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LAUGHING MATTERS OR COMOEDIA NATURALIS

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1.

Banqueting Olympians aside, gods are no laughing matter, certainly not when they are almighty, know everything and consequently cannot be surprised. Indeed, how could a being of infinite perfection have any sense of humour and what could such an entity be humorous about ? In any case, it couldn't have a hearty laugh at itself — there would be nothing to laugh at —, and that's a pity. For self-irony is the core of humour, whereas mere superiority, if ever it could exist, is — as everybody has experienced — infinitely boring. After all, finite beings — if they think about it carefully — are definitely inferior to themselves. Therefore, if humour is an eminently human affair and an almost universal phenomenon at that, it may be presumed to be intimately, even intrinsically, bound up with our human condition, with our radical finiteness and our powers of self-organisation, with our consciousness and its modicum of self-reference. Indeed, that seems to be the reason we need not be afraid of death — the ultimate in finiteness — because, accustomed as we are to a solitary life — the paradise of self-reference — we can, for this reason alone, easily dispense with ourselves for a time. Maybe this is sophistry, but it is sophistication as well : exaggeration on the basis of paradox, the paradox of uninhibited vitality in the face of universal futility. What talk of death, *our* death, does not, medical arithmetics aside, partake of exaggeration ? Perhaps *all* talk, all language is an exaggeration of semantic self-assurance and therefore a most social, convenient, sometimes even exasperating, form of self-deceit. The sharp consciousness of our finiteness and the magic of our self-referential alacrity very well could be the source, the foundation, the necessary — though not sufficient — condition of all comicality and all sense of humour. In other words, empirical im-

plementation apart, some essential conditions of humour and comicality possibly can be "derived" from our human predicament, that we too often tend to forget and are nevertheless continuously reminded of. And lucky we are, if we can get away with our deficiency by laughing it off. It *is* unhealthy to have poor sense of humour and it is the grace of humanity that, as it seems, only gods almighty and philistines have no sense of humour at all, either because they are too infinite by definition or because by stubbornness, stupidity or fear, they are not self-conscious enough. They are definitely beyond our grasp or they are intrinsically ridiculous on their own account. Seriousness, seriously administered all the time, is a deadly poison, for, after all, there's no therapy for being alive. To be absolute is better left to Things Unknowable.

2.

What must a finite, self-conscious and self-organising entity, for short, a cultural animal such as man, think about himself, his endeavours and the world he is born, lives and dies in ? For one thing, he needs must be convinced that he — and for that matter his fellow creatures as well — are, on the face of it, irretrievably futile. For whatever he, or anybody else, intends to realise, to think, feel or do, whatever indeed he *does* realise is inexorably swept away by the irreversibility of time, the time all lifes are lived and all deaths are died in. If he is no more, it is, at least for all practical purposes, as if he had never been. And this is so, because he intends to realise, to *do* something, precisely because one must *do* something in order to *be* : to be is to be on the way to nothingness. On the face of it, to be alive is to be perfectly heterotelic : life is a priori, as it were, indeed much ado about nothing. Sure, there's nothing new, perhaps nothing serious about this : at least it is a well-known and in fact uncontested, even incontestable truth. However, such a state of affairs — and eternal bliss apart, it is the only possible state of affairs — quite neatly fits in with the definition of comicality that seems to be most promising : the theory according to which comicality is to be found in the surprise induced by the sudden deflation into nothingness of what was thought to be important and substantial, otherwise said, the theory of incongruity. For what can be more substantial or important than the expectations — great and small — of life itself, and what can be more deflating than the sudden realisation of their manifest nullity ? And yet, no one is seriously or even

humorously inclined, one may presume, to regard our human predicament as such as comical, let alone as a hoax. On the contrary, as there is, on the face of it, no viable alternative to being alive, such a move seems to be incongruous by itself. Nevertheless, life would be or could be comical for a man completely indifferent to himself or convinced that he could feel quite cosily at home on his own, even in the absence of himself. Yet, the first hypothesis is an impossibility, for nothing whatever could have any importance then, not even initially, and the second is a pragmatic contradiction, based on the universalisation of self-reference and therefore in concreto unthinkable and quite beyond our grasp. For short, if human life as such *is* comical, to see it thus is to have a fictitious sense of humour. Comicality therefore and humour must be finite, limited and well-defined, just like everything else : *for us* human beings, being alive, some things cannot correctly be laughed at, however generous our sense of humour. And certainly, life and death are such things. What's more, they are the *only* things of this sort. As long as life is safe and as long as a modicum of self-referential vitality is preserved, almost everything may be comical and the sense of humour may be almost universal. Otherwise said, in order not to be trivial and consequently insipid, comicality of things and the sense of humour must pertain to the episodes of life, not to life in its totality, and they must be specific, that is, pertain to the accidents and chancy variety of life, not to its essentials and their inexorable and uniform necessity. But these limitations in space and time and these specifications of essentiality and accidentality are questions of opinion, i.e. of cultural choice : they indeed depend on what is thought to be essential and substantial and what is not. But what is thought to be the case, what consciousness makes of what is given, is notoriously diverse, even fantastical, intrinsically fallible and, more often than not, wrong. This seems to be the reason why the sense of humour and the comicality of things are so unevenly distributed in our world and why the domain of laughter is so vast and diffuse as to defy definition. One man's laughing stock is another's wailing wall. Certainly, there are limits even here, for some things thought essential for the preservation of life are not so very relative or accidental, indeed, they are sometimes very poorly so. But these essentials apart — and they are mostly biological in nature — specifically cultural or unmistakably culturally interpreted natural phenomena — biological ones included — can be or become comical in one way or another and can delight our sense of humour,

if we are not or not too much inhibited by idiosyncrasy, convention, prejudice or, generally speaking, if we are not taken in by what one might call "cultural enchantment" and its many paraphernalia. The reason seems to be that, although culture as such is necessary — as everybody needs must have an all-round orientation in the world in order to live with a modicum of stability — cultural variety and even contradiction, to say nothing of self-contradiction, is baffling in the extreme. Cultural choices are mostly made in the air, if not in the mist, and if cultures are not as frivolous as fashions, to justify them against alternatives has proved to be — and is — almost as difficult as to find sharp edges on a circle or to put a sphere right side upwards. And yet, we all spend and sometimes waste our life betting on a way of living that even if it is more right than some others, is at least more wrong than it ought to be, even according to its own standards. Indeed, our radical finiteness, that makes for the necessity of an all-round orientation in the world, i.e. in fine for the pretence of adequacy and completeness, makes at the same time and on this selfsame ground of necessity for an orientation that is inadequate and incomplete, even contradictory in principle. Alternatives therefore cannot, in the last instance, be argued out of existence, they merely can be laughed away. And if we are not somehow and subreptitiously a bit naive, the best we can do is to have from time to time a good laugh at ourselves and our own cultural pretence, hoping not to be caught in the rear by the tragical features that are at the core of all cultural choice and justification. To be safe in our choices, to be culturally justified in a really satisfactorily way is like asking how to throw a double six : as far as mathematics is concerned — and mathematics is the paradigm of proof — it can't be done, unless the dice are loaded, as all well-advanced cultures and some others perfectly know. To laugh seems to be as necessary as it is dangerous : it might show us the dice to be loaded indeed. And perhaps, to reveal the universal fraud of cultural philistinism, to reveal the arbitrariness, the emptiness and even the intrinsic heterotely of self-invented absolutes, may be the essence of the morals of comicality and humour.

3.

It is possible to show — though it cannot be done here — that all finite beings that need theories about themselves and their natural and cultural environment in order to think, feel and act appropriate-

ly, necessarily produce views that are more or less inadequate and incomplete. This isn't a very remarkable observation and it might even be endorsed without any proof at all. Certainly, some exceptions may be noted : perfection and fatality are cases in point. But these have to do with events, situations and things in domains that are to a very high degree or even completely closed, i.e. that are isolated from the environment, either naturally or artificially, and that, moreover, are in themselves highly or completely transparent. In such rare cases expectations are, as it were, automatically confirmed and unexpected events and therefore contrast are, sometimes even a priori, excluded. But such exceptional — mostly formal and abstract — cases of guaranteed systematic efficiency aside, all real life situations are characterised more or less — though to a degree that may vary considerably — by openness, chancy events, vagueness, fusion and even contradiction. In these cases however, description, representation and interpretation of the domain at hand are or can be more or less beside the point, awkward, unclear, confused or even simply wrong, and accordingly expectations formed on this labile and even essentially contestable basis can easily be thwarted, even to the point of complete frustration. This can happen most plausibly as far as cultural options and their implementations are concerned, because these are conceived, organised, interpreted and implemented symbolically. And symbols — contrary to signs in the strict sense — are queer and volatile entities, whether they are thought to be invented or discovered, and can play most ludicrous tricks, ideally and in fact, in the first place on those that really and naively believe that they are, after all, adequate and complete — as they ought to be —, i.e. that they indeed provide the systematically efficient orientation they are conceived for. Even nature, as it is culturally, i.e. symbolically described and interpreted, has, in many if not all cases, an essential part to play in this game of hide and seek, between what is thought to be the case and what in fact nature and culture prove to be. What is thought is, one might say, never exactly and exclusively what it is thought to be : up to a point it is always something more than and something different from what, according to theory, it ought or is expected to be. Consequently, the almost universal, though partial, disparity between thinking and being gives all that effectively *is* an almost inexhaustible and unforeseeable debunking power. Moreover, cultural options, being incomplete and inadequate in principle, have as such their own debunking potential: what is thought is not only not necessarily what really is the case –

ita est sicut significat – but even what one thinks one is thinking is, more often than not, not exactly what really has been thought. One may surmise therefore that naturally and/or culturally induced and finally self-induced debunking of cultural pretence, so to speak, and its ideal of systematically efficient or even perfect orientation in the world, is the defining characteristic of the comicality of things and the sense of humour. However, as cultural seriousness is unavoidable, the sense of humour cannot be effectual and things cannot be comical in all circumstances without being nihilistic simpliciter. And nihilism is no laughing matter. To clearly, even sharply, see the essential inefficiency and defectiveness of human nature and culture requires, in order to avoid indifference pure and simple or even sheer malignity, the neutralisation of its dire effects : the futility of our endeavours, the nothingness of their results, must be seen to be futile themselves. The futile itself must be nullified, defectiveness and inefficiency must be or prove to be innoxious, or at least, they must be considered thus; they must be anaesthetised. This can be done in a series of ways — even inefficiency itself can prove to be heterotelic, i.e. it can prove to have one way or another positive results —, but the most prominent and most widespread neutralisation-device is without doubt the playground. Under conditions of play — where effective results do not really count – humour can fully develop and effectively exercise its debunking potential : the *feast* therefore, the celebration of and the holiday from culture — however culturally organised and embedded — is therefore the proper place for humorous quips. One must be in a festive mood to stand without loss of vitality the miseries of being human : jokes about coffins comfortably designed and luxuriously fitted out can properly be told only by and to people that are — rightly or wrongly — convinced of their booming health. The theatre therefore, an outgrow of this festive mood, the place of enthusiasm and contemplation, is the privileged milieu of comicality. Comedy is play, more or less, always and everywhere. To see the comicality of things and to have a hearty laugh, one must be, up to a certain point, detached. Aloofness is a prerequisite to stand the debunking of what, otherwise, is after all the pain of and the devotion to the seriousness of life. The sense of humour therefore shows a marked tendency to become the "fine art" of aesthetic distancing. For it can be highly dangerous and disruptive to speak truly of reality in its very presence : the play's the thing to catch with impunity the nullity of all pretence. At least, up to a certain point. It is almost impossible to convince

people of their cultural and therefore self-made contradictions : those are, after all, the vices in fashion and therefore the virtues they live by. One can hardly expect people to be prepared or to be able to change the cultural options they have lived by for a long time, simply because they finally prove to be contradictory; certainly not, when it is quite clear that such change, for better or worse, will not - without doubt — be immune to debunking all over again. Progress and its dubious absolutes aside, cultural options are, all things considered, ontologically inadequate and incomplete, and therefore, if one looks them squarely in the face, the matrix of all ridicule. We cannot be freed from our defectiveness as such and consequently the best we can — and must — do is to be somewhat generous to ourselves and others without being deluded : but for the hubris of thinking and the dogmatism of being, to make fun of our world is truly to make fun of ourselves as well.

4.

The subject of neutralised debunking is so vast and the complexity of our cultural options and their possible defectiveness and insufficiency is so enormous and diverse, that it is quite impossible in a short space even succinctly to give a fair account of the procedures used — and misused — to realise the sudden deflation of pretence. However, from the general principle of the almost universal disparity between thinking and being, between the context of reality and the context of expectation, some procedures can be "deduced" that in their ramification and implementation play an important role in the "construction" of comicality. These procedures can be ordered in a series evincing, from low to high, their comical potentialities. These procedures are : irrelevance, ambiguity and ambivalence, context-contamination proper, incongruity and absurdity and finally heterotely as such. Each of these principles of construction can take different forms, depending on the subject-matter and the medium they are applied to, and different principles can be combined in a variety of ways. The general scheme however can be surveyed without great difficulty, precisely because it is rather abstract and formal. Moreover, it is necessary to point out that the disparity between being and thinking, between initial expectations and final facts and results — that is the raison d'être of the procedures - makes by itself for highly important principles of comicality, that can and must be combined with the other principles

mentioned. Indeed, disparity as such has a variable degree of depth — i.e. of semantic weight — and a variable degree of extension — i.e. of repetitivity and systematicity —, that directly lead to such factors of comicality as contrast and surprise. These features of disparity as such can further explain why the suddenness of deflation is an important element in the efficacy of comicality. To reveal the nullity of things, thoughts, events, situations and actions in a flash is a formal procedure of composition — that as such partakes of the aesthetic dimension of comicality — that parallels and heightens contrast and surprise. It may be sophistical in its structure, but it need not be : it may simply evince a logical jump that in principle could be filled out. It is well-known that the flawless perfection of full extensive proof, to take an example, presupposes a closed domain that as such, as a kind of formal determinism, rebuts all comicality. Moreover, by taking us by surprise, it makes it difficult to find some form of defense – what is possible generally in highly complex domains, certainly if the deflation concerns matters of considerable semantic depth –. Lastly, even if no sophistry is in play, it allows us to laugh away the revelation of futility as merely said or pretended, which is quite impossible if adequate proof is provided painstakingly and step by step. The jump provides, as it were, a formal escape and has in this sense an auto-immunising effect, it manifestly is not to be taken seriously, at least not formally : its brilliancy neutralises its dire effect. In an analogous way the required neutralisation is reached by the absurdity — if there is — being explicitly confined to the stage or being isolated artificially by the set-up of the joke. To be convicted of cultural absurdity in matters of importance, to be convicted of one's own idiocy by inexorable proof, may be the utmost in philosophical criticism, but it is, all things considered, a way of arguing that would simply make us miserable beyond repair, if not aggressive. Comicality and the sense of humour, on the contrary, have a redeeming power we all from time to time are urgently in need of. As we are, by the way, of philosophy too, whatever the consequences.

5.

We have already alluded to the fact that a completely isolated domain of reality is highly exceptional or even, for all practical purposes, non-existent. Moreover, if guaranteed systematical efficiency is obtained, no comicality can ensue. Such domains

however, highly abstract and formal as they are, are not really interesting, not even in logic and mathematics. In all real life situations — and every domain, closed or open, is effectively situated in real life, in the unknown environment of all possible domains —, a certain openness is unavoidable. As if taking risks, at least in principle, is, as far as real life is concerned, the only really interesting — and possible — thing to do. And it certainly is, even in philosophy. The first and foremost consequence of this state of the human world is that the possibility of unforeseen factors intruding and interfering with the business at hand cannot be excluded. Only death cannot be interfered with. The mildest form of this general phenomenon of implementing and realising disparity within the domain at hand, the mildest form of context-contamination therefore, is the intrusion and interference of irrelevant factors. Elements pop up that have — at least in principle — nothing to do with the matter, but they frustrate the expectations our endeavours are occupied with. All sorts of nuisance are typical for this form of comicality. It simply evinces that it is impossible for all practical purposes to have adequate and complete isolation of domain, even if the domain is in itself efficiently closed. It is clear that even in this rather simple case — a mild form of comicality indeed — a great many varieties and modalities are possible, depending on the semantic weight of the matter at hand, the importance attributed to it and the degree of futility and systematicness of the frustrating interference. The greater the weight of the matter, the greater the futility of the intruding factor, the greater the contrast; the greater the systematicness of the interference, the greater the surprise; and the greater contrast and surprise, the greater the nuisance and the greater after all the final debunking of the initial enterprise. However, that this well-known phenomenon is a very simple case, is illustrated by the fact that it can easily make an artificial impression, as if the set-up itself is somehow undeserving of belief. Indeed, the plausibility of systematic irrelevance and deep contrast is not great, because the context-contamination in question is, on the face of it, merely external and quite arbitrary. This implausibility — and its consequent impression of artificiality — is gradually reduced when the complexity of the context one is working in, is great enough to necessitate a certain measure of vagueness, internally and externally, i.e. a certain ambiguity and ambivalence, so that the handling of the domain in question loses its overall guranteed systematic efficiency. In this case boundaries become somewhat unclear or diffuse — a

measure of ambivalence — and there's a degree of internal uncertainty — a measure of ambiguity — concerning the efficient handling of the domain. In such a case context-contamination is, as it were, internally and externally almost self-induced : one is indeed losing one's grip on the matter and the domain itself starts fusing with its environment. In such a situation, the more or less exaggerated cultural pretence of systematic efficiency, precision of delimitation and flawless or at least appropriate orientation and action, can easily be interfered with, internally and externally, and consequently be frustrated and nullified in various degrees. Misunderstanding and the taking of one person for another inadvertently are examples of this kind of comicality. In this way, more or less systematically a certain degree of fictitiousness in the handling of the domain is introduced. If the semantic weight of the matter is poor, its consequences are negligible and the systematicness of the errors is low, comicality has a tendency to be rather mild in character : the resulting frustration is rather slight and the final debunking may be rather amusing. But, if the contrary is the case, casual disorientation might easily become so systematic and full of contrast and the inefficiency may be so counter-productive that the result might verge on delusion, however limited in time. If this is the case, context-contamination proper has been reached : to misrepresent and misinterpret matters at hand in a systematic way, so that one context in its totality is taken for another, is to make — consciously or unconsciously — a system of being deluded, verges on closed fictitiousness and consequently can hardly be called simple ambiguity and ambivalence any more, even if the delusion is most heavily based upon and effectuated by them. This procedure of comicality can, as all others, easily be combined — and generally is — with the more or less systematic intrusion of irrelevant elements, that for one thing may help to induce the delusion and moreover may help explain the continuous surprise comedy often evinces. However, if the comedy is to be a story, the chancy character of events must reveal a certain logic, i.e. the arbitrariness of the intruding elements must not be, from an external point of view, that arbitrary, however baffling events may seem to the person — the comic character — that is deluded. However, the more context-contamination is internally induced, the more plausible it becomes and the more the impression of artificiality — that pertains not only to irrelevancy but to ambiguity and ambivalence as well — disappears. And the more plausibility is reached, the higher the comical possibilities : the greater the contrast, the more baffling

it becomes and consequently the greater the effect of the debunking of pretence and the final nullity of the enterprise. It is perhaps interesting to remark that the comicality of systematic delusion, that context-contamination proper and its resulting deflation is, as it were, the exact reverse of what generally may be called "metaphorisation" or the "construction of metaphor". Indeed, whereas in metaphorisation the contamination results in a sort of fusion between different domains and is interpreted as being semantically appropriate and informative, in comical context-contamination there is a clash between the domains, the fusion does not come off and the attempted construction of metaphor is as it were inhibited and frustrated : metaphorisation proves to be a blatant mistake. Comicality seems to be metaphorisation gone broke. The reason for this phenomenon, however difficult it may be to analyse it properly, seems to be intrinsically connected with the fact that metaphor or poetry aren't supposed and need not be taken literally, whereas the cultural requirement of systematic efficiency of action precisely implies that one ought to be able to apply in a really literal way the metaphors cultural orientation of necessity is replete with. Indeed, metaphorisation of thought is the mark of our finiteness : inadequate and incomplete as our thinking is, it must provide us with an all-round orientation and consequently it must order a domain, the domain of all domains, that cannot be surveyed literally. Therefore, to make sense of the world at large in the realm of theory and contemplation, one must cast a web of metaphor over all that is or can be -- any philosophy, any worldview depends on such a set of root-metaphors, as they have been called — in order to give our finiteness its proper place in a world that is, after all, too large for our thoughts and too deep for our imagination. But to act and to be, one must act and be literally. And this literality is really beyond our ken. To act effectively, the suggestive character of our cultural orientation must be transformed in a set of prescriptions that have enough precision and definiteness to result precisely in *this* deed now and no other. And this transformation is of necessity a jump, that leaves us more or less in the dark, for the simple reason that more often than not there *is* disparity between thinking and doing. However vaguely and metaphorically we may be thinking, we always act literally. We *are* exactly what we *do* but what we thought we were going to do and what we think we have done, is but loosely connected with what is in fact the case, *our* case : the relation between thinking and being therefore is as such metaphorical in

nature. It is a fusion of domains that cannot be effectuated sytematically in a satisfactory way, precisely because the "adaequatio rei et intellectus" cannot be adequate and complete for any finite entity, that is a real part of a universe that must be acted in in order to get known. And, as we have seen, this disparity is at the origin of the possible comicality of things and our sense of humour. Consequently, if there were no disparity between thinking and being, there would be no metaphorisation, but no comicality either. Both are intrinsically linked and unavoidable in principle. This state of affairs can be illustrated paradigmatically by taking one of the most deep and intriguing cultural metaphors the human species ever invented, namely the phrase "God exists". What indeed must *really* be done in order to live in such a way that the truth of this expression is exemplified in our life ? It is no exaggeration to contend that nobody really, literally knowns what such an expression might imply in fact. And this is true even a priori : for if God exists and we are part and parcel of His universe, whatever we do will inevitably exemplify His existence. The notion therefore must be specified, but with the sole truth of the existence of God, this is quite impossible. Certainly saints — if ever they exist — and inquisitors — that doubtlessly do — are great believers in the existence of God, and yet there seems to be in fact a remarkable difference in their implementations of the phrase. Perhaps "Tartuffe" has a good answer but it may be fairly assumed that no honest human being has a satisfactory one. Yet this need not imply that the expression is simply nonsensical. Poetry, after all, isn't. But it certainly means that our systematic efficiency in thought and action is rather severely limited and that cultural choices that needs must have precision in order to be effective, possibly and in principle make for comicality, and for some other phenomena as well, inter alia for inquisition. Comical persons therefore, such as context-contamination proper produces, seem to be cultural fools - or heroes — that naively suppose that cultural options are or can be integrally and systematically efficient, and consequently are doomed to be subject to delusion and end up by becoming fictitious. "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" after all, *does* poetry in order to talk, once and for all, prose, that is, in his case, cash. It can't be done — at least not systematically — but that's no fault of "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme", it simply means that he took cultural pretence all too seriously, as he had learned to do. Just as morality, viewed from a distance, is most of the time not so much a question of being moral,

as of taking advantage of the morals of others. Context-contamination however can lose its artificiality – as in the set-up of "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" – completely by becoming eminently and exclusively internal. In this case we enter the realm of incongruity and absurdity proper : comicality then is exemplified as the logical or at least unavoidable consequence of the cultural options taken. Such cases are twofold. In the first place, comicality can be quite formal in character and then it has to do essentially with the remarkable phenomenon of self-reference alluded to in the beginning of this paper. Here it is shown that cultural options are, by themselves, internally contradictory : context-contamination is intensified by self-reference, taken literally and absolutely, and becomes, so to speak, context-explosion. Or, alternatively said, the domain in question finally proves to be no domain at all : the pretence of absolute order boils down to absolute chaos once again, and the domain explodes into nothingness. That may be the reason why philosophy and its crux, the eternal dispute between dogmatism and scepticism, verges on the ridicule. However, it would lead us too far to discuss the essentially comic character of all absolutes. But it may be said that philosophy, even great philosophy – just like great tragedy – can be, from a certain angle, the subject of comedy. More to the point, because somewhat more modest, is Mark Twain's remark : "I was very glad to be able to answer the question. I said I didn't know". All logical jokes – sophistry held in abeyance – seem to be of this kind. But such jokes seem to have not only logical and epistemological, but even and foremost cultural significance : they tend to be all-inclusive, foundational and self-referential. They tend to become philosophical indeed and, in a nutshell, to have the same structure – at least formally – as all human orientation at large. And consequently, debunking aside, they verge on tragedy. No prime minister can afford to answer an explosive question – and some evident questions certainly are explosive nowadays – by saying : "I don't know". For, after all, what is he – or she – prime minister for but to answer questions that cannot be answered anyhow ? And indeed, most of the time, prime ministers and, for that matter, most of us, really don't know. It would be a miracle if they, or we, indeed did. And this is the moment formal comicality, induced by absurdity and neutralised by its theoretical character, collapses into the mess of praxis, i.e. into the more often than not intrinsic heterotely of the powers, great and small, that be. And that's also the moment jokes become dangerously close to tragedy,

and accordingly censureship normally sets in. Heterotely or counter-purposiveness is the last and highest form of comicality. Bound up by its theoretical core with logical inconsistency and in reality intrinsically connected with the inescapable ontological deficiency of all consciousness, counter-purposiveness is the trading mark of all tragedy. It seems hard therefore in such a state of affairs to look steadily at the bright side of things, as comicality requires. Certainly, comicality is lost – as it is in philosophy proper – if everything is at stake, i.e. if life really is in danger and self-reference may be ousted. Evidently, "Oedipus Rex" cannot be comically transcribed. For, Freudian interpretation aside, it is at least the tragedy of a man that happens to be in such a position in the world that it is impossible for him to know precisely what he ought to know in order to avoid committing — let's say – a horrible crime, whatever his epistemological acuteness in the circumstances. There's even more to it : precisely because he is epistemologically so acute, because he knows such a crime could be his, he unavoidably acts in such a way as to commit it. Whatever the logical and epistemological weaknesses of the play – if there are any -- Sophocles' play is paradigmatically an example of — even second-order -- heterotely, and as such the tragedy of epistemology — of the disparity between thinking and being — par excellence. As all finite knowledge is in principe possibly of this nature, there isn't and there can't be anything comical about the inexorable course of events in the play. It is pure tragedy. However, the subtlety, even sublimity of nature, if not of natural grace, can be such or so effective that, in some circumstances, that pertain to the episodes of life, the constitutional heterotely of culture, culturally revealed, can nevertheless lead exceptionally to positive results or at least to neutral ones : the dangers we are confronted with are naturally debunked and futilised or, otherwise said, heterotely itself proves to be futile or even efficient by a quib of nature or the surprising course of events. As if inefficiency can be, in some cases, the most efficient way to realise the goals one has in mind; as if the vices we live by, strange to say, one way or another promote the virtues that ought to be. For short, as if heterotely could be efficiency regained. However exceptional and surprising, nobody can really affirm such things don't happen sometimes. Indeed, precisely the disparity between thinking and being can make room for an efficiency beyond our expectations. To slip on bananaskins is one of the most surprising tactics to win the race, but it is not — absolutely — impossible. However, such cases are rare, at

least as far as weighty, cultural and certainly political matters are concerned : as if history could easily neutralise its criminals. Most of these cases therefore are limited to the domain of fiction : they are most easily construed, accepted and endorsed on the playground, when we are holiday-minded and have taken leave of reality. Perhaps "Le Misanthrope" is a case in point. If causality is the cement of the universe, honesty undoubtedly is the cement of society. But "Le Misanthrope" being one out of ten thousand, doesn't realise that – as far as convenience and social efficiency are concerned – hypocrisy is more successful in the short run than absolute honesty ever can be in eternity. And, being so absolute, he's heterotelic in the extreme. This extremism – Jede Konsequenz führt zum Teufel – would boil down to tragedy, but for the – not quite arbitrary fact – that the play is and remains undecided and leaves open the possibility of reform. Yet, such reform – a manifest intention of many comical forms – is not really to be relied upon in this case. For honesty seems to be too essential to be tampered with, as Hamlet knew quite well. With an heterotely of such semantic weight and centrality as "Le Misanthrope" evinces the limits of comicality seem to have been reached : King Lear's fool seems to peep around the corner. Distancing, disinterrestedness, play and neutralisation seem to have, as we have said in the beginning, their limits : beyond them nothing remains but identification. Fiction, whatever its powers of redemption, at last crumbles down to reality, and reality – as once more Hamlet knew well – is the graveyard of poor Yorick. It is no easy matter to nullify the effects of real heterotely and it becomes highly implausible that it could, in the end, be put upside down for the benefit of all or even some. Therefore, if life is effectively in danger and consequently self-reference cannot be guaranteed any more, if our very cultural identity is really at stake, tragedy seems to take the place of comedy. There is a marked asymmetry between them : tragedy has the last word. Divine comedies may be universal, but in fact, for finite beings, such as we are, they seem to be more often than not human tragedies. As in logic the set of all sets is finally nothing at all, so in tragedy we are reduced to nothingness. And in this case our sense of humour, however large and generous, must forsake us, because it is beside the point : its object becomes all-embracing and gets lost, its point of support fails us, and comic perfection by the grace of self-reference and the grace of nature is no perfection any more. Our possibilities, our flexibility is taken away, and our necessities, the fatality of our

being, weights upon us : even fools and players, dandies and philosophers have their inexorable limits.

6

If neutralised debunking is the core of comicality and the sense of humour and if it can be shown — as we tried to do — that debunking can be grounded in and is an outgrow of the intrinsic inadequacy and incompleteness of all possible human orientation in the world — that therefore needs must be essentially contestable and inherently pretentious - the way seems free for an integrated and integral theory of comicality and humour. To illustrate this, let's succinctly review some of the traditional theories of comicality that have been proposed. Incongruity apart, that has been integrated in our notion of culture as implying the necessary possibility of disparity between thinking and being, the most conspicuous of these are theories of superiority and theories of release of restraint.

Is there any place for superiority in our scheme and, if so, what kind of superiority is implied ? Natural or biological superiority — if it exists — is simply out of the question, for mere strength — in whatever sense — has nothing to do with humour : to knock one's opponent out - to make metaphor precise — is to be superior, if anything is. Yet there is nothing comical about that : power as such is merely brutal and power there must be to be superior in this sense. Superiority therefore must be cultural, but, if this is the case, it is more than dubious : it would imply that one's cultural set of opinions and convictions could be — at least ideally — adequate and complete, and it is quite certain that this is impossible in principle. However, it is no wonder that a radical determinist, such as Hobbes, promoted such a theory. Yet determinism — and the really superior knowledge it implies, i.e. godlike knowledge — would make, as we have suggested, comicality impossible from the outset. Moreover, power that is not all-powerful, is power that corrupts, and corruption, though it may be a source of comicality for an outsider, is, as far as humankind goes, not precisely the most convincing indication of superiority. The theory of superiority therefore is, in this sense, self-refuting : it is doomed to be heterotelic, it must do away with its object of discourse. It is comical on its own grounds. There's indeed nothing comical about having power over others : that's simply a question of having the right gun at the right time at one's disposal. One must be lucky to have it, and nobody is as lucky

as to have it all the time. Comically speaking, power will not do. It may be concluded that intrinsically and from an absolute point of view no culture is as such superior to any other. Such a delusion would imply, for instance, that all ethnic or historical cultures, except our so-called scientific one, are merely ridiculous, and this is — the myopia of unabated chauvinism aside — not quite the case. Indeed, it would be more than foolish to imply so : it would be tragical. But, if power over others will not do, power over oneself is another story. It may be argued that cultural debunking as such, as far as intelligence and self-knowledge are concerned, is indeed superior : it evinces the fact that one isn't naive enough to be fooled by one's cultural options, even if one, after all, identifies with them. In such a case, the culture in question, with all its imperfections on its back, is freely accepted. And that, really, is a form of superiority seldomly achieved or achievable as such. The superiority implied however is not the superiority of the culture as such, but it resides in the fact that one sees its limitations, and nevertheless has the courage to endorse it — at least in its essentials — i.e. that one is, on one's own free will, prepared to seek one's masterhood in self-limitation — where all things considered all mastership must be sought —. That is, without doubt, the best one can make of superiority in this world, if indeed it is true that all cultural options have their incomparable pros and cons. To have power over others is to be lucky — for the time being — but to have power over oneself is to belong to the aristocracy of humanity. And there are no tricks, neither of descend nor of demagogy to make this virtue true. There simply are no tricks at all : as Bertrand Russell said, it simply consists in remembering one's humanity and forgetting all the rest. Such an aristocratic view of cultural identity induces a sense of humour as large and deep as humour possibly can be. Almost everything can be debunked, because it is consciously known that debunking, more often than not, is eminently to the point. Yet, such superiority never is nor can be aggressive : it doesn't imply that in some cultures, or even in only one of them, all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The superiority, being humane, is quite generous, because, if it is seriously humorous, i.e. really so, it includes our own selves in its object : it is based upon sympathy, the sympathy with the inferiority we all finally share and are bound to laugh at because we have chosen this inferiority freely. However, aggressiveness, as it is evinced in sarcastic and cynical remarks, may be to the point, precisely for those in fact lamentable — and comical — persons that

pretend they have attained essential superiority, i.e. an adequate and complete orientation in the domain in question : they are indeed people that pretend to have discovered a method to throw a double six. They are philistines and their pretence is nothing but pretence, i.e. sheer stupidity. And this is dangerous because it is heterotelic a priori : it must lead inevitably to fanaticism that is empty by definition and to inquisition that is by definition arbitrary and brutal. And what could be more innocent, because it is symbolical and playful, than to debunk such pretence by being sarcastic and cynical ? The said superiority therefore is neither natural or biological, it is not even cultural : it is moral, and therefore it is generous. For morality — if it is not philistine — is, if it is anything at all, the paradigm of generosity. It is not difficult now to see that the form of superiority Bergsonian considerations imply, can quite easily be integrated in our scheme. Indeed, no really intelligent person will ever pretend that the mechanical application of strict and rigid procedures in real life situations can ever result in anything but misrepresentation, inefficiency, heterotely and even catastrophe, unless the machinery would be adequate and complete, which is logically impossible. To pretend so, is mere philistinism. It is in fact nothing but a rigid, awkward and even heterotelic form of self-defense; an exorcism of the fear of life, that is, of the fear of being and doing as such. And it is well-known that those that thus fear death are psychologically death long before they die. The medicine of philistinism is in fact a mortal poison : "L'avare" is a case in point. That's moreover the reason why modern, overgrown bureaucracy is, most of the time, not only a mess — an almost self-referential absurdity — but also ridiculous, to the point of being heterotelic in fact. Philistinism, one might say, is the morality of bureaucracy and its morbid idea that living men are as infinitely patient and malleable as files is one of the most widespread forms of delusion and a clear indication of the heterotely of the modern world. Yet that's hardly a humorous matter : it verges on cultural asphixiation. And it leads to cynicism.

Secondly, is there any place for the theories of release of restraint ? It may be presumed there is, even essentially so, not only on sexual matters — important though they are — but on all limitations culturally induced, even in matters of logic. And the release, applicable to all self-imposed cultural restraints is, just as the moral superiority of the sense of humour and the comical effects of the mechanisation of life, intrinsically connected with the possibility

of comicality. On the principle of the disparity between thinking and being one may indeed say that cultural limitations have their debunking potential in themselves, as well in matters logical as in matters sexual. The freedom from rationality and the freedom from sexual inhibition however, must, in our interpretation, be seen in a somewhat different light. Freedom from rationality is not so much freedom from an intolerable but almighty tyrant — as Schopenhauer has it — but rather as a deflation of the pretence of almighty rationality, by the sudden revelation of its inherent limitations and its a priori defectiveness, just as the freedom from sexual inhibition is not so much the debunking of a tyrannical morality, but rather the deflation of the pretence of absolute sexual freedom, and in fine therefore, rather a proof of the necessity of limitation. In this case sexuality and logic go hand in hand. To love everybody is indeed to love no one in particular and consequently, as particularity is the law of existence, not to love at all. It is necessary to have some modicum of logic. Yet, as there isn't and cannot be one and only one adequate and complete system of logic, one must choose some logic, and consequently some defectiveness in order to have any logic at all. And this particular defectiveness could, in principle be avoided, just as this particular sexual inhibition could in principle be shunned. But one cannot have no logical defectiveness and no inhibitions whatever, or vice versa, one cannot have all possible logics and all possible love at the same time. In order to function properly, one must choose one's cake and eat it. To choose such limitations is to choose them continuously and to hold on to them at least for a certain time, so that, whatever one's choice, one is continuously restrained. And such an expenditure of energy is culturally necessary in order not to be trivial and therefore empty. This endeavour not to be trivial — to choose one's own form of living — is to be culturally engaged in an effort that is necessary but nevertheless not completely justifiable in a satisfactory way. In such a situation however, it is quite comprehensible that the restraint implied is from time to time released, and it is quite evident that it can be released in a most easy and innoxious way under conditions of play. For this reason, it seems, logical absurdity and sexual jokes can be tolerated only when they are neutralised by conditions of aesthetic distancing : the playfulness is the guarantee that they don't deteriorate in empty stupidity and logical madness, or in sexual animality pure and simple. Man being specifically a rational and a sexual animal, release of restraint is most explicit in these cases but, because debunking

implies by definition the sudden and sharp visibility of an in fine somewhat arbitrary one-sidedness of *all* cultural options, *all* comicality can be said to contain a certain measure of it. Release of restraint therefore is a necessary concomitant of all cultural specification and implementation. The sense of humour and the comicality of things evince the freedom from cultural restrictions : they are the playful improvisation of variation or even absurdity and triviality on the themes of cultural necessity. And the more freely the themes of our life have been chosen the more variation and absurdity can be tolerated and the more release of restraint can be realised. The play is once more the thing wherein we'll catch the defectiveness of our own selves. And what has been freely chosen, can freely be cast away. Release of restraint — the euphoria in our sense of humour — is a delightful present, the surplus value, the grace of compensation for restraint. And our mastery is this, that we can stand release in so far as we can stand restraint. Therefore, the laughs of fools are forced and, if not forced, faulty.

7

It may be clear by now, not only why philistinism is a laughing stock but also why philistines have poor sense of humour, for short, why the normality of philistines makes for madness.

Philistinism is precisely the result of the endeavour — comprehensible, though misplaced and therefore dangerous — to deny the essentials of the human predicament : kitschy people are continuously trying to convince themselves that they have found an orientation that can do away with the disparity between thinking and being. They think the gap has been or can be closed definitely or that, after all – and this boils down to the same thing — it never did exist in the first place. They believe or rather they tend to believe that dogmatism – whatever its content — has a solution – *the* solution — for everything. It is quite clear that such an attitude simply denies even the possibility of humour : there is indeed nothing laughable about a perfect solution. Consequently for philistines the sense of humour and the comicality of things are out of place : for them, they are a priori beside the point. However, the weird idea of a perfect orientation is simply fake, and instead of closing the gap between thinking and being, it makes it permanent and unsurpassable. By denying the existence or importance of the disparity philistinism promotes an attitude that is in principle wrong

to the point of being incorrigible. Consequently philistines are, in any case, and everywhere a laughing stock, simply because there's nothing to be laughed at. Culturally interpreted, they take their gods literally. And unhappily for them, such gods do not exist. And gods, if they do not exist, are without doubt the most pretentious entities in the world, and therefore comical in the extreme. Philistines think they can throw a double six. But by their method the dice are so loaded, they can't be thrown anymore. They're in for madness.

It may be clear by now too why the sense of humour and the comicality of things are highly culturally determined and therefore notoriously relative. Indeed, however clearly and intensely we may be convinced of the inadequacy and incompleteness of our thinking, in fact, our acting, our being is always absolute : we must, precisely because we are limited, choose our cultural form in a non-trivial way, and therefore our being, our life always exemplifies and illustrates some cultural absolutes, which, because we continuously have betted upon them, we cannot in all honesty laugh at. However generous our thinking, we *are* always dogmatical up to a certain point. And accordingly, our sense of humour is limited thereby. We can easily laugh at the gods we don't believe in, we can perhaps smile at those we live by, if we realise that our beliefs are, after all, inadequate, because even our own gods are really beyond our ken, but it seems quite out of the question simply to debunk them : the things we live by cannot seriously be cast away without creating a breath-taking vacuum that may strangle us. Nihilism pure and simple is the burial-ground of all humour and all comicality.

It has already been suggested that the sense of humour in its more aggressive forms is the most sharp and disruptive way to criticise cultural pretence and inefficiency. And, for sure, playful nihilism is a way of looking at things no form of dogmatism and therefore philistinism can tolerate. There is indeed nothing that can bring cultural and more specifically political dogmatism more efficiently to the brink of nervous breakdown than the playful and seemingly unconcerned but pertinent jocularity that evinces the total nullity of the cultural and political frame-up. Nothing can be more infuriating for authority than the brilliance of the sudden revelation of it irresistibly crashing down into nothingness by the sheer weight of its own pretence. It is like proving that the problem-solving vitality of pretence is nothing but an intricate and laborious way of committing suicide. To make clear in a flash that the self-styled

saviours of humanity are really but suicidal anomalies, must be murderous indeed, and therefore infuriating in the extreme. But philistine fury ought to and could more profitably be directed at itself : if the sense of humour might prove to be socially dangerous and disruptive, the reason may be that cultural debunking is, in part, and certainly in its more aggressive forms, merely a revelation of cultural stupidity. And stupidity — the most notorious characteristic of cultural and political dogmatism — is generally more heterotelic in fact than humour ever can be : humour, even sarcasm and cynicism, but kill to resurrect. And certainly, it is not in the power of the actual effects of stupidity to guarantee such grace. The dangers of humour, however biting, are innocent after all. "Comoedia naturalis" is indicative not only of high intelligence and vital mental agility but also, whatever the appearances, of moral generosity : it makes us laugh, if only to make despair manageable.

8

We have tried to show that the sense of humour and the comicality of things are, all things considered, no laughing matter. On the contrary, we tried to make it plausible that "comoedia naturalis" is at the heart of our human predicament and our consequent cultural instability and precariousness. We tried to show that on this basis a theory can be outlined that is anthropologically as general as it is specifiable culturally. Moreover, we have given some idea of its possible integrative force. However, it would require much elaboration and much more precision to make the theory really convincing. We have indeed been obliged to skip, if not argument, at least proof, and therefore we had to make jumps all the time, if not "unlawful matches of things", as Bacon said. We hope they were not really that unlawful and we hope that our suggestions at least can point the way. Papers, such as this one, cannot really provide what they set out to do, or their objective must be limited to the point of disappearing altogether. Articles are, if not simply a laughing matter, at least bad intellectual poetry. But, indeed, philosophy, most of the time, is nothing else. Consequently, there is, even concerning theories of humour and comicality, reason enough for cautiousness, but none for despair. And if, on the contrary, there is reason for despair, we hope to have shown it can be laughed away.

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