

LAUGHING AND ALTERITIES. ON THE MOVEMENT OF ALTERITY IN THE PHILOSOPHIES OF LAUGHTER

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Laughing is an event of alteration. Without alteration laughter wouldn't be possible. This paper aims at describing laughter and alterity as intertwined phenomena. Therefore it investigates five different dimensions of alterity within the phenomenon of laughter. The source material for this study is provided by a series of monographs about laughter which were published during the 20th century: beginning with Henri Bergson's *Laughter*, followed by Helmuth Plessner's *Laughing and Crying*, Hans Blumenberg's *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, Milan Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and finally by Peter L. Berger's *Redeeming Laughter*. By describing the social, corporal, historical, phenomenal and redeeming alterations of laughing a new performative ethical perspective on the phenomenon of laughter will be shown.

Keywords: Laughter – Alterity – Event – Liminal experience – Philosophical anthropology – Performative ethics

“If one fully understood the phenomenon of laughter, one would have understood the central mystery of human nature.”

(Berger 2014, chapter 4: *Homo Ridens: Physiology and Psychology*)

1. Introduction: Laughing as an Event of Alteration. Laughter¹ is an event of alteration. Without alteration laughing wouldn't be possible. This paper aims at describing laughter as a phenomenon which is intertwined with alterity. Thereby it targets to analyze how and in what modes alterity gets realized through laughter. In the following, five dimensions of alteration that laughter makes possible will be lined out: Social, corporal, historical, phenomenal and redeeming alteration. Instead of examining the phenomenon

¹ This essay exclusively describes the phenomenon of laughing/laughter, other phenomena of human expression like e.g. smiling may seem to be similar, but when investigated closely they differ in a lot of ways (see e.g. Plessner [1982a, also 1982b, 206]).

Laughter/laughing: I will use the expression *Laughing* when the actualization of laughter is in focus, and *Laughter* when the context relates to the phenomenon itself.

of laughter in itself or asking what it is that triggers laughter or to what end it functions, this essay only wants to describe some of the different possibilities of alteration which laughter has to offer.

The premise of the idea to describe the possible alterations that are conducted during laughing is based in the characterization of laughing as a phenomenon which is a liminal experience, or, to put it differently, an experience of crossing a border. But who is undergoing this liminal experience in laughing? This alteration is happening to the laughing person as well as to the one laughed about, and also to the relation and situation the different parties are put in. Furthermore, even laughter itself is altering: laughing has the possibility to change everything which is in its environment and it is also changing itself at the same time. As we will see later, laughing is a phenomenon of huge ambiguity and shouldn't be described as a decided phenomenon. We merely can describe possibilities of laughing in its alterity on their ever changing field of varieties. This essay's research interest is how laughing alters persons and situations², and how it finally also alters alterity and related fields, esp. ethics.

This paper focuses mainly on the philosophically relevant research about laughing from the twentieth century which offered a huge variety of relevant studies about laughing. A series of monographs by Henri Bergson, Helmuth Plessner, Milan Kundera, Hans Blumenberg and Peter L. Berger will be analyzed because each of these works helps us to discover another dimension of alteration within the phenomenon of laughing.

2. A short Genealogy of the Last Century of Laughing Philosophies. The most radical change in the philosophical interest in the twentieth century can be characterized by a "turn towards the lifeworld", as Marquard (1965, 211) puts it, a shift towards language, culture, corporality, et cetera³. In the wake of this turn towards the lifeworld arose a renewed interest for the phenomenon of laughter. This discussion is still going on⁴, but has to large parts found its way out of philosophy and into the field of sciences, especially in terms of popular interest⁵. Today, looking back at the last century, we may call it the one of the philosophies of laughing. A series of monographs was written about laughter:⁶ At the beginning of the twentieth century Henri Bergson published *Le rire (Laughter)*, in

² Which is, of course, also a way to tell what laughing means.

³ A matter which recently was getting a rather ironic treatment: „It seems like that every important dimension of human existence in the world has to be emphasized by a different turn“ (translation by BK), Alloa, Bedorf, Grüny, Klass (2012), 7.

⁴ See e.g. Sepp (2013), Vydrová (2014), Vydrová (2015), Liggieri (2016).

⁵ This shifting away from philosophical discussions of the phenomenon to scientific ones can clearly be seen by having a quick look at the article about "Laughter" at the world's topmost (at least based on the amount of articles, readers and writers) source of information, the English version of Wikipedia.

⁶ Most of these monographs bear the similarity that they do not only deal with laughing but also with something other, in the case of Plessner with crying, by Kundera with forgetting, and finally in Blumenberg's writings with theory.

1940 Helmuth Plessner wrote *Lachen und Weinen (Laughing and crying)*, Milan Kundera issued his *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting)* in 1979, Hans Blumenberg published *Das Lachen der Thrakerin (The Laughter of the Thracian Woman)* in 1987⁷ (based on his article *Der Sturz des Protophilosophen. Zur Komik der reinen Theorie [The fall of the protophilosopher. About the comic aspect of pure theory]* from 1976), and Peter L. Berger offered as a closing point in 1997 his book *Redeeming laughter. The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (2nd edition 2014).

Of course, not all of these authors can or should be labelled unquestioned as philosophers in a strict sense, but as the phenomenon of laughing seems to be as transcending as human nature, why should one exclude perspectives from other forms of knowledge? Philosophy, especially when concerned with phenomena of the lifeworld, is able to include all necessary sources – without regard of their origin: from its own tradition, from sciences or art – that are helping to enrich our potential for description of the phenomenon in discussion.

At a first glance the list of monographs on laughing reflects the multidisciplinary of research as the authors come from different fields of anthropological research (philosophical, sociological, literary) but a second look also reveals the intercultural dimension of it what one can tell simply from the words that are used to signify the phenomenon: *le rire* (French), *das Lachen* (German), *smích* (Czech) and *the laughter* (English).

But how could the twentieth century as the century of laughing theories/philosophies be described thematically? The importance of laughter arose in relation to the upbringing of lived and experienced, ‘lifeworldly’, phenomena in general, as feelings like fear and angst, and the interest for the lived corporality (the ‘*Leiblichkeit*’) to overcome the oblivion of it (as an echo to Nietzsche’s diagnosis of ‘*Leibvergessenheit*’).

One can easily witness the shifting of paradigms in philosophy and the humanities within the last century looking at the monographs listed above: as the century went on, following largely those premises, laughing is generally analyzed as a social event, but also in its ambiguity, its corporality, and in its relations to meaning, to reality and to life.

Henri Bergson’s essay at the beginning of the century is still mostly founded upon the paradigms of the nineteenth century concerning the role of the body – for instance, the seemingly simple fact that laughing is loud and visible does not even get a comment by Bergson – he sees it merely as a matter of intelligence, and by doing so he follows in Cartesianism’s footsteps. Despite the title of his writings, for Bergson, laughter itself is not the most important phenomenon; it only gets into the focus of his research as a way to reproduce the life of society. Followed by the revolution of phenomenology, the thing itself, in our case the phenomenon of laughing, is getting in the center of research interest by a fair interest in its ‘surface’, so not only as a placeholder for something ‘behind’ it. The question no longer is how one can create and exploit laughter, but what laughing means. Does it relate to meaning in general or not? What such an inquiry can accomplish on the surface illustrate Plessner’s works: By analyzing laughter and crying he even dis-

⁷ An English translation by Spencer Hawkins has been published recently, see Blumenberg (2015).

covers the ability of man to include disproportionalities under abandonment from normal forms of controlled behavior into one's own behavior. This finally leads to his discovery of a main feature of human existence, the excentric positionality of man.⁸

Another main point of the philosophical approach towards laughing derives from the fact that laughing is something which overcomes somebody; thus it is a liminal experience of difference. The emphasis on the liminal experience of laughing and hence, more general, on the event of difference can thus be seen as the main transformation of the concept of criticism in the 20th century.

While these analyses brought new facets in the foreground of research, some others seemed to diminish. From the classic Greek texts on, laughing always was related to morality and ethics, as well as aesthetics. In the final chapter of this paper we will see whether the ethical relevance of laughing really was forgotten in the 20th century. But before, we will investigate the different dimensions of alteration in laughing.

3. Discovery and Movement of Alterity in the Phenomenon of Laughter. The monographs about laughing can be schematized by their main alterities that they aim to describe. All of them develop different perspectives on laughing which we will show relates to the main alterity which the authors emphasize.

These dimensions will help to show how alterity in its various alterations was discovered step by step. Furthermore, it shows on a metalevel the movement of alterity, that means how these alterations not only alter laughing but also alterity, so that we will see rather weak and rather strong concepts of alterity.

1. Social alterity – Bergson

In Henri Bergson's *Le rire (Laughter)* laughing is described in its social function and signification (Bergson 2008, 12). It is treated as a group phenomenon (ibid., 10) which encircles and assembles a certain group and excludes the ones laughed about. But Bergson's main argument doesn't stop at the point where a group is making fun of someone – the paradigmatic situation for this figure by Bergson is the one of comedy theatre play – laughter, accordingly, is triggered by a mere imitation of life that tends to appear mechanic in its actions. Laughter then is just a necessary step for reintroducing the one laughed about back into 'life', which basically means for Bergson to escape from mechanism, which only can be a bad imitation of life, and to find one's way back to 'life', which is described by Bergson as ever changing unpredictable alteration (see ibid., 29). The social function of laughter now can be seen as a form of punishment (ibid., 21) which aims to correct "eccentricity" (ibid., 20) from 'life'. It has been noted that this characterization of laughter gives a very pessimistic account not only of laughter, but also of sociality and 'life'⁹, but these implications shall not be discussed here.

Here, only the moment of social alteration through laughter which Bergson implic-

⁸ Compare (Plessner 1981, 28).

⁹ See e.g. (Plessner 1982b; Jurzik 1985).

itly states interests us: firstly, laughter needs other humans (Bergson 2008, 8), as the social function of laughter as punishment only can lead to changes from person to person. The alteration that Bergson describes concerns mostly the one who is the target of laughter: nothing less than this person's whole personality, including all their habits and actions, language and behavior, is altering from a mechanic imitation of life back to 'life' itself thanks to a punishing group.

What appears to be remarkably peculiar is that the laughing group which is doing the work for 'life' itself is standing outside of it, too: "Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy" (ibid., 10). For being able to laugh, one has to stand outside of the tragedy of human existence, outside of empathy. For Bergson, Laughter is a highly intellectual and theoretical act.

The note of social alteration through laughing described by Bergson is a rather weak one: it doesn't seem to have any confrontation with some strong alterity. On the contrary, the social alteration is only a step for curing eccentricity back into society and as a process that Bergson describes it seems to be rather mechanical. Somehow one gets the idea that Bergson, who desperately wants to avoid mechanism cannot do without it, too. The theorist is the most notable blind spot in this theory of laughter.

2. Corporal alterity – Plessner

With Helmuth Plessner's *Laughing and Crying*, the focus of the analysis of laughing radically changes from a theoretical social observation to the lived experience of laughing itself. Laughing no longer is only of interest because of its function for society or an aesthetical theory of comedy. Plessner's main interest lies on the conflict happening within the laughing person. Laughing is something that radically challenges the concept of a self-controlled individuality: it is an event that involuntarily bursts out of someone (which is its similarity with crying, see Plessner [1982b] 207). Laughing is "a form of expression of a crisis between the state of man to his/her own corporality" (ibid., 211¹⁰) as it is "a loss of self control, a breaking of balance between man and physical existence" (ibid., 273): as a phenomenon it is *a limit of Human Behavior* (which is the subtitle of Plessner's book). To put it in other words, laughing (as well as crying) means to transcend those limits that are set by regular human behavior under structured and stabilized relations. This liminal experience is made possible by the specific relationship of man in his/her double role as corporality (Leib) within the body (Körper) (ibid., 238).

In laughter, man is experiencing the other to his controlled behavior, the outbreak of laughter overcomes usual boundaries– at least for some time in a set procedure. But Plessner also takes the social situation of laughing serious: for him, laughter is an answer, a response of the body – "Unanswerable, not harming situations provoke laughing or crying." (ibid., 276). While the fixed, regulated relationship of man breaks apart in laughing, the body gives an answer where otherwise no one is possible: "Even in unanswerable situations, Man – due to his eccentric positionality – does find the only possible answer:

¹⁰ All translations of Plessner 1982b are by the author of this essay (BK).

The body which went out of relation to Man gives an answer instead, not as an instrument of activity, language, gesture, but as body” (ibid.), and by doing so, demonstrates one’s humanity: “to be able to cope with something where nothing is possible. By being under the level of controlled or at least formed corporality, Man demonstrates one’s humanity” (ibid., 364).

To put this in terms of alteration, one can conclude that laughing alters not only the one who is the object of laughter (Bergson), but also the laughing person. The alteration is happening away from controlled corporality to something else, which is experienceable rather than describable, and especially in this alteration according to Plessner lies the potential of humanity itself.

3. Historical alterity – Blumenberg

Laughing was never an evident phenomenon for philosophy as it was heavily discussed over the centuries. A very short summary of different interpretations concerning laughter gave Hans Blumenberg in his study *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*. Blumenberg analyses the afterlife of the Thales anecdote where Thales falls into a well and is getting laughed of by a neat, witty Thracian servant girl who explains her laughter: “he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet”¹¹. This anecdote, based on a fable by Aesop, already contains everything about how theory clashes with the reality of a lifeworld. This is why Blumenberg calls this anecdote a *Protohistory of Theory*. From then on he investigates the afterlife, the adaptations and transformations of this anecdote up to Heidegger’s interpretation.

Besides being able to offer both a very unusual and a precise retelling of the clash between different concepts of reality within the occidental philosophy and sciences, Blumenberg’s study shows how the description of this clash went along by altering the understanding of laughter, ranging from being evaluated only as a sign of stupidity up to being a true philosophical expression, back and forth in history. Of particular interest for describing the intertwined relation between laughing and alterity we can learn from Blumenberg’s study that different interpretations of laughing came side by side with different evaluations of the relation between the lifeworld and philosophy/sciences.

4. Phenomenal Alterity – Kundera

Milan Kundera’s approach to the phenomenon of laughter is based on what one could call his *gelontological difference*: although we use only one word for laughing, the phenomenon has two very distinctive meanings, so that one can find a difference in laughter itself. Kundera refers to one side of the laughter as the ‘laughter of the angels’, which means for Kundera to “rejoice over how well ordered, wisely conceived, good, and meaningful everything here below” is (Kundera 1996, 87). The other kind of laughter that Kundera describes he calls the ‘laughter of the devil’: “Things deprived suddenly of their supposed meaning, of the place assigned to them in the so-called order of things [...],

¹¹ Plato (1921), *Theaetetos*, 174a.

make us laugh. In origin, laughter is thus of the devil's domain. It has something malicious about it [...], but to some extent also a beneficent relief [...]" (ibid., 86).

While the focus before was either on alteration on the social aspect of laughing or on the condition of the laughing subject itself, with Kundera we now gain an alteration of the phenomenon of laughter itself. This alteration within laughter refers to its relation to meaning. Both the devilish and the angel-like laughter can be described as answers, but these answers lay somewhere within the range from total consent to total dissidence in relation to meaning. Like Bergson before him, Kundera describes both realizations of laughter with the circle metaphor: While Bergson's main concern was to integrate everybody back into the circle of life, this dimension for Kundera only would mean to accept a pre-given meaning. Kundera's accentuation lies more in the possibility to break out of a circle with the 'demonic' laughter, which is a response to the ambiguity of things and their meaning itself.

5. Redeeming alterity – Berger

A religious interpretation of laughing was offered by Peter L. Berger: inspired both by Alfred Schütz' theory of paramount reality versus finite provinces of meaning, and Kierkegaard's idea of a leap into faith, he describes laughing as something which conducts the leap out of a dominant reality into an own world of comedy (his examples for making this evident are the jesters and fools who also are related to holiness, as the topos of holy idiots/fools like Dostoyevsky's prince Myshkin or Hašek's Švejk). This experience of comedy is interpreted by him as a promise of redemption (see Berger 2014, foreword). The comic experience is a form of lower transcendence and can be interpreted as a sign of the higher, religious, redeeming one.

With Berger we once again get a description of laughter as a personal alteration (like Plessner), but beyond that he connects this analysis with the social standpoint. The alteration Berger is aiming at is one which enables to transcend the paramount reality. Almost one hundred years after Bergson's *Le rire (Laughter)* we find ourselves now at the exact opposite end regarding the description of the phenomenon: not only that the focus shifted away from the one laughed about to the one who is laughing, but also no longer shall one be reintroduced to society or 'life' by laughter. We see that laughter and laughing have altered itself completely. All of these descriptions are possible and plausible ones, because of the wide range of the phenomenon itself and its ambiguity.

Conclusion: the Ethics of Altering Human Phenomena. What results from these descriptions of alterations? Based on a minimal description of ethics as a discipline which is concerned with the relation to alterity, the conclusion can be drawn that alterations of laughing can also be seen as something of ethical relevance. As proven in the argumentation before, the discussion of the morality and ethics of laughter has only stopped on the surface. This research showed traces of the way how the ethical relevant relation, and this is alterity, is getting treated within the philosophies of laughing.

To sum it up, there are at least two ways of ethical thinking: the first represented by

philosophers like e.g. Levinas and Derrida, who asked about alterity. The other approach of an ethical philosophy would mean to investigate anthropological relevant phenomena where alteration is being conducted and imparting itself as an event¹². This second approach is a shift away from fixed concepts of alterity towards a performative one of alteration. This would be a response to the undefinable place of man, which was and is a topic for Philosophical Anthropology from Pico della Mirandola onwards: the founding structure of man is his capability of alteration. Also, it is a way to give seemingly simple human forms ethical relevance and opens a possibility to alter ethics.

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¹² One could also describe alteration as a physical process, but then one would have to define what physics means. In his lecture *Natur, Freiheit, Welt*, Eugen Fink (1992) puts ethics and physics in a relation: „Ethics are founded in physics“, *ibid.*, 68[trans. BK], and he explains that this means „the task to think the humanity of man from his/hers relation to the world“, *ibid.*, 69).

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