

Chapter Eleven

Life's Joke: Bergson, Comedy, and the Meaning of Laughter

Russell Ford

Elmhurst College, Illinois, USA

fordr@elmhurst.edu

[01 773-791-5209](tel:017737915209)

Abstract:

The present essay argues that Bergson's account of the comic can only be fully appreciated when read in conjunction with his later metaphysical exposition of the *élan vital* in *Creative Evolution* and then by the account of fabulation that Bergson only elaborates fully three decades later in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. The more substantive account of the *élan vital* ultimately shows that, in *Laughter*, Bergson misses his own point: laughter does not simply serve as a means for correcting human behavior but is rather the *élan vital*'s vital summons, the demand of life itself, that human beings challenge their obligations, question their societal forms, and thereby create new and, for Bergson, more ideal forms of life and community.

Keywords: Bergson, comedy, life, laughter, politics, ethics, vitalism

“Drama offers nature her revenge on society” (Bergson L76/R122).

In his *Introduction to Sociology*, Theodor Adorno states that “it can happen that we catch sight of the essential—and may even do so today—in relation to phenomena that seem to lack any such significance” (Adorno 2000, 19). Henri Bergson's 1900 *Le Rire (Laughter)* is a case in point.

Despite its brevity and relative neglect in Bergson scholarship, the concerns of this little book extend to much more profound—more essential—things than its title indicates.¹

Bergson's account of the laughable is often wrongly reduced to *Laughter's* most famous phrase, namely that we laugh whenever we find “the mechanical is encrusted [*plaqué*] on the living” (Doyle 2002, 153-174; Doyle 2016, 83-87).² With this formulation, Bergson invites us to imagine a fishmonger who can only throw an object as if it were a fish, or a particle physicist who only sees things as physical particles. But Bergson's essay has at least three concerns not adequately encapsulated by this phrase: it aims to answer the behavioral and social question of what provokes laughter, of what the laughable *is*; it aims to situate this answer within Bergson's developing metaphysical position;

The author would like to thank Keith Ansell-Pearson for the invitation to write this essay, Anna Street for her helpful comments, and Lydia Moland for her tireless and brilliant editing work that made it substantially better in every way. Errors and incidences of humor that remain are the author's own. This essay is dedicated to Rich Doyle whose work inspired it and nourished it. With gratitude and thanks.

¹ Several recent and classical accounts of Bergson's work, such as Mullarkey's *Bergson & Philosophy* (2000), Lawlor's *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (2003), Deleuze's *Le bergsonisme* (2008), Ansell-Pearson's *Henri Bergson: An Introduction* (2011), omit consideration of *Laughter* entirely. He is mentioned only in passing in Morreall's humorously self-serving entry in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Philosophy of Humor.” Of the various accounts of Bergson's philosophy, only Jankélévitch's *Henri Bergson* (2015), originally published in 1931, contains significant references to *Laughter*. It should also be noted that Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1990), originally published in 1905, also addresses Bergson's claims.

² The fourth section of the first chapter of *Laughter* states that “[t]he attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (L21/R22-23). (This passage is italicized in the French and printed in small caps in the English translation.)

and it aims to provide something of an account of art generally.³ This ambition helps to explain both one of the more comical aspects of Bergson's book – that it doesn't deal at all with the actual act of laughter – but it also helps explain one of the most enigmatic and important passages in the book: the crossed carrefours that organizes and concludes the final section of the opening chapter (L24ff/R29ff). There Bergson acknowledges the difficulty of offering a definition of the comic. Instead of a single definition, he suggests an image:

[W]e might think of an immense forested avenue, with *crosses* or carrefours that mark it at intervals: at each carrefour we will walk round the crossing, we will venture out to explore the paths that open out before us, after which we will go back to our original direction.

This image shows that the claim that the comical is “the mechanical encrusted on the living” is not the conclusion of Bergson's analysis of the comic phenomenon but merely the result of the exploration of one of these *stipes* – these branching paths – that emerge as he pursues the *patibulum* of the meaning of the comic. is to argue can only be in with yet other branching paths in his later career: first, 1907, then with contrary to one of his primary claims, such a joke on its

³ The concern with the nature of art generally is presented quite early in the first chapter (L10/R2). However, in the first part of the third and final chapter of the essay – the chapter that the rest of the book has been explicitly building towards – Bergson asks, “What is the object of art?” (L72/R115) and he answers, a few pages later, in a brief statement that virtually presents his entire metaphysics, that “[a]rt is certainly only a more direct vision of reality” (L75/R120).

greatest achievement?⁵ As the metaphysical exposition of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1907) will make clear, laughter

Bergson's procedure in *Laughter* is not argumentative. It is rather as if he invites the reader to join him in an intellectual stroll that discovers its topic as it proceeds. This essay will attempt to signpost the paths Bergson ultimately follows, then give a sense of the greater philosophical journey of which they were ultimately a part.

1. The Argument of *Le Rire*

Chapter One of *Le Rire*, the first *stipe* of the carrefours, is sociological. It is, after all, the sociologist who investigates not only "the comic in general" but who surveys "the comic of forms and expressions" of a society. Bergson accordingly gathers his metaphysical tools from a series of sociological observations whose results, after further refinement, he will proceed to deploy in a fully formed theory of art as well as social life.⁷ Bergson's rhetoric here is vital for following not only the argument of *Laughter* but also seeing the way that the argument develops later. Bergson orients himself and his investigation by the metaphysical crossing, the philosophical *patibulum*, of the carrefours – it drives his investigation and, at the carrefours, it orients and structures his sociological strolls. The preceding four parts of Chapter One have developed the various *stipes*, the radiating bars, of the cross – the *crux* – of Bergson's argument.

⁷ Prusak's "reinterpretation" of Bergson's book too strongly argues that the theory of *élan vital* "organizes" *Laughter*, but he is absolutely correct to note that Bergson's metaphysics, which is still far from completely formulated in 1900, has a distorting effect on several of Bergson's claims. (Prusak, 2004)

⁷ Prusak's "reinterpretation" of Bergson's book too strongly argues that the theory of *élan vital* "organizes" *Laughter*, but he is absolutely correct to note that Bergson's metaphysics, which is still far from completely formulated in 1900, has a distorting effect on several of Bergson's claims. (Prusak, 2004)

His observations – for instance, the sociological *stipes* into which he sojourns – conjoined to the other *stipes* provide only an initial orientation, not what is all too easily confused with Bergson’s “definition” of comedy.

Having catalogued these observations—which I will not detail here—Bergson turns his attention to how they have enriched his initial claim that the comical is “the mechanical encrusted on the living”.⁸ His first conclusion is that the comic concerns only the human (L10/R2). When we laugh at a hat blowing away from its owner, seems to be purposely, consciously evading capture: it seems to be acting like a human. Secondly, the comic is accompanied by an “*absence of feeling*” (L10/R3) appeals exclusively to “pure intelligence” (L11/R4, translation altered). laughter requires an echo: that is, it requires a community (L11/R4). From these characteristics, Bergson draws a metaphysical conclusion: society requires of each of its members “a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence. *Tension* and *elasticity* are two forces, mutually complementary, which life brings into play” (L16/R14). However, a further qualification is needed: “is not satisfied with simply living, it insists on living well” (L16/R14) fears individuals that content themselves with *merely* living according to established norms and habits. To borrow William Connolly’s term, the laughable would arise when the teleodynamic activity of a society—its flexible evolution of

⁸ Bergson’s book is filled with examples of the various comic phenomena he discusses. Some are familiar and recur often – such as scenes from *Don Quixote* and *The Misanthrope* – others are taken from the vaudeville or comic stage of Bergson’s own time, while still others are seemingly perennially funny (a person slipping on a banana peel, sneezing at the most poignant line while delivering a eulogy, etc.).

norms—is placed in abeyance.⁹ The comparably much shorter sections three and four of Chapter One add just two more things that prompt laughter: bodily rigidity (which reverses the properly human dominance of form over matter) and repetitive bodily actions that, by fulfilling the three characteristics and so also exemplifying the mechanical encrusted on the living, cause the human actor to resemble a mechanism rather than a living being.¹⁰ These two sections become important when Bergson turns to the relation between art and life.

In Section Five of the first chapter, Bergson returns to the philosophical *patibulum* from his sojourns in the *stipes* and, rather than nailing comedy to a simple Latin cross, this multiple crucifixion, as though on the more ornate Gothic cross' several *stipes*, allows him to explore three other observations of the comic effect. Although it eludes any definition, Bergson states that there is a “formula” of the comic effect that “exists well enough in a certain sense, but its development does not follow a straightforward course” (L24/R28). The *roulette* that its development does follow is again an early indication of Bergson’s conclusion not only in *Laughter* but in the development of the theory of *élan vital* in *Creative Evolution* and *Two*

⁹ In his article, “Species Evolution and Cultural Freedom,” Connolly offers the neologism “teleodynamic,” or “teleodynamism,” as the name for an alternative to three prevalent forms of teleology: genocentrism, divine intentionalism, and natural teleology. Connolly’s teleodynamism “projects differential degrees of agency into multiple, heterogeneous, and interacting systems, and it identifies periodic moments of creativity within and between evolving organisms.” He concludes that teleodynamism “does not altogether deny teleology; rather, it insinuates differing degrees of creativity into *teleodynamic* processes.” In other words, such processes are goal-oriented but undetermined as to the goal that they must pursue, creating new goals as evolution proceeds (Connolly 2014, 444). Keith Ansell-Pearson’s *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (2001) pursues a similar reading of Bergson.

¹⁰ As Bergson puts it elsewhere: “The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself” (L23/R26).

Sources of Morality and Religion. The development of Bergson's account of comedy is neither rigid nor repetitive and is, in fact, "a game, a game that imitates life" (L37/R52) If, as Heraclitus is said to have remarked, "[l]ife is a child at play, moving pieces in a game" (Graham 178/179; HCT 154 [F109]), then the comic fancy chooses roulette.

The second chapter of *Laughter* takes up what Bergson calls the comic element in situations and in words. Its method is to take children's games and amusements and to discover how they develop or grow into a more mature form of the comic – but this is to be done to test the law that has already been discovered: "*Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement*" (L37/R53). Bergson's three examples of such "children's games" are the jack-in-the-box, the dancing-jack (a puppet controlled by strings), and the snow-ball, by which Bergson means "an effect which grows by arithmetical progression, so that the cause, insignificant at the outset, culminates by a necessary evolution in a result as important as it is unexpected" (L43/R62). Each of these examples is carried further using corresponding situations from drama.¹¹ "But," Bergson asks at the conclusion of these three analyses, "why is it we laugh at this mechanical arrangement?" (L45/R66). The answer, which Bergson regards as merely a different formulation of the previous answer, is that "the rigid mechanism which we occasionally detect, as a foreign body, in the living continuity of human affairs is of peculiar interest to us as being a kind of *absentmindedness* on the part of *life*" (L45/R66; emphasis added to "life").

Despite his claim that this is just the same definition repeated in a different form even Bergson

¹¹ Bergson assumed, at the outset of Chapter Two, "that the stage is both a magnified and a simplified view of life" and that "comedy is capable of furnishing us with more information than real life on this particular part of our subject" (L37/R51).

seems to realize his argument is starting to shift here. He notes first that “the “methods” of the second chapter “have been entirely empirical” (L46/R67), but he then turns to what he calls “a full and methodical theory” (L46/R67) which will involve discovering, via the particular magnification provided by drama, the “essential characteristics [that] life, when viewed from without, seems to contrast with mere mechanism” (L46/R67).

The turn to life itself, after the tripartite characterization of the comic as human, concerned solely with the intelligence, and inherently social, is bewildering for the reader unless one recalls that this book is by an author who, in his earlier works, showed a marked interest not only in contemporary psychological research but also in the philosophical issue of the worldly embodiment of the mind. In *Time and Free Will (Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience)* Bergson sought to show, among other things, the reality of the “free act” through the elaboration of his capital concept of duration.¹² *Matter and Memory (Matière et Mémoire)* makes this worldly embodiment even clearer, stating in what Bergson calls his “theory of *pure perception*” (Bergson 1896, MM65/MM67) – a theory that has not yet had memory added back into the activity of perception – that “[p]erception, in its pure state, is, then, in very truth, a part of things” (Bergson 1896, MM64/MM66-67). The laughable, the comic and the laughter that it provokes must also be features of life peculiar to the form of the human.

“Life,” Bergson asserts, “presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space” (Bergson 1900, L46/R67). The difference between these aspects yields three

¹² See especially Bergson’s account of the way that the associationist conception of the mind employs a defective understanding of the free human individual (Bergson 1889, 155-163). Frédéric Worms’ summary of the *Essai* in his “Brève introduction aux autres livres de Bergson” at the end of his *Introduction à Matière et Mémoire de Bergson* is also helpful in this regard (Worms 1997, 292-295).

characteristics “which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical” (Bergson 1900, L48/R68) and to each of these characteristics can be opposed its counterpart, yielding the following table which would depict, according to Bergson, a corresponding and complete list of “the methods of light comedy, [for which] no others are possible” (Bergson 1900, L46/R68):

Outward characteristics of the living

A continual change of aspect

The irreversibility of the order of phenomena

The individuality of a perfectly self-contained series

Outward characteristics of the mechanical

Repetition

Inversion

Reciprocal Interference of Series

For each characteristic of the mechanical, Bergson provides several examples drawn from comic theater. Repetition is a series of incidents that recur in different circumstances; inversion is obtained by the reversal of roles (Bergson highlights the trope of “the robber robbed”); while the reciprocal interference of series is perhaps illustrated best by Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* or *The Comedy of Errors* in which the device of twins allows for the characters to have a reasonable but incorrect understanding of their actions while the audience is able to see the situation revealed at

the end of the play.¹³ In each case, Bergson concludes, the objective of the laughable is “to obtain what we have called a *mechanization* of life” (L52/R77).

The other section of Chapter Two is concerned with laughable effects expressed in or obtained by language. It is a relatively minor part of Bergson’s argument in which he merely demonstrates how language, too, is laughable when it adheres to his three-part criteria. He then turns to the comic in character, which, as the subject of Bergson’s third and final chapter, is the culmination of the argument of the entire book

Human beings are essentially social beings for Bergson, and the laughable can therefore only be found where a member of a community displays an “absent-mindedness” toward both her fellow citizens and to the norms of the community that she has learned in order to become its member (L65-66/R102-103). A philosopher of normative political theory, banging out journal articles in her ivory tower, entirely unaware of any real political situation, would be such an absent-minded individual. The function of laughter is both to chastise such “callousness to social life” (L66/R102) but also to return the individual to society by waking her from her dream (L66/R103). It is for this reason that Bergson regards “[t]he analysis of comic *characters* ... as the most important part of our task” (L65/R101).

But this “most important task” quickly leads to others. It occupies only half of the first section of Chapter Three before giving way to a second problem: the relation and meaning of art to human life. In this discussion, and in contradistinction to so many caricatures of Bergson’s theory, laughter is certainly reasserted as a social corrective but one that, while perhaps instantiated by individuals, indicates a natural, social, and unconscious action on the part of

¹³ Bergson’s own examples are the comparably less well-known *Tartarin on the Alps* (1885) by Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897) as well as works by Eugène Marin Labiche (1815-1888).

nature and society that follows a logic imperceptible to consciousness: “It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life” (L94/R152).

This revolt occurs when society attempts “to reprove the absentmindedness of one of our fellows and to wake him out of his dream” (L66/R103). human society has its own customs and habits to which newcomers – children and immigrants alike – are introduced and immediately expected to follow. someone ignores or otherwise violates these norms they exhibit—in Bergson’s apt phrase—“*a growing callousness [le raidissement] to social life*” (L66/R102). Like a character in a comedy, the laughable member of society is distinguished not by particular faults or acts of wickedness, but simply by “rigidity.” After a detour through the techniques by which an unsociable fault can be made laughable, Bergson returns to the central issue of character and concludes that “inattention is here equivalent to what we have called unsociability” (L71/R112).

14

Here Bergson raise the question of the relation between comedy and the other arts. “Life is action” and drama is action rendered artfully (L73/R115). This life of action is concerned with utility, not creativity. Perception self-knowledge oriented toward capabilities and the fulfillment of needs; even our everyday language is utilitarian, ignoring the individuality of things whenever possible and instead seeing things as genera. In sum, Bergson concludes, “we live in a zone

¹⁴ Bergson’s analysis of the techniques by which a comic character can be rendered yields three characteristics. The first is that the character must be unsociable (again, though, not immoral); the spectator’s attention must be drawn to the unintentional and automatic *gestures* of the character (rather than to the character’s *actions*); and, finally, the character is marked by automatism, not merely in the sense of behaving like a machine but in making “involuntary gestures” and/or in uttering “unconscious remarks” (L69-71/R111). The combination of the two – “systematic absentmindedness” – is the most laughable spectacle of all, and its exemplar is Don Quixote.

midway between things and ourselves, externally to things, externally also ourselves” (L74/R118). The aim of art is precisely “to brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities ... in order to bring us face to face with reality itself” (L75/R120). Artists are human beings, members of society, who are able to detach themselves, in part, from the utilitarian character of life and thereby create artifacts that reveal the ultimate natural necessity that human beings must live together in society and also live by the rules instituted for the order of that society.

Having identified the distinguishing features of comedic characters, and after offering a surprisingly expansive account of the relations between comedy, art, and life, Bergson ends the first part of the final chapter by returning “to the double conclusion we reached in the course of our investigations” (L80/R130). The first part of the conclusion is that “a person is never ridiculous except through some mental attribute resembling absent-mindedness” (L80/R130). This attribute is now further likened to a “parasite,” and the function of laughter would be to excise a foreign body. Moreover, the comical aims to depict character types that are as widespread in a society as possible, thereby achieving a maximum curative effect. These distinctive characteristics form the second part of Bergson’s conclusion. Finally, however, Bergson adds a remarkable statement on the relation between comedy, art, and life: “So we were probably right in saying comedy lies midway between art and life. It is not disinterested as genuine art is. By organizing laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment, it even obeys an impulse of social life. And in this respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature” (L81/R131). Here again, Bergson’s nascent metaphysics intrudes—productively—on his analysis. As he will explain in *Creative Evolution*, life aims to create forms and, in human beings, it has created forms that are

themselves capable of creating forms. Reading this back into *Laughter*, Bergson can be seen ascribing the comic art—and the laughter it produces—to human beings so that they might have an implement to shatter the inevitable calcification of their naturally creative social forms.

return to the discussion of comic character : vanity.¹⁶ Neither virtue nor vice, this omnipresent human quality is “an admiration of ourselves based on the admiration we think we are inspiring in others” (L82/R132). Although he forgoes a detailed analysis of vanity, Bergson clearly indicates that it is a necessarily social quality—it is “based on” what we think we are “inspiring in others” —and he also makes clear its close bond with laughter: “laughter perform[s], with mathematical regularity one of its main functions—that of bringing back to complete self-consciousness a certain self-admiration which is almost automatic, and thus obtaining the greatest possible sociability of characters” (L82/R133). One of the main functions of laughter seems then to be the laughable—because it occurs with “mathematical regularity” —rejoining of social life with natural life.

in our everyday dealings with them are generally reduced to types, and those types often correspond to the individual’s profession. Thus, if the precipitate of the laughable is vanity, its most common and effective forms will be the vanity that assumes the form of “*professional callousness (l’endurcissement)*” (L84/R136). Bergson exemplifies this character by pointing to judges who only speak legalese and act solely according to the dictates of the legal profession. Doctors that do the same, or religious officials—Tartuffe being the obvious example—are likewise too rigid to be lifelike and therefore laughable. In each case, the vain character has and acts on a self-estimation that is *not* based on others, making them laughable. Although these examples provide helpful and readily-available evidence for Bergson’s argument, he pushes the

¹⁶ See footnote 14.

point further. In addition to—and perhaps lurking beneath—every instance of professional callousness is what Bergson calls a “professional logic,” i.e. certain ways of reasoning that are customary in particular professional circles, but awkward or maladapted for general public life (L85/R138). An investigation of this “professional logic,” as well as its cognates and outgrowths, will form the core of argument of the final two sections of *Laughter*.

As short as they are, and as far as they stray from the central thesis of *Laughter*, the final two sections of the last chapter are among the most important and rich in the book. Having introduced the idea that there is a kind of logic to the comic—that “particular” or “professional” logic that manifests as a professional callousness—Bergson, in section four, takes up directly the claim by the artist and critic Théophile Gautier that “the comic in its extreme form is the logic of the absurd” (L85/R139).¹⁷ Bergson immediately notes, however, that there is an obvious error in Gautier’s theory insofar as there are absurdities that are not comic at all; his theory mistakes a cause for an effect. However, Gautier’s theory is not discarded entirely. Rather, having previously determined what it is that produces the comic effect, Bergson sets about rectifying Gautier’s claim (L86/R139).

The correction is accomplished by an analysis of that epitome of the comic, Don Quixote, who “furnishes us with the general type of comic absurdity” (L87/R142). On the one hand, an ordinary person who perceives “something that bears a faint resemblance to a large motionless body with revolving arms” would probably identify this thing as a windmill through simple common sense: “Common sense represents the endeavor of a mind continually adapting itself

¹⁷ Pierre Jules Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) was a widely-esteemed critic and playwright. He is one of the few critics whose theory of comedy Bergson singles out in *Laughter*. Despite the widespread notoriety of Gautier’s claim about the comic, the source of the quote is unclear.

anew and changing ideas when it changes objects. It is the mobility of the intelligence conforming exactly to the mobility of things. It is the moving continuity of our attention to life” (L86/R140). Common sense is the faculty that navigates the everyday middle ground of the utilitarian, the space between the extremes of art and life. Quixote’s error is logical, but it also represents “a very special inversion of common sense” (L87/R141). Where common sense, in its healthy operation, is a continuous adaptation between the mind and the world, the “special inversion” in Quixote’s case is that his character has acquired a particular rigidity; his is “[a] stubborn spirit [that] ends by adjusting things to its own way of thinking, instead of accommodating its thoughts to things” (L87/R142). The latter part of Bergson’s remark is an infelicitous one because it obscures the work that the plastic and utilitarian mind does in coming to have ideas of the objects that it encounters. Bergson seems to intend a distinction between Quixote’s idiomatic rigidity and the supple adaptability of everyday common sense. He discards the various sorts of rigidity that characterize the morbidity of various kinds of mental illness—these arouse pity and Bergson has already concluded that the laughable bears no trace of the emotional. What he is left with, surprisingly, is the logic of dreams: “The behavior of the intellect in a dream is exactly what we have just been describing. The mind, enamored of itself, now seeks in the outer world nothing more than a pretext for realizing its imagination” (L88/R143). And, Bergson continues, “if the logic of the comic is the logic of dreams, we may expect to discover in the logic of the laughable all the peculiarities of dream logic” (L88/R143). The hypothetical is significant because Bergson will assume the veracity of his antecedent in the subsequent discussion.

Given that forms of the laughable become laughable when they are recognizable as a cognate of one of the more familiar forms, Bergson now argues that any “*play of ideas*” becomes

laughable when it is recognized as resembling what he calls “the play of dreamland (*les jeux du rêve*)” (L88/R143). This is a complicated rhetorical maneuver. What allows it is perhaps best expressed in an essay that Bergson published in 1908, one year after *Creative Evolution*, entitled “Memory of the Present and False-Recognition.” There, speaking of psychic facts generally, Bergson writes that the abnormal or morbid psychic fact

was already being manufactured while the conditions were normal; but it was prevented from emerging, when about to appear, by one of those continually active inhibitory mechanisms which secure *attention to life*. Were each of these organs to work by itself, there would result a host of useless or untoward effects, liable to disturb the functioning of the others and so upset that adjustable equilibrium by which our adaptation to the environment is continually maintained. But a work of elimination, of correction, of bringing back to the point, is constantly going on, and it is precisely this work which secures a healthy mind. (Bergson 2002, 142)

Although not mentioned, one of the ways of correcting and retrieving ill minds is, of course, laughter. Inverting the traditional question from “why is the ill mind so?” to “why isn’t the healthy mind so?” Bergson here establishes the basis for a novel interpretation of psychic life generally that helps to explain the convoluted path of the concluding pages of *Laughter*. In his 1908 essay he continues “I have applied that method [of explaining why certain psychical phenomena are not found in the normally healthy mind] to the study of dreams They are supposed to be facts of a special order . . . which is the dream-life” (Bergson 2002, 142-3). Our utilitarian social existence is a limitation, a diminishment of the fullness of our dream-life and its bewildering array of sensible and intelligible effects, and laughter—as Bergson argues in 1900—is the social remedy for any member of the community who strays too far into “the play of dreamland.”¹⁸

¹⁸ In the fourth section of *Laughter*, Bergson flatly states that “Comic absurdity is that of dreams” (L88/R142; the entire phrase is italicized in the French). It is difficult – if not impossible – to correlate Bergson’s arguments in 1900

Since “given one form of the laughable, other forms that are lacking in the same comic essence become laughable from their outward resemblance to the first,” any relaxation of our utilitarian social disposition may lead us into “a certain general relaxation of the rules of reasoning” (L88/R143-4). In other words, the relaxation of reason may lead us to become laughable. More generally, “[t]he reasonings at which we laugh are those we know to be false, but which we might accept as true were we to hear them in a dream” (L88/R144). Bergson identifies four such reasonings that have the appearance of dream-reasonings: witticisms, in which a play on words overtakes (or undercuts) the play of ideas; “comic obsessions,” in which a common element repeatedly appears in all manner of contexts; “a particular *crescendo*” that terminates a string of ever-more ridiculous situations; and, finally, the “reciprocal interference of two series” that is possible in dreams because, in dreams, the dreamer “is himself, and not himself” (L88-91/R143-7). This analysis which, on the one hand, seems to accord with what Bergson had previously argued in fact leads to a new insight that Bergson only develops in a few brief lines of the final section of the entire book. As Bergson writes in the opening line of that section, “the comic seems to show itself in a form somewhat different from the one we lately attributed to it” (L91/R147-8). It is no longer simply the “callousness” of a “plaque” that adheres to the living, nor is it simply a “mechanical encrustation,” —although, to be sure, it appears in

with those he makes in 1908. To do so would, at a minimum, require an investigation that ranged far afield of the present argument. What can be —and has been—shown is that Bergson’s discussion of dreams in 1900 and 1908 both emphasize the same central point: that our everyday utilitarian existence – common sense – is a “constriction” of the much more extensive life of dreams. Additionally, reading backwards from the 1908 essay to *Laughter*, the later essay is a valuable clarification of the final pages of the former.

these guises—it now appears as the self-criticism of life itself effected by humanity, its avatar and greatest achievement.

Any reader of the final section of *Laughter* must find it remarkable that Bergson's "theory" of comedy is so often reduced to "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (L24/R29). It remains true that laughter "is first and foremost a means of correction" (L91/R148), but it is equally true, as the analysis of Chapter Three has shown, that the corrective aspect of laughter "is not what we are immediately struck by in our first impression of the laughable" (L91/R148). Our first impression of the laughable is not contempt or hatred, but "sympathy." The person at whom we laugh is first treated "as a playmate" (L92/R144). As Bergson notes, the examples he has given immediately preceding have shown that there is "a movement of relaxation" in laughter that must be analyzed and accounted for" (L92/R142). The work of common sense is utilitarian; it "demands a continuous effort of intellectual tension" by which the mind forces its ideas to remain within the bounds of the sensible (L92/R149). But this work is just that and, like any form of work, it requires occasional suspension. Such a suspension is not a pure disavowal of real existence but is rather, like the logic of dreams, the continuation of the creation of ideas only now broken away from the restrictions of the sensible. "So," Bergson writes, "comic absurdity gives us from the outset the impression of playing with ideas. Our first impulse is to join in the game" (L92/R149). Common sense is work—it is a tensity—and the laughable character appears first of all—and perhaps only for a moment—as someone who has set this work aside. The result—"our first impulse," Bergson stresses—is an implicit solicitation to join in their play (L92/R149-150).

Two points remain. The first is that the relaxation of laughter and the behavior of the laughable are unsustainable. The prior analysis of laughter has not been discarded, it has only

been simplified: laughter is the social disapprobation inflicted on someone who has wandered too far from the social life of common sense. The second part, closely bound to the first, is that laughter is human only insofar as it is vital. Or, better, it is vitality, the *élan vital*, that laughs through humanity. Laughter is not infallibly inspired by kindness, justice, or any other conventional normative consideration. To be an act with normative force, “it would have to proceed from an act of reflection” (L93/R150). However, Bergson has just finished demonstrating that the initial sympathy provoked by the laughable arrives prior to common sense and reflection. “In this sense, laughter cannot be absolutely just” (L93/R151). Thus Bergson concludes by returning to the *naturalness* of laughter, to its vitality. By laughing at and thereby humiliating its members, a society betters itself perhaps not normatively but certainly creatively; in Bergson’s words, “nature has utilized evil with a view to good” (L93/R152). In order to develop, grow, expand and pursue teleodynamic ends, society must play at its most central forms of life, its most cherished and constitutive beliefs – and this play will appear inevitably laughable to conservative common sense. In the concluding lines of *Laughter*—lines that already anticipate the metaphysics of *Creative Evolution*—Bergson reminds the reader that “[w]e have seen that the more society improves, the more plastic is the adaptability it obtains from its members; while the greater the tendency towards increasing stability below, the more does it force to the surface the disturbing elements inseparable from so vast a bulk; and thus laughter performs a useful function by emphasizing the form of their significant undulations” (L93-4/R152). In other words, the laughable brings the non-vital to light and allows it to be eliminated from the social body. The result—and this is the most important conclusion of Bergson’s essay—is a decrease in the laughable but an *increase* in a society’s ability to play with its constituent and normative forms—to experiment with new forms of life—without abandoning common sense. Laughter is

the sign of a “slight revolt on the surface of social life” (L94/R152) that betokens the work of stabilizing and making less disturbing all of the organs that make up human society precisely by valorizing their different teleodynamisms.

2. Laughter and Life

Bergson’s *Laughter* has led two strangely different lives: famous for being a detailed philosophical consideration of the laughable, and famous for being ignored or minimized as a part of Bergson’s corpus.¹⁹ Bergson never returns to the book, takes up its arguments or, if he does, he does so implicitly and without citation or mention of comedy and laughter. In fact, whether Bergson himself realized it or not, the discussion of comedy—especially in the closing pages of *Laughter*—adds an important dimension both to the metaphysics developed most fully in *Creative Evolution* and to the study of human norms and values in the much later *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. As Prusak has correctly argued, Bergson’s discussion of the laughable is inextricable from his discussion of norms.²⁰ Furthermore, such norms need not be envisioned as fixed termini but can rather be conceptualized in William Connolly’s Nietzschean formulation of the dynamically vital processes that constitute the open cosmos of creative

¹⁹ The editors of *Bergson’s Key Writings* provide a note to their Introduction explaining that “[t]he one work we have excluded from both the readings and our introductory discussion is *Laughter*, because, being primarily a popularist piece of work, its place must be peripheral in an analysis of his academic philosophy” (Ansell-Pearson and Mullarkey 2002, 376). Finally, Bergson’s last publication, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* also makes no reference to *Laughter*.

²⁰ Prusak, op. cit., 384. Prusak is here following the earlier work of Helmuth Plessner.

evolution, as *teleodynamic*.²¹ Work such as Prusak's, Connolly's, Lombardini's, and others enable a new appreciation of Bergson's full account of comedy and its role in his larger political project. Such an endeavor is beyond the scope of the present essay, but some traces of the laughable can be found in both *Creative Evolution* and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* that might serve as seeds for future research.²²

The avowed purpose of *Creative Evolution* is to explicate the *élan vital*, discovered in Chapter One, which shows that “[l]ife does not proceed by the association and addition of elements, but by dissociation and division” (EC89/CE90). The *élan vital* does not follow any kind of teleological development but rather develops according to the problems that impose themselves as obstacles to its unified expression. This is the inception of the three great classifications – plant, animal, and human – the last of which is marked by two different faculties: intelligence and instinct.²³ Bergson offers several definitions of these terms but the most comprehensive is as follows: “*instinct perfected is a faculty of using and even of constructing organized instruments; intelligence perfected is the faculty of making and using*

²¹ Connolly, 444. An interesting essay that uses Connolly's work to analyze the political role of the laughable in Aristotle is John Lombardini's "Civic Laughter: Aristotle and the Political Virtue of Humor." Lombardini writes that "the positive value of laughter lies in its ability to serve as a medium for critical engagement with friends, enemies, and strangers with whom we disagree" (216, also see the discussion on 219-222).

²² Additional examples of such work can be found in Ford (2004, 2016), Lefebvre (2008, 2013).

²³ "The *impetus of life* [*l'elan de vie*], of which we are speaking, consists in a need of creation" (Bergson 1998, EC251/CE252). Bergson's subsequent discussion elaborates the way that the impetus of life is forced to reckon with matter as an obstacle to its creativity. The discussion culminates in Bergson's declaration that "Everywhere but in man, consciousness has had to come to a stand; in man alone it has kept on its way. Man, then, continues the vital movement indefinitely, although he does not draw along with him all that life carries in itself" (EC266/CE266).

unorganized instruments” (EC140/CE141). It is intuition— “instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious” (EC176/CE178) —that yields consciousness whose expansion thereby yields “endlessly created creation” (EC178/CE179). Accordingly, humanity, possessed of consciousness – which is, as the most expansive faculty for creation, “the motive principle of evolution” — “comes to occupy a privileged place in nature” (EC182/CE183). Humanity is the creation whose consciousness allows it, a created form, to invent ever new forms.²⁴ The chain of evolution, of division that pursues ever-different forms of wholeness in its teleodynamic process, is broken by the consciousness of man. “With man, consciousness breaks the chain. In man, and in man alone, it sets itself free” (EC264/CE264). Constantly threatened by the ease of “automatism,” the free and fully conscious human being is the “term” and the “end” of evolution (EC265/CE265). In its everyday utilitarian activity the very freedom of instinct that constitutes consciousness – a blend of intellect and intuition – threatens to sweep humanity into a vacuous dreamworld. Laughter is the vitality of the intellect that returns it to the teleodynamic task of real creation.

Twenty-five years after *Creative Evolution*, Bergson published his last major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (*Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*).²⁵ A

²⁴ Bergson is somewhat unclear as to whether non-human animals possess intelligence. He states that intelligence and instinct “never entirely separate from each other” (EC142/CE143) but that different organisms possess one or the other to a greater degree. They “represent two divergent solutions, equally fitting, of one and the same problem” (EC143/CE144).

²⁵ Bergson’s fame was at its peak during the second decade of the twentieth century and he traveled widely, both to lecture on his philosophy and to further the interests of the French government during the First World War. He retired from the Collège de France in 1920 and then went into near-seclusion after 1925 due to crippling arthritis. The publication of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* was therefore a major philosophical event. For an

steady contrast is drawn throughout the book between what Bergson calls “open” and “closed” societies and between these societies and the *élan vital* elaborated in his earlier work.²⁶ In the final chapter of *The Two Sources*, Bergson states that the “closed society is that whose numbers hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defense, bound, in fact, to a perpetual readiness for battle. Such is human society fresh from the hands of nature” (TSMR266/DSMR283). The open society, on the other hand, is a society which Bergson dreams of embracing all of humanity. It is “a dream dreamt, now and again, by chosen souls, it embodies on every occasion something of itself in creations, each of which ... conquers difficulties hitherto unconquerable” (TSMR267/DSMR284). The difference between these two types of societies – in their mutual connection to Bergson’s metaphysics – is the particular type of “fabulation” that provides the basis for the belief system that holds them together.²⁷ And Bergson emphasizes that they must be *held*; durable human communities require a particular kind of grounding fiction in order to keep the intelligence from driving their members apart, in order to constitute a *common sense*. “The truth is that intelligence would counsel egoism first” (TSMR122/DSMR126). With the ascendancy of intelligence in humanity, “*religion is then a defensive reaction of nature against the dissolvent power of intelligence.*” (TSMR122/DSMR127). As humanity develops, this “defensive reaction” assumes the more familiar social forms of laws and the norms of various social groups.

account of the intellectual currents in which Bergson’s final book appeared – one largely dominated by phenomenology and Heidegger – see Kleinberg 2005.

²⁶ Bergson’s concepts would later be famously adopted by Karl Popper.

²⁷ The English translation of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* renders the French “*fabulation*” as the “myth-making function.”

However, as Bergson has persistently argued across his oeuvre, the *élan vital* is a creative force that reaches its apex in humanity: the creation that is itself a power of creation. But it does not create with the intelligence, whose function is to preserve the creation that every human community already is. Instead, it is instinct, the sympathy that binds all human beings to each other, by which individuals give their allegiance, give themselves “to a society comprising all of humanity” (TSMR212/DSMR225). Bergson turns to a kind of mysticism in *The Two Sources*, to “dynamic religion,” one that prospects for ever-better and more inclusive forms of social life, of humanity. The vital tool for such prospecting is laughter. Its perpetual criticism of our tendencies to egoism, to self-absorption – in short, to vanity – remedies and valorizes the joint work of human communities. At the limit, vanity is abolished – precisely the condition for a society that comprises every human being. Human life was only ever a joke: the *élan vital* acting as a creative force that perpetually risks the complacent self-absorption of vanity in order for that same *élan vital* to perpetually goad its greatest achievement, humanity, toward the joyful and free creation of its own future.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 2002. *Introduction to Sociology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ansell-Pearson, Keith. 2011. *Henri Bergson: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- . 2001. *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, eds. 2002. *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Bergson, Henri. 2013. *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. 10e édition. Paris: PUF.
- English edition: Bergson, Henri. n.d. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (trans: Pogson, F.L.). Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing.
- . 2013. *Le rêve suivi de Fantômes de vivants*. Paris: PUF.
- . 2013. *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. 11e édition. Paris: PUF. English edition: Bergson, Henri. 1977. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (trans: Audra, R. Ashley and Brereton, Cloudesley). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- . 2008 *Le rire : Essai sur la signification du comique*. Eds. Frédéric Worms and Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc. Paris: PUF. English edition: Bergson, Henri. (trans: Brereton, Cloudesley and Rothwell, Henry). Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008.
- . Ed. Frédéric Worms. 2012. *Matière et mémoire : Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit*. Paris: PUF. English edition: Bergson, Henri. 1990. *Matter and Memory*. Revised edition. (trans: Paul, N. M. and Palmer, W. S.). Revised edition. New York: Zone Books
- . Eds. Frédéric Worms and Arnaud François. 2013. *L'évolution créatrice*. 12e édition. Paris: PUF. English edition: Bergson, Henri. 1998. *Creative Evolution*. Unabridged edition. (trans: Mitchell, Arthur). Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
- Bevis, Matthew. 2013. *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP.
- Carroll, Noel. 2014. *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, OUP.
- Connolly, William. 2014. Species Evolution & Cultural Freedom. *Political Research Quarterly* 67, 441-452.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1998. *Le bergsonisme*. 2nd edition. Paris: PUF. English edition: Deleuze, Gilles. 1990. (trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam). New York: Zone Books.

- Doyle, Richard. 2002. LSDNA: Rhetoric, Consciousness Expansion, and the Emergence of Biotechnology, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35: 153-174.
- . 2016. Something Mechanical Encrusted on the Living Or, ‘Que Signifie Le Rire?’ *Angelaki* 21: 83–87.
- Ford, Russell. 2004. On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Comedy for Life: Bergson on Comedy, *The Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 89-105.
- . 2016. Introduction: Why So Serious? On Philosophy and Comedy,” *Angelaki* 21, 1-11.
- . 2016. Humor, Law, and Jurisprudence: On Deleuze’s Political Philosophy. *Angelaki*, 21, 89-102.
- Freud, Sigmund, and Peter Gay. Edited by James Strachey. 1990. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Heller, Agnes. 2005. *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Henri Bergson*. 2015. Edited by Nils F. Schott and Alexandre Lefebvre. Durham ; London: Duke University Press Books.
- Kleinberg, Ethan. 2005. *Generation Existential: Heidegger’s Philosophy in France 1927-1961*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Lawlor, Leonard. 2003. *The Challenge of Bergsonism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Lee, Richard A. Jr. 2016. At Least They Had an Ethos. *Angelaki* 21, 55-64.
- Lombardini, John. 2013. Civic Laughter: Aristotle and the Political Virtue of Humor. *Political Theory* 41, 203-230.
- Lefebvre, Alexandre. 2008. *The Image of Law: Deleuze, Bergson, Spinoza*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- . 2013. *Human Rights as a Way of Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP.

Morreall, John. Philosophy of Humor. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/>>.

Mullarkey, John. 2000. *Bergson & Philosophy*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2000.

Prusak, Bernard G. 2004. Le Rire à Nouveau - Rereading Bergson. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, 377-388.

Worms, Frédéric. 1997. *Introduction à Matière et mémoire de Bergson*. Paris: PUF.

———. 2009. *La philosophie en France au XXe siècle. Moments*. Paris: Folio.

Index for Ford

Adorno, 1
Ansell-Pearson, 2n, 9n, 31n
art, 6, 22, 23
Bergson, Henri, 1-35
Cervantes
 Don Quixote, 22, 25, 26
comedy,
 Bergson's account of, 1-35
comic character, 19-20, 23
Connolly, William, 9, 31
dreams, 27, 28, 34
élan vital, 3, 21, 30, 32, 35
Freud, 2
games, 10
Gautier, Théophile, 25
Heller, 5n, 24
laughable
 in language, 19
laughter, 2
 Bergson's account of, 1-35
 sociological account of, 6
Lombardini, John, 32
Moliere
 Tartuffe, 24
play, 10, 26, 29
Helmut Plessner, 31n
Popper, Karl, 34
Prusak, Bernard G., 3n, 4n 7n, 31n, 32

religion, 34-35
tragedy, 22
vanity, 24
wit, 28

DRAFT