



The Place of Laughter in Hobbes's Theory of Emotions

David Heyd

Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 43, No. 2. (Apr. - Jun., 1982), pp. 285-295.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-5037%28198204%2F06%2943%3A2%3C285%3ATPOLIH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y>

Journal of the History of Ideas is currently published by University of Pennsylvania Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/upenn.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE PLACE OF LAUGHTER IN HOBBS'S THEORY OF EMOTIONS

BY DAVID HEYD

I. Laughter is a human phenomenon which seems to resist theorization. Although it is one of the most widespread—indeed, universal—responses of human beings to comic and also non-comic stimuli, theoreticians have found it hard to explain its nature and even harder to specify the conditions of its arousal. It is hardly surprising that laughter has never held a very high priority in the theoretical interest of philosophers. Its inherent inscrutability drove thinkers like Cicero to skepticism and admission of ignorance;¹ its universality and vulgarity brought others to hold laughter in low esteem. Most philosophers have been deterred from the study of laughter by the unfounded fear of treating an unserious matter seriously, or of investigating rationally something based on incongruity and absurdity.

Thus, some philosophers altogether ignored the subject of laughter; others—like Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Descartes, and Kant—mentioned it in a cursory manner, holding it to be relatively insignificant. A third group, consisting of Hobbes, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Freud, not only gave serious and systematic thought to the subject, but also considered it as highly important for the understanding of human nature. For philosophers of this group the study of laughter was theoretically important, since it supported a general psychological or metaphysical thesis concerning man, his conception of the world, and his relations with his fellow creatures. Schopenhauer's incongruity theory of laughter served to demonstrate his theory concerning the tension between the direct intuitive perception of concrete objects and the abstract conception of universal concepts.² For Bergson, laughter was a unique expression of the typical tension between the "vital" and the spiritual (known by intuition), on the one hand, and the mechanical and the material (known through the intellect), on the other.³ Freud, too, used laughter as a vehicle to convey his revolutionary theory of the unconscious and its indirect modes of expression. Jokes were thus understood by Freud as having a structure and function very similar to those of dreams.⁴ Hobbes, like these thinkers, was not interested in laughter as such, and did not overestimate its significance; yet, like them, he used it to illustrate some of his basic ideas about human nature.

* A shorter version of this article was presented at the Annual Conference of the Israel Philosophical Association in Jerusalem (April 1979).

¹ *De Oratore*, II: lviii, 235: ". . . I should still not be ashamed to show ignorance of something which even its professed expositors do not understand." (Trans. E. W. Sutton, Loeb Library Edition, 373.)

² *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York, 1966), I, sec. 13, II, chap. 8.

³ *Laughter*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (London, 1921).

⁴ *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Standard Edition (New York, 1960), ed. and trans. J. Strachey, VIII, particularly 28-9, 159-80.

Hobbes is usually considered a pioneer in the modern study of laughter. This reputation is not fully deserved, as many of the elements of his analysis can be found in the discussions of his predecessors. Yet, Hobbes is no doubt the first to give a systematic account of laughter, an explanation which is inherently connected with his general theory of human nature and interests.

The analysis of laughter is part of Hobbes's doctrine of the emotions (or "passions"). This may seem odd, for laughter is often treated as a typically intellectual and "rational" response, completely devoid of emotional involvement.⁵ Moreover, it is not clear why laughter should be given such detailed attention within a relatively poor and scanty theory of emotions (compared with those of Hobbes's contemporaries, Descartes and Spinoza). There are, I believe, two reasons for Hobbes's choice in laying stress on the concept of laughter.

(i) *The metaphysical-methodological reason.* Laughter is an expression of a passion that distinctly exemplifies Hobbes's general theory concerning the origin, identity, and classification of the emotions; it also exemplifies the materialistic assumption which reductively connects emotions as mental phenomena with their physical source, on the one hand, and their bodily manifestation, on the other.

(ii) *The psychological-moral reason.* Laughter is an emotion whose analysis typically reflects the general Hobbesian conception of man's nature as a social creature: the ceaseless competition for positions of power, the unrelenting struggle for self-preservation, and the purely egoistic nature of man, who continuously strives for superiority over others.

II. Hobbes discusses laughter in two places: in chapter 9 of *Human Nature* (1650), and in chapter 6 of *Leviathan* (1651).⁶ Though the discussion in the latter is shorter, there are no significant differences between the two versions. In both cases the context of inquiry is the theory of passions, although Hobbes clearly states that laughter itself is not a passion but only "the sign" or the bodily manifestation of a certain passion. This passion has no name in ordinary language, and Hobbes refers to it by the term "glory," which connotes the feeling of superiority, pride, and self-assertion. This emotion of "glory" consists of the recognition of one's power, preeminent abilities and advantageous position in relation to others. Hence, it "is always joy."⁷

According to Hobbes, there are various situations which typically give rise to this feeling of glory: (a) success in one's own actions beyond one's expectations; (b) the perception of infirmities and defects in others; (c) the perception of infirmities and defects in one's own past (as long as they do not carry any "present dishonour"); (d) the conception of some absurdity abstracted from individual persons. The laughter evoked by these types of circumstances is, according to Hobbes, always connected with feelings of superiority, "the imagination of our own odds and eminency." Such aware-

⁵ Cf. Bergson, *Laughter*, 4-5.

⁶ References are to *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. W. Molesworth (London, 1839/40), III (*Leviathan*) and IV (*Human Nature*).

⁷ *Human Nature*, 45-47. The following exposition of Hobbes's view of laughter is based on these pages.

ness of one's abilities and success is typically sharpened under conditions of *comparison*, which is the reason for Hobbes's claim that we usually laugh *at others* (or *at our own selves in the past*).⁸

It is important to note that Hobbes's superiority theory of laughter completely dissociates laughter from its most apparent source, the *comic* ("wit" and "jest"): "for men laugh at mischances and indecencies wherein there lieth no wit or jest at all." And when we do laugh at jests, the absurdity which makes the jest laughable is always and necessarily connected with the imagination of "our odds and eminency." We might further support Hobbes's statement by noting that there are also comic situations which do not excite the particular response of laughter at all (such as subtle irony, or a funny event experienced in *solitude*).

However, not every state of "glory" takes the form of laughter. Only when the passion of glory is occasioned suddenly by an unexpected or unforeseen condition can laughter occur. We may now quote Hobbes's final definition of laughter: "[t]he passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."

Having defined laughter and the conditions of its inducement, Hobbes proceeds to evaluate it. Much laughter is a sign of pusillanimity, says Hobbes. For it is characteristic of people who "are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves" and cannot achieve self-assurance but through the observation of the defects of others. Great minds compare themselves only with people of their own kind, which seems to imply that they do not laugh much.⁹ Hobbes refers, however, to one kind of laughter which may suit also higher minds: laughter "at *absurdities* and infirmities *abstracted* from persons"; this is a non-offensive type of laughter. Its impersonal nature neutralizes the element of scorn and derision that is essential to the other types of laughter. We might add that laughter at oneself is also legitimized by Hobbes for the same reason, although the laughter of self-irony is not explicitly mentioned by Hobbes.

The empirical evidence which Hobbes offers in support of his superiority definition of laughter is very meager. He draws attention to two facts: first, that no one likes to be laughed at; secondly, that laughing to oneself in company makes all others feel jealous and uneasy (for everyone suspects that he is the object of scorn). But as we shall see in the sequel, Hobbes's main argument for his definition is theoretical rather than empirical.

III. Hobbes's definition of laughter is rooted in the traditional discussions of the subject, his own claim to originality notwithstanding. When he says "but what joy, . . . and wherein we triumph when we laugh, is not hitherto declared by any," he is ignoring a long list of philosophers with whom he was definitely familiar.

In Plato's *Philebus* (48-50)¹⁰ Hobbes could have found an explanation of

⁸ Although Hobbes does not mention the laughter of giggling girls, which appears not to be aroused by comparison with an inferior person, his superiority thesis applies to this case as well. For such laughter reflects self-assurance and supremacy over others who by hypothetical comparison are despised.

⁹ *Leviathan*, 46.

¹⁰ *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (London, 1892), IV, 621-24.

laughter in terms of superiority. Socrates cites laughter as a typical example of “mixed feelings,” i.e., experiences of simultaneous pleasure and pain. The object of laughter—the ridiculous or comic person—is inferior to the laugher in the epistemological sense of “not knowing oneself.” But such ignorance can, according to Socrates, be taken as ridiculous only if it is “powerless” and harmless to others. Now, laughter itself is pleasant, but owing to its special kind of objects it is always accompanied by envy or *Schadenfreude*, which is painful. So, as in Hobbes, laughter is a typical response to the misfortunes of others. The difference is that Plato interprets “misfortunes” on a purely epistemological level (unjustified self-conceit), while Hobbes is concerned with a wider spectrum of inferior characteristics and defects (and ascribes the unjustified self-conceit, “vain glory”, to the laugher). In *Laws* (935)¹¹ Plato distinguishes, like Hobbes, between offensive and non-offensive laughter, invoking the same Hobbesian criterion of personal scorn vs. innocent impersonal humor.

Aristotle’s short comment on comedy (*Poetics* 1449a)¹² has become the *locus classicus* for those interested in the subject of laughter. Hobbes no doubt knew this passage, but probably could not acknowledge its impact on his views because of his general aversion to Aristotelianism. Aristotle follows Plato in identifying the object of laughter as the harmlessly ridiculous, but parts company with him in replacing the epistemological defect of ignorance by the aesthetic category of deformity or ugliness as the *genus* of the ridiculous. The object of laughter may be “men worse than the average” or the mask that “is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.” Again, although Hobbes understands the superiority of the laugher in a much wider sense than the aesthetic and quasi-moral sense of Aristotle, the seeds of the superiority theory are definitely Greek. It should however be remembered that while Aristotle as an aesthetician is interested only in the analysis of the laughter-raising object (the comic), Hobbes as a psychologist is concerned only with the laughing subject and with the function of laughter in human behavior. Nevertheless, the inferiority of the object of laughter in Aristotle and the superiority of the laugher in Hobbes suggest a similar subject-object relation.

The superiority factor in the analysis of laughter was also given a *rhetorical* sense. Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (1419b)¹³ briefly mentions jests, which are “of some service in controversy” (e.g. in destroying one’s opponent’s earnestness). Cicero elaborates the idea of laughter as a means of attaining rhetorical advantage;

. . . it shatters or obstructs or makes light of an opponent, or alarms or repulses him; and it shows the orator himself to be a man of finish, accomplishment and taste.¹⁴

Note however that in this sense laughter is a *means* for the achievement of superior position, whereas in Hobbes’s analysis laughter is an *expression* or an effect of a feeling of supremacy.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, V, 324-25.

¹² *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1924), XI, Chap. V.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI.

¹⁴ Cicero, *De Oratore*, II: lviii, 236 (Loeb Edition, 373).

Bacon, whose general impact on Hobbes was considerable, emphasizes the intellectual source of laughter and says "that laughing is scarce, properly, a passion". "The conceit of somewhat ridiculous" which precedes laughter is a cognitive rather than an emotional attitude.¹⁵ As we shall see, Hobbes follows Bacon in considering the cognitive elements of laughter no less than the dynamic-emotional ones. Hobbes also learnt from Bacon that laughter must be effected by a *sudden* and unexpected change in our mental life, and also that it is accompanied by delight and joy. Bacon also presents a psycho-physical explanation which connects the spiritual grounds of laughter with the details of its bodily manifestation.

In 1649, just a year before Hobbes published his *Human Nature*, Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* appeared. It is a more extensive and systematic treatise on the emotions than Hobbes's, and Hobbes—who at the time was living in Paris—no doubt knew it. Descartes tries to relate the emotion of laughter to the bodily processes which reflect it (mainly the inflation of the lungs with air which looking for an outlet "rushes out" in an outburst). The psychological circumstances of such a physiological state consist of a combination of joy with "some little element of hate or at least of wonder."¹⁶ All the three elements of joy (delight), hate (superiority), and wonder (suddenness) form the basis of Hobbes's analysis. Furthermore, Descartes defines derision or scorn as "a sort of joy mingled with hatred," which when coming upon us unexpectedly causes laughter. Thus, the least perfect are usually the most given to mocking; "for, desiring to see all others held in as low estimation as themselves, they are truly rejoiced at the evils which befall them. . . ."¹⁷ We are reminded of the element of *Schadenfreude* in Plato and of the general attitude of Hobbes.

There is however an important difference between the grounds of laughter in Hobbes and Descartes; for while Hobbes maintains that laughter expresses pure superiority, Descartes considers only a person who *deserves* the evil which befalls him as a proper object of ridicule. This difference is indicative of the respective moral views of the two philosophers. Secondly, Descartes—like Spinoza—distinguishes between laughter as scorn and derision and useful laughter or bantering which is devoid of hate (or indeed of any emotional content);¹⁸ Hobbes speaks almost exclusively of derisive laughter.

IV. How is Hobbes's own analysis related to his general theory of the emotions and to his philosophical assumptions both in the methodological-metaphysical sphere and in the psychological-moral one? The basic metaphysical principle by which Hobbes explains both the inanimate world and the organic and human world is the principle of motion. He distinguishes in humans between two kinds of motion: the vital and the animal. The first is involuntary; the second, voluntary. Vital motion is that of the pulse, the circulation of the blood, digestion, breathing, etc. Examples of animal motion are walking, speaking and striking. Animal motion (in contrast with vital motion) "depends always upon a precedent thought of *whither, which way and what*". Imagination is its first internal beginning. A minute, invisible

¹⁵ *Natural History*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon* (London, 1826), I, 483-84.

¹⁶ *The Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New York, 1973), I, 385-86, secs. 124, 125, 126.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 413, secs. 178, 179.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 413, sec. 180.

motion in the brain passes to the heart, where it either eases or obstructs the vital motion of the blood. The first motion produces pleasure; the second, pain.¹⁹ Descartes' mechanistic explanation was formulated under the direct influence of Harvey's anatomy.

Hobbes defines the passions as "the interior beginnings of voluntary motions," beginnings which are located in the imagination. The animal motion of drawing nearer to a thing (in the case of pleasure) or retiring from it (in the case of pain) is the behavioral expression of the passions. Although Hobbes does not say so explicitly, he divides the emotions into two groups: the positive emotions, which create appetite or desire, and the negative, which create aversion.

This general analysis is well illustrated by the phenomenon of laughter. Laughter is not an emotion but only a bodily manifestation of an emotion called "glory." The emotion of glory is typically a matter of the imagination, or more specifically of the way in which we perceive or conceive ourselves in relation to others or to ourselves in an earlier stage. As in all other emotions, there is in laughter a cognitive element of *conception*, which anatomically speaking is located in the brain. This cognitive element is especially conspicuous in laughter, since glory is based on operations of evaluation and comparison. Laughter, like other emotions in Hobbes's theory, is not just a "drive" or a blind impulse over which reason has no control (with the possible exception of hysterical laughter or laughter stimulated by tickling); laughter is not considered by Hobbes an instinctual, irrational, or "demonic" impulse, but rather a voluntary motion. It is connected with deliberations about the organization of man's abilities and endeavors aimed at the increase of his power and chances of winning the competitive struggle against others.

It should however be noted that the distinction between voluntary and involuntary motion is problematic in a mechanistic theory such as Hobbes's, and it is therefore not clear how imagination can serve as the starting point of the interior voluntary motions (the emotions). Hobbes regards imagination as "nothing but decaying sense,"²⁰ i.e., a remnant of the operation of external bodies on our senses (and brain), an operation which is not subject to our willpower and lies beyond our control. Indeed, laughter was traditionally considered by most theoreticians as a typically involuntary response—not dissimilar to sneezing. It seems that the solution to this problem must lie in Hobbes's analysis of the concept of will. The will is "the last appetite, or aversion [in deliberation] immediately adhering to the action or the omission thereof."²¹ And a voluntary act is thus "that, which proceedeth from the will, and no other." In this deterministic sense, actions that have their beginning in ambition, lust, and fear are voluntary, and so is the burst of laughter whose beginning is in sudden glory. Only vital motions are, strictly speaking, involuntary since they involve no deliberation whatsoever, that is to say, no appetite or aversion.

¹⁹ For the elaboration of these distinctions and those mentioned in the next paragraph, see *Human Nature*, 31-32 and *Leviathan*, 38-39.

²⁰ *Leviathan*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

Hobbes's theory of passions assumes two methods of identifying passions or emotions, taking desire as the starting point, which may be analyzed as follows: (i) the regressive method: the attempt to examine the passion in reverse—from desire to conception in the imagination which created it (or in Hobbes's terminology “from what conception proceeds everyone of those passions”); (ii) the progressive method: the attempt to identify the passion through its external manifestation, the transformation of the invisible micro-motion in the brain into the macro-motion, which is accessible to ordinary sense perception and empirical observation.

Bacon and Descartes follow the second method; but Hobbes tries the first method, which requires introspection and is sustained by assumptions that are not behavioristically verifiable. Surprisingly, Hobbes, the materialist, does not investigate in detail the behavioral expression of the emotion of “glory,” although it seems that he would have accepted Bacon's and Descartes's descriptions in this matter. One possible explanation for this methodological choice is that, for reasons related to his general philosophical and political purpose, Hobbes is primarily interested in the psychological aspects of human behavior, i.e., in the conception of the imagination which gives rise to the emotions. This will be our concern in the next section.

V. Hobbes's entire psychology is founded on the assumption of human egocentricity, man's natural aspiration for self-preservation, the constant competition from birth to death for power—one aspect of which is social recognition. Hobbes's superiority theory of laughter suits this theoretical framework. Laughter reflects a feeling of power which may be directed either at the laughing subject himself, or at another person, or at abstract human properties and characteristics.

Yet, Hobbes's attitude towards that feeling of triumph called ‘glory’ is ambiguous, and accordingly his evaluation of laughter is ambivalent. On the one hand, Hobbes is a naturalist, who regards every form of struggle for self-preservation and power as a legitimate strife which in itself cannot be subject to moral judgment. And laughter as an attempt to attain superiority by deprecating others is no exception to that rule. On the other hand, he is highly critical of those who laugh excessively at others: “much laughter at the defects of others is a sign of pusillanimity.” Great minds compare themselves only with the most able.

In order to elucidate this ambivalence we may try to reconstruct some arguments which Hobbes does not state explicitly. That sudden glory which is the passion of laughter is a special case of glory in general. Hobbes distinguishes between three sorts of glory: just or well-grounded glory, false glory, and vain glory.²² Just glory is based on the consciousness of one's own power justified by past actions, and giving rise to pride. Such an experience of one's own power is also projected to the future and serves as a basis for the aspiration to a further increase in power. False glory proceeds from “fame and trust of *others*, whereby one may think well of himself, and yet be deceived.” Aspiration based on this kind of glory is bound to fail. Lastly, vain glory is created by imagination (“fiction”) of actions done by one which

²² *Human Nature*, 41.

in fact were never done by him. The ego is puffed with pride which has no foundation in reality. Vain glory cannot therefore produce any aspiration or appetite. As examples of vain glory Hobbes mentions our identification with the heroes of romance or with agents of actions we admire. Hobbes's list of *signs* of vain glory is fairly long (imitation, counterfeiting, etc.), but strangely does not include laughter.

Nevertheless, although Hobbes does not expressly say so,²³ it seems that the sudden glory in laughter should be understood as vain glory. For, firstly, it cannot be just glory, since those who enjoy self-confidence, "the great minds", do not need to resort to laughter. Their self-assurance is genuinely confirmed by their own deeds and does not require comparisons with weaker people. Secondly, the sudden glory that makes us laugh is not false glory either, because laughter is not dependent on the image of the subject in the eyes of others. To put it succinctly, being produced by something *we* find in ourselves, laughter cannot be the expression of *false* glory; being produced nevertheless by *comparison* with inferior persons, laughter cannot be related to *just* glory.

If we construe the sudden glory of laughter as vain glory, not only can we solve the problem of Hobbes's ambivalent attitude to laughter, but we will also be able to understand why laughter is not exactly an emotion. For vain glory is not expressed in any aspiration or appetite whatsoever; it is void or "unprofitable" in the sense that it does not lead to any (animal) motion. Its bodily manifestation is a motion that is *futile par excellence*; it consists of neither appetite (moving towards) nor aversion (moving away). Accordingly, the description of laughter as arising from the futile and immobile state of vain glory can be satisfactorily integrated with Hobbes's definition of *contempt*, which is a most important factor in his conception of laughter: "Contempt [is] nothing else but an immobility, or contumacy of the heart, in resisting the action of certain things." The things we despise are neither loved nor hated, i.e., are emotionally indifferent to us. This, incidentally, is also Descartes's view: in the case of derision or scorn an emotional equilibrium (and hence "immobility") is guaranteed by the admixture of some hatred (of "*small evils*") with some joy (derived from the evil being *deserved* by the derided person).²⁴ In the case of "bantering" no hate or joy is involved, and hence it is not a passion at all but rather an indication of the *tranquillity* of the virtuous soul.²⁵ Naturally Hobbes does not leave room for "bantering" in the Cartesian sense, and his "laughter without offense" is still an expression of superiority.

Laughter therefore holds an extraordinary position among the emotions. It is a behavioral phenomenon which indeed has an emotional correlate ("glory"), but a sterile and void one ("vain-glory"). So although laughter forms part of the theory of the emotions, it is not an ordinary emotion: although sudden glory is an emotion in its original etymological sense of

²³ Except for the last sentence of the section on laughter in *Human Nature* (47), which associates laughter (at least of a certain type) with vain glory.

²⁴ *Passions of the Soul*, 413, sec. 178.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 413, sec. 180. Cf. Bergson, *Laughter*, 4: "Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion."

“moving out” (i.e., in the bodily “distortion of the countenance”), it does not move the laugher *anywhere*. Although it has an *object* (in contrast with *Angst*, for example), it has no specific *end*.

This aspect of the interpretation of Hobbes's analysis of laughter agrees with later theories that are otherwise understood as anti-Hobbesian (“incongruity theories of laughter”). Kant, for example, defines laughter as “an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.”²⁶ In other words, the source of laughter is an emotion (affection) which turns out to be *futile*. Contrary to other emotions like love and fear which give rise to *motion* (a purposive action), the reduction of the affection of laughter into nothing is just a “play of representations” and produces “an *equilibrium* of the vital forces of the body.” Spencer too notes that laughter is a purposeless action, although it is caused by strong feelings (which usually elicit motions that are directed to special ends).²⁷ The convulsions of the body in the case of laughter have no object, no evolutionary function, apart from the mere discharge of surplus energy. Darwin also follows Hobbes in claiming that laughter is a purposeless movement, although like Kant and Spencer he does not consider laughter as exclusively the expression of superiority.²⁸ Finally, Arthur Koestler refers to laughter as a “luxury reflex”: it serves to release redundant psychic energy that cannot be used in any purposive way.²⁹ Koestler considers the superiority factor as the emotional-dynamic basis of laughter, and ascribes the reason for the futility of the emotion to the intellectual conception of the absurdity or incongruity of the situation.

Hobbes, like some of his followers, insisted on adding the dynamic element to the analysis of laughter. The emotional element and the cognitive (or intellectual) element are two necessary complements in his analysis. Yet, unlike other emotions, the ‘passion’ of sudden vain glory does not lead to any action, desire or aversion. In this lies its futility and also its pleasure-effect.

VI. Laughter clearly exemplifies the Hobbesian thesis which may be called “the uniformity of the emotions.” In the Introduction to *Leviathan* Hobbes speaks of the

similitude of *passions*, which are the same for all men, *desire, fear, hope*, etc.; not the similitude of the *objects* of the passions, which are the things *desired, feared, hoped*, etc.; for these the individual constitution, and particular education, do so vary. . . .³⁰

To the psychological explanation of the heterogeneity in the objects of the passions, Hobbes later adds a materialistic one: since the human body is in a state of constant change, it cannot be that the same things would stimulate in men the same desires and aversions.

The comic is accordingly in the laughing subject rather than in the laughed-at object. Anything can be an object of laughter as long as the

²⁶ *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford, 1911), 199, sec. 54.

²⁷ “The Physiology of Laughter”, in *Essays* (London, 1868), I, 200-01.

²⁸ *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York and London, n.d.), 196.

²⁹ *The Act of Creation* (London, 1969), 31 and Pt. I *passim*.

³⁰ *Leviathan*, xi.

conditions of superiority and of the interest creating "glory" are satisfied. There are no inherent properties which make the object laughable in itself. Hobbes diverges from the Aristotelian tradition of aesthetic analysis of the comic as an object having unique characteristics. He is instead interested in the psychological mechanism in the subject which may take as an object practically any phenomenon (especially if the "glory" is *vain*).

Laughter especially suits the uniformity thesis, because although "glory" may be no more universal and uniform than any other emotion, its bodily expression is the most uniform of all behavioral manifestations of human emotions. Anatomically and physiologically people laugh in a strikingly similar way independently of culture, race, or ethnic group. This may be due to the "futility" of laughter, which is in Spencer's opinion the physiologically easiest outlet of superfluous emotional energy. Whereas the purposiveness of all other emotions dictates different modes of behavior depending on values and beliefs, laughter is completely "natural" and culture-independent.

Finally, a question may be asked concerning the status of Hobbes's theory of laughter: Is its validity empirical or metaphysical? Watkins³¹ argues that Hobbes's psychological doctrine is supported by a combination of metaphysical ideas and empirical generalizations about human nature; or to be more precise, by empirical generalizations interpreted and distorted by metaphysical assumptions. Watkins takes laughter as an example, and claims that although Hobbes's doctrine of laughter is vulnerable to empirical refutation, Hobbes would always try to interpret it in terms of his metaphysical theory. According to Watkins, Hobbes should therefore be understood as claiming an unfalsifiable status for his hypotheses about laughter.

It seems though that Hobbes just *cannot* attach such a status to his analysis of laughter. For according to his own thesis of the uniformity of the passions, laughter is identifiable behaviorally, i.e., independently of its object or even of the passion which gives rise to it ("glory"). Thus, if we could (and it seems that indeed we can) produce examples of laughter that do not express superiority, Hobbes would not be able to defend his theory by not considering them as genuine cases of laughter, and would have to admit that his hypothesis is (prima facie) refuted. Theoreticians like Bergson, Freud, and Koestler, who partly follow Hobbes, explicitly put forward the superiority thesis as an empirical and falsifiable rather than an analytically valid statement. This does not mean that they are forced to accept any prima facie counterexample as refuting the superiority thesis. Watkins, for instance, says that the cause of laughter is not the thing laughed at, but rather the fact that only *I* can see the point of the joke. But this does not in the least undermine Hobbes's superiority theory; on the contrary, it supports it, although not in a direct and obvious way. "Glory" is not merely raised by defective objects which deserve scorn or contempt, but also by situations which highlight the subject's special powers (like being the only intelligent person who understands the sting of a joke).

The problem is that although the link between an emotion and its object is conceptual or analytical (fear must be connected with some

³¹ J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes's System of Ideas* (London, 1973), 77-78.

frightening object), its bodily manifestation is not necessarily unique, and the same behavior can express mental states other than the emotion in question. In the case of "glory" it is obviously true that the object of the emotion is some derided or deprecated person or character; but Hobbes has far from proved that laughter as such always indicates glory (we may think of hysterical laughter, laughter excited by gas, etc.). We see then that Hobbes—who took the "regressive route" of analyzing glory in terms of the conception and psychological interests which give rise to it—tries to secure public criteria for identifying glory by also examining its bodily manifestation in the form of laughter (the "progressive route"). This move makes his theory open to criticism as not agreeing with some kinds of laughter that do not involve superiority. But the critics should remember that Hobbes after all was *not* interested in a theory of *laughter*, but rather in a theory of the *emotions* in general and of "glory" in particular. And in this respect it seems that most of his critics as well as his staunch followers have missed the main import and intent of his analysis.

The Hebrew University, Jerusalem.