiology and Psychology of Laughter and the Comic" is, unfortunately unprocureable in New Zealand. This treatment is from quotations given by Höfding (Op.cit.p.291.) and Ribot: "The Psychology of the Emotions." (Walter Scott Company London)
 p.356-7.

ulation of the sympathetic nerves, which shows itself in a rhythmic contraction of the blood vessels." (1)

This results in a rhythmic inhibition of the flow of blood to the brain, which would thus pour the whole of its blood back to the heart much too quickly for the constricted arteries to remedy the deficiency were it not for the compensatory action of laughter. Laughter, as has already been shown, tends alternately to impede and to accelerate the flow of venous blood into the thorax, the two processes corresponding to the expiration and the inspiration respectively. Thus we find that the contact-movement of tickling, which causes a contraction of the blood-vessels and a restriction in the supply of blood to the brain, results also in an increased pressure in the thorax, and a decreased flow of blood from the brain. It is only when the interruption of the contact frees the restricted arteries that the inspiration allows the blood freely to drain off into the heart. This physiological explanation of tickling will be seen to correspond very closely to our explanation on the psychical side, although it is not here suggested that the two can be in any way combined. However much truth

(1) Höfding: Op.cit. p. 291.

there may be in Hecker's theory, it errs in ignoring all spiritual elements; but we would only point out that it utilizes, on the physiological side, the same series of events that we have described on the mental plane, a depression in the feeling of bodily well-being, followed by a sudden rebound that restores the organism to its normal state of healthy functioning, or, to be more correct, to a momentary state somewhat above the normal.

CHAPTER III.

THEORIES OF THE COMIC.

Already we have blundered, somewhat clumsily perhaps, over controversial ground, and, if we are to hope for any measure of success in our efforts to travel a little further along the road than others have done, we must spend a short time in examining the tracks which they have made, lest we should stumble into the pitfalls dug for them in addition to the ones especially prepared for ourselves.

There have been, in the history of thought, two main lines of answer to the Laughter - Sphinx's riddle, both of which have numbered amongst their adherents some extremely keen minds. The general attitude of the first school is, perhaps, best expressed by Hobbes: "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly." (1) All explanations of this type, have been dubbed "Theories of Degradation", although, as

(1) Thomas Hobbes: Op.cit. p. 46.

will be seen, the idea has taken widely diverse forms in different writers. It is to the German schools of psychologists and philosophers that we owe the second type of answer, the Intellectual Theory or Theory of Incongruity, which, broadly speaking, asserts that the laughable is to be found in the recognition of an incongruity between two objects or situations. Up till quite recent times these were practically the sole contestant theories on the field, but, of late years, others have been evolved, guided, only too often, by a desire for novelty rather than by a careful examination of all the facts. A brief historical survey and criticism of each of the main theories is probably the best introduction to a study of the Comic.

1. THEORY OF DEGRADATION. -----

Whilst one dare not number Plato amongst the definite upholders of this theory, it is of interest to note that he held that the object of laughter lay in self-conceit allied with ignorance or weakness of some kind. "The vain conceit of beauty, of wisdom and of wealth are ridiculous if they are weak.

Those of them (the self-conceited) who are weak and unable to revenge themselves when they are laughed at, may be truly called ridiculous."⁽¹⁾ Aristotle also evidently inclined in this direction when he defined the laughable as that which has to do with what is a deformed or mean, but not painful or destructive.

The real originator of this theory appears to have been Thomas Hobbes, who finds the cause of laughter in "a sudden conception of some ability in him that laugheth", ⁽²⁾ gained by a comparison of himself with one who is in some way his inferior. He adds, however, that laughter is to be found mostly in those "who are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves, who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour by observing the imperfections of other men."⁽³⁾ Although he makes some very pertinent remarks about laughter in the couple of pages allotted to the subject, Hobbes does not attempt to carry his treatment out to its logical conclusion, or to offer any of the explanations and emendations that

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(1) Plato: "Philebus." Jowett IV. p.623.

(2) Hobbes: "Human Nature." p.46.

(3) Hobbes: "Leviathan," (Collected Works; John Bohm; London, 1840) Vol IV. p.46.

every crude general theory demands.

Hobbes was followed by Alexander Bain for whom "the occasion of the Ludicrous is the Degradation of person or interest possessing dignity in circumstances that excite no other emotion." (1) The pleasure derived from degrading, he refers to either the "sentiment of Power, direct or sympathetic," or "the release from a state of Constraint", whilst, in another place, he mentions an outburst of laughter as constituting a frequent accompaniment of the "emotion of Power." (2)

This theory of Hobbes and Bain will be seen, at a glance, to account for much of the laughter which comes within our everyday experience, but, even in the form given by the latter, it is not at all clear how they would go on to apply it to some of the subtle laughter of wit and humour, or to many of the forms of "group-laughter." They make no attempt, however, to follow their theory up, deeming the subject too trivial, no doubt, to engage for long, the serious attention of philosophers. (3)

(1) Alexander Bain: "Mental and Moral Science."

(Longmans Green & Co. London, 1884) p.315.

(2) Ibid: p. 257.

(3) Since the completion of most of this thesis, a recent work has come to hand which would appear, to

(3) (Continued)

some extent, to follow out the Theory of Degradation to its logical conclusion. It is Dr. Boris Sidis' "The Psychology of Laughter" (Appleton and Company, New York, 1917.) This book, I may say, was unprocureable in New Zealand, and reached me too late to influence the writing of this thesis, but a few references to it will be found in my later pages. Dr. Sidis devotes himself to the extension, by means of many excellent examples and minor rules, of his central position, which is best expressed in his own words: "We laugh from strength and we laugh at weakness. Laughter arises from the sense of freedom of mental activities. We laugh from consciousness of our superior power when we see the weakness of the inferior." (p.80.) And again, "There is laughter of enjoyment the more the difficult becomes easy; but the more the easy is difficult, the more occasion for laughter, or derision. Shall we say that the one is the ascending laughter, the laughter of triumph, and the other the reverse, the descending laughter, the laughter over the defeated?" (p.23.)

THEORY OF INCONGRUITY.

2.

Since, as has been said, most of the upholders of the Theory of Incongruity have been Germans, many of the writings upon this aspect of our subject are beyond our reach, which fact, considering the total inadequacy of the majority of these theories to explain the phenomena, need not worry us as much as might be supposed. It is a characteristic of German schools of thought to explain in terms of pure reason; and these rational explanations, to the English type of mind, occupied as it now is with the instinctive bases of life, often appear absurdly insufficient.

Kant is the first great champion of the Theory of Incongruity as providing an explanation of the comic. For him the essence of the comic lies in dissolved expectation, involving some absurdity; the laughable consists in the sudden perception of an incongruity between the expected and the actual, understanding by the "expected" everything that can, without jarring, find a place in the "apperceptive mass." "Laughter," he says, "is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly

reduced to nothing."⁽¹⁾ Schopenhauer puts practically the same idea in a slightly different way, when he says that "the source of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and therefore unexpected, subsumption of an object under a conception which in other respects is different from it, and accordingly the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it, thus between the abstract and the concrete object of perception."⁽²⁾

Professor Lipps, following these two writers, prefers, however, a type of the theory which involves what he terms "internal incongruity." For him, the incongruity no longer exists between two separate states, say two concepts, or a concept and a percept, but between two distinct and contrary elements in the same presentation. His typical example, so ably discussed by Sully,⁽³⁾ is that of the child wearing his father's tall hat, or the father wearing the little cap of his son. It is in the absurd nature of this unnatural connection of the big and the little that the mind finds material for laughter.

(1) Kant: "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment." tr by J.C.Meredith, (Oxford, 1911) p.199.

(2) Arthur Schopenhauer: "The World as Will and Idea" tr. by Haldane & Kemp. (Kegan Paul, London, 1909) Vol. II. p. 271

(3) Op.cit. pp. 9 -17.

All the forms of this theory, like most of the explanations of the comic put forward at various times, can quite justly be met with the double criticism that they exclude much that is most certainly comic, at the same^{time} that they include much that could, by no stretch of the imagination, be considered such. As Bain points out, "inequality of means to ends, discord, disproportion, falsehood, are incongruous but not necessarily ludicrous: an idiot ruling a nation is highly incongruous, but not laughable."⁽¹⁾ On the other hand it is surely stretching the connotation of "incongruity" to meaningless lengths to make it the essential quality in the laughter of the victor gazing down upon his conquered foe, or the merriment of a city crowd when a dignified policeman slips, and falls upon the pavement.

Were the Theory of Incongruity a correct explanation of the ludicrous, we should expect, that, once a joke had been heard or a funny situation sensed, it would, from that moment, cease to provoke laughter in the individual perceiving it. There is no longer any expectation to be dissolved, or any sudden incongruity to be sprung upon the reason;

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(1) Bain: Op.cit. p.315.

the mind knows what is coming, and so cannot be surprised into a laugh. As a matter of fact this is often found to be the case, especially in the more ephemeral kinds of wit; a pun or an epigram tends to lose its "bite" after the first time of hearing. That this is by no means a universal rule, however, is shown by the long and hearty life of some of the old "chestnuts" that have been chuckled over for the last couple of decades or more. Some jokes depend for their force upon the suddenness and unexpectedness with which they are sprung upon us; others gain their hold by their appeal to some deep-seated prejudice or feeling within the heart of man. Especially is this noticeable in the realm of literature: it is difficult to raise a smile during a second reading of Oscar Wilde's extremely witty play "On the Importance of Being Earnest", whilst Goldsmith's "Vicar of Wakefield" is a never-failing fount of bubbling laughter to the lover of quiet humour. Even the most hackneyed witticism or absurdity, however, is capable of affording us immense delight if we ourselves are telling the story to an appreciative audience. There is quite a common type of so-called humourist who will, with great glee, recount his slender stock of three or four pet jokes to

every acquaintance of railway train or dining table, and will find such occasions to afford him a bottomless well of laughter. He in himself is a sufficient rebuttal of any theory that would find the essence of the laughable in any sudden conception of an unexpected incongruity.

It is by no means impertinent to ask Lipps and the Intellectual School why the perception of an incongruity should result in the particular physical reaction which we call laughter. Why should it not call forth any of the other reactions of which man is capable? The Intellectualists explain the comic by reference to the incongruous, but they show no necessary connection between this and the comic as defined by us in terms of laughter. As will later be seen, the Theory of Incongruity is here far inferior to certain developments of the older Theory of Degradation.

III. BERGSON'S THEORY.

Henri Bergson was one of the first writers to give to laughter a social significance; for him it is a weapon wielded by society against recalcitrant

members whose sins are not such as to warrant legal punishment or social ostracism. There is, as a result of the working of some mental law of inertia, always a tendency for men's actions to become mechanical and automatic. Necessary as this process of habit-formation is at the lower levels of action, when it begins to creep into the performance of more important acts it becomes a distinct menace to society. That society may flourish it is essential that its members should be constantly adapting themselves to their environment and their environment to themselves, and any tendency towards merely mechanical reactions is at once seen and checked by society. As a rule the fault is not grave enough to call down upon itself the law of the State, although, in cases where the results are serious, the individual may incur a charge of "culpable negligence". Neither does society feel called upon to boycott a man for mere absentmindedness, but some correction must be applied. So society laughs.

The ultimate cause of laughter is thus seen to be the perception of a "certain mechanical rigidity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability, and the living pliable-

ness of a human being."⁽¹⁾ That is laughable which tends to travel off at a tangent whilst society is whirling in a circle, so that absentmindedness becomes, for Bergson, the typical form of the comic. He gives as an example, the case of a man who, not noticing a stone in his path, stumbles and falls. The passers-by burst into roars of laughter, which is really the expression of society's criticism at the conduct of one of its members who is so lost to the world as to fail to notice the obstacle in his way. It must not be supposed, of course, that laughter is, without exception, a moral influence, for it is conformity to the customs of the social group, rather than to the tenets of morality, that society demands. Bergson is of the opinion, however, that the general influence of laughter is good rather than bad.

This account of laughter will appear very one-sided and incomplete unless we mention the three conditions insisted by Bergson at the beginning of his book.⁽²⁾

(a) "The Comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human." If we laugh at non-human

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(1) Bergson: Op.cit. p.10.

(2) Ibid: pp. 3 - 7.

objects, it is only because we have detected in them some human attitude or expression. It is thus that we may laugh at the turnip-and-candle ghost of the small boy.

(b) Absence of feeling is essential to the Comic, for its appeal is to pure intelligence.

(c) Laughter is always laughter in a group in which no one outside the group can join.

Since various points in our quarrel with Bergson's theory will appear throughout the course of this thesis, a very brief criticism will here suffice. Brilliantly original as this theory is, it is only by dint of much squeezing and distortion that its author can fit into it all the facts which he has set out to explain. He works out a technique, which he turns into a kind of pack-horse, whose function it is to carry hypotheses, proved in a few instances at the lower levels of the laughable, into the highest realms of the Comic. He finds, for instance, that the mechanism of comic situations is based upon the three processes of repetition, inversion and reciprocal interference of series, and having, by dint of much stretching, fitted examples of wit, or what he calls "the Comic in Words", under one or other of these heads, he assumes that he has

proved his main thesis as far as wit is concerned, although, by this time the reader has lost all touch with the mechanical rigidity from which he started.

Commencing from an explicit statement of his main theory he begins to apply it to wider and ever wider circles, each time dropping a little of its meaning, until, when we at last reach the outer confines of the Comic, we are at a loss to find on our pack-horse, any of the baggage with which we so hopefully started out.

Another instance of this gradual movement from the originally meaningful to the almost meaningless is to be seen in Bergson's attempt to found adult's appreciation of the Comic upon the child's laughter at the antics of such toys as the Jack-in-the-box, and the dancing-Jack. It is surely bordering upon the ludicrous to try to prove that the scene in "Don Quixote", where "the mule-driver strikes Sancho, who belabours Maritornes, upon whom the innkeeper falls etc.", gains its comic element from an implicit comparison with childhood's memory of the ever-growing snowball which we have all laboured to build. Yet it is by establishing such a connection that Bergson attempts to transfer

the rigid and mechanical nature of the snowball to the farcical *mêlée* in the attic.

Even in those cases in which Bergson applies his touchstone of mechanism more directly, it is by no means sure that other and contrary theories would not supply an equally satisfactory explanation. In dealing with the Comic element in bodily deformities, which is most commonly espied and expressed by children and the lower races of men, he maintains that laughter here arises from the perception that the hump or the squint might well have been acquired by some mechanical habit of holding the normal body in a wrong position.⁽¹⁾ Thus society laughs that its members may beware of developing humpbacks or squints. Any writer, without a theory to prove, who had seen a group of school children mocking the mentally- or bodily-deformed butt of the neighbourhood, would realize the futility of crushing such a case into any brilliant new hypothesis. When the existent Theory of Degradation offers a far more feasible explanation to anyone who does not shun the old as such.

This criticism bears even more strongly upon Bergson's explanation of our laughter at the peculiar dress of another age or country: ordinarily,

(1) Bergson: Op.cit. p.23.

he holds, a man's clothes are taken as a part of his living moving body, but, as soon as he appears "yellow-stockinged and cross-gartered", we perceive that his dress is merely a mechanical disguise of his real self, and we laugh because that which was living is now dead.⁽¹⁾ To me this certainly seems to be the same superior laughter as that which the British sailor levelled at the Frenchmen who called a cabbage 'chou' (shoe) "when he knew the blessed thing was a cabbage."

To take still another example, Bergson explains the laughter caused by the "slapstick" antics of a clown tumbling and leaping in the circus ring as arising from a growing impression of his rigidity, of his likeness to a thing rather than a person. We would certainly prefer to lean in the other direction, and find some theory based upon his excessive liveliness, and the very evident fact that he is discharging a surplus of nervous and mental energy. On one occasion, I heard a house "brought down" with a simple joke whose technique consisted in the exact reversal of Bergson's process, namely, the attributing of human qualities to a piece of mechanism.-- "A man whose Ford car, or "Tin Lizzie", had been stolen,

(1) Bergson: Op.cit. p.39.

inserted in the agony column of a daily newspaper, the appeal, "Lizzie, come home! All is forgiven." Bergson might, of course, reply that the comic element here lies in the implied mechanization of the usual type of advertisement appearing in this column, but this is surely a very roundabout way when far simpler explanations are possible.

IV. FREUD'S THEORY. *****

Anyone possessing even a moderate knowledge of Dr. Freud's general psychological theory, could make a fairly safe guess as to the principles laid down in his treatise on Wit, but he might not be prepared for the very close parallel which Freud draws between wit-work and dream-work. The writer evolves a very complicated wit-technique which he shows to be very largely the same as that put forward in his "Interpretation of Dreams." The main processes in the formation of a witty saying, as in dream formation, are condensation, displacement and indirect representation. As an example of the first of these processes, he quotes a poor relation of Baron

Rothschild as saying "Rothschild treated me just like an equal, quite famillionaire in fact," and it is very noticeable that his whole treatment of this portion of his subject closely resembles the opening chapters on slips of the tongue in his "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis."

The technique of wit having been shown to be to a large extent identical with that of dreams and everyday slips and mistakes, it is quite easy to go on to show that its function has much in common with the functions of these other phenomena, and is, in fact, the gratification of a tendency which would otherwise remain ungratified, the discharge of psychic energy which would otherwise remain dammed up.

Now the damming up of any psychic energy implies the existence of another more powerful sum of energy, whose function it is to guard the undesirable mass of feeling. If by any means this first energy should slip out under the cloak of a witticism, the guardian-energy at once becomes superfluous, and must find some medium of discharge. This medium is laughter, which thus represents "the static energy utilized in the inhibition - - - now sudden-

ly become superfluous." (1) Correspondingly we have a sudden accession of pleasure, which always results from the conversion of static energy into actual dynamic energy. It is thus that the pleasure and the laughter which accompany wit are derived.

A distinction drawn by Freud between "harmless" wit and "tendency" wit is one that will ^{of} prove/great use to us in the treatment of our subject, although we cannot agree with him as regards the connotations he gives to these terms. (2)

Harmless wit he defines as wit for its own sake, wit which serves no other particular purpose. Tendency wit, on the other hand, is wit which provides an outlet for some tendency or urge whose normal path of discharge is closed. Freud gives four types of such wit : - exhibitionistic or obscene wit, aggressive or hostile wit, cynical wit and sceptical wit, any of which may make full use of wit-technique in order to express the urge they represent. The two last-named types, it will be seen, might well be classed under aggressive wit.

Corresponding to the distinction between

(1) Freud: Op.cit. p. 229.

(2) Op.cit. p.128 - 137.

harmless and tendency wit, is one between "fore-pleasure" and "removal pleasure" which terms represent the pleasure arising from the above two types of wit respectively, ⁽¹⁾ In harmless wit, the fore-pleasure is the only pleasure, and represents, like the pleasure of tendency wit, an economy of expenditure in energy. In serious speech reason is for ever on guard to prevent absurdities, and to ensure that the true meaning of a word or sentence shall be the sole reason for its utterance. But in a witticism, reason is avoided, and the mind begins to play with words and phrases regardless of their true logical signification. The much-despised pun is a splendid example of this : mere superficial sound resemblances are taken as the basis of association, and the controlling power of rational thought is thrown to the winds. Harmless wit thus represents a temporary escape from the control of reason. Reason, apparently, once befooled, "joins in the fun" in the form of laughter. In tendency-wit, this pleasure and laughter arising from the mere technique of the witticism are also

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 (1) Op.cit. p. 210 - 12.

present, but they are almost eclipsed by the pleasure that results from the freeing of a powerful urge now for a short time allowed expression. This is the "removal-pleasure" of tendency wit.

Freud's rather rambling discussion of wit is, perhaps, best summed up in his own words, in which he reviews the history of its development in the individual. "It (wit) begins as play in order to obtain pleasure from the free use of words and thoughts. As soon as the growing reason forbids this senseless play with words and thoughts it turns to the jest or joke in order to hold to these sources of pleasure, and in order to be able to gain new pleasure from the liberation of the absurd. In the role of harmless wit it assists the thoughts and fortifies them against the impugment of the critical judgment, whereby it makes use of the principle of intermingling the pleasure sources. Finally it enters into the great struggling suppressed tendencies in order to remove inner inhibitions in accordance with the principle of fore-pleasure. Reason, critical judgment and suppression, these are the forces which it combats in turn. - - - - The pleasure which it produces, be it play pleasure or removal pleasure, can at all times, be traced to the economy of psychic

energy in so far as such a conception does not contradict the nature of pleasure, and proves itself productive also in other fields." (1)

Although Freud's chief concern is with the psychology of wit, he adds a final chapter on the Comic, which term, however, he makes no attempt to define, treating it sometimes as a genus under which "wit" is a species, and sometimes as a cognate species with wit and humour. The pleasure derived from the Comic arises in very much the same way as in the case of pure wit, by an economy of psychic expenditure. Now, however, the economy is not one of inhibition but an "economy of thought". In witnessing any man in a comic attitude, situation or action, we unconsciously compare the amount of energy he is expending with the amount that we should put forth were we in his position; and from the surplus of one of these amounts over the other springs the pleasure and laughter of the Comic. An example may serve to make this very doubtful theory a little clearer. A man in the street, engaged in an animated conversation, gesticulates and suits his actions to his words in a way that we rightly consider ludicrous. The laughter resulting in the onlookers

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(1) Op.cit. p. 212.

arises in the following manner: we instinctively tend to imitate any action that we see, and an innervation corresponding to the act to be imitated is set up in the central cerebral areas. Almost immediately, however, we see that the man is expending far more energy than is necessary to the achievement of his end, and we have an idea of the much easier way in which we would carry on the conversation. Now, since the formation of an idea of a simple act demands a much smaller expenditure of energy than that of the idea of a larger and more complicated act, it follows that we have a surplus of innervation-energy when we discard the motor-idea of ourselves gesticulating as we talk for the simpler idea of ourselves conversing quietly. This surplus of ideomotor energy finds expression as laughter, which thus represents the difference between the energy needed for the setting up of an idea of a simple action and that involved in the idea of a more complex action. "In the case of an immoderate or inappropriate movement on the part of the other, my greater expenditure for understanding becomes inhibited 'statu nascendi' during the mobilization as it were, it is declared superfluous and stands free for further use or for discharge through laughing."⁽¹⁾

(1) Op.cit. p. 311.

Humour is explained by Freud in a somewhat similar way, except that now the economy is one of expenditure in feeling.⁽¹⁾ A humorous situation is one that tends to make a call upon sympathy or some other feeling, but, this demand never being made, the surplus feeling-energy discharges itself as pleasurable laughter.

We have been compelled by reason of the great complexity of his theory to spend more time upon Freud than his contributions to our subject would perhaps warrant; whilst any attempt at a criticism of his opinions from the point of view of the orthodox psychology is likely to prove most unsatisfactory. We shall not, therefore, touch upon points in his general psychology that have been well discussed by the ablest psychologists of the day.

That the laughter at witticisms often represents more than appears on the surface such long-standing subjects of wit as mothers-in-law and Ford cars will prove beyond all doubt, but whether the laughter of tendency-wit can be divided into two distinct laughs is very doubtful. The direct expression of a repressed urge is certainly not accompanied, as a general rule, by the laughter that Freud

(1) Op.cit. pp.370-6.

would have us believe results from its indirect release. Why it should express itself as laughter in the one case, and by a totally different reaction in the other is by no means clear. A criticism closely connected with this might be levelled at his derivation of the pleasure and laughter of wit from the energy no longer needed to repress the impulses which have escaped. The question at once arises, "Why should this energy issue in pleasure and laughter? Is it not more natural that energy, when its functioning has been destroyed, and the forces which it represents, whether rational, moral or social, have been foiled should issue in painful rather than joyful reactions?" One is somehow reminded of Schopenhauer's story of the warders sitting down for an evening's card-playing with their escaped prisoner, when one reads of the surplus energy of the foiled "endopsychic censor" finding expression in extremely pleasant laughter.

The orthodox psychologist might find a dozen reasons for quarrelling with Freud on the question of the reduction of laughter at the comic to the difference between the energy needed for the setting up of the idea of a smaller action and that used up

in forming the idea of a somewhat larger act. In the first place, on Freud's own showing, the two ideas must be formed in any case in order to be compared with one another, so that there can be no economy of expenditure from the inhibition of the larger one "statu nascendi". Secondly, even if such an economy were possible, the amount of energy saved would be far too small to account for the huge volume of laughter that may burst from an audience at a delightful piece of subtle foolery on the stage. Is it possible that the difference between the energy used in forming a motor idea of the customary swing of my walking-stick and that needed for imagining the ridiculous twirl of Charlie Chaplin's cane should result in the convulsive laughter with which I first reacted upon the latter many years ago.

We cannot agree with Freud again when he asserts that in humour, the appeal to feeling is merely illusory. Much humour gains its lasting hold upon us only because of its incorporating within itself elements of sympathy, tender emotion or other strong feeling. The reaction of the truly humorous soul upon Goldsmith's account of Moses' purchase of the gross of green spectacles is by no

means the coldly rational thing that Freud would have us believe. Freud's own examples, depending as they all do on some absurd anti-climax, can scarcely be admitted to be cases of true humour at all.

5. Greig's Theory.

The most recently published work upon our subject is Greig's "The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy",⁽¹⁾ and, as the writer drives "Freudianism" to its utmost limits in search of a theory of laughter, a short discussion of the principles contained might not be out of place here. Greig reduces the whole of the phenomena of laughter to "love", which term, however, he never explicitly defines; but it would appear that he intends us to interpret it in something of the wide sense of Freud's "sex". His theory might best be briefly stated in his own words : -

"..... the smile and the laugh arise as responses of the instinct of love. The laugh, which in a development of the smile, occurs when the smooth functioning of the instinct is for any reason first ruffled and then calmed again, or, in other words,

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(1) J.Y.T. Greig: "The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy."

(Allen & Unwin, London, 1923.)

when behaviour, within which love is one stream, is first checked or interrupted, and then freed from the check or interruption. The laugh is a channel of escape for psycho-physical energy that has become momentarily surplus, through the weakening or disappearance of the obstacle to meet which this energy was mobilized in the first instance."⁽¹⁾

We would quite agree with Greig that "at first glance the simple formula does not seem promising," and that to make it fit all varieties of laughter "would seem to require very special pleading"; and, even after reading this very special pleading, one is more impressed with its cleverness than its cogency; for, in trying to fit all the phenomena into his narrow mould, the writer woefully distorts both laughter and love. An example of this is found in his explanation of the laughter of children at a Punch and Judy show.⁽²⁾ He accounts for the burst of laughter that invariably follows the tossing of the baby out into the crowd by reference to his general formula. "Every child

(1) Op.cit. p. 70.

(2) Op.cit. pp 112-115.

who is following the course of the drama closely is in some measure in love with Judy's baby. When Punch ruthlessly tosses it away, each child has a momentary gasp of apprehension from which he recovers at once on reflecting that the poor baby is only a doll after all."⁽¹⁾ Personally, I should be much more inclined to place this on a par with the unholy and secret delight with which a class of children will see one of its members strapped. This explanation is not so subtle, and shows, no doubt, a lack of faith in the goodness of human nature, but it would certainly appear more satisfying. Much of the laughter at a Punch and Judy show, Greig explains by making Punch a phallic symbol, with other subsidiary phallic symbols, hump hat, nose, etc. attached to him! Another rather amusing instance of erotic symbolism occurs in his explanation of the laughable element in an incident in Furetiere's "Le Roman Bourgeois", where a clumsy lover, in his nervous confusion, knocks down a mirror in the house of his beloved. The mirror, according to Greig, is the symbol of Narcissism, so that its fall (to the minds of an audience) would represent a sudden checking of the stream of self-love. The dam

(1) Ibid p. 113.

having been removed by a realization of the triviality of the whole affair, the stream flows on, and laughter results.⁽¹⁾ This is probably the supreme example of the twisting of facts to fit a ready-made and cleverly-conceived theory.

Quite unconsciously Greig drifts, by a very loose and indeterminate use of language, into theories inconsistent with his own, and so explains phenomena which could not otherwise come under the category of "love". The laughter of satire, irony, etc., he dismisses by assuming that "hate is ultimately a derivative of love",⁽²⁾ so that, if we can reduce a laugh to hatred, we have thereby shown it to spring from love. Greig explains whatever phenomena he can by referring them to "love" in the sense of natural heterosexual love, but, for an explanation of the remainder (and the residual phenomena would appear to form the major portion of those under discussion), he is compelled to appeal to narcissism or self-love; nor does he perceive that in his treatment he practically identifies this impulse of auto-eroticism with the instinct of self-assertion, thus reducing most of his cases of laughter, as we shall see later, to

(1) Op.cit. p. 125.

(2) Ibid: p. 174.

examples of Hobbes' "sudden glory". The sting contained in all laughter he is compelled to explain in terms of checked self love. "The immediate effect of being laughed at is essentially the same into whatever context we fit the laugh : we feel belittled."⁽¹⁾ Hobbes had expressed exactly the same thought from a slightly different viewpoint, some four hundred years before. "Also men laugh at the infirmities of others by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated. It is no wonder, therefore, that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is triumphed over."⁽²⁾

6. Sully's Theory.

James Sully cannot really be said to have formulated a theory of the comic at all, his work being descriptive and critical rather than explanatory. He is driven to conclude that "the result of our enquiry is that the impressions of the laughable cannot be reduced to one or two principles. Our laughter at things is of various tones. It gathers

(1) Op.cit. p. 188.

(2) Hobbes: "Human Nature." p.46.

up into itself a number of primitive tendencies."⁽¹⁾

The close relationship which he shows to exist between laughter and play is, perhaps, his most valuable and original contribution to our subject; and, if any theory of the comic can be drawn from his work, it is certainly a "play-theory." Working upwards from the laughter of children at play, which he takes to be the typical example of pure laughter, he shows that the play-attitude is predominant in most laughter right up to the witty, which consists in a playing with words and ideas. Like play, laughter is a "light pleasureable activity in contrast to the more burdensome activity of our more serious hours," and is enjoyed "as a relief from graver occupations." He is far too cautious an investigator to reduce the appreciation of the comic to a formula as do Bergson and Freud, and contents himself with saying, "Our comparison justifies us in identifying play and mirth so far as to say that when we play and when we laugh our mood is substantially the same,"⁽²⁾ qualifying even this moderate statement a few pages later with another to the effect that "this saturation of laughter with

(1) Op.cit. p.153.

(2) Ibid: p. 149.

the spirit of playfulness is characteristic only of the gayer kind, that which is purified from all tinge of seriousness." (1)

It will be remembered from our treatment of Bergson that Sully is not alone in making childish play the basis of laughter. We quoted the former as saying, "It (wit) begins as play in order to obtain pleasure from the free use of words and thoughts," (2) but he makes no serious attempt to carry this play principle throughout his treatment of wit, much less to apply it to the comic and the humorous.

The value of Sully's account is greatly discounted by the fact that nowhere in this book does he attempt to define or explain the nature of play itself, so that his whole theory tends to become an elaborate case of "ignotum per ignotius." Greig in this connection says, "There are two main difficulties in the way of accepting this position, and both are serious. The first is that neither Sully nor Dugas make it at all clear what psychological meaning they give to the term 'play'; the second is that whatever psychological meaning we may eventually agree to

(1) Op.cit. p.152.

(2) Bergson: Op.cit. p.211.

give this term, play appears to cover a much wider field than laughter." (1)

Without going deeply into the various theories of play we can do no more than express a doubt as to any very close casual relationship existing between laughter and play. If the play of children is a discharge of surplus nervous energy we can, from our discussion of the physiology of laughter, understand that the two may often occur together, but we cannot agree either that the play-attitude is the essential factor in the appreciation of the comic, or that laughter normally accompanies what Sully terms "pure" play, that is, play which does not express any other tendency than that towards its own production.

Whatever ideal pictures we may paint for ourselves of happy children laughing at their play, it is an undoubted fact that the loudest laughter in a school play-ground is that aroused by the sight of a ludicrous mishap to a play-fellow, by the breaking of a window by some unfortunate child, or by the failure of a teacher to kick the football as far as can the 12 year old captain of the school XV.

Much of this laughter, of course, can be accounted

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(1) Greig: Op.cit. pp. 67 - 68.

for in terms of increased respiration and accelerated circulation resulting from violent physical exercise. When this exercise is suddenly stopped for some reason or other, the excess of surplus energy flowing from the improved condition of the organism finds expression in the laughter so characteristic of a school playground. If this is what Sully means by the "pure" laughter expressive of "pure" play, we can agree with him that the two are often found together; but this is not laughter at the comic, nor are we justified in terming this a "play-attitude", and basing upon it our treatment of the intellectual forms of laughter. "Pure" play of a quieter sort is not accompanied by laughter; children are inclined, on the contrary, to take much of their play in deadly earnest, nursing their dolls with the gravity of matrons, and playing at marbles with the set features of financiers gambling on 'Change, whilst the seriousness with which the average adult Englishman "works at play", be it football, racing, or billiards, is proverbial. It may, of course, be urged that there are elements of competition, ambition, revenge, etc. in the organized games of the adult which are not present in the play of

children; but a careful examination of the latter will show that such elements are very often implicitly implied in even the simplest form of childrens' play.

Having shown that play is not always accompanied by laughter, it remains only to demonstrate that the play-attitude is not always present in laughter, in order to break down any hypothesis as to an invariable causal bond existing between laughter and play. In this connection it is only necessary to mention such extreme types as the bitter, the cynical and the sardonic laugh, in which it is impossible to detect any of the pure play-laughter of the child. Where is the element of play in the savage laughter of a Dean Swift, or the bitter revengeful mockery of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs? "I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; " (1)

7. Max Eastman's Theory.

Our historical sketch would not be complete without mention of the recent attempt by Max Eastman to demonstrate humour as a primary instinct.⁽²⁾

(1) Book of Proverbs, 1. 26.

(2) Max Eastman: "The Sense of Humour." (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1922.)

"The Sense of humour," he says, "is a primary instinct of our nature functioning originally only in the state of play, and related not remotely in its development to that gregarious instinct of which smiles and smiling laughter appear to be an inherent part."⁽¹⁾ Its function in life is to act as "a very inward indispensable little shock absorber -- an instinct, as we might call it, for making the best of a bad thing."⁽²⁾

"Humour is thus the most philosophic of all emotions. It is a recognition in our instinctive nature of what our minds in their purest contemplation can inform us, that pleasure and pain are, except for the incidental purpose of preserving us, indifferent, that failure is just as interesting as success."⁽³⁾

"Humour," he goes on, "in its adult state is thus seen to be somewhat like electricity, and possess two currents -- a negative and a positive. The negative current is a discommoding of some light or playful interest that has been specifically aroused, the positive a gratification of some interest which,

 (1) Ibid: p. 226-7.

(2) Ibid: p. 21.

(3) Ibid, p. 22.

if it has not been specifically aroused, may at least be assumed to have a general existence in the hearts of those who laugh." (1)

Whilst paying tribute to the masterly style and suggestive treatment of the writer, one cannot but agree with Greig, when he says, "He appears to me to have followed too trustfully the leading -- the misleading as I believe it to be on only too many occasions -- of Professor William McDougall." (2) This is exemplified in his use of McDougall's two tests for primary emotions as the standard by which to prove his theory as to the fundamental nature of the instinct of humour.

McDougall would class as primary all emotions that (a) are clearly displayed in the instinctive activities of the higher animals, and (b) "appear in human beings with morbidly exaggerated intensity." (3) Eastman's attempt to apply these tests to the so-called "instinct" of humour is by no means convincing; Darwin is practically the only scientific writer who has recorded any systematic observations of laughter in the higher animals, and his language on the subject is designedly guarded and vague, (4) and his

(1) Ibid, p. 30.

(2) Greig, Op.cit. p.277. Footnote.

(3) McDougall: "Social Psychology" p. 49.

(4) Darwin: "Expression of the Emotions." pp. 132-5.

conclusions are certainly not such as to warrant the postulating of a new instinct of humour. Even if we admit, however, that the instinct of humour can be shown to conform to these two tests, we cannot allow Eastman to assume that McDougall's criteria of primary instincts and emotions have gone unchallenged in the scientific world. Both Shand ⁽¹⁾ and Drever ⁽²⁾ have demonstrated their insufficiency and have formulated far more stringent tests, which Eastman would find it difficult or even impossible to apply successfully to his "instinct" of humour.

I do not wish in any way to appear to discount the value of Max Eastman's contributions to our subject, and, indeed, as will later appear, I shall myself endeavour to reduce laughter to an instinctive basis; but it would not appear to be at all necessary to postulate a separate and distinct primary instinct of humour for that purpose. Dr. Drever gives as the first and most important test of a primary emotion or instinct, ⁽³⁾

"irreducibility by introspective analysis to simpler

(1) Alex Shand: "The Foundations of Character." (Macmillan, London, 1920.) gives four tests: pp. 219-20.

(2) Dr. Drever: "Instinct in Man" gives five tests, comprising McDougall's two, and three selected from Shand: p. 173.

(3) Eastman appears to apply the term "humour" to both the instinct and its corresponding emotion.

components;" and, even if Eastman's introspection would place humour in this category, the great number of theories which attempt to reduce it to simpler elements would show that he stands almost alone in this respect. This fact will, at all events, prove that the "sense of humour" cannot stand on exactly the same footing as the primary emotion of anger, which men have always been content to recognise as one of the irreducible elements of the human mind.

Combination of Theories.

Many attempts have been made, both explicitly and implicitly, to weld two or more of these theories into one. By an implicit attempt we mean a tendency in this direction shown by the running into a definition or phrase of two ideas which really belong to separate and distinct theories. Such an implicit attempt at fusing the Theories of Degradation and Incongruity is found in Hazlitt's definition of the ludicrous as that "where there is a contradiction between the object and our expectations, heightened by some deformity or inconvenience, that is by its being contrary to what is customary or desirable."⁽¹⁾

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(1) Hazlitt: Op.cit. p.5.

Spencer is evidently trying to reconcile the same two theories when he says, "Laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small -- only when there is what we call a descending incongruity." (1)

Such half-hearted hints, of course, which make no attempt to examine the consequences that logically follow from the connection made, can hope for nothing but failure; but many more serious attempts to combine two theories, or subsume others under one favourite theory have met with scarcely greater success. Bergson, for example, tries to subsume under his own theory the Theory of Degradation by making degradation a special case coming under the mechanization of life, and by appealing to the technique he has erected to aid him in this difficult task. "But if an analysis is correct, degradation is only one form of transposition, and transposition itself only one of the means of obtaining laughter." (2)

By making the whole of the comic of degradation a mere sub-class coming under another small class of comic situations Bergson ruins his case by overstatement. Could not the upholder of the Degradation Theory assert, with far

(1) Spencer: Op.cit. p. 206.

(2) Bergson: Op.cit. p. 124.

stronger reason than Bergson possesses, that the perception of rigidity where there should be the flexibility of life is only one of the grounds upon which one man realizes the inferiority of another? I am inclined to think that the latter subsumption is, in every way, preferable to Bergson's.

The chief attempts at synthesis have been directed towards the Theories of Degradation and Incongruity, as being the two chief classical rivals, but, as yet, no strikingly successful combination has been evolved. Sully, after a short study of the possibilities of some form of fusion or subsumption, expresses the opinion that "the attempt to analyse our perceptions of the laughable in the hope of discovering some single uniting principle has proved to be abortive."⁽¹⁾ Ribot also is of the opinion that "the error lies in thinking that laughter has a cause. It has very distinct causes which, seemingly, can be reduced no further, or, at least, their unity has not hitherto been discovered."⁽²⁾ "Laughter manifests itself in circumstances so numerous and heterogeneous --- physical sensations, joy, contrast, surprise, oddity, strangeness, baseness, etc. -- that the reduction of

(1) Sully. Op.cit. p.138

(2) Ribot. Op.cit. p.351.

all the causes to a single one is very problematic."⁽¹⁾

Despite such pronouncements as these, however, the search for a single principle capable of explaining laughter will still go on. It is a characteristic of the scientific mind that it cannot rest content with two or more alternative causes explanatory of any one phenomena, and, unless a new and all-embracing principle is discovered, it will always be attempting to reconcile the two sides of any dualism.

The difficulty of reconciling the Theories of Degradation and Incongruity arises from the fact that they are not strictly correlative theories, taking up, as they do, entirely different attitudes towards the phenomena they are to explain. The former is essentially subjective, the latter far less so in its outlook, that is, for the Degradation Theory the laughable stands in a much more vital relation to the laughter than it does for the Theory of Incongruity, which often tends to dissociate the two, and consider the comic out of all relation to the person appreciating it. The classical instance of this is Schopenhauer's typical example of the

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(1) Ibid. p.357.

ludicrous, "the amusing look of the angle formed by the meeting of the tangent and the curve of the circle." This fits in with his theory, and, therefore for Schopenhauer, it must be comical, despite the fact that no man has ever laughed at it, and no man, probably, ever will. Although they seldom rise to such sublime heights of absurdity as this, the adherents of this theory often tend to ignore the reaction of the individual upon their instances of absurd incongruities, and fail to explain, if indeed they note the fact, why it is that what would raise a roar of laughter on some occasion is at other times, in the same company, met with a stony silence, or even with tears. In so far as they separate the laughable from the laugher they reduce incongruity from the position of an explanatory theory to that of a mere technique of the comic. For the upholder of the Degradation Theory, on the other hand, there is no danger of dissociating the comic from the person enjoying it; such a separation spells ruin for his theory, which is interested not so much in laughter as in the laugher laughing. C. Lloyd Morgan puts this distinction between the two theories rather neatly,

"But a good deal depends upon whether the laughter is regarded as a relatively detached and disinterested spectator or is looked upon as eminently self-centred in his outlook. Schopenhauer's doctrine of the incongruous involves the assumption of the former attitude; Hobbes' 'sudden glory' shows an emphasis on the latter." (1)

But what bearing has this discussion upon our other as to the synthesis of these two theories? It is evident that they cannot be joined on an equal footing as two aspects of the one set of phenomena, since this would involve that every comic object or situation must be both degrading and incongruous, which hypothesis has already been found incapable of proof. Nor can degradation in any of its forms be regarded as a special case of incongruity, for we have seen that their entirely different outlook makes it impossible to give any meaning to a combination of the two theories as they stand. This objection, of course, applies equally well to a subsumption of the Incongruity Theory, in the form given it by such writers as Lipps, by the Theory of Degradation; but there

(1) C. Lloyd Morgan: Article on 'Laughter' in the "Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics." Vol. 7 p. 803.

is here the difference that whereas under the latter theory there can be no real separation of the laughable from the laugher, the former allows, as we have seen, of such a separation partial or complete, when the laugher tends to become a "disinterested spectator." This of itself would suggest that the relationship expressed by the Degradation Theory is a much closer one than that contained in the rival theory, and that, if any modification is to be made, it must be in the latter, since any radical change in the former would result in the complete destruction of the relationship of the laugher to the inferior object. The direction of this modification we have already had pointed out to us by Schopenhauer and others; continue the process of dissociating the laugher from the incongruous situation, until incongruity, from being a theory of causes, becomes a mere technique of the comic, one of the many means by which the comic writer attains the end of showing his readers their own superiority.

In putting forward this suggestion for the subsumption of Incongruity by Degradation we are aware that we have ignored many philosophical discussions bearing upon the principles involved, and, while realizing the heinousness of our offence, can only make the excuse that it is nothing more than a

suggestion, and that there appears no other way of avoiding an irreconcilable dualism.

CHAPTER III.

CONDITIONS OF COMIC AND STATEMENT OF THEORY.

CONDITIONS OF THE COMIC.

Having spent a considerable time in examination and criticism of the main theories of the Comic, we are now faced with the far more difficult task of formulating some better explanation, or, at all events, of so modifying some existent theory that it shall avoid many of the errors we have noted. Before commencing upon this rather formidable portion of our subject, however, it might be as well to make a preliminary study of one of the pre-conditions of the comic strongly stressed by Bergson and others, namely the necessity for the absence of all feeling.

"It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion."⁽¹⁾

Even a superficial examination of the phenomena concerned would leave us no doubts as to the truth of this statement as applied to some instances of the comic. There are many situations and objects that call forth our laughter only because we consistently refuse to allow our emotions access to the compartment of our mind which conceives them; once let the light of deep feeling fall upon the comic scene, and it becomes sordid, pitiful, or obscene, and our laughter turns to tears or nausea. A very striking example of this is found in a joke which one writer has given as a test of the sense of humour. --- A very bald-headed man accustomed to wearing a wig to hide his shining pate, has died. The undertaker is in the room laying out the body, when the wife of the deceased enters with a pot of glue and a brush. "I thought it would look rather bad if poor John's wig should

(1) Bergson Op.cit. p.4.

slip while the relations are visiting him; so
 I brought some glue for you to stick it on with!"
 "Oh, that's all right, mum," replies the man,
 "I've used a nail! " ----

It is extremely interesting to study the reactions of various people upon the recounting of this crude joke. Some, perceiving only the ludicrous nature of the thing from the purely intellectual point of view, burst into roars of laughter; with others the half-formed laugh is suddenly strangled by the realization of the gruesomeness of the whole subject, or by the birth of pity for the poor woman; others again unhesitatingly declare it coarse and vulgar, and "fail to see anything funny in it." Personally, I recognise that it is gruesome and coarse, I realize that the mental state of the woman would be pitiable, but this realization brings with it no accompanying emotion, and coldly, callously, hardheartedly, I laugh.

A similar set of mixed reactions can be seen during the recital of a blasphemous or obscene story to a crowd of men, or even to a single individual at different times, in different moods, or amongst different surroundings. On some occasions

religious or moral feelings are aroused, and the joke falls flat, or is met with anger and indignation; at other times these feelings are absent, and the same story is welcomed, enjoyed, and gloated over.

Upon an examination of such instances as this Bergson and others have based the generalization that the absence of feeling is an essential precondition of laughter and the comic; and most psychologists appear to have let the assertion go unchallenged, although such a treatment as Freud's, of course, assumes its falsity. C.Lloyd Morgan is the only writer who, to my knowledge, has explicitly contradicted Bergson here, and his treatment occupies but a few lines. "And it is questionable whether the total exclusion of emotion (by which we must understand that which is in affective antithesis to the laughing mood) is characteristic of the best comedy. If, as is generally held, humour is a blend of the playful and the serious owing its timbre to overtones of something akin to pity, then, so far as humour is an ingredient of comedy, emotion is present."⁽¹⁾

The case of humour is the most apparent exception

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(1) C.Lloyd Morgan: Op.cit. p. 805.

to the generalization laid down, and it is difficult to see how it could have escaped the notice of Bergson and his followers. George Meredith, clinching the point with one of his delightfully apt literary references, says, "Heart and mind laugh out at Don Quixote, and still you brood on him The stroke of the great humourist is world-wide with lights of Tragedy in his laughter."⁽¹⁾

It is not only in humour, however, that we find elements of feeling. In the case of laughter at an obscene story it is not right to assert, because the feeling that attaches to the idea of morality is for the moment banished, that all feeling must therefore be absent. As Freud has been at great pains to show in his treatment of obscene wit, the feeling accompanying the sexual impulse is all too powerfully present. Again, in all the forms of laughter that we designate contemptuous, cynical, bitter, sympathetic etc., the emotional element is so pronounced that it has given its name to the particular type.

So far from excluding all feeling from the comic, we might, with much truth, say that there

(1) George Meredith: "An Essay on Comedy."

(Constable & Coy., London, 1918) p.83.

are certain feelings which are conducive to the production of laughter, and which help us towards a realization of the laughable. Certain it is that when a man says he is "in the mood for a bit of fun" he does not mean that, having banished all feeling from his soul, he is in a coldly intellectual state, into which joy, elation, contempt or pity cannot enter. The phrase denotes the presence of feelings conducive to laughter as well as the absence of those opposed to the spirit of fun. To the man "in the mood for a bit of fun" almost anything may be provocative of peals of laughter, whilst all the comic writers from Aristophanes to Herbert Jenkins could not manage to raise a smile from the same man "in the blues."

If then it be true that what may provoke us both to laughter to-day may, to-morrow, rouse pity in myself and indignation in my neighbour, what meaning can we give to such terms as "the comic", "the laughable", the "ludicrous", which it will be remembered we defined as "any object, idea, person or event, that, by some appeal, however faint, to the intellect, provokes or tends to provoke laughter or a smile. Greig notes the relativity of laughter when he says, "Nothing is laughable in itself; the

laughable borrows its special quality from some person or group of persons who happen to laugh at it, and, unless you happen also to know a good deal about the person or group of persons you cannot by any means guarantee the laughter beforehand." (1) What sense is there then in speaking of a "comical story" or a "laughable situation" if laughter is so dependent upon the individual mind, its constitution and its moods? Must I say that "the laughable" is for me at any particular moment, only what will make me laugh at that moment? Such a purely transient connotation is evidently impossible, although it is true that every man is inclined to give the term a subjective meaning, and condemn other men's sense of humour as crude, or shallow, or over-subtle. The terms "ludicrous" and "comic", and to a lesser extent, the term "laughable" represent something of a norm or standard: "the comic" for any particular class or society is that which the average individual in that class, in a normal mood, would, in the absence of counteracting causes, count sufficient ground for laughter.

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(1) Greig: Op.cit.p.71.

THEORY OF LAUGHTER.

In our earlier discussions we discovered what we thought to be an element common to both physiological laughter and the laughter of tickling, an element which appeared to be the essential constituent in both these forms of laughter, and which we called "the realization of well-being, bodily or mental." In the case of physiological laughter it arises from an acceleration, usually comparatively sudden, of the bodily functionings; in tickling it is the result of the removal of a momentary fear. It is our plan then to examine the various forms which the laughable may take, and see if we can find this element not only present in, but also the absolute essential of each of them, the factor without which they could not retain their comic character. In order to do this we shall take, one by one, the most important groups of objects at which men usually laugh, starting from the simplest and working up to the more complex, in order to find out if the reaction of the observer upon them takes the form of this "realization of well-being". Preliminary to this, however, we must discover exactly what this phrase implies, and what changes of meaning it is likely to

undergo during our progression through the various forms of the comic.

In both of the cases we have already examined, this "realization of well-being" has been characterized by a peculiar "lightness" of body or mind, a freedom from restraints that have just been removed. This condition is closely akin to the emotional state of "joy", but the two are not identical; it is, indeed, the "passion that hath no name", which Hobbes termed "sudden glory",⁽¹⁾ and Bain the "emotion of Power".⁽²⁾ While taking this "sudden glory" as the basis of their theories of the comic, however, Hobbes and his followers have tended to stress rather the opposite aspect, the degradation of others, so much so, in fact, that their doctrines have been termed "Theories of Degradation." Bain words his theory thus, "The occasion of the Ludicrous is the Degradation of some person or interest possessing dignity in circumstances that excite no other strong emotion."⁽³⁾ In so far as the degradation aspect is substituted for that of the "sudden glory" of the laughter, the theory becomes meaningless; for the spectacle of

(1) Hobbes: "Human Nature", p.46.

(2) Bain: "Mental and Moral Science", p.257.

(3) Ibid: p. 315.

a degradation, unless accompanied by a feeling of "sudden glory", cannot evoke laughter. We do not deny that it is generally so accompanied; but we would only point out that the stressing of the wrong element in the theory has brought upon it much undeserved criticism.

Even were their statement of their theory more correct, there would still be a great need to enlarge and supplement the treatment of Hobbes and Bain; for theirs, after all, is a mere bald generalization, which they make no attempt to work out to its logical conclusion; and its application to particular instances is almost sure to bring out the need for important modifications and conditions. This then is our excuse for resurrecting a theory which many writers have, after a superficial examination, long ago consigned to an honourable grave.

The first necessity in taking up this old theory at the point at which it was dropped by Hobbes and Bain is to couch it in the language of modern psychology; and, in doing so, it is inevitable that we should, to some extent, alter its scope and meaning by the application of a phraseology

in which the work of modern investigators is embodied. Dr. Drever has already noted a connection between laughter and the emotion of 'elation' or 'positive self-feeling', which Dr. McDougall asserts to be the feeling tone accompanying the expression of the instinct of self-assertion.

"We must take into account, as before, the exhilarating character of the 'positive' self-feeling itself, which, stimulating the impulse, develops 'tension' by out-stripping the possibilities of action. So it is always in the intoxication of joy, the 'tension' in the extreme case being relieved by an emotional 'storm', usually what we call 'laughter', the 'sudden glory' of Hobbes, but often by the opposite kind of emotional 'storm', 'weeping', and sometimes by a mixture or alternation of the two."⁽¹⁾

It is noticeable that McDougall's description of the typical situation by which the instinct of self-assertion is excited, has a very close parallel in Hobbes' definition of the laughable. "The situation that more particularly excites this instinct is the presence of spectators to whom one feels oneself for any reason, or in any way,

.....
 (1) Dr. Drever: Op.cit. p.193.

superior."(1)

"The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly."(2)

We have some authority then for identifying the "sudden glory" of Hobbes, the "passion that hath no name", of which laughter in the outward expression, with the emotion of 'elation' as understood by modern psychologists; and, without entering into the discussion between Drs. Drever and McDougall, as to the exact relationship between the emotion and the instinct, which, in the case of self-assertion and self-abasement, seems to me very doubtful, we may say that laughter flows from the gratification of the instinct of self-assertion or self-display. The 'degradation' aspect of our theory is then most clearly emphasized by Dr. Drever's statement that "the tendencies (of self display and self-abasement) are partly satisfied in their own feelings, but the real satisfaction is nevertheless in the signs in others of the opposite feelings, 'negative' with 'positive' and 'positive' with 'negative'". (3)

(1) William McDougall: "Social Psychology" (Methven, London, 1921.) p.64.

(2) Hobbes: "Human Nature", p.46.

(3) Dr. Drever: Op.cit. p.191.

The strongest emotion of elation, and, therefore, the heartiest laughter will thus be found in those cases in which another human being is very evidently feeling inferior to ourselves and generally "less than the dust."

Expressed in this new phraseology, our theory might now be stated, roughly it is true, in the following form, -- Laughter arises, or tends to arise from the gratification of the instinct of self-assertion; laughter, that is to say, is an expression of the emotion of elation --- Why it is that the emotion of elation does not always issue in laughter, we are not, at this point, in a position to say. Our main task in the succeeding pages will be to show that the essential element in every instance of the comic is one which panders, in some way or other, to the "ego-impulse". In order to achieve this end we shall, as was previously mentioned, examine the most important types of the comic in the ascending scale most convenient for our purpose. The order we shall choose will not necessarily be that of the development of the comic in the life of the individual or the race; it will merely be a progression from cases in which the self-assertive element is most pronounced to those in which, at a first glance, it appears very small or even entirely

lacking.

CHAPTER IV.

OCCASIONS OF LAUGHTER.

(1) LAUGHTER OF VICTOR.

One of the most elemental forms of laughter from our point of view is of a type that is found in a marked form in the lower stages of development both of the individual and the race, the wild laugh of the victor over the body of his prostrate foe. It bulks very largely in the literature of old myth and legend, and may be seen, in one form or other, in many of the passages of the Old Testament. It appears again, in a weakened form, in the laughter of children successful in some kind of competitive play; the "King of the Castle" laughs his defiance to the whole world, and the "marble champion" pockets his winnings with a chuckle. Bully somewhere gives an example of a street-urchin who screamed with laughter after having killed a

companion in a street fight: this would appear to have been something of an atavism. Even among their highly civilized elders it is not unknown; and it is seldom that the successful football team does not come off the field with broad smiles grotesquely wreathing their ^{players'} muddy faces. "Good taste" alone forbids them the throaty bellow of the warrior with his foot on his opponent's neck. In such cases as these the cause is too apparently a rapidly swollen self-esteem to demand much discussion, although intellectually, the laughter may be little, if any, higher than that of tickling. So crude and elemental is it that the situations that call it forth can scarcely be termed "comic" at all.

(2) PHYSICAL DEFORMITIES.

The next form of the laughable that we shall choose, is, however, by no means so simple; it is the much-discussed laughter at physical deformities. It is for attributing this type of laughter to the gods that Plato criticizes Homer whose lines in the "Iliad" run, "Inextinguishable laughter arose among the blessed gods, when they saw Hephaestus

bustling about the mansion."⁽¹⁾ The clumsy efforts of the crippled Vulcan, in comparison with the daintiness of Ganymede, appear to have provoked great mirth in the assembled deities. Bergson's attempt to reduce this type of laughter to society's criticism of an undue rigidity we have already examined and discussed; it appears very forced when compared with the explanation by reference to a sudden idea of the superiority of oneself. As the upholders of the Theory of Incongruity would maintain, there is involved something of a rapid implicit comparison between the deformed body and the idea of a healthy one; but it is not at all clear why the realization of this comparison should result in laughter, unless the comparison awakes in us the "sudden glory" of the superior. Even apart from the sympathetic emotion aroused by fellow-feeling, it is impossible to imagine one hunchback laughing at the deformity of another afflicted in the same manner as himself; for, in such a case, there can be no idea of superiority.

This kind of laughter most certainly presupposes at least a temporary suspension of the emotional life; and is, for that reason, most

 (1) Quoted by Plato: Republic III, 389.

commonly found in savages, children, and the lower types of civilized adults, although all of us are liable to short periods of emotional anaesthesia in which certain malformations of the human form appear comic. Especially is this so when we know that the deformity is a mere disguise put on to make us laugh; almost any man will laugh at a circus clown with a huge red nose, or a student on Capping Day, masquerading as a hideous old toothless hag, although such laughter must involve some reference, explicit or implicit, to men and women actually so afflicted. Charlie Chaplin's feet, and the horrible leering squint of one other motion-picture actor would appear to provide material for laughter for thousands of quite normal kindly folk. The brutal element in laughter at bodily deformities is very thinly disguised, and a very slight development of sympathy or social feeling tends to prevent its habitual indulgence.

3. MENTAL DEFORMITIES.

There is another type of natural affliction, however, to which civilized Christian communities do not extend the measure of protection that they give

to bodily deformities, even cultured men and women often seeing no harm in mirth at the expense of the mentally deficient, as the circulation of jokes in which these unfortunates figure will clearly testify. The baiting of the village idiot is a never-failing fount of laughter, and any mention of the local lunatic asylum, on the stage or in the drawing room, will seldom fail to evoke merriment from the hearers. This laughter is especially directed against the "harmless idiot" type, upon whose face there lingers an everlasting smirk of self-satisfaction. The absurd nature of his pride, and his silly smile tend to disarm our pity, and we laugh the louder because of his satisfaction with the world in general, and himself in particular. As with bodily deformities, a realization of the pitiableness of their condition will tend to check our laughter at these poor creatures, although it must be supposed that the sense of our own superiority lingers on. To the casual reader, Don Quixote is a laughable maniac who tilts at windmills, and rhapsodizes over the coarse red hands of milkmaids; for another, reading with a gleam of sympathy, he is the champion of all ideals, struggling against a tawdry world of grim realities.

one at whose extravagances we may smile, but whom we sometimes envy for his childlike faith in the ultimate good. For the child, who himself lives in a quixotic world of dragons and fairy princesses, there is nothing at which one may even smile; Don Quixote is no longer an intellectual inferior, but the embodiment of boyish dreams. Michael, the child hero of Compton Mackenzie's "Sinister Street", "read the tale seriously, and thought it the saddest tale ever known."

4. NAIVETÉ AND LACK OF KNOWLEDGE.

It is not necessary, of course, that those at whose mentality we laugh should be absolute sub-normals; much of our heartiest laughter, indeed, is directed at others, who are, in our own opinion at least, just slightly our intellectual inferiors. There is but little room here for pity, so that our laughter is practically unchecked by emotional barriers, often assuming, as a consequence, great proportions. The mental quality most often calling forth this type of laughter is what we term naïveté, or unconscious ingenuousness, shown in the simple remark of an acquaintance,

unversed in the bounds society puts upon the divulging of confidences, or in the artless prattle of a child, who, all unknowing, reveals to visitors one of the little secrets of the family. In the words and acts of children we find the deepest and perhaps the purest source of this type of merriment; for our laughter is refined and purified by the large admixture of sympathy and "tender emotion" with the more elemental "sudden glory". We laugh at children rather than with them far more often than we might imagine; and, disguised as it may be by other factors, the essential component of our laughter at the naïveté of children, is the emotion of elation, springing from the gratification of the instinct of self-assertion. Freud, in another connection, gives a most delightful story, a slightly varied version of which might well illustrate our meaning here.

---- A small boy of nine and his sister, two years his senior, have written a play, which they are producing for the amusement of an assembly of uncles and aunts and other relatives. The first act depicts a young sailor, setting out into the world to make his fortune, and saying fond farewells to his newly-wedded bride. The curtain falls; and it rises for the

second act some six years later. The sailor is returning, and, after many embraces, pours out on to the table a shower of gold and jewels, with the words, "Look, my dear, what I have earned during these six long years." His wife passes to the back of the stage, and, throwing open a door, reveals a bed with eight dolls, representing children of various sizes, lying thereon. "See, my husband, I have not been idle either!" _ ----

The peals of laughter that greeted this climax arose from a recognition of the children's utter ignorance of the conditions that regulate the arrival of babies. Acted before an audience of children, it would, with the possible exception of one or two sophisticated young persons, have been fully appreciated by all as the touching drama it was meant to be; but we adults make it the occasion of an expression of our own superior knowledge, although the crude elemental nature of our laughter is tempered by our love for and sympathy with the naïve little authors.

As in most cases of the naïveté of children it is inferior knowledge at which we laugh rather than inferior intellect; and this may be regarded as a step upwards in the nature of our

laughter. It is almost purely a realization of superior knowledge on our own part that makes us laugh at such blunders on the part of children as the definition of the Vatican as "an empty space with nothing in it. There is a saying that Nature abhors a Vatican"; or a demagogue as "a large receptacle capable of holding beer or spirits". For Freud, incidentally, our laughter here would be, in its essence, a veiled attack upon Roman Catholicism or the Labour Party; and although, with some, this element might be present, it can be regarded only as secondary in any but a few fanatics. Because of their very limited experience, children are barred from most of the laughter of superior knowledge; and even the youth, when most fervently declaring his right to the free speech and opinion of an independent manhood, is often irritated by the incomprehensible "wait-till you-are-my-age" smile of grey beards.

A particularly amusing form which the comic of inferior knowledge or mental power may take is that which Sully has termed "insistence upon the obvious." There is, for example, one in the company whose slow wits cannot follow the

course of the conversation, and who lags behind, heavily belabouring a point which everyone else has long since taken for granted. The rest are only too glad, on occasions, to turn from their battle of wits for a moment, and experience the thrill of elation that comes from watching another tilting at windmills on the verge of the affray. It is this element which Shakespeare introduces into the final act of "A Midsummer-nights Dream", when, for example, the Lion apologetically introduces himself to the assembled nobles, in these terms:

"You ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear
The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,
May now perchance both quake and tremble here,
When lion rough in mildest rage doth roar;
Then know that I, one Snug, the joiner, am
A lion fell, nor else no lion's dam;
For if I should, as lion come in strife
Into this place, 'twere pity on my life."

The mirth-provoking factor in Snug's speech is identical with that which makes the schoolboy smile on his first introduction to the mathematician's labour-ed attempt to prove that $1 + 1$ really does equal 2. It is, incidentally, interesting to note that the

ordinary non-mathematical person greets in exactly the same way Einstein's proof that it doesn't.

That men like to feel the "sudden glory" of superior knowledge is a fact that has long been recognised and utilized by writers of comedy in the evolving of comic scenes. When the audience is cognisant with conditions of which one of the actors is supposedly ignorant, they love to sit back in their seats and chuckle over their momentary superiority, as the befooled one acts and speaks in accordance with his entirely wrong conception of the situation; they love to watch him walk into the trap which they have been privileged to see prepared. Shakespeare is undoubtedly our greatest master in the art of pandering to the instinct of self-assertion in audiences and readers. In all his comic works, from his flimsiest farces to his most masterly comedies, this mechanism appears again and again; a character, ignorant of certain facts, or deliberately fooled into a ludicrous misconception, walks serenely into a dilemma of whose nature all but he are fully aware. In "A Midsummer Night's Dream" we alone are completely "in the know", and so we alone are privileged to smile

as Puck, accidentally, or of malicious intent, plays his impish pranks upon Lovers, Mechanics, and Fairy Queen. Whilst watching a performance of the "Merry Wives of Windsor", on the other hand, we are the firm allies of the waggish matrons, and laugh with them over the misfortunes of the fat knight.

Malvolio, yellow-stockinged and cross-gartered, makes a splendid butt for self-assertive laughter of a none too kindly nature; but a more sympathetic smile is reserved for the disconsolate Orlando, curing himself of love by flirting with his disguised lover.

5. SLIGHT ACCIDENTS AND MISFORTUNES.

Closely connected with, and often arising out of, lack of knowledge those hundred and one minor misfortunes and difficulties, from which we see others suffering during the course of the day, provide, for some minds, a fruitful source of merriment. Here again the comic spectacle must not be of such a character as to arouse a great degree of sympathy in the onlookers, for any strong feeling of sympathy militates against laughter of this type. Where exactly the dividing line between the laughable and the

pitiful in misfortunes lies depends largely upon the mental constitution of the individual, as well as upon his surroundings at the moment. The more sensitive men and women will see grounds only for tears in the comic situation that will convulse the coarser types with laughter.

It is possible, under peculiar circumstances, for even the more serious catastrophes of life to evoke the laughter that generally follows upon the minor misfortunes. Sully quotes, in another connection, the case of a group of young adolescents who burst into uncontrollable laughter at the news of the death of a very close common friend, whose serious illness they had just been discussing.⁽¹⁾ Sully explains this nervous outburst as the result of the breaking down of an unstable attitude caused by severe strain. This is probably quite true; but he does not show why the outbreak should have taken the form of laughter. It might well be reduced to the same general formula that we have held throughout, the sudden realization of one's own superiority. To youths and girls at the critical age of early adolescence, when the

(1) Sully: Op.cit. p.66.

instinct of self-assertion tends to be at its strongest, the death of a friend would, in their unnatural state of nervous tension, convey, first of all, the realization of their own abundant life, and their laughter might be interpreted, "We live! We live! He is dead, but we live! "

Although the absence of sympathy is essential in the laughter at slight misfortunes, it is by no means necessary, as Bergson would have us believe, that all feeling must be banished before we can give ourselves up to the enjoyment of such a comic spectacle as that of a man slipping on the pavement. It is true that we must not give too much thought to his bumps and bruises, but it is also certain, however much we may disguise the fact, that a malicious enjoyment reinforces our natural laughter if the victim is a personal enemy, or represents a class against which we have some grudge. It is doubtful if there be any man so good that he does not feel a secret thrill of pleasure in his heart, and a stifled chuckle in his throat at the sight of his own particular enemy careering down a crowded thoroughfare in pursuit of his wind-driven hat. To stand with one's own hat firmly fixed on one's head, and a smile of kindly superiority on

one's face whilst a stranger thus performs is pleasant; but to see the man, who has gained the appointment one has long coveted, so humbled and made ridiculous is delightfully ludicrous.

Especially noticeable is it that laughter is evoked by such slight misfortunes to persons possessing or pretending to dignity, power, or reputation greater than our own. Man is so constructed that he delights in the fall of dignity, he loves to see his superiors drop in the estimation of the world, although he may be most kindly and philanthropic in the raising of those lower on the scale than himself. The explanation, of course, is simple; our superiors have long evoked in us the attitude of self-subjection, but it only needs some slight humbling misfortune to lower them in our eyes, check, be it only for a moment, the smooth action of this instinct, and raise in us, as Dr. Drever has shown, the emotion of elation proper to the opposing instinct of self-assertion. With regard to our inferiors, on the other hand, we are constantly in a state of self-assertion, and it may even give us pain to see them humiliated or distressed by some slight misfortune; although, if pity be absent, the downfall of any human being is

apt to pander to the instinct of self-assertion in us sufficiently to produce at least a smile.

6. MINOR VICES.

"For Folly is the natural prey of the Comic, known to it in all her transformations, in every disguise; and it is with the springing delight of hawk over heron, hound after fox, that it gives her chase, never fretting, never tiring, sure of having her, allowing her no rest." (1)

Not only do physical and mental weaknesses prove a source of merriment to the ordinary man, but moral deficiencies also, if they be not serious enough to offend his moral or religious sentiments, are welcomed in others as a means towards self-assertion. The humourist, however, who would use this means of raising a laugh, must proceed most warily; for there are a hundred little turns and twists in the moral characters of any audience, which may, if ignored, freeze the smiles upon their lips, and leave in their eyes only a glassy stare of disapproval. The broadest rule that can be laid down in this respect is that the vice which we

(1) George Meredith: "An Essay on Comedy." (Constable, London, 1918) p.62.

find laughable in another must be pronounced enough to make us feel a thrill of elation, but not of such a serious nature as to offend or disgust the moral side of our nature.

Although, as has been pointed out, these limits to the laughable are relative not only to the individual, but also to the environment and mood of any one man, there are some vices which mankind recognizes as too serious to be made the subject of jest, whilst there are others which are accepted as fitting butts for the humourist and comedian.

Practically every comic writer, for example, has used drunkenness as a foil whereby to raise a laugh, so that the merry list of tippling characters is almost endless, Falstaff, Sir Toby Belch, Tony Lumpkin, and all that laughable, lovable brotherhood of the bottle.

Perhaps the failings which most often feel the sting of laughter are vanity and hypocrisy, those two vices, by means of which man rears himself upon a tottering, uncertain pedestal, which the comic spirit loves to tear from under him. It is bad enough, in all truth, for a man to see others towering above him when they deserve their exalted position,

but when he knows that their claims are mere empty air, he cannot resist a malicious laugh at anything which tends to show them up in their true light. Here literature gives us such famous names as Tartuffe, Thraso, Tartarin de Tarascon, Malvolio, Winkle, and the unfortunate Alnaschar, the Barber's fifth brother.

7. BREACH OF CUSTOM.

The great mass of mankind, it has always been recognised, is extremely conservative and parochial; and tends to react upon the new and the strange in no very friendly manner. If the new idea, habit or institution is strong enough to excite its anger or fear, Society will react accordingly; but if Society as a whole does not take such a serious view of the innovation, it will use it as a foil whereby to demonstrate the superiority of the existing order of things. In other words, Society will "laugh it out of court." A fuller discussion of this aspect of our subject must be left to a later chapter on the social significance of laughter; and it will suffice to mention here

that any group or section of Society, be it large or small, tends to greet with laughter any breach of its minor conventions, or the existence of a different set of habits and customs among the members of another group. Nation laughs at nation, county at county, village at village; the doctor cracks a joke at the astuteness of the lawyer, and the latter retaliates with a joke at the "quackery" of the medical men; Society (in its most exclusive sense) sneers at the "nouveau riche" who blunders happily up the social ladder, whilst the lower strata find great amusement in the eyeglass and Oxford accent of the "gentleman".

Whole treatises might well be written on the psychology of fashion. If a fashion in dress comes to us from some recognised authoritative source it is accepted without demur, even though it involve such acute discomfort as did "tight-lacing" and the crinoline; but should some bold nobody dare to walk our streets attired in a highly sensible but unusual style of his own conception, he would be met by peals of laughter, or, at the least, by half-suppressed sniggers. Our differing reactions in each case spring entirely from our different attitudes

towards the originators of the fashions. In the realms of fashion we assume an habitual attitude of subjection towards certain recognised leaders, who may, in consequence, foist almost any absurdity upon us so long as they can keep us in that state of self-subjection; but this only makes us the more eager to assert our own superiority, and the superiority of the particular group to which we belong, over any individual bold enough or foolish enough to disregard the dress-conventions of that group. Hence the ripple of laughter that will run down a crowded thoroughfare at the sight of a man dressed after the fashion of another country or another age.

This brings us to the subject of the laughter at foreigners and their peculiarities of speech and custom. One writer on the comic tells of three British sailors who met three Chinamen, when each group was so struck by the ludicrous appearance of the other that all six finally collapsed in paroxysms of mirth upon the pavement. Although we cannot vouch for the truth of this particular incident, it certainly serves to illustrate the way in which the members of one group react

upon the idiosyncracies of another. The ordinary man is so constituted that the sight of any habit custom or fashion differing greatly from those of his immediate associates at once reveals to him the superiority of his own, and so induces laughter, half triumphant, half scornful and altogether pleasant. This process may even result in the invention of national nicknames by the inhabitants of one country for those of another. Such a name as "Froggy" for example, is used by the average Briton, when he would refer in slighting, laughing terms to the French, and is not received by the latter in any very kindly spirit.

As might be expected, laughter of this type tends to die away as one's horizon becomes broader and one's sympathies deeper, being found in its most marked form in children and savages, and being almost entirely lacking in your true cosmopolitan. Sully,⁽¹⁾ in an excellent chapter on the laughter of savages, has shown that, whilst they may be, as a general rule, impressed with the superiority of the white man, they will find much cause for merriment in his clumsy attempts to perform some simple native action such as weaving or hut building, and his futile endeavours to

(1) Sully: Op.cit. ChVIII.

master the intricacies of their language. When they are dealing with a member of another tribe, instead of with the awe-inspiring white man, they make no attempt whatever to curb their laughter, and their jokes and jibes at his expense are liable to become wantonly cruel. The same element of brutal cruelty may often be traced in the laughter of school-boys at the hapless one who has shown himself ignorant of some unwritten law of school or playing field. The educated and well-travelled man, on the other hand, realizing that the value of all moral codes and social customs is relative to one's particular situation on the globe, as well as position in society, will not be so easily elated by the apparent superiority of his own habits to those of another man, and will, consequently, feel but little desire to laugh at the unusual wherever he may find it.

8. BREACH OF AUTHORITY.

The writer who said that every child is born "either a little Liberal or a little Conservative" was only partly right -- every child is born both. It is only the proportions that vary in

each case. Not only does man tend to cling to the old, and react with laughter upon the individuals who would break with it, but he also tends to take delight in the fall of established authority, and to laugh thereat, simply because it is established authority. It is the clashing of these two tendencies in his soul that produces the history of every man as a social unit; if the one wins he is a Conservative, whose laughter will be, in general, aimed at the apostle of the new; if the other, he is a Radical, ever ready to chuckle over the downfall of the old. In some fortunate beings there is a balance; and they can sit back and laugh at us all.

What we have termed laughter at the breach of authority, therefore, is seen to be exactly the reverse of that laughter which we discussed under the heading of "Breach of Custom" in the previous section. The situation may be identical in both cases; whether we direct our laughter against the rebel or against the institution or authority that is defied depends entirely upon the attitude we take up towards the old and the new. If we identify ourselves with the established, then our opinion of ourselves, and the opinion that others hold of us,

must rise or fall with it, and every deviation from the customary is made the occasion of the glorification of ourselves through the institution or custom concerned. If, on the other hand, the shackles of authority be heavy upon us, and we feel that the institution is tending to crush out our individuality, we receive, with laughter and gladness, anything that lessens that power, be it only for a moment, and enables us to assert our independent personality. The desire to be recognised as a self-contained, self-reliant entity, instead of a mere unit in the herd, a portion of the social organism, exists in every man; but it is only in comparatively few cases that this desire finds direct expression in revolt against society. In the remainder of us the social instincts and sentiments are too strong to allow of such a path of release, and we find an indirect form of expression in laughter, on such occasions as authority is in any way demeaned or defied. A fuller discussion of this aspect of our subject, however, must be left to the chapter on the Social Significance of Laughter.

As a general rule the radical or destructive spirit is in the ascendancy in childhood, but, with age and experience, and the loss of our sense of adventure,

we tend to become what Kenneth Grahame, in his delightful child study "The Golden Age", has called "stiff and colourless Olympians" who "might dabble in the pond all day, hunt the chickens, climb the trees in the most uncompromising Sunday clothes; are free to issue forth and buy gunpowder in the full eye of the sun -- free to fire cannons and explode mines on the lawn; yet never do any of these things." If we are successfully to approach the laughter of children it must be with this principle in mind, that the average child is a little rebel at heart, revelling in topsyturvydom, and laughingly welcoming anything that will upset the established order of things. Sully imagines that he has set the adherent of the Degradation Theory an unsolvable riddle, when he asks him to explain the child's laughter at the sight of his disordered nursery on cleaning-day. In the light of our discussion the answer to Sully is clear. These chairs and tables, that are now piled ignominiously on top of one another in one corner of the room, are the representatives of authority in his daily life: authority, in the person of parents or nurse, has decreed that he shall not overturn the furniture, or pull down the curtains, or spill water on the floor; and lo, here are all these things being done; and

the whole world is given over to the most delightful din, and choas, and confusion. Could any child resist a thrill of elation at the sight?

We have, in an earlier section, reduced some of the laughter of children to the realization of their own superiority, in any particular, over one or more of their play fellows; but by far the greater part of what Sully has termed "pure" laughter might, I think, be explained by reference to our present principle of revolt against authority. The wild hilarious laughter, with which a crowd of children will stream out into the playground at the sound of the closing bell, is the sign of an individuality, suppressed for five hours by the stern eye of the teacher, and now reassumed with their caps and satchels. It is the expression of the ego-urge which the daily routine of the crowded schoolroom tends to repress. That this principle holds good even in a child of very tender years is shown by the roguish laugh with which he will await the result of some prank played upon his doting parents; whilst even the most obedient child will, at times, laugh out his defiance to the world in no uncertain tones. We would not, of course, reduce laughter in the earliest months of life to such an

impulse towards self-assertion; it then appears to be mainly connected with the gratification of bodily wants. Many writers, indeed, have traced the origin of the smile and the laugh, as forms of bodily expression, back to the look of repletion on the infant's face as it leaves the mother's breast.⁽¹⁾ This type of laugh or smile may well be understood from our discussion of the physiology of laughter in an earlier chapter, but at exactly what age more purely mental elements begin to enter into the laughter of the young child it would need a long and tedious process of observation to discover.

As the child grows older, the primitive nature of this first rebellious laughter tends to be disguised, or it may appear to vanish altogether, as he becomes more socialized, and, consequently, more conservative; but it is doubtful if even the staidest of men are entirely free from a desire to laugh at the fall or ridicule of an institution that has long demanded their unquestioning obedience and loyalty. How, otherwise, are we to explain the prevalence of jokes and witticisms directed against such an institution as marriage? Marriage is responsible for the

(1) André Tridon, for example, says "The facial expression of the laughing person suggests that of the satisfied nursing leaving the mother's breast. In both cases the contour of the open mouth and the lines of the face present striking similarities. Laughter would then be an infantile symptom of gratification." "Psychoanalysis" London, 1919 p.114.

loss of more personal freedom, and the sinking of more individuality, than, perhaps, any other institution. It is, however, a highly respectable custom, being upheld by the strongest moral sentiments of society, and anyone who dares openly to assert his individual judgment on the subject of the relations between man and woman can expect only social ostracism. To cease to be an independent personality, and to become merely "X's husband", or "the wife of Y", is, however, intolerable, and so men combine, and women also, to laugh at what they are often prone to think their common tyrant. In this way they experience a moment of relative independence, and then return the easier to their bondage.

We may bring under this section a type of laughter that has loomed large in the more modern treatises upon the comic, the laughter at obscenities. Sexually-tinged jokes form so large a part of the stock-in-trade of one type of so-called humourist that such writers as Freud and Greig have been led to found their theories of laughter upon a sexual basis. Laughter, however, is by no means the form of bodily expression which we normally associate with the freeing of sex energy, and it seems quite feasible, on the

other hand, to explain most, if not all, of the laughter at obscene stories by reference to the principles laid down above. Especially is this so when we remember that the habit of making merry over the indecent is usually contracted during the years of puberty or early adolescence, when the voice of authority banning such conversation is particularly loud, and the spirit of revolt particularly strong. We are strengthened in this view when we find young boys laughing together over indecent jokes, which their experience most certainly does not enable them to understand, but which are surrounded by an air of "naughtiness"; and we venture to say that, with all sexual jokes, the element of "naughtiness" is the chief laughter-producing factor. This faint aroma of wickedness, of saying or thinking what some authority has forbidden us to say or think, tends to cling to the idea of sex throughout life, and to give it always that delicious flavour which belongs only to forbidden fruit. It is only when a man has learned to face the facts in a natural and healthy manner, and to realize that sex and sin are not synonymous, that he can hear a lewd remark without feeling a desire to snigger. Thus it is that the laughter at the obscene is to be found chiefly in adolescents and the lower grades of society.

9. "HARMLESS" WIT.

All of the laughter of satire, irony and humour will, with little difficulty, find a place under one of the forms of the laughable that we have discussed, as will also the laughter resulting from what Freud has called "tendency-wit." There remains, however, a difficulty : what are we to say of Freud's "harmless wit", which comprises the thousand and one apparently pointless tricks and turns of speech and ludicrous intonations of the voice, that go to lighten the seriousness of the working day? Where, in the much despised pun, for example, are we to find that reference to an inferior, which is to give us the thrill of elation expressed in laughter?

It may do something to elucidate this problem if we realize first of all that there is a very strong personal element in much of the wit in which we indulge, within a somewhat restricted circle of friends and acquaintances, an element comprehensible only to those who have lived for some time in our immediate environment. Many of the purposeful mispronunciations and ludicrous intonations, which we allow to slip into our everyday speech, cause laughter in an audience only because they call to mind an

idiosyncrasy of some acquaintance common to them all, and so give the basis for a momentary feeling of self-elation. It must be admitted, however, that not all wit can be explained after this fashion; and we have still to explain a large residue of successful witticisms, in which there is no trace of a reference to any person or any definite group of persons.

The clue to an adequate solution here must be found in our discussion on "Breach of Authority" in the previous section, and in a tendency that has been noticeable throughout our treatment of the occasions of laughter, the tendency, namely, for the object of laughter to become more and more impersonal in nature, as the comic assumes higher forms. We began with the wild laugh of the victor with his foot on the throat of his prostrate foe, and we have just finished a discussion of the laughter that results from the temporary degradation of some institution or recognised authority. In order to illustrate our point still further, let us take a series of witticisms chosen almost at random from Oscar Wilde's "Importance of Being Earnest."

(a) Lady Bracknell says, "I am sorry if we are a little late Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady

Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger." To which Algernon replies, "I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief."

(b) Algernon: "You don't seem to realize that in married life three is company and two is none."

(c) Gwendolen: "The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I had over mamma, I lost at the age of three."

(d) Lady Bracknell (cross-examining her prospective son-in-law) : "Are your parents living? "

Jack: "I have lost both my parents."

Lady Bracknell: "Both? ----- That seems like carelessness."

It will be seen that there is, in the first of this series of witticisms, a strong personal element, which gradually diminishes through the second and the third, until it vanishes altogether in the last. In (a) that is to say, we have a "catty" thrust at Lady Harbury and her grief; in (b) it is the institution of marriage that is pilloried; (c) has the

faintest suspicion of personal reference, from which, however, (d) is entirely purged. A more careful examination will now reveal what Freud would call a "wit-technique", underlying the personal element in these examples, and common to them all. In the first three especially we find the use of a trite and hackneyed form of expression, with a slight alteration in the matter, that gives it a new and startling meaning, whilst the last, a pure play upon words, depends for its witty nature upon a very similar principle, the use of a single word in two different senses. Whilst reading example (a), for instance, one is led by the familiar phraseology to expect that Lady Harbury "looks quite twenty years older", and that "her hair has turned quite white with grief", but the witticism lies in substituting for the expected words their contraries, "younger" and "gold".

Many writers, even if they accepted our general theory, would insist that this is merely a device for bringing out more strongly the personal gibe, that it is, in a word, only a part of the technique or mechanism of wit. It is true that the thrust at Lady Harbury would lose much of its power

were it not expressed in epigrammatic terms, and we would not go so far as Freud, in making a mechanical division of the laughter of "tendency-wit" into two distinct halves; but that this so-called technique plays a large part in the production of laughter is shown by the fact that, in examples (c) and (d) above, it stands practically alone, as the sole source of laughter. In passing from the "tendency-wit" of (a) and (b) to the "harmless wit" of (c) and (d), we still retain a part of our laughter, although we lose all personal reference. Where then is the factor in these latter witticisms that causes us the thrill of elation necessary to the production of laughter?

Although we cannot agree with his general theory of laughter, a statement of Bergson's, in his chapter on "The Comic in Words," may prove of great use in the solving of an answer to this question. He says, "Whereas an illuminating comparison and a striking image always seem to reveal the close harmony that exists between language and nature regarded as two parallel forms of life, the play upon words makes us think somehow of a negligence on the part of language, which, for the time being, seems to have forgotten its real function, and now claims to accommodate things to itself instead of accommodating itself to things."

And so the play upon words always betrays a momentary lapse of attention in language, and it is precisely on that account that it is amusing."⁽¹⁾

Language, then, is the institution whose degradation in the so-called "harmless" wit gives rise to the momentary feeling of superiority, that finds expression in laughter language, of course, not as a mere collection of words and grammatical rules, but as the embodiment of authority, the instrument whereby society imposes upon us a ready-made set of conventions and habits of thought. There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as purely "harmless" wit, no wit for its own sake; the "tendency" in wit cannot be eliminated without destroying the laughter-producing element also. Harmless wit, as we have seen, differs from tendency-wit only in the more impersonal nature of the object against which it is directed. The fourth of Oscar Wilde's witticisms quoted above, for example, is a pure play upon words, and depends for its comic effect upon the different meanings which are applied to the word "lost" by Jack and Lady Bracknell. The former uses it in the sense of bereavement, but the latter gives it something of the implication of carelessness which it often

(1) Bergson: Op.cit. p.121.

bears; and it is amusing to us to see the common usages of language tripping one another up, falling over one another, as it were, and arriving eventually only at misunderstanding and confusion. The comic nature of all epigrammatic wit, such as is exemplified in the other three cases, arises from the taking of some set and common form of speech, and, by a dexterous twist, giving it a meaning entirely inconsistent with its customary one. In laughing on such occasions, we feel that we are asserting ourselves as against the authority of society, which, in giving us a conventional set of symbols for the expression of our thoughts, seeks at the same time, to control those thoughts, by forcing us to squeeze them into certain out-and-dried formulae.

CHAPTER VI.

DISGUISED INTERIORITY AND NERVOUS LAUGHTER.

Having traced laughter throughout its various forms as arising from "the gratification of the instinct of self-assertion", it still remains for us to explain certain types of laughter which arise apparently under circumstances exactly the reverse of those

we have described. It is a common occurrence to find men laughing loudly on occasions when they can, by no manner of means, feel anything but inferior to their environment. Must we then admit that our whole theory breaks down when asked to explain this phenomenon?

A moment's consideration, I think, will show that a slight modification of our original statement will allow us to embrace even such an extreme case as this under our general formula. Laughter, under such conditions, denotes not "the gratification of the instinct of self-assertion", but the conscious or semi-conscious desire to hide from others one's realization of one's own inferiority. Perhaps the conditions under which this type of laughter most commonly occurs are to be found when some recognised humourist is telling a joke, the point of which one or more of his audience fail to see. The dullard, unless he be a very strong character, or very proud of his ignorance, is driven to hypocritical laughter, if he would prevent the laugh being directed against himself; for the rest of the audience, their appetite for the thrills of elation once whetted, will gladly turn upon the unfortunate one, and make him the butt of a new burst of merriment. There is, indeed, an illuminating

parlour hoax, in which a well-known wag tells an entirely pointless story as though it were a good joke. At a given point, two or three confederates in the audience will commence to laugh immoderately; and it is interesting, if one be in the know, to watch the mental struggles going on around the room between the desire to be honest and the fear of being thought dull, until, one after another, the victims will break into sickly uncertain smiles, or try to hide their denseness from the world beneath huge guffaws. One is led to suspect that this principle of disguised inferiority has something to do with the fact that most men can read through a book of "funny" stories without a smile, but will respond with hearty laughter, when the same jokes are recounted to them by others. They are then afraid to remain silent, even if they can see nothing laughable in the narrative; for to stand unmoved before a gale of merriment demands an iron will, or a profound contempt for the opinion of one's fellows. Monsieur Bergeret, the delightful philosopher of Anatole France's creation, laments that his peculiar sense of humour has often set him at cross-purposes with other men. "That which amuses other men does not make me laugh, that

which amuses me does not make other men laugh. I have often noticed, I see the ludicrous where no one else perceived it. I am gay and I am sad in the wrong places, and it has often made me look like a fool."

All that is necessary to produce laughter of this type is to place a man in surroundings amidst which he feels his own inferiority, and then set his superiors laughing at something in which he cannot see the comic element. These superiors may be regarded as such by reason of nimbler wit, higher social status or even sheer weight of numbers. The very fact that they are laughing, indeed, tends to make them rank higher in their own eyes, and in those of a silent spectator, for is not laughter the sign of superiority? The only way, then, for a man to conceal his inferiority is to outlaugh them all. Many men have established a reputation for brilliance by their adroitness at this pardonable deceit! It will be seen that such laughter, like all other laughter we have discussed, results from the impulse towards self-assertion, but is of an artificial nature, because it does not flow naturally from the gratification of that impulse, but is an attempt to disguise the fact that it has been thwarted.

We may term it then the "laughter of disguised inferiority."

On the other hand, as might be expected, when one of the superior ones of the earth finds himself in the midst of people whom he considers his inferiors, he tends to refrain from laughing at those things which they consider fit and proper objects of merriment, because to do so would be to degrade, rather than elevate himself in his own opinion. He may smile at them, indeed, but he will seldom laugh with them. The surest sign that a man is rising in his own estimation is that he ceases to laugh at the poor jokes of his erstwhile superiors. An excellent example of this is to be found in J.M. Barrie's "Admirable Crichton" ---

Ernest, after failing to impress Lord Loam's somewhat disdainful daughters with a weakly epigram, despairingly tries it upon the butler, Crichton:

Ernest: "I am not young enough, Crichton, to know everything." (It is an anxious moment, but a smile is at length extorted from Crichton as with a corkscrew.)

Lady Mary (Somewhat later): "Tell me, what did Mr. Ernest mean by saying that he was not young enough to know everything?"

Crichton: "I have no idea, my lady."

Lady Mary: "But you laughed."

Crichton: "My lady, he is the second son of a peer! "

A few weeks later, "in a state of nature" upon the island, Crichton, now beginning to realize his own superiority, reacts very differently upon a witticism from the "second son": "I would therefore most respectfully propose that every time Mr. Ernest favours us with an epigram his head should be immersed in a bucket of cold spring water."

The laughter of disguised inferiority, then, results from a conscious attempt to hide one's sense of inferiority from the world; but there is still another type, which differs from it only in that the impulse to hide one's inferior worth is entirely, or almost entirely, unconscious. It is this which is generally termed "nervous laughter."

Nervous laughter generally arises during that "struggle between the two opposed impulses of the instincts of self-display and self-abasement, with their emotions of positive and negative self-feeling,"⁽¹⁾ which McDougall has called "bashfulness." The impulses to "strut" and to "blink" are equally balanced, succeeding one another as the controlling force in rapid alternation; and, during the brief reign of the instinct of self-assertion, we laugh nervously and uncertainly,

(1) McDougall "Social Psychology" p. 146.

in order to prove to ourselves, as well as to others, that we are equal to the occasion.

Nervous laughter is, as might be expected, particularly noticeable amongst young adolescents, in whom the struggle between self-assertion and self-subjection reaches its climax; and they are subject to a peculiar form which they term "the giggles". The giggles is a kind of half-suppressed, half-uncontrollable nervous laughter, which occurs only under conditions that are calculated to create an impression of awe and veneration. In church or school, for example, groups of two or more young people are often strongly seized by the desire to laugh aloud, and it is only their fear of authority that compels them to confine themselves to badly-suppressed sniggers. The object that first stimulates them to merriment may be of the most trivial nature, containing within itself nothing in the slightest degree ludicrous; and it is noticeable that as soon as the authority is removed, and they become their own masters again, the gigglers lose all desire to laugh, and are at a loss to explain their behaviour. The presence of a recognised authority, therefore, would appear to be the cause not only of the partial suppression of the laughter, but also of the very impulse to laugh. The explanation of

this phenomenon is to be found in the struggle between the instincts of self-display and self-abasement. The latter prompts us to subject ourselves to the authority of the institution concerned; but the former demands that we should find some expression for our individuality even under such conditions; and the "giggles" is our half-hearted declaration to ourselves, and to the world at large, that "a man's a man for a' that." It is not, perhaps, a very lofty expression of the individual's revolt against society, but it serves its purpose as a harmless, if somewhat annoying, safety-valve for the expression of the adolescent's over-grown ego-urge. It protects society from his hotheaded intolerance of the old, at the same time that it prevents his youthful enthusiasm from being entirely engulfed in some hide-bound institution.

There is a biological theory of nervous laughter, which reduces it to a sudden discharge of nervous energy, stored up during a period of unnatural restraint, and released by some slight stimulus.⁽¹⁾ Although we cannot stop to examine this theory, it must be apparent at a glance that it is the physiological counterpart of the psychological explanation which we have put forward. The impulse

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(1) Spencer: "Physiology of Laughter" in "Essays "

of self-assertion, dammed up for a while by the heavy hand of authority, finds expression at last in a hesitating, uncertain, and often too boisterous laughter.

CHAPTER VII.

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LAUGHTER.

In this age of social sciences no treatise on any psychological subject would be recognised, which regarded man as an isolated, self-contained unit, and none would be complete without a discussion of the influence of the phenomena concerned upon the relations existing within the social group. The most determined attempt of modern times to show the social significance of laughter is that made by Henri Bergson, who, as we have seen, regarded it as the sanction of society, imposed upon those who tend to endanger the welfare of the group, by allowing the "élasticité" of life to degenerate into the "raidéur" of a machine. Our general theory makes it impossible for us to accept such a view of the function of laughter in society, enticing though

it may be; and, whilst recognising that laughter has an important part to play in social life, we cannot too strongly stress the fact that it is not social, but entirely individualistic in nature. In its very essence it is an expression of individuality, and, although it may incidentally subserve many social ends, its main function is not to act as a weapon in the hands of society, but to assert always the rights and the worth of the individual. If this be the case, how then does it come about that men laugh in groups, and appear to use this group-laughter as a weapon for the attacking of other groups, and the punishment of recalcitrant members in their own?

That laughter is capable of use as a weapon may be seen from its effect upon the person against whom it is directed. Whatever theory of laughter we may hold, there are but few of us who can resist giving some expression, however slight, to a momentary feeling of anger, when we are made the object of a burst of laughter; and the fortunate man, who can resist, does so, I venture to say, rather by reason of powerful self-control, than because he realizes that "no harm is meant." Even the most kindly laughter is liable to give offence if the object of it be not in his customary

state of self-control. Beneath all the sympathy and good feeling that it may contain, he can still detect in the laugh that element that arises from his own inferiority, real or supposed, to the laugh-
er.

It is no argument against our view of laughter to point out those comparatively rare cases of men, who, like Socrates, can relish a joke against themselves; for laughter at oneself is not an exception to, but a particular case of the principles we have already discussed, and may arise in either of two ways. It may be that a man is laughing at himself as exhibited in some thought or action in the past, and, in comparing the past with the present self, he tacitly says, "Ha! Ha! Ha! That is what I was, but this is what I now am: behold the remarkable improvement! I can afford to laugh at the youth that once I was, for I have outgrown his weakness and his folly." It is quite a common thing for men to use their past selves as a foil, whereby to demonstrate the glories of the present. If our merriment at our own expense be not of this type, it can only be an example of what we have termed the "laughter of disguised inferiority", by

which we try to conceal the fact that the laugher's shafts have gone home; for no man can find grounds for honest laughter in the realization of his own inferiority.

It is interesting to note in this connection the statement often made that Englishmen make much of Bernard Shaw because he spends all his time laughing at them. It is true that this element in all Shaw's works has a great fascination for the average cultured Englishman, but I venture to say that, insofar as anyone laughs at the biting satire of such a play as "The Man of Destiny", he ceases to be an "average Englishman" at all, and becomes a Shavian, that is to say, he identifies himself with Shaw for the moment, forms with him an alliance, whose purpose it is to seek out and ridicule the follies of all other Englishmen. Were I ever in my heart to realize that Shaw means me, as well as my neighbour, it is highly probable that his work would cease to be amusing, and become merely foolish or immoral.

Having demonstrated that laughter can be used by the individual as an instrument both of attack and defence, it remains for us to show how it can be used in the same capacity by society as a whole, or by particular groups within society; and,

in order to do this, we must make a very short preliminary study of the manner in which men tend to form themselves into groups or classes. Without going into a detailed discussion of the psychological bases of society, we can do little more than point out that such grouping actually does occur, and that the groups may be differentiated on grounds of race, territory, birth, wealth, religion, sex, occupation, political opinion or any of the thousands of important or trivial qualities in which men differ. These groupings may be absolutely permanent, as in the case of race and sex, or as transient and ephemeral as the "sides" in a game of "chasing". A man will, of course, be a member of very many different groups at the same time, and it is probable that the interests of the various groups to which he belongs may sometimes clash; but there is generally one dominant interest, that will determine his allegiance to some particular group on such occasions.

The earliest social groupings, excluding, of course, differences of sex, are those into family and tribe; and it is an oft-noted fact among sociologists, that the individual savage can express himself only through, and as a part of one of these groups.

Individuality is at a minimum and individual rights unrecognised in the savage state, so that a man can gratify his instinct of self-assertion only insofar as the family or tribe to which he belongs, has proved its superiority over some other group. Individually he is a cypher, and can make his influence felt in the world only as a member of one of these groups. This would lead one to suppose that group-laughter must precede individual laughter in the history of the race, and that this actually is the case has been shown by Sully, who records that the savage seldom or never laughs, except in concert with his fellows.⁽¹⁾ It might be argued from this that laughter, in its beginning, is not egotistic, and that the individual factor we have so strongly stressed is not therefore a necessary element in its production; but to argue thus would be to overlook the fact that the savage so closely identifies himself with his family or tribe that its every fall is his fall, and its every rise the cause of as much elation in him, as if he had personally distinguished himself. Add to this the fact that he has no other mode of expression for the promptings of the instinct of self-assertion than through the activities of the group, and it is not at

(1) Sully: Op.cit. p.295.

all surprising that laughter, individualistic though it be in essence, should begin in a communal form.

In a civilized community the bonds that bind a man to any particular group are, as a general rule, far looser than in the primitive state, and so, more freedom being given to the individual, we naturally find a strong tendency for individual laughter to supercede the "choral laughter" of the group. Choral laughter, however, will never be entirely ousted from even the most civilized society; for man will always identify himself, though more weakly than in the primitive community, with some social group, and will feel elation at its successes, and subjection at its humiliations. The father tends to laugh when his son laughs; Methodist will chuckle with the Methodist over some joke at the expense of the Catholic; the Englishman will join with a fellow-countryman to laugh at the "nearness" of the Scotchman, and with the Scotchman to poke fun at the Irishman. These alliances for the sake of mutual self-glorification are in a state of constant flux; some may last through a life-time, some fall to pieces after a few years or months, whilst others are formed in a moment, serve their

purpose, and vanish as quickly as they came.

The only constant factor throughout all this flicker and change of laughter-groupings is that all serve the one purpose, the gratification of the instinct of self-assertion in the individual through his identification with the group.

We have seen that laughter, besides serving as an expression of "sudden glory" in the individual, may be, and often is used by him as a weapon of attack and defence in his intercourse with his fellow-men; and most of what we have said in this connection will apply, 'mutatis mutandis', to the laughter of the group. Although the strongly-established groups which we call nations, may prefer to make appeal to the more imposing, if sometimes less effective weapons of diplomacy and warfare in their quarrels with their neighbours, the weaker groups are, as a general rule, perfectly satisfied to confine themselves to gibes and laughter. It has already been noted in these pages how laughter acts as a kind of social fly-wheel, in that it tends to suppress those who threaten society with revolt against its conventions, at the same time that it

spurs on those who would cling too blindly to the old.

"Laughter", says Bergson, "is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it." (1) It must not be imagined, however, that the influence of laughter in this direction is all for the good. Far from it. Many excellent innovations have been smothered, and the birth of others long delayed, by the scornful laughter of an intolerant society, whilst much that was best in the past has been laughed to an untimely end by a generation intoxicated with its own successes. On the whole, however, it would appear that laughter has accomplished more good than harm, in ridding society of certain noxious growths, that wax fat upon its wrath, flourish under its legal suppression, and shrivel up and die only at the scorching touch of its ridicule. To laughter, at all events, we owe no more and no less than we do to any other instrument, wielded in the hands of a well-meaning, but imperfect

(1) Bergson: Op.cit. p.197.

society.

In order to discover the nature and basis of some of the more permanent of these laughter-groupings, it is only necessary to open any book of classified "funny" jokes, as, for example, "Cole's Fun Doctor", when one finds such rough classifications as the following: Fun about : - Husband and Wife, Women, Mothers - in - law, Clothes, Clergymen, Teachers, Doctors, Lawyers, Servants, Employers, Drunkards, Mormons, Jews, Eminent Men, Irishmen, Americans, Chinamen etc. etc. This classification, based as it is upon the direction which men have given to their laughter in the past, represents the manner in which society has utilized its natural groupings as a basis for its choral laughter. These groupings, of course, have arisen in a multitude of ways, some not even remotely connected with laughter, but, once they have been formed, man has, by identifying himself now with this group, and now with that, used them as a means towards the evoking of the "passion" of "sudden glory".

There are other groupings, however, which seem to have, as their sole function, the arousing of this feeling of elation in the members composing them, and which die away, consequently, with the burst

of laughter to which they have given birth. A simple example may bring this out more clearly. I am in the habit of riding a peculiar little motor-cycle which has the engine situated within the front wheel; and this machine provides a never-failing source of merriment to the children playing in the streets through which I pass on the way to College. They will leave their marbles, skipping, and fighting, and stand in groups on the roadside, laughing and pointing fingers of scorn at the oddity. As soon as I have passed however, the groups break up, and the members go on with their interrupted play. For the moment they have identified themselves with the big world whose motor cycles have the engines in the conventional position, and have joined together with the common purpose of triumphing over the inferiority of the "outsider". It is not that they despise me, or even the machine which I ride -- all of them would, indeed, be glad enough to possess it -- but only that they regard the custom of the larger group, to which they belong, as superior to that of the smaller group, of which I, apparently, am the only member. I have recently tried the experiment of

giving different children short rides on my way to and from College, and find that, as soon as a child has been on the bicycle, he ceases to join in the groups of scoffers. He has now a sufficient reason for allying himself to my lost cause, and taunting with "sour grapes" the unfortunate ones who are still awaiting their turn, so that I may eventually find myself defended, rather than attacked, by the laughter of a secure majority.

Although we have by no means exhausted the almost infinite possibilities of our subject, we have now arrived at a point where we can close our treatment without leaving it suspended in mid-air as it were. We have traced the development of laughter from its lowest to its highest forms; we have seen it as resulting from purely physiological causes, and again as the reaction upon a highly-intellectual, and entirely impersonal witticism; but, in whatever guise, and under whatever conditions it has appeared, we have always detected in it one constant element, the raising of the individual, by some means or other, above the level of his fellows, or above his own customary level.

Perhaps the most surprising, as well

as the least agreeable impression conveyed by these pages is that laughter is entirely selfish in essence. We have been accustomed to look upon it as something merry, something social in which old enmities are forgotten, and old friendships renewed; and it comes as a shock to have it forced upon us that laughter, although it may incidentally fulfill such pleasant social functions, is, in reality, the instrument of the individual, used by the individual for the individual's own purposes. We have, no doubt, got a somewhat gloomy view of our subject, because we have only just touched upon its more pleasant aspects; and, had it lain within our scope, fully to discuss the laughter of humour, where pity mingles with superiority, and the element of contempt is thickly overlaid with a rich covering of sympathy, we might have ended on a lighter note. But the fact remains that, however delightful its accompaniments, and however merry its associations, laughter is based on a prompting, conscious or unconscious, for self-expression. Pleasant it very often is, purely altruistic it can never be. As Bergson has said, "It is a froth with a saline base. Like froth it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste

may find that the substance is scanty, and
the after-taste bitter."⁽¹⁾

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(1) Bergson: Op.cit. p.200.

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