

1 Plato (428-348 B.C.)

As with so many topics, Western thought about humor and laughter begins with Plato. What we laugh at, in Plato's view, is vice, particularly self-ignorance, in people who are relatively powerless. Our amusement is a kind of malice toward such people, he thought, and this should make us wary of amusement, but so should the fact that amusement is an emotion in which we tend to lose rational control of ourselves. In his *Republic*, when setting up rules for the education of the young Guardians of the ideal state, Plato singles out laughter as something to be avoided. The guardians "must not be prone to laughter, for usually when we abandon ourselves to violent laughter, our condition provokes a violent reaction." So that the young Guardians are not given bad models to follow, literature should be censored to eliminate all mention of the gods or heroes as overcome with laughter. (*Republic*, 388e)

Philebus 48-50

SOCRATES:

And do you realize that when we see a comedy, here again the soul experiences a mixture of pain and pleasure.

PROTARCHUS:

I don't quite understand you.

SOC:

No, Protarchus, for it's somewhat difficult to see this mixture of feelings in our reaction to comedy. Yes, it does seem difficult.

PROT:

Yet the obscurity of this case should make us more eager to examine it, for that will make it easier to detect other cases of mixed pleasures and pain.

SOC:

Yes, go on.

PROT:

We mentioned malice just now [before this passage]. Would you call that a pain of the soul?

SOC:

Yes.

And yet the malicious man is somehow pleased at his neighbor's misfortunes.

PROT:

Certainly.

SOC:

Now ignorance, or what we call stupidity, is an evil.

Plato

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PROT:

Surely.

SOC:

Assuming that to be true, observe the nature of the ridiculous.

PROT:

Please explain.

SOC:

Taken generally, the ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice. It is that kind of vice which can be described by the opposite of the inscription at Delphi.

PROT:

You mean "Know thyself," Socrates?

SOC:

I do. And the opposite would read "Know not thyself."

PROT:

Certainly.

SOC:

Now, Protarchus, see if you can divide this into three parts.

PROT:

How? I'm afraid I can't.

SOC:

Do you mean that I must make this division for you?

PROT:

Yes, and I beg you to do so.

SOC:

Aren't there three ways in which someone may be ignorant of himself?

PROT:

What are they?

SOC:

First, about wealth; he may imagine himself richer than he is.

PROT:

Yes, many people are like that, certainly.

SOC:

But there are even more who imagine themselves taller or more handsome or physically better than they really are.

PROT:

Quite so.

SOC:

And yet surely the greatest number are mistaken about the third class of goods, that is possessions of the soul. They imagine themselves superior in virtue, when they are not.

PROT:

Yes, indeed.

SOC:

And of all the virtues, isn't wisdom the one most men are always claiming, disputing endlessly and lying about how wise they are?

PROT:

Certainly.

SOC:

And may not all this be truly called evil?

PROT:

Surely.

SOC: Well now, Protarchus, we must make another two-fold division if we want to see the curious mixture of pleasure and pain that lies in the malice of amusement. How do we make this division? All who are foolish enough to hold this false conceit of themselves can be divided, like mankind in general, into two classes—those who are strong and powerful and those who are the opposite.

PROT:

Certainly.

SOC: Then let this be the principle of division. Those who are weak and unable to retaliate when they are laughed at may rightly be called ridiculous; those who are strong and can defend themselves may be more truly called formidable and hateful. For ignorance in the strong is hateful, because it is hurtful to everyone both in real life and on the stage, but powerless ignorance may be considered ridiculous, which it is.

PROT:

That's perfectly true, but I'm not yet clear about the mixture of pleasures and pains here.

SOC:

Well, let's consider the nature of malice.

PROT:

Go ahead.

SOC: Both pain and pleasure can be wrong, can't they? Unquestionably.

SOC:

And delighting in our enemies' misfortunes is neither malicious nor wrong?

PROT:

Of course not.

SOC: But to feel delight instead of pain when we see our friends in misfortune—that is wrong, isn't it?

PROT:

Certainly.

SOC: Now, didn't we say that ignorance is always an evil?

PROT:

Yes.

SOC: Then if we find in our friends the three kinds of ignorance we outlined, imaginary wisdom, beauty and wealth, delusions which are ridiculous in the weak and hateful in the strong—if we find these in a harmless form in our friends, may we

not say, as I was saying before, that these delusions are simply ridiculous?

Yes, we may.

SOC: And do we not agree that this state of mind, being ignorant, is evil?

Certainly.

SOC: And when we laugh at it, do we feel pain or pleasure?

Clearly we feel pleasure.

PROT: And we agreed that it is malice that is the source of the pleasure we feel at our friend's misfortune? Certainly.

SOC: Then our argument shows that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, our pleasure, in mixing with malice, mixes with pain, for we have agreed that malice is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is pleasant, and on these occasions we both feel malice and laugh.