

Nietzsche, humor and masochism

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Abstract

In this paper, I criticize the view—which I call “the exclusive relief thesis”—that humor relieves suffering, and *exclusively* relieves suffering. A representative of this view is Freud. In “Humour,” he writes that “the essence of humor” (*das Wesen des Humours*) is that “one spares oneself suffering.” I argue that, while humor *does* relieve suffering, it *also* causes it. I argue for this by looking at Nietzsche’s explanation of why humor relieves suffering. For Nietzsche, humor relieves suffering because it is an attitude in which a person recognizes that her failure is *involuntary*; it therefore relieves the suffering of *guilt* (what Nietzsche calls “*Gewissenbisse*”). I argue that, while this explanation is correct, it implies that humor is identical to self-humiliation, and causes the suffering of self-humiliation. Finally, I suggest that, in this light, humor is masochistic: it relieves the suffering of guilt by causing the suffering of self-humiliation.

Key Words: humor, Nietzsche, Freud, masochism, guilt

Introduction

In the following, I will look at a view about what can be called *the therapeutic function* of humor. By this, I mean what humor *does*, to a person’s suffering, that is, the effect, or the impact, that having humor has, on a person’s suffering. It is important to note that this does not refer only to the *positive* therapeutic function of humor. It refers to the whole field of activity of humor on suffering: how humor alleviates, relieves, but also contributes to, or perhaps even causes, a person’s suffering. The view which I will look at can be called *the exclusive relief thesis*. According to this view, humor relieves suffering, and *exclusively* relieves suffering. In the literature which addresses the therapeutic function of humor, this is a widely-shared view. It is held as far back as Aristotle, and, as I will discuss below, has its classical representative in Freud. My intention is to criticize this thesis. I will suggest that humor not only relieves suffering, but also *causes* it, simultaneously.

In order to argue for this, I will look at Nietzsche’s understanding of humor. Nietzsche was concerned with humor—as well as related topics, comedy and laughter—throughout his entire work. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, many of Nietzsche’s analyses of the tragic view of the world can also be understood as analyses of a humorous view of the world (after all, he places the central dictum of the tragic view of the world, that what is best is not to

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be born, and second best, to die soon, in the mouth of a satyr, Silenus). In *The Gay Science*, the “gay” (*fröhlich*) science which Nietzsche projects is, very much, a humorous science. And, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes that the only “real enemy” of the ascetic ideal—that condition which Nietzsche blames for the largest part of human suffering—is nothing else than “comedians of that ideal”—that is, people with humor.²

However, my focus will be restricted to *The Gay Science*, and, in particular, the first section of *The Gay Science*. In this section, Nietzsche ascribes to humor the therapeutic function of relieving suffering. Moreover, Nietzsche attempts to answer the question *why* humor has this therapeutic function. This is an important question. Many people claim—and it appears self-evident—that humor relieves suffering. However, few people try to explain *why* this is; and, often, the explanations offered are inadequate.³ Nietzsche’s explanation is as follows. The particular suffering which humor relieves is the suffering of guilt—specifically, guilt over failure. This is the suffering expressed in the following statement: “I am a failure. But I am responsible for being a failure. And I hate myself because of this.” For Nietzsche, humor is an attitude in which people recognize their failure, but recognize their failure as *involuntary*. For example, a person fails a test, and humorously comments to herself, “I must be as stupid as a big, dumb, ox.” With this comment, she recognizes her failure—her stupidity—but recognizes it as involuntary: it is an ox-like, that is, involuntary stupidity. Humor relieves suffering for this reason. In humor, a person no longer finds herself guilty in relation to her failure; or, to put it another way, she achieves *innocence* in relation to her failure.

I believe that this explanation is largely correct, which is one of the reasons I will look at it. However, the primary reason I am interested in it is that I believe that it refutes the exclusive relief thesis. It suggests that humor, in addition to relieving suffering, *also* causes it; specifically, that it also causes the suffering of self-humiliation. I will argue that self-humiliation has two primary conditions: to humiliate oneself is to expose one’s failure, and to expose one’s failure as involuntary. (One can think of cases of self-humiliation like the exposure of a disease, or an ugly body.) In this light, according to

² “All I have been concerned to indicate here is this: in the most spiritual sphere, too, the ascetic ideal has at present only *one* kind of real enemy capable of *harming* it: the comedians of this ideal—for they arouse mistrust of it” (Nietzsche 1989a, p. 160).

³ Many of the answers which have been traditionally given to this question function like the sword which cuts through the Hydra’s head, and raise more questions than they answer. For example, it is often claimed that humor relieves suffering, by “distancing” us from suffering. However, there are many techniques which “distance” us from suffering, which, however, do not relieve it—for example, looking at suffering in a serious play, or movie. Why, then, does *humorous* distance relieve suffering? Furthermore, there are many cases of humor in which we are brought into the closet *proximity* with suffering—Freud’s anecdote about the criminal is one of them. Is it really tenable to say, therefore, that humor distances us from suffering? Or does its ability to relieve suffering lie elsewhere?

Nietzsche's explanation, humor is identical to self-humiliation. In both, a person exposes—that is, recognizes—her failure as involuntary.

But if Nietzsche's explanation refutes the exclusive relief thesis, then it gives rise to a mystery. This is the mystery of what can be called the *therapeutic dualism* of humor, namely, that humor *both* relieves, *and* causes suffering. In the following, I will try to solve this mystery, by pointing to the relation between humor and masochism.

My plan is as follows. (1) I will look at an example of the exclusive relief thesis—Freud's account of humor. (2) I will look at Nietzsche's explanation, in *The Gay Science*, of why humor has the therapeutic function of relieving suffering. (3) I will argue that this explanation suggests that humor *also* causes the suffering of self-humiliation. (4) I will try to solve the mystery of the therapeutic dualism of humor, by looking at the relation between humor and masochism.

1.

In order to clarify the exclusive relief thesis, as well as to give an indication of how widespread a view it is, I will begin by looking at one example of it—Freud's account of humor in his paper "Humour."

In "Humor," Freud gives an account of the psychological origins of humor. Freud suggests that humor arises from a "transpos[ition]" of "psychical accent" from the ego to the superego (Freud 1961a, p. 163). In simpler terms—which Freud himself provides—humor arises from a person taking the perspective of an *adult*, and viewing herself as a *child*. Specifically, this means that she views her *serious* concerns as *children's* serious concerns—concerns which might *appear* to be serious, but which, in fact, are trivial. An example of this is the following joke. A patient visits a doctor, and the doctor says, "I have bad news, and I have very bad news." "What is the bad news?" the patient asks. "The bad news," the doctor says, "is that you have twenty-four hours to live." "What, then, could the *very* bad news be?" the patient asks. "The very bad news," the doctor says, "is that I was supposed to tell you yesterday." The humor in this joke, one could say, consists in the fact that it shows that death—certainly one of our serious concerns—is, in fact, trivial—nothing more than a doctor's slip in memory.

For Freud, this account of humor carries an important consequence for the relation between humor and suffering. For if, in humor, we treat our serious concerns as trivial, then, in humor, we treat what causes us suffering as trivial. And, by trivializing why causes us suffering, humor relieves suffering. Freud therefore writes that "the essence of humor" (and this formulation should be remembered) is that one "spares oneself" (*sich ersparen*) suffering. In order to illustrate this, Freud tells an anecdote about a criminal,

who is walking to his execution on a Monday, and who remarks, “Well, the week’s beginning nicely” (Freud 1961a, p. 160). This criminal’s humorous remark *trivializes* his own, impending death—it makes it nothing more than the bad beginning to his week. But it thereby relieves his suffering *from* his own, impending death: he suffers it just as he would suffer the bad beginning to his week. In this light, Freud writes—in a passage which is a kind of encomium to humor, and which, if that dialogue were about humor, would belong in the *Symposium*:

Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (Freud 1961a, p. 161)

Humor relieves suffering; and it relieves suffering to the degree that, through it, a person “cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world.”

However, Freud adds an important qualification to this idea. I noted this qualification above. Freud writes that the fact that humor spares oneself suffering, is “the essence of humor” (*das Wesen des Humours*). Humor spares oneself suffering—but this is its *essence*. Humour spares oneself suffering—but *does nothing else*. Freud elaborates on this idea in a passage in which he compares humor to other mental processes which relieve suffering. Freud writes that, according to his view,

humour [is brought] near to the regressive or reactionary processes which engage our attention so extensively in psychopathology. Its fending off of the possibility of suffering places it among the great series of methods which the human mind has constructed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer—a series which begins with neurosis and culminates in madness and which includes intoxication, self-absorption and ecstasy. Thanks to this connection, humour possesses a dignity which is wholly lacking, for instance, in jokes, for jokes either serve simply to obtain a yield of pleasure or place the yield of pleasure that has been obtained in the service of aggression. In what, then, does the humorous attitude consist, an attitude by means of which a person refuses to suffer, emphasizes the invincibility of his ego by the real world, victoriously maintains the pleasure principle—and all this, in contrast to other methods having the same purposes, without overstepping the bounds of mental health? (Freud 1961a, p. 162)

Freud here compares humor to intoxication, self-absorption, and ecstasy. These are, he notes, pathological processes; they are “regressive or reactionary processes which engage our attention so extensively in psychopathology.” Now, like these processes, humor is a “metho[d] which the human mind has constructed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer.” However, Freud writes that, “in contrast to other methods having the same purposes,” humor *does not* “overste[p] the bounds of mental health[.]” In other words, for Freud, humor is not a pathology. Humor—like pathologies—relieves suffering. But humor—unlike pathologies—does not also cause it. This is, as Freud writes, the “dignity” (*Würde*) of humor. In this respect, Freud holds the exclusive relief thesis: humor has the therapeutic function of relieving suffering; and this is its *exclusive* therapeutic function.⁴

2.

I will now turn to the Nietzsche’s explanation of *why* humor has the therapeutic function of relieving suffering, which he gives in the first section of *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche presents this explanation in the context of a general historical scheme which he proposes, and which is the primary theme of the first section. I will, then, briefly describe this historical scheme (which, as I will point out later, is unique when compared to the many other historical schemes in Nietzsche’s work). It consists in two primary stages—or, as Nietzsche says, ages:

⁴ Two other examples of the exclusive relief thesis can be found in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Heinz Kohut’s *The Analysis of the Self*. Of course, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle is interested in comedy. Comedy and humor are distinct: comedy is an aesthetic form of representation, and humor is a general attitude taken towards real things. However, they are closely related: one could say that the way in which comedy represents things, is the way in which humor understands things. Aristotle defines comedy in the following way: Comedy, just as we said, is an imitation of what is inferior to a greater degree, not however with respect to all vice, but the laughable is a proper part of the shameful and ugly. For the laughable is a sort of mistake and ugliness that is painless and not destructive...” (Aristotle 2002, p. 1449a). For Aristotle, comedy *relieves* suffering: it is the imitation of what causes us suffering—mistake, inferiority, and ugliness—and yet in such a way that it rendered “painless and not destructive” (ἄ νόδονον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν). Additionally, in respect of its therapeutic function, this is comedy’s *exclusive* function. Aristotle, here, is defining comedy; he is stating what the essence of comedy is. If, therefore, comedy were somehow to *cause* suffering—to render what causes suffering, painful and destructive—then this would not belong to comedy *per se*. In *The Analysis of the Self*—the foundational text of self-psychology—Kohut writes: “In many, perhaps in most, instances the appearance of humor is sudden and constitutes the belated overt manifestation of the silently increasing dominance which the patient’s ego has achieved vis-à-vis the previously so formidable power of the grandiose self and of the idealized object. All of a sudden, as if the sun were unexpectedly breaking through the clouds, the analyst will witness, to his great pleasure, how a genuine sense of humor expressed by the patient testifies to the fact that the ego can now see in realistic proportions the greatness aspirations of the infantile grandiose self or the former demands for the unlimited perfection and power of the idealized parent imago, and that the ego can now contemplate these old configurations with the amusement that is an expression of its freedom” (Kohut 1971, p. 325). I cannot give a full interpretation of this passage here. However, basically, Kohut suggests that humor fulfills the therapeutic aim of psychoanalysis. It marks the patient’s freedom from her captivation to her infantile grandiose self, her demand for power and perfection. Moreover, for Kohut, this is *fundamentally* what humor does: it does this “[i]n many, perhaps in most instances.”

1. Nietzsche calls the first age “the age of tragedy” (*die Zeit der Tragödie*). The age of tragedy describes the *present*. Nietzsche writes that, “[f]or the present, we still live in the age of tragedy, the age of moralities and religions” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 74). In the age of tragedy, Nietzsche says, people believe that their lives have a “purpose,” or a “because.” They believe that their lives have *worth*. Nietzsche gives the following dictum to the inhabitants of the age of tragedy: “‘Life is worth living,’ everyone of them shouts...” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 74).

Of course, this raises an immediate question. If, in the age of tragedy, people believe that their lives have worth, then why is it the age of *tragedy*? Why is it not, for example, the age of optimism, or the age of faith? Nietzsche provides the following explanation. In the age of tragedy, people believe, specifically, that there is an *ideal* life which has worth. But they do not believe that their *actual* lives have worth. In fact, they recognize that their actual lives are *worthless*. They recognize that, “at bottom,” their actual lives are “instinct, drive, folly, lack of reasons”—precisely those features which mark the absence of those features (for example, virtue and wisdom) which would make up a life which they believe has worth (Nietzsche 1974, p. 74). During the age of tragedy, therefore, people recognize the *failure* of their actual lives. This recognition, Nietzsche writes, fills people with “remorse”—*Gewissenbisse*; this is a word which is crucial to understanding the age of tragedy, and I will return to it later (Nietzsche 1974, p. 74). This is why the age of tragedy is, specifically, an age of *tragedy*.

2. Nietzsche does not give the second age a name. However, whereas the age of tragedy describes the present, the second age describes the future—what is to come. Because the second age describes the future, Nietzsche describes it only indirectly—by describing what the present, the age of tragedy, *is not yet*. Nietzsche writes that, presently,

you will never find anyone who could wholly mock you as an individual, also in your best qualities, bringing home to you to the limits of truth your boundless, flylike, froglike wretchedness! To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh *out of the whole truth*—to do that even the best so far lacked sufficient sense for the truth, and the most gifted had too little genius for that. (Nietzsche 1974, p. 74)

What is the second age? First, in one respect, it is perfectly continuous with the age of tragedy. Just as in the age of tragedy, in the second age, people recognize their failure: they recognize their “boundless, flylike, froglike wretchedness” (*grenzenlose Fliegen- und Frosch-Armseligkeit*). Nevertheless, this continuity is complimented by a radical discontinuity. In the second age, people recognize their failure; but, rather than feeling *remorse* over it, they *laugh* at it. In the second age, people “laugh at [themselves],” and

laugh at themselves precisely insofar as their “boundless, flylike, froglike wretchedness” is “br[ought] home” to them, “to the limits of truth.”

Another way to put this is that, in the second age, people have *humor* towards their failure. To be sure, Nietzsche does not, in his description of the second age, mention the word “humor.” Rather, he focuses on laughter (or its verbal form—*lachen*). However, I believe that the laughter which Nietzsche mentions signifies, not merely physical laughter, but, more broadly, humor. To begin with, this laughter is *self-directed* laughter; and, in contemporary speech, people who laugh at themselves are said to have “humor.” Additionally, Nietzsche writes that people “laugh at [themselves],” insofar as they laugh “out of the whole truth” (*aus der ganzen Wahrheit*), that is, their failure. This laughter cannot signify physical laughter: for how would physical laughter, so to speak, leap out of “the whole truth”? Rather, this laughter signifies an intentional attitude, which people have towards “the whole truth,” and “out of” which they laugh at it. I suggest that this attitude is humor. Humor is that intentional attitude, which people have towards a content like “the whole truth,” and “out of” which they laugh at it. In this respect, Nietzsche uses “laughter” as a *metonym* for humor. This use is not uncommon. For example, when someone says, nostalgically or hopefully, “Ah, laughter!” they have in mind, not physical laughter, but, rather, humor.⁵

Let me make a first observation. In this historical scheme, Nietzsche ascribes to humor the therapeutic function of relieving suffering. An age in which people recognize their failure, and feel remorse over their failure, is succeeded by an age in which people recognize their failure, but have *humor* towards it. In this respect, humor towards their failure, relieves people’s *suffering*—their feeling *remorse*—over their failure.

Of course, this is not the most profound discovery. Of course having humor towards one’s failure, relieves suffering—remorse—over it. This could clearly be seen in Freud’s example of the criminal; the criminal’s humor towards his failure—his impending execution; and what is a greater failure than devising one’s own death—relieves his suffering over it.

The question I would like to ask is this: Why, according to Nietzsche’s historical scheme, *does* people’s humor towards their failure relieve their suffering over their failure? This

⁵ Another indication that Nietzsche believes that people have humor towards their failure, is his statement that, in the second age, “the comedy of existence” becomes “conscious of itself” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 74). This description refers to humor: humor is that attitude in which people become “conscious” of the comedy of real things, that is, the “comedy of existence.” Additionally, this description is parallel to his description of people’s “laughter” in the second age. Just as the comedy of existence becomes conscious *of itself* (that is, people have humor towards themselves), so too people laugh *at themselves*. This suggests, again, that Nietzsche’s “laughter” signifies humor.

is, properly speaking, the question of why humor has the therapeutic function of relieving suffering.

However, in order to answer this question, let me ask a more specific one: What, according to Nietzsche's historical scheme, is the precise kind of suffering which humor relieves? After all, if one wants to know *why* humor relieves suffering, one should first know the *kind* of suffering that it relieves. Furthermore, humor does not relieve *every* kind of suffering—for example, constant pain. There are, so to speak, limits to humor.

The answer to this question is straightforward. Humor relieves the suffering that people experience when they feel remorse over their failure. But what, precisely, is this “remorse”? Recalling Bernard Williams' discussion in *Moral Luck*, is this remorse regret? Or is it something morally inflected, like self-blame? (Williams 1982) Here, the word which Nietzsche uses, and which is translated as “remorse,” is helpful. The word is *Gewissenbisse*—literally, the bites of conscience, or, more generally, *self-reproaches due to guilt*. The suffering which humor relieves, therefore, is the suffering of *guilt*—people's suffering of guilt, over their failure. This is the suffering which is expressed when someone says, “I am a failure. But I am *guilty* for my failure. And I hate myself, I despise myself, on account of this.”

The original question, therefore, can be posed in the following way: Why does people's having humor towards their failure relieve their suffering of *guilt* over their failure?

I believe that Nietzsche's answer to this question is that humor is an attitude, in which people recognize their failure, but recognize it as involuntary. Returning to Nietzsche's description of the second age, this can be seen in two ways:

1. Nietzsche writes that, in the second age, people “laugh out of the whole truth.” As I suggested, this means that people have *humor* towards “the whole truth.” However, this *also* means that, in humor, people *recognize what the whole truth is*; that is, they laugh *out of* the humorous recognition of “the whole truth.” Now, “the whole truth” is people's *failure*—their “boundless, flylike, froglike wretchedness,” which, as Nietzsche says, is “br[ought] home” to them, “to the limits of truth.” In humor, therefore, people recognize their failure as “the whole truth”—and they laugh out of this.

But what does it mean that, in humor, people recognize their failure as “the whole truth”? To begin with, it means that they recognize their failure *as what they are*. Their being, their nature, is their failure. In this respect, Nietzsche's understanding of humor in *The Gay Science* is very close to his understanding of the tragic view of the world in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche, neither humor nor the tragic view of the world are,

primarily, aesthetic sensibilities—that is, sensibilities which pick out properties like beauty, or ugliness. Rather, they are insights into “the whole truth”—into what people are. And, in both cases, they are insights into the failure which people *are*.⁶

This has an important consequence. If, in humor, people recognize their failure as what they are, then, in humor, people recognize their failure *as involuntary*. It is their being, their nature; it is therefore something which they cannot help, and can do nothing about.

An example which can illustrate this is Shakespeare’s humorous depiction of Polonius in *Hamlet*. Of course, in this example, Shakespeare’s humor is directed, not towards himself, but towards someone else. However, what this example illustrates will hold for humor which a person directs towards himself.⁷ Shakespeare depicts Polonius humorously: Polonius attempts to be the wise, and helpful counselor to Laertes; however, he is stupid, and ineffective; he babbles and babbles. But what does this humor consist in? To be sure, it consists in the fact that Shakespeare depicts Polonius’s failure. But it does not merely consist in this. After all, Shakespeare depicts Claudius as a failure—and in a similar way to Polonius—but this depiction is not humorous. More than this, it consists in the fact that Shakespeare depicts Polonius’s failure as his “whole truth”—as what he is. Polonius *is* just stupid and ineffective. His babbling, so to speak, bubbles up from his very soul. And, for this reason, Shakespeare depicts Polonius’s failure as *involuntary*. It is what Polonius is; it is something which he cannot help, and can do nothing about. It is humorous for this reason.

2. Nietzsche writes that, in the second age, people’s “boundless, flylike, froglike wretchedness” is “br[ought] home” to them, “to the limits of truth.” This again suggests that, in humor, people recognize their failure as “the whole truth.” However, it also suggests that, in humor, people recognize their animality; and, specifically, that they recognize their failure as the failure of animals—of flies, or frogs.

The humorous recognition of animality, and of one’s failure as the failure of animals, is well-known. Much humorous jesting involves the imitation of animals, and, in particular, the failures of animals—for example, hooting like a monkey, in order to show how foolish one is. But what, precisely, does this humor consist in? To be sure, it partially consists in the recognition of *incongruity*—that one, oneself, a *human being*, is, also, an

⁶ In the tragic view of the world, “[o]nce truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks” (Nietzsche 1999, p. 40).

⁷ Another difference between the humor in this example and the humor Nietzsche is discussing is that Shakespeare’s humor consists in a depiction of Polonius, whereas Nietzsche’s humor is a way of recognizing the features of real things. However, I do not believe that this difference is salient. The intentionality of humor—how humor *views* the objects that it relates to—is the same in both cases.

animal. But it also consists in the fact that, by recognizing one's animality, and, in particular, one's failure as the failure of animals, one recognizes one's failure as *involuntary*—which is, precisely, the kind of failure which *animals* possess.

For example, a person fails a test, and says, "I must be as stupid as a big, dumb, ox." This is a humorous comment. But what accounts for the humor? Partially, it is due to the recognition of the incongruity that he—a human being—is, also, an ox.⁸ However, it also consists in the recognition that his failure *is just like an ox's failure*—that is, an *involuntary* failure. By saying, "I must be as stupid as a big, dumb, ox," this person is saying, "I am stupid, like an ox—I cannot help it, I can do nothing about it."

Another example is the humor in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (and, according to the anecdote told by Max Brod, when Kafka originally read this story to his friends, he laughed the entire time). In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa turns into a giant beetle. However, he then tries to deal with what has happened in a roughly normal way. For example, he intends to return to work—so he tries to conceal what has happened from his boss. Additionally, he tries to console his parents. Of course, all of this fails. Gregor is a giant *beetle*. A giant beetle cannot console a mother—in particular, a neurotic mother. Gregor's failure is humorous. But why, precisely, is it humorous? It is humorous because Gregor fails in just that way that a beetle would fail—involuntarily, or in such a way that he cannot help it, and can do nothing about it.

In this light, I believe that it becomes clear why, for Nietzsche, humor has the therapeutic function of relieving suffering. By having humor towards their failure, people recognize their failure *as involuntary*. But this precisely relieves their suffering of guilt over their failure. It shows that they are not guilty for their failure. Another way that this can be put is that humor achieves, for people, innocence in relation to their failure.⁹ To return to the example I mentioned above, the person who fails a test, and says, "I must be as guilty as a big, dumb, ox," recognizes his failure, and recognizes his failure as involuntary. By virtue of this, this person relieves his suffering: he will not feel guilty over his failure to pass the test, but will, in relation to his failure, feel innocent—as innocent as an ox.

3.

I believe that Nietzsche's explanation is correct. Nevertheless, there is a peculiarity in it. This peculiarity can be perceived in the *continuity* between the age of tragedy, and the

⁸ By emphasizing this, I wish to indicate that humor does consist in the recognition of incongruity, but that it also consists in something else, and this other thing may account for why it consists in the recognition of incongruity.

⁹ In this perspective, Nietzsche's understanding of humor is brought into line with the Stoic tendencies which have often be recognized in his work. Michael Ure has written about the connection between humor and Stoicism in Nietzsche, although with a different account of Nietzsche's understanding of humor than the one I am offering here. See Ure 2009 and Ure 2005.

second age, which I noted above. Just as in the age of tragedy, in the second age—the age in which people have humor—people recognize their failure. In fact, they do not merely recognize it. More than that, they *immerse* themselves in it. They recognize their failure as “the whole truth,” as what they are. The peculiarity in this is that, in this light, it is difficult to understand how humor could relieve suffering. Would it not rather be the case that humor—immersing people in their failure—causes suffering? Another way to put this question is this. In light of Nietzsche’s explanation, how innocent could humor really be?

This question can also be posed in relation to Freud’s account of humor. For Freud, humor relieves suffering. It relieves suffering because, in humor, people view their serious concerns—which include what causes them suffering—as trivial. However, to view one’s serious concerns as trivial, is, effectively, to trivialize one’s entire life. This is even and especially the case in respect to what causes one suffering. What causes one suffering often constitutes the entire significance of one’s life; people often take themselves to be the heroes, or, alternatively, the victims, of what causes them suffering. In this respect, to view what causes one suffering as trivial, would not relieve suffering; rather, it would cause it. Humor would not at all be innocent. In fact, Freud acknowledges this—even though it contradicts the entire tendency of his paper. After noting that the agency responsible for humor is the superego, and that, therefore, in the case of humor, it is the superego which is responsible for the relief of suffering, Freud writes, “[i]n other connections we knew the super-ego as a severe master” (Freud 1961a, p. 165). The superego is a severe master (*gestrengen Herrn*); as Freud puts it in *The Ego and the Id*, it is “a pure culture of the death instinct” (Freud 1961b, p. 52). But if the superego is this, then how could one of its inventions, humor, relieve suffering? Or, again, how innocent could humor really be?

Of course, from Nietzsche’s perspective, humor is perfectly innocent. It is precisely because, in humor, people immerse themselves in their failure—recognize that their failure is “the whole truth,” or what they are—that they recognize their failure as *involuntary*, and achieve, in relation to it, a perfect innocence. Nietzsche’s explanation does not compromise the innocence of humor. Rather, it establishes it. Innocence is the *quod erat demonstrandum* of Nietzsche’s theory of humor.

What I will argue is that, according to Nietzsche’s explanation, humor is *not* innocent as all that. I believe that Nietzsche’s explanation suggests that humor has the therapeutic function of causing suffering. Specifically, it suggests that humor is self-humiliating, and causes the suffering of self-humiliation. However, before arguing for this, two qualifications should be added:

1. I am not arguing that Nietzsche's explanation suggests that humor only has the therapeutic function of causing suffering. Rather, I am arguing that it suggests that *in addition* to having the therapeutic function of relieving suffering, it *also* has the therapeutic function of causing it. In this respect, the innocence of humor is preserved. Only, this innocence is, so to speak, a *perverted* innocence, or an impure innocence: an innocence which involves causing oneself suffering.

2. I am not arguing that Nietzsche deliberately intended his explanation to suggest this. In fact, I am fairly certain that Nietzsche did not deliberately intend his explanation to suggest this. On the other hand, this does not mean that Nietzsche was not, in some way, aware that his explanation suggests this; nor does it mean that Nietzsche was not, in some way, excited by the fact that his explanation suggests this. I will return to this excitement later.

What is self-humiliation? First, by "self-humiliation," I do not mean humiliation which a person voluntarily carries out on himself. Self-humiliation can be voluntary or involuntary.¹⁰ Rather, I mean humiliation, which a person causes, and whose object is himself, rather than another person. In this sense, a classic case of self-humiliation is the following. A person stands up in a room, in front of a large audience, and is ready to give a lecture. Then, he pees on himself. Everyone sees this; the sight is unavoidable; the person looks at himself in horror. It is self-humiliating. But why is it self-humiliating? I believe that there are, primary, two reasons:

1. It is self-humiliating because this person *exposes his failure*. This person commits a failure: rather than give a tight, rigorous, performance, he pees on himself. However, he *exposes* his failure—he pees on himself in front of a large audience. This *exposure* of his failure accounts for why it is self-humiliating. If, for example, this person peed on himself, but, by some grace, he were able to hide it, then he would not humiliate himself. Rather, he would feel relief, and feel lucky.

2. It is self-humiliating because this person exposes his failure *as involuntary*. Imagine that this person were to pee on himself, but, before he peed on himself, he declared, "I will now pee on myself." In this way, he would expose his failure (it would be a moral failure, or a failure of social propriety); but he would not *humiliate* himself. Rather, he would feel pride, or, if he came to his senses, guilt. It is only because, in peeing on himself, he exposes his failure *as involuntary*—as something which he cannot help, and can do nothing about—that he humiliates himself.

¹⁰ In this respect, there is an interesting question about the status of self-humiliation as an action. There seem to be cases in which it is not an action *per se*.

The exposure of failure as involuntary is crucial to self-humiliation—and to humiliation, in general. It is present in every paradigmatic case of self-humiliation and humiliation—for example, peeing on oneself (which, not accidentally, is often the first definition of an “accident”); the exposure of an ugly body; and the exposure of disease. Furthermore, it accounts for the typical feeling of helplessness in self-humiliation and humiliation. Because one’s failure is exposed as involuntary, one feels helpless in relation to it. One cannot do anything about it; and one cannot hide it—one cannot make it “go away.”

With this in mind, let me return to Nietzsche’s explanation. According to Nietzsche’s explanation, humor is an attitude in which a person recognizes his failure, and recognizes his failure as involuntary. Recognition, however, is a type of exposure. In recognizing something, we bring it to light, we exhibit it—we expose it. In this respect, humor, according to Nietzsche’s explanation, is identical to self-humiliation. In humor, a person *exposes* his failure, and exposes his failure as involuntary.¹¹

This can be illustrated by the examples of humor which I looked at above. Significantly, each of these examples was meant to show how humor *relieves* suffering. A person fails a test, and says, “I must be as guilty as a big, dumb, ox.” As I suggested, with this comment, this person recognizes his failure, and recognizes his failure as involuntary; and, by virtue of this, he no longer feels guilt over his failure, but, rather, innocence. However, this comment also exposes his failure, and exposes his failure as involuntary—and this is self-humiliating. By saying, “I must be as stupid as a big, dumb, ox,” this person is exposing that he is genuinely stupid—that is, stupid in such a way that he cannot help it, and can do nothing about it. He is exposing that he is stupid as an *ox*.

Or take Shakespeare’s humorous depiction of Polonius.¹² Shakespeare depicts Polonius in such a way that his failure is recognized, and his failure is recognized as involuntary. While it would be incorrect to say that this relieves Polonius’s suffering, nevertheless, it achieves, for Polonius, innocence. Polonius is helpless in his failure. He is like a big child. However, Shakespeare’s depiction exposes Polonius’s failure, and exposes his

¹¹ A number of writers have linked humor and humiliation—although in contexts quite different from the present one, and not as self-humiliation. Most notably, Bergson does this in *Laughter* (which, in a way analogous to Nietzsche, is just as much about “humor” as it is about “laughter”). Bergson suggests that laughter (or humor) is an instrument of humiliation, by which a social group enforces norms. “Every small society... is thus impelled, by a vague kind of instinct, to devise some method of discipline or ‘breaking in,’ so as to deal with the rigidity of habits that have been formed elsewhere and have now to undergo a partial modification... Therefore society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social ‘ragging’” (Bergson 2008, p. 66).

¹² Of course, in this example, the humor, and the humiliation, is directed towards another person; however, the *identity* between the humor and humiliation which is illustrated in this example, will hold for the humor and humiliation which a person directs towards himself

failure as involuntary—and it is therefore humiliating. The same dynamic is present in *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor's failure to deal with what has happened in a roughly normal way is a perfectly innocent failure—it is the failure of a beetle. But it is, simultaneously, humiliating. Gregor's beetle-like failure is exposed. While *The Metamorphosis* is wildly humorous, it is also, and by virtue of this, a passion narrative—a narrative of a person experiencing, progressively, and in an intensifying way, humiliation.

If, according to Nietzsche's explanation, humor is self-humiliating, then humor also causes the suffering of self-humiliation. I will not describe in detail the suffering of self-humiliation; I believe that it is familiar. However, I do want to point out one component of this suffering, which might be overlooked, and which, I believe, is particularly prominent in humor.

The suffering of self-humiliation is primarily the suffering of exposure. In humiliating himself, a person suffers from the sight of himself. A sign of this is that, in order to relieve the suffering of self-humiliation, a person wishes to “turn away” from himself, to “look away” from himself, or to “close his eyes” to himself. This same kind of suffering can be found in humor. Humor exposes a painful sight of a person (for example, the painful sight of ox-like stupidity, or the painful sight of Polonius, or Gregor). And, because of humor, a person is often inclined to “turn away.”

But the suffering of self-humiliation is also due to something else. In self-humiliation, the sight a person has of himself leads him to express aggression towards himself. For example, the person who pees on himself, does not merely suffer from this painful sight; he also, by virtue of this sight, expresses hatred and spite towards himself. In fact, it may be because of this that a person wishes to “turn away” from himself. What he wishes to save himself from is not so much the sight of himself, but the fact that this sight leads to the expression of aggression towards himself.

Humor, as self-humiliating, also causes this expression of aggression towards oneself. This can be seen in the often-noted aspect of cruelty in humor. This aspect has given rise to many moral concerns about humor—the tendency of humor to dehumanize its objects. This most recently came to attention in the “humorous” photographs which were taken of prisoners at Abu Ghraib—humorous photographs which are indistinguishable from the practice of torture (Henderson 2005). But it also can be seen in humor which a person directs towards himself. As has frequently been noted, Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* is, among other things, a compendium of jokes which Jews tell about themselves—what Freud calls “Jewish jokes” (*Judenwitze*). These jokes often repeat the dehumanizing stereotypes to which Jews have been historically subject. For example, Freud relates a joke about two Galician Jews. They meet in the neighborhood of a

bathhouse. One of the Jews says to the other, “Have you taken a bath?” The other replies, “What? Is there one missing?” This joke reinforces the old stereotype of the dirtiness of Jews (while, incidentally, it relieves suffering over it—by making it involuntary) (Freud 1960, p. 48).¹³ The cruelty of humor is due to the fact that it is self-humiliating. However, it is cruel, not merely because it creates a painful sight of a person, but because it leads a person to express aggression towards himself. For example, in saying, “I must be as stupid as a big, dumb, ox,” a person is expressing hatred, and spite, towards himself.

I have tried to show that, according to Nietzsche’s explanation, humor is self-humiliating, and causes the suffering of self-humiliation. However, this implies that the exclusive relief thesis is incorrect. Humor does not have, exclusively, the therapeutic function of relieving suffering. It also has the therapeutic function of causing suffering.

4.

This, however, gives rise to a mystery. This mystery can be called the mystery of the *therapeutic dualism* of humor—namely, that humor both relieves suffering, and causes it. How is this possible? How can the same thing both relieve suffering, and cause it?

I believe that there is a solution to this mystery. It is not as incorrigible as the mystery of other types of dualism—for example, the dualism of mind and body, or God and evil. In order to explain what this solution is, I want briefly to look at another phenomenon, which presents the same mystery of therapeutic dualism as does humor. This is the phenomenon of masochism.

The common definition of masochism is the finding of pleasure in pain. Masochists beat themselves, cut themselves, humiliate themselves, castigate themselves, and find themselves guilty for practically every imaginable human offense. They spend a great deal of their lives inflicting pain on themselves. However, in this infliction of pain, masochists generate pleasure for themselves. More precisely, they diminish their pain. They experience, for example, less anxiety, tension, and guilt. In this light, masochism is a vivid example of the mystery of therapeutic dualism. In masochism, the same thing which causes pain, diminishes pain; or the same thing which causes suffering, relieves suffering.

¹³ Freud draws attention to how jokes express aggression. He writes that jokes can express “hostile aggressiveness” (*eindseligen Aggression*) which otherwise—without the censorship-evading “technique” of the joke—could not be expressed (see Freud 1960, p. 101 ff.). Interestingly, Freud discusses this in the context of what he calls “tendentious” (*tendenziöse*) jokes—jokes which are not “innocent” (*harmlosen*), but which have a “purpose” (*Tendenz*). This purpose can be either “exposing” (*entblößenden*) or “hostile” (*eindseligen*) (see Freud 1960, p. 89 ff.). I cannot give a full discussion of Freud’s theory of jokes here—and it is worth keeping in mind that Freud separates jokes from humor in this text (Freud 1960, p. 227 ff.)—but my intention has been to show that humor is *never* innocent, and that insofar as there are “exposing” and “hostile” aspects to humor, these are deeply connected to one another.

However, it might seem as though masochism is a particularly unhelpful way to approach the mystery of therapeutic dualism. Masochism may be the most mysterious instance of this mystery. It presents the psychological—and even semantic—paradox of the identity of pleasure and pain, or the relief of suffering and the causation of suffering. In fact, Freud, in the very first sentence of the “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” writes that masochism “may be justly described as mysterious” (*rätselhaft*) (Freud 1961c, p. 158). This is an idea which Freud repeats in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he refers to the “mysterious masochistic trends of the ego” (*rätselhaften masochistischen Tendenzen des Ichs*) (Freud 1955, p. 13).

However, Freud—and precisely in “The Economic Problem of Masochism”—offers a solution to the mystery of therapeutic dualism which is presented by masochism. In “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” Freud considers a number of different forms of masochism. One of the forms he considers is what he calls “the negative therapeutic reaction.” In the negative therapeutic reaction, a patient resists the progress of her therapy. She wishes to remain ill; she even makes herself ill. For Freud, the negative therapeutic reaction is a clear case of masochism. The patient makes herself ill—and so causes herself to suffer; however, Freud is convinced that this making herself ill also relieves her suffering: there is, Freud writes, a “gain from illness” (*Krankheitsgewinnes*) (Freud 1961c, p. 165).

Freud offers an explanation for the negative therapeutic reaction. The key lies in what Freud calls an “unconscious sense of guilt” (*unbewußte Schuldgefühl*). Freud writes:

The satisfaction of this unconscious sense of guilt is perhaps the most powerful bastion in the subject's (usually composite) gain from illness—in the sum of forces which struggle against his recovery and refuse to surrender his state of illness. The suffering entailed by neuroses is precisely the factor that makes them valuable to the masochistic trend. It is instructive, too, to find, contrary to all theory and expectation, that a neurosis which has defied every therapeutic effort may vanish if the subject becomes involved in the misery of an unhappy marriage, or loses all his money, or develops a dangerous organic disease. In such instances one form of suffering has been replaced by another; and we see that all that mattered was that it should be possible to maintain a certain amount of suffering (Freud 1961c, p. 165).¹⁴

¹⁴ In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud discusses the negative therapeutic reaction and gives the same explanation. “In the end we come to see that we are dealing with what may be called a ‘moral’ factor, a sense of guilt, which is finding its satisfaction in the illness and refuses to give up the punishment of suffering” (Freud 1961b, p. 48).

A person with a negative therapeutic reaction has an unconscious sense of guilt. However, by causing herself to suffer, she relieves the suffering of her guilt. This is her “gain from illness.”

For Freud, this explanation of the negative therapeutic reaction is an explanation of masochism, in general.¹⁵ It solves the mystery of the therapeutic dualism of masochism. Masochists have an unconscious sense of guilt; they suffer terribly from this; by causing themselves to suffer, they relieve this unconscious sense of guilt. Effectively, they punish themselves, and this punishment relieves their unconscious sense of guilt. One could say: it makes them innocent. In this respect, Freud finds, in masochism, less a mystery, than an economy—a masochistic economy. This is an economy of guilt, causing oneself suffering, and innocence.

I suggest that this solution to the mystery of the therapeutic dualism of masochism, can solve the mystery of the therapeutic dualism of humor. What explains the fact that humor relieves, and causes suffering, is that humor has a masochistic economy. In order to show this, let me make two observations about humor, as it is understood according to Nietzsche’s explanation:

1. In terms of the suffering which it relieves, and the suffering which it causes, humor has a conspicuous resemblance to masochism. Like masochism, humor relieves people’s suffering from guilt. To be sure, this guilt is not “unconscious”; rather, it is quite conscious: it is the guilt which people feel when they recognize their failure. Nevertheless, it is still guilt (and Freud does not suggest that unconscious guilt is qualitatively different from conscious guilt), and it is still the suffering of guilt. Furthermore, like masochism, humor causes the suffering of self-humiliation. This is the most conspicuous similarity between the two. Masochists primarily cause themselves the suffering of self-humiliation. Even when they inflict pain on themselves in direct ways, they humiliate themselves—they make themselves weak, and helpless; they *expose* themselves as weak, and helpless.

2. But the similarity extends beyond this. Just as in masochism, in humor, a person, by causing himself to suffer, relieves his suffering. In humor, a person causes himself to suffer. He humiliates himself. He exposes his involuntary failure. However, for precisely this reason—by humiliating himself—he relieves his suffering; he relieves his suffering from guilt, or he achieves, in relation to his failure, a perfect innocence. As in masochism, in humor, self-humiliation achieves innocence. Humor has a masochistic economy. So, for example, a person fails a test, and says “I am as stupid as a big, dumb,

¹⁵ This is not the only explanation of masochism which Freud offers in “The Economic Problem of Masochism.” He also suggests that it is the sexualization of punishment, as well as the erotic “binding”—the controlling, and taking pleasure in—destruction. As with many of Freud’s texts, there is a multiplicity of explanations which may not be mutually consistent.

ox.” This comment is self-humiliating. However, this self-humiliation achieves, for him, a perfect innocence. He exposes his involuntary failure—that his stupidity is the stupidity of an ox; but, in this way, he feels perfectly innocent in relation to it.

I will conclude by noting that the masochistic economy of humor sheds an interesting light on Nietzsche’s own interest in humor. Nietzsche’s interest in humor is not merely theoretical. He does not only want to explain why humor has the therapeutic function of relieving suffering. Rather, Nietzsche’s interest in humor can be put this way: Nietzsche has *hope* for humor.

Nietzsche’s hope for humor can be seen in a number of ways. For example, the historical scheme which begins *The Gay Science* is distinct from the many other historical schemes that can be found in Nietzsche’s work. Generally, Nietzsche’s historical schemes look backwards, and describe movements of decline. One could think here of the historical scheme in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which describes the movement from the tragic view of the world, to the Socratic-scientific view of the world; or the historical scheme in the *Genealogy*, which describes the movement from “master” morality to “slave” morality. However, the historical scheme in *The Gay Science* neither looks backwards, nor describes a movement of decline. Rather, it looks forward, and describes a movement of ascent. And what this historical scheme looks forward to—what it ascends to—is humor.

Connected to this, in the first section of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes, “even laughter may yet have a future” (Nietzsche 1964, p. 64). (Given what I said above, this reference to laughter should be taken as a reference to humor.) This is a formulation which Nietzsche repeats, and strengthens, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, in which he writes, “perhaps, even if nothing today has any future, our laughter may yet have a future” (Nietzsche 1989b, p. 150). Nietzsche finds practically everything in his contemporary world as a reason for despair (and one can think here of his nearly histrionic exclamations in the *Genealogy* that the world is now a sick-house, or that contemporary human beings only inspire in him nausea). However, for Nietzsche, humor is an exception. Humor, of all things, has a future. Nietzsche, therefore, has hope for humor; in fact, he has an exclusive hope for humor.

But why does Nietzsche have this hope for humor? A plausible explanation is that, for Nietzsche, humor has the therapeutic function of suffering. It relieves people’s suffering from guilt, or it achieves, for people, innocence. Indeed, one of the only unequivocally positive values that can be found in Nietzsche’s work is the value of innocence. I cannot discuss this in detail here. However, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche foregrounds the value of innocence. In the Preface, Nietzsche describes his own movement from sickness to health as movement from sickness to innocence. He writes:

lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe sickness, also from the sickness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before (Nietzsche 1974, p. 36).

In the first section of *The Gay Science*, humor carries out this movement from sickness to innocence. This may be why Nietzsche has hope for humor.

But perhaps there is a deeper reason why Nietzsche has hope for humor. Perhaps Nietzsche has hope for humor, not merely because it carries out the movement from sickness to innocence, but because it does this by causing suffering: in other words, because it has a masochistic economy. Of course, this may seem like a perverse suggestion. It would make Nietzsche's hope for humor a matter of masochistic excitement: the excitement of someone who does not merely want to go to heaven, but who wishes to be crucified beforehand.

At this point, let me cite a passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, the same text in which Nietzsche states that, "perhaps, even if nothing else today has any future, our laughter may yet have a future." Nietzsche writes:

We should reconsider cruelty and open our eyes... we must, of course, chase away the clumsy psychology of bygone times which had nothing to teach about cruelty except that it came into being at the sight of the sufferings of others. There is also an abundant, over-abundant enjoyment at one's own suffering, at making oneself suffer—and wherever man allows himself to be persuaded to self-denial in the religious sense, or to self-mutilation... he is secretly lured and pushed forward by his cruelty, by those dangerous thrills of cruelty turned against oneself (Nietzsche 1989b, pp. 158-9).

Perhaps, in Nietzsche's hope for humor, he was "secretly lured and pushed forward by his cruelty, by those dangerous thrills of cruelty turned against oneself."

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