

## 9. Observations on Man (1749)

David Hartley

### From *Observations on Man* (1749)

I come now to examine the pleasures of mirth, wit, and humour.

But, first, it will be necessary to consider the causes of laughter, and particularly the mental ones.

Now it may be observed, that young children do not laugh aloud for some months. The first occasion of doing this seems to be a surprise, which brings on a momentary fear first, and then a momentary joy in consequence of the removal of that fear, agreeably to what may be observed of the pleasures that follow the removal of pain. This may appear probable, inasmuch as laughter is a nascent cry, stopped of a sudden; also because if the same surprise, which makes young children laugh, be a very little increased, they will cry. It is usual, by way of diverting young children, and exciting them to laughter, to repeat the surprise, as by clapping the hands frequently, reiterating a sudden motion, &c.

This is the original of laughter in children, in general; but the progress in each particular is much accelerated, and the occasions multiplied, by imitation. They learn to laugh, as they learn to talk and walk; and are most apt to laugh profusely, when they see others laugh; the common cause contributing also in a great degree to produce this effect. The same thing is evident even in adults; and shews us one of the sources of the sympathetic affections.

To these things it is to be added, that the alternate motions of the chest follow the same degrees of mental emotion with more and more facility perpetually, so that at last children (who are likewise more exquisitely sensible and irritable than adults) laugh upon every trifling occasion.

By degrees they learn the power of suspending the actions both of laughing and crying, and associate this power with a variety of ideas, such as those of decency, respect, fear, and shame: the incidents and objects, which before occasioned emotion sufficient to produce laughter, now occasion little or none, from the transmutation of their associations: their new associated pleasures and pains are of a more sedate kind, and do not affect them so much by surprise; and, which is a principal cause in respect of individuals, their equals laugh less, and, by forming them to the same model with themselves, make the disposition to laughter decrease still faster. For whatever can be shewn to take place at all in human nature, must take place in a much higher degree than according to the original causes, from our great disposition to imitate one another, which has been already explained.

It confirms this account of laughter that it follows tickling, as noted above, *i.e.* a momentary pain and apprehension of pain, with an immediately succeeding removal of these, and their alternate recurrency; also that the softer sex, and all nervous persons, are much disposed both to laugh and cry profusely, and to pass quickly from one state to the other. And it may deserve to be inquired, how far the profuse, continued laughter

and mirth on one hand, sorrow, hanging the lip, and crying, on the other, which occur in madness, agree with it.

As children learn the use of language, they learn to laugh at sentences or stories, by which sudden alarming emotions and expectations are raised in them, and again dissipated instantaneously. And as they learnt before by degrees to laugh at sudden unexpected noises, or motions, where there was no fear, or no distinguishable one, so it is, after some time, in respect of words. Children, and young persons, are diverted by every little jingle, pun, contrast, or coincidence, which is level to their capacities, even though the harshness and inconsistency, with which it first strikes the fancy, be so minute as scarce to be perceived. And this is the origin of that laughter which is excited by wit, humour, buffoonery, &c.

But this species of laughter abates also by degrees, as the other before considered did, and, in general, for the same causes; so that adults, and especially those that are judges of politeness and propriety, laugh only at such strokes of wit and humour, as surprise by some more than ordinary degree of contrast or coincidence; and have at the same time a due connexion with pleasure and pain, and their several associations of fitness, decency, inconsistency, absurdity, honour, shame, virtue, and vice; so as neither to be too glaring on the one hand, nor too faint on the other. In the first case, the representation raises dislike and abhorrence; in the last, it becomes insipid.

From hence may be seen, that in different persons the occasions of laughter must be as different as their opinions and dispositions; that low similitudes, allusions, contrasts, and coincidences, applied to grave and serious subjects, must occasion the most profuse laughter in persons of light minds; and, conversely, increase this levity of mind, and weaken the regard due to things sacred; that the vices of gluttony, lewdness, vain-glory, self-conceit, and covetousness, with the concomitant pleasures and pains, hopes, fears, dangers, &c. when represented by indirect circumstances, and the representation heightened by contrasts and coincidences, must be the most frequent subject of mirth, wit, and humour, in this mixed degenerate state, where they are censured upon the whole; and yet not looked upon with a due degree of severity, distance, and abhorrence; that company, feasting, and wine, by putting the body into a pleasurable state, must dispose to laughter upon small occasions; and that persons who give themselves much to mirth, wit, and humour, must thereby greatly disqualify their understandings for the search after truth; inasmuch as by the perpetual hunting after apparent and partial agreements and disagreements, as in words, and indirect accidental circumstances, whilst the true natures of the things themselves afford real agreements and disagreements, that are very different, or quite opposite, a man must by degrees pervert all his notions of things themselves, and become unable to see them as they really are, and as they appear to considerate sober-minded inquirers. He must lose all his associations of the visible ideas of things, their names, symbols, &c. with their useful practical relations and properties; and get, in their stead, accidental, indirect, and unnatural conjunctions of circumstances, that are really foreign to each other, or oppositions of those that are united; and after some time, habit and custom will fix these upon him.

The most natural occasions of mirth and laughter in adults seem to be the little mistakes and follies of children, and the smaller inconsistencies and improprieties which happen in conversation, and the daily occurrences of life; inasmuch as these pleasures are, in great measure, occasioned, or at least supported, by the general pleasurable state, which our love and affection to our friends in general, and to children in particular, put the body and mind into. For this kind of mirth is always checked where we have a dislike; also where the mistake or inconsistency rises beyond a certain limit; for then it produces concern, confusion, and uneasiness. And it is useful not only in respect of the good effects which it has upon the body, and the present amusement and relaxation that it affords to the mind; but also because it puts us upon rectifying what is so amiss, or any other similar error, in one another, or in children; and has a tendency to remove many prejudices from custom and education. Thus we often laugh at children, **rustics**, and foreigners, when yet they act right, according

to the truly natural, simple, and uncorrupted dictates of reason and propriety, and are guilty of no other inconsistency than what arises from the usurpations of custom over nature; and we often take notice of this, and correct ourselves, in consequence of being diverted by it.

This text was taken from the following work.

David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* (London, 1749) pp. 437-441

[https://www.google.com/books/edition/Observations\\_on\\_Man\\_His\\_Frame\\_His\\_Duty\\_a/jQw2AQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0&kptab=sideways](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Observations_on_Man_His_Frame_His_Duty_a/jQw2AQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0&kptab=sideways)

The use of this work is governed by the public domain.