

## Taking Laughter Seriously

Barbara Houston

*University of New Hampshire*

There can never be enough said of the virtues, dangers, the power of a shared laugh.

—Françoise Sagan<sup>1</sup>

Talking about laughter can be dangerous! To paraphrase E.B. White: “Analyzing [laughter] is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Joris Vlieghe and his compatriots, Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein (hereafter referred to as Vlieghe et al.), want us to take laughter seriously; they want us to see laughter as an important feature of human life that is *in itself* educational and has “profound pedagogical significance.”

Given that Vlieghe et al. start with the *fact* of common laughter, and that so much rests upon their phenomenological description of it, I too begin here, and ask: Is laughter what they say it is? They give us two accounts: one more philosophical, one more physiological. They claim that laughter is more than some internal emotional state. It is, rather, a corporeal experience: Citing Plessner, Vlieghe et al. write, “Corporeal occurrences emancipate themselves. These shake us and bring us out of breath. Man has lost her relation to her physical existence, which in turn withdraws from her and which does with her as it pleases.”<sup>3</sup> Is laughter an involuntary, automatic, and anonymous taking over of the flesh? Is it categorized with “arbitrary, meaningless, and uncontrollable reactions”? Is it highly contagious? My response is a resounding “Yes!” followed by a querulous “No!” Yes, we recognize the phenomenon that Vlieghe et al. call laughter, at least I do, when I recall the time that I was laughing so hard describing a Peter Sellers movie that I drove into the back of a parked car!

So, why the querulous “No”? Because such laughter is at the end of a long continuum of laughter, which has, at one end, smiles, chortles, and chuckles; in the middle, giggles; and, only at the far other end, what has been called uproarious, explosive, uncontrollable, or falling-down kinds of laughter. What Vlieghe et al. call laughter is narrower in scope than we might hope. If Vlieghe et al. really mean that only “belly laughter” counts as laughter, then we need to exercise that most unfunny virtue, caution, and not be led into thinking that laughter per se has an educational dimension. On this view, only laughing like a hyena has “profound educational significance.”

I also query the claim that laughter is involuntary. We are again bedeviled by ambiguity: are we asking whether *all* laughter is involuntary or whether one subset of laughter is involuntary? It may be true, as Aristotle says, that we cannot tickle ourselves, but the claim that “there is no such thing as a controlled or intentional laughter” is an exaggeration. We can suppress, inhibit, and even terminate laughter (as opposed to the inclination to laugh), as we do at funerals. It was, again, Aristotle who pointed out that “we don’t blame someone for laughing if he has tried really hard

not to.”<sup>4</sup> The point is that we expect people to try. Further, we can produce at will a convincing imitation of laughter in social situations and even thereby induce it; we deliberately laugh at the boss’s lousy jokes or we “laugh” to put ourselves and others in a laughing mood. No: laughing *is*, to some degree, under our control.

Consider examples of laughter that are *truly* involuntary, instances that might be better called “symptoms.” We can have paroxysmal attacks of involuntary laughter without psychological cause — such fits are signs of disease, generally of the nervous system, which often have a poor prognosis. Such laughter can, for instance, be a symptom of pseudobulbar palsy, Alzheimer’s, Wilson’s disease, Pick’s disease, a terminal stage of Kuru, multiple sclerosis, grand mal epileptic seizure, dementia, or a reaction to LSD.<sup>5</sup> A telling comment on this kind of laughter, however, is that “there is no humor corresponding to this laugh; indeed some patients complain that they cannot help laughing without feeling at all inclined to laugh.”<sup>6</sup> There is, additionally, hysterical laughter after trauma, cases of hysterical *group* laughter, and even epidemics of group laughter. Indeed, a study by Thomas Adeoye Lambo reports on outbreaks of a laughing syndrome in Tanganyika and Uganda that affected over a thousand people.<sup>7</sup> These cases offer instances where laughter is truly arbitrary and meaningless, but it is not the laughter that we value.

One problem here is the tension between the psychological definition of laughter that Vlieghe et al. offer, where laughter is a bodily response to a disorienting situation, and the competing definition of laughter that emerges from their focus on its physicality. Neither definition by itself nor a conjoined definition is adequate, for they cannot rule out the peculiar cases that I have mentioned. Any analysis that is isolated from the social context, content, and meaning of laughter keeps this phenomenon more innocent and less problematic than if it were contextualized.

Laughter, even of the sort specified, does not *in itself* have an educational dimension. We can appreciate the claim that such laughter *sometimes* breaks us open, leaves us vulnerable and defenseless, and removes us from our firmly held position(s) in a way that makes room for new possibilities. But not *always*. As we have seen, the involuntariness, automaticity, and anonymity of the flesh that can take us over in laughter is problematic; it sometimes leads us not to a *momentary* breakdown, but rather to a *continual* breakdown that allows for nothing else. Such laughter is, at the least, noneducative.

Some *momentary* “breakdowns” of laughter could be educational experiences, depending upon what has come before, occurs during, and follows the incident. By definition, in experiencing such a breakdown, we are moved, if only momentarily, out of a position of identity. But for this to be educational, *everything* depends on whether the resultant identity is, to use John Dewey’s term, “reconstructed” — whether it undergoes growth.

Further, there are situations in which such laughter is positively *miseducative*, perhaps precisely because it leaves us open, defenseless, and without a position of identity from which to resist harmful perceptions. I have in mind here uproarious laughter at racist or sexist jokes, laughter that unites and aligns us against “them,”

and uncontrollable laughter that accompanies ridicule and scorn. I would not claim that *all* such laughter is miseducative, or even morally wrong. The point is that, as Vlieghe et al. admit (but only in parentheses), laughter can be aggressive, even as it is at the same time “opening.”

Laughter is not “innocent.” Perusal of a dictionary convinces us that to laugh at someone or something is sometimes to ridicule, show contempt for, or hold up to scorn. Furthermore, laughter is sometimes a way to silence, dismiss, or claim victory over others. Sneering, jeering, and snickering are well known forms of laughter. There is no question that laughter can be aggressive, hostile, and cruel. We need to look at *who* is laughing *at what*, and *with whom*, before we can assess whether or not there is any positive educational dimension to the laughter.

Finally, from an educational perspective, there is the great mystery of laughter. Vlieghe et al. point to one of its striking epistemological features by quoting Alphonso Lingis: “Laughter affirms itself indubitably.... That at which and with which someone laughs is true.”<sup>8</sup> Yes, that’s the truth, and therein lies laughter’s danger, and its power!

We philosophers know that when, in laughter, “we are confronted with a truth,” we may *not* be confronted with a truth. However, knowing that nothing kills laughter faster than curiosity about what really is the case, we wisely keep quiet. What is mysterious is that, in laughter, we can have persons without their usual constricting structures and identities, persons with wide open minds. We can have a situation full of possibilities, a veritable piñata full of surprises at our fingertips, and *no one* inclined to investigate them! The epistemological point is telling. We laugh uproariously because we know exactly who we are and who others are. Jokes notoriously trade on stereotypes and fixed generalities. You can watch the laughter begin as soon as you say: “An Englishman, an Irishman, and a rabbi walked into a bar.” So, is the promised piñata of possibilities of laughter just a happy illusion? Perhaps not. Perhaps the physiology of laughter *does* defeat psychology, rendering those of us who thought we knew who we were defenseless and open to more than we know. However, mysteries abound. One mystery is: how can we accept what is indubitable and yet also be open to it *not* being true about us, or anyone else? And here is another: the idea that the experience of open possibilities unaccompanied by curiosity about truth might be an educational experience.

Our situation reminds me of Molnár’s Riddle. Ferenc Molnár, the great playwright and well known connoisseur of coffee, once said, after drinking a cup of suspicious-looking black liquid available after the War: “It contains one good thing, one bad thing, and one mystery. The good thing is that it contains no chicory — the bad that it contains no coffee — the mystery: what makes it black?”<sup>9</sup> As with Molnár’s coffee, so with laughter: it contains good things, bad things, and mysteries.

---

1. Françoise Sagan, *La Chamade* [Wild Heartbeat], trans. Robert Westhoff (New York: Dutton, 1966), 28.

2. Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves, *Only Joking* (New York: Gotham, 2006), 78.

3. Helmuth Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen. Eine Untersuchung nach den Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens* [Laughing and Weeping: An Examination of the Borders of Human Behavior] (Bern, Germany: Francke, 1961), 87 (translation by Vlieghe et al.).
4. Ronald de Sousa, "When Is It Wrong to Laugh?" in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1987), 228–229.
5. Fredric Stearns, *Laughing* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles Thomas, 1972), 25–32, 39.
6. *Ibid.*, 38.
7. *Ibid.*, 40.
8. Alphonso Lingis, *Body Transformations: Evolutions and Atavisms in Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005), 90.
9. George Mikes, *Laughing Matter* (New York: Library Press, 1971), 74.