

Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy

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Aristotle on Wittiness

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In his ethical works, Aristotle investigates a panoply of ethical virtues. Some of these virtues—such as temperance, courage, and justice—are familiar excellences that other philosophers also explore. Aristotle, however, also identifies wittiness, *eutrapelia*, as a virtue. Aristotle's interest in wittiness invites questioning. In what sense is wittiness a virtue? Why should Aristotle devote attention to it? Wittiness, after all, typically falls off the tables of virtues that we draw up today. Wittiness might seem more like a good *social skill* than an ethical virtue *per se*.¹

In what follows, I examine Aristotle's views on the nature of wittiness, primarily as he presents them in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here, Aristotle offers his fullest account of wittiness as a virtue, strictly speaking.² I tackle four main questions that Aristotle's *Nicomachean* account generates: (1) What, according to Aristotle, is wittiness? (2) How do Aristotle's moral psychological views inform Aristotle's account, and how might Aristotle's discussions of other, more familiar virtues elucidate wittiness? (3) How does wittiness, as an ethical virtue, benefit its possessor? And (4) how can Aristotle resolve key tensions that his commitment to a *virtue* of wittiness generates for his ethics?

1. Elucidating Aristotle's Sketch

Aristotle situates his account of wittiness within a larger discussion of the social virtues, that is, virtues “concerning certain words and deeds in a community” (περὶ λόγων τινῶν καὶ πράξεων κοινωνικῶν: *EN* 4.8.1128b5–6).³ One of

¹ As Curzer 2012: 7 notes.

² In *EE* 3.7, Aristotle is unwilling to describe wittiness as a virtue, strictly speaking. Instead, he makes the puzzling claim that wittiness, like friendliness and truthfulness, is praiseworthy, yet not a virtue, “for it is without choice” (ἀνευ προαιρέσεως γὰρ: 1234a24–25). Following Gottlieb 2009: 48, I assume that the *EE* discussion construes wittiness as a temperamental character trait, rather than as a virtue. On wittiness as a temperamental character trait, see also Aristotle's characterization of the “educated hubris” of youth in *Rhetoric* 2.11, which I discuss briefly. *Magna moralia* 1.30's discussion is noncommittal on wittiness's virtue status.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, Greek translations are my own from the TLG. I have benefited from consulting various translations, however.

these virtues, truthfulness (ἀλήθεια, explored in *EN* 4.7), concerns truthful self-presentation. Two other social virtues from this cluster—a nameless virtue akin to friendliness (identified as φιλία in *EN* 2.7.1108a28) and wittiness (εὐπράγελα) —“are about the pleasant” (περὶ τὸ ἥδύ: 1128b7). Aristotle, in turn, carves out wittiness’s proper domain. Recreation (ἀνάπαυσις) is part of human life (1127b33), indeed, a necessary part (1128b3–4).⁴ Such is the sphere of wittiness, which Aristotle examines in *EN* 4.8. Friendliness, which Aristotle explores in *EN* 4.6, concerns the pleasant in our other social engagements (1128b8–9).

In *EN* 10.6, Aristotle explains recreation’s necessity more fully. Recreation is required, he says, for the sake of keeping active at work in serious activity (σπουδαίειν: 1176b33–1177a2). As a general principle, a given *X* is a serious (σπουδαῖος) *X* when that *X* performs well as an *X*; that is, according to *X*’s proper virtues (*EN* 1.7.1098a9–12; 2.6.1106a17–21). For human beings, serious activity consists in the exercise of the soul’s rational element according to virtue. Hence, the serious person is characterized by his activity according to virtue (10.6.1176b27). Ethically virtuous activity, however, is strenuous. In acting, we must respond at the right time, about the right objects, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way (2.6.1106b21–22). Being serious is “work,” because it is tough to grasp the mean (2.9.1109a24–30; cf. 2.6.1106b28–33). Our human limitations prevent us from remaining at work in such serious activity all ways and continuously. Instead, to engage in serious activity as fully as possible, we require breaks. “Recreation, then, is not an end; for it comes to be for the sake of activity” (10.6.1176b35–1177a1).

Recreation characteristically involves passing time with playful amusement (διαγυῖς μετὰ παιδιᾶς; 1127b34). Such amusement, in turn, characteristically involves joking and laughter. But we can joke and indulge laughter excessively or deficiently, both as speakers and listeners (1128a3–4). A virtue, then, is necessary to address how we amuse ourselves in our recreation. The buffoon, the *bōmolochos*, goes to excess in these ways, joking and enjoying jokes without restraint (1128a4–7; 1128a33–b1). The boor, the *agroikos*—or perhaps “the stiff”—is deficiently disposed toward joking and enjoying jokes. Boors are “those themselves saying nothing laughable and disgusted by those who do” (1128a7–9). The boor, who contributes nothing to playful amusement, is “useless” in this domain (1128b1–3).

The buffoon and the boor are excessive and deficient, respectively, concerning (1) what, (2) how, and (3) to whom they speak and listen (in relation to the laughable). The witty person, in contrast to both of these characters, exhibits an intermediate state. In the sphere of playful amusement, he enjoys saying, and

⁴ I choose “recreation” for ἀνάπαυσις, given Aristotle’s view, to be discussed, of ἀνάπαυσις’s role in reenergizing and reinvigorating our capacities.

listening to, that which one should—and as one should (1128a1). Further, the witty person discerns in whose presence he stands when he speaks and listens (1128a2). A certain dexterity or tact (ἐπιδεξιότης), then, is proper to the witty person (1128a16–17). The name given to witty people (*eutrapeloi*) speaks to their versatile (*eutropoi*) character (1128a10). The witty person displays a situational attunement in the sphere of playful amusement that enables him to joke, and to enjoy jokes, well. Aristotle observes that we tend to confuse witty people and buffoons. The latter, given their power to elicit laughter as such, are often called witty. But Aristotle thinks that we must carefully distinguish buffoons from witty people (1128a15–16). We can, after all, joke too much, about the wrong things, in the wrong way, and with the wrong people.

To get clear about “what” and “how” the witty person will enjoy speaking and listening, consider the tact that the witty person displays. Such tact, Aristotle suggests, exemplifies a decent, liberal, educated, and refined character, as opposed to a slavish, uneducated one (1128a20–22; a31–32). Hence, the witty person will say—and will listen to—those things that decent and liberal people would enjoy in their playful amusement (1128a18–20). The witty person “says what is not inappropriate for a liberal” person (1128a26). Although different people find different items pleasant and hateful (1128a27–28), the decent and liberal person’s pleasure sets the norm. Later, in *EN* 9, Aristotle holds that “the serious person, *qua* serious, enjoys actions according to virtue, but is disgusted by those [that come] from vice, just as the musical person is pleased by fine melodies, but pained by bad ones” (1170a9–11). Such is the “pure and liberal pleasure”—unlike mere indulgence in bodily pleasure—that the serious person enjoys (cf. 10.6.1176b19–21).

Thus, as both speaker and listener, the witty person enjoys innuendo (ὐπόνοια) as opposed to the foul language (αἰσχρολογία) common in older forms of comedy (1128a23–24).⁵ He will not enjoy all kinds of jokes—especially if they indulge in, or constitute, direct personal abuse (λοιδορήματα) (1128a28–31). Existing laws that forbid such abuse, then, need not restrain the witty person (1128a30–31).⁶ On the contrary, the witty person, exemplifying a graceful or refined (χαριεῖς) character, is a law in himself (1128a31–32). As suggested by the

⁵ Taylor 2006: 234 and Halliwell 2008: 317 contend that Aristotle has in mind the scurrilous comedy of Aristophanes. Cullyer 2013: 148 identifies the speech of the sausage seller in Aristophanes’ *Knights* as a paradigm of the sort of “old” comedy that Aristotle has in mind. Janko (1984) 2002: 206, by contrast, denies that Aristophanes is the target. According to Janko, Aristophanic comedy actually exemplifies the intermediacy between buffoonery and boorishness constitutive of wittiness. On this reading, “old” comedy is exemplified in the direct personal abuse seen in the so-called Megarian comedy of Susarion (c. 580 BCE). For a discussion of ancient evidence, see Janko (1984) 2002: 244–50.

⁶ Aristotle does not necessarily endorse these laws in *EN* 4.8—see *τοῦς*, “perhaps,” at *EN* 4.8.1128a31.

Politics' description of law as intellect without desire (3.16.1287a32), the witty person regulates his own behavior according to reason.

2. Wittiness and *Epithumia* for the Pleasures of Laughter

Aristotle's account of wittiness follows the general pattern of *EN* 3–4's discussions of other ethical virtues. In particular, it follows the doctrine of the mean, as articulated in *EN* 2.6.1106b25–1107a8. (1) Aristotle's account of wittiness identifies a sphere of concern, namely, speaking and listening as part of playful amusement during recreation. (2) The account identifies excessive, deficient, and mean states, namely, buffoonery, boorishness, and wittiness. (3) The account explains the ways in which the buffoon and boor are excessive and deficient with respect to what, how, and to (and with) whom they engage in the relevant domain.

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, and, indeed, Aristotle's account of ethical virtue, emerge against the background of Aristotle's moral psychology. How do Aristotle's psychological views inform and illuminate his discussion of wittiness? To put this question into sharper focus, recall that, on Aristotle's view, the ethical virtues concern the reason-responsive element of the human soul. The ethical virtues are states in which this element not only listens to, but also harmonizes with, practical reason's orders (*EN* 1.13.1102b13–1103a10; 3.12.1119b15–16; 9.4.1166a13–19; *EE* 2.8.1224a24–25). More specifically, I take Aristotle to hold that the various ethical virtues concern the reason-responsive element's epithumetic and thumotic aspects.⁷ If so, then precisely which aspects of the reason-responsive element does wittiness concern?

Aristotle is less than clear on this point.⁸ But we can make headway by considering Aristotle's remarks on buffoons and boors. Buffoons, Aristotle says, are notable for "wholly striving for the laughable and aiming more at making laughter than at saying elegant things and not causing pain to the object of joking" (*EN* 4.8.1128a4–7). The buffoon "is weaker than the laughable, and sparing neither himself nor others if he will cause laughter" (1128a33–35). Buffoons, that is to say, are dominated by a certain love of laughter. Boors, by contrast, are "disgusted" with or "unable to endure" (δυσχεραίνοντες) those who would say something funny (1128a8–9; 1128b4).

⁷ Here, my account of Aristotle on ethical virtue's concern for the reason-responsive element of the soul is influenced by Aquinas' discussion of the various ways that the ethical virtues concern concupiscible desire (= *epithumia*) and irascible desire (= *thumos*). See *ST* 1.81.2; 1–2.23.1. For fuller discussion, see Walker 2018; chap. 6. On this distinction's Platonic origins, and on Aristotle's acceptance of it, see Cooper (1996) 1999: 255–64. On the concupiscible/irascible distinction's historical development, see Meyer and Martin 2013: 653–54.

⁸ As Bostock 2000: 48 and Curzer 2012: 172 note. On this basis, Bostock 2000: 48 denies that wittiness actually is a virtue of the nonrational part.

Buffoons and boors, in short, are inordinately attracted to, and repulsed by, the pleasures of laughter and the humorous. *Rhetoric* 1.11, for its part, emphasizes such pleasures: "[S]ince playful amusement, every indulgence, and laughter are pleasant, it is necessary for laughable things—men and words and deeds—also to be pleasant" (1371b34–1372a1). *EN* 10.6 similarly highlights the pleasures of playful amusement (1176b9). On its account, those who elicit laughter are welcome company for tyrants. For such jokers make themselves pleasant (1176b13–16). Pleasure, however, is the characteristic object of *epithumia* (*Topics* 6.3.140b26–30; 6.8.147a1; *EN* 3.1.1111a32; 7.9.1151b11–12; *EE* 2.7.1223a34; *Rhetoric* 1.10.1369b15–16).⁹ On this basis, I suggest, wittiness concerns a specific kind of non-rational desire, namely, *epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter.

We have good reason to identify the pleasures of laughter as objects of *epithumia*. For Aristotle, as for the Plato of the *Republic*, bodily pleasures—the pleasures of food, drink, and sex—are *epithumia*'s paradigmatic objects (cf. *Republic* 4.437e and 439d with *DA* 2.3.414b5–15; *Part. An.* 2.17.661a6–8; *EN* 3.10.1118a31–32; *Rhetoric* 1.11.1370a17–27). *Epithumia*, however, can extend to other pleasant items, such as honor and wealth, perhaps via our associating the satisfaction of bodily pleasures with the possession of honor and wealth.¹⁰ On the one hand, the pleasures of laughter have an intense, strongly bodily component, which shows them akin to other bodily pleasures. In the throes of laughter, our faces contort and turn red; our eyes squeeze closed; our bodies convulse in paroxysms; we gasp for breath. On account of the human midriff's thin, sensitive skin, stimulating this area can lead us involuntarily to burst out in laughter (*PA* 3.10.673a1–12).¹¹ Recognizing how overpowering the pleasures of laughter can be, Aristotle allows that we may forgive laughter-akratic people who burst into laughter at inappropriate times (*EN* 7.7.1150b5–12). On the other hand, we tend to enjoy the pleasures of laughter in the same recreational contexts that we enjoy certain bodily pleasures, such as eating and drinking. In *EN* 10.6, Aristotle segues from remarks on tyrants' enjoyment of the pleasures of laughter to remarks on the other, bodily pleasures that tyrants enjoy (1176b9–21; cf. *EN* 1.5.1095b20–22). Hence, we are prone to associate the pleasures of laughter with these bodily pleasures. In multiple, overlapping ways, pleasure from laughter stands to count for Aristotle as a secondary or derivative object of *epithumia*. Aristotle thus invites additional comparison with Plato's Socrates, who says that the soul's pleasure-desiring element takes strong delight in jokes (*Republic* 10.606c).¹²

⁹ On *epithumia* as "pleasure-based" desire, see Pearson 2012: chap. 4.

¹⁰ Cf. Lorenz 2006: 47–48 on *epithumia* for external goods in Plato's *Republic*. Against the thought

that Aristotle restricts *epithumia* only to bodily pleasures, see Pearson 2012: 100–104; 109–10.

¹¹ On the bodily aspects of laughter in Aristotle, see Halliwell 2008: 314–16.

¹² Cf. Plato, *Philebus* 48c–50a on the peculiar (mixed) pleasures of the laughable.

For Aristotle, then, the buffoon and the boor are to the laughable what the intemperate person and the insensible person are to sex, food, and drink. Aristotle's *Eudemian* account of wittiness makes this comparison explicitly: "In matters of food and drink, there are finicky people and omnivorous people—those who take next to nothing and do not even like it, and those who take and enjoy everything that comes. The boor and the vulgar buffoon stand in just the same relation to each other" (*EE* 3.7.1234a5–8; trans. Kenny).¹³ Others have noted wittiness's similarities to temperance. Aquinas, for instance, proposes that the virtue of modesty (or *decorum*) both (1) includes what Aristotle calls wittiness and (2) composes part of temperance (*ST* 2–2.160.1; 168.3).¹⁴ Indeed, Aquinas follows Gregory in describing "excessive play" or "senseless mirth" as the "daughter of gluttony" (*ST* 2–2.168.3).

In virtue of their excessive disposition toward *epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter, buffoons reveal a motivational structure akin to that of intemperate people. The buffoon, unlike the witty person, is relatively indiscriminating with respect to the objects and sources of laughter. He is excessively greedy, or even hungry, for laughs. Various etymologies of the Greek *bōmolochos* highlight these aspects of the buffoon's standpoint. According to LSJ, *bōmolochos* ("altar-ambusher") originally signified someone who stole scraps of meat at sacrificial altars. This definition, which portrays the *bōmolochos* as a kind of shameless mendicant, recalls the etymology offered by the 2nd-century CE grammarian Harpocration, whose remarks explicitly refer to a passage from *Tyranny* by Pherecrates, a 5th-century BCE comedian. According to Harpocration's lexicon (B27), the *bōmolochoi* are the kinds of people whom we find "sitting under the altars and begging with flattery."¹⁵ This general etymology foregrounds the buffoon's similarity to the intemperate person. Both seek to gratify their *epithumiai* without regard to propriety.

Modern scholarship challenges this etymology; yet such work still draws a tight link between *bōmolochia* and intemperance. Stephen Kidd, for instance, notes another use of *bōmolochos* in Aristotle, namely *History of Animals* 9.24.617b18, which identifies the *bōmolochos* as a kind of bird, a species of daw. Kidd offers multiple examples of Greek vase imagery of birds flying over altars, ready to steal food. He also cites imagery of such altar-ambushing birds from Aesop (Archilochus fr. 172–81 West) and Aeschylus (*Suppliants* 751). Stealing

¹³ *Virtues and Vices*—often judged as pseudo-Aristotelian, but defended as authentically Aristotelian by Simpson 2013—also links buffoonery and intemperance as vices concerning the epithumetic aspect of the soul: cf. 1.1249b31 and 6.1251a16–20. Even if the *Virtues and Vices* is not authentically Aristotelian, its author, I suggest, had good reason to make this point.

¹⁴ Curzer 2012: 186; by contrast, suggests only that temperance has only highly generic similarities with wittiness.

¹⁵ Greek text in Kidd 2012: 240.

food from altars, Kidd suggests, befits "the understandably impious domains of non-human animals."¹⁶ Like the buffoon narrowly conceived, the *bōmolochos* qua altar-ambushing bird is guided by intemperate, unconstrained appetite. The intemperate person displays the tendency of human beings, as animals, to drift to extremes in enjoying bodily pleasure (*EN* 2.8.1109a14–16; 2.9.1109b1–2). Likewise, the buffoon shows the proclivity, seen in "most people," for "enjoying playful amusement and joking more than one should" (4.8.1128a13–14).¹⁷

My proposal—an *epithumetic reading* of Aristotle on wittiness—thus differs from a 2012 alternative defended by Howard J. Curzer. On this alternative reading, wittiness principally concerns friendly feeling, which, it contends, motivates people to tell and listen to jokes. On this *friendly-feeling reading*, buffoons (on the one hand) display deficient friendly feeling insofar as they enjoy abusive humor; boors (on the other hand) display excessive friendly feeling insofar as they refrain from enjoying even innocuous humor. Witty people, by contrast to both, "have the right friendly feeling for others." On the friendly-feeling reading, wittiness concerns not all enjoyment of humor, but only the enjoyment of jibing, mocking humor. According to Curzer, "wit governs only put-downs."¹⁸

The claim that friendly feeling is wittiness's proper *pathos* is well motivated. For both wittiness and friendliness concern the pleasant in social engagements. Whereas the former virtue concerns playful amusement, the latter concerns the rest of life. Perhaps, then, these two virtues concern different spheres in which friendly feeling can express itself.

Yet this friendly-feeling reading quickly faces problems. A first problem: this reading is too general. On this reading, to be witty is simply to have appropriate friendly feeling in recreational contexts. By this account, then, those who play board games or sing in such contexts are witty if they do so with neither excessive nor deficient friendly feeling. This result, however, stretches the notion of wittiness too far. Accordingly, the friendly-feeling reading fails to account Aristotle's strong focus on laughter and joking *per se*. A second problem: this account highlights only certain kinds of humor in recreational contexts. If humor has other sources (other than mockery), then this account risks being insufficiently general to address humor of these other varieties. A third problem: the friendly-feeling reading fails to account sufficiently for other key aspects of Aristotle's

¹⁶ Kidd 2012: 249–50.

¹⁷ Cf. Halliwell 2008: 319 on the buffoon's "promiscuous desire for laughter."

¹⁸ Curzer 2012: 173. Aristotle identifies friendly feeling as rooted in, or as a kind of, *thumos* (*Politics* 7.7.1327b40–1328a1). Hence, one may identify the friendly feeling reading as a *thumotic reading*. Although I take issue with Curzer's account of wittiness, I have found his discussion of this neglected virtue suggestive and philosophically stimulating. Destree (Chapter 2, this volume) emphasizes the thumotic aspects of laughter. I grant that various passions might be implicated as causes of laughter. Yet my account here insists that the *virtue* of wittiness concerns our *epithumia* for laughter (however such laughter is caused).

account of wittiness. In particular, it has little to say about Aristotle's explicitly linking wittiness, buffoonery, and boorishness (on the one hand) and temperance, intemperance, and insensibility (on the other hand). My account, I argue, captures this feature of Aristotle's view more fully.

A defender of the friendly-feeling reading can reasonably respond that *EN* 4.8 highlights mockery. Moreover, *Rhetoric* 2.11 famously describes a certain wittiness as "educated hubris" (πραιαδειμένη ὕβρις; 1389b11–12). Contrary to the common assumption that *Rhetoric* 2.11 defines the virtue of wittiness, however, I note that this passage appears in a psychological character sketch of the young, *Rhetoric* 2.11 accounts for wittiness, at best, as a passion (along with anger, love of honor, pity, and so forth) toward which the young are prone. It does not account for wittiness as an authoritative ethical virtue.¹⁹ Still, *Rhetoric* 2.11's remarks suggest that, for Aristotle, wittiness will somehow especially concern desires to tell and listen to abusive, or potentially hubristic, jokes or jibes. This point gives some support to the friendly-feeling reading. So, to succeed, my epithumetic proposal must accomplish three tasks. (1) My proposal must explain why Aristotle especially emphasizes abusive humor. (2) It must explain how wittiness concerns the desire for laughter from other sources. (3) It must apply not only to listening to jokes, but to telling jokes as well.

To address these matters, I call attention to two Aristotelian claims about the laughable. The first claim appears in *Poetics* 5: "The laughable is a certain mistake and deformity, free from pain and not harmful" (ἀμάρτημά τι καὶ ἀλόγος ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν; 1449a34–35). The second claim appears in the *Tractatus Coislinianus* (*TC*), which is probably either a summary of the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, or a compendium of Peripatetic views: "The joker aims to expose mistakes (ἀμάρτηματα) of soul and body" (8).²⁰ How do these claims inform how we should think about wittiness?

Concerning task (1) (on mockery), both claims highlight mistakes or errors as objects of laughter. Abusive humor addresses a set of non-painful, non-harmful mistakes or faults pervasive in human life. Such mockable errors are especially prone to elicit laughter in recreational contexts. Aristotle presumably does worry, independently, about abusive humor's potential for harm. For these reasons, Aristotle reasonably highlights mockery when he is discussing wittiness. But for all that, wittiness can still concern *epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter generally. Mocking laughter need only be a perspicuous type of laughter, not a defining concern of wittiness as such.

Concerning task (2) (on laughter from other sources), if Aristotle thinks that wittiness concerns only mocking laughter, then there is good reason to attribute to Aristotle a *superiority account* of the laughable. Laughter, on such an account, expresses both contempt for the object of ridicule and a sense of superiority to that object, namely, another person. If Aristotle thinks that wittiness concerns only mocking laughter, Aristotle may reasonably identify wittiness as a virtue concerning our responses to the laughable so construed.²¹

Yet Aristotle does not accept a superiority account of the laughable. For he points out that wordplay and puns as such also elicit laughter. *Rhetoric* 3.11 highlights the role of "deceptive" (ἐξαπατά) misspellings, violations of audience expectations, and equivocation on the meaning of terms in eliciting laughter (1412a28b11). *TC* 5–6 follows suit. Hence, while *EN* 4.8 highlights mockery, Aristotle's remarks on such non-mocking laughter show his awareness that laughter has causes other than personal characteristics. Again, *Rhetoric* 1.11 holds that the set of laughable items includes "men and words and deeds" (καὶ ἀνθρώπους καὶ λόγους καὶ ἔργα; 1372a1; my emphasis). *TC* 5 claims that "laughter comes about *from speech* [and] *from actions*" (my emphasis). Sometimes such words and speech might convey mockery and aggressiveness; but they need not always. For *Rhetoric* 3.11 simply appeals to surprise and incongruity to explain the humor of its wordplay examples.²² Therefore, contrary to those who attribute a superiority account to Aristotle, the laughable for Aristotle includes more than just what elicits contempt. Likewise, we should not restrict Aristotelian wittiness just to a virtue that concerns *epithumia* for the pleasures of *mocking* laughter. Non-mocking forms of humorous repartee, after all, can play no less a role in recreational amusement than mocking forms do. Wittiness's operative sphere is playful amusement. Thus, wittiness should also address *epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter at amusing wordplay and such.

Aristotle's account of the laughable, I suggest, and so too his account of wittiness, is broad enough to include both mocking jibes and amusing wordplay. Once more, Aristotle emphasizes the role of *non-painful, non-harmful mistakes of soul and body* in eliciting laughter. In doing so, he accepts a broad account of the laughable—"the non-painful, non-harmful mistake" account—according to which laughter is a response to perceived non-painful, non-harmful mistakes of body and soul. I take Aristotle's view to invite comparison with, and perhaps even

²¹ On superiority accounts, see Morreall 2009: 4–9 and Carroll 2014: 8–16. Skinner 2004: 140–42 suggests that a superiority account is implicit in Plato and Aristotle, even if apparently first formulated with explicitness in Quintillian, *Institutio oratoria*. Skinner traces the development of Hobbes's own account of humor in, e.g., *Leviathan* 6.42, to Hobbes's engagement with classical views. As Skinner points out, Hobbes wrote a Latin paraphrase of the *Rhetoric* in the early 1630s.

²² Destrée (Chapter 2, this volume) makes the interesting suggestion that even the joking wordplay that *Rhetoric* 3.11 considers has some aggressiveness to it. Perhaps. But Aristotle's account there, as far as I can see, highlights only surprise and incongruity as proper causes of such wordplay's humor.

¹⁹ On natural vs. authoritative virtue, see *EN* 6.13. My view of wittiness in *Rhetoric* 2.11 differs from Destrée's (Chapter 2, this volume).

²⁰ Translating from Janko (1984) 2002: 36. On using the *TC* as a source of Aristotelian views, see Janko (1984) 2002: 42–90 and Watson 2012.

to constitute an early version of, the recently discussed *benign violation account* of humor, according to which laughter is a response to objects or circumstances that subjects simultaneously appraise (1) as violating norms and (2) as harmless.²³ Aristotle can identify non-painful, non-harmful personal faults and deficiencies as one key set of relevant laughable mistakes, and fitting candidates for jibing laughter. Another important set of non-painful, non-harmful mistakes, however, includes the violations of spelling, audience-expectation, and pragmatic norms examined in *Rhetoric* 3.11 (and *TC* 5–6)—violations that traditional *incongruity accounts* of humor emphasize.²⁴

Concerning task (3) (on listening to and telling jokes), perhaps my proposal that wittiness concerns *epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter adequately explains the witty person's disposition toward *listening to* jokes. For one who listens to jokes is prone to laugh. But can my proposal explain Aristotle's focus on *telling* jokes? We typically tell jokes to other people, after all, not to ourselves.²⁵ The joker aims to make other people laugh. But if so, the worry goes, then it is unclear how wittiness concerns *the joker's epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter. In joking with others, the joker seems not to satisfy such *epithumia*. So, perhaps the friendly feeling reading fares better than my epithumetic reading on this score.

My reading, however, can address this worry. For joking with others provides a ready *occasion* for the joker's enjoying the pleasures of laughter—especially when the teller and listener are friends. First, we are psychologically primed to laugh in the presence of friends (*Problems* 28.8). In such circumstances, we are in good spirits, and are more open to laughter than we are when alone. Second, laughter requires a certain surprise (*Rhetoric* 3.11.1.1412a28). But it is hard to surprise oneself when one is alone. The loss of this element of surprise explains, for instance, why one cannot tickle oneself into laughter (*Problems* 35.6).²⁶ Hence, joking to oneself provides a poor way to satisfy the relevant *epithumia*. Joking with others, however, allows for a certain surprise on the joker's part.

Joking includes everything from improvisatory teasing banter to recounting structured narratives with funny punchlines. When the joker engages in the

former, he is usually as surprised as his friends, and he laughs just as much as they do. Yet telling a more structured joke to another, even when the joker knows the punchline, usually makes the joker laugh as well. For in actively retelling a joke, one characteristically attends to the joke's surprising elements. True, the joker need not always laugh when he tells old jokes. Yet even then, the joker's seeing and listening to another laugh at such jokes permits the joker to take vicarious pleasure in the listener's laughter (and pleasure). In such cases, the other's laughter reminds the joker of *his own* past laughter—and past pleasure. Nevertheless, even then, the joker is still prone to laugh along with friends—again, on account of the convivial atmosphere in which he tells his jokes.²⁷

On my reading, then, wittiness for Aristotle concerns *epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter arising from the full range of harmless mistakes. It does so *both* insofar as one listens to *and* insofar as one tells jokes. True, buffoons tell hurtful jokes. But contrary to Curzer, buffoons are *also* “raucous people who tell too many innocuous jokes” and who are prone to “spoil a serious moment with an ill-timed jest.”²⁸ In all these ways, the buffoon fails to participate well in the sphere of playful amusement.

3. The Stance of the Buffoon and the Boor

The buffoon's kinship with the intemperate person, in conjunction with Aristotle's remarks on the buffoon's lack of innuendo, suggest, though do not determine, the sort of foul language, or *aischrologia*, in which Aristotle thinks the buffoon characteristically takes pleasure (1128a24). The intemperate person, recall, enjoys the “most widely shared pleasures” (*EN* 3.10.1118a32–b4), that is, the blunt, largely tactile bodily pleasures of food, drink, and sex that even non-rational animals pursue (1118a26–32). Accordingly, the buffoon will take special pleasure in the laughter to be found in “the bodily lower stratum.”²⁹ The buffoon, I suggest, takes excessive pleasure, most of all, in the blunt forms of laughter and humor to be based on, and found in, what is “at hand” (1128a12–15), namely, the parts of our lower bodies linked with pleasures and *epithumiai* that we share with other animals. Such parts of our bodies serve as a simple and most shared source

²⁷ Thanks to Franco Trivigno for some helpful points about these matters.

²⁸ Curzer 2012: 171. Culler 2013: 148 agrees that the witty person is apt to enjoy both the putdown and the pun. But she proposes that the relevant passion regulated by wittiness is “the pleasure of social interaction.” In some sense, this proposal is right: Aristotle explicitly holds that wittiness concerns activity in the domain of playful amusement, and so, wittiness (by extension) concerns the pleasures to be enjoyed in that domain. But Aristotle presumably does not think that wittiness, strictly speaking, concerns, say, games such as knucklebones, except insofar as they were occasions for laughter.

²⁹ I borrow this term from Bahkktin's 1984 analysis of grotesque comedy.

²³ For developments of the benign violation account, see Veatch 1998 and McGraw and Warren 2010. I do not assess this account here.

²⁴ On incongruity accounts, see Morreall 2009: 9–15 and Carroll 2014: 16–37. Morreall 2009: 11 appeals to *Rhetoric* 3.11 to show that Aristotle appeals to incongruity to explain certain kinds of humor. I agree with Morreall, but argue that such incongruity belongs to a larger set of “mistakes” (or benign violations) that constitutes the object of humor for Aristotle.

²⁵ Fortenbaugh 1968: 217 holds that wittiness concerns a kind of appreciation for the laughable. Curzer 2012: 172 criticizes Fortenbaugh's approach. Although my account of wittiness's scope differs somewhat from Fortenbaugh's, Curzer's worries still apply.

Engberg-Pederson 1983: 90 identifies the proper passion regulated by wittiness as the pleasure and pain one gives to others in the domain of playful amusement. This proposal, while not entirely off track, is nevertheless overly broad insofar as it has nothing to say about laughter as such.

²⁶ On tickling, cf. *EN* 7.7.1150b22–25; *Part.* *Ath.* 3.10.673a8–10.

of laughter in virtue of the benign violations associated with them. The buffoon, then, will be especially inclined toward the crudest and least sophisticated forms of humor, namely, joking explicitly oriented around food, drink, and sex. And the buffoon will especially enjoy foul language that refers to these parts of our bodies and their activities—all as a way of taking pleasure in the laughter that these parts of our bodies elicit.

But the buffoon need not be restricted to such laughter. The buffoon will also be concerned to expose faults of the mind as well. Hence, the buffoon will be excessively disposed to laughter of this variety, too. The buffoon, however, will enjoy such laughs especially *insofar as* bodily pleasures elicit them. He will enjoy such laughs especially insofar as, say, someone's needs to eat, drink, and have sex generate these other kinds of mistakes, and especially insofar as such joking approximates crude humor. Further, the buffoon will indulge too much, on the wrong occasions, in more sophisticated kinds of humor, such as punning and wordplay. For the buffoon associates the pleasures of laughter of *any* sort primarily with the pleasures of laughter of the *crudest* sort.³⁰

The intemperate person is slavish to his appetites and not in proper control of himself (EN 3.10, 1118a23–25). The buffoon is similarly slavish (4.8.1128a33–b1; cf. a20–21), lacking discrimination and rational regulation over his *epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter. Thus, the buffoon will offend and abuse other people through joking. But as I understand the buffoon's vice, offense and abuse *as such* are not so much the buffoon's intentional aims as they are side effects of the buffoon's inordinate lust for laughs. The buffoon abuses others, but incidentally, as he goes about satisfying his desire for laughter. The buffoon, in this sense, is more akin to the intemperate adulterer than to the pleonectic adulterer who performs adultery for the sake of gain (EN 5.2.1130a24–33).³¹ The buffoon does not seek to profit from his abuse; instead, he simply desires the pleasures of laughter too much.

The boor's deficient disposition toward *epithumia* for the pleasures of laughter, by contrast, shows up in the boor's stiffness and discomfort with the laughable. Boors, Aristotle says, seem to be “hard” (σκληροί: 1128a9). Whereas the buffoon has an overly indiscriminating sense of humor, the boor lacks a sense of humor—or displays a kind of psychic shell against being affected by what at hand is laughable. Just as the insensible person responds insufficiently

³⁰ On the role of memory and *phantasia* in associating one item with another, see, e.g., *On Memory* 2.451b10–25, discussed by Lorenz 2006; chap. 11. Similarly, memory and *phantasia* play a role in one's associating pleasure in one item with pleasure in another item: see *Physics* 7.3.247a11–14 and EN 3.10.1118a10–13.

³¹ At a conference on neglected virtues at the University of Auckland, I was pleased to see Micah Lott independently make this comparison between the buffoon and the intemperate adulterer in his own work on ready wit.

to the “necessary” pleasures of food, drink, and sex (EN 7.4.1147b23–28), so too the boor responds insufficiently to pleasures in a realm of human existence—namely, playful amusement—that is also, in its own way, “necessary” to life (EN 4.8.1128b3–4). Like the intemperate person and the buffoon, the insensible person and the boor overlap. Indeed, struggling in EE 3.2 to formulate an example of vicious insensibility, Aristotle actually refers to the “rustic boors (ἀγροίκους) the comic poets lead [to stage], those [who] do not [even] approach what is measured and necessary with respect to pleasures” (1230b18–20; cf. EN 2.2.1104a22–25).³²

The insensible person's overlapping with the boor is not just an interesting coincidence. Instead, this overlap results from their similar uneasiness with human embodiment, and with the attendant frustrating and messy desires for food, drink, and sex that such embodiment generates. The intemperate agent neglects the rational side of his nature and indulges excessively in the pleasures that he can enjoy by satisfying the *epithumiai* that he possesses in virtue of his animality. Such *epithumiai*, however, disturb the insensible agent. And so, the insensible agent resists them and dissociates himself from these markers of his animality—especially insofar as they give rise to various faults of mind and body. The insensible agent aspires, in some way, to possess the disembodied rationality proper to the god. For this reason, perhaps, Aristotle says that insensibility is “not human” (οὐ . . . ἀνθρώπινη; 3.11.1119a6–7), and that “if [to] someone nothing is pleasant, nor different from anything else, he would be far from being human” (πρόπω . . . τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἶναι: 1119a9–10). The boor and the insensible agent display the same ambition to resist their humanity, an ambition rooted in their uneasiness with humanity's animality. Even when humor emerges from, and addresses, our animality in the form of innuendo, the boor cannot take it. Like the buffoon, the boor associates laughter of any variety with laughter of the crudest variety. Such association sustains the boor's aversion to laughter as such.³³

³² Theophrastus, *Characters* 11, goes further in this direction, identifying *agroikia* less as a deficient disposition toward playful amusement and more as a general lack of sophistication. Similarly, Theophrastus does not offer an account of the buffoon *per se*. Meanwhile, since I disagree with Curzer's view that witness solely concerns mocking humor, I also disagree with his thesis that the vice of boorishness is identifiable with over-sensitive solicitude. See Curzer 2012: 169. I grant, however, that boors will be prone to such traits when mocking humor is at issue.

³³ As Halliwell 2008: 314 observes, “The corporeality of laughter may have given some Greek philosophers, especially the Pythagoreans, an urgent reason to distrust it, just as in due course it would give Christian moralists grounds to condemn it.”

4. The Benefits of Wittiness, the Harms of Buffoonery and Boorishness

On Aristotle's view, ethical virtues bring their possessors into a good condition, especially with respect to passions, and conduce to their well-being and good functioning (*EN* 2.6.1106a16; *Physics* 7.3.247a20–24). The vices, by contrast, underrmine and harm their possessors. But here, a question arises. Sure, we might *admire* the witty person. And a bad sense of humor—whether excessive or deficient—may well be *blameworthy*. Yet how can buffoonery and boorishness *harm* you?³⁴

In response, the analogy between wittiness, buffoonery, and boorishness (on the one hand), and temperance, intemperance, and insensibility (on the other) again proves useful. Consider the intemperate person, who desires bodily pleasures “at the expense of others” (ἀντὶ τῶν ἄλλων: *EN* 3.11.1119a2–3). Such a figure neglects his rational capacities and the regulation that they provide over non-rational desires. He attains certain ends set by appetite (e.g., the pleasures of rich, sweet, fattening chocolate cake). But excessively disposed toward these pleasures, the intemperate person sacrifices other ends (most notably, health, but any other end that potentially conflicts with his excessive appetites). The result is an internal incoherence in the intemperate person's soul, a disharmony marked by the intemperate person's pain and regret. The intemperate person's state of soul, rent by conflict, Aristotle argues, is intrinsically unsatisfying (*EN* 9.4.1166b17–22).

To the extent the buffoon is like the intemperate person, Aristotle can suggest, the buffoon's character harms the buffoon in a parallel fashion. The buffoon, in virtue of his unrestrained sense of humor, takes too much pleasure in laughter, and excessively gratifies the appetite for it. As a result, the buffoon neglects other objects of *epithumia*, objects that also have an important place in human life. Hence, the buffoon gratifies *epithumia* for laughter in a way that fails to harmonize this *epithumia* with other *epithumiai*. The buffoon is always after a laugh (*EN* 4.8.1128a5). He is disposed to elicit or enjoy laughter at the expense—at the pain—of both himself and others (*EN* 4.8.1128a6–7; a35). As I follow Aristotle, buffoons may well elicit laughter and attention from others. But in gratifying their excessive desires for laughter, they tend to alienate others, for their unrestrained desires for laughter lead them to abuse other people. That such abuse angers other people, and generates interpersonal conflict, would explain why legislators are apt to enact legal prohibitions on it—prohibitions that the self-regulating

witty person does not require. Thus, buffoons pursue the pleasures of laughter at the expense of honor and their own good reputations. Buffoons, we might also expect, will pursue laughter even at the expense of securing wealth. Aristotle, however, indicates that honor and wealth are other natural—and personally beneficial—objects of *epithumia* (7.4.1147b30; 1148a25–26). Like the intemperate person, who harms himself (1) by eating more than he should and (2) by generating conflicts with his other desires, the intemperate person harms himself by enjoying laughter at the cost of satisfying other *epithumiai* for, and attaining the stable possession and enjoyment of, such goods as honor and wealth.³⁵

The boor, for his part, fails to enjoy recreation as well as he could. He takes insufficient pleasure in those amusements that are good for him. For as an unmattered, finite being, the boor is not a god. He cannot engage in serious activity eternally and continuously. On the contrary, he must engage in recreation, and enjoy himself in the sort of playful amusement fitting for human beings, who form communities and live with others. Insufficiently disposed to a form of pleasure beneficial for beings of his kind, he fails to pursue it sufficiently. This failure renders the boor's serious agency insufficiently stable, for he deficiently enjoys those activities that would enable him fully to recharge his ethical batteries. Given serious action's demands, the recreation-averse boor is prone to a harmful kind of ethical burnout that undermines his effectiveness in serious contexts.

The witty person, unlike either of these figures, demonstrates a well-harmonized soul, one under reason's regulation, but capable of granting the appetite for laughter its appropriate—necessary—place in human life. The witty person's dexterity in conversation and easy “movements” (κινήσεις) of character (1128a10–12) signal the harmony between his rational and reason-responsive elements, and between his desire for the pleasures of laughter and his other non-rational desires. Unlike the boor, the witty person enjoys a necessary part of human life. Unlike the buffoon, however, the witty person can benefit from the pleasures of laughter, for he enjoys them without sacrificing other goods. Moreover, the witty person's distinctive way of engaging in playful amusement—free from both detached stiffness and tiresome indulgence—makes him

³⁵ Aristotle suggests that ethical virtue is a necessary condition for being able to benefit from the possession and use of various goods. See *EE* 8.3.1248b26–37; *Politics* 7.1.1323a37–41. On this conditionality view, see Broadie 1999: 244–47. For the thought that ethical virtue allows for the compossible enjoyment of different goods, see Den Uyl 1991: 203–6. See also Cooper (1996) 1999: 274–76 on virtue and the integrating order that it establishes within a life. In attaining the mean, in enabling an agent to harmonize the pleasures of laughter with the enjoyment of other goods choiceworthy for themselves, and in disposing an agent to attain what is fitting within recreational contexts, wittiness and witty action are marked by proper order, symmetry, and boundedness. In these ways, contrary to Engberg-Pederson 1983: 91–92, wittiness and witty action attain the *kalon* (on the features of which, see *Metaphysics* M.3.1078a36–b1 and *Topics* 5.1.135a13, discussed by Rogers 1993: 355–57).

³⁴ The account in this section follows Walker 2018: chap. 6, §3. For applications to other virtues, see chap. 9.

welcome, enjoyable company. And it enhances those social engagements in which he participates, so that they can attain their restorative, recreational aims for all involved, including the witty person. In all these overlapping ways, Aristotle can say, wittiness benefits the virtuous.

5. A Puzzle about Recreation and Wittiness's Virtuosity

In closing, I consider a puzzle that emerges from Aristotle's acceptance of wittiness as a virtue concerning playful amusement and our *epithumiai* for the pleasures of laughter.

As noted, wittiness's proper sphere is recreation, which reinvigorates our powers for serious action. The claim that playful amusement is for the sake of serious, virtuous activity—Aristotle holds further—explains common beliefs and appearances concerning playful amusement. It would be "out of place" (*ἀτροπον*), Aristotle says, if we exerted ourselves and suffered the trials of life for the sake of playful amusement as an unqualifiedly ultimate end (*EN* 10.6.1176b28–31; cf. *Politics* 8.3.1337b33–1338a1). Serious action appears "better" (*βελτιω*), or more choiceworthy for its own sake, than playful amusement does (1177a3–4).

So, here is the problem. On the one hand, Aristotle holds that although playful amusement is choiceworthy for its own sake, just as a pleasant pastime, it does not constitute serious action. Playful amusement remains choiceworthy for the sake of serious action. On the other hand, Aristotle apparently accepts that the witty enjoyment of playful amusement is a kind of virtuous action. But then, it seems, witty joking should count as a serious action in its own right. In other words, by introducing a virtue concerning playful amusement—a sphere distinct from serious action, but rather, *for the sake of* serious action—Aristotle's account of wittiness generates a tension. Playful amusement, it appears, cannot be serious; yet wittiness, qua virtuous, seems to meet Aristotle's conditions of seriousness. Or, to state the tension from another perspective, by introducing a virtue of wittiness, Aristotle seemingly suggests that the serious person qua serious is never free from the demands of seriousness; yet Aristotle insists on the virtuous person's need occasionally to free himself from these demands, if he ultimately stands any chance of reliably meeting them.

To deal with this worry, Aristotle should hold that the exercise of wittiness is a proper part of serious, virtuous action (and not just instrumentally valuable for its sake). (1) Playful amusement, while recreational, is still a kind of rational activity; it too is an exercise of the human function. Yes, recreation provides rest, but not the sort that sleep offers. "For sleep," Aristotle says, "is an idleness of the soul in that respect in which it is said [to be] serious and bad" (*EN* 1.13.1102b7–8). (2) As an exercise of the human function, playful amusement can be performed

seriously, in some sense at least. After all, the witty person's playful amusement differs in kind from the buffoon's or the boor's. (3) If one were to deny that witty modes of playful amusement constitute serious, virtuous action, then one would have equally good reason to deny that other, paradigmatic ethically virtuous actions also were serious. Once more, consider temperate eating, drinking, and having sex. Presumably, one can enjoy these activities as part of one's recreation and for the sake of serious action. Temperate drinking seems especially important in symposiastic settings, prime locations for playful amusement.³⁶ Aristotle, at any rate, suggests that playful amusement can include the enjoyment of bodily pleasures (*EN* 10.6.1176b19–21).

Since witty modes of playful amusement are types of serious action, one must clarify the precise kind of serious action that serves as playful amusement's end. In *EN* 10.6, I suggest, Aristotle construes serious action as something like *the whole range* of virtuous actions—that is, virtuous agency in general. According to *EN* 10.6, in other words, recreation enables one fully to exercise practical wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, liberality, and the rest of the virtues, as one's circumstances require. But to exercise—and to continue to be able to exercise—this whole range of virtues is a demanding task. Recreation and playful amusement, Aristotle can say, are necessary for serious action in this robust sense.

On my proposal, then, Aristotle's view amounts to the following: When one enjoys playful amusement as regulated by wittiness, one still acts seriously and virtuously, at least in some *absolute* sense. For such witty behavior, Aristotle can say, still constitutes virtuous agency. But the restricted range and kind of serious and virtuous agency that one exercises in recreational contexts differs—at least in degree, if not necessarily in kind—from the sort that one exercises in non-recreational contexts. In recreational contexts, one's virtuous agency is principally restricted to the exercise of wittiness (or perhaps temperance). In witty recreation, one does not exercise the full range of virtues. This omission is not because one's immediate situation compels one to be fully absorbed in one kind of virtuous activity (as, say, a courageous soldier is not in a position to have sex temperately while he fights a battle). Instead, the full range of one's agency is largely offline in recreational contexts. Therefore, witty recreation is *relatively* unserious—though not necessarily unserious in an *absolute* sense. The tensions, then, that Aristotle's account of wittiness generates can be eased. On the one hand, witty (and temperate) action, qua virtuous, still counts as serious (in one sense). On the other hand, such action is still analytically distinct from,

³⁶ I thank Emanuel Mayer for this point. Cf. Halliwell 2008: 319, noting *Politics* 7.17.1336b16–23 on symposiastic recreation.

and instrumentally valuable for, the sake of serious action (in a second, different sense), that is, the performance of a complete range of virtuous actions.³⁷

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³⁷ I presented versions of this chapter at a meeting of the Yale–NUS College Ancient Worlds research cluster, at a University of Auckland conference on Neglected Virtues convened by Glen Pettigrove in honor of Rosalind Hursthouse; at a Union College workshop organized by Krisanna Scheiter on Virtue and Emotion in *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.5–9; and at a University of Oslo workshop on Laughter and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy organized by the editors of this volume. I am grateful for the questions and suggestions that I received from the participants at these events; the comments of Colin Guthrie King (at Union) and Panos Dimas (at Oslo); written feedback from Franco Trivigno, Pierre Desfrée, Howard J. Curzer, and an anonymous reviewer; and the Yale–NUS College Small Research Grant (IG15-SR102, funded by the Singapore Ministry of Education Tier 1 Academic Research Fund) that supported my work.