

Is a sense of humour a virtue?

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“[T]he more I come to think of you, you noble one [Socrates], you were the only one who nobly and profoundly understood what comedy is and when it is appropriate to a high-minded spirit”.¹

Is a sense of humour a virtue? In an informal sense of the term ‘virtue’, of course it is. A sense of humour is a trait nobody wants to be thought of as lacking, and one that we value in partners, friends and colleagues alike. But the claim that a sense of humour is a *moral* virtue seems far more controversial. Yet in a fascinating article, just this claim has been advanced by Robert C. Roberts,² who relates it to the further claim that there are figures, such as Socrates and Tolstoy, “whose wisdom was partially constituted by a sense of humour”.³ Now, if it is right that certain forms of wisdom are partially constituted by the possession of a certain sense of humour, then it is a likely corollary that the development of such wisdom goes hand in hand with the development of such a sense of humour. In which case, the development of such a sense of humour would be a significant dimension of moral education, understood as a training in the virtues.

These claims are related to the idea that we sometimes experience ‘aspect-dawning’ of ethical depth and profundity. It seems reasonable to claim that aspect-dawning – coming to ‘see as’ differently, ‘cottoning on’ to a particular way of seeing – is central to humour. (Consider the basic cognitive shift involved in ‘getting’ a

joke.) As I shall aim to show, Roberts succeeds in showing that such a change of aspect can sometimes be ethically significant: when it enables one, through what Kierkegaard calls the 'leap' of ethical transition, to enter a fundamentally different ethical perspective, as a result of which one's moral 'vision' is transformed.

Moreover, we standardly think of humour as a pleasurable phenomenon. And Aristotle claims that pleasure is an index of the virtues: that is, what I take pleasure in is an index of my character. If this is so, this lends a *prima facie* plausibility to Roberts' claim that one index of one's character is one's sense of humour. Could it be, then, that exposure to a 'virtuous' sense of humour can make a difference to my character, and therefore be a useful tool in moral education?

In what follows, I shall begin to explore the question of what features a sense of humour would need to have to count as 'virtuous', and to discuss the corresponding dangers of a 'vicious' sense of humour. I shall also suggest that what Aristotle calls fine 'discernment' in relation to the ethical dimension of a sense of humour might involve seeing that a sense of humour is *only* a virtue if it is linked to other virtues. But here I part company with Roberts, in two ways. First, I suggest that we need to distinguish two distinct claims that Roberts conflates: whether a sense of humour is a trait highly useful in the development of the virtues, and whether it is itself a distinct virtue. The former seems to me more plausible than the latter, and is actually quite sufficient to support most of what Roberts wants to claim. Second, Roberts claims that in order to be a virtue, a sense of humour must be allied with compassion and hope. A version of such a claim might still be made by someone who accepted the above qualification. That is, even if one held that a sense of humour is a trait highly useful in the development of the virtues rather than being itself a distinct virtue, one might still think that such a trait was a manifestation of virtue only if allied

with compassion and hope. However, I shall argue that such a view would be wrong. First, Roberts does not explain why we should select these two virtues in particular for such special treatment. Second, I aim to show that humour lacking these qualities can still nevertheless play roles of vital ethical importance, such as fostering the self-recognition on which self-knowledge depends. Insofar as self-knowledge is an essential factor in the development of the virtues, such a sense of humour can still count as ‘virtuous’.

I. Humour, virtues and the human *telos*

The idea of a sense of humour as a virtue has its roots in Aristotle. In a short, often overlooked section of book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle recognises wit [*eutrapelia*] as a moral virtue, but chiefly because “one part of life is relaxation, and one aspect of this is entertaining conversation” (1128a).⁴ I want to make a bolder claim about the ethical significance of a certain kind of sense of humour than this. It is valuable not only in a dinner party guest or such like, but is of much more central importance in the development of our moral vision.

According to Aristotle, a virtue is a *hexis* ([habitual] disposition). Moreover, it is “the disposition that makes one a good man and causes him to perform his function well” (1106a). Roberts implicitly draws on this background: the idea that virtue theorists standardly presuppose the existence of a human nature and *telos*. He argues that to possess a virtue is to have realised at least one aspect of that nature, and that thus a virtue amounts to “a congruity between one’s character and one’s nature”.⁵ (If it is part of my *telos* to possess the virtue of courage, say, and I do indeed possess this, then there is a match between what I am and what I ought to be.) Conversely, a

moral failure - where one falls short of the human *telos* in some respect - is an incongruity between one's nature or *telos*, and one's character. For the virtue ethicist, perceiving such incongruities "would be a mark of moral knowledge, and the disposition to perceive them could be counted an important part of wisdom".⁶ But incongruity is often held to be central to humour.⁷ Though humour only occasionally seems to depend upon outright contradiction (such as in the schoolboy howler "Lincoln was a great Kentuckian. He was born in a log cabin, which he built with his own hands."⁸), it often seems to depend upon a "softer" kind of incongruity: what one commentator calls "the linking of disparates, ... the collision of different mental spheres, ... [or] the obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another".⁹ To give but one example, Paul Merton's confession that he has always wanted to ask Lee Harvey Oswald: "Can you remember what you were doing when President Kennedy was assassinated?". Roberts notes that for Socrates, human well-being depends upon caring more about such features as integrity than about such factors as one's wealth or reputation. But he adds: "One gets the impression that the lack of congruity between real well-being and what people pursued as their well-being ... often struck him as comical."¹⁰ One might be tempted to quote examples in support of this claim, and indeed Roberts references various examples of Socrates' dry, ironic sense of humour. I shall give but one, from the *Apology*. This occurs at the point where Socrates, having been found guilty, has to propose a suitable punishment:

I tried to persuade each one of you not to think more of practical advantages than of his mental and moral well-being ... What do I deserve for behaving in this way? Some reward, gentlemen, if I am bound to suggest what I really deserve ... Nothing could be more appropriate for such a person than free maintenance at the state's expense.¹¹

But it is important to realise that an awareness of this ironic sense of humour is something that emerges over a growing acquaintance with Socrates' personality as one reads Plato's early dialogues: it cannot be captured simply by quoting isolated examples of it.¹² The reason why this is important will become clearer over the course of our discussion, but we can start to see the point by considering Roberts' claim that to perceive *as comical* the incongruity between a person's well-being and what they pursue as their well-being:

is an achievement quite above most of us, for whom there is little incongruity to be perceived in pursuing wealth, reputation, and physical well-being as the highest ends (even if we give lip service to Socrates' opinion that there is something higher). It is one thing to know that there is incongruity here. But to see it so vividly and so confidently as to see the *humor* in it suggests either that one is frankly native to the viewpoint from which the incongruities are perceived (like Socrates) or that one has been drawn into that viewpoint for the moment by a skilful humorist.¹³

One important point that this quote brings out is that a genuine instance of 'aspect-dawning' is necessary genuinely to share the humour here. Mere intellectual assent to Socrates' point of view ("lip service") will not do. (Compare 'getting' a joke in the sense of merely understanding what the joke is supposed to be, with 'getting' it in the sense of actually finding it funny.) Moreover, Socrates often seems to take a certain *pleasure* in the incongruity he sees. And according to Aristotle, in Myles Burnyeat's words, "to learn to do what is virtuous, to make it a habit or second nature to one, is among other things to learn to ... take pleasure - the appropriate pleasure - in doing it".¹⁴ If this is right, coming to see or feel a perspective as one's native

perspective and to take an appropriate pleasure in doing so is an important part of a training in virtue.

However, finding something comical is clearly only *one* of a range of possible responses to finding it incongruous.¹⁵ So when is seeing as comical the incongruity between someone's character and their nature an *appropriate* response? Why not rather feel concern or alarm at the moral failings of oneself or another? I take there to be at least two dimensions to this question. The first part of an answer might be given by considering what the ethical advantages of developing a taste for incongruity could be. Can we show that a taste for incongruity - something that is *prima facie* ethically neutral - in fact has potential advantages in the formation of ethical character? The second part requires a response to the possible objection that certain forms of amusement - especially, perhaps, at one's own failings - involve ethical evasion. I shall aim to deal with each of these questions in turn.

II. The ethical advantages of a taste for incongruity

The development of sensitivity to incongruity gives us several benefits. First, part of such sensitivity is a heightened awareness of the discrepancy between what people say and what they do. (Compare here Roberts' remarks on Socrates). And John Morreall has suggested that a person with such awareness is more likely to see people's feet of clay, and thus be less gullible, less susceptible to demagoguery.¹⁶ Second, of more fundamental ethical relevance, such an awareness of discrepancy is a useful tool in transcending the concerns of one's *own* current self: in developing 'comic distance' (akin to what Roberts calls 'dissociation'). This ability to step outside one's own immediate concerns is surely essential to the development of any

‘moral’ point of view. For example, on a broadly Aristotelian picture, as I strive for virtue I need to be able to get at least sufficient distance from my character to be able to compare it to my *telos* as embodied in the virtuous agent. (Aristotle claims that “the man of good character ... is a sort of standard and yardstick of what is fine and pleasant” (1113a).) This is presumably what Roberts means when he claims that “self-transcendence, especially the capacity to transcend one’s own *character*, is a presupposition of the life of virtue”.¹⁷ Third, more specifically, the cultivation of such comic distance is necessary in the development of such virtues (or quasi-virtues) as patience, perseverance and humility. In these and perhaps in other ways, a sense of humour can be a useful tool in the development of one’s moral character. But I suggest that we shall understand this better by further investigating Roberts’ claim that a sense of humor can be “an index of character”.¹⁸ Like much else in this discussion, this thesis has its roots in Aristotle, and it will be useful for our purposes to show these roots more explicitly than does Roberts.

III. A sense of humour as an index of character

Let us start by returning to Aristotle’s general account of the virtues. Famously, he defines a virtue as aiming to hit the mean between excess and deficiency. Moral virtue, he claims, “is concerned with feelings and actions” such as “fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and pleasure and pain generally” (1106b). Any of these, he continues, can be felt too much or too little. “But to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue” (1106b). Aristotle’s discussion of *eutrapelia* fits this general characterisation. Excess and deficiency are here represented by the buffoon and the

boor respectively. Buffoons [*bomolochoi*] are those “who go too far in being funny”: they are “vulgar persons who exert themselves to be funny at all costs, and who are more set upon raising a laugh than upon decency of expression and consideration for their victim’s feelings” (1128a). On the other hand, “[t]hose who both refuse to say anything funny themselves and take exception to the jokes of other people are regarded as boorish and sour” (1128a). As usual, Aristotle wants us to hit the mean: “those who exercise their humour with good taste are called witty [*eutrapelos*], as one might say ‘nimble-witted’” (1128a).

As mentioned earlier, Aristotle’s discussion places these qualities in the context of entertaining conversation of the kind befitting the Athenian nobleman. So he objects to the buffoon, for instance, because he says “things that a man of taste would never dream of saying, and some that he would not listen to either” (1128b). But I am arguing – along with Roberts - that the ethical significance of humour is more wide-ranging than this. Considering part of St. Thomas Aquinas’ gloss on Aristotle’s discussion can help us to see why. According to Aquinas’ explanation of this part of the *Ethics*, those deficient in *eutrapelia* appear “to be ‘agrii’, that is, ‘boorish’ and hard, *because they are not softened by the pleasure of play*”.¹⁹ Unlike the witty person, the boor, lacking such softening, simply takes himself and life’s travails too seriously. Thus understood, this ‘softening’ – breaking down the barriers of excessive seriousness and self-importance - seems an important prolegomena to developing the capacity for self-transcendence.

According to Aristotle, the mean is judged not with reference to any general principle, but “the decision lies with our perception” (1109b), and the right action is judged with reference to what the virtuous agent would do. So the simple answer to

the question of what qualities a ‘virtuous’ sense of humour would have to possess is “those possessed by the sense of humour of a virtuous agent”. Clearly, at a first glance this doesn’t seem to help. So what more can we say to get beyond this?

III. Perspectivity and the index of character

To say that a virtuous sense of humour is that of a virtuous agent is not sheer filibustering evasion. To see why, recall the earlier claim that a talented humorist can bring us round to a particular new way of seeing. This is a version of what Roberts calls ‘perspectivity’: the ability - very important in the appreciation of humour - to share something of the perspective or ‘vision’ of another. This is why the reference to the *character* of the virtuous agent is important. Moreover,

[h]umor depends on “being there”, on being in a position to have just the right *Gestalt* as provided by setting, background, mood, shared language, and experience; and it seems to be this sense of or orientation in the normal ... that provides the “perspective” required for appreciating a piece of humor.²⁰

To find humorous, say, what Socrates finds humorous about people’s tendency to pursue illusory forms of well-being depends upon our “having access to [his] perspective on human attitudes and behavior”.²¹

It is worth pausing to ask exactly what is meant here by ‘having access to’. It cannot mean - at least to begin with - ‘sharing’, in the full sense of that term, otherwise one could not be brought around to seeing things in the ‘new’ way, since one would have to be there *already*. (This is a specific instance of a more general point about Aristotle’s *Ethics*: the question of what its intended audience already possesses, and what they still need, in relation to training in virtue.) A first

suggestion, then, might be that it involves entertaining the ‘new’ position *hypothetically*: trying to view the world ‘as if’ Socrates’ view were the case. But, unless strongly qualified, that will hardly do: it sounds far too intellectualist. What is required, I suggest, is an *imaginative identification or engagement with the ‘new’* point of view. Richard Moran has distinguished between ‘hypothetical’ and ‘dramatic’ imagination, and what I have in mind is what Moran seems to mean by the latter.²² Whereas ‘hypothetical’ imagination involves assuming something to be true and seeing what consequences follow, ‘dramatic’ imagination “involves something more like a point of view, a total perspective ... And imagining along these lines involves something more like genuine rehearsal, ‘trying on’ the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it”.²³ A large part of the ‘skill’ of Roberts’ humorist is that he makes this imagining *easier* for us, at least in the sense that he initiates a process that may culminate in our genuinely coming to ‘see’ the world from this alternative point of view. It goes without saying that a prerequisite for such imagining is the ability to stand outside one’s own current concerns. But crucial for our purposes is the question of what the result of regular exposure to such humour might be. In a discussion of this, Roberts makes the following suggestion as to the dangers of entering into a racist or sexist view in order to ‘appreciate’ racist or sexist jokes:

If I indulge regularly and gleefully in sexist humor, and have no corresponding taste and time, say, for humor that “puts down” male chauvinists, I should consider myself in danger of falling into a kind of *addiction of “vision”* which may lead to a change in my commitments and character.²⁴

However, what matters for our purposes is that there can be positive as well as negative “addictions of ‘vision’.” Just as a racist and sexist joke could be enjoyed, in the right circumstances, by one who is not himself racist or sexist, so “virtuous humor

like that of Socrates ... can be enjoyed by those who are not virtuous, though it is unlikely to originate among them”.²⁵ What is of most interest about this for our purposes is the following claim:

[J]ust as the enjoyment of vicious [e.g., racist or sexist] humour is a “seeing” from the perspective of vice and has thus the tendency to convert one, or confirm one, in vice; so the enjoyment of Socratic ... humor is a “seeing” from the perspective of virtue and has the tendency to convert one, or confirm one, in virtue. Thus the “playful” character of humor is one source of its moral importance. It is because people are *not* locked, by virtue of their beliefs, in a particular humor perspective, that it can function as a bridge from virtue to vice and from vice to virtue. We can play at thinking with Socrates just as we can play at thinking with the sexists. And if a virtues-humorist like Socrates (or we ourselves, if we have undertaken a project of moral growth) can get us much involved in seeing the incongruities in vice, then the enjoyment of that humor which at first nudges us toward virtue, may come at last to express it in us.²⁶

In other words, to borrow Moran’s phrase, we have in such cases ‘tried on’ such a point of view sufficiently often to find that it has eventually come to ‘fit’ us. Thus – and this is the main point - we reach something like Aristotle’s conclusion: that character is formed largely through habituation, and that the right role models are crucial, in developing a ‘virtuous’ sense of humour just as much as in developing any given virtue.²⁷

IV. Humour as a “boundary zone”: a Kierkegaardian *excursus*

But who is capable of developing such a sense of humour? Implicit in Roberts' discussion is the idea that those most likely to be brought around to such a vision are those already on its boundaries. This fits with the way Aristotle's *Ethics* is often read more generally. As Burnyeat puts it, "he is giving a course in practical thinking to enable someone who already wants to be virtuous to understand better what he should do and why".²⁸ But this is made explicit in reference to humour (or, to use his more general term, 'the comic') by Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Climacus, who repeatedly describes himself as a 'humorist', famously, but *prima facie* bizarrely, claims that two forms of the comic – irony and humour - are "boundary zones" between the Kierkegaardian existence-spheres. A life-view of irony is said to be on the boundary between the aesthetic and ethical views of life, humour between the ethical and the religious views of life.²⁹ We do not need, for our purposes here, to go into detail about what Kierkegaard means by the aesthetic, ethical and religious existence-spheres: it is sufficient to know that, on Climacus' schema, the ethical is 'higher' than the aesthetic, the religious 'higher' than the ethical. Most Kierkegaard commentators have been at a loss to explain why two forms of the comic, specifically, should play this "boundary zone" role. But our discussion so far about a 'virtuous' sense of humour enables us to suggest an answer. The role of irony and humour as "boundary zones" involves relating oneself to a 'higher' position that one has not embraced, but is *nevertheless making some attempt to identify or engage with imaginatively*, after the fashion of Moran's 'dramatic' imagination. The last quote from Roberts above makes it possible to see how, through such imaginative identification or engagement, the genuine appropriation of a 'higher' perspective might actually take place. Jamie Ferreira has shown that, contrary to the popular picture of Kierkegaard, the 'leaps' of ethical and religious transition are not necessarily acts of will, but shifts of vision akin

to Wittgensteinian ‘aspect dawning’. In particular, they are often realisations that a particular ‘vision’ has ‘taken hold’ of one, such that it has become “so real that it seems to be the only way to see it”.³⁰ The kind of attractive redescription that makes such a ‘leap’ possible for a person could come about as a result of imaginative identification or engagement with a ‘higher’ ethical perspective. I suggest that Climacus views irony and humour as boundary zones largely because they involve this kind of imaginative identification or engagement.

Relatedly, Roberts suggests that since a ‘virtuous’ sense of humour “is a power to see by the light of the virtues, it is a form of wisdom and therefore a capacity which in the higher reaches of its development surely must be counted among the virtues.”³¹ In fact, I don’t see how this conclusion – that a sense of humour is a distinct virtue – is supposed to follow. But we do not need to agree with Roberts on this specific point to agree with his later, more plausible, conclusion that “humor, and a sense for it, can function as a bridge to virtue, a device of moral education: moral humor can draw into the moral life persons who are on the periphery of it.”³²

Exposure to such ‘virtuous’ rather than ‘vicious’ humour is an example of the kind of conditioning out of inappropriate responses that is central to a broadly Aristotelian account of moral education. And if such a perspective that we are initially brought into by a skilful humorist eventually becomes ‘second nature’ (the aim of training in virtue, on Aristotle’s account), then the humour in which we take pleasure is an example of “being properly affected”: of taking pleasure “at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way”.

V. “Moral vision” and the sense of humour

Before leaving the foregoing behind, it is worth noting why the references to ‘vision’ and ‘aspect dawning’ are important. Having a “Socratic” sense of humour is indeed a matter of having a certain “vision”: it cannot be reduced to, say, holding certain beliefs.³³ The philosopher who perhaps more than any other has been responsible for putting the metaphor of ‘moral vision’ on the ethical map is Iris Murdoch. Murdoch claims:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, *what they think funny*: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what ... one may call the texture of a man’s being or the nature of his personal vision.³⁴

Two points in relation to this quote are important here. First, and most obviously, Murdoch’s inclusion of “what they think funny” on this list of constituent parts of a person’s vision is obviously significant for our purposes. Second, her overall point about a person’s ‘vision’ is true of our Socrates: that is why, as alluded to earlier, it is dangerous to try to demonstrate his sense of humour simply by quoting isolated examples of it.

Let us summarise and recap the argument so far. If a person's sense of humour can betoken something of his character, and if our training in virtue must take place by reference to an exemplary virtuous agent, then it is *prima facie* plausible that such an agent's sense of humour might be a useful moral-pedagogical tool. I think that my claim here makes explicit what Roberts probably has in mind when he suggests that "considered as an educational device" humour "can be a way of communicating, in something like a vision, some distinctions fundamental to an ethical view of life".³⁵ And we can accept this conclusion regardless of whether we accept Roberts' further claim that a certain kind of sense of humour is a distinct virtue.

VI. The "ethical evasion" objection

But let us return at this point to the objection trailed earlier. This objection was that laughter – especially at oneself – could amount to a form of ethical evasion. For instance, Reinhold Niebuhr claims that laughter after having recognised "the depth of evil" is "the instrument of irresponsibility"³⁶: a failure, ultimately, to take either the self or life with sufficient seriousness. This point, put excessively dogmatically for my taste by Niebuhr, is put somewhat more persuasively by Conrad Hyers:

It is possible to laugh at oneself as a way of excusing oneself, as a technique for not looking candidly at oneself, and of casually evading the deeper necessities of repentance, seeking forgiveness, and gaining restitution and change. Here humor, instead of being the servant of seriousness ... becomes the screen of irresponsibility ... Humor can become an easy path of escape from intellectual labor, moral accountability, and religious commitment.³⁷

(I take it that any reader put off by the religious dimension of Hyers' way of putting this point can readily imagine a purely secular ethical version of the same point.)

That this *can* happen is undeniably true. But we are now in a position to see that this objection simply reinforces the overall point for which I have been arguing. There is no reason to suppose that the kind of Socratic humour we have been considering falls foul of this objection. Insofar as this humour is rooted in a perspective of virtue, and a realisation of the continual need to do ethical work on oneself in the life of developing virtue, such humour *is*, ultimately, “the servant of seriousness”.³⁸ Anyone who fell into the trap that Hyers highlights would no longer *be* practising this ‘humour of virtue’. The objection therefore simply reinforces the importance of our looking towards the right exemplars or role models.

VII. Criticizing Roberts: compassion, hope and attention to the particular

So far, the position I have outlined is broadly sympathetic to that of Roberts, though I have aimed to make more explicit than he does how such a position is rooted in Aristotle. Let me now start to put some distance between Roberts and me.

We noted earlier in passing the importance of fine ‘discernment’ to Aristotle’s view of moral judgement. This discernment, Aristotle claims, lies in “perception”. Now consider the idea that such discernment might involve recognising links between, and the inter-dependence of, certain virtues. Many virtues are only that if allied to certain other virtues. (In saying this, I am not subscribing to a full-blown ‘unity of the virtues’ thesis, but only to the weaker claim that *some* traits cannot be virtues if separated from some other virtues.) It seems plausible to think that something similar might be true of a sense of humour. But Roberts’ claim in this respect is too strong. He claims that “a sense of humour cannot be a virtue unless it is

allied with compassion and hope”.³⁹ I have already questioned the need to describe a sense of humour as a specific virtue. But even allowing for this, need we agree that a sense of humour cannot be ‘virtuous’ in our broader sense – that is, useful in the development of the virtues – unless it is allied with compassion or hope? I see no reason to suppose so. First, as mentioned earlier, Roberts does not give any especially compelling reason why these two specific virtues should be selected for such special treatment. Second, this part of Roberts’ thesis is offered at too high a degree of generality. Let us consider these points in turn.

Roberts introduces the need for compassion and hope in response to the discomfort he anticipates his reader might feel with the idea of someone such as Socrates “being amused at something as tragic as the failure of a human being to achieve his most essential well-being. Is there not something morally defective about a person who can be amused by this sort of thing?”⁴⁰ Consequently, he claims that the Socratic sense of humour is only virtuous if it brings with it a sense of hope for those at whom one is amused, which he contrasts with an aloofness and indifference to their well being. (“If it is ever fitting to be amused by somebody’s being lost, it must be on the supposition that there is hope for him.”⁴¹) He claims that “Socrates’ philosophy of persons seems to allow for hope that they may, in some mode of existence, come to themselves”,⁴² and behind this hope “must be a compassion which really does wish them well”.⁴³ It is far from clear to me that Socrates is always this optimistic, and it may be that there are better exemplars under this aspect than him. If one were to make the best case one could for this part of Roberts’ thesis, one might better turn to the Catholic short story writer Flannery O’Connor. Compassion and hope play a vital role in O’Connor’s often humorous stories. O’Connor portrays characters who are in many ways odious, and although we find ourselves laughing *at* them (rather than *with*

them), we are typically not encouraged to do so in a sneering fashion. Two of O'Connor's best stories - "Everything that rises must converge" and "Revelation" - end with a kind of revelation in which the key characters - the arrogant young student Julian and the self-righteous bigot Mrs. Turpin - come to see themselves for what they are, but in a way that allows for repentance and the improvement of their character. In what follows, I shall focus on "Revelation". It would be hard to imagine anyone further from the Socratic maxim of "know thyself" than Mrs. Turpin. A snob and a racial bigot, she makes snap judgements of everyone she meets, but is utterly convinced of her own right to a place in heaven. The following passage gives a sense of Mrs. Turpin's character:

Sometimes at night when she couldn't go to sleep, Mrs. Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself. If Jesus had said to her before he made her, "There's only two places available for you. You can either be a nigger or white-trash", what would she have said? "Please, Jesus, please", she would have said, "just let me wait until there's another place available", and he would have said, "No, you have to go right now and I have only those two places so make up your mind". She would have wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would have been no use and finally she would have said, "All right, make me a nigger then - but that don't mean a trashy one." And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black. ...

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them - not above, just away from - were the white-trash; then above them were the homeowners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud

[her husband] belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their own homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it. Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head ...⁴⁴

At the end of the story, her revelation as she cleans out the hogs⁴⁵ is of “a vast horde of souls rumbling toward heaven”, in which “a tribe of people whom she recognized as those who, like her and Claud, had always had a little of everything”⁴⁶ march *behind* the blacks and “white trash” to whom Mrs. Turpin has always unquestioningly taken herself to be superior. In O’Connor’s Catholic vision, Mrs. Turpin’s revelation shows her the fundamental equality before God of all humans – including those she has always looked down upon. “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” I suggest that O’Connor’s compassion is shown in the fact that, however awful Mrs. Turpin is, we are never encouraged to sneer at her. And her hope is shown in the thought that even someone as narrow-minded as Mrs. Turpin might come to see the error of her ways. My point is that, although O’Connor undoubtedly encourages us to laugh *at* Mrs. Turpin, the presence of this compassion and hope gives the humour a fundamentally different character from what it would have if we had just been encouraged to sneer at her. Although writers on humour often distinguish between ‘laughing with’ and ‘laughing at’, the above draws our attention to the fact that there are also very different kinds of ‘laughing at’.

So there are certainly cases in which compassion and hope are allies in a ‘virtuous’ sense of humour. Moreover, this is one way of glossing a claim made by Kierkegaard: that a sense for the comic needs to be balanced with a sense of pathos.⁴⁷ But consider another case relevant to the virtues. Isn’t there such a thing as a sense of humour that lacks both compassion and hope and yet which can be redeemed by its ability to foster the self-recognition upon which self-knowledge depends? Much satire answers this description. Consider, for instance, the following description of a university departmental meeting, from Malcolm Bradbury’s novel *The History Man*:

Then the alarm clock of Benita Pream, the administrative assistant, pings; Professor Marvin coughs very loudly and waves his arms. He looks up and down the long table, and says: “Can we now come to order, gentlemen?” Immediately the silence breaks; many arms go up, all round the table; there is a jabber of voices. “May I point out, Mr. Chairperson, that of the persons in this room you are addressing as ‘gentlemen’, seven are women?” says Melissa Todoroff. “May I suggest the formulation ‘Can we come to order, persons?’ or perhaps ‘Can we come to order, colleagues?’ “Doesn’t the phrase itself suggest we’re somehow normally in a state of *disorder*?” asks Roger Fundy ... The meeting has started; and it is always so. ... Benita Pream’s alarm has pinged at 14.00 hours, according to her own notes; it is 14.20 before the meeting has decided how long it is to continue, and whether it is quorate, and if it should have the window open, and 14.30 before Professor Marvin has managed to sign the minutes of the last meeting, so that they can begin on item 1 of the agenda of this one, which concerns the appointment of external examiners for finals: “An uncontentious item, I think”, says Professor Marvin.

It is 15.05 before the uncontentious item is resolved. Nobody likes the two names proposed by Professor Marvin. But their dissents are founded on such radically different premises that no two other names can be proposed from the meeting and agreed upon. A working party is suggested, to bring names to the next meeting; no one can agree on the membership of the working party. A select committee of the department is proposed, to suggest names for the working party; no one can agree on the membership of the select committee. A recommendation that Senate be asked to nominate the members of the select committee who will nominate the members of the working party who will make proposals for nominations so that the departmental meeting can nominate the external examiners is defeated, on the grounds that this would be external interference from Senate in the affairs of the department: even though, as the chair points out, the department cannot in any case nominate external examiners, but only recommend names the Senate, who will nominate them. A motion that the names of the two external examiners originally recommended be put again is put, and accepted. The names are put again, and rejected. A motion that there be no external examiners is put, and rejected. Two ladies in blue overalls come in with cups of tea and a plate of biscuits, and place cups in front of all the people present. A proposal that, since the agenda is moving slowly, discussion continue during tea is put and accepted, with one abstainer, who takes his cup of tea outside and drinks it there. The fact that tea has come without an item settled appears to have some effect: a motion that Professor Marvin be allowed to make his own choice of external examiners, acting on behalf of the department, is put and accepted. Professor Marvin promptly indicates that he will recommend to Senate the two names originally mentioned, an hour before; and then he moves onto the next item.⁴⁸

This wonderful passage is likely to ring a bell with any lecturer or professor who has experienced the pedantry, time-wasting and petty power-mongering of many a meeting. The passage is hardly characterized by compassion and hope. Yet it is important to note that many readers may come to recognize in such satire aspects not only of their colleagues but also of themselves. Such self-recognition, and the self-knowledge that can stem from it, is surely an important dimension of a training in virtue, and so the related sense of humour – even if it lacks compassion and hope – cannot be dismissed as devoid of virtue.

What could Roberts say in response to this? Perhaps that such satire might be thought to manifest hope at least insofar as its ultimate aim is to *improve* people. But this seems to me somewhat forced. If it does not strike you thus in this particular case, then consider the following remark from Philip Larkin, on why a writer should have a regular job. As a writer, Larkin morosely explains, one often wakes up and wants to slit one's throat. Whereas in a regular job, within fifteen minutes at work, you will want to slit someone else's throat.⁴⁹ Clearly, to describe such a line as either compassionate or hopeful *would* seem forced. But while it is far from clear that such a line *manifests* virtue, such 'black' humour can play a significant role in the *development* of the virtues insofar as we are forced to recognize what we are, at least sometimes, like. In other words, again, such humour fosters the self-recognition upon which self-knowledge depends. To exclude such humour from the realm of virtue – perhaps even to denigrate it as 'vicious' – would be to overlook an important fact. Sometimes, the pills we need to swallow are more bitter than Roberts allows, and it is not clear that a humour of manifest compassion and hope is best placed to bring about the recognition that we need. (Nobody knew this better than Jonathan Swift.) Roberts includes 'black' humour on his list of the varieties of humour he considers to be

“positively reprehensible”.⁵⁰ Yet no reasons are given in support of this. What I am suggesting is that, in denigrating such humour in this way, Roberts misses a potentially important dimension of humour’s ethical significance.

One could go further against Roberts by considering a further kind of ‘black’ humour, related somewhat to the Larkin line: the kind of ironic humour that, again, shows no signs of either compassion or hope, but which nevertheless recognizes the human need to ‘go on’ with life despite its capacity to disappoint. An obvious example comes from Dorothy Parker:

Razors pain you;
 Rivers are damp;
 Acids stain you;
 And drugs cause cramp.
 Guns aren’t lawful;
 Nooses give;
 Gas smells awful;
 You might as well live.⁵¹

Again, it would be pushing one’s luck to describe the last line as manifesting hope. So it would seem – as with the Bradbury and Larkin cases – that insofar as such ironic humour excludes compassion and hope, it could not count, for Roberts, as virtuous. But, for reasons similar to those given above, I don’t see why such a sense of humour should be ‘out of bounds’ to a person developing the virtues. Why, exactly, should such a person shy away from such a sense of irony?

The conclusion we can draw from all this is that Roberts' claim - that a sense of humour, in order to be virtuous, must be allied with compassion and hope - is too strong, too broad-brush. He perhaps recognizes this when, at one part of his discussion, he seems to qualify his earlier claim. He claims that a sense of humour would not be a moral virtue if it were "isolated from certain other virtues, *such as* compassion and hope".⁵² On this view, perhaps he would concede that compassion and hope might, in some circumstances, be replaceable with other virtues. But it would be a mistake to go down the road of trying to isolate what other virtues or attitudes, as well as compassion and hope, might be candidates for this role. What we need is a less general approach than this: more "attention to the particular" and a greater sensitivity to context. Our earlier discussion enables us to see why. In the discussion of O'Connor, for instance, only by paying attention to the particular context in which the humour occurs were we able to see that there can be significantly different cases of 'laughing at', some of which should certainly not attract our ethical censure.

VIII. Summary and conclusion

Let us recap. I've suggested, following Roberts, that there are certain forms of moral wisdom that are partially constituted by the possession of a certain kind of sense of humour. I've also suggested, as a specific instance of Aristotle's general claim that what one takes pleasure in is an index of one's character, that one's sense of humour is an index of one's character. Moreover, exposure to a virtuous sense of humour (such as that of Socrates) – and the corresponding 'moral vision' of which it is a part – can be a useful tool in moral education. This is again a specific instance of a more general claim of Aristotle's: that moral character is developed via habituation.

But we can accept all this without agreeing that a sense of humour is a distinct virtue. Roberts is also right to think that part of the fine discernment so important to moral perception will require us to see that a sense of humour could only count as ‘virtuous’ (in our broader sense) if linked to other virtues. However, he does not take on board an important implication of this claim. For I have also argued that Roberts is wrong to suppose that this can be cashed out on so general a level as the claim that a combination of compassion and hope is always necessary. In reply to his position, as well as pointing out that he gives no compelling case as to what is so special about these two particular virtues, I have also aimed to make plausible the idea that even humour lacking these qualities can nevertheless play ethically important roles, such as fostering the self-recognition on which self-knowledge depends. Insofar as self-knowledge is an essential factor in the development of the virtues, such humour cannot legitimately be excluded from the realm of the ‘virtuous’ sense of humour. And we shall be best placed to see this precisely by being sensitive to the context in which such humour occurs: by paying “attention to the particular”. Writers on the virtues commonly stress the importance of their context-dependence. A ‘virtuous sense of humour’, it seems to me, is no exception.⁵³

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. H.V. and E. H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), Volume 2, entry 1763.

² Robert C. Roberts, "Humor and the virtues", *Inquiry* 31 (1988), pp. 127-49.

³ Roberts, 1988, p. 131.

⁴ All quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from the translation by J. A. K. Thomson (London and New York: Penguin, 1976). One sign of how overlooked this section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* has been is that Hugo Rahner entitled his article on it "Eutrapelia: a forgotten virtue" (see M. Conrad Hyers (ed.) *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 185-97). Rahner begins his article with the question: "Did you ever practice *eutrapelia*?" (p. 185). The context makes it quite clear that he expects his audience not to have much of a clue what he is talking about.

⁵ Roberts, 1988, p. 130.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The so-called "incongruity theory" is standardly held to be one of the three major traditional "theories" of humour (alongside "superiority" and "relief"). For an overview of such theories see: John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); John Morreall (ed.) *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); John Lippitt, "Humour and incongruity", *Cogito*, 8 (1994), pp. 147-53, "Humour and superiority", *Cogito*, 9 (1995) pp. 54-61, "Humour and release", *Cogito*, 9 (1995), pp. 169-76; and Noel Carroll, "Humour", in Jerrold Levinson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 344-65.

⁸ Cited in Marie Collins Swabey, *Comic Laughter: a philosophical essay* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 115.

⁹ D. H. Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1951), p. 235.

¹⁰ Roberts, 1988, p. 132.

¹¹ Plato, *Apology*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in *The Last Days of Socrates* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 36c-37a.

¹² Roberts clearly agrees with this: see Roberts, 1988, p. 148 n. 7.

¹³ Roberts, 1988, p. 132.

¹⁴ M. F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on learning to be good”, in Amelie O. Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 77.

¹⁵ On this point, see Morreall, “Funny ha-ha, funny strange and other reactions to incongruity”, in Morreall (ed.), 1987, pp. 188-207.

¹⁶ John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 151.

¹⁷ Roberts, 1988, p. 147.

¹⁸ Roberts, 1988, p. 144.

¹⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nichomachum*, lib. iv, lect. 16, cited by Rahner, in Hyers (ed.), 1969, p. 193, my emphasis.

²⁰ Roberts, 1988, p. 134.

²¹ Roberts, 1988, p. 133.

²² Richard Moran, “The expression of feeling in imagination”, *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), pp. 75-106.

²³ Moran, 1994, p. 105.

²⁴ Roberts, 1988, p. 137, my emphasis. Compare here Gore Vidal’s quip that the real problem with pornography is that consuming it leads you to want *more* pornography. Note also exactly what is and is not being claimed here. Roberts describes the “addiction of ‘vision’” as a “danger”, not an inevitability. Laurence Goldstein has suggested to me that some traditional working men’s club comedians can regularly tell racist jokes in their acts while remaining on a personal level non-racist. But even if this is true, it does not falsify Roberts’ claim that the addiction of vision can be a *danger*. Ultimately, Roberts’ is an appeal to plausibility. My agreement with him stems from the fact that it strikes me as plausible that spending too much time inside the head of the racist, with no “corresponding taste and time” for humour that is not racist, could be corrupting, in much the same way that even if one has no especial objection to pornography, one might find good cause to worry about someone whose taste in films extends only as far as – say - a violent, misogynistic kind of porn.

²⁵ Roberts, 1988, p. 138.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Note that in saying this I do not mean to deny that sometimes empathy with another person precedes and leads to our being able to appreciate her distinctive sense of humour, rather than *vice versa*. My

claim is not that a sense of humour is absolutely necessary to achieve such empathy, but simply that it can be a useful such tool: one that is, moreover, not fully appreciated. I am grateful to Laurence Goldstein for pointing out that sometimes the causation can be the other way round.

²⁸ Burnyeat, 1980, p. 81.

²⁹ Or so Climacus says in a number of places. Actually, the full picture is rather more complicated: for a detailed account, see John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2000), especially chapter 5.

³⁰ M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: imagination and will in Kierkegaardian faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 110.

³¹ Roberts, 1988, p. 138.

³² Roberts, 1988, p. 147.

³³ This point about “vision” is a significant part of Aristotle’s understanding of virtues (*aretai*) as opposed to skills (*technai*). Whereas in the latter case the excellence of the product is normally sufficient to say that its maker acting skilfully in producing it, in the case of a virtue, “we need to see not only what she did or said; we need to know how she *saw* what she was doing or saying” (Gerard J. Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 55, my emphasis).

³⁴ Iris Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality”, in *Existentialists and Mystics* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1999), pp. 80-1, my emphasis.

³⁵ Roberts, 1988, p. 147.

³⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humor and Faith”, in Hyers (ed.), 1969, p. 141.

³⁷ M. Conrad Hyers, “The Comic Profanation of the Sacred”, in Hyers (ed.), 1969, p. 26.

³⁸ Compare Wittgenstein: “Working in philosophy ... is really more a working on oneself. On one’s own interpretation. On one’s way of seeing things.” (*Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 16e.) I am grateful to Laurence Goldstein for reminding me of this remark.

³⁹ Roberts, 1988, p. 127.

⁴⁰ Roberts, 1988, p. 145.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation", in Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), pp. 491-2.

⁴⁵ Earlier in the story, Mrs. Turpin has been attacked in the doctor's surgery by a young girl who tells her to "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (p. 500).

⁴⁶ O'Connor, 1971, p. 508.

⁴⁷ This point is made in various places: see, for instance, *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. H.V. and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 366 and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. H.V. and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 80-93.

⁴⁸ Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man* (London: Arena, 1984), pp. 154-5.

⁴⁹ I take this from *Pretending to be me*, Tom Courtenay's one-man show based on Larkin's poetry and letters, but have been unable to track down the original source of the line.

⁵⁰ Roberts, 1988, p. 128.

⁵¹ Dorothy Parker, "Résumé", in *The Collected Dorothy Parker* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 99.

⁵² Roberts, 1988, p. 145, my emphasis.

⁵³ For comments on earlier versions of this paper, I should like to thank David Cockburn, Laurence Goldstein, Daniel Hutto, Stephen Mulhall, David Owen, Anthony Rudd, Robert Sharpe, Robert C. Solomon and audiences at the Universities of Canterbury (New Zealand), Essex, Hertfordshire and Wales (Lampeter).