

8. Human Nature (1650)

Thomas Hobbes

From *Human Nature* (1650)

There is a passion that has no name; but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance which we call laughter, which is always joy: but what joy, what we think, and wherein we triumph when we laugh, is not hitherto declared by any. That it consists in wit, or, as they call it, in the jest, experience confutes: for men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lies no wit nor jest at all. And forasmuch as the same thing is no more ridiculous when it grows stale or usual, whatsoever it be that moves laughter, it must be new and unexpected. Men laugh often (especially such as are greedy of applause from every thing they do well) at their own actions performed never so little beyond their own expectations; as also at their own jests; and in this case it is manifest, that the passion of laughter proceeds from a sudden conception of some ability in himself that laughs. Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated. Also men laugh at jests, the wit whereof always consists in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another: and in this case also the passion of laughter proceeds from the sudden imagination of our own odds and eminency: for what is else the recommending of our selves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity? For when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonor we participate, we never laugh thereat. I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonor. It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over. Laughter without offence, must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and when all the company may laugh together: for laughing to one's self puts all the rest into jealousy and examination of themselves. Besides, it is vain glory, and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmity of another, sufficient matter for his triumph.

This text was taken from the following work.

Thomas Hobbes, *The Treatise on Human Nature* (London, 1812), Edited by Philip Mallet. p. 65

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