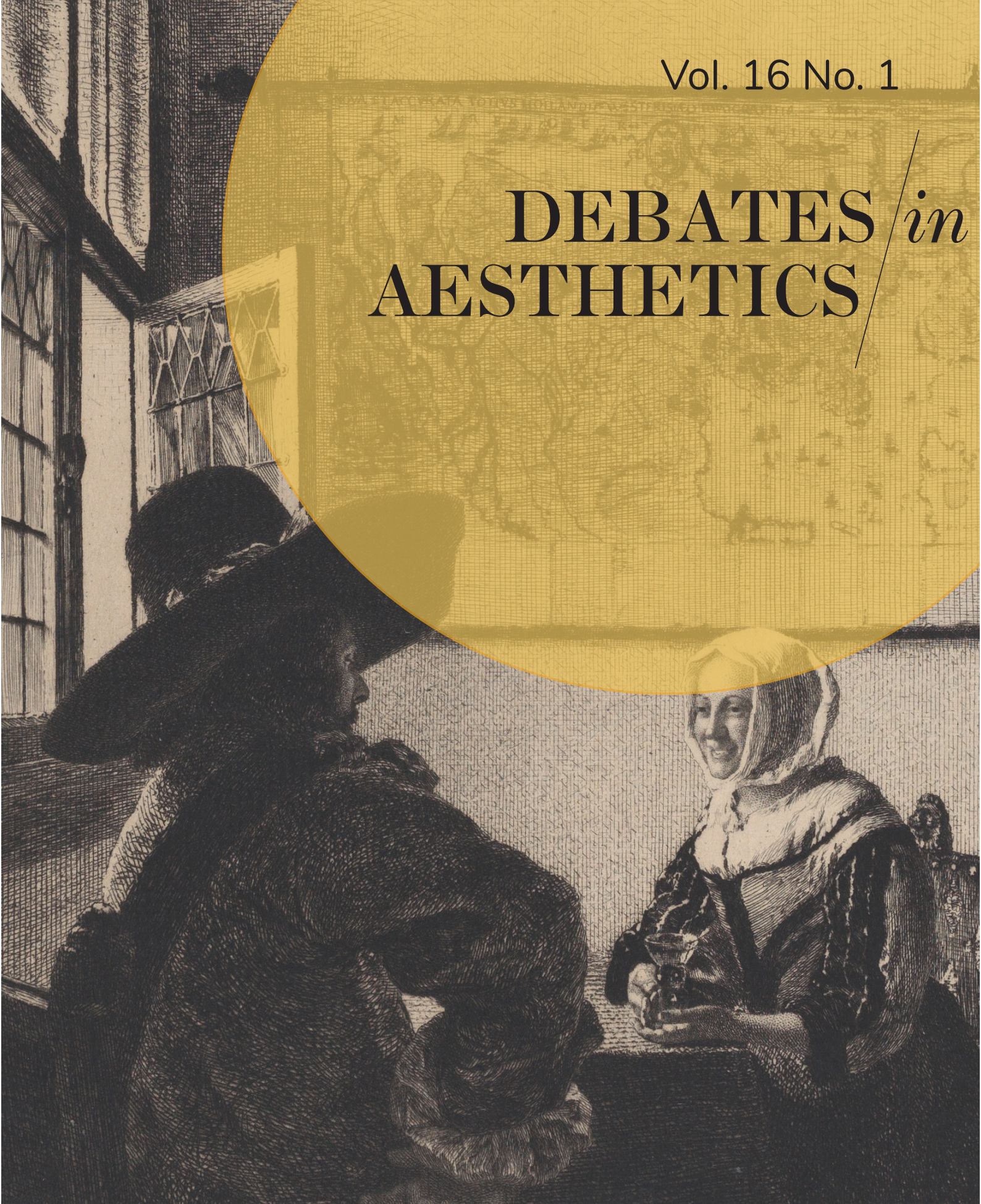


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KANT'S THEORY OF LAUGHTER

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In this paper I offer an alternative interpretation of Immanuel Kant's theory of laughter that can meet the challenges left behind by the interpretations that have so far been given. I argue that laughter is a reaction to the dissolution of nonsense, which takes the form of realizing our own misconceptions about the object. Laughter reveals something about our cognitive and rational system: namely, that it is insufficient to explain all of our experiences and perceptions of the world and that we often need to revise our expectations in order to make sense of the world. In this respect, laughter stands in a direct opposition to Kant's notion of the sublime.

1 Introduction

In this paper I offer an alternative interpretation of Immanuel Kant's theory of laughter that can meet the challenges left behind by the interpretations that have so far been given. Contemporary interpretations tend to explain Kant's notion of laughter as a species of the beautiful, sublime, or both. In short, they argue that the concept of laughter is similar to the concept of the beautiful in that it originates in a disinterested play between cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding, yet dissimilar to the beautiful in that the play is disharmonious, rather than harmonious, resulting instead in the feeling of displeasure. On the other hand, laughter also shares similarities with the sublime in that its discordance evokes a purposive relationship between the faculties of imagination and reason, thereby resulting in the feeling of pleasure. As Patrick Giamario, one of the proponents of this view, writes:

The pleasure of laughter consists in how the contrapurposiveness of a joke paradoxically stimulates the free activity of reason. The joke is purposive from the perspective of reason because the laughter it generates stimulates reason to freely transform its principles for thinking about and acting in the sensible world. (Giamario 2017, 172)

However, there are many difficulties with such an interpretation. Firstly, it fails to accord with Kant's characterization of pleasure inherent in laughter as a kind of relief (KU 5:332, 209). Pleasure characterized as a relief signifies a reduction of that something, which produces tension and frustration and thus a reduction of the disagreement between cognitive faculties. This suggests that the source of pleasure lies in the elimination of disharmony between the imagination and understanding rather than in additionally acquired harmony between imagination and reason.

Secondly, the interpretation of pleasure in laughter as originating in the satisfaction of the faculty of reason and its ideas does not appear to be consistent with the material content distinctive for objects that occasion laughter. Namely, the faculty of reason is associated with ideas of freedom, god, and immortality, and as such it expresses ideas that celebrate the rational and moral side of our being, such as life-affirming ideas of compassion, peace, virtue, gentleness, courage, altruism, etc. Yet objects that occasion laughter tend to express ideas that are opposite to rational ideas, such as ideas of irrationality, mortality, moral and physical weakness, clumsiness, absent-mindedness, etc., all of them emphasizing the finite, the sensuous, and the smallness of a human character. For example, we laugh at Mr. Bean's clumsiness and helplessness in practical matters, at the dishonest, insecure, stingy, and selfish nature of George Constanza in *Seinfeld*, or at the confrontational, irritable, and socially awkward manners of Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Since comical objects tend to communicate ideas that stand in opposition to the ideas of reason, it does not seem to be a tenable position to explain pleasure inherent in laughter as the result of the purposive relationship between imagination and reason.

Thirdly, interpretations given so far fail to account for the distinction between the notion of laughter and ugliness, presumably both depending on the mental state of disharmony between imagination and understanding. As Giamario explains:

The subject laughs when the understanding cannot make sense of the world with the empirical concepts and rules it normally employs. As the world of appearances diverges from its expectations, the understanding experiences a certain frustration before suddenly relaxing and providing the subject with the paradoxical pleasure of laughter. (Giamario 2017, 167)

However, Kant explains ugliness in a similar way, namely as the result of the object's resistance to be subsumed under the established concepts and rules of the understanding. Ugliness depends on the feeling of displeasure due to the "discord of freedom, in the play of the power of imagination and the lawfulness of the understanding" (Anthr 7:241, 137). We find an object ugly when the sensible manifold apprehended by the imagination conflicts with the understanding and its need to establish order and unity over the heterogeneity of the manifold. Accordingly, this interpretation raises the question as to why it is the case that, even though both laughter and ugliness depend on the state of mind of disharmony between imagination and understanding (i.e. they both involve a certain kind of incongruity that is ill-adapted to our cognitive faculties), we should after all feel pleasure in the former, while not in the latter.

Appealing to the similarity between Kant's notion of laughter and the sublime cannot solve this problem. This is because the disharmony involved in the sublime takes place between the faculties of imagination and reason and not between imagination and the understanding as in laughter. As Kant writes, the experience of the sublime is the result of the failure of imagination to satisfy the task given to it by the faculty of reason: namely, to sensibly present the rational idea of infinity (infinite size in the mathematical sublime and infinite power in the dynamical sublime). It is the disharmony between imagination and reason that produces the feeling of displeasure. Yet the fact that imagination fails to satisfy the task given to it by reason, on the other hand, indicates the existence of the supersensible faculty of the mind (i.e. the faculty of reason), which produces in us the feeling of intense pleasure. Accordingly, the faculty of reason is present in the feeling of displeasure. In fact, it is precisely because of reason's presence that imagination reveals itself as inadequate.

On the other hand, laughter depends on the mental state of disharmony

between imagination and understanding. In this relation, there is no failure of the imagination to satisfy the task given to it by the faculty of reason; rather, it is the case that the sensible manifold apprehended by imagination simply conflicts with the understanding's concepts and rules. Laughter consists in the frustration of the faculty of the understanding and thus it is difficult to see how such frustration could reflect or inspire the power of the faculty of reason and the accompanying feeling of pleasure.

In what follows, I offer an alternative interpretation of Kant's theory of laughter that can meet these challenges. In short, I argue that laughter is a reaction to the dissolution of nonsense, which takes the form of realizing our own misconceptions about the object. Thus, no appeal to the faculty of reason is required. Laughter reveals something about our cognitive and rational system: namely, that it is insufficient to explain all of our experiences and perceptions of the world and that we often need to revise our expectations in order to make sense of the world. In this respect, laughter stands in a direct opposition to Kant's notion of the sublime.

2 Kant on Laughter

In §54 of the Third *Critique*, Kant provides the following definition of laughter:

In everything that is to provoke a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical (in which, therefore, the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction). Laughter is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing. This very transformation, which is certainly nothing enjoyable for the understanding, is nevertheless indirectly enjoyable and, for a moment, very lively. (KU 5:332, 209)

According to Kant's formulation, laughter is a response to a representation that involves some sort of nonsense and which evokes in us the experience of displeasure and tension. Laughter is initially a response to something that we find unsatisfying and frustrating. More specifically, Kant explains laughter as an affect that occurs when our expectations are suddenly transformed into nothing. He illustrates his idea by means of the following example:

If the heir of a rich relative wants to arrange a properly solemn funeral for him, but laments that he cannot get it quite right, because (he says), "The more money I give my mourners to look sad, the merrier they look," then we laugh out loud, and the reason is that an expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing. (KU 5:333, 209)

This example points out the incongruity between the explanation (i.e. the outcome of the story) that we expect to hear, namely some reasonable explanation as to why the rich relative has troubles arranging for the proper funeral, and the explanation that is actually delivered. Based on the information given in the beginning of the story, we form an expected outcome that is shown to be wrong in the end. In other words, the outcome of the story disrupts or fails to meet our expectations.

Kant explains more clearly his notion of the transformed-into-nothing expectation by contrasting it with a *directly-contradicted* expectation. He writes that the expectation:

must not be transformed into the positive opposite of an expected object – for that is always something, and can often be distressing – but into nothing. For if in telling us a story someone arouses a great expectation and at its conclusion we immediately see its untruth, that is displeasing, like, e.g., the story of people whose hair is supposed to have turned

gray in a single night because of a great grief. By contrast, if in response to such a story another joker tells a very elaborate story about the grief of a merchant who, returning from India to Europe with all his fortune in merchandise, was forced to throw it all overboard in a terrible storm, and was so upset that in the very same night his wig turned gray, then we laugh and it gives us gratification. (KU 5:333, 209)

Our expectations are contradicted when we are presented with an outcome that contradicts our basic beliefs about the world (i.e., hair turning grey overnight) and which we find positively displeasing, rather than comical. On the other hand, a transformed-into-nothing expectation does not violate our basic beliefs about the world. The outcome of the story (i.e., wig turning grey) does not actually contradict our expectations; rather, it appears to be unrelated and detached from our expectations. Accordingly, our expectations are transformed into nothing when the outcome of the story appears to be nonsensical and unintelligible in light of our expectations (i.e., the wig absurdly turns grey).

To illustrate Kant's idea more clearly, let us consider a more contemporary example of a joke:

When the unfaithful artist heard his wife coming up the stairs, he said to his lover, "Quick! Take off your clothes!"
(Marmysz 2003, 36)

Here again we are confronted with a situation where our expectations (we expect that the artist will try to hide his affair by telling the lover to put their clothes on) are incongruous with the actual outcome of the joke (the artist tells the lover to take their clothes off). However, the actual outcome does not in fact contradict our basic beliefs about the world. Our expectations are not simply contradicted, since it is clear from the joke that the artist does want to hide the affair and not reveal

it. Rather, the outcome of the joke appears to be nonsensical in relation to our expectations.

A directly-contradicted expectation and a transformed-into-nothing expectation depend on a different mental state, i.e. different relationship between our faculties of imagination and understanding. When our expectations are directly contradicted, the imagination (what we perceive) disagrees with understanding (what we expect); that is, with our basic beliefs about the world. On the other hand, a transformed-into-nothing expectation involves a disconnected or detached relationship between imagination and understanding. That is to say, the imagination neither agrees nor disagrees with the understanding. As evident in the unfaithful-artist joke, our basic beliefs and expectations do remain intact (the artist wants to hide the affair). Thus, the imagination is not in disagreement with the understanding (with our expectations). Yet, it is also not in agreement, since we normally associate the act of taking clothes off with an attempt of revealing the infidelity, rather than hiding it. The artist's demand turns upside down our conceptual expectations concerning hiding the infidelity.

Laughter accordingly originates in a representation that involves disconnection, i.e. neither harmony nor disharmony between imagination and understanding. While harmonious (or disharmonious) relation between imagination and understanding results in the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful (or displeasure in the ugly), a disconnected relation between the two cognitive faculties results in neither pleasure nor displeasure. For example, Kant is very careful in describing the effect that a transformed-into-nothing expectation has on the faculty of understanding. He writes that such expectation "is certainly nothing enjoyable for the understanding" or "the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction" (KU 5:332, 209) implying thereby that there is no actual experience of displeasure. While failure to agree or disagree with our expectations is certainly not satisfying for the understanding, it is also not positively

dissatisfying. Rather, the experience is one of puzzlement, uneasiness and tension. When confronted with transformed-into-nothing expectation, understanding is simply lost.

3 The Paradoxical Pleasure of Laughter

Kant's formulation of laughter as it stands cannot account for the amusing aspects of laughter. If laughter is an affect resulting from the transformation of our expectations into nothing, i.e. into nonsense, but nonsense is unsatisfying for the understanding, then how can we enjoy laughter after all?

Kant does not give an explicit answer to this question, yet the few remarks he offers allow us to construe a plausible explanation. First, he writes that laughable objects "always contain something that can deceive for a moment" and it is only when the "illusion disappears" that we laugh (KU 5:334, 210). This suggests that nonsense in laughter is merely apparent and it is only when the illusion of nonsense disappears that we experience enjoyment. Secondly, laughter is produced by the "sudden shift of the mind, first to one and then to another point of view for considering its object, there can correspond a reciprocal tensing and relaxing" (KU 5:332, 209), which means that affective movement from tension to a pleasurable relief is necessitated by the movement of the mind. Thus, laughter involves an alternation between two different mental states. Thirdly, Kant appears to attribute the reciprocal tensing and relaxing to the faculty of understanding. For example, he writes that a joke

begins with thoughts which, as a whole, insofar as they are to be expressed sensibly, also occupy the body; and since the understanding, in this presentation in which it does not find what was expected, suddenly relaxes. (KU 5:332, 209)

This suggests that it is not the faculty of reason that takes control of the

nonsensical situation; rather, it is understanding itself that finds its way out of nonsense. Fourth, Kant states that:

we laugh and it gives us gratification, because for a while we toss back and forth like a ball our own misconception about an object that is otherwise indifferent to us, or rather our own idea that we've been chasing, while we were merely trying to grasp and hold it firm. (KU 5:333, 210)

Here the implication is that we laugh not at a nonsensical representation, but rather at realizing our own misconceptions about the given representation.

Taking all these points into consideration, the suggestion seems to be that laughter is a reaction to the dissolution of nonsense, rather than nonsense itself, whereby the dissolution of nonsense takes the form of realizing our own misconceptions about the object. Pleasure in laughter lies in detecting our mistaken assumptions about the object and thereby relieving us from the nonsense provoking tension. Thus, no appeal to the faculty of reason is required.

Kant's theory of laughter accordingly appears to be consistent with the leading contemporary theory of humor in philosophy and psychology, namely the incongruity theory. Although an earlier version of this theory considers the perception of incongruity as sufficient condition for laughter, most recent accounts argue that an additional element is required in order to explain the amusing aspects of laughter. According to some theorists this additional element consists in the resolution of incongruity. It is not the incongruity itself that is pleasurable, but rather the relief that occurs when resolving the incongruity. We laugh only when we grasp our mistaken assumptions about the object as we thereby automatically resolve nonsense. Without realizing our misconceptions about the object, the experience would be one of confusion and puzzlement rather than laughter, which often occurs when we fail

to understand the joke.

4 Laughter and the Sublime

As argued thus far, laughter is occasioned by a representation that appears nonsensical in light of our expectations and thus provokes the feeling of tension and frustration, but which in the end results in the feeling of pleasure due to the resolution of nonsense. We feel pleasurable relief in recognizing that it is not the representation itself that fails to agree with our cognitive abilities, but rather the opposite is the case; it is our own cognitive abilities that misguide us and lead us into a wrong direction (into forming false expectations). This implies that what is laughable is not the object itself, but rather the subject in recognizing the rigidity of its own mind.

Laughter accordingly shares a similarity with Kant's notion of the sublime in that they are both attributed not to the object (as is the case in the beautiful and ugly), but to our mind. Both involve some sort of incongruity, which is caused not by the object, but by the failure of our cognitive system. In the sublime, this incongruity is caused by the perception of objects of great size and powers that occasion the idea of limitlessness in us (i.e. limitlessness of size and the destructive and devastating power of nature) and which is evoked in us due to our limited capacity of imagination. Kant explains that imagination's ability to comprehend the sensible manifold is limited, thus it happens in the direct perception of a vast and powerful object that imagination fails to successfully comprehend the sensible manifold and present it as a unified whole. This failure of our imagination produces the feeling of displeasure.

In laughter, however, the incongruity is caused by representation that appears to be disconnected from the understanding and which we experience as nonsensical or purposeless. What we perceive (the outcome of the story) is not merely in opposition to what we are expecting; rather it is completely unrelated to our expectations. That is, it lies out-

side of our ordinary way of seeing and thinking about the world.

Furthermore, the feeling of displeasure or frustration in both sublime and laughter is merely of a transitory nature. Namely, they both result in a paradoxical feeling of pleasure. Pleasure in the sublime arises by means of a displeasing disharmony between imagination and reason (it is the failure of our imagination that reveals the presence of the faculty of reason), while in laughter it occurs by means of realizing our own misconceptions about the object. Thus, the source of both sublime and laughter is not actually the object, but the subject himself. The sublime is a feeling of inadequacy of our psychical and sensible nature, yet at the same time recognition of the supremacy of our reason over our sensible nature. Thus, it is a feeling of respect for ourselves as rational and moral beings. Laughter, on the other hand, is a feeling of inadequacy of our cognitive system, of our ordinary enforced rules of order that govern our perception of the world. Thus, it is a feeling of disrespect and self-mockery for our own cognitive abilities. Yet, similar to how we attribute sublimity “to an object in nature through a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject)” (KU 5:257, 141), we also attribute laughable deficiencies to the object rather than to ourselves. In contrast to the sublime, laughter reveals something about our cognitive and rational system; namely, that it is insufficient to explain all our experiences and perceptions of the world and that we often need to revise our expectations in order to make sense of the world.

We can see that laughter stands at an opposite pole from the sublime (just as ugliness stands at an opposite, negative pole of the beautiful). The experience of both laughter and sublime resides in the subject’s recognition of its own division between two extremes: that is, between the phenomenal and sensuous side, and the noumenal and rational side of our being. The difference is that in the sublime it is the rational side that dominates, the recognition of which is experienced through a feel-

ing of respect and awe. In laughter, on the other hand, it is the sensible side of human nature that dominates and which results in the underwhelming feeling of nonsense and insignificance. While sublime brings to mind the ideas of human greatness, decency, immortality, hope, and love, laughter brings to mind ideas of mortality, moral weakness, foolishness, ignorance, and irrationality. In the sublime, our expectations are overwhelmed as we come to realize the presence of the faculty of reason. In laughter, our expectations are underwhelmed as the illusion vanishes and we come to realize the triviality of the situation and degradation of values. The sublime celebrates the victory of our rational faculties, while laughter belittles them and mourns their fall.

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