

Existential Laughter

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The fact of the matter is that we must acknowledge that in the last resort there is no theory. (Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, entry 2509)

Each of the previous three articles in this series has examined one of the three main traditions of humour theory; those based around incongruity, superiority and the release of energy. We have seen that each of these theoretical traditions sheds some light upon humour and laughter, but also that all fail in their overly ambitious task of offering a fully comprehensive theory. This has not deterred some scholars from wanting to develop such a theory; perhaps by incorporating the best features of each of the main three theoretical traditions into one 'super-theory'. But while it is true that such a synthesis of theories might be superior, as a theory, to each by itself, such a technique would still not give us an adequate general theory. Why? Because we have seen that the inadequacies of the theoretical traditions are not merely those of omission; inadequacies which could be resolved by supplementing any given theory with insights from alternative perspectives. Rather, some of the most important problems are *intrinsic* to the theories themselves; most notably, the need to stretch terminology, to a sometimes ludicrous degree, which we observed in both the incongruity and superiority traditions. So rather than attempting, in this final article, the construction of such a super-theory, I shall approach our subject from a very different angle. Most philosophers who have written about humour and laughter have done so in passing; their comments usually being digressions from, or a subsection of, some topic perceived as being more important. It therefore seems surprising that two thinkers-Nietzsche and Kierkegaard-who attach to humour and laughter profound significance, have not attracted more attention in this field. ¹ This final article, therefore, will shift our attention away from 'theories of humour', and aim to show that both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard have something of interest to say about laughter and humour, but that this something relates, not to their relation to the theoretical traditions examined previously, but to the profound *existential* significance of laughter and humour.

Nietzsche's laughter

Let us start with Nietzsche. Possibly the best known Nietzschean soundbite on laughter is from his *Nachlass*:

Perhaps I know best why man is the only animal that laughs: he alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was *compelled* to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as might have been expected, the most cheerful. ²

This clearly shows that for Nietzsche, the comic and the tragic are closely interlinked.

Yet at the beginning of *The Gay Science*, he seems to favour the comic. Here Nietzsche expresses regret that 'the comedy of existence has not yet "become conscious" of itself'; that we thereby 'still live in the age of tragedy, the age of moralities and religions'. ³ Nietzsche describes founders of moralities and religions as 'teachers of the purpose of existence', ⁴ who try to offer reasons why life is worth living. Included in such an outlook seems to be the assumption that oneself, the other and life itself are matters which should be treated with great solemnity. The 'teacher of the purpose of existence...wants to make sure that we do not laugh at existence, or at ourselves-or at him...again and again the human race will decree from time to time: "There is something at which it is absolutely forbidden henceforth to

laugh".⁵ (Such an attitude is akin to what in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche calls the 'Spirit of Gravity'; 'gravity' (*Schwere*) meaning both 'heavy' and 'serious'.) But this proscription of laughter can only be temporary: 'There is no denying that in the long run every one of these great teachers of a purpose was vanquished by laughter, reason and nature: the short tragedy always gave way again and returned into the eternal comedy of existence'.⁶ Nietzsche's reasons for this favourable view of laughter and 'the comic' are clearly demonstrated in his other writings on laughter. He views it as having the potential to *redeem* us from the suffering of the human condition. It is the *redemptive potential of laughter as an attitude towards ourselves and our world* that leads Nietzsche to condemn those who forbid us to laugh at ourselves, them, and human existence. Note, therefore, that laughter is assigned a *quasi-religious* role. This notion of laughter as redemptive is already hinted at in Nietzsche's earliest book,

The Birth of Tragedy. Moreover, Nietzsche here offers an attitude of laughter as a direct alternative to one particular type of redemption; that promised by versions of Christianity which concentrate on an after-life, thereby according to Nietzsche-downgrading this life for the sake of a destructive false hope. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche discusses 'Dionysian' man's insight into 'the horror or absurdity of existence'; and how a confrontation with the abyss; a looking 'truly into the essence of things', provides him with 'tragic knowledge'. When we confront the idea that nothing we do could 'change anything in the eternal nature of things', this 'insight into the horrible truth outweighs any motive for action'.⁷ Yet here *art* can act as a 'saving sorceress'; turning 'these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity'.⁸

This brief hint of the importance of laughter or 'the comic' to Nietzsche is fleshed out in the much later 'Attempt at a self-criticism' of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Here Nietzsche criticizes his former self for succumbing to romanticism, in suggesting the need for tragedy as an 'art of metaphysical comfort'.⁹ The idea here is that 'romantics' can all too easily end up as similar to Christians, in that for them, art plays the same role as Christianity's after life in providing a solace which is, in Nietzsche's eyes, merely a way of trying to escape reality. Here Nietzsche warns against *any* such form of 'metaphysical comfort' and offers his alternative:

'No! You ought to learn the art of *this worldly* comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists. Then perhaps, as laughers, you may some day dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil-metaphysics in front. Or, to say it in the language of that Dionysian monster who bears the name of Zarathustra:

"Raise up your hearts, my brothers, high, higher! And don't forget your legs! Raise up your legs, too, good dancers; and still better: stand on your heads!

"This crown of the laugher, the rosewreath crown: I crown myself with this crown; I myself pronounced holy my laughter. I did not find anyone else today strong enough for that. "Zarathustra, the dancer; Zarathustra, the light one who beckons with his wings, preparing for a flight, beckoning to all birds, ready and heady, blissfully light-headed;

"Zarathustra, the soothsayer; Zarathustra, the sooth-laugher; not impatient; not unconditional; one who loves leaps and side-leaps: I crown myself with this crown.

"This crown of the laugher, the rosewreath crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter have I pronounced holy: you higher men, *learn* to laugh!"¹⁰

And it is on this ecstatic hymn of praise to laughter that Nietzsche's 'Attempt at a self-criticism' ends. Zarathustra's 'laugher's crown, this rosewreath crown' is clearly offered as an alternative to Jesus's crown of thorns. And the context within which Jesus acquired this crown is significant. According to the accounts of both Mark and Matthew, the acquisition of this headwear is as part of the Roman soldiers' mocking humiliation of Jesus immediately prior to his crucifixion.¹¹ Jesus seems here to be a victim of the cruel, mocking 'laughter of the herd' to which Zarathustra himself falls victim in the Prologue of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, when his attempt to teach the crowd in the market-place his doctrine of the *Übermensch* results in his being ridiculed and laughed at. Both Zarathustra and Jesus are mockingly laughed at for preaching radical and unconventional doctrines. Nietzsche's main points here, I suggest, are these. If the Christian gospel-reader comes to associate laughter with the cruel mockery of the soldiers in Jesus's final humiliation prior to the crucifixion, it is not difficult to see how he or she might come to give laughter negative connotations. (Recall the point commonly made that the majority of Biblical references to laughter are negative.) It is also easy to see how he or she might seize with relish Jesus's words about laughter's being available to the saved after death. (These words 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh'¹²-are accompanied by another saying-'Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep'¹³-which Nietzsche describes as 'the greatest sin here on earth'.) But this idea, Nietzsche thinks, contains within it connotations of *ressentiment* and revenge. This is the feature of Christianity for which Nietzsche takes it to task in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where he argues that central to Christianity is the idea of the revenge of the 'weak' or 'slavish' over the 'strong' or 'noble'. The upshot of all this is that Zarathustra is stressing that there can be kinds of laughter other than that of mockery and revenge; he is claiming that laughter can be redeeming. And it is the redeeming potential of laughter for *this* life; for the here and now, upon which Nietzsche wants to focus. This laughter-the 'laughter of the height'-represents a position from which one can laugh at 'all tragedies, real or imaginary'.¹⁴ From the vantage point of the height, there is nothing that cannot be seen as amusing; and the ultimate joke is life itself.¹⁵ We are now able to unpack the sense in which laughter, or a response to existence as 'comic', is being offered in direct opposition to the 'metaphysical comfort' of 'afterworldly' Christianity. (That this is so seems clear from the contrast between 'metaphysical' and 'thisworldly' comfort in the 'Attempt at a self-criticism' quote.) The implication seems to be that once 'this-worldly' comfort is learned, there will no longer be a need to learn any other kind of 'comfort'. Because for the person who has learned to laugh at anything-'all tragedies, real or imaginary'-such laughter will be both *all there is* (in the absence of an afterlife) and *all that is needed*. This perspective commended by Zarathustra seems to represent, on a huge scale, what John Morreall and others have called 'the humorous attitude'.¹⁶ If, as Morreall claims, important factors in such an attitude are a certain distance from oneself, one's views and one's values, and a realization that 'nothing is important *simpliciter*',¹⁷ then the one who can laugh the 'laughter of the height' passes this test. She who realizes that what life requires is constant self-overcoming; that there is in life no final goal or success, and yet is able to laugh at this realization; at the realization that one's life is, in an ultimate sense, pointless; may genuinely be said to be able to laugh at herself.

All this leads Greg Whitlock to claim that 'Nietzsche's philosophy is first and foremost the recognition of the value of humour for life. Zarathustra's antics of self-coronation and holy pronouncements are a comical celebration of the triumph of zarathustran lightness over rival nihilistic and desperate philosophies'.¹⁸ According to Whitlock, Zarathustra triumphs over 'melancholy modern man', who is 'a stranger to lightheartedness',

being 'weighed upon by the grave concerns of the day, be they great or small' .¹⁹ On such a view, Zarathustra's progress is all about 'lightheartedness'. This certainly squares with Nietzsche's constantly repeated preference, in *Zarathustra*, for 'lightness' over 'weight'; exemplified by the connections constantly drawn between laughter, 'lightness' and related ideas such as dance.²⁰

But while it is true that in *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche counsels something like this, Whitlock ignores a major problem with such a prescription. An extensive reading of Nietzsche leaves one with the recurring impression that the 'lightness' and 'joy' which he praises are, ultimately, beyond him. Nietzsche seems constantly to fail his own test of joyous affirmation without *ressentiment*.²¹ This raises an important question: is the 'laughter of the height' within the bounds of *human* possibility? And, moreover, does Nietzsche realize that it might not be? Zarathustra's exhortations to 'learn to laugh' are directed at the 'higher men'; a group of characters in the book who, while being far superior to the common herd of humanity, are far from being *Übermensch*. (The *Übermensch* the zenith of Nietzschean ideals; a being who exercises his will to power to destroy everything within him that is weak, comfortable and slavish, practising constant 'self-overcoming'- is Nietzsche's symbol for what is in some sense beyond humanity; 'man is a rope, tied between beast and *Übermensch*.²² Significantly, it is not claimed, even of Zarathustra, that he becomes an *Übermensch*.²³) So the question I want to pose is: Does the *Übermensch* represent Nietzsche's longing for what is *beyond* the 'lightness' that we have seen him counselling? The relevance of this question will become clearer when we compare Nietzsche with Kierkegaard.

Irony and humour in Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard's most extended treatment of irony and humour is to be found in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.²⁴ As with laughter for Nietzsche, so both irony and humour are for Kierkegaard *existential attitudes*; attitudes to an individual's entire being-in-the world, rather than momentary 'escapes' or 'reliefs' from the business of everyday living. But there is, for Kierkegaard, a fundamentally religious dimension to irony and-especially-humour. In his *Journals*, Kierkegaard famously remarks that 'the humorous is present throughout Christianity' and that Christianity is 'the most humorous view of world history'.²⁵

To understand these strange-sounding remarks, we need to understand the roles played by irony and humour in the *Postscript*. There are two: (i) as 'boundary zones' on the 'stages on life's way' or spheres of existence, and (ii) as 'incognitos' or masks for the ethical and the fully religious; as ways in which an ethical and religious outlook are given expression to the world outside the individual. Let us investigate this further.

Irony and humour as existential boundary zones

To do so, we need a brief summary of Kierkegaard's spheres of existence; the aesthetic, ethical and religious.²⁶ Kierkegaard's picture of living aesthetically is revealed most clearly in volume one of *Either/Or*. The aesthete is one who lives for the moment, with no overriding life-plan or guiding-principle other than seeking pleasure and avoiding commitment, since he fears that such commitment will lead to his greatest enemy: boredom. Kierkegaard employs various methods of indirect communication to persuade us that *despair* inevitably arises from such a mode of living. Moreover, in trying to convince himself and us that what gives meaning to life is enjoyment, the aesthete needs to use ever heavier doses of irony. This reveals the significance of irony for Kierkegaard; the ironist is he who realizes the limitations of living aesthetically. In becoming ironical, the aesthete

reveals that he has an *intellectual* understanding of the limitations of his particular object of desire, but he fails to make a further move; one which is not merely intellectual but *existential*; a move beyond irony to truly ethical living. The ethical is the 'way out' of the despair of 'living aesthetically'.

To be ethical, for Kierkegaard, involves committing oneself absolutely to one's projects (primarily social roles, such as parent, judge or teacher). By such commitment, one transcends the aimlessness of living aesthetically. Kierkegaard's ethical individual holds a narrative conception of the self, whereby one's life is given meaning and value—indeed whereby one *becomes* a self—through this commitment to, and acting on the responsibilities of, such projects. To fail in such a project is, at least partially, to fail as a person.

But such a mode of living has limitations, arising from two connected problems. Firstly, when commitments arising from two conflicting projects clash (e.g. family duties versus duties to one's country), how do we decide which to prioritize? The problem is the lack of one overriding grounding project. Without such a project, there will be within the ethical life the constant threat of conflict between the demands of one's different projects. Secondly, how does one choose which projects to commit oneself to in the first place? Despair can arise here too; stemming from a realization of the ultimate arbitrariness of one's selection of projects. After all, of any given project, it could be asked: what gives it its meaning? Why *that* project, and not some other?

Here Kierkegaard thinks the religious individual is at an advantage. For the individual who has made the extra-rational 'leap of faith', there is an absolute *telos-God-which* grounds all other projects. The fully religious individual maintains, along with 'a relative concern for the relative' (commitment to various 'temporal' projects), 'an absolute concern for the absolute' (commitment to God). No 'temporal' goal can warrant such absolute commitment; only the 'eternal'-God. But just as irony is supposed to be a boundary zone between the aesthetic and the ethical, so Kierkegaard claims that humour is a boundary zone between the ethical and the truly religious. Why?

To answer this, we need to understand the fundamental difference between the humorist and the religious individual. For Kierkegaard, as for Nietzsche, humour is crucially related to suffering. (Both irony and humour are discussed in this context.) Kierkegaard's admiration for the humorist lies in the latter's realization that suffering is *essentially*, not merely accidentally, related to existence. But the difference between the humorist and the authentically religious individual lies in the fact that 'the humorist turns deceptively aside and revokes the suffering in the form of the jest'.²⁷ 'The humorist comprehends the profundity of the situation, but at the same moment it occurs to him that it is doubtless not worth while to attempt an explanation. This

revocation is the jest'.²⁸ His realization that suffering is essentially related to existence does not go that one stage further, and accept that suffering is related to guilt, and the individual's inadequacy before God.

C. Stephen Evans expresses the view that for Kierkegaard the humorist 'is someone who has taken the humor which is a general element in life and made it the fundamental ground of his distinctive way of life'.²⁹ (Compare here the person who laughs Nietzsche's laughter of the height.) What Kierkegaard admires about this is that whereas everyone is able to see 'contradictions' or incongruities and laugh at them, by no means everyone 'is able to see and face the fundamental contradiction in her own existence—to smile and laugh at herself'.³⁰ Evans continues: 'The humorist in Kierkegaard's special sense has learned to smile at the whole of life, because she has learned to smile at herself. She can see the incongruity between her ideals and her actions, the contrast between the eternal love she was created for and the feeble temporal actions through which she attempts to express

that love'.³¹ So 'humor in this deep, profound sense' is close to the religious life because 'the heart of the religious life is this very perception of the permanent discrepancy between ideal and actuality'.³²

However, although humour and religious life are similar, they are not identical. What distinguishes them, for Evans, is a certain *detachment*. He claims that 'to perceive a contradiction as humorous one must perceive it from a detached standpoint'.³³ But detachment is out of the question for Kierkegaard's authentically religious individual, since he is 'strenuously seeking to *existentially realize* the resignation, suffering, and guilt which characterize the religious life'.³⁴ Kierkegaard claims that the humorist embodies a *knowledge* of Christianity which has not been realized existentially.³⁵ What lies behind this, for Evans, is the idea that the humorist has gained knowledge of the central idea of Christianity, the 'absolute paradox' of the incarnation; but then chooses to smile at this rather than make the 'leap of faith'. What 'limits' him is that he views the incarnation as a *doctrine*; a philosophical idea. Evans's point seems to be this. Viewed intellectually, as a doctrine, the incarnation could indeed raise a smile, since it is the 'absolute paradox'; the ultimate 'contradiction', and for Kierkegaard it is 'contradiction', or incongruity, in which humour is rooted. However, for the Christian, the incarnation is not merely a doctrine, but rather the source of an existential 'passion'.

So in viewing the paradox purely intellectually, the humorist necessarily misunderstands it. (The idea that he who attempts to understand religion in a purely intellectual way necessarily misunderstands it, is pivotal to Kierkegaard's philosophy of religion.) The Christian, then, will see things differently from the humorist. While able to see how the paradox might raise a smile, along with this awareness goes a *commitment* to Christianity nonetheless. 'His life then becomes a blend of jest and earnestness'.³⁶ The humorist, by contrast, is left with the jest alone as his fundamental attitude towards life. Here, then, lies the fundamental difference between our two characters.

Irony and humour as 'incognitos'

The second role irony and humour play for Kierkegaard is as 'incognitos', for the ethicist and the religious individual respectively.

Firstly, why is irony an incognito for the ethicist? For Kierkegaard's ethicist, commitment to the demands of the ethical; to the duties and responsibilities which follow from one's projects, must be 'infinite'. In view of this commitment, and in order not to be distracted by 'all the relativities in the world', the ethicist 'places the comical between himself and the world, thereby insuring himself against becoming comical through a naive misunderstanding of his ethical passion'.³⁷ What I take Kierkegaard to mean here is that the ethicist launches a kind of pre-emptive strike against being ridiculed (and the distraction from his projects which this might cause), by ironising himself. Kierkegaard tells us that the ethicist is 'ironical enough to perceive that what interests him absolutely [Le. his projects] does not interest the others absolutely; the discrepancy he apprehends, and sets the comical between himself and them, in order to be able to hold fast to the ethical in himself with still greater inwardness'.³⁸ *Irony is thereby a defence mechanism by which the ethicist, when necessary, protects the integrity of his self and creates a private space for the pursuit of his projects.* The irony he displays is self-irony. It might be thought, however, that the ethicist has a duty to communicate the ethical to others. Yet such irony can itself be a form of indirect communication; it could communicate something about the nature of ethical living—the need to create this 'private space'—to those progressing towards the ethical. In the way described above, the ethicist is able to *show* what he cannot *say*.

A similar 'incognito' is at work in the case of the humorist and the religious individual. The religious individual's commitment to God and the strivings of the religious life are ultimately

so private a concern, for Kierkegaard, that they cannot be expressed, except indirectly, to the world at large. Like irony for the ethicist, then, humour can provide for the religious individual 'a screen between himself and men, in order to safeguard and insure the inwardness of his suffering and his God-relationship'.³⁹ 'Religiousness with humor as its incognito is therefore a synthesis of absolute religious passion...with a maturity of spirit, which withdraws the religiousness away from all externality back into inwardness, where again it is absolute religious passion'.⁴⁰ In this way, the religious individual remains in the world, humour being his incognito in the same way that irony is for the ethicist. Humour provides a shield by which a space can be preserved in which the religious individual's 'God-relationship' can be acted out.

Connections and contrasts

This article has aimed only to make a preliminary comparison between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. What initial connections and contrasts can we draw?

Firstly, we should note that both philosophers are unusual in seeing, albeit in very different ways, a crucial link between humour, laughter and religion. Very little work has been done in this area, and Nietzsche and Kierkegaard would seem to be two potentially useful resources for future thinking on this subject. Secondly, recall our earlier observation that most philosophers who have written on humour and laughter have viewed them as mere diversions from more important business. Clearly, 'irony' and 'humour' for Kierkegaard, and 'laughter' for Nietzsche, are far more important than this. They play crucial *existential* roles; as attitudes towards human existence as a whole. Further consideration of their existential significance—rather than on theorizing as to their nature—is, I suggest, one potentially interesting direction in which the philosophy of humour and laughter could go.

It is worth considering what each thinker would make of the other. Firstly, how would Kierkegaard appear to Nietzsche? It does appear that for Kierkegaard, there is something the striving of the 'God relationship'—at which laughter is inappropriate. And there is no doubt that the authentically religious individual is, for Kierkegaard, an advance on the 'humorist'. So Kierkegaard clearly fails Nietzsche's test of being able to laugh at everything. But the question arises: are we able or prepared to face up to Nietzsche's challenge to laugh at everything—at 'all tragedies, real or imaginary'? As I asked earlier, can any human—in practice—pass this test? This leads us to ask: how would Nietzsche appear to Kierkegaard?

The distinction Evans draws between the humorist and the religious individual draws attention, Kierkegaard might claim, to a problem with the position Nietzsche commends. Nietzsche's view of the self is such that his admirable individual must view the creation of a coherent, stylish self as his perpetual, never-ending task. He may never rest on his laurels because, at any given point—to use Alexander Nehamas's words—'any given event may prove impossible to unify, at least without further effort, with the self into which one has developed'.⁴¹ And yet he must also have sufficient detachment from himself, his world and this process of self-creation, that he can view all of it as—ultimately—laughable. We have seen that for Kierkegaard, the reason the humorist falls short of the authentically religious individual is that the former lacks the strenuous commitment to the religious task which the latter undertakes. But focus, for a moment, on this strenuous commitment to a task. The self-overcoming that Nietzsche commends seems too similar to the religious outlook as described by Kierkegaard for it to be obvious how the two views—the ultimate commitment to a task and the ultimate futility and laughability of this, as everything else can easily be held simultaneously. It seems insufficient to me simply to say, as some have

suggested, that this is just part of the irony of 'the postmodern condition'.

Let me take this further. A connected problem stems from the fact that Nietzsche's laughter of the height is, at least in part, a laughter of *joy*. Yet, as mentioned earlier, this joy seems always to be beyond Nietzsche I suggest that the connections Kierkegaard makes between humour and religion offer an insight into why this might be.

The problem is that the laughter which Zarathustra urges the higher men to laugh is *willed*. 'Learn to laugh at yourselves as a man ought to laugh', Zarathustra demands; view existence and the world in such a way that there is nothing at which you cannot laugh. But is there not something odd about the idea of willed laughter? Such an idea, I suggest, betrays the fact that, for all his talk of 'joy' and 'lightness', the kind of laughter which Nietzsche is commending is, ultimately, *defiant*. It symbolizes a determination to 'affirm' in the face of despair.

In this regard, Kierkegaard's humorist is very different. Notably absent from a Nietzschean view of the world is that sense of absolute dependence characteristic of a religious outlook. Whereas characteristic of Kierkegaard's religious individual is a consciousness of being ultimately nothing before God. The religious individual, trusting in God, is able to see the humour in this-that humans, for all their apparent achievements, are ultimately utterly dependent on the divine but she is only able to *enjoy* it as humour because she is aware of a 'way out'; faith in such a God's benevolence. It is this 'way out' that enables her to smile through the pain. Such a smile will be of a very different character from Nietzsche's laughter of defiance. Kierkegaard's 'humour as an incognito for religiousness' has as its base a *security* which is utterly absent from the precarious life of self creation which Nietzsche's Zarathustra sets himself. The question this raises is whether a Nietzschean joy is *possible* in the absence of such security, religious or otherwise. In other words, does Nietzsche's defiant laughter, far from showing Whitlock's 'comical celebration of the triumph of Zarathustran lightness over rival nihilistic and desperate philosophies', in fact fall within the bounds of what Howard Hong, writing about Kierkegaard, has described as 'the incognito of resignation or despair'?⁴²

Finally, let us consider why two thinkers one a Christian, one who labelled himself the Antichrist-see humour and laughter as so important. The answer, I suggest, lies in the idea that for both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, humour and laughter operate as *expressions of the limitations of human possibility*. Let me explain.

T.F. Morris suggests that for Kierkegaard the existential attitude of humour 'accentuates that there are *no temporal goals* which are sufficient to establish one's happiness'.⁴³

When *all* temporal objects of desire are seen as incapable of bringing about 'eternal happiness', the person who reacts to such a discovery with humour truly deserves to be called an existential humorist. The religious significance of this, for Morris's Kierkegaard, is that if one understands the limitations of all temporal objects of desire, one will not pursue any such object-such as an 'ethical' project *as if* it could bring one ultimate happiness.

This realization provides the opportunity to turn to 'the eternal': 'It is when we are free from the pull of all temporal things that God can come into our range as a possible object of desire'.⁴⁴ Thus the existential attitude of humour can free us to desire God.

Now just as humour for Kierkegaard constitutes knowledge of the limitations of 'all temporal objects of desire', I suggest that for Nietzsche, laughter represents something very similar: the recognition of the limits of all *human* objects of desire. We mentioned earlier the problem which might appear to face Nietzsche: if there is a position from which nothing can be taken seriously, what sense can it make to strive for constant self-overcoming? I suggest that for Nietzsche the *Übermensch* is intended to provide a 'way out' of this. Zarathustra's laughter is, at least in part, at the inadequacy of *the human*. But the higher men are urged to see 'how much is still possible'. What is still possible is the *Übermensch*;

that symbol of self-overcoming and a creative will to power which personifies Nietzsche's ideal. The laughable inadequacy of the human expresses itself in Kierkegaard by opening, in the 'humorist', the possibility of the desire for God; and in Nietzsche, by Zarathustra's desire for the *Übermensch*.⁴⁵ In both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, humour and laughter represent responses to the limitations of what is *humanly* possible. Opinions will differ as to the desirability of what each puts *beyond* the humanly achievable. Many will view Kierkegaard's recommended 'leap into the arms of God' as unacceptable; and Nietzsche's urge to strive for the overhuman a grandiose piece of wishful thinking.⁴⁶ If so, however; if we are unable to go beyond the 'human' in either of these ways; it may be that what we are left with is precisely humour and laughter. I am suggesting that what leads Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to view humour and laughter as being of such fundamental importance for their overall worldviews is their place as *expressions of the limits of human possibility*. Thus our two thinkers might serve as a premonition of Georges Bataille's infamous claim that a burst of laughter is 'the only imaginable and definitively terminal result. .. of philosophical speculation'.⁴⁷ For both, all specifically *human* endeavour is ultimately worthy of laughter. That is one reason why this series has not ended with an attempt at a 'super-theory' of humour or laughter. Such an enterprise would simply have been too laughable.

Notes

1. For instance, in the seminal and otherwise highly useful collection John Morreall (ed). (1987) *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, State University of New York Press), Nietzsche is completely absent; and though there is a short extract from Kierkegaard, it serves mainly to present him as another incongruity theorist. (Five of the seven pages of Morreall's book which the extract takes up are devoted to a footnote the main purpose of which is to offer examples to support the claim that 'the comical' is based upon 'contradiction', by which Kierkegaard means what others have meant by 'incongruity'.)
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. A.M. Ludovici. Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, (1909), p.74.
3. Nietzsche (1883) *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York, Vintage, 1974, Sect. 1.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Nietzsche (1872) *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York, Vintage, 1967, Sect. 7.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Nietzsche (1886) 'Attempt at a self-criticism' of *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann,

New York, Vintage, 1967, Sect. 7.

10. *Ibid.* What Nietzsche quotes here is a condensed version of some of the references to laughter in 'On the Higher Man', a section of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part 4.

11. The relevant passages are Matthew 27: 27-31 and Mark 15: 16-20.

12. Luke 6:21.

13. Luke 6:25.

14. Nietzsche (1883), *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 'On Reading and Writing', trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969.

15. For a fuller account of the 'laughter of the height', and a contrast with the 'laughter of the herd', see John Lippitt (1992) Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the status of laughter, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32, no. 2, pp. 39-49.

16. See John Morreall (1983) *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany, State University of New York Press, chapter 10.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

18. Greg Whitlock (1990) *Returning to Sils Maria: A Commentary to Nietzsche's Also Sprach Zarathustra*. New York, Peter Lang, p. 267.

19. *Ibid.*

20. For instance, the well-known quote that Zarathustra 'would believe only in a god who understood how to dance'. See *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 'On Reading and Writing'.

21. See, for example, some of his extremely resentful attacks upon Christianity, such as that on St Paul in *The Antichrist*.

22. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 'Zarathustra's Prologue'.

23. Although certain scholars, such as Laurence Lampert, claim that the *Übermensch* is what Zarathustra becomes.

24. Like many of Kierkegaard's works, the *Postscript* is written under a pseudonym; in this case, Johannes Climacus. The significance of the pseudonyms for understanding Kierkegaard is a highly controversial area, but one beyond the scope of this paper. Many commentators have thought that of all the pseudonyms, it is Climacus who most closely represents Kierkegaard's own views. Yet the reader should bear in mind that, although throughout this piece I shall refer to the author of the *Postscript* as 'Kierkegaard', it is through the pseudonymous figure of Climacus that he speaks; and we cannot be certain that the views expressed by Climacus are

necessarily those of Kierkegaard himself.

25. Soren Kierkegaard (1970), *Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hang. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, entries 1682 and 1681, respectively.

26. Owing to lack of space, the following summary will have to be slightly oversimplified. In particular, there are held to be two kinds of religiousness:

'Religiousness A', a religion of 'immanence', in which the individual's life is given meaning by faith in 'the eternal' (God), but which falls short of 'Religiousness B'; a genuine Christianity in which the believer is related through faith to the 'absolute paradox' of the incarnation.

27. Kierkegaard (1846) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 400.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 401.

29. C. Stephen Evans (1987) Kierkegaard's view of humor: must Christians always be solemn?, *Faith and Philosophy*, 4, no. 2, p. 181.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. This claim about the importance of 'comic distance' is one often made in humour theory.

Compare the earlier paragraph discussing Morreall on the 'humorous attitude'.

34. My italies.

35. See *Postscript*, p. 243.

36. Evans, *ibid.*, p. 184.

37. *Postscript*, p. 450.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 451.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 452.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Alexander Nehamas (1985) *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, p. 85.

42. Howard V. Hong (1976) The comic, satire, irony, and humor: Kierkegaardian reflections, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, I, p. 104.

43. T.F. Morris (1988) "Humour" in the concluding unscientific postscript; *Heythrop Journal*, XXIX, p. 300. My emphasis.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

45. These, in fact, are closer than might at first appear; John Andrew Bernstein, amongst others, has argued that Nietzsche's thought represents the attempt to reclaim *for man* what had

once been bestowed upon God. (See his *Nietzsche's Moral Philosophy* (1987) Associated University Presses.) So Kierkegaard represents the desire for God; Nietzsche the desire for man as God.

46. The exact meaning and significance of the *Übermensch* or 'overhuman' in Nietzsche's thought remains a highly contentious issue in Nietzsche scholarship, but one beyond the scope of this article.

47. Georges Bataille (1985) *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl. Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, p. 99.