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Introduction

WHEN JOHN LOCKE DIED in 1704 his friends mourned the loss of a philosopher who combined seriousness of thought with a special talent for raillery. Locke, they recalled, often relied on this skill to pierce through affectation and conceitedness, making it an important part of his philosophical practice. Because he considered ‘gravity’ a sign of imposture, one friend noted, Locke would mimic anyone adopting an overly serious demeanour to make them an object of ‘ridicule.’¹ Another reported that Locke practised raillery ‘better than anyone’ and even managed to blend ‘mirth with instruction.’² For Locke, ridicule was no mere pleasant diversion; it was an instrument of enlightenment and an aid to inquiry.

Although he found ridicule useful, Locke was also keenly aware of its risks. He often ‘spoke against raillery’ to his friends and judged it of ‘dangerous consequence if not well manag’d.’³ In his writings on education Locke proved even more reticent, warning that youth should ‘carefully abstain from *raillery*’ if they wished to ‘secure themselves from provoking others.’⁴ Those who jest may not even be aware that they have created an enemy, he cautioned, because the object of the joke may laugh along just to save face. The ‘right management of so nice and ticklish a business’ was

1. Pierre Coste, ‘The Life and Character of Mr. Locke in a Letter to the Author of the *Nouvelles de La Republique Des Lettres* by Mr. P. Coste’, in *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Locke. Publish’d by Mr. Desmaizeaux, under the Direction of Anthony Collins, Esq.* (London: R. Francklin, 1739), iv–v.

2. Masham to Le Clerc, 12 January 1704, in Roger Woolhouse, ‘Lady Masham’s Account of Locke’, *Locke Studies* 3 (2003), 189.

3. *Ibid.*, 190.

4. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996), 108. Emphasis in original.

‘not everyone’s talent’, Locke insisted, as even ‘a little slip may spoil all’, causing needless injury and offence.⁵ If mirth could correct and enlighten, it could also wound and diminish, hurting the pride of those on the receiving end and endangering civility.

As this book demonstrates, Locke was far from alone among Enlightenment philosophers in viewing laughing, raillery, and jesting as ambiguous and fraught. The questions of why humans laugh and when it was appropriate for them to do so had been continuous preoccupations of philosophers at least since Aristotle. The century after Locke’s death, however, saw philosophical scrutiny of the subject rise to a pitch and intensity rarely seen before or since. It is at this time, moreover, that philosophers in Britain placed the *politics* of ridicule at the foreground of their investigations. That is, they concerned themselves less with the physical or mental origins of laughing than with how jesting and raillery could disrupt or sustain social life. They were in equal measure fascinated and perturbed by the power of ridicule to embarrass or provoke its targets, and expended great energy probing the limits of its propriety. There was more at stake here than fixing standards of decorum; rather the aversion to being laughed at reflected an all too human need for recognition and esteem, a need that had to be balanced against the undeniable utility of ridicule as a corrective to pride and pretension.

The debate began in earnest with one of Locke’s own pupils, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury and grandson of one of the architects of England’s Glorious Revolution.⁶ In the treatises that made up his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), Shaftesbury tried to rescue ridicule from the charge of incivility and demonstrate its usefulness against the bigoted, fanatical and proud. Few others expressed such confidence that the abusiveness of ridicule would decline with time, as citizens grew accustomed to mocking and being mocked in turn. The social value of ridicule was so great, Shaftesbury alleged, that preserving its free use in debate was among the most critical tasks that philosophy could perform. And although he inherited Locke’s fears about the offensiveness of this behaviour, he did not shy away from deploying what he defended, particularly against religious enthusiasts, clerics and philosophical rivals. For Shaftesbury, ridicule was not a trifling conversational technique; it was a force for enlightenment and a necessary antidote

5. *Ibid.*, 108.

6. For the sake of consistency I will always refer to Anthony Ashley Cooper as ‘Shaftesbury’ even though for some of the period I cover he had not yet assumed the title of Earl.

to the pedantic scholasticism that had dominated European intellectual life for too long.

In the chapters that follow we will encounter a wide range of philosophers who drew on Shaftesbury's example by avowing the power of ridicule to unsettle prejudice, demarcate the boundaries of sociable behaviour, and attack entrenched systems of thought and power. Far from constituting a school, they varied hugely in their intellectual affinities and philosophical temperaments. They ranged from the philosophical sceptic David Hume to his Aberdonian critics Thomas Reid and James Beattie, to enthusiastic defenders of the rights of man such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Alexander Geddes. And while they shared a fascination with the promise of ridicule as a mode of criticism, few celebrated or indulged in it without misgivings. All engaged in intense handwringing over the damage that even well-intentioned ridicule could cause to civility and social peace.

What lay behind this surge of philosophical interest in ridicule? Part of the explanation lies in what Jürgen Habermas long ago identified as the transformation of the public sphere. The relaxing of censorship and deregulation of the printing trade in the 1690s led to an explosion of political and religious parodies, burlesques, satires, squibs and scoffs. In such an atmosphere, the model of polite conversation popularized by coffee-house magazines like the *Spectator* was little more than a faint aspiration, as Whig and Tory partisans went out of their way to belittle, demean and pour scorn on their rivals.⁷ Many satirists aggressively sought to mobilize public opinion around the issues of toleration, the still-contested revolution settlement of 1688, and seemingly endless wars with France. Whigs and Tories alike expressed unease about the new discursive climate and it was not long before ridicule ceased to be merely a feature of public debate but an *object* of it as well. Beginning with Shaftesbury, philosophers made it their business to determine whether ridicule was an unfortunate

7. There is now a substantial literature on the gulf separating eighteenth-century ideals of politeness from the reality of actual public speech. See especially Kate Davison, 'Occasional Politeness and Gentlemen's Laughter in 18th Century England', *The Historical Journal* 57, 4 (2014), 921–45. Also Simon Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) and Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006). The culture of politeness, Helen Berry writes, cultivated an 'underbelly of impolite resistance'. Helen Berry, 'Rethinking Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England: Moll King's Coffee House and the Significance of "Flash Talk": The Alexander Prize Lecture', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 1 (2001), 68. For Michael Brown the Enlightenment, especially in Britain and Ireland, was 'intrinsically impolite'. Michael Brown, 'The Biter Bitten: Ireland and the Rude Enlightenment', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, 3 (2012), 394.

by-product of this new freedom of debate or, on the contrary, one of the most valuable features of it.

The troubling role that ridicule played in reflecting and solidifying social hierarchies also prompted reflection on the limits of its propriety. As Simon Dickie has shown, the British upper and merchant classes had a voracious appetite for jokes targeted at the poor, labourers, servants, the Welsh, Black people, and women.⁸ Jest-books full of the sort of stereotyped characters that would make many modern readers wince were wildly popular. This prompted concern less about the potential harm to those who served as the butt of the jokes than for the corrupting effects on those encouraged to laugh along. Locke himself worried that gentlemen overly accustomed to mocking their social inferiors would develop a haughtiness that they would struggle to shake when dealing with members of their own class.⁹ The habit of laughing down could too easily develop into the habit of laughing at one's peers.

A final explanation relates to a philosophical topic that was keenly debated at the turn of the eighteenth century. As intellectual historians and political theorists have long emphasized, a key question in eighteenth-century philosophy was that of sociability or the extent to which humans were (or could be made) fit for political society.¹⁰ The place afforded to laughter and ridicule within that debate, however, has so far been neglected. It is no coincidence that philosophers who pondered how to theorize, promote and manage peaceable co-existence also took an interest in ridicule. For theorists of natural sociability indebted to the Stoic tradition, such as Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson, humans have a natural inclination to associate with one another. To them, the practice of laughing and joking was, fundamentally, a benevolent expression of that natural desire for community. This contrasts with a rival Epicurean and Augustinian tradition—featuring the likes of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville—that emphasized how the ungovernable pride of postlapsarian humans locked them into a perpetual struggle for positional superiority. Looked at from the perspective of this tradition, ridicule starts to look more ominous. While it might have some utility as a method for

8. Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter*, chapter 5.

9. Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 92.

10. For the sociability debate, the focus of chapter 2, see Paul Sagar, *The Opinion of Mankind: Sociability and the Theory of the State from Hobbes to Smith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

shaming the unsociable into reforming their behaviour, it was also a troubling expression of contempt that could bruise fragile egos and frustrate the project of corralling prideful humans into a tolerable co-existence. Although the sociability debate did not map precisely onto the controversy over ridicule (where a thinker stands on one issue is never a precise predictor of how they view the other), it nevertheless provides a useful lens through which the stakes of the ridicule debate become clearer.

I argue that the ridicule debate in Enlightenment Britain should be taken seriously not only by historians, but also by political theorists confronting the problem of how to harness the critical power of ridicule without wielding it as a weapon of gratuitous humiliation or abuse. By excavating the debate that Shaftesbury started, we can glimpse earlier attempts to guard against ridicule's dangers without forsaking the contemptuousness and bite from which it draws power. Ridicule, I will conclude, is a political force to be regarded warily but never disavowed. For now, however, we need to look more closely at the two broad ways of thinking about ridicule that structured that eighteenth-century debate.

Hobbesian Laughter and the Danger of Contempt

According to the tradition of thought that Shaftesbury challenged, ridicule was inextricably bound up with contempt, the passion we experience when we behold something lowly, beneath consideration, or even worthless. It was a tradition faithful to the etymology of the term itself. 'Ridicule' derives from the Latin *ridere* (to laugh) but, as its cognate 'deride' (from *deridere*) suggests, the laughter of ridicule communicated contempt rather than mere joy. According to Laurent Joubert's influential *Traité du ris* (1579), we laugh when beholding something 'ugly, deformed, improper, indecent, unfitting, and indecorous'.¹¹ To laugh at something was always to elevate oneself above it. As a social practice, therefore, ridicule was heavily associated with the vice of pride. To ridicule someone was to laugh disdainfully at their expense and encourage others to do the same.¹²

11. Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 20.

12. In 'all the situations' that produce laughter, René Descartes put it, 'there is always some element of hatred'. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 245. Unlike Hobbes, however, Descartes reserved a role for a 'moderate ridicule' that could 'helpfully rebuke the vices by making them appear ridiculous'. *Ibid.*, 268.

It was precisely the troubling disdainfulness of laughter that inspired one of the most infamous statements on the topic in the early modern period: that of Thomas Hobbes. In the chapters that follow I frequently use the adjective ‘Hobbesian’ as shorthand for an understanding of laughter as an expression of prideful superiority. To take a Hobbesian approach to the politics of ridicule, I will show, was to emphasize how laughter injured the self-worth of those on the receiving end and robbed them of their social standing. To look at ridicule through a Hobbesian lens was to call into doubt the very possibility of a safe or inoffensive jest. And while few (if any) of the thinkers examined here bought into this account entirely, it nonetheless offers a useful heuristic for understanding why and how so many philosophers saw ridicule as a problem for politics.

It is worth noting at the outset, however, that what Hobbes himself actually wrote about laughter was a good deal more complicated. Over the course of three works, Hobbes scrutinized the origins of laughter both to situate it within his taxonomy of the passions and to better understand its destructive power. The first and most important ingredient in laughter that Hobbes identified, and that most neglected by his later critics, was surprise. Whatever makes us laugh, he asserted in *Elements of Law* (1640), must be ‘new and unexpected’.¹³ If something that made us laugh in the past has grown ‘stale or usual’ then it will lose the capacity to amuse us again. He repeated the point in *Leviathan* (1651), insisting there that habituation or custom reduces our propensity to both laugh and weep because ‘no man laughs at old jests’ or ‘weeps for an old calamity’.¹⁴

What sorts of surprises did Hobbes have in mind? In *Elements of Law*, Hobbes allowed that a gathering of people may laugh together when surprised by some general absurdity that is ‘abstracted from persons’.¹⁵ For the most part, however, we laugh when made suddenly aware of some ability in *ourselves*. If we have underestimated our ability to carry out a task, but then manage to pull it off against our expectations, we may emit a laugh in surprise. The mysterious passion that is the source of laughter is, then, a ‘sudden conception of ability in himself that laugheth’.¹⁶

13. Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law: Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 54. On the centrality of suddenness to Hobbes’s account of laughter see David Heyd, ‘The Place of Laughter in Hobbes’s Theory of Emotions’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, 2 (1982), 287.

14. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43.

15. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, 55.

16. *Ibid.*, 54.

There are two things to note about this definition. First, despite what Hobbes's critics claimed, there is nothing in it that suggests that laughter must arise from a triumph over someone else. Surprise at having surpassed our expectations of our own ability is quite enough. A hiker who laughs at the summit of a mountain having convinced herself she would never make it is as much a Hobbesian laugher as someone who laughs in scorn at a beaten opponent. So too is the person who laughs at general human folly, which can prompt a laugh that offends no one.¹⁷ Second, there is nothing in Hobbes's theory that implies that the superior will necessarily laugh at those weaker than themselves. In *Leviathan*, laughter emerges from what Hobbes calls 'a sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly'.¹⁸ The term *conception* here is key. The 'eminency' in question often exists solely in the laugher's own imagination, a point Hobbes stresses repeatedly. The proud who are 'greedy of applause from everything they do well', he says, are particularly disposed to laugh because they are actually insecure about their self-worth and giddily surprised by any act they happen to perform well.¹⁹ Even in cases where their sense of superiority is justified, these laughers are mistaken in their belief that the 'infirmities' of others constitute 'sufficient matter' for triumph.²⁰

The definitions of laughter contained in *Elements of Law* and *Leviathan* were not Hobbes's final word on the subject, however. In *De Homine* (1658) Hobbes revised his position slightly by rephrasing one of the conditions of laughter and adding another. Rather than writing of inferiority, Hobbes now employed the language of 'unseemliness' to describe what it is in an object that prompts us to laugh, implying a more general inappropriateness rather than weakness.²¹ More significantly, Hobbes now added 'strangeness' as a necessary condition for laughter, suggesting that we never laugh at 'friends and kindred' even if they act in an unseemly manner.²² There are then, Hobbes concluded, 'three things conjoined that move one to laughter: unseemliness, strangers [*sic*], and suddenness'.²³ By stipulating that these three elements must be 'conjoined', Hobbes made

17. As Ewin notes, 'inoffensive laughter' is entirely possible in Hobbes's schema. R. E. Ewin, 'Hobbes on Laughter', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 51, 202 (2001), 31.

18. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 54–55.

19. *Ibid.*, 54.

20. *Ibid.*, 55.

21. Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen (De Homine and De Cive)*, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 59.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

clear that one element on its own was insufficient and that laughter could not arise solely from egoistical interpersonal comparison. Bonds of friendship were sufficient to stifle laughter on his theory, just as familiarity was.

For Hobbes, then, the problem was not that the strong would constantly laugh at the weak but that vainglorious mockers would provoke angry retaliation from those whose dignity they managed to offend. If, as Hobbes maintained, social life was an arena for contests over honour, then to be ridiculed in this way was no laughing matter. Because ‘men take it heinously to be laughed at or derided’, he warned, they will risk life and limb to settle the score, with dire consequences for social peace.²⁴ Hobbes had witnessed enough duels to realize how quickly a jest could lead to violence and unsurprisingly included derision among the provocations to ‘quarrel and battle’ prohibited under his laws of nature.²⁵

Hobbes was forced to admit, however, that this particular law of nature was ‘very little practiced’, as the psychic satisfactions to be had from expressing contempt towards others were simply too great.²⁶ Since, as he argued in *De Cive* (1642), ‘all the pleasure and jollity of the mind’ consisted in besting others, it is ‘impossible but men must declare themselves some mutual scorn and contempt, either by laughter, or by words, or by gesture’.²⁷ This did not stop him trying to impress upon his aristocratic tutee, William Cavendish, the importance of attempting restraint when the occasion to mock someone presented itself. Adopting the ‘Satyricall way of nipping’ that haughty aristocrats were fond of, Hobbes cautioned Cavendish, was a sure way to lose friends and become embroiled in duels.²⁸ A gentleman should instead

24. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, 92.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.* As Kinch Hoekstra observes, this is why Hobbes urges us to *acknowledge* each other as equals for the sake of peace, even when our pride prompts us to announce our superiority to others instead. Kinch Hoekstra, ‘Hobbesian Equality’, in *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*, ed. S. A. Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 77.

27. Hobbes, *Man and Citizen (De Homine and De Cive)*, 115. As Quentin Skinner has shown, Hobbes’s wariness towards ridicule (notwithstanding his frequent use of it himself against scholastics and clerics of all stripes) stemmed from the inclusion of ridicule among the most prized weapons in the tradition of classic and Renaissance rhetoric. See Quentin Skinner, ‘Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter’, in *Visions of Politics*, vol. 3, *Hobbes and Civil Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For an account of Hobbes’s wit that situates it within the Lucianic tradition of *serio ludere* see Conal Condren, *Hobbes, the Scribblers and the History of Philosophy* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012).

28. Hobbes to Charles Cavendish, 1 September 1638, in *Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*, ed. Robert McNamee et al., University of Oxford, <https://www.e-enlightenment.com>. For Hobbes’s criticism of duelling culture see Markku Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness and Honour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 170–71.

display his nobility by assisting those in ‘danger of being laughed at’ and so guard them from humiliation.²⁹

Hobbes’s critics, several of whom we will meet later on, lambasted him for his views on laughter and the philosophy of human nature they reflected. But although the specifics of Hobbes’s argument were unique to him, his general worry that vainglorious men laughing at each other could produce discord was commonplace, especially among writers working in a more religious idiom. The Quaker Robert Barclay denied that ‘jesting’ could qualify as ‘harmless mirth’ largely on this basis.³⁰ Others interpreted St Paul’s admonishment to indulge in neither ‘foolish talking, nor jesting’ in his Epistle to the Ephesians as having far-reaching consequences for how Christians should and should not laugh at one another.³¹ The theologian Isaac Barrow insisted that Paul’s words forbade any ‘injurious, abusive’ or ‘scurrilous’ jests that tended towards the ‘disgrace, damage, vexation, or prejudice’ of a neighbour or that raised ‘animosities, dissensions, and feuds.’³² The Presbyterian Daniel Burgess, in his 1694 *Foolish Talking and Jestings Described and Condemned*, similarly declared that those who threaten ‘God and Men’s peace’ for the ‘tickle of their fancies in prejudicial and disgraceful jibes’ were making an ‘unwise bargain.’³³ Jean Baptiste Bellegarde cautioned readers in his *Reflexions upon Ridicule* to ‘keep that jest within your teeth that is ready to burst’ for although it might raise a momentary laugh, it would also ‘make an eternal wound in the heart’ of the person targeted and ‘he will never pardon you.’³⁴ For ‘they who seem to take it patiently, have a secret rage within.’³⁵

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, worries about the fractiousness of ridicule continued to mount, even as the worst of the violence and turmoil that so alarmed Hobbes seemed to have abated. For Quentin Skinner, from this moment on there was a sustained effort to ‘outlaw’ laughter as displaying an uncivil lack of self-restraint, one that

29. Hobbes to Cavendish, *Electronic Enlightenment*.

30. Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity: Being an Explanation and Vindication of the Principles and Doctrines of the People Called Quakers* (London, 1678), 352.

31. King James Bible, Ephesians 5:4.

32. Isaac Barrow, *The Theological Works of Isaac Barrow*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1818), 320.

33. Daniel Burgess, *Foolish Talking and Jestings Described and Condemned* (London: Andrew Bell and Jonas Lumley, 1694), 59.

34. Jean Bellegarde, *Reflexions Upon Ridicule and the Means to Avoid It* (London: Tho. Newborough, D. Midwinter, and Benj. Tooke, 1706), 56.

35. *Ibid.*, 31.

needed to be ‘governed’ by manners or ‘preferably eliminated’ altogether from polite society.³⁶ Lord Chesterfield’s admonishments to his to son to avoid laughing aloud in company became emblematic of the restraints that society placed on mirth.³⁷ As Norbert Elias put it, the civilizing process demanded that laughter be ‘pruned’ and jesting curtailed.³⁸ The possibility that ridicule could serve any valuable social function seemed to have receded.

The Shaftesburian Alternative

Although the tradition of regarding laughter as an uncivil expression of contempt was dominant in early modern Britain, it co-existed with a separate tradition of *civil* mirth that Shaftesbury could later tap into. In many cases, these competing traditions could be found in the same author.³⁹ Indeed, the majority of the philosophers we will encounter in this book believed that both traditions contained a grain of truth, even as they leaned more towards one than the other. Those who raised doubts about the contemptuousness of laughter often acknowledged a legitimate role for it as an innocent diversion or a corrective to error and vice. In his *Government and Improvement of Mirth According to the Laws of Christianity* (1707), Benjamin Colman regretted that most jesting was little more than the ‘froth and noxious blast of a corrupt heart’ but praised the ‘loveliness’ of a ‘civil mirth’.⁴⁰ Similarly Barrow, in his interpretation of Paul’s instruction in Ephesians, noticed that the term used to signify jesting, *eutrapelia*,

36. Skinner, ‘Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter’, 172.

37. Philip Dormer Stanhope, *Letters written by the late Right Honourable Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, to his son Philip Stanhope*, vol. 1 (Dublin: John Chambers, 1776), 376.

38. Norbert Elias, ‘Essay on Laughter’, ed. Anca Parvulescu, *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017), 284.

39. As Morton notes, although criticisms of laughter were ubiquitous, categorical prohibitions were rare. Adam Morton, ‘Laughter as a Polemical Act in Late Seventeenth-Century England’, in *The Power of Laughter and Satire in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Mark Knights and Adam Morton (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018), 108. As Curtis notes, some sixteenth-century philosophers such as Erasmus and Thomas More ‘gave licence to the use of laughter as a means of making necessary and health-giving criticism’. Catherine Curtis, ‘From Sir Thomas More to Robert Burton: The Laughing Philosopher in the Early Modern Period’, in *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity*, ed. Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger and Ian Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 112.

40. Benjamin Colman, *The Government and Improvement of Mirth According to the Laws of Christianity* (Boston: B Green, 1707), 20 and 18. Colman echoed Locke in arguing that ‘Youth is more especially the Age of Levity and Laughter, and needs Correction’. *Ibid.*, 3.

was used by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to mark a key social virtue, and declared it unlikely that Paul would have ruled out what Aristotle approved.⁴¹ On Barrow's account, Paul was summoning the Ephesians not to forgo jesting altogether, but to seek out a mean between buffoonery and moroseness. For it was, he maintained, ill advised to be 'always dumpish' or 'seriously pensive' in the company of others.⁴² Burgess, in his own gloss on Ephesians, agreed. What he termed 'lawful jesting' was occasionally needed to 'raise drooping spirits and sharpen blunted minds.'⁴³

For those seeking concrete exemplars of civil mirth, scripture was again at hand. A defence of good humour was readily available in Christ's miracle at the wedding at Cana, an intervention that, in Colman's words, authorized 'regular mirth'.⁴⁴ But the Bible also contained at least one example of a godly person laughing *at* others. In the book of Kings, the prophet Elijah tests the worshippers of Baal by challenging them to have their deity ignite a pyre. When it becomes clear that their efforts have failed, Elijah taunts them by sarcastically suggesting that Baal might be on a journey, or even asleep, and that perhaps a louder prayer might rouse him. For many early modern critics, no further proof was needed to sanctify the use of ridicule to counter idolatry and presumption. John Edwards, in his *Theologica Reformata* (1713), held that all 'jeering is forbidden excepting the jeering of idols' and leaned for his argument upon the fact that 'Elijah, in a deriding manner, bids the Priests of Baal cry aloud'.⁴⁵ The dissenter Isaac Watts found that there were 'Seasons wherein a wise Man or Christian may treat some criminal or silly Characters with *Ridicule* and *Mockery*' for 'Elijah condescended thus to correct the *Priests* and *Worshippers* of Baal'.⁴⁶ Barrow also drew on the example of Elijah to demonstrate how facetiousness

41. For Aristotle the *eutrapelos* occupies an intermediate position between the buffoon (*bōmolochoi*) who seeks to raise a laugh at all times regardless of the consequences, and the boor (*agroikoi*) who disapproves of all laughter whether appropriate or not and so fails to recognize the importance of playful conversation to a flourishing life. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128a3–10. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle describes *eutrapelia* as a kind of 'cultured insolence', implying that there was a way of laughing at others and being laughed at in turn that was commensurate with civility. Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, 1389b12. For an insightful analysis of Aristotle's *eutrapelia* as a political virtue see John Lombardini, *The Politics of Socratic Humor* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), chapter 4.

42. Barrow, *The Theological Works of Isaac Barrow*, vol. 1, 308.

43. Burgess, *Foolish Talking and Jestings Described and Condemned*, 53.

44. Colman, *Government and Improvement of Mirth*, 91.

45. John Edwards, *Theologica Reformata, or the Body and Substance of the Christian Religion* (London: John Lawrence, at the Angel in the Poultry, 1713), 344.

46. Isaac Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects* (London: John and Barham Clark, Eman. Mathews, and Richard Ford, 1723), 241–42.

could expose ‘things apparently base and vile to due contempt.’⁴⁷ For when ‘plain declarations will not enlighten people, to discern the truth and weight of things, and blunt arguments will not penetrate’, he argued, ‘then doth reason resign freely its place to wit, allowing it to undertake its work of instruction and reproof.’⁴⁸

Shaftesbury also sought to rehabilitate mirth but did so in a more secular idiom. His ambition was to drain from English culture a gloomy Calvinist mindset that reduced social life to a contest for recognition between proud individuals and emphasize instead the human capacity for sympathetic connection and reasonable disagreement. For the Earl and his followers, achieving this required discrediting the Hobbesian account of why we laugh. Over the course of the eighteenth century they turned Hobbes into a straw man and his theory into a caricature. But as Jon Parkin has shown, straw men have their uses and have played an underappreciated role in the generation of new philosophical ideas.⁴⁹ The slaying of a straw man Hobbes, I will show, paved the way for an alternative paradigm, one that made laughter once again a thoroughly social (and sociable) practice.

What was special about this alternative way of thinking about laughter? I analyse Shaftesbury’s writings in the first two chapters and show how, as in the case of Hobbes, what he said was crudely misinterpreted by followers and critics alike. But for now I will outline four particularly salient features of the new mode of thinking that he inaugurated. First, unlike the Hobbesian variety, Shaftesburian laughter could be more easily *shared* in company without anyone present feeling slighted or diminished. And while Hobbesian laughter placed a strain on community by giving vent to an unsociable feeling of contempt, Shaftesburian laughter was agreeably contagious. For Shaftesburians, no philosophy that grounded laughter in individual self-glory could account for how shared laughter

47. Barrow, *The Theological Works of Isaac Barrow*, vol. 1, 308.

48. *Ibid.*, 309. Those who cited Elijah’s actions as a precedent, however, were forced to downplay the violence that his ridicule portended. No one who consulted the entirety of this episode from the book of Kings could conclude that Elijah mocked the worshippers of Baal in a spirit of correction. On the contrary, Elijah, having already tricked these false prophets into exposing their misplaced faith in Baal, used ridicule to compound their humiliation. Nor did he present the prophets with a chance to recognize their error and reform. Instead, flush with victory, Elijah ordered their massacre. This was not ridicule with an eye to education; it was a verbal chastisement that foreshadowed a far worse punishment to come.

49. Jon Parkin, ‘Straw Men and Political Philosophy: The Case of Hobbes’, *Political Studies* 59, 3 (2011).

forged friendship and conviviality. Instead, they insisted, laughter generally resulted from surprising incongruities in persons, objects, or situations that could be appreciated collectively at the expense of no one's honour or dignity.⁵⁰

Second, Shaftesburians were more sanguine about ridicule as a mode of moral criticism because they clung to a teleological world view that posited a strict demarcation between what was natural or virtuous, on the one hand, and what was unnatural or vicious, on the other. Ridicule, on this view, was effective against vice because, once exposed, vice *naturally* inspires contempt in anyone with an uncorrupted moral sense. For Shaftesburians, certain behaviours and traits were intrinsically ridiculous, meaning that any properly constituted mind should dismiss them with laughter once exposed. On the Hobbesian account, whether something is found to be ridiculous or not is a relative and contingent matter, depending more on the skill of the ridiculer than on any qualities inherent in the object itself. Conversely, for Shaftesburians, directing ridicule against whatever was natural or virtuous was impossible and would only result in the ridiculer themselves becoming an object of derision. And while the Shaftesburian notion that ridicule was a 'test of truth' became a well-worn trope that critics occasionally interpreted too literally (see chapter 2) many of Shaftesbury's readers adopted a version of it and held that ridicule could indeed be used to test for verity and worth.

Third, Shaftesburians were, by and large, interested in tapping ridicule's potential as an *everyday* social practice and critical method. Certainly, they recognized that great wits such as Swift, Dryden and Pope were particularly gifted in the arts of mimicry, irony, sarcasm, or mock praise. But they also recognized that these writers hardly monopolized such practices. Shaftesbury took pains to criticize the writing style of authors and refine conversational practice in the drawing rooms of the gentry. But he was also interested in the puppet shows mocking Protestant enthusiasts performed in London's markets and in the power of such performances to shape public perception of religious dissent. Mary Wollstonecraft was more concerned by the everyday use of ridicule by men to demean women, even as she recognized that the likes of Swift led the way. Scottish abolitionists like Alexander Geddes were hardly master

50. Matthew Bevis, *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 80. For many students of laughter today the incongruity theory is still largely unsurpassed and remains, in Terry Eagleton's words, the 'most plausible account of why we laugh'. Terry Eagleton, *On Humour* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 67.

satirists, but they nevertheless saw value in using satire to educate public opinion on the evils of the African slave trade.

Finally, on the Shaftesburian view, the element of contempt that had been so central to the Hobbesian view could never be disavowed completely. On the contrary, it was from contempt that ridicule derived both its danger *and* its practical efficacy as an instrument of enlightenment. Even those philosophers most solicitous of civility saw the need to communicate their own contempt and excite contempt in others. In some cases, they judged that a true civility demanded contempt. For Hutcheson, the potential for ridicule to serve as an instrument of sociability often depended on its power to deflate its object. For the Aberdonian philosopher James Beattie, scoffing contemptuously at sceptics like David Hume was not only permissible but required if civil society was to hold together. For Shaftesburians, if a ridiculous doctrine, person, or institution has taken on an air of authority, then a gentle jibe might not be sufficient to expose it. In those circumstances, a more withering ridicule was the order of the day.

Ridicule and Political Theory

Recovering the ridicule debate in Enlightenment Britain is of more than historical interest. Teresa Bejan has made the case for returning to the seventeenth century to enrich our understanding of the current divide between those calling for greater civility in public life and those who see in such calls a thinly veiled attempt to suppress marginalized voices.⁵¹ My similar wager is that returning to the eighteenth-century debate on ridicule will speak to the disagreement between those who see forms of speech such as sarcasm, satire and mockery as essential to a healthy politics and those who fear them irrational, trivializing or abusive. The principal problem with this dispute, I want to show now, is that its participants are too indebted to either the Hobbesian or Shaftesburian manner of approaching the issue and so neglect the insights of the other.

To begin with, there are strong Hobbesian overtones in the argument made by some political theorists that contemptuous speech brutalizes politics by converting disputants into belligerents and discussion into the silence of mutual disdain.⁵² For some liberals, the concern goes deeper

51. Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

52. Karen Stohr, 'Our New Age of Contempt', *New York Times*, 23 January 2017. On the 'civilitarian' critique of insulting public speech see Bejan, *Mere Civility*. For Bejan and

still. Jeremy Waldron has argued that contemptuous speech can remove from those subjected to it the reassurance that they enjoy equal standing within the polity, making it a potent weapon of civic exclusion.⁵³ This applies also to racist or misogynistic jokes; such jokes are never just humour but also implicit attempts at humiliation that endanger the minimal sense of self-worth necessary for membership in a political community.⁵⁴ Looked at through a Hobbesian lens, those who object to such jokes are not humourless killjoys, but are voicing a legitimate worry about a real injury deserving of redress.

Traces of the Hobbesian understanding of laughter can also be glimpsed in the realist critique of attempts to substitute moralistic condemnation for political contestation.⁵⁵ Speakers who frequently have recourse to ridicule inject precisely the kind of simplistic moralism into political contests that realists abhor. After all, those who publicly mock others often presume that once their opponents have been exposed as ridiculous then the contest will be settled in their favour, obviating the need for further contestation and exchange. The Hobbesian objection is that these ridiculers mistakenly believe that their mockery constitutes a real triumph for virtue and truth, as opposed to an illusory, contingent, or easily reversible victory. From a realist point of view, the destructiveness of this presumption extends beyond any harm done to its immediate target. For it also inflicts (or attempts to inflict) shame on those who hesitate before piling on or who dare acknowledge that what is ridiculous to some may not be so to others.

There are Shaftesburian elements too lurking in our contemporary politics, particularly among those who see ridicule as a *guarantor* of civility rather than a threat to it. If, as Henri Bergson claimed, it is the arrogant, vain, or otherwise ‘unsociable’ that are most horrified at being laughed at,

Garsten, ‘mutual contempt can corrode the affective bonds of democratic citizenship’. Teresa Bejan and Bryan Garsten, ‘The Difficult Work of Liberal Civility’, in *Civility, Legality and Justice in America*, ed. Austin Sarat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 18.

53. The power of contemptuous utterances as a force for civic exclusion is discussed at length in Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

54. On the dangers of humiliation, conceived of as behaviour that ‘constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured’ see Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.

55. The literature on realism in political theory is large and growing. For some of the best recent work in this tradition see the essays collected in Matt Sleat, ed., *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

then ridicule may prove an effective means of protecting politics from just those sorts of characters.⁵⁶ More recently, several political theorists and historians have championed ridicule as a weapon against authoritarian personalities.⁵⁷ According to another version of this argument, ridicule is valuable less for what it accomplishes than for what it replaces. When we ridicule someone, we are pointedly *not* treating them seriously, or with the deference they demand. Ridicule can thus function as a way of refusing terms of engagement perceived to be unjust or otherwise skewed against the speaker. Even the relatively powerless, after all, can laugh in defiance at the folly and vice of the powerful. And while ridicule can do little to substantially alter asymmetries of power, it can nevertheless bolster the laugher's determination to resist the interpretation of the social world that the powerful may wish to foist upon them. As Miranda Fricker has written, declaring 'something potentially authoritative to be absurd gives one critical courage' as 'one hermeneutical rebellion inspires another.'⁵⁸

Finally, echoes of Shaftesbury can be heard in the argument made by some political theorists that ridicule *enables* exchange because it is a form of criticism that, while severe, nevertheless invites reply. On this view even contemptuous jests are better for politics than silently regarding someone with disdain. For some, the demise of mutual mockery between individuals and groups is actually an ominous sign that an altogether nastier form of exchange is about to commence. The adage that when the jokes stop the shooting might be about to start expresses a real worry that laughing at each other might be the last thing propping up civility in conditions of heightened social and political tension. If, as Iris Marion Young argued, humour merits inclusion among 'the forms of speech that often lubricate

56. Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 154.

57. Ronald Dworkin, 'The Right to Ridicule', *New York Review of Books*, 23 March 2006. Robert Darnton, 'To Deal with Trump, Look to Voltaire', *New York Times*, 27 December 2018. For Elizabeth Markovits the 'idea that irony's victims are always unfairly ridiculed is spurious; some characters call for deflation, and irony is a less aggressive . . . way than frank speech to deflate another's arrogance'. Elizabeth Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 102. The liberal philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has made the ambitious claim that 'carefully calibrated ridicule' could be a more powerful resource against injustice than appeals to moral argument. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (London: Norton, 2010), 172.

58. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 167.

ongoing discussion' then an excessive earnestness may spell more trouble for civility than ridicule itself.⁵⁹

I contend that the tension between these perspectives is where the most fruitful thinking about the politics of ridicule is to be found. To declare ridicule uncivil is to deny its sociable and emancipatory potential. On the other hand, it is no less problematic to overlook ridicule's capacity to humiliate the already vulnerable or to embrace a teleological view that presents it as the friend of virtue and the scourge of vice. The best British Enlightenment thinking on the topic recognized that neither aspect of ridicule—the oppressive nor the emancipatory—could be discarded without cost. Political theorists who want to take ridicule seriously must do the same.

Overview of the Book

Shaftesbury first earned notoriety for defending ridicule in his *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* of 1708. Commentators have generally interpreted Shaftesbury's *Letter* as targeting religious fanatics, High Church clerics, and other deviants from the Whig common sense of his day. In the first chapter I upend this view by revealing how Shaftesbury's project was far more ambitious in scope. The Earl, I argue, did not limit his ridicule to enthusiasts or priests but instead, drawing on the ancient Stoics and Cynics, sought to shock his readers into revising their beliefs and adopting a sociable religious disposition more conducive to toleration. It was the first indication that Shaftesbury was elevating ridicule from a conversational art to a vehicle for enlightenment.

Shaftesbury died in Naples in 1713, having fled both the English cold (he was a chronic asthmatic) and the political disappointment of a Tory electoral triumph. But by then he had already published what would become the urtext of the ridicule debate for the remainder of the century, *Sensus Communis: an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709). Chapter 2 situates *Sensus Communis* in its political context and shows how Shaftesbury's commitment to ridicule received an early test when the High Churchman Henry Sacheverell used a sermon at St Paul's Cathedral to mock Whig pieties concerning toleration. By agreeing with Whig efforts

59. Iris Marion Young, 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy', in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 129.

to suppress Sacheverell's sermonizing through Parliamentary impeachment, Shaftesbury conceded that the coercive power of the state was sometimes needed to create space for the more sociable exchanges he preferred. The chapter concludes in the 1720s with two of Shaftesbury's most influential early readers: Bernard Mandeville and Francis Hutcheson. I show that it was in the disagreement between these two philosophers (one a champion of Shaftesbury, the other his most trenchant critic), that the significance of ridicule to the debate on sociability comes truly into focus.

In the third chapter we turn to David Hume and to reactions to Shaftesbury's experiment in Scotland. To many of his early critics, it appeared that Hume had followed Shaftesbury in making ridicule central to his philosophical practice, particularly when it came to religion. Even today several commentators agree that Hume either deliberately sought to provoke laughter in his readers or simply lacked the self-control necessary to keep his own derision hidden. I complicate this picture by revealing Hume's ambivalence towards the Shaftesburian programme. If good humour was a virtue for Hume, it was one that could conceal worse vices. And while he indulged his taste for ridicule frequently, he also harboured Hobbesian doubts about its capacity to distort debate and sow discord.

Hume's Aberdonian adversaries, Thomas Reid and James Beattie, are the focus of chapter 4. These Common Sense philosophers took a keen interest in the psychology of laughter and were anxious to undermine Hobbes's argument that laughter was ultimately an expression of contempt. But they never disavowed ridicule in philosophical argumentation and public debate. On the contrary, Beattie in particular championed it as an antidote to scepticism, a philosophy he deemed both absurd (and hence immune to rational refutation) and dangerously persuasive. Far from being a frivolous or uncivil mode of speech, therefore, Reid and Beattie made ridicule into a shield for the common sense understandings that held society together.

The final chapters of the book turn to two more radical incarnations of Shaftesbury's experiment to be found in the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1790s. In the fifth chapter we turn to a group of critics on the fringes of the Scottish Enlightenment who deployed ridicule for a very different political cause: the campaign against the Atlantic slave trade. William Dickson, Alexander Geddes and James Tytler all set out to expose defenders of African slavery as not merely mistaken but contemptible, and their arguments as an absurd affront to humanity. Taking their cue from Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, the form of ridicule they often adopted was a mock endorsement of the very pro-slavery arguments they sought to

discredit. In adopting this rhetorical strategy, I argue, these abolitionists found that some prejudiced or self-interested claims on behalf of slavery could not be countered by argument alone and that presenting them as beneath refutation was essential to defeating them.

Chapter 6 brings us to the role of ridicule in the work of one of the century's foremost critics of men and women's subordination. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Mary Wollstonecraft, referencing Shaftesbury, accused Edmund Burke of using ridicule to humiliate his political opponents, including her own mentor, Richard Price. Yet she herself showed few qualms about returning like with like. Rather than demonstrating inconsistency, I argue, Wollstonecraft's rhetorical strategy reveals her appreciation for the power of ridicule to expose prejudice and undercut illegitimate claims to authority. Particularly in her two *Vindications*, Wollstonecraft deployed ridicule as a weapon against haughty elites and made a case for teaching young women to laugh contemptuously at the cultural products (mainly sentimental novels) that contributed to their subordination.

In recovering these experiments with ridicule my aim is not to exhaust the full range of reactions to Shaftesbury's project or trace every intervention into the debate he inspired. Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* went through eleven editions during the eighteenth century (so far as philosophical texts go only Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* went through more) and tracking every response to its claims about ridicule would be tedious and not especially instructive. Nor have I scoured these texts for models ripe for contemporary imitation. Ridicule is nothing if not contextual and the same applies to arguments about how it might be used. What I have offered, however, is an exercise in historical recovery that can help us recognize what might be transpiring when a critic, comedian, politician or journalist reaches for ridicule, and what effects this can have on our social and political life. Ridicule does not currently lack for champions. Nor have we a shortage of critics lamenting its tendency to trivialize, distract and wound. Less common are historically informed analyses of what ridicule can and cannot do, drawn from an era in which the promise and pitfalls of ridicule were subjected to greater scrutiny than any other. This book, I hope, will begin to fill that gap.

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