

# WHY DO WE LAUGH AND CRY?

A philosopher interprets the meaning  
of laughter and tears

by ALFRED M. STERN

IN TRYING TO ANSWER the question, "Why do we laugh and cry?" I do not want to inquire into the psychological motives of people's laughter and tears. The meaning of my question is: How can the psychological phenomena of laughing and crying be interpreted philosophically? How can we conceive *rationally* these two polar manifestations of our psychism, which are so typically human and, nevertheless, so deeply irrational?

In my theory, laughter is interpreted as a value judgment, an instinctive, negative value judgment concerning a degradation of values. This judgment is not expressed in words, but in the inarticulate sounds we call laughter.

Laughter, however, is not only our *reaction* towards a degradation of values. Sometimes it is also an *action* provoking a degradation of values or, at least, trying to provoke it. When we laugh at a person, or a thing done by a person, although no value degradation can be found in them, we try to degrade their value. And often we succeed.

There is a French saying, *le ridicule tue*, the ludicrous kills. Of course, it does not kill physically, but it may kill morally, axiologically;\* it may kill values, and then laughter may have tragic consequences.

If we laugh at a serious person or his work, this person is *offended*. And he is right to be *offended*, for instinctively he recognizes in this laughter an attempt to degrade his value or that of his work in the eyes of other people.

The phenomenon of weeping is closely related to that of laughing. The basic difference between the two became obvious to me when I tried to interpret two souvenirs of my childhood. I remember a walk with my father and one of his colleagues, Mr. F., in an Austrian summer resort. I was about seven years old. A torrential rain had just ceased, and the ways were soaked and muddy. Suddenly, Mr. F. slipped and fell into a dirty puddle. He rose immediately, wet and full of mud, while my father roared with laughter.

I did not understand this laughter at the time, nor the fact that Mr. F. became very *offended*. Years later I learned that my father did not like Mr. F., who indeed, was not very worthy of affection.

Now, interpreting my father's laughter axiologically, I come to the following conclusion: Falling into a puddle and rising wet and covered with mud, the human personality, supposedly the source of all spiritual values, changes for a moment into a simple thing, into a physical object, subjected to gravity and other mechanical forces,

\* *Axiology* is the technical term, derived from the Greek, to designate the theory of values.

like all unintelligent passive objects of a nature exempt from values and hierarchies. By this change from an evaluating subject into a value-free object, the human person suffers a transitory degradation of his value, and the laughter he provokes by behaving like a dull lifeless thing is an instinctive negative value judgment, criticizing and chastising that degradation.

Perhaps my father would not have laughed if he had had some affection for and sympathy with Mr. F., for, as Emerson remarks, affection and sympathy may prevent us from noticing the ludicrous. Axiologically speaking, this means that some affection would have prevented my father from seeing in Mr. F., fallen in the puddle, only a passive object, subjected to value-free mechanical forces, degrading the value of what man is supposed to be: the center of emanation of spiritual values. If Mr. F. was offended, he recognized in my father's laughter an instinctive negative value judgment, prejudicial to his human dignity.

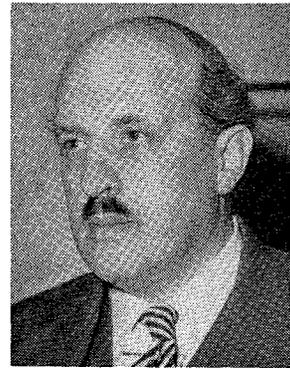
The philosophical significance of the phenomenon of crying was revealed to me by the analysis of another childhood souvenir. One day—I was about nine years old—my mother brought me to school. On the way we saw a man stumbling and falling on the paving stones. Some passers-by laughed, but immediately ceased laughing, because the man did not rise again. My mother asked me to wait a moment in a doorway, in order to spare me afflicting impressions, and went, with other persons, to help the unknown man. A few minutes later she returned, crying. The man had fractured his skull and was dead.

Only now do I understand, philosophically, the difference between these two events.

What had aroused my father's laughter had been a *degradation of values*. What had caused my mother's tears had been a *loss of values*. Even without knowing the man, my mother, instinctively, must have interpreted his death as a loss of values, for every human life represents an ensemble of values: moral values, intellectual values, esthetic values, religious and social values—in short, spiritual values. And death means a loss of those specific values united in a certain human person. Not only a loss of values, but also the fact that they are threatened or unattainable may provoke our tears.

In a general way, we may affirm:

We laugh at *degraded values*, or in order to degrade values, but we weep about *threatened, lost, and unattainable values*. If the laughter about the comic is the instinctive expression of a *negative* value judgment concerning a degradation of values, weeping is the instinctive expression of a *positive* value judgment on threat-



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ened, unattainable, and lost values. Weeping, thus, always refers to things positively appreciated.

We may say that the tears of fear and anxiety express positive value judgments on values considered as threatened, while the tears of nostalgia, affliction, and mourning express positive value judgments on lost values. The tears of frustration, anger, and rage express positive value judgments on unattainable values.

This situation seems to involve a paradoxical element, for although expressing *positive* value judgments, weeping is considered a *negative* vital value, and we don't like to weep. And although expressing *negative* value judgments, laughing is considered a *positive* vital value, and we like to laugh. As far as weeping is concerned, this paradox is easily solved. Although we express by our tears that we appreciate certain things in a positive way, it is evident that what we weep about is the menace, the unattainableness, or the loss of those positive values. The menace, the unattainableness, and the loss of positive values are evidently negative values. Therefore, weeping is considered a negative value, and we don't like to weep.

### The paradox of laughter

But how about laughter? We like to laugh and consider it a *positive* vital value, although it expresses a *negative* appreciation. This seems paradoxical. But we have to admit that we do not dislike uttering negative value judgments from time to time. He who expresses a negative value judgment—be it rationally or instinctively, as in laughter—criticizes a degradation of values, committed by somebody else—except in the cases where we laugh at ourselves, chastising ourselves for a degradation of values we have committed.

The word "to criticize" comes from the Greek *krités*, meaning judge. He who criticizes, uttering a negative value judgment—either in rational concepts and articulate words or in the irrational, inarticulate sounds we call laughter—considers himself the judge of the one he criticizes; and this gives him an agreeable feeling of superiority.

But this is only one of the reasons we like to laugh, and certainly not the most flattering for *homo sapiens*. I think there are other reasons, which seem to me more important. They are linked to the double character of laughter: laughter as a criticism of society with respect to the individual, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a criticism of the individual with respect to society. From this latter angle laughter would appear as a kind of self-liberation of the individual from the coercive influence which the social group exerts on him, by virtue of its imperious system of values.

Society laughs at human weaknesses expressed in individuals, for human weaknesses are degradations of human forces, which have a positive value and which society tries to preserve. Therefore, society chastises by its laughter those human weaknesses whose degradation the individual could avoid.

If our fellow men laugh when we commit a stupidity, this laughter is a mild punishment and a warning, by which society wishes to tell us: "Be careful, you just degraded *intellectual* values, which are the privilege of man. Watch yourself, be more attentive and industrious, and you will avoid such humiliating incidents."

We view here a pedagogical aspect of laughter—its corrective function, which serves to show its social usefulness.

Society also chastises by laughter any minor degradation of *moral* values committed by its members, such as roguery, cheating, boasting. But we would not laugh at any moral default of a more serious character, like unfaithfulness, hypocrisy, calumny, or treason, because they no longer constitute *degradations* of moral values, but *losses* of moral values, which may provoke tears.

*Most rarely and only with uneasiness do we laugh at degradations of esthetic values, as they appear in ugly persons.* When laughing at an ugly person, that is, a person who, by his mere physical appearance, degrades certain esthetic and sometimes vital values, we have a bad conscience, because the person is not responsible for his ugliness. It escapes his will, it is his nature.

Thus, the criticism expressed in laughter would not exert its corrective function. When laughter, a social and axiological manifestation, clashes with nature, it is an empty blow. Nature is stronger. Being pedagogically and socially useless, laughter about the degradation of esthetic values as it appears in human ugliness is not sanctioned by society. It is even condemned and rejected as indecent. And this, too, can be explained axiologically. For in laughing at the expense of an ugly person, we risk hurting him morally and provoking a loss of his self-confidence.

In this case, our punishment of the *degradation* of *esthetic* values, as it appears in his ugliness, would provoke a *loss* of *moral* values, and tears may be the reaction of the victim. This would be especially true with respect to ugly girls or women, for in the hierarchy of values of the feminine sex the esthetic value of physical beauty occupies a higher place than in that of the male, since the personal destiny of a woman depends to a large extent on her physical appearance.

### "Indecent" laughter

But if, for these reasons, society condemns as "indecent" our laughter about human ugliness, it encourages our laughter at any degradation of esthetic values which results not from nature but from willful human activity. Society encourages us, for instance, when we chastise by our laughter those true or pretended degradations of esthetic values which it calls "degenerate art." It allows us also to laugh at the clown.

In order to understand the axiological relations between the individual and society we have to distinguish among individual, collective, and universal values. It

has been contended that, since they are relations between objects and appreciating subjects, *all* values are individual. But this contention is shortsighted, for it overlooks the fact that only those values are individual which depend on the individual peculiarities of the appreciating subjects, while the values which are independent of the individual peculiarities of those who affirm them may be termed objective values.

Among the latter I distinguish between collective and universal values, defining as collective those values which depend upon the collective peculiarities of the group that upholds them—for instance, a class or a political party; and as universal those values which are independent both of the individual and the collective peculiarities of those who affirm them.

The majority of individuals, collective groups within society, and society as a whole tend to present their individual or collective values as universal values. This explains the state of axiological warfare which exists between the individual and the society, the individual and particular collective groups, the individual and the individual, and among the different collective groups within society. Laughter is one of the most powerful weapons in this axiological warfare. In order to protest against the claim of universality of a merely individual or collective value, the adversary has only to degrade, that is, to ridicule it.

### Society's system of values

The majority of individual and collective values are dictated by particular interests and tastes. But in society the different particular interests and tastes compensate one another, so that what comes up to the surface consists of only the most general appreciations. This is why the system of values of society implies most of the universal values, and especially those which are necessary for the conservation of society. Hence, society tries to preserve them and to protect them with special sanctions. The mildest of these sanctions is the laughter with which society punishes whoever degrades values belonging to the system of values that it is interested in preserving and protecting.

The ideal society would be that one whose system of values would include nothing but values of universal validity. However, any actual society is always more or less distant from that ideal. During periods of degeneracy, the number of collective values of a ruling party, or of the individual values of a dictator, exceeds that of the universal values in the axiological system of a given society. This society is not always an honest administrator of universal values.

The criticism of society is mostly directed against the collective values of certain particularistic groups within itself and against the individual values of certain original persons. Wishing to preserve its own system of values intact, wanting to increase its authority, and trying to impose it upon everybody, society uses laughter in order to degrade any competing system of values,

that is the systems of collective values of certain particularistic groups or the systems of individual values of certain too individualistic persons.

In order to escape this punishment of laughter, which would isolate them socially, the particularistic groups and individuals may give up their specific value conceptions, too ostensibly different from those of the majority. By its laughter or even by the menace of this laughter society will then have exerted an *assimilatory* function.

This dangerous character of the laughter of society at the cost of individuals and particular groups explains the reaction of the individual and of the particular groups toward society, the revenge they take in laughing at society, in trying, by their laughter, to degrade the system of values of society by which they feel themselves oppressed.

This is the second basic aspect of laughter I have mentioned: that of a criticism of the individual toward society. From this angle laughter would appear as a kind of spiritual liberation of the individual from the coercive influence society exerts on him, by virtue of its imperious system of values. In laughing at certain values sustained by society, the individual tries to degrade them, and thus affirms his personal sovereignty towards society. The positive value we ascribe to this laughter would then be derived from the freedom of appreciation, reconquered by the individual from an axiologically oppressive society.

The specific weapon the individual forges in this warfare of laughter against society is the joke. There exist as many classes of jokes as classes of values. There are jokes degrading intellectual values, others degrading moral values, esthetic values, religious values, vital values, instrumental values, economic values, etc.

### The off-color joke

The number of anecdotes drawing their comic effects from a degradation of those moral values which characterize the erotic life is especially noticeable. On the one hand, we have the vigorous sexual passions; on the other hand, the rigorous restrictions of these passions by ethics, religion, social conventions, and penal prohibitions. The individual can not escape the social pressure exerted by these conventions and taboos. He can violate them only at the risk of social and sometimes even of penal sanctions. The individual takes his revenge in trying, by means of jokes and anecdotes, to degrade those moral values of erotic life which the social and moral conventions and legal prohibitions try to protect. The laughter resulting from those degradations is for the individual a kind of symbolic liberation from a social pressure from which he suffers.

When the individual ceases to suffer from the effect of those conventions and prohibitions, he is no longer so eager to degrade their value. Therefore, it is neither the old ladies nor the old gentlemen who tell us the most piquant stories.

There are many kinds of laughter which have nothing

to do with the comic. Let me mention here only two of them: the laughter of joy, closely linked with tears of joy, and the smiles of modesty, politeness, etc. These kinds of laughter beyond the comic can be explained not by degradation, but by another phenomenon which I call devaluation. By devaluation I mean any quantitative diminution of a positive or negative value, which does not necessarily imply a qualitative degradation. In diminishing, for instance, the negative character of a negative value, I do not degrade it, because it does not suffer any deterioration of its quality. I simply devalue it quantitatively.

### The smile of modesty

There is a great variety of smiles: the smile of modesty, of courtesy, of welcome, of encouragement, of pity, of irony, of embarrassment, and so on. I have tried to explain all of them by using the concept of devaluation.

Let me only take the example of the smile of modesty. If one pays a compliment to a pretty lady, to a great artist or scientist, these persons react, in general, with a smile. Is it a smile of joy? Rarely, unless the lady is in love with the man who pays her the compliment, and the artist or scientist considers the flatterer a true connoisseur. But in general the smile by which we respond to a compliment is a smile of modesty, expressing a social convention rather than a true feeling. I have tried to understand this phenomenon axiologically and found that whoever responds with a smile of modesty to the compliment of another person tries to devalue his own value, to minimize it in the eyes of the partner or partners.

In general, the smile of modesty is not sincere, it is a social fiction, but it is an important one in human relations. Whoever refuses to respond with a smile of modesty to a compliment is immediately considered as arrogant. People say of him: "This man is very sure of his value."

And if it is a lady who accepts a compliment without a smile of modesty, she is immediately condemned, especially by the feminine witnesses of the scene. Refusing to devalue by a smile—at least fictitiously—the esthetic value which was ascribed to her by the compliment, the lady certainly exposes herself to all kinds of criticism.

"Look at her!" the other ladies will say. "She takes this seriously; she really believes in her superiority!"

And the ladies who are less pretty than she will comment: "Besides, her legs are far from perfect!"

But in allowing a smile of modesty to glide over her lips, the lady makes "as if" she devaluated the esthetic value of her beauty, and thus she will be pardoned for possessing it.

I said earlier that we weep about threatened, lost, and unattainable values. But how about the tears we may shed in reading or attending the performance of a tragedy? Since the events presented in a tragedy are

purely fictitious, the values involved in it do not seem to be really lost or threatened or unattainable.

Aristotle was right in insisting on the fictitious character of the events presented in the tragedy and of the *dramatis personae*. But in my opinion we have to realize that the *values* involved in the tragedy are not fictitious at all. The mode of existence of values is that of validity, and this is a domain beyond the distinction between the real and the fictitious. Values which proved their validity in the fictitious experiment of artistic imagination have at the same time proved their validity in life, for an ideal validity is, at the same time, a real one. From this springs the gravity of the fictitious experiences of the artistic play, for its axiological results are valid for life itself.

If the tragedy shows, in an imaginary realm, that certain values are threatened, unattainable, or lost, if it shows the *precariousness of these values on an ideal plane*, then their precariousness is also demonstrated on the plane of reality. Thus, the tears we may shed at a tragedy are justified, axiologically.

We may say with Kant, that man is a citizen of two worlds. Not of a metaphysical and an empirical world, as Kant affirmed, but of the world of values and the world of value-free physical, causal occurrences. I think that during his whole life man balances on the edge between these two worlds. He sacrifices a good deal of his energies to the effort to remain well equilibrated within the world of values, so that he may not fall into the axiological emptiness of the natural world of blind causes, toward which he is pulled by a kind of gravity, since, with a part of his being man belongs to this natural world of physical things and causes. This effort is justified, for the laughter he provokes by degrading human values sounds badly to the ears of the victim of such a fall into the axiological emptiness of brute nature.

### Living in two worlds

We are citizens of these two worlds also as far as the tragic is concerned: for the collisions between the spiritual world of values and the world of value-free natural occurrences are responsible for most of the losses of values which characterize our tragic existence and which make us cry. The causal world of natural occurrences is totally indifferent toward values; it destroys them, without taking into account their positive or negative character, their superiority or inferiority. In the clashes between the world of natural occurrences and spiritual values, the highest positive values often perish on the field, and the negative values survive.

Since man is a citizen of two worlds—that of values and that of natural, causal occurrences—he is the battlefield of their terrible collisions. If there is in the world an inexhaustible source, it is that of tears. The clashes among antagonistic values and their collisions with the world of natural occurrences never cease to nourish that source of the bitterest of all liquids.