

SCHOLASTIC HUMOR

Ready Wit as a Virtue in Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Scholastic philosophers can be quite funny. What's more, they have good reason to be: Aristotle himself lists ready wit (*eutrapelia*) among the virtues, as a mean between excessive humor and its defect. Here, I assess Scholastic discussions of humor in theory, before turning to examples of it in practice. The last and finest of these is a joke, hitherto unacknowledged, which Aquinas makes in his famous Five Ways. Along the way, we'll see (i) that the history of philosophy is not so hostile to humor as is commonly supposed; and (ii) that the competing theories of humor like the Incongruity Theory and the Release Theory are not altogether incompatible. We'll also see at least one example of an apparent attempt by modern translators to excise humor from a medieval text. Our considerations will open a window into what oral discussion and debate at medieval universities was actually like, and how we should understand the relationship between the texts we have now and the exchanges that actually occurred then.

Keywords: Aristotelian ethics, medieval ethics, philosophy of humor, Thomas Aquinas, The Five Ways, Bonaventure, John Buridan

Scholastic philosophers are funny. Or at least, many of them can be. John Buridan is often funny, and so at times are Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas. Here, I offer an account of Scholastic humor in theory, before giving some examples of it in practice. In theory, Scholastic humor is Aristotelian. Aristotle defines ready wit as “cultured insolence,” and sees the ability to indulge in wit appropriately as a mean between vicious excess (buffoonery) and deficiency (boorishness). Humor, then, is a virtue. Scholastic thinkers pick up on this, and sometimes indulge

in humor in practice; occasionally, their jokes are preserved in the texts that have come down to us. In what follows, I provide and analyze some examples from Scholastic texts. The finest of these is Aquinas' *sed contra* in the famous Five Ways, with which the present paper ends. There, Aquinas cites God as the ultimate authority in the debate about God's own existence. This is congruent with the other forms of Scholastic irony and wit that I consider here, and should be read as such.

Right away, I want to bring up two objections. First, the very notion of Scholastic humor might seem oxymoronic, like Umberto Eco's *nomadic urban planning* and *silent film phonetics*.¹ Second, analysis of humor is bound to ruin the humorous effect. As David Foster Wallace remarks in his discussion of Kafka, "there's no quicker way to empty a joke of its own peculiar magic than to try to explain it."² So why do it at all?

To the first, I say: please bear with me. While it's often assumed that the Scholastics are humorless pedants, not all of them are fairly represented by Voltaire's witless Pangloss.³ To the second: this paper is not meant to analyze all Scholastic humor, nor do I attempt to give an exhaustive list of examples. It is, rather, meant to give the reader a sense of what makes the Scholastics occasionally funny, and why they value humor in the first place. If this essay gives you a feel for Scholastic humor, then the essay itself should be ditched, like Wittgenstein's ladder. My hope is that one day, reading a discussion of some abstruse topic like the divisions of hell or the potency of prime matter, something will (rightly) tickle your funny bone.⁴

Let me begin with a very general overview of the philosophy of humor as it stands today. The main question is, what is humor?⁵ Historically, one prevalent answer to this question is given by the superiority theory: humor is prompted by feelings of superiority over the object of one's laughter. It is *Schadenfreude*, produced by someone else's inferiority or harm. John Morreall suggests that this understanding of humor has largely contributed to its bad name among so many philosophers, from Plato to Hobbes.⁶ Another answer to this question is the relief theory: humor involves a relief of tension or pent-up energy. The most widely accepted view, however, is that of the incongruity theory: humor depends on a perception of something that runs contrary to our expectations and patterns of thinking. For instance, consider how P.G. Wodehouse dedicates one of his books:

To my daughter Lenora, without whose never-failing sympathy and encouragement this book would have been finished in half the time.⁷

What makes a joke like this one funny is the incongruity between the expectation, itself a product of literary convention, and the punchline, which undermines it.

As we'll see, elements of all three answers to this question are represented in Scholastic humor, both in theory and in practice. Indeed, the putative tensions between these theories have probably been exaggerated: Aquinas often thinks and jokes in terms like those of the incongruity theory; yet he also thinks humor provides a kind of release from mental strain, as the release theory maintains. These two aspects of his thinking are not at odds, as we'll soon see.

ARISTOTELIAN HUMOR IN THEORY

Enjoyment of humor, like other virtues, is a mean between two vicious extremes. Contrast Falstaff's buffoonery as an example of one extreme, with the sour prospective nannies in *Mary Poppins* as an example of the other. Accordingly, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* IV, 8, Aristotle tells us that:

Those who carry humor to excess are thought to be buffoons and vulgar people, who itch to have their joke at all costs, and are more concerned to raise a laugh than to keep within the bounds of decorum and avoid giving pain to the object of their fun. Those on the other hand who never by any chance say anything funny themselves and take offense at those who do are considered boorish and unpolished. But those who joke in a tasteful way are called ready-witted, which implies a sort of readiness to turn this way and that; for such sallies are thought to be movements of the character, and as bodies are discriminated by their movements, so too are characters.⁸

Hence ready wit is a kind of versatility. Unlike boorishness or buffoonery, wit can adapt to circumstance. One who has it differs from one who is *unpolished* or, literally, *hard* (σκληρός, *sklêros*). In the *Aristoteles Latinus*, one who lacks any wit is a *ruricola* or an *agrius*⁹—that is, one who is unsophisticated or rustic, literally a yokel or a bumpkin. The virtue of ready wit is, in contrast, a kind of refinement and urbanity.

Indeed, it is precisely this notion of cultivation as an essential component of wit that figures in Aristotle's account of ready wit in *Rhetoric* II, 12. There, in a discussion of youthful traits, he adds love of wit, which he glosses as "cultured insolence" (πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις, *pepaideuménē húbris*; *erudita contumelia* in Moerbeke).¹⁰

Why *cultured*? I submit that without some cultivation and familiarity with its object, wit collapses into buffoonery or even boorishness—as anyone who has seen a tasteless or even hostile attempt at parody can attest. What makes a parody or impersonation funny is its refinement and proximity to its object: an actor, for example, has carefully studied and taken on the quirks of a prominent politician, and truly looks and sounds just like her or him. Similarly, the Scholastics are cultured enough in their own methods, and fond enough of them, to know precisely how

and when to deal with them ironically—that is, to be insolent in a cultivated way.

We'll turn to examples soon. Before that, it's worth establishing that the Scholastics themselves are well aware of this train of thought in Aristotle. For example, Aquinas glosses the *NE* text in his *Sententia libri "Ethicorum"* (bk. II, lecture 9) as follows:

[Aristotle] shows the virtue that exists with respect to humor. And he says that, with respect to the enjoyment of humor, one who sticks to the mean is called ready-witted, because he turns easily to anything; and this disposition is called *ready-wittedness*. But one who enjoys it too much is called a buffoon [*bomolochos*], from *bomos* which is an altar, and *lochos* which is a raptor. Such a one is thus said to resemble the kite, which always flies around the altars of idols on which animals are sacrificed, in order to snatch up something. Similarly, one who goes too far with humor is always standing by to snatch up someone else's words or deeds, to make a joke of them. And this disposition is called buffoonery [*bomolochia*]. But one who is deficient in this regard is called uncultivated [*agrocious*], which is from *agrestis* ['uncultivated', 'rural'], and the disposition is called boorishness [*agroichia*].¹¹

Here, Aquinas agrees with Aristotle on two important points. First, Aquinas thinks that ready-wit is a virtue; second, that it is to be distinguished from at least one of its contrary extremes in terms of cultivation. Elsewhere, in his *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas accounts for the first point by telling us that wit is reducible to the primary virtue of temperance.¹² And he adds color to the second point by remarking that ready wit is a way of showing that one can be pleasing to one's comrades.¹³ So ready wit has a social component as well: by it, one communicates one's readiness to play ball, so to speak.

In fact, immoderate unwillingness to partake in humor is *sinful*, according to the Angelic Doctor. In the *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, q.168, a.3), he devotes a stand-alone article to the question "whether excessive lack of humor constitutes a sin (*peccatum*)."¹⁴ His answer is a firm *Yes*. He goes on to describe humorlessness in terms we can easily recognize:

It is contrary to reason for someone to be constantly oppressive to others, namely to contribute nothing pleasant, and even to hamper others' enjoyments. Hence, as Seneca says, 'comport yourself wisely, so that no one would consider you harsh, nor scorn you as a mean person'. But there are those who are lacking in humor, and will not crack a joke, and moreover are annoyed when other people do, because they refuse to accept even moderate humor. And such people are, accordingly, vicious [*vitiosi*].¹⁴

John Buridan describes boorish people in similar terms in his *Questions on the “Nicomachean Ethics” of Aristotle* (*QNE*; bk. 4, q.19). There, Buridan couches our natural inclination toward humor in teleological terms:

Since God and nature do nothing in vain, nature would not have given us such an inclination toward humor unless it benefitted us in some way. From these things, it is clear that sometimes it happens that one is lacking with respect to humor in a way that is perverse. This can be made plain to anyone, because it is not right that there are some who always want to behave as if they are inconsolably unhappy. And it is not easy to associate with such people.¹⁵

Ironically, the descriptions Aquinas and Buridan give us of humorless and unpleasant people sound a good deal like later Humanist parodies of Scholastic philosophers. Yet Scholastics took the lessons in Aristotle and elsewhere to heart, and indulged in humor at key moments. Let’s see what this looks like in the context of the medieval university.

SCHOLASTIC HUMOR IN PRACTICE

Here, I’ll give four examples of humor preserved in Scholastic texts. The first of these has a distinctively oral character and comes from Buridan’s *Questions on the “Posterior Analytics” of Aristotle*. There, Buridan asks whether there are two ways of saying that something is what it is *per se*—for instance that humans are rational animals *per se*. Against this, Buridan raises the following objection:

There are not two ways of saying *per se*, but many. For it is not pronounced the same in different places, for instance in Paris and in Rome.¹⁶

It’s hard to imagine such a ludicrous objection—namely that there are as many senses of *per se* as there are ways of pronouncing it—ever being put forth seriously. But here it is. With this objection, Buridan takes an ironic attitude toward the general Scholastic method of inquiry. Any objection raised by a teacher in the course of a scholastic question will invariably be refuted. Its fate is sealed from the start. If so, why not throw in some unbelievably weak objections, just for fun?

There is a further, oral way in which this argument is funny. Buridan stands out as perhaps the most obviously humorous Scholastic—a point we’ll return to in a moment. Thus, one can readily imagine a teacher like Buridan hamming it up for the class: imitating in an exaggerated way the different accents saying *per se*, perhaps with affectations to boot. This is, after all, a well-known comic device. It is also an ancient one: it seems to have been a gimmick of Roman comedy. As Palmer remarks, “It

may well be that Roman audiences found Greek as irresistibly funny as French in general or the German word for 'five' [*fünf*] appears to English music-hall patrons."¹⁷ In Buridan, we find a hint at just this sort of exaggerated linguistic comedy in the different pronunciations of Latin.

There is a general lesson to be learned here. Medieval universities had a far more oral culture than our modern universities, probably to an extent which is now difficult to fathom. For example, students as well as teachers played a kind of logical *gotcha!* game called an *obligatio*, where an answerer is bound (*obligatus*) to a proposition, and must answer questions posed to him consistently with that proposition. The questioner wins if he gets the answerer to contradict himself; the answerer wins if he runs out the time.¹⁸

Likewise, a good deal of philosophy was presented in oral disputations, which were only later written down, edited, and refined into the disputed questions we now have on our shelves. Public events were held in which students could ask a famous teacher anything they liked (*quodlibet*), and again some of these answers were only subsequently written down.¹⁹

The *gotcha!* element of obligational games is also present in these quodlibetal debates, as can be surmised from some of the questions recorded for posterity. This is unsurprising: at an event where anyone can ask anything, you're bound to get questions which range from the abstruse and technical to the ludicrous and off-the-wall.²⁰ Probably the latter, for the most part, wouldn't be recorded. Even so, there are examples on record hint at such questions. For instance, someone put the following amusing question to Thomas Aquinas: is truth more powerful than wine, the king, and women?²¹ Wine, admittedly, can overpower the body; the king, however, can order us to put life and limb in peril; yet he can also be ruled over (*dominatur*) by women.²² Truth, we feel intuitively, should win out. But how? Aquinas begins by remarking that the question is based on a category error: strictly speaking, things from different *genera* can't be compared. Nevertheless, he tells us, they can be compared in terms of their effects:²³

The effect in which these things agree, and over which they have power, is in producing change in the heart of man. Therefore, we should see which of these has greater power over the heart of man. Note that what is changeable about man pertains, on one hand, to body, and on the other hand to soul. The latter is twofold: sensitive and intellective. The intellective is also twofold: practical and speculative. Now, among all the things that naturally pertain to change in terms of bodily disposition, wine has the greatest power, for it causes one to speak through drunkenness. Among the things that pertain to

the sensitive appetite, pleasure is the most powerful, and especially with respect to sexual matters; and thus, woman is the most powerful. Furthermore, in practical matters, that is in human affairs, the king has the greatest power to act. And in speculative matters, truth is the most powerful. Now powers of body are beneath those of soul; animal powers are beneath intellectual ones, and practical ones are beneath speculative ones. Therefore, simply speaking, truth is higher, more excellent, and more powerful.²⁴

Truth wins—QED. But who would come up with such a question? Whoever put it to Aquinas must have plucked it from the deutero-canonical I (III) Esdras 3–4, where the question is posed by certain young men (*iuvenes*) who served as guards to Darius the Great. There, the question is taken extremely seriously, and provides an occasion for a grand and well-attended public debate: we learn that Darius straightaway “sent and summoned all the nobles of Persia and Media and the satraps and generals and governors and prefects.”²⁵ The winner of the debate, we’re told, will be handsomely rewarded:

whoever’s speech appears wiser than the rest will be given great gifts and great tokens of victory: he will be clothed in purple, and drink from gold cups, and sleep on a gold bed; and he will have a chariot with gold bridles, and a headdress of fine cloth, and a necklace around his neck; and for his wisdom, he will be second only to Darius, and he will be called Darius’ kin.²⁶

High stakes! The question, clearly, is a difficult one, and its solution momentous. Why not, then, put it to Thomas Aquinas?

Aquinas himself notes that this question was put forth by youngsters (*iuvenes*), though who these youngsters are isn’t clear: does he mean Darius’ guards, or the young students at the University of Paris who brought this question to him? Probably both. Young university students apparently came across this question in their reading of Scripture and determined to put it to the *Doctor Angelicus*. This suggests a kind of *gotcha!* element to quodlibetal discussions: clever students would have come up with questions that were tricky and tangled and cute, and put their *doctores* to the task of answering them. After all, at a quodlibet, you get to ask whatever you want. Many such questions, as I’ve said, were probably not recorded—indeed, some of them would probably not have been worth recording at all. But the presence of this one in Aquinas’ *Quodlibeta* suggests that at least some of them must have been like this. We should imagine laughter (and probably not a few groans) through the course of a medieval quodlibet.

Further examples of the oral culture of medieval universities could be given, but let me get to the point: oral contexts like these provide a

good deal more opportunities for humor than written ones do. The fact that evidence of oral humor bubbles up in texts like those of Buridan and Aquinas is suggestive: medieval universities would have been a good deal funnier than we typically imagine. Humor certainly abounds in student songs, with their references to “drinkers who thirst without being thirsty,” and so on.²⁷ But it would also have appeared in otherwise serious academic discussion. Ready wit is, after all, engaging, and audience attention is a limited resource. The relationship between the texts we have now, and the oral culture present back then is akin to that between a lively conference discussion and the cut-and-dried presentation of the same material in final, published form. We should not take them as directly representative of the register or tenor of the discussions and debates that really went on at the medieval universities. The occasional humor that we do find in the texts thus gives us a window into what intellectual life at the medieval university actually would have been like.

The second example comes from the *Summa Theologiae*. In a discussion about whether sacred doctrine is a matter of argument, Aquinas gives us the following objection:

If sacred doctrine is a matter of argument, then the argument itself proceeds either from reason or from authority. But if it proceeds from authority, then it is not fit for the loftiness of the subject, since an argument from authority is the weakest sort of argument—*according to Boethius*.²⁸

Let’s tease this passage apart, mindful of the fact that explaining a humorous effect often, sadly, ruins it. What Aquinas is doing here is citing an authority—a common move among Scholastics—to back up the claim that arguments from authority are relatively weak. It therefore follows, ironically enough, that his argument that arguments from authority are weak is itself weak—just the sort of cultured insolence one would expect from a Scholastic philosopher.

The humor of this passage has gone largely unnoticed, though Aquinas can here only be read as being ironic. Maybe readers and translators have felt that an ironic attitude is inappropriate to the Angelic Doctor. If so, this is yet another example of wariness about humor in education and study, of the sort cataloged and discussed by John Morreall.²⁹ In fact—get this—the Fathers of the English Dominican Province actually *excise* it from their famous translation. In their version of this passage, there is no mention of Boethius as an authority whatsoever. But there it is in the Latin.

The third example is a bit like the second, in that it is funny on two levels. To give context, here is the puzzle: is chastity a virtue? Well, if

virtue is measured according to the mean, and deviation from the mean is a vice, then it follows that clerical celibacy—total abstention—is a vice. After setting up the problem, Bonaventure (Giovanni di Fidanza) remarks that:

When it is said that virtue accords with the mean, this should not be understood in objective terms. For if this were the case, then no one would be chaste unless he slept with half the women in the world, since that is precisely the mean between all of them and none.³⁰

This remark is humorous in two ways. First, it is funny merely to imagine the herculean task which Bonaventure describes. Second, Bonaventure is taking a mildly ironic attitude toward the doctrine of the mean. The second aspect presents another sample of cultured insolence: one must, after all, understand the doctrine of the mean to joke about it in this way. But what can we say about the first?

When medievals talk explicitly about sex, the effect is often surprising. In the Anglosphere especially, we sometimes seem primed to think that the further back in time you go, the more Victorian sensibilities get. Not so: the medievals are not, on the whole, a prudish lot. We shouldn't confuse the ideal of their Christian sexual mores with the facts on the ground. For anyone caught conflating the two, I prescribe an afternoon of writing Rabelais or Chaucer out on the chalkboard.

Indeed, the ribald humor of Rabelais and Chaucer is indeed what the suggestion that one should sleep with half the women in the world most closely resembles. But this physical humor is not the sort of cultured insolence or *eutrapelia* we have been so far considering. It is humorous of course, albeit in a cruder way. And it has analogues elsewhere in Scholastic writing. For instance, Buridan's *Sophismata* is laced throughout with arguments to the effect that you are a donkey, your father is a dog, plus examples of people eating raw meat, being thrown off of bridges, and the like. This is not so much ready wit, but in the vein of what Aristotle says elsewhere about the comic effect produced by the inferiority of other people, who evoke laughter on account of their ugliness, stupidity, vice, and the like.³¹ This *Schadenfreude* is common among ancients and medievals, and even finds its way into such unlikely venues as their logic texts. Hence valuing cultured insolence, which is our main concern here, does not preclude appreciation of a kind of crude, physical and medieval humor like that of Bonaventure and Buridan from seeping through.

Now here's a problem: maybe this observation about the gulf between theory and practice undermines the case for Scholastic humor that I've been building so far. A suppressed premise in my case is that, given that the Scholastics value humor in theory, we should expect to find them engaging in it in practice. But why suppose this, especially when we've

just seen that medieval people do not always live up to their own ethical ideals?

Admittedly, no ideal worth the name is met all the time—if it were, it would hardly count as an ideal. Yet it should be met at least to *some* extent. This observation gives us a key to resolve the present tension: in discussing medieval attitudes and practices toward Christian ideals, we saw that they do not meet them all of the time. But the case I am making for Scholastic humor is simply that they valued humor in theory and took part in it at least *some* of the time. Certainly, sometimes they may have erred on the side of boorishness, missing or avoiding an appropriate opportunity to exercise ready wit. Perhaps sometimes they engaged in it too much, erring on the side of buffoonery. Indeed, Buridan seems to have been prone more to excess than to defect: at one point he admits that “although it is easy to be humorous, to do so well—that is, in accordance with the mean in all circumstances—is nevertheless quite difficult.”³² But even if humor came more naturally to Buridan, those who might have erred on the side of defect still had sound Aristotelian reasons to seek out opportunities to be humorous.

On to higher vistas: the ribald humor we saw just a moment ago stands in stark contrast to our fourth and final example, which appears in Aquinas’ famous Five Ways. As we saw in the second example, Thomas likes to play on Scholastic tropes about citing authority. Now in a typical Scholastic article, a propositional question is posed, inviting a yes or no answer. Objections are raised, then dismissed by an authoritative statement to the contrary—a *sed contra*. Then the problem is discussed, and the objections addressed in turn. It is in such a *sed contra* that we find our final example.

In a famous article, Aquinas poses the question, “Does God exist?” presents arguments that He does not, and then gives us the following authoritative statement to the contrary:

Against this is what is said (Exodus 3) by God Himself: “I AM THAT I AM”³³

In a way, the use of God’s own words here makes perfect sense: if we’re going to cite an authority, why not the highest one—namely, God Himself? But given the context, it is also ironic. The question, after all, is whether God exists; and as an authority, we trot in the Almighty Himself, so we can hear it straight from the horse’s mouth, so to speak? (“Yes, I really do!”). Hence there is ready wit to be found even in the buildup to the famous Five Ways.

Indeed, this humorous incongruity comes at the perfect moment: by the time we get to the *sed contra*, we have considered powerful argu-

ments against the existence of God in two objections. One objection is that God is not explanatorily necessary, and that all we need to posit is the natural world. The other is that the existence of God is incompatible with evil. Therefore—so the arguments run—God does not exist. Hence a considerable tension has been built up at this point, which the *sed contra* effectively dispels.

Such use of humor to dispel tension is well in keeping with what Aquinas says elsewhere about the role of humor in relaxing the mind, especially following deep and sustained focus in difficult matters. Aquinas explicitly compares these mental efforts to physical labor. And, just as rest of the body following labor is necessary, so too is rest of the mind, which can be attained through play (*ludum*). As Aquinas observes in *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q.168, a.2 (the same question as his discussion of humor set out above):

it is necessary to employ a remedy against mental exhaustion, and this is obtained through amusement [*delectatio*], having set aside attention to perseverance in the exercise of reason [. . .] And this is what Aristotle says in *Ethics* IV [1127b33 & 1128b3], namely that “in the course of life, a sort of rest is obtained through play [*ludus*].” Therefore, one ought to make use of such things from time to time.³⁴

Having weighed these serious and perennial problems for the existence of God and being on the verge of working through the deep and difficult Five Ways, we get a break in the form of a *ludus*: God’s own authority is cited in the question of His own existence. Thus, Aquinas makes use of a didactic method, whereby students are given a bit of humor to lighten the tension. This method of indulging in humor before turning to serious intellectual and spiritual matters is well known, and indeed quite old. The earliest mention of its use of which I am aware is in the Talmud (Shabbat, 30b), itself likewise a context of religious education:

Before [Rabbah bar Nachmani] began teaching *halakha* to the Sages, he would say something humorous and the Sages would be cheered. Ultimately, he sat in trepidation and began teaching the *halakha*.

Experience teaches that such pedagogical use of humor can be highly effective. No wonder, then, that Aquinas also puts it to use in one of his most famous and significant discussions.

The philosophy of humor can learn a further lesson from Aquinas on this point. As we saw at the outset, there are different competing accounts of what humor is. The most generally accepted of these is the incongruity theory. An alternative is the relief theory, according to which laughter is the release of pent-up energy. Aquinas’ account, wherein humor gives enjoyment and rest from mental labor, seems like a clear

analogue to the relief theory. Yet in his theoretical treatment of ready wit, Aquinas analyses humor in terms which are much closer to the incongruity theory. Still, there is no tension, because these apparently competing theories are mutually compatible: laughter is *prompted* by a perception of incongruity and *involves* or *produces* release or rest. Release itself is not generally sufficient to produce laughter; it is, rather, a product of laughter. If these facts go unacknowledged, the release and incongruity theories are at risk of talking past one another. As we see here, Aquinas makes use of both aspects of humor: as something prompted by incongruity, and as a method for producing release.

At any rate, I expect some pushback on this reading of Aquinas (—irony in the *Quinque Viae*? *Really!*?). So let me be clear: I take the choice of this *sed contra*, instead of any other authority that could have been cited to the same effect, to be ironic; but it would be buffoonery to be ironic throughout the whole thing, especially with such a momentous subject matter. And Thomas is no buffoon. I find nothing insincere about Thomas' Five Ways. And his belief in the Almighty is likewise doubtless sincere. What Thomas is being ironic about here is the Scholastic method itself. And indeed, what better place for it? Given that the subject under discussion is the Supreme Good, we should be all the more aware of the weaknesses of our own methods, taking care to “lean not on [our] own understanding,” as *Proverbs* says.³⁵ Further still, we should bear in mind that humor is a *virtue*. If the Angelic Doctor is indeed being humorous here, then it redounds to his own merit.³⁶

NOTES

1. Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, Translated by William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 74–75.

2. David Foster Wallace, “Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed,” *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2006), 61.

3. Historical accounts of humor tend to present the negative accounts many thinkers give. For instance, see John Morreall's “Philosophy of Humor,” esp. §1, “Humor's Bad Reputation.” While it's true that humor has gotten a bad rap, evidence of humor still seeps through the cracks, as the present paper aims to show.

4. To be clear: I do not mean to suggest that anything which strikes a modern reader as funny or anomalous should be interpreted as deliberately so on the part of any medieval author. For example, Aquinas interprets John's

claim about Christ that “he must increase, but I must become less” (John 3:30) as an anticipation of Christ’s increase in death by elevation on the cross, and John’s diminution in death by decapitation—a reading liable to strike a modern reader as “inappropriate or even absurd”, as Eleonore Stump remarks (“Ioannes mortuus minoratus per capitis abscissionem, Christus vero sublimatus per crucis exaltationem”; *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, cap. 3, l.5; cited by Eleonore Stump, “Biblical Commentary and Philosophy”, *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 259–60). Not any such remark is deliberately humorous, even if it may well strike a modern reader that way.

5. For an excellent and detailed overview, see John Morreal, “Philosophy of Humor,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/humor/>.

6. John Morreal, “Humor, Philosophy and Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no.2 (2014): 121.

7. P.G. Wodehouse, *The Heart of a Goof* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1926).

8. *NE* IV, 8 (1128a4–12). The translation here is Rackham’s, though I’ve altered it slightly, with an eye to Ross’s.

9. *ruricola* appears in some MSS of the *Vetus Latina*; *agrius* in *Grosseteste* and some *Vetus Latina* MSS.

10. *Rhetoric* II, 12 (1389b11–12).

11.

exemplificat de virtute quae est circa ludos. Et dicit quod circa delectationem quae est in ludis, ille qui medium tenet vocatur eutrapelus, quasi bene se vertens ad omnia; et dispositio vocatur eutrapelia. Ille autem qui superabundat, vocatur bomolochus a ‘bomos’ quod est altare, et ‘lochos,’ quod est raptor; et dicitur ad similitudinem milvi, qui semper volabat circa aras idolorum in quibus animalia immolabantur ut aliquid raperet; et similiter ille qui excedit in ludo, semper insistit ad hoc quod rapiat verbum vel factum alicuius, ut in ludum convertat. Dispositio autem vocatur bomolochia. Ille autem qui deficit, vocatur agroicus, idest agrestis, et dispositio vocatur agroichia.

(*Sententia Ethic.*, bk. 2, lec. 9, n. 9.).

12. “modestia, quae medium servat in delectationibus aliorum sensuum, et eutrapelia, quae medium servat in delectationibus ludorum, reducuntur ad temperantiam” (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 44, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3.).

13. “seipsum alteri exhibet [. . .] per affectionem, inquantum se delectabilem exhibet sociis, ut in ludis, quod facit eutrapelia” (*Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 34 q. 1 a. 2 co.).

14.

Est autem contra rationem ut aliquis se aliis onerosum exhibeat, puta dum nihil delectabile exhibet, et etiam delectationes aliorum impedit. Unde Sen-

eca dicit, ‘sic te geras sapienter ut nullus te habeat tanquam asperum, nec contemnat quasi vilem.’ Illi autem qui in ludo deficiunt, neque ipsi dicunt aliquod ridiculum; et dicentibus molesti sunt, quia scilicet moderatos aliorum ludos non recipiunt. Et ideo tales vitiosi sunt.

(*ST II-II*, q.168, a.4, co.). Cited by Morreall (2020), §5

15.

cum deus et natura nihil frustra faciant [. . .] natura non dedisset nobis tantam inclinatioem ad ludos nisi nobis in aliquo profuissent. Ex quibus manifeste apparet quod aliquando contigit prave deficere circa ludos, et unicuique patere potest, quoniam quibusdam non est decens quod semper volunt esse quasi tristes sine solatio. Non enim est cum eis facile conversari

(fol. 83, vb).

16.

non sunt idem modi dicendi per se, sed diversi, Parisius et Romae, cum non sit idem in diversis locis

(*An. Pos.* lib. I, q. 11, arg. 4).

17. Leonard Robert Palmer, *The Latin Language* (Oklahoma: Oklahoma UP, 1988 [1954]), 82–83.

18. For a clear and concise overview of the logic of *obligationes*, see Catarina Dutilh Novaes and Sara L. Uckleman, “Obligationes,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Logic*, ed. Catarina Dutilh Novaes and Stephen Read (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 370–395.

19. For a handy guide to these practices and the texts associated with them, I heartily recommend Eileen Sweeney’s “Literary Forms of Medieval Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019), ed. Edward N. Zalta,

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/medieval-literary/>.

20. Part of what makes the fun of medieval debate difficult to pick up from the texts that have come down to us is their regimented format. As Olga Weijers succinctly puts it, “This rigorous and monotonous scheme often hides what must have been lively discussions”. See *In Search of the Truth: A History of Disputation Techniques from Antiquity to Early Modern Times* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 174.

21. *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, ed. Raimondo Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1949), bk. XII, q.14.

22. Et videtur quod vinum, quia immutat maxime hominem. Item quod rex, quia pellit hominem ad id quod est difficillimum; scilicet ad hoc quod se exponat periculo mortis. Item quod mulier, quia dominatur etiam regibus. (*Quaest. Quodlibet.*, bk XII, q.14, a.1, arg.).

23. “si consideremus ista quatuor secundum se, scilicet vinum, regem, et mulierem, et veritatem, non sunt comparabilia, quia non sunt unius generis.

Tamen si considerentur per comparationem ad aliquem effectum, concurrunt in unum, et sic possunt comparari.” (*Quaest. Quodlibet.*, bk. XII, q.14, a.1, co.)

24.

Quod ergo inter ista magis immutet cor hominis, videndum est. Sciendum est ergo, quod immutativum hominis quoddam est corporale, et aliud est animale; et hoc est duplex, sensibile et intelligibile. Intelligibile etiam est duplex, scilicet practicum et speculativum. Inter ea autem quae pertinent ad immutantia naturaliter secundum dispositionem corporis, habet excellentiam vinum, quod facit per temulentiam loqui. Inter ea quae pertinent ad immutandum appetitum sensitivum, excellentior est delectatio, et praecipue circa venerea: et sic mulier est fortior. Item in practicis, et rebus humanis, quae possunt hoc facere, maximam potestatem habet rex. In speculativis summum et potentissimum est veritas. Nunc autem vires corporales subiciuntur viribus animalibus, vires animales intellectualibus, et intellectuales practicae speculativis; et ideo simpliciter veritas dignior est et excellentior et fortior.” (*ibid.*).

25. “Et mittens vocavit omnes magistratus Persarum et Medorum et purpuratos et praetores et praefectos” (I (III) Esdras 3, 14).

26. “et cuiuscumque apparuerit sermo sapientior alterius, dabit illi Darius rex dona magna et epinicia magna, purpura cooperiri et in auro bibere et super aurum dormire et currum aureo freno et cidarim byssinam et torque circa collem, et secundo loco sedebit a Dario propeter sapientiam suam et cognatus Darii vocabitur” (I (III) Esdras 3, 5b-7).

27. “potatores exquisiti / licet sitis sine siti.” These are the opening lines from the “Potatores Exquisiti” in the *Carmina Burana*, reprinted in K.P. Harrington, *Medieval Latin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975 [1925]), 377.

28. “si sit argumentativa, aut argumentatur ex auctoritate, aut ex ratione. Si ex auctoritate, non videtur hoc congruere eius dignitati, nam locus ab auctoritate est infirmissimus, secundum Boetium” (*ST I*, q. 1, a. 8, arg. 2).

29. John Morreall, “Humor, Philosophy and Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014): 120–131.

30. “quando dicitur quod virtus consistit in medietate, hoc non est intelligendum respectu obiecti, quia sic nullus esset castus nisi cognosceret medietatem omnium mulierum de mundo, quia illud est medium inter aliquam et nullam” (*In quartum librum Sententiarum* IV.33.2.1). Cited by Pavel Blažek (2008), 253.

31. Poetics 5 (1449a32–7). Note that Aristotle there distinguishes comic effects produced by the suffering of others from the ridiculous, “a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm.”

32. “licet ludere sit facile, tamen ludere bene scilicet secundum medium rationis in omnibus circumstantiis est bene difficile” (QNE bk.4, q.19, ad 1; fol. 83, rb).

33. “Sed contra est quod dicitur Exodi III, ex persona Dei, ‘ego sum qui sum.’” (*ST I*, q. 2, a. 3, co)

34. “oportet remedium contra fatigationem animalem adhibere per aliquam delectationem, intermissa intentione ad insistendum studio rationis [. . .] Et hoc est quod philosophus dicit, in IV Ethic., quod ‘in huius vitae conversatione quaedam requies cum ludo habetur,’ et ideo oportet interdum aliquibus talibus uti” (ST II-II, q.168, a.2, co.). For his part, Buridan (QNE bk.4, q.19, co.) makes the connection between intense study and the need for mental release in the form of humor, especially before one enjoys the physical release of sleep. There are, he tells us, some people who are accustomed to intense study, and who will experience strange and even sometimes terrible dreams unless they first have some mental release (“*expertis sunt qui cum diligentia studere solent, <qui> non statim possent uti somno sine formis mirabilibus et aliquando terribilibus*”; fol. 88, va). *Verbum sat!*

35. Proverbs 3.5.

36. I am grateful for comments and suggestions from Peter King, Calvin Normore, John Moreall, Mark Kingwell, Christian Pfeiffer, Enrico Donato, Bryan Reece, Irene Binini, Joseph Gerbasi, Giacomo Fornasieri, James Pepe, Tomas Flecker, and Lazaros Gianas. Any errors and infelicities that remain are mine. Thanks, all!

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