



Humour in Nietzsche's style

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Abstract

Nietzsche's writing style is designed to elicit affective responses in his readers. Humour is one of the most common means by which he attempts to engage his readers' affects. In this article, I explain how and why Nietzsche uses humour to achieve his philosophical ends. The article has three parts. In part 1, I reject interpretations of Nietzsche's humour on which he engages in self-parody in order to mitigate the charge of decadence or dogmatism by undermining his own philosophical authority. In part 2, I look at how Nietzsche uses humour and laughter as a critical tool in his polemic against traditional morality. I argue that one important way in which Nietzsche uses humour is as a vehicle for enhancing the effectiveness of his ad hominem arguments. In part 3, I show how Nietzsche exploits humour's social dimension in order to find and cultivate what he sees as the right kinds of readers for his works.

Nietzsche is a unique figure in Western philosophy for the importance he places on laughter and humour. He is also unique for his affectively charged style, a style frequently designed to make the reader laugh. In this article, I am primarily concerned with the way in which Nietzsche uses humour, but I will inevitably discuss some of his more theoretical remarks on the topic, as these cannot be neatly separated. One topic I do not discuss in detail is the way Nietzsche uses laughter, especially what he calls "higher laughter," as a symbol for the affirmation of life.¹ This is in line with my focus on Nietzsche's humorous style. This article has three main parts. In part 1, I look at the way various commentators appeal to Nietzsche's attempts at self-parody in order to give an account of the scope of his critique of morality. Such commentators argue that Nietzsche engages in self-parody in order to mitigate his own decadence, or dogmatism, by undermining his claims to philosophical authority. I argue that this account of the scope of Nietzsche's critique is too extreme and that Nietzsche can accept the charge of decadence, and dodge the charge of dogmatism, without forfeiting authority.

In part 2, I look at the way Nietzsche uses humour and laughter as a critical tool in his polemic against traditional morality. The idea that Nietzsche uses humour to combat morality is not new, but I hope to develop it in new ways.²

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Doxastic states that are imbued with emotion, like moral and religious beliefs, are recalcitrant. We are reluctant to revise them in the face of counterevidence, and when we do attempt to revise them, we often do so in irrational ways. Furthermore, it can be difficult to bring them under scrutiny at all (Alfano, 2018). They are the kinds of beliefs that are often taken for granted as theoretical starting points. Nietzsche uses laughter in order to provide an emotional counterbalance to such beliefs. Laughter dispels reverence in a way that opens up topics previously held to be off-limits for critical scrutiny. I show further how Nietzsche uses humour to super-charge his *ad hominem* arguments. Nietzsche's *ad hominem* arguments tend to draw attention to some contingent psychological or socio/political fact about a philosopher in order to undermine their claims to universality or disinterestedness. If philosophers' bold metaphysical theses are expressions of fanciful wish-fulfilment, or their claims to legislate values for all humanity mere pretence, then there would be something incongruous, and a little amusing about them. Nietzsche jumps on this incongruity and blows it up to massive proportions with wicked and silly humour. He could simply tell us that philosophers' claims to universality or disinterestedness are false, and he does do this. However, convinced of the urgency of his criticisms, and of our reluctance to revise certain beliefs in the face of argument, he chooses to hammer the point home on an affective level.

One aspect of laughter that distinguishes it from other affects is its strong social dimension. In part 3, I show how Nietzsche exploits the social dimension of humour and laughter for his philosophical purposes. Humour is social because it fosters in-groups and out-groups. It is also an expression of shared values. Laughing together is pleasant and offers a feeling of community and intimacy; it indicates that those laughing are like one another in some respect. Nietzsche uses humour in order to draw like-minded thinkers out of the woodwork of what he calls "slave morality" (BGE 260). Nietzsche was increasingly preoccupied with finding and cultivating the right kinds of readers for his works. Given the way in which morality has entrenched itself in the modern psyche, he believes that very few people will be receptive to his criticisms of it. Nevertheless, he recognised that modern human beings are the inheritors of both "master" and "slave" morality and that their moral feelings are often ambiguous and pull in different directions. By making the reader laugh at the values of slave morality, values they inevitably hold dear, Nietzsche can make them aware of ambiguities in their feelings that might otherwise pass them by. If they can find these values risible in some respect, perhaps they are not as beholden to them as they thought. In this way, he uses humour in order to identify and foster intimacy with those more sympathetic to his views, to strengthen their beliefs and feelings further in his direction, and to challenge their complacent acceptance of traditional morality.

1 | SELF-PARODY AND THE SCOPE PROBLEM

A number of commentators have picked up on Nietzsche's injunctions to laugh at oneself, and his attempts at self-parody, and used them to address what some commentators refer to as the "scope problem" (Robertson, 2012). On the one hand, Nietzsche is obviously a critic of something called morality, and on the other, he champions an alternative ideal. For Simon Robertson, the scope problem is a matter of specifying Nietzsche's target in order to limit the scope of his critique so that it does not apply to his own positive ideal. Some commentators on humour have eschewed Robertson's version of the scope problem by proposing that Nietzsche's self-parody, and his injunctions to laugh at oneself, imply that he takes his criticisms of morality apply equally to his own positive ideal. These readings tend towards a relativistic interpretation of Nietzsche.

Daniel Conway claims, for example, that Nietzsche uses self-parody as a tool to mitigate his own decadence. For Conway, Nietzsche is engaged in the same kind of task as his targets. He goes so far as to claim that the *Genealogy* requires us to identify Nietzsche himself as an "ascetic priest" (Conway, 1992 p. 353). The ascetic priest plays a key role in what Nietzsche calls the "slave revolt in morality." He is responsible for creating a conceptual scheme in which the slavish characteristics of passivity, non-aggression, and abstinence are explained as most valuable, and for persuading even the nobles to accept it. They do this in order to check the nobles' unpredictable violence and to achieve a spiritualised form of mastery over noble and slave. For Conway, Nietzsche too is attempting to effect an evaluative

gestalt shift in the manner of the ascetic priest. Conway claims that the early Nietzsche attempted this task naively, while the later Nietzsche did so with self-awareness. Nietzsche came to recognise his own priestly decadence and consequently “develops his critique of modernity out of a strategic self-parody, which ensures that these criticisms are self-referential in scope, thus invalidating any claim he might make to the privileged perspective of the physician of culture” (Conway, 1992 p. 354). Conway also puts this point by saying that Nietzsche’s self-parody “forfeits the epistemic privilege of the philosophical critic” and undermines “his various claims to philosophical authority” (Conway, 1992 pp. 343, 347). Nicolas More similarly claims that Nietzsche’s uses parody to “protect his own positions from charges of dogmatism by subverting the authority of all philosophers (himself included)” (More, 2014 p. 28). Sander Gilman takes this thought further to an explicitly paradoxical level by associating parody with what others have called the “falsification thesis,” namely, the view that cognition is necessarily mired in falsification (Clark 1999/1990). Drawing on the unpublished work *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, he claims that Nietzsche “turns to his own poetry for the substance of his parody, attempting to strip away everything but the vital appearance—that the truth lies outside his grasp, that the ultimate truth is the poetic lie” (Gilman, 2001 p. 112).

These accounts of the scope of Nietzsche’s critique are too extreme. Conway recognises that Nietzsche “occasionally does” assert his status as a privileged physician of culture, but this is an understatement. Nietzsche makes claims upholding the critical bite of his attack on morality far more often than he parodies that attack. While Nietzsche certainly recognises his own decadence, and describes parts of his own project as ascetic, he does not mean to thereby forfeit all claims to philosophical authority. Conway’s claim that book III of the *Genealogy* requires us to identify Nietzsche with the ascetic priest gets something right, but it is not entirely correct. In this book, Nietzsche situates his own project within the context of the *ascetic ideal* because it is a project driven above all by truthfulness. Nietzsche recognises that the pursuit of truthfulness at any price is a core moral value and that his own conditioning in traditional morality was a prerequisite for his ability to call those values into question. Nietzsche sees his own voracious drive for truth as a product of his historical situatedness in late 19th Century Europe, and his upbringing in traditional morality. Accordingly, he presents himself as an instrument in morality’s own “self-cancellation” (*GM* III 27). Nevertheless, the fact that Nietzsche’s critique was driven by the moral value of truthfulness does not vitiate his own claims to truthfulness or philosophical authority. Rather, Nietzsche’s relentless pursuit of the truth leads him to question the *value* of truthfulness, the core of the ascetic ideal. It forces him to ask whether truth is something we really ought to pursue at *any* price. Thus, Nietzsche locates himself within the scope of his critique of the unconditional value of truthfulness, but he does not take this to undermine the truthfulness of his critique, or the authority of his positive ideal. Thus, Nietzsche can accept the charge of decadence without forfeiting authority.

Robertson’s approach to the scope problem is more promising. In order to address it, he follows Maudemarie Clark’s appeal to Bernard Williams’ distinction between a narrow conception of morality and a wider notion of the ethical. Nietzsche attacks “morality,” which Robertson construes as “a system of values and obligations, compliance with which is categorically and universally required” (Robertson, 2012 p. 107). However, this leaves room for Nietzsche to champion a broader ethical ideal that not one everyone ought to pursue. Robertson’s preferred conception is a quasi-aesthetic perfectionism on which Nietzsche “makes a constitutive claim about what a higher type is and how such an individual ought to be” (Robertson, 2012 p. 107). Crucially, these oughts are non-categorical; what a higher type ought to do is determined by their motives. On this reading, Nietzsche’s criticises the categoricity and universality of morality and puts forward a different, non-categorical ideal that is immune to those criticisms. If this is the case, then Nietzsche need not give up *all* authority as philosopher or cultural critic in order to mitigate the charge of dogmatism. If Nietzsche does not claim to legislate universally, then in an important sense, he is not a dogmatist.

2 | LAUGHTER AND SLAVE MORALITY

The evidence that Nietzsche mocks or parodies his own mature positive ideal is thin. Nevertheless, he does frequently encourage laughter, and laughter at oneself. Why is this the case? Commentators have noted that Nietzsche

takes laughter to play an epistemic function. For Glazer, laughter can play a role in Nietzsche's battle against slave morality. According to Glazer, the structure of "mirth" which is often, but not always, accompanied by its most characteristic expression, laughter, is uniquely suited to rooting out and exorcising the pernicious values of slave morality. He claims that mirth is "essentially directed toward a proposition or proclamation that one ceases to take seriously, in the sense that one had but no longer takes it to be true or binding." Thus, it is "psychologically impossible" to consider a claim to be true or a command to be binding if one also finds it amusing (Glazer, 2017). In order to explain this purported psychological fact, Glazer appeals to Nietzsche's drive psychology. In order to find a claim plausible, certain drives need to be held in check, including, for Glazer, the drive to laugh. When the drive to laugh gains power over these other drives, the result is a bubbling forth of mirth, and a lapse in one's doxastic commitment to the proposition one previously held true or binding. For Glazer, it is not enough to consciously disavow traditional morality because a positive affective orientation towards morality can survive conscious disavowal; it is this positive affective orientation that mirth pinpoints and eradicates.

Glazer's formulation gets something right about laughter, Nietzsche certainly does use laughter as a tactic to exorcise recalcitrant moral values, but it is too strong. Nietzsche recognises that drives can group together in coalitions and furthermore that the drive to laugh can operate hand in hand with other drives in the pursuit of truth. Zarathustra purportedly "laughs the truth," and in GS 1 Nietzsche says: "To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to *laugh out the whole truth*—to do that even the best so far lacked sufficient sense for truth" (Z On the Higher Men 7; GS 1 emphasis original). Nietzsche sometimes suggests that there is something genuinely comic about existence and that it can be fitting to laugh at it (GS 1). Thus, it seems then that truth and laughter are not completely opposed. Silly facts are one counterexample to Glazer's formulation. I find it amusing that Charles Darwin thought that hedgehogs used their spines to carry strawberries to their nests, but that does not stop me from believing that the fact is true (Rundell, 2019). The fact is incongruous. Charles Darwin is one of the foremost naturalists in human history and yet he believed this wild falsehood (which would perhaps be a little amusing even if it were true). It seems we can also find our values amusing. I might stop a friend from stepping on a row of ants, on the grounds that the ants' lives are valuable and so we ought to avoid ending them prematurely. Nevertheless, I might also find it an amusing fact about myself and human beings in general that we often care deeply even about the smallest, and most seemingly trivial of creatures. This does not stop me from valuing such creatures. Again, there is something incongruous going on; the ants are cosmically puny, and there is an estimated quadrillion of them on earth; nevertheless, people often value their individual lives and think we ought not wantonly end them.³ Incongruity is not the only reason we might find a claim or command amusing. A claim might also appear amusingly absurd to us, but this would not stop us from taking it to be true. A proposition or command can amuse us for various reasons. Glazer claims that mirth is directed towards a proposition that "one ceases to take seriously, in the sense that one had but no longer takes it to be true." Although he clearly spells out what he means by taking a proposition seriously, the intuitive force of his point rests on an equivocation. Of course, we cannot simultaneously find a claim amusing and also take it seriously, if to take a claim seriously means to not find it amusing. However, it is much less obvious that we cannot find a claim amusing and think that it is true. On the contrary, silly, incongruous, and absurd facts abound. Even if Glazer is wrong about the structure of mirth, he is certainly right that we often do laugh at claims that we think are false, or commands we think are not binding, and that Nietzsche exploits this fact for philosophical and rhetorical purposes.

Humour is not unique in serving this purpose. Nietzsche engages a variety of affects in order to divest readers of their slavish values. In addition to cultivating positive affects towards his preferred ideals, he tries to evoke negative ones towards his targets. One prominent affect is disgust or nausea [*Ekel*] (Fossen, 2019; Von Tevenar, 2019). Nietzsche is constantly trying to shift his readers affective stance towards their values and rebalance the scales of their evaluations. In book one of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche gives dramatic form to the creation of slave morality out of *ressentiment*. He invents a character, "Herr Vorwitz und Wagehals," or "Mr. Wanton-Curiosity and Daredevil," who he sends into the shadowy and stuffy workshop where workers infested with *ressentiment* "*fabricate ideals*" (GM I 14). What disgusts Nietzsche most is the deceit involved in the fabrication of slave morality; the workshop "stinks of sheer lies." frustrated by the lack of actual power over their noble oppressors, the slaves recast their

powerlessness as a virtue and posit a fantasy revenge enacted by the establishment of the kingdom of God. In short, the slaves are motivated by the same desire for power as their oppressors. Mr. Wanton-Curiosity and Daredevil reacts to the spectacle of the workshop with revulsion. As Janaway notes, Nietzsche uses the drama to “enact disgust on the reader’s behalf”: “Enough! Enough! I can’t stand it anymore. Bad air! Bad air!” (GM I 14). Janaway also highlights the way in which Nietzsche transfers the disquiet that he cultivated earlier, against the thoughtlessly violent nobles, to the slaves (Janaway, 2007 pp. 103–4). If the nobles’ untrammelled pursuit of power revolts us, should we not also be revolted, perhaps even more so, by the slaves’ covert grasping after it? At root, both value systems share the same basis, a tendency towards power.

In this way, Nietzsche subtly manipulates his readers’ affects in order to bring about a desired effect; namely, a loosening of the ties that bind them to slave morality. As Alfano notes, Nietzsche takes certain doxastic states to have a kind of staying power or recalcitrance (Alfano, 2018). Particularly, problematic are beliefs that are imbued with emotion, or “thick” beliefs, like those of religion and morality. They have staying power because we are loath to revise them in the face of counterevidence. When we do revise them, we often do so in irrational ways. Furthermore, it can be difficult to bring them under one’s critical radar at all. They are the kinds of beliefs that are generally not up for serious discussion. When Nietzsche encourages laughter at thick beliefs, or systems of beliefs, he hopes to send a shockwave through our default affective responses and to open up a space in which we can scrutinise such beliefs.

A rich vein of Nietzschean humour can be found in his frequent use of ad hominem argument. Nietzsche’s ad hominem arguments are often charged with humour, whether mocking and playful, or cruel and biting. Nietzsche thought of himself as a psychologist, diagnosing the mental states that inevitably give rise to certain philosophical or moral views. He employs the ad hominem as a diagnostic strategy by identifying and attacking the affects, drives, and character of his opponent rather than their arguments as such. The ad hominem is ordinarily considered an informal fallacy and so an unacceptable move in debate. However, as Robert Solomon points out, ad hominem arguments do not always count as fallacies, and they can provide good grounds for dismissing, or at least being suspicious of a person’s views (Solomon, 1996; 2004 pp. 26–7).

The main problem with ad hominem arguments is that they can lead one to dismiss a good argument on the basis of its promulgator’s flaws; however, this need not be the case. For example, when a lawyer attacks a witness on the basis of their moral failings, they do so ad hominem, but these failings can provide good grounds for dismissing the witness’ testimony (Solomon, 2004 p. 27). The same can be true, in certain circumstances, for philosophical views. According to Solomon, ad hominem arguments can expand, rather than limit, the field of argument by focusing not just on the soundness of premises and validity of arguments, but also on the motivations, intentions, and circumstances that gave rise to the view under scrutiny (Solomon, 2004 p. 30). Nietzsche does both of these things, often attacking arguments and their promulgator’s character in a single breath. For fields of inquiry in which there are no obvious truths or proofs, subjects like religion and morality, ad hominem argument can be useful for digging up and attacking the motivations behind certain claims. Humour is well-suited to ad hominem argument and can ramp up its effect. For example, Nietzsche often uses hominem to target philosophers’ ambitions to transcend their individual psychologies and socio-economic/political circumstances. An effort that Nietzsche sees as woefully misguided and risible in itself. Nietzsche takes advantage of the latent humour in philosophy’s pretensions and magnifies it to extreme proportions for rhetorical effect.

He directs one humorous ad hominem at Schopenhauer. In BGE 186, Nietzsche quotes what Schopenhauer calls the “proper *foundation* of ethics;” namely, his claim: “Harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can” (Schopenhauer, 2009 p. 140). Nietzsche responds to this with vitriol and playfulness in equal measure:

Anyone who has ever truly felt how inane false and sentimental this claim is in a world whose essence is will to power—, they might recall that Schopenhauer, pessimism notwithstanding, *actually*—played the flute ... every day, after dinner. You can read it in his biography. And just out of curiosity: a pessimist who negates both God and world but *stops* before morality,—who affirms morality and plays his flute, affirms *laede neminem* morality: excuse me? is this really—a pessimist? (BGE 186)

Nietzsche does not take the time to refute Schopenhauer's claim about the foundation of ethics, instead he cruelly dismisses it as "inanely false" and "sentimental." Furthermore, instead of presenting counter arguments to Schopenhauer's pessimism by probing his claim that the thing in itself is will, or his claim that suffering is intrinsically bad, he questions the sincerity of Schopenhauer's beliefs. Nietzsche paints a comic portrait of the stern philosopher, who purportedly found so little to value in this world, relaxing after dinner by practicing the flute (presumably, beloved poodle at his side). Nietzsche heightens the pitch of his mockery by adding that Schopenhauer "actually" played the flute, in fact, he did so "every day," and he had the bad sense not to hide this pastime from biographers. Could Schopenhauer *really* believe that the world was bereft of value if he played the flute and affirmed morality? Indeed, he seems to have found plenty to value. And while Schopenhauer would retort that music and morality have value only in virtue of their capacity to negate the will to life, Nietzsche would respond by pointing out that this seems frankly insincere in light of his behaviour. By pointing and laughing at Schopenhauer's personality and interests, he inclines those tempted by Schopenhauer's pessimism to take a distrustful step back from his extreme claims.

In *TI Skirmishes* 29, Nietzsche mocks Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism in a miniature dialogue, presented as "Excerpts from a doctoral exam":

—'What is the task of all higher schooling?' To turn men into machines.—'What method is used?'—They have to learn to be bored.—'How is this done?'—Through the concept of duty.—'Who is the model for this?'—The philologist: he teaches you how to grind away at your work.—'Who is the perfect human?'—The civil servant.—'What philosophy gives the highest formula for the civil servant?'—Kant's: the civil servant as thing-in-itself set to judge over the civil servant as phenomenon.—

Here, Nietzsche sweeps Kant's rigorous argumentation aside with a few jokes: Kant is a boring, civil servant's philosopher. Nietzsche means to draw attention to Kant's motives and circumstances. The forces that gave rise to Kant's thought were at work elsewhere in German society. Nietzsche casts Kant's philosophy in the light of a new capitalistic valorisation of work as an end in itself and the mechanisation of human beings in an industrial society. These forces brought about the 18th and 19th century man-as-civil-servant as well as the civil servant's philosopher, Kant, who glorified dutiful, boring, work-grinding behaviour by casting it in, as Nietzsche elsewhere mocks, "majestic moral structures" (*D* preface 3; Kant, 1998).⁴ Nietzsche playfully considers the possibility that Kant's philosophy is not a sublimely independent work of his intellect but rather something that developed in order to justify the mechanistic, boring, and grinding daily life of the German civil servant. Nietzsche's joking urges us to examine the social structure and material circumstances under which Kant developed his ideas, something philosophers would not ordinarily be inclined to do.

Nietzsche often launches ad hominem attacks against philosophers and artists on the basis of their nationality. These are often sweeping generalisations about a national culture; however, Nietzsche usually qualifies them to a particular eras, centuries, or movements of thought. This is not always the case with the Germans, who he often unqualifiedly castigates.⁵ When he must praise a German thinker or artist, he will separate them from their Germanness by referring to them as "European" (*TI Skirmishes* 19, 49). The Germans and the English are Nietzsche's favourite ad hominem targets, but the French get a few nudges as well (*TI Skirmishes* 2, 6; *BGE* 254).

For example, Nietzsche often appeals to the Englishness of utilitarianism's more well-known advocates in order to criticise the view. In a more memorable ad hominem, he claims: "people *don't* strive for happiness, only the English do" (*TI Arrows* 12). Here, Nietzsche mocks the purported universality of the utilitarian claim that all human beings strive for happiness by presenting it as a national idiosyncrasy instead. We see here again Nietzsche's use of ad hominem to reveal the pretensions of bold claims to universality and knock them down a peg. Nietzsche anticipates the claim in *TI* with another, less pithy, ad hominem:

Ultimately, they all want *English* morality to be given its dues: since it is best for humanity, for the "general utility" or "the happiness of the majority"—no! the happiness of *England*. They want, with all

the strength they can muster, to prove to themselves that striving for English happiness, I mean for comfort and fashion (and, at the highest level, for a seat in Parliament) (BGE 228).

While Kant's ethics is the ethics of the civil servant, utilitarianism is the ethics of the Parliamentarian. What drives it is a desire for comfort, fashion, and herd happiness. In this way, Nietzsche disputes the universal pretensions of Kantian and utilitarian ethics by rooting them in a particular time and place, and by postulating possible motivations for them: a valuation of hard-work and drudgery, for Kant, and a valuation of comfort and ease, for utilitarianism. Nietzsche often jabs at these theories, which purport to be interested in the well-being of everyone, by claiming that they are selfish. Thus, the utilitarian is interested in "the happiness of *England*," and, at least in Nietzsche's eyes, certainly not his own happiness. He makes a similar accusation of selfishness against Kant:

What? You admire the categorical imperative within you? This "firmness" of your so-called moral judgement? This absoluteness of the feeling, "here everyone must judge as I do?" Rather admire your *selfishness* here! And the blindness, pettiness, and simplicity of your selfishness! For it is selfish to consider one's own judgement a universal law, and this selfishness is blind, petty, and simple... (GS 335).

Again, Nietzsche casts doubt on philosophers' supposedly disinterested motivations by considering ways in which their philosophies might serve to prop up their own personal prejudices and nationally rooted values. Humour is a particularly effective tool for cementing Nietzsche's point that traditional morality's claims to universality are mere pretence. Why is this the case? There is already a germ of humour in the possibility that moral philosophers are merely putting on airs when they purport to legislate for all humanity. If this were true, what a monstrous incongruity it would be. Nietzsche could simply deploy sober argumentation in order to show that philosophers' claims to universality are bogus and leave it at that; however, he exploits the nascent humour in his criticism in order to drive the point home. Nietzsche was convinced of the urgency of his critique. He saw traditional morality as deeply inimical to flourishing and culture and so he throws everything he has at the reader in order to open their eyes to that danger.

Nietzsche's ad hominem arguments are not bald character assassination, they have a point, and they can direct us towards the truth. They call into question the pretensions of their targets and urge us to adopt a standpoint of suspicion. For Nietzsche, philosophical positions are, as Solomon says, "steeped in and constitutive of the character of the person in question" (Solomon, 2004 p. 43). And so, Nietzsche attends not only to arguments but also to their source. Because we cannot assume that philosophical works spring forth entirely independently of the cultural, material, and psychological contingencies that surround their creation, we need to have a look at these things as well. Humour is an effective rhetorical tool in this context because philosophers have traditionally conceived of their work as transcending cultural, material, and psychological contingency. Nietzsche capitalises on this incongruity and uses humour to blow up the contingent aspects of moral philosophy to grotesque proportions. What Nietzsche offers is a kind of caricature sketch, he zeroes in on some contingent facts about a philosopher and their work, like Schopenhauer's psychological idiosyncrasies, and makes them stick out like exaggerated facial features. At his best, Nietzsche's humour can make his points seem almost blindingly obvious, but then of course we must take a closer look.

3 | NIETZSCHE'S COMMUNITY OF TASTE

One difference between affects like humour, or mirth, and other affects that Nietzsche deploys against morality, like disgust, is that humour has a strong social dimension. Disgust does have a social dimension. Things are certainly found disgusting in some cultures that are not found disgusting in others. In ancient cultures especially, we find that the practices and customs of rival groups were deemed disgusting or unclean in order to delineate the bounds of one's own culture and to solidify group identity. Nevertheless, humour's positive affective valence binds people

together in way that disgust does not do quite as effectively. Nietzsche exploits this social dimension for his philosophical purposes. Contemporary philosophers and psychologists working on humour generally recognise that it is a social phenomenon.⁶ Humour is capable of strengthening social bonds and fostering a sense of community. It creates in-groups and out-groups: those who 'get' the joke and those who do not, those who are the butt of the joke and those doing the joking. Laughter together is pleasant and can indicate shared beliefs, prejudices, and values. It is certainly more pleasant than feeling disgust together. As Alfano notes, "because laughter typically arises spontaneously in reaction to eliciting conditions, laughter is a difficult-to-fake, difficult-to-stifle expression of what one does and does not value" (Alfano, 2018 p. 66). Laughing with other people helps cement shared beliefs and values and to erode confidence in the beliefs and values of the object of laughter. Nietzsche takes advantage of the social aspect of laughter in order to draw hypothetical individuals into a community that shares his tastes in a broad sense. Nietzsche recognises, with a mixture of anxiety and pride, that he is "untimely" and that few will be receptive to his ideals. He uses humour in order to draw out those more sympathetic to his views, to cement their beliefs further in his direction, and to put strain on their complacent acceptance of morality. Nietzsche is interested in drawing people like himself away from traditional morality; namely, people capable of creating great works of culture.

In Nietzsche's earliest writings, he endorses the romantic thought that mythology is the core of a genuine culture, and the further thought that a new, self-consciously constructed mythology was necessary in the modern world. He thought that Wagner's music dramas could provide the mythic core that would launch a general rebirth of German culture. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he charts the rise and fall of Greek tragedy and envisages a reinvigoration of the spirit of the genre in Wagner's music. At his most romantically optimistic, he claims:

Let no one believe that the German spirit has lost its mythical homeland forever when it still clearly understands the voice of the bird that speaks of that homeland. One day it will awake in the morning freshness from a deep sleep. Then it will kill the dragon, destroy the malicious dwarf, and awaken Brünnhilde—and even Wotan's spear will not block its path (BT 24).

His hopes on this score were bitterly dashed. Wagner's inaugural Bayreuth festival was an uninspiring event attended by bourgeois spectators more interested in socialising than in the music itself. In his later work, he set his sights on a more modest aim. Not for an elevated, and general, *German* culture, but a higher (non-national) culture open to an elite few (Gemes and Sykes, 2015). Through his writings, Nietzsche aimed to wake up and encourage those who were capable to strive for freedom, affirmation, and greatness. He believed that if he could find suitable readers with ears to hear, then his writing could inspire them to struggle against traditional morality and create great works of culture. Parodying Christ's self-description as a fisher of men, Zarathustra claims: "my very happiness I cast far and wide, between sunrise, noon and sunset, to see if many human fishes learn to jiggle and wiggle on my happiness. Until, biting on my sharp hidden hooks, they have to emerge into my height, the motliest gorge gudgeons to the most spiteful of all fishers of human fish" (Z On the Honey Sacrifice). Nietzsche's own humour can perhaps be seen as one such "hidden hook."

Thus, we often see Nietzsche preoccupied with finding the right kind of audience. These preoccupations abound in his prefaces. He begins his preface to *The Anti-Christ* by claiming: "This book belongs to the very few. Perhaps none of them are even alive yet... My day won't come until the day after tomorrow. Some people are born posthumously" (A preface 1). In the preface to *Daybreak*, he asks with some trepidation, "But do you not understand me?"⁷ and closes with an injunction: "My patient friends, this book desires for itself only perfect readers and philologists: *learn to read me well*" (D preface 2, 5). Nietzsche places high demands on his ideal audience, and he tries to foster intimacy with them, his 'patient friends,' who may not even be alive yet. Again, in the preface to the *Genealogy*, he places further demands upon his readers: "If this book is unintelligible to anyone and hard on the ears, the fault, as I see it, does not necessarily lie with me" (GM preface 1). He presupposes that his readers have knowledge of his earlier writings and that they have "not spared some effort in the process" as "these are in fact not easily accessible." He then heightens his demands further:

As far as my *Zarathustra* is concerned, for example, I count no one as an authority who has not at sometime been deeply wounded and at sometime deeply delighted by each of its words: for only then may he enjoy the privilege of reverent participation in the halcyon element out of which the work was born (*GM* preface 8).

Nietzsche demands above all a deep emotional involvement with his writings. There is an element of what Nietzsche calls "perspectivism" here. To engage with *Zarathustra* properly, one ought to be able to experience each of its words from a painful and wounding perspective, and then be able to shift perspective and reread each word joyfully. Nietzsche invites the reader to get under his skin and "participate" in the 'halcyon element' out of which he created it. The reader must digest his "fare," and "ruminate," slowly, attending to the different ways in which it makes them feel (*GS* prelude 1, *GM* preface 8).

One way in which he attempts to coax out his ideal reader is by fostering intimacy with them through his sense of humour. Ted Cohen remarks in his book on jokes that joking has the capacity to cultivate the intimacy of a shared sense of community. This seems to be one of the things that Nietzsche tries to achieve with his jokes. Cohen claims that this kind of community has two constituents. The first is a shared set of beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, or points of view on the world, and the second is a shared feeling or response to something. Cohen claims that both of these things can be fostered without jokes, but that jokes can use the second constituent to amplify the first (Cohen, 1999 p. 28). He notes that we are disappointed when others do not get our jokes and that when they do, it satisfies a deep human longing; namely, to know that "we are enough like one another to sense one another, and to live together" (Cohen, 1999 p. 29). A joke does not compel its conclusion in the way that an argument does. When one person finds a joke amusing and tells it to another, and the recipient does not find it funny, it is not necessarily because they do not understand the joke, rather it is because there is some part of them that is unlike the teller. Some aspect of the teller allows them to be amused by the joke, and this aspect is lacking in the recipient. When a joke succeeds, and both parties laugh together, there is a shared sense of community. They are similar in some way, and they enjoy a feeling of intimacy. Cohen and Nietzsche are unlikely bedfellows. Cohen's account of jokes is largely egalitarian, for him, when another laughs at my joke I am reassured "that this something inside me, the something that is tickled by a joke, is indeed something that constitutes an element of my humanity" (Cohen, 1999 p. 31). Nietzsche's jokes, on the other hand, are often made at the expense of egalitarian values and are meant to appeal to ambivalences about them. The community that Nietzsche appeals to is not 'humanity' but a kind of aristocratic cultural elite.

In this way, Nietzsche's jokes are designed to draw in his ideal readers, those who share his tastes in a broad sense. He is trying to both foster and draw out already existing feelings of misgiving against the targets of his jokes. They are meant to resonate with those who, for example, have misgivings about traditional morality in its various forms. His ideal readers will be amused by his barbed remarks about English comfort and herd happiness and about German drudgery and its un-aristocratic valuation of work as an end in itself. His jokes are meant to appeal to those with certain philosophical and aesthetic sensibilities, those sensibilities that he thinks are conducive to greatness. Nietzsche does not envisage his ideal readers as a coterie of like-minded thinkers, with identical views to himself, rather, he means to inspire those with certain character traits to seek out their own independence. Nietzsche is looking for readers who share that part of himself that finds certain things funny or certain people and views worthy of mockery. Nietzsche's humour tracks the capacity to create great works of culture because if one shares Nietzsche's sense of humour, then one shares at least some of his values, and sharing Nietzsche's values is, for him, a precondition for producing such works.

Nevertheless, one can of course have ambivalences about slave morality, and so enjoy Nietzsche's jokes, without having these noble capacities. One thing Cohen's theory does not countenance is our capacity to laugh and joke about ourselves. Nietzsche values this capacity and tries to cultivate it in his readers with humour. He uses jokes to encourage his readers to take a step back from their values and laugh at them. In this way, humour affords a critical distance that can serve as a standpoint from which we can call our values into question. Nietzsche thinks that certain questions about our values are wrongly considered to be off limits; and furthermore, that we have been unable even to raise questions that he sees as especially pressing. Nietzsche claims to be after "knowledge of a kind that has neither existed up to now nor even been desired" (*GM* preface 6). He criticises moral philosophers for taking the value

of compassion and selflessness for granted and for offering what he sees as post hoc rationalisations for their prejudices. Schopenhauer, for example, treats the content of morality as immediately obvious before plunging into a lengthy investigation of its grounds. For Nietzsche, this is to set off entirely on the wrong foot. Thus, he proclaims that “*the value of these values must itself be called into question.*” He takes this to be virgin territory; “until now one has not had even the slightest doubt or hesitation in raking “the good” as of higher value than the evil” (*GM* preface 6). Given the radically new nature of his project he claims: “I myself had reasons for looking about for learned, bold, and industrious comrades (I am still doing so today).” Had he been in the mood, he could have added that he requires comrades with a sense of humour about themselves and their values. By encouraging the reader to laugh at their values, he dispels the reverence that stops them from questioning them and that stops them from seeing them as questionable. Thus, even if one does not share Nietzsche's aristocratic ideals, it does seem possible to share in his laughter, so long as one has the capacity to take a critical step back from one's values.

One thing Nietzsche does in the “Skirmishes” section of *Twilight* is give rapid sketches of his aesthetic and philosophical tastes. He offers his opinions and feelings about so many thinkers and artists that one would be hard pressed to find anyone who agreed with all of them, but that is not the point. Nietzsche is displaying his tastes to provide the reader with a self-portrait, telling them his likes and dislikes in order to make an example of himself. He tries to carve out a noble, aristocratic taste by disdaining anything he deems common, vulgar, mediocre, or plebeian (*TI* Germans 6; Skirmishes 3, 45, 48). He charges this self-portrait with jokes in order to foster intimacy with a hypothetical community of others who share his capacity to produce great works. He calls *Twilight* a “declaration of war”, and in it, he challenges anything that to him remotely smells of “ideality” or slave morality (*TI* preface). The ‘Skirmishes’ section abounds with barbed jokes meant both to foster certain sensibilities by challenging figures in the history of art and thought, and to resonate with his (perhaps unborn) ideal readers' already existing sensibilities. The first section of “Skirmishes” contains a flurry of ad hominem jokes directed at Seneca, Rousseau, Schiller, Dante, Kant, Hugo, Liszt, Sand, Michelet, Carlyle, Mill, and Zola. Nietzsche uses a shotgun tactic to sketch out his aristocratic sensibilities and his antipathy towards “Modern ideas,” bad psychology, pessimism, and romanticism (*EH* *Twilight* 2).

What kind of sensibilities is Nietzsche trying to appeal to in section 1 of ‘Skirmishes’? For one, a taste for the light, affirmative, aristocratic, and courtly poetry of the Provençal troubadour to his successor, “*Dante: or the hyena who writes poetry in tombs*” (*TI* Skirmishes 1). A taste for Stendhal's “psychologist's eye and grasp of the facts” over ‘*Zola: or ‘the joy of stinking,*’ and more generally, the “Parisian novelist” who “cannot put three sentences together without it hurting your eye, the *psychologists eye*” (*EH* *Clever* 3; *TI* Skirmishes 1, 7). Nietzsche also envied Stendhal's sense of humour: ‘He beat me to the best atheism joke, just the sort of thing that I would say: “God's only excuse is that he doesn't exist”’ (*EH* *Clever* 3). Stendhal is evidently part of Nietzsche's community of taste. A taste also for Napoleon and Goethe's “return to nature” over Rousseau's. Goethe returned to nature “by coming *toward* the naturalness of the Renaissance,” a “high, free, even terrible nature and naturalness,” whereas Rousseau wanted to return to the supposed original equality of nature (*TI* Skirmishes 49, 48). Accordingly, Nietzsche quips: “*Rousseau: or the return to nature in impuris naturalibus,*” or ‘*in natural dirtiness*’ (*TI* Skirmishes 1). Finally, a taste for his own withholding and easily misunderstood style, full of detours, ambiguities, masks, and misdirection to John Stuart Mill's “insulting clarity” (*TI* Skirmishes 1). In this way, Nietzsche tries to root out, and perhaps to create, his ideal readers by drafting a standard of taste. And he tries to win readers over to his standard by fostering intimacy through his sense of humour. In Cohen's terms, Nietzsche's jokes create a shared feeling of amusement that serves to amplify the reader's existing beliefs or prejudices against the joke's target. It also seems true that a well-placed joke can kindle a belief where none existed before or amplify an unconscious prejudice into a firmly held and conscious distaste.

Nietzsche's humour makes up an important part of his attempt to engage his readers' affects. I have considered a number of different, often interrelated, uses to which he puts it. First, he uses it to dislodge thick beliefs, beliefs that agents would be reluctant to give up in the face of sober argument alone. Second, Nietzsche thinks that we have inherited an unconscious reverence towards traditional morality and traditional institutions that hinder us from seeing them as objects of possible criticism. His humour provides a counterbalance to this reverence and affords an emotional distance from which we can scrutinise things previously held to be off-limits. Third, Nietzsche uses humour to

cement his points on an affective level. Nietzsche saw his critique as urgent, and so he pulls no punches in attempting to convince his readers of its urgency. He often uses humorous ad hominem arguments in order to do this. Fourth, Nietzsche exploits humour's social dimension in order to foster intimacy with his readers. He uses humour to seek out people who share his values, and consequently people who have the capacity for greatness, to draw them closer to his side, and to put more distance between them and slave morality. The way in which Nietzsche affects us is often challenging and confrontational, and the same can be said for his jokes. He tests our integrity by calling for us to reckon with our deepest feelings in our attempts to enquire into ourselves and our values. Since most of his readers are inheritors of slave morality, his sallies against it can be provocative and unsettling. By making the reader look at the ways in which they are attracted and repelled by certain values, he fosters the capacity to postpone judgment and to look at the matter under enquiry from multiple sides. Nietzsche prescribes a relentless self-scrutiny of one's feelings, and the critical distance afforded by laughter and humour can enable the reader to engage in that self-scrutiny.⁸

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ENDNOTES

¹ A number of commentators rightly point out the connection between laughter and affirming life or overcoming nihilism: Ansell-Pearson, 1994; Gordon, 2015; Gunter, 1968; Hatab, 1988; Lippitt, 1992; Meyer, 2012; 2018; Weeks, 2004; Wirth, 2005. This is an important topic that would take me too far afield from my main concern here, which is Nietzsche's humorous style and his attempts to evoke ordinary experiences of laughter or mirth.

² See: Alfano, 2018 ; Glazer, 2017; Gordon, 2015; Higgins, 2000.

³ I do not mean to assume the truth of the incongruity theory of humour, merely that we often find incongruous things amusing. Nietzsche recognises this: *HH* 16, 169, 213.

⁴ This phrase is from *Kant*, 1998 B 375.

- ⁵ See: EH Wagner 4: “It is even my ambition to be considered the despiser of the Germans *par excellence*.”
- ⁶ See: Alfano, 2018; Carroll, 2014; Cohen, 1999; Curry & Dunbar, 2013; Dennett, 1978; Dezechache & Dunbar, 2012; Morreall, 2009.
- ⁷ This question becomes a frequent refrain. See EH Destiny 3, 7, 8, 9.
- ⁸ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, as well as Christopher Janaway, Ken Gemes, Aaron Ridley, and Felix Hagenström for many excellent discussions, which greatly improved this article.

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