

The First Laugh

[Last year I wrote a short story, "The First Suicide," to which, although the story itself was only 8-pages long, I added a 12-page long preface on the history of suicides. I guess that I'm feeling less depressed this year as I have now written this short story "The First Laugh," and I have shown a little restraint by adding a shorter preface.]



οὐδέν γάρ γελά τῶν ἄλλων
No other animal laughs

—Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*. 3.10 (673a8)

To those who study it professionally, laughter is no laughing matter.

For philosophers, Aristotle's dictum that humans are the only animal that laughs has become embroiled in the age-old mind-body question. Are humans only incidentally animals that laugh or is laughter an essential quality of what it means to be a human? Is laughter a sign that we have souls? For the atheist Nietzsche, laughter is almost divine:

And assuming that the gods also practice philosophy, a fact which many conclusions have already driven me to – I don't doubt that in the process they know how to laugh in a superhuman and new way – and at the expense of all serious things! Gods delight in making fun: even where sacred actions are concerned, it seems they cannot stop laughing.

—*Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 294

Nietzsche's prophet Zarathustra similarly advocates for laughter when he tells the "higher men" that they should "... learn to laugh at yourselves as a man ought to laugh!" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 303). We humans, for Nietzsche (and me!), are not only *homo ridens* but also *homo risibilis*.

In 1900, the French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson published *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (*Laughter. Essay on the Meaning of Comedy*), the thesis of which is that comedy has a moral dimension, to wit, that laughter forces people to be better and to suppress their vices, because laughter makes them conscious of their faults:

Beyond actions and attitudes that are automatically punished by their natural consequences, there remains a certain inflexibility of the body, of the mind and of the character that society would like to eliminate to obtain a greater elasticity and a better sociability of its members. This inflexibility is the comic, laughter is the punishment.

In 1905, Sigmund Freud published *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*) in which he argues that jokes are enjoyable because they allow us to laugh at things that we have unconsciously repressed.

Given this background, it should not seem like a joke that the study of laughter has become fully ensconced within academia. The American Humor Studies Association was founded in 1975 and publishes the peer-reviewed journal *Studies in American Humor* and sponsors academic conferences across the country. The International Society for Humor Studies was founded in 1988 and publishes the peer-reviewed journal *Humor. International Journal of Humor Research*, in addition to sponsoring annual academic conferences on humor studies. Over the past generation, interdisciplinary programs in humor studies have sprung up at many American and European universities.

Humor theorists have categorized humor into three main groups: superiority, incongruity, and release. Superiority humor—also referred to as derision or disparagement humor—was recognized as early as Plato, who condemned the aggressive malice in laughing at others as detrimental to our own souls (e.g. *Republic* 3.388e). Incongruity humor, which involves the contrast between an established set of expectations and its resolution through an unexpected punch line, is the most common type of humor involved in most modern jokes. Release humor is the type the Freud describes—humor as a form of release or liberation of nervous energy built up from repressed aggressive or lustful impulses.

Neuroscientists have also turned their attention to laughter. They have studied the human brain pathways that contribute to laughing, finding that the brain regions associated with decision-making have to be inhibited to facilitate spontaneous and unbridled laughter, something that relies on emotional circuitry connecting the frontal and medial brain areas responsible for experiencing emotion with those required for expressing emotion. People who suffer from such psychological conditions as gelotophobia are shown to have poor connectivity between those regions. Biochemists have found that laughing replaces the cortisol in our bloodstream with dopamine, oxytocin and endorphins, chemicals that in the brain contribute to feelings of pleasure and relatedness to others.

Evolutionary biologists have also focused on laughter and on how our unique human ability to voluntarily control our facial muscles sets us apart from other animals. Yes, other animals like dogs and dolphins play, but we are the only ones who curl up our mouths and crinkle our eyes (a Duchenne smile) and continually exhale as we laugh—sometimes losing our breath in our mirth. [For those pet-owners who swear that their pets can laugh, I’m going to stick with Aristotle. We may say that we are laughing with our doggies but we are really only laughing at them.]

And evolutionary biologists hypothesize that laughter evolved in the earliest hominid populations to help cement group solidarity. As Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson (2005) see it:

Evolutionarily elaborated from ape play-panting sometime between 4 million years ago and 2 million years ago, laughter arising from non-serious social incongruity promoted community play during fleeting periods of safety. Such non-serious social incongruity, it is argued, is the evolutionary precursor to humor as we know it.

R.I.M. Dunbar (2022) argues that laughter in early hominid groups was a more effective method of bonding than the time-consuming social grooming used by apes and thus allowed these hominids to increase the size of their groups beyond the limit that could be bonded by social grooming.



And so: There must have been a first laugh.

And let’s say that happened in 202,004 BCE, ten years before we last saw our *homo heidelbergensis* family of Gar, Ker-i, and Ker and learned of the first suicide.

The First Laugh: A Short Story

One TwoHand after the FirstMoon of the New SunCycle, One TwoHand SunCycles of NewTribe (i.e. Thursday, 14 August, 202,004 BCE).

Ker-i turned over on the sleeping grass and slowly opened one eye. A ray of sunlight was just peaking into the cave, spreading a hazy light over the still smoldering NewTribe Hearthfires. Ker-i yawned. She had slept better than she had in many a SunCycle. Little Ker lay at her side, snorking in that baby way he always had. But Ker wasn’t a baby anymore. He was almost TwoHand Moons old. Yes, Ker still tried to

suckle at Ker-i's no-longer full breasts, but Ker-i could tell that he wasn't getting much nourishment there; and just a few Suns ago Ker-i had begun to feed Ker a porridge of pounded baby seeds—those tops of the thin grasses that grow down by the river. Ker-i had been collecting those seeds during the Moons before her belly had grown too big for her to do anything other than waddle around near the cave opening, and she had been carefully hoarding them in a leather pouch, waiting for the time when her new baby would need them. And for the past two Suns, after Ker-i had pounded the seeds with a river pebble and mixed them with some flakes of dried RedFish from this Suncycle's harvest, Ker had been gobbling up his new food. But now, instead of the sweet milky poops that Ker had for Moons been squirting onto the sleeping grass, a dark, foul-smelling turd lay next to him. Ker-i would have to wipe Ker's bottom all clean when he woke up and then go out to collect some more of the soft sleeping grass, if she could still find any this late in the season.

Ker-i rolled back over on her side. Gar was gone, a depression in the grass indicating where he had been sleeping—and snoring loudly, once again! Ker-i hoped that Gar had brought the water pouch with him when he had gone out to relieve himself and that he would bring it back full of the spring water that still—barely—flowed out of the rock opening down there below the cave. Ker-i closed her eyes and thought that she might get a little more sleep before Gar got back or Ker woke up. She buried her nose in the sleeping grass and inhaled deeply. The aroma reminded her of her childhood, when her mother had first showed her the best places to collect the sleeping grass which gave off a subtle, piney, perfume when you lay on it. In her mind's eye, Ker-i could see her younger self playing with her brother Kur. All Sun long, they would run around making faces at each other, pretending to make the growling grimace that the men made to each other when they were mad, or when the men just trying to show that they thought they deserved that leg of RedDeer meat. Ker-i and Kur would grimace at each other until one of them—usually Ker-i, being the younger—would wrinkle up her nose and curl up her lips into a big smile. Ker-i and Kur would then hug each other and run off to play some more.

And now that she was a mother, Ker-i had been making that same curled-lip smile to her baby Ker. And Ker quickly responded by curling up his lips and wrinkling his nose when he was staring up at his mother's smile. And when Ker-i would tickle him

on his sides and on his belly, Ker would wrinkle up his mouth and make that chortling grunting sound that all of the NewTribe made when they were happy and content.

Ker started to stir. Ker-i rolled over and made that curled-lip smile at her baby. Ker curled his lips back up at her. Then, in a sudden flash of inspiration, Ker-i put her hands over her eyes and said “Ker, where’s mama, where’s mama?” Ker gave a little concerned grunt “Maa?” Then Ker-i took her hands away “Here’s mama, here’s mama.” Ker’s eyes crinkled and his little belly shook as he exhaled out a loud “Hahaha!”

Ker-i could see faces poking up from all the nearby Hearthfires as the other NewTribe members looked up to see what this strange new sound was all about. Just then, Ker-i could see Gar come running into the cave, carrying a full water pouch above his head as he rushed in to see what was causing the commotion at his Hearthfire. And just before Gar got to Ker-i and the laughing Ker, he stubbed his toe on a rock that shouldn’t have been there and went sprawling down face first, the water pouch landing on his head, drenching him. Gar quickly sat up with a fighting grimace on his face. But Ker-i and the other NewTribe who saw Gar trip and fall all started to exhale out their own “hahaha”’s from their smiling faces. Gar looked around and, for the first time in his life, curled up his lips, wrinkled his eyes and nose, and joined his tribe in laughing.

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