MSt in Ancient Philosophy Thesis

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Thesis Title: The Subversive Power of Laughter: Plato and Aristotle on Humour.

Word count: 14947

Abstract

Plato explicitly theorises about laughter in three dialogues: *Republic* (388a-389a, 605c-607a); *Philebus* (47e-50b); and *Laws* (816d-817a, 935a-936a). Although it is not possible to construct an overarching Platonic "theory" of laughter, this thesis argues, based on Platonic moral psychology and epistemology, that Plato is preoccupied with the subversive potential of laughter in the soul and state (subversive laughter) while also allowing for a socially and ethically positive form of laughter (playful laughter). Aristotle is generally seen as taking a more positive view of humour and laughter than Plato: he includes εὐτραπελία (wittiness) as a virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1127b34-1128b9). This thesis will show how Aristotle's philosophising on laughter emerges, converges, and diverges from Plato's "theories" of laughter, arguing that laughter for Aristotle can be either subversive or playful, and that the latter always has the potential to turn into the former. Finally, this thesis will show how the influence of Plato and Aristotle on modern humour theory (the Superiority Theory and the Incongruity Theory) should not be underestimated and so sheds further light on why we laugh and whether it is possible for laughter ever to be free from subversive potential.

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1. Introduction

> Yes, I can endure guilt, however horrible; the laughter of my enemies I will not endure. (Eur. *Medea* 796-797)

The above quote is taken from Euripides' *Medea* after Medea discloses her plans to murder her children in an act of ultimate revenge against her husband Jason. That she is willing to endure the pain and guilt of killing her own sons rather than suffer "the laughter of [her] enemies" speaks volumes about the power of hostile laughter to disgrace and denigrate in a culture where the stakes of honour and shame are high. Moreover, this motif – the fear of disgrace associated with hostile laughter – is prominent across a number of tragedies (Halliwell, "Greek Laughter" 26). In the *Histories*, Herodotus employs laughter as a literary device, a signpost which informs the reader that "some character, often at the height of prosperity, has lost all sense of his vulnerability" (Lateiner 174). Thus, laughter in Herodotus is indicative of excessive pride and self-confidence, thereby helping to justify for the reader a character's approaching demise (Lateiner 174). And so, across Greek tragedy and history, we find examples of laughter's powerful potential to *undermine* its agent or its object. For Medea, it is preferable to kill her own children rather than have her honour and reputation undermined by the laughter of her enemies. And in Herodotus, laughter indicates that the power of the agent will be greatly undermined. For example, the laughter of Cyrus (1.90.3) and Xerxes (7.103.1, 7.105, 7.209.1, 8.114.2) acts as a signpost for the destruction of their respective empires.

But laughter is much more than a powerful literary trope in Greek culture. Nearly every Greek school of philosophy adopted a stance towards laughter because of its inextricable connections with the broader scheme of Greek values – with honour and shame, friendship and enmity (as was the case for Medea), pride and humility (for Herodotus), but also pleasure and self-

discipline, freedom and servility (Halliwell, "Greek Laughter" 6). Plato and Aristotle share tragedy's and history's concern with laughter's potential to undermine its agent, its object or both. More specifically, this thesis will argue that Plato's explicit theorising about laughter is preoccupied with how laughter can undermine and ultimately *subvert* the authority of reason in the soul and similarly undermine authority and cause subversion in the state. It will then show how Aristotle's philosophising about laughter responds to Plato's and argues that, although he generally takes a more positive view of laughter than Plato, he is also very much aware of the subversive potential of laughter in both soul and state. It will also argue that both philosophers allow for a morally and socially positive form of laughter although this must be strictly controlled and nurtured by education and the law.

2. Plato on laughter

2.1 Introduction

> Moreover, they must not be lovers of laughter either. For whenever anyone gives in to violent laughter, a violent reaction pretty much always follows. (*Republic* 388e5-7)[1]

The above quote is taken from the discussion of Guardian Education in Book III of the *Republic.* Having told Adeimantus that they must ask Homer and the other poets not to represent the gods and heroes as engaging in excessive grief or lamentations, Socrates goes on to condemn lovers of laughter and the representation of gods and virtuous people as being overcome by laughter. This passage is representative of Plato's views on laughter throughout his dialogues, i.e. laughter is a force to be reckoned with, demanding serious philosophical attention and strict regulation. Although there is no overarching Platonic "theory" of laughter, Plato does explicitly theorise about laughter in three dialogues: *Republic* (388a-389a, 605c-607a); *Philebus* (47e-50b); and *Laws* (816d-817a, 935a-936a). In this chapter, I will explore these "theories" of laughter and argue that they are all preoccupied with a particular type of laughter which I call "subversive laughter" since it acts as a subversive force in both the soul and state. Moreover, I will show that the key to understanding laughter's subversive potential lies in Plato's moral psychology, particularly his theories of the divided soul.

Not only does Plato theorise about laughter in three of his dialogues, laughter abounds in the drama of the dialogues themselves. This laughter is often provoked by the character of Socrates whose ambiguous use of irony and ridicule points to Plato's understanding of the complex

[1] The translation of the *Republic* passages is Reeve, *Philebus* is Fowler and Lamb, *Laws* is Bury (unless otherwise indicated).

nature of humour and laughter.[2] For although Plato is preoccupied with subversive laughter in his explicit theorising about laughter, I will argue, based on Platonic moral psychology and epistemology, that he approves of another, positive type of laughter which I will refer to as "playful laughter".[3] Finally, I will show how Plato's attitudes towards laughter were a forerunner for the modern Superiority Theory of laughter, which holds that our laughter is an expression of superiority over others or over a former state of ourselves (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humour"). I will argue that Plato allows for two types of superiority – unjustified superiority, which applies to "subversive laughter", and justified superiority which applies to "playful laughter".

2.2 Laughter and the divided soul

Before I begin my analysis of Plato's "theories" of laughter, it is necessary to give a brief outline of Plato's tripartite/bipartite theories of the soul to illuminate the effect that laughter has on the soul and thus the psychology of the person who laughs. The theory of tripartition is first introduced in *Republic* IV when Plato asserts that each person's soul is divided into three separate and distinct parts – appetite, spirit, and reason (435e1-441c6).[4] The appetitive part of the soul is the largest part in each person's soul (442a5). It is the part of the soul with which we have an appetite for "the pleasures of food, sex, and those closely akin to them" (436a9-11). The rational part of the soul is a natural ruler for "it is really wise and exercises foresight" on behalf of all three parts of the soul (441e3-5). And finally, the spirit is the part of the soul

[2] Socratic irony and its uses are beyond the scope of this thesis. See Halliwell ("Greek Laughter" 276-302); Nehamas (46-98); Vlastos on this complex topic.

[3] See Halliwell ("The Uses of Laughter" 280-87) for his distinction between "consequential" and "playful" laughter. While Halliwell's two types of laughter apply to Greek culture as a whole, the two types of laughter that I will discuss in this chapter have their own unique characteristics as they are based on Plato's moral psychology. Moreover, I will substitute "subversive" for "consequential", for as I will argue, this type of laughter always has the potential for subversion in both the soul and state.

[4] A lot of scholarship has been written on Plato's tripartite theory of the soul e.g. Brennan; Burnyeat; Cooper ("Human Motivation"); Kamtekar; Lorenz; Stalley.

with which one feels anger (439e3-5). It is the natural ally of reason, helping to keep appetite at bay when it rises up and forces someone contrary to his reason (440a8-b6, 441a1-4).

Plato's theory of the tripartite soul is present in other dialogues that are widely accepted as being composed after the *Republic* such as the *Phaedrus* (246a2-b5, 253c8-e5) and the *Timaeus* (69c-70b).[5] However, there is no trace of the doctrine of tripartition in the *Philebus*, a late dialogue, but rather the bipartition of the soul into a rational and non-rational element (Waterfield 297). And scholars are divided over whether Plato stood by tripartition when he wrote his final dialogue, the *Laws*.[6] Furthermore, even within the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* we find the bipartition coexisting with tripartition.[7] In his article, "The Place of the *Philebus* in Plato's Dialogues", Waterfield (297) maintains that this coexistence of theories is not necessarily an inconsistency. He supports this view by asserting that the spirited part of the soul "is explicitly said to vacillate, sometimes siding with the rational, sometimes the appetitive part (*Rep.* 441a, cf. 553c)" and that this belief is what allows Plato to return to talking of bipartition without being false to his views. While I agree with Waterfield that bipartition and tripartition need not be mutually exclusive, his argument is not sufficient. For although the spirited part of the soul is known to ally with both reason and appetite, this does not mean that it disappears and loses its identity as a separate, third part of the soul. On the contrary, it continues to serve its own unique purpose of providing emotional support to either appetite or reason. The stronger argument for the coexistence of bipartition and tripartition lies in the distinction between the non-rational and rational parts of the soul: reason is the only rational part of the soul whereas appetite and spirit both belong to the non-rational part of the soul.

[5] See Brandwood, Figure 2 on the chronology of Plato's dialogues.
[6] See Bobonich (261 ff.); Sassi; Wilburn for three different views on the tripartite theory of the soul in the *Laws*.
[7] See *Rep*. 606d and *Tim.* 72d for evidence of the bipartite theory of the soul.

According to this view, Plato can talk of bipartition, i.e. the rational and non-rational parts of the soul while simultaneously upholding his beliefs about tripartition.

How does the above discussion of tripartition and bipartition relate to laughter? In the *Philebus* (50a) we are told that laughter is a pleasure.[8] And in *Republic* IX, Plato holds that the three parts of the soul have three kinds of pleasure, one pertaining to each (580d7-9): the appetite takes pleasure most easily from the things that can be brought about by means of money (580e1-581a6); the spirit takes pleasure in victory and honour (581a9-b3); reason takes pleasure in learning and philosophy (581b4-10). In the next section, I will argue that Plato's "theories" of laughter are primarily concerned with laughter that is a pleasure of the non-rational part of the soul and that this is subversive laughter.[9] For the purposes of this thesis, it is more helpful to think of the soul as bipartite, i.e. as having a rational and a non-rational part, rather than tripartite, since it's not always possible to make a clear distinction between laughter from appetite and laughter from spirit.[10]

2.3 Subversive laughter

Although it's not possible to construct a single theory of laughter from the four passages mentioned in the introduction,[11] my aim is to show that Plato's explicit theorising about laughter in the *Republic* and the *Philebus* points to the subversive potential of all laughter that arises from the non-rational part of the soul while his theorising in the *Laws* provides a socially

[8] See section 2.3.
[9] Plato allows for a socially and morally positive alternative to subversive laughter – playful laughter – which is a pleasure of the rational part of the soul in his theorising about laughter in the *Laws* (816d-817a, 935a-936a). See section 2.4.
[10] See section 2.3.
[11] See Halliwell, "Greek Laughter" 310.

and morally positive alternative to subversive laughter, i.e. playful laughter that arises from the rational part of the soul. In his book chapter, "Plato on Laughter and Moral Harm", Trivigno analyses these passages with the aim of constructing "a consistent account of the moral harm of some kinds of laughter" (14). While I am indebted to Trivigno for his analysis, in this section I aim to add to this analysis by arguing that the moral harm caused by some kinds of laughter is more specifically laughter's ability to *subvert* an agent's moral capacities by suppressing the agent's reason, thereby increasing the probability that he will choose to act against reason. Furthermore, I will show that subversive laughter not only has the potential to undermine the authority of reason in the soul, but can also cause subversion in the state in two ways: firstly, the physical act of laughing has the potential to undermine the authority of the state when it is directed at the things which the state considers to be good. Secondly, when reason is undermined in the soul by laughter, the agent is more likely to obey the non-rational part of the soul and thus to do wrong in society.

The first Platonic "theory" of laughter which I will explore is the passage from Book III of the *Republic* as mentioned in the introduction. This passage occurs in the context of Plato's discussion of the role of poetry in Guardian Education. According to Socrates, the good person "is most self-sufficient when it comes to living well" (387d11-e1) and when he suffers a bereavement he will "lament it the least and bear it the most calmly" (387e6-7). Because of this, he proposes banning "the lamentations and pitiful speeches of famous men" (387c11-d1) by Homer and the other poets because he fears that if young people take such stories seriously, they will go on to "chant many dirges and laments at the slightest sufferings" (388d5-6). Socrates then turns to the parallel case of laughter and insists that young people in the *Kallipolis* must not be "lovers of laughter" (φιλογέλωτάς) for "whenever anyone gives in to violent laughter (ἐφιῇ ἰσχυρῷ γέλωτι), a violent reaction pretty much always follows (ἰσχυρὰν καὶ

μεταβολὴν ζητεῖ τὸ τοιοῦτον)" (388e4-7). Furthermore, Plato condemns poetic representations of the gods and worthwhile people as being "overcome by laughter" (κρατουμένους ὑπὸ γέλωτος) (388e9-389a1), such as the following representation of the gods in the *Iliad*: "And unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods as they saw Hephaestus limping through the hall" (389a3-6).

I will begin my analysis of this ambiguous passage by looking at the translation of "ἰσχυρος". Trivigno (15) translates this as "powerful" whereas Reeve (69) chooses "violent". I have gone with Reeve's translation as it conveys more emphatically that the laughter described in the passage is a dangerous and volatile force that should be banned from the *Kallipolis*. Violence implies some sort of excessive behaviour, whether that be a strong emotional response or behaviour involving physical force. These forms of excess point to a lack of rational control on behalf of the agent and therefore "violent laughter" cannot arise from the rational part of the soul. Thus, this type of laughter must arise from the non-rational part of the soul. Moreover, this laughter must be subversive for it causes the agent to be "overcome" (κρατουμένους), i.e. it subverts the agent's moral capacities by overcoming reason which as we saw in section 2.2 is the natural ruler of the soul. Although it is difficult to interpret exactly what Plato means when he says that a "violent reaction" pretty much always follows "violent laughter", based on his moral psychology, I think the "violent reaction" consists in the consequences that result from the overthrow of reason in the soul, whether this be a violent emotional reaction, physical violence or both.

This view finds support in The Allegory of the Cave in *Republic* VII. Here, Socrates says that when a person leaves the Cave and is forced to return, it takes a while for his eyes to readjust

to the darkness. And so, he provokes laughter, for the prisoners in the Cave believe that his eyes have been ruined by the upward journey. Socrates then says that if anyone tried to free the prisoners and lead them upwards, they would attempt to kill him (516e7-517a6). The Allegory of the Cave is the third in a series of images/metaphors for Plato's ontological and epistemological view of the universe.[12] While an analysis of these images is beyond the scope of this thesis, suffice to say, reality is divided into two parts – the invisible realm of universals (i.e. Forms) and the visible realm of particulars (i.e. physical objects). These realms can then be sub-divided giving us four increasing levels of reality and truth – εἰκασία (conjecture), πίστις (belief), διάνοια (thought), and νόησις (understanding).[13] Thus, similar to the "violent laughter" of Book III, the laughter of the prisoners in the Cave is a pleasure of the non-rational part of the soul since they are living at the lowest level of truth (εἰκασία) and so do not *know* what they are laughing at, i.e. they do not know that the world outside the Cave is more real than the world of shadows in which they live. Their laughter is subversive for since it is a pleasure of the non-rational part of the soul, the latter is strengthened to the detriment of reason and this is what encourages a "violent reaction" – in this instance the degeneration of laughter into the most extreme form of physical violence, i.e. murder.

This episode also serves as an example of how subversion in the soul can quickly turn into subversion in the state. The prisoner who leaves and then returns to the Cave is an analogy for the philosopher-king who journeys upward to the intelligible world of the Forms and then returns to the visible world, "the common dwelling of the other citizens" (520c2). Like the prisoner who returns to the Cave, he must first grow accustomed to seeing in the dark, but when

[12] The first image is the metaphor of the sun (507b-509c) and the second image is the analogy of the divided line (509d-511e).

[13] Scholars are divided over whether there is a one to one correspondence between the four levels of the cave and the four parts of the divided line. Those in favour of a one to one correspondence include Gould (165-181), Hardie (57-58), Karasmanis. Those not in favour include Joseph (43), Robinson (182), Strang.

he is used to it, he will see "infinitely better" than the other citizens because he has "seen the truth about fine, just, and good things", i.e. the Forms (520c1-5). However, similar to the prisoner who returns to the Cave, at first he will behave awkwardly and appear "completely ridiculous" (σφόδρα γελοῖος), i.e. laughable to his fellow citizens (517d3-10). And so, the laughter of the citizens, like the laughter of the prisoners in the Cave, arises from the non-rational part of the soul for they do not *know* what they are laughing at, i.e. they do not know that the intelligible world is more real than the physical world in which they live. And so, laughter is subversive in the state on two levels. On the first level, the physical act of laughing at the philosopher-king undermines his authority, for laughter signifies that the agent does not take the king seriously and therefore does not respect his authority. On the second level, the agent's reason is weakened when he laughs at the philosopher-king, and as we saw in Book III and in the analogy of the Cave dwellers, this can lead to violence, in this case regicide – the ultimate act of subversion in the state.

Finally, the quote which Plato supplies from the *Iliad* in this passage provides further support for the view that the laughter described in Book III is subversive laughter. Halliwell ("The Uses of Laughter" 282) views this incident from the *Iliad* as "a paradigm of playful laughter" for the divine laughter which Hephaestus' behaviour incurs dissolves the atmosphere of hostility which had previously built up between Zeus and Hera (1.595-600) and "represents the celebration of the pure pleasure of the moment". However, according to Plato's moral psychology and beliefs about the gods, this episode of divine laughter is anything but playful. Firstly, Plato bans such representations of the gods from the *Kallipolis*, for they could make the citizens think that it is permissible to be overcome by laughter in their own lives (Trivigno 15-16). Secondly, the gods would not laugh like this, for as Plato asserts in Book II, the gods are "best in every way" (381b3-4) and therefore would never lose control and be overcome by

"unquenchable" laughter. In other words, it is impossible for the gods to engage in subversive laughter because they are perfect and so the reason in their souls cannot be undermined.[14]

Furthermore, the object of the gods' laughter in this passage is misdirected for it is wrong to laugh at a god because every god is completely good. In Book V, during the discussion of the three waves of paradox, Socrates reflects on the laughable: "It is a fool who finds anything ridiculous except what is bad, or tries to raise a laugh at the sight of anything except what is stupid or bad, or – putting it the other way around – who takes seriously any standard of what is beautiful other than what is good" (452d5-e1). And so, according to this view, the gods in this passage are represented as fools for they are laughing at what appears to be ridiculous, i.e. Hephaestus hobbling around serving drinks but which is actually good, i.e. Hephaestus is a god and every god is completely good. Thus, Plato bans such sayings about the gods because it portrays them as irrational fools and encourages the people who encounter them to act similarly.

Similar to the passage in *Republic* III, Plato's theorising on laughter in Book X appears in the context of a discussion on the role of imitative poetry in the *Kallipolis* and sheds further light on laughter in Book III. In this passage, Socrates states that the chief charge against imitation is "its power to corrupt all but a very few *good* people" (605c6-8). For while we are proud of being able to endure our personal sufferings in silence, most people take the sufferings of a tragic hero seriously and are not afraid to "suffer along with the hero" (605c10-e2). Then, mirroring the passage in Book III, Socrates explains why this is the case in both tragedy and

[14] See *Phaedrus* (246a3-b4) where Plato describes both gods and mortals as having three parts to their souls but whereas the souls of mortals are flawed, the souls of gods are perfect.

comedy. In the former, "our naturally best element", i.e. the rational part of the soul, relaxes its guard over the "lamenting one", i.e. the non-rational part of the soul, and thinks there is no shame in praising and pitying the sufferings of someone else who grieves excessively. In fact, the agent thinks he has made "a clear profit" in the pleasure he gets from indulging his "natural appetite" for "weeping and lamenting" (606a3-b3). However, only "a few people" are aware that the enjoyment of other people's sufferings is inevitably transferred to one's own since when "pity is nourished and strengthened by [other people's sufferings], it is not easily suppressed in the case of one's own sufferings" (606a-b).

Socrates then asserts that the same argument applies to the comical (περὶ τοῦ γελοίου), i.e. to those who enjoy jokes in a comedy or in private that they would be ashamed to tell themselves:

> For the element in you that wanted to tell the jokes (γελωτοποιεῖν), but which you held back by means of reason because you were afraid of being reputed a buffoon (βωμολοχίας), you now release; and having made it strong in that way, you have been led unawares into becoming a comedian in your own life. (606c)

The "element" that wanted to tell the jokes in the passage above is synonymous with the "lamenting" element from the discussion of tragedy, i.e. it is the non-rational part of the soul. Thus, both tragedy and comedy weaken the rational part of the soul and strengthen the non-rational part of the soul. And since most people are unaware that watching imitative poetry has this effect on their souls, most people are vulnerable to this corruption of the soul.[15] The subversive potential of laughter thus becomes more clear in this passage than in Book III, for this passage explicitly draws on Plato's moral psychology rather than relying on conjecture. However, rather than following the tripartite theory of the soul as introduced in Book IV, a

[15] See section 2.2.

bipartite model is clearly followed here as Plato distinguishes between just two parts of the soul – the rational and the non-rational.

Similar to the case of tragedy, when an agent enjoys jokes that he would be too ashamed to tell himself, his "best element", i.e. reason "relaxes its guard" over the part of the soul which takes pleasure in such jokes, i.e. the non-rational part of the soul (606a6-8). Thus, laughing at inappropriate jokes leads to a subtle subversion of reason, for the rational part of the soul mistakenly allows the non-rational part of the soul to take pleasure from inappropriate humour without realising the implications for itself, i.e. its subversion by the non-rational part of the soul. Furthermore, this type of subversion is an example of *akrasia,* i.e. knowingly doing what is not good. *Akrasia* is made possible by Plato's theory of the divided soul because not all parts of the soul, i.e. the non-rational part, need always aim at what is good. Thus, in this instance, the agent knows that he should not make vulgar jokes but since his reason has been weakened by allowing the non-rational part of the soul to take pleasure in inappropriate comedy, he makes vulgar jokes himself, being led by the non-rational part of his soul which has become stronger than reason. And so, Plato bans imitative poetry from the *Kallipolis* because of its ability to establish the non-rational part of the soul as ruler in the soul (607a2-7). For poetic imitation "nurtures and waters" all of the "appetites, pains, and pleasures" pertaining to the non-rational part of the soul and "establishes them as rulers in us" when "they should be ruled" (606d1-6). In the case of comedy, it is specifically our desire for vulgar jokes that is amplified and that subverts reason by establishing itself as ruler in the soul.

It becomes clear how this kind of laughter can lead to subversion in the state when we consider the kind of humour employed in the comedy of Plato's day, i.e. Old Comedy. As Halliwell

("Greek Laughter" 243) puts it, this genre is characterised by "loidoric, sexual, political and religious *anomie*". It is a genre that is free to direct satire at the dead, a practice frowned upon by Plato and Greek culture in general (Halliwell, "Greek Laughter" 29-30). Moreover, it is a genre in which the public vilification of named or well-known individuals was permitted (Halliwell, "Comic Satire" 48) and which enjoyed legal immunity or at least a special licence concerning the Athenian laws of slander (Halliwell, "Greek Laughter" 244). I agree with Halliwell ("The Uses of Laughter" 295) that the reason why Old Comedy was given such licence was because it was performed in the context of a festival: "What matters for festivity is above all the creation of a sharp contrast between what is permissible or even called for within the bounds of the festival, and the norms which are commonly adhered to outside this special 'space'". However, as we saw above, for Plato the boundary between festivity and life is permeable, for the non-rational part of the soul which enjoys the vulgar and shameful jokes of Old Comedy is strengthened to the extent that the agent no longer holds back from telling such jokes in his own life. Thus, the topics that we find laughable in comedy become laughable in real life.[16] And so, laughter has the potential to become subversive in the state, for just as it undermines the authority of public figures and moral norms on stage, so too does it undermine these in real life.

Turning now to the *Philebus,* the central concept of which is the determination of "the good", which hinges on the relative value of knowledge and pleasure. During the lengthy discussion of pleasure, Socrates argues that comedy is the ultimate example of a mixed pleasure (47e-50b). He tells Protarchus that the laughable arises from some form of ignorance and that our

[16] See section 3.3.

friends' ignorance is laughable when they are weak but hateful when they are powerful (49e).[17] The analysis of laughter in this passage is based on the emotion of *phthonos* ("envy" or "malice").[18] According to Socrates, *phthonos* is "a kind of *unrighteous* (ἄδικός) pain and also a pleasure"[19] for it causes pain at the good fortune of friends when we should rejoice, and pleasure at the misfortunes of friends when we should grieve (49d-50a). Socrates summarises his argument that comedy is the ultimate mixed pleasure as follows:

> Then our argument declares that when we laugh at the ridiculous (γελοίοις) qualities of our friends, we mix pleasure with pain, since we mix it with envy (αὖ φθόνῳ); for we have agreed all along that envy (τὸν γὰρ φθόνον) is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is a pleasure, yet these two are present at the same time on such occasions. (50a)

Moreover, Socrates stresses that this argument applies not only to comedy on stage but to the comedy of life.[20]

Thus, laughter as described in the *Philebus* is caused by the presence of a specific emotion, i.e. *phthonos* that, like all of the emotions, arises from the non-rational part of the soul. Moreover, since this emotion is "unrighteous" or more specifically "unjust" (ἄδικός), the type of laughter which it evokes is the expression and continuation of an unjust emotion. In *Republic* IV, during the discussion of the tripartite soul, Socrates tells Glaucon that justice occurs in the soul when all three parts do their own job "where ruling and being ruled are concerned", i.e. reason is the ruler, spirit is its auxiliary and appetite is ruled (443a12-444a1). And so, when *phthonos* causes

[17] I agree with Trivigno (22) that the reference to "friends" should be understood in a broad sense as referring to loved ones, neighbours, and one's fellow citizens.
[18] See Destrée ("Comedy" 167-168); Hackforth; Ed Sanders on the meaning of *phthonos.* I agree with Destrée ("Comedy" 167-168) that *phthonos* in this passage should be understood in the way that Greeks generally understood the term, i.e. as "envy".
[19] My italics.
[20] See section 3.3.

pleasure at the misfortunes of friends and when this pleasure is expressed through laughter, injustice occurs in the soul for reason cannot be the ruler in the soul at this time. This is because reason which is "really wise" (441e4) would never allow the expression of an unjust emotion. Therefore, laughter in the *Philebus* arises from a soul in which reason has been subverted. Moreover, since the non-rational part of the soul is strengthened by participating in this one emotion, i.e. *phthonos*, and since laughter is the ultimate expression and continuation of this emotion, laughter is also responsible for prolonging and intensifying subversion in the soul.

Similar to the laughter in Books III and X of the *Republic,* laughter in the *Philebus* has the potential for subversion in society. For laughing at the misfortunes of our friends, i.e. taking pleasure in the pain of our fellow citizens, is a direct violation of the commonality of pleasures and pains which is made a principle of the *Kallipolis* in the *Republic* (464a). Prior to laying down this principle, Socrates maintains that there is no "greater evil for a city than what tears it apart" and no "greater good than what binds it together" and that the sharing of pleasures and pains brings the city together while the privatisation of such things tears it apart (462a9-c1). Thus, since laughter as described in the *Philebus* is a private rather than a shared pleasure, it has the potential to threaten the stability of the state.

2.4 Playful laughter

The final dialogue in which we find a Platonic "theory" of laughter is the *Laws.* Plato's theorising in this dialogue exhibits an intense awareness of the subversive potential of laughter while providing a socially and morally positive alternative, i.e. playful laughter. In Book VII, the Athenian (the chief protagonist of the *Laws*) lays down a law whereby only slaves and foreigners can engage in comic mimicry and states that it is important for the citizens to learn

about this sort of "ludicrous comic-acting" (τὰ τοῦ γέλωτος κωμῳδήματα) so they can "avoid ever doing or saying anything ludicrous, through ignorance" when they ought not to (816d-e). For, as the Athenian maintains, "it is impossible to learn the serious without the comic, or any one of a pair of contraries without the other, if one is to be a wise man" (816e1-4). In other words, it is only by understanding the laughable that we can avoid becoming laughable in our own lives. Moreover, the Athenian asserts that there must always be some "novel feature" in mimic shows so that the public don't gain a taste for any particular form of vulgarity by seeing it performed repeatedly on stage (816e9-10).[21] And in Book XI, when laying down the law against abuse, the Athenian notes that those who engage in passionate abuse cannot resist indulging in ridicule of their opponent and that ridicule is "a thing we abuse when it is uttered in passion" (935c8-d1). The Athenian then goes on to forbid comic writers from employing ridicule that is serious and uttered in passion. Furthermore, he forbids them from ridiculing the citizens of Magnesia either with or without passion. And so only non-citizens can be subject to ridicule by the comic writers and this must be in jest and without passion. And the task of making this distinction – between jest and earnest, passion and lack of passion – is entrusted to the Minister for Education (935e-936a).

These two passages from the *Laws* exhibit an awareness of the subversive potential of comedy, as was the case in *Republic* X, while also providing a strategy for producing socially and morally positive comedy and thus laughter. First of all, the fact that only non-citizens can become comic actors and only non-citizens can be ridiculed in comedy helps to eradicate one of the problems posed by laughter in the *Philebus,* i.e. the violation of the principle of the commonality of pleasures and pains. For if citizens are not represented in comedies, whether

[21] See section 3.3.

as actors or characters, it is not possible to laugh at the misfortunes of our friends, i.e. our fellow citizens. And so, comedy as prescribed in the *Laws* serves as a kind of inverted refrigerator, causing warmth for those on the inside and chilliness towards those on the outside, thus strengthening the bonds between citizens. Secondly, when the Athenian asserts that the citizens must understand the comic in order to avoid becoming laughable in their own lives, we should remember that the laughable (i.e. the ridiculous) is defined in the *Philebus* as a form of ignorance of the weak. And so, by learning to avoid being laughable, the citizens are simultaneously learning to avoid self-ignorance. Thus, comedy as prescribed in the *Laws* helps to protect the agent's reason rather than subverting it, for by helping him to avoid self-ignorance it gives him the opportunity to become "a wise man" (816e1-4).

Moreover, unlike Old Comedy with its incredible licence for ridicule, comedy in the *Laws* must ridicule only what is truly ridiculous and therefore truly bad.[22] For every comedy must be approved by the Minister for Education before it is performed and since he is responsible for ensuring that the citizens of Magnesia have been properly educated in what is truly good and what is truly bad, it follows that what is presented as laughable on the comic stage must always be truly bad. Finally, comedy in the *Laws* is morally and socially appropriate for it forbids ridicule that is serious and uttered in passion. We saw in section 2.3 that passion belongs to the non-rational part of the soul. And so, since laughter in the *Laws* is uttered without passion and in jest, and since it is directed at what is truly ridiculous rather than what appears to be ridiculous, it must arise from the rational part of the soul. Hence, laughter as prescribed in the *Laws* is playful laughter. Plato carefully imposes restrictions on comedy precisely to avoid subversive laughter and encourage playful laughter that protects the harmony of the souls of

[22] See *Rep.* 452d5-e1 and section 2.3.

the citizens as well as the harmony of the state, for by laughing at the same truly bad things the citizens share in a pleasure, thereby strengthening the unity of the state.[23]

Although Plato is preoccupied with subversive laughter because of the danger it poses to both the soul and state, there are many examples of playful laughter scattered throughout the drama of the dialogues. I will conclude this section by briefly looking at playful laughter in the *Phaedo*. In this dialogue, Plato sets out to prove the immortality of the soul (72e-77a) – a profoundly important task in a dialogue set during Socrates' last hours and death. Given the gravity of the topic and setting, it might seem strange that this is the only dialogue in which Socrates openly laughs:[24] he laughs quietly (ἐγέλασέν τε ἠρέμα) in response to Simmias' comment that he is afraid to trouble him with questions for fear of upsetting him in his present misfortune, i.e. his approaching execution (84d). Thus, Socrates' only laugh in Plato's dialogues is a paradigm of playful laughter. For he laughs because he *knows* that death is not really a misfortune and so Simmias' comment is ignorant.[25] As we saw in section 2.3, only what is truly ignorant is truly laughable and so, Socrates' laughter arises from the rational part of the soul for he laughs at what is truly ridiculous. Furthermore, the fact that he laughs "quietly" shows that he is not laughing with passion and has therefore not engaged the passions of the non-rational part of the soul – his laughter acts as a playful, gentle corrective to Simmias' ignorance. Moreover, it acts as a sign of reassurance, indicating to Simmias and the other interlocutors that he is not distressed by the thought of his impending death.[26]

[23] See *Rep.* 462a-c.
[24] See Halliwell, "Greek Laughter" 283.
[25] See *Phaedo* 64a-67c on the goodness of death.
[26] See Halliwell ("Greek Laughter" 278-284); Naas (24-25) on laughter in the *Phaedo*.

Towards the end of the *Phaedo*, Socrates similarly employs laughter – in this case the fear of appearing laughable rather than the physical act of laughing – to show that he does not fear death. When he is told to drink the poison, Crito advises him that since the sun has not yet set, he should delay drinking it and enjoy the company of his friends for a few more hours (116e1-5). However, Socrates ignores Crito's advice on the grounds that it would make him ridiculous: "I do not expect any benefit from drinking the poison a little later, except to become ridiculous (γέλωτα) in my own eyes for clinging to life, and be sparing of it when there is none left" (117a). Since Socrates knows that death is nothing to fear, it is therefore irrational for him to cling on to life. And so, he would appear ridiculous/laughable in his own eyes if he delayed taking the poison, for he knows that he would be acting irrationally and therefore badly by postponing his own death. Socrates fears ridicule that comes from a position of knowledge, i.e. playful laughter, in this case his own knowledge that death is good.[27] Thus, the fear of appearing *truly* laughable acts as an antidote against self-ignorance, ensuring that reason rules in the soul.

However, although Socrates fears looking ridiculous in the above passage, that is not to say that he fears all forms of ridicule. He makes it clear that he does not fear ridicule/laughter that arises from a position of ignorance, i.e. subversive laughter: for he is determined to always tell the truth, even if this provokes the ridicule of the masses who do not know.[28] Playful laughter in the *Phaedo* acts as a benign corrective, gently reminding Simmias that it is wrong to fear death and warning Socrates himself against the same fear. Like subversive laughter, it is a pleasure, but a gentle pleasure for it pertains to reason, and so the agent remains in control and

[27] See *Rep.* 506d2-e5 and 536b7-c7 for further evidence that Socrates fears appearing ridiculous to those who know, i.e. appearing ridiculous to himself or to other philosophers.
[28] See *Rep*. 450e1-451b1, *Laws* 830c, and Naas (23) on how Socrates is not afraid of appearing ridiculous to those who are ignorant.

is not "overcome" by laughter as was the case in *Republic* III. Furthermore, in the *Phaedo* we see that playful laughter can be defiant but unlike subversive laughter that, according to Plato, wrongly defies the soul and the state, playful laughter is here appropriately defiant towards death. In the next section I will show how Plato's "theories" of laughter foreshadowed the modern Superiority Theory of laughter.

2.5 The Superiority Theory

One of the earliest and best-known proponents of the Superiority Theory of laughter was Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes argues in *Leviathan* (1651) that laughter arises from a passion which he calls "sudden glory":

> Sudden glory is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves. (Hobbes, *Leviathan* 48-49)

However, the origins of Hobbes' theory can be traced back to Plato. Although Hobbes' thoughts on laughter are by no means identical to Plato's "theories" of laughter, they are evocative of some aspects of subversive laughter in Plato. For example, the passion of "sudden glory", although it is not necessarily a mixed pleasure, for Hobbes does not say that it involves pain, is nevertheless reminiscent of *phthonos* in the *Philebus* which similarly takes pleasure in "some deformed thing in another", i.e. the misfortune of friends through their own ignorance, making the agent feel superior by comparison. Hobbes' theory of laughter also evokes the

laughter of the gods in the *Iliad* that Plato censures in *Republic* III.[29] For the gods laugh at the physical deformity of Hephaestus and undoubtedly feel superior to him in that moment. Furthermore, Hobbes' assertion that such laughter occurs most frequently in those with the "fewest abilities in themselves" is evocative of the prisoners in the Cave in *Republic* VII, i.e. the ignorant multitude, who, not realising their own ignorance, laugh at what appears to be ridiculous but is in actuality not.

In her paper, "Superiority in Humor Theory", Lintott argues that the Superiority Theory is not an essentialist theory for Plato. While I agree that not all laughter for Plato is superior in the Hobbesian sense, I think Plato allows for two types of superiority which encompass all of his explicit theorising about laughter in his dialogues. The first type I call "unjustified superiority" which applies to subversive laughter. This is Plato's equivalent of Hobbes' superiority theory discussed above. It is unjust, because as discussed in section 2.3, the agent who engages in subversive laughter ridicules things that appear to be ridiculous but are not, and so the agent feels superior when she is not. Hence her feelings of superiority are unjustified. The second type I call "justified superiority" which applies to playful laughter. In the comedy which Plato prescribes in the *Laws*, the citizens feel superior when they engage in playful laughter for they are taking pleasure in the ignorance of the characters on stage, thereby feeling superior to the characters. But since only slaves and non-citizens can act in comedy and since such comedies may only poke fun at what is truly ignorant and thus truly ridiculous, the superiority of the spectators is justified.[30]

[29] See section 2.3.
[30] While there are many examples of justified (e.g. *Phaedo* 84d, *Theaet.*174d) and unjustified superiority (e.g. *Rep.* 337a2, 457a10-b5) in the drama of the dialogues themselves, the question of whether all examples of laughter in the dialogues can be construed as either justified or unjustified superiority is beyond the scope of this thesis.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that there are two types of laughter in Plato's explicit theorising about laughter – subversive laughter which is a pleasure of the non-rational part of the soul and has the potential to subvert both reason in the soul and authority in the state, and playful laughter which is a pleasure of the rational part of the soul and has the potential to nurture reason and promote harmony in the state. The fact that Plato is preoccupied with the former in most of his theorising about laughter shows that he takes laughter to be a serious threat, viewing it as a powerful force that must be strictly controlled in both soul and state. Moreover, I have shown that Plato's "theories" of laughter are a forerunner for the modern Superiority theory of laughter. But while most modern scholars who write about a superiority theory of laughter are concerned solely with the equivalent of Plato's subversive laughter,[31] Plato allows for two types of superiority – justified and unjustified – based on his moral psychology. Thus, by reading Plato's "theories" of laughter alongside the modern Superiority Theory, we can expand this theory to encompass morally and socially appropriate laughter.

[31] See for example Dadlez (especially p. 2), Hobbes (48-49), Monro (349-351). See also section 2.5.

3. Aristotle on laughter

3.1 Introduction

> Now should we define the man who jokes well by his saying what is not unbecoming to a well-bred man, or by his not giving pain, or even giving delight, to the hearer? Or is the latter definition, at any rate, itself indefinite, since different things are hateful or pleasant to different people? (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1128a25-29)[32]

The above quote is taken from Aristotle's discussion of the moral virtue of wittiness (εὐτραπελία) which is the intermediate state or mean between boorishness (ἀγροικία) and buffoonery (βωμολοχία) (1127b34-1128a10). Aristotle seems to favour the first of the proposals in the quote, i.e. the man who jokes well (εὐτράπελος) does so by saying "what is not unbecoming to a well-bred man".[33] However, the fact that Aristotle draws attention to the "indefinite" nature of his definition of the εὐτράπελος points to his recognition of the elusive nature of humour and laughter and the difficulty of using humour appropriately. Like Plato, Aristotle has no overarching "theory" of laughter, but his attitudes towards laughter and humour are revealed across his ethical, political, literary critical, and biological works. In this chapter, I will show how Aristotle's philosophising on laughter emerges, converges, and diverges from Plato's explicit theorising about laughter. I will argue that although Aristotle generally takes a more positive view of laughter than Plato, he is also very much aware of the subversive potential of laughter in both soul and state. I will focus on the discussion of εὐτραπελία as a moral virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, drawing on the moral psychology therein to show how laughter for Aristotle can be either subversive or playful, and that the latter always has the potential to turn into the former. Furthermore, I will show that while the ready-

[32] The translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* passages is Ross (2009), *Poetics* is Halliwell (1995), *Politics* is Rackham, and *Rhetoric* is Lawson-Tancred (unless otherwise indicated).

[33] The second proposal ("not giving pain") and third proposal ("even giving delight") are not satisfactory for as I will discuss in section 3.2, the boor (ἄγροικος) takes offence at any attempt to raise a laugh and so he is pained and certainly not delighted even by the jests of the εὐτράπελος.

wit (εὐτράπελος) engages in playful laughter, the buffoon (βωμολόχος) engages in subversive laughter.[34] I will then examine some of Aristotle's thoughts on comedy in the *Poetics* (1460b13–21) and *Politics* (1336b16-19, 1336b33–35) to show that while Plato completely reforms comedy in the *Laws* in order to protect the citizens from subversive laughter and encourage playful laughter, Aristotle is not compelled to reform comedy to the same extent. I will argue that this is the case because while Plato believes poetic imitation inevitably has a negative impact on real life, Aristotle is more optimistic about the effect that art has on life.

Furthermore, I will argue that, similar to Plato, many of Aristotle's attitudes towards laughter foreshadow the modern Superiority Theory of laughter and that, like Plato, he allows for two types of superiority – unjustified superiority, which is always subversive, and justified superiority, which is always playful. Moreover, I will show that the level of education of the agent is key for determining whether superiority is justified or unjustified. Finally, I will briefly show that in the *Poetics* (1453a30-38) and the *Rhetoric* (1412a6-1412b11), although he never uses the word "incongruity", Aristotle adumbrates the modern Incongruity Theory of laughter which holds that the cause of laughter "is the perception of something incongruous – something that violates our mental patterns and expectations" (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor") and that this form of laughter can be either playful or subversive. Thus, Aristotle's contribution to modern humour theory is indebted to Plato's theorising about laughter while simultaneously superseding it.

[34] In section 3.2 I will show that the buffoon's laughter is subversive in the soul and the *well-run* state, i.e. it undercuts *good* order in the soul and state.

3.2 Eutrapelia as a moral virtue

For Aristotle, ethics is the study of the human good. He writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that there is verbal agreement among everyone that this good is εὐδαιμονία (happiness) (1095a14-20). He then goes on to provide a detailed study of what happiness is. Although an analysis of Aristotle's definition of happiness is beyond the scope of this thesis, suffice to say, happiness is defined as something final, self-sufficient and the end of all action (1097b20-21). Moreover, it is rational activity in accordance with virtue (1098a11-18). Aristotle goes on to divide the virtues into two types – moral virtues and intellectual virtues – the former belonging to the non-rational part of the soul, the latter belonging to the rational part.[35] The moral virtues are courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, pride, good temper, friendliness, truthfulness, ready-wit (εὐτραπελία), and justice. According to Aristotle, since life involves rest as well as activity and since playful conversation is a part of rest, there seems to be a kind of playful conversation which is most tasteful and therefore best (1127b33-1128a1). And so, Aristotle identifies εὐτραπελία as the moral virtue or mean pertaining to the sphere of play and relaxation (1128a10-12).[36] He writes that the εὐτράπελος (ready-wit) is tactful, saying and listening to the things that befit a well-bred man (1128a18-19). Furthermore, there are jokes that the εὐτράπελος will not make for "the jest is a sort of abuse" and just as lawgivers forbid us from abusing certain things, there are things which we should never joke about. The well-bred man then is "a law to himself", successfully striking the mean when it comes to playful conversation (1128a29-34). Those who exceed the mean of εὐτραπελία and carry humour to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons (βωμολόχοι δοκοῦσιν εἶναι καὶ φορτικοί) who will tell a joke at

[35] Although the moral virtues are excellent states of the non-rational (appetitive) part of the soul (see *Nic. Eth.* 1103a4-7 with Brown's note pp. 211-212), the perfection of moral virtue requires the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) for the former determines the end while the latter makes us do the things that lead to the end (1144b30-1145a6). See also 1106b35-1107a3.

[36] Cf. *Eud. Eth.* 1234a-b11 where wittiness is treated as praiseworthy but not as a virtue for it does not involve purposive choice, i.e. it contributes to the natural virtues but is not a virtue proper, i.e. it does not involve practical wisdom (*phronesis*). On the difference between natural virtue and virtue proper see *Nic. Eth.* 1144b-1145a6. See Fortenbaugh (90-91) and Walker (118-120) on the problem of wittiness qua moral virtue.

all costs, always aiming to raise a laugh, whether that involves causing pain to the object of their humour or engaging in shameless flattery. On the other hand, those who are deficient in humour are thought to be boorish and unpolished (ἄγροικοι καὶ σκληροὶ) for they can neither make a joke themselves nor put up with those who joke in their company (1128a3-10).

In chapter 2, I wrote that Plato is preoccupied with subversive laughter in his explicit theorising about laughter and that it is a pleasure of the non-rational part of the soul and is characterised by a lack of control and a lack of knowledge/education on the part of the agent. Furthermore, I discussed how Plato allows for playful laughter which is a pleasure of the rational part of the soul and so occurs when the agent is in control and possesses knowledge about the object of his laughter. Similarly, although he is working within a different moral psychological framework to Plato,[37] I think that Aristotle allows for the same two types of laughter – subversive and playful – that are also characterised by the level of control and the level of knowledge/education of the agent. The laughter of the εὐτράπελος is morally and socially positive and is the equivalent of Plato's playful laughter. This type of laughter benefits the soul for it is an expression of the moral virtue of εὐτραπελία. As mentioned above, the ultimate human good for Aristotle is happiness which can be summed up as rational activity *in accordance with virtue* (1098a11-18). And so, the laughter of the εὐτράπελος, by expressing a moral virtue, contributes to his happiness and thus to the development of his soul.

[37] Since Aristotle maintains that all of the moral virtues (and their corresponding vices) belong to the non-rational, appetitive part of the soul, and since εὐτραπελία is the virtue pertaining to laughter, laughter (both subversive and playful) must belong to the appetitive part of the soul. However, according to Plato's moral psychology, εὐτραπελία is not a virtue, and laughter can be a pleasure of either the rational or non-rational part of the soul as demonstrated in sections 2.3 and 2.4

Moreover, since εὐτραπελία is the virtue pertaining to the sphere of play and relaxation, the εὐτράπελος engages in the pleasure of play in the correct way.[38] Towards the end of his account of wittiness, Aristotle writes that "relaxation and amusement are thought to be a necessary element in life" (1128b3-4) and in Book X he agrees with Anacharsis that we should amuse ourselves in order to exert ourselves and that relaxation is therefore not an end, for it is taken for the sake of activity (1176b28-37). Therefore, the laughter of the εὐτράπελος, which expresses play in the correct way, further contributes to the agent's moral good for it prepares the agent for engaging in serious activity and thus for practicing the other moral virtues. Thus, the laughter of the εὐτράπελος is both instrumentally valuable and choiceworthy for its own sake.[39] For on the one hand wittiness is virtuous activity in its own right, since it is the correct way to behave during amusement which, although it is taken for "the sake of activity" (1176b36-37), is nevertheless a "*necessary* element" (1128b3-4) in life since "we *need* relaxation because we cannot work continuously" (1176b35-36).[40] On the other hand, wittiness is of instrumental value because it recharges the agent in the correct way, thereby enabling him to fully exercise the other virtues pertaining to serious action, i.e. action outside the sphere of relaxation.

The laughter of the εὐτράπελος not only benefits the soul of the agent, it also benefits society for it strengthens the social bonds between citizens. Along with friendliness and truthfulness, wittiness is one of the virtues of social intercourse. Elsewhere in the *Ethics,* Aristotle writes that exercising the moral virtues consists in feeling and acting "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way"

[38] See *Rh.* 1370a14-16 and 1371b35-1372a2 on play/laughter as a pleasure.
[39] See Walker (118-120) on wittiness's virtuousness.
[40] My italics.

(1106b18-23). Hence, exercising the virtue of εὐτραπελία consists in making and taking jokes in this way, thereby confirming the agent's commitment to common values and upholding the moral community. Moreover, wittiness is related to a particular emotion – the emotion of finding something laughable (Fortenbaugh, "Mean-Dispositions" 216-217). Konstan, in his book *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* (40) writes that it was a Greek habit of thought to understand "emotions as responses not to events but to actions, or situations resulting from actions, that entail consequences for one's own or others' relative social standing". A joke then is an action which elicits the emotion of finding something laughable and has consequences for one's own or relative social standing. Thus, the jokes that the εὐτράπελος tells and listens to, and so the laughter that he engages in, always has positive consequences for his own social standing while never endangering the social standing of those he jokes with, i.e. his fellow citizens.

However, this is not to say that the εὐτράπελος cannot make offensive jokes towards slaves who occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder and so have no social standing to endanger. While drawing a contrast between decent and indecent forms of humour, Aristotle makes an analogy with the contrasting styles of old and new comedy (1128a22-25). He says that the authors of the older kind were amused by "indecency of language" (αἰσχρολογία) while the authors of new comedy find "innuendo" (ὑπόνοια) more amusing. He concludes the analogy by stating that "these differ in no small degree in respect of propriety". Thus, Aristotle's new comedy, which we now call Middle Comedy (Destrée, "Jokes" 43), is more decent than Old Comedy and is analogous to the humour of the εὐτράπελος.[41] Moreover, the surviving fragments of Middle Comedy suggest that social comedy was a prominent theme (Stace 64),

[41] The old comedy that Aristotle mentions is undoubtedly the comedy of Aristophanes and his contemporaries.

and that while obscenity was still present in these comedies, by this point it tended to come from the mouths of slaves and other low-class characters rather than indiscriminately as was the case in Old Comedy. Thus, the analogy between the decent humour of the εὐτράπελος and Middle Comedy suggests that the εὐτράπελος is supposed to target his social inferiors, thereby reinforcing the citizens' commitment to decency, since it creates a barrier between "us" and "them", where the unseemly habits of slaves are ridiculed and hung out to dry.[42]

Aristotle acknowledges that it is no easy task to find the mean, i.e. to exercise the moral virtues, and that just as finding the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for the one who knows, the same holds for finding the mean in our feelings and actions (1109a24-29). It is clear that this holds for the mean of εὐτραπελία from what he says about the excess of εὐτραπελία, i.e. βωμολοχία (buffoonery). He asserts that "the ridiculous side of things is not far to seek (ἐπιπολάζοντος)" and so "*most people* delight more than they should in amusement and in jesting" (1128a13-15).[43] Thus, most people engage in the excess of βωμολοχία rather than in the mean of εὐτραπελία and so most people engage in subversive laughter rather than in playful laughter. Moreover, the latter always has the potential to turn into the former. Unlike Plato who treats playful and subversive laughter as separate entities, the former belonging to the rational part of the soul, and the latter belonging to the non-rational part of the soul, for Aristotle, εὐτραπελία and thus playful laughter is a careful balancing act from which it is all too easy to fall into the excesses of βωμολοχία and thus subversive laughter.[44] The laughter of the

[42] However, although targeting their social inferiors creates a bond between citizens, it may also lead to subversion in the state, for a large body of slaves who are discontented with being the target of laughter could ultimately revolt against their masters. This is in contrast to Plato's *Kallipolis* where the threat of such subversion is minimal, for the producers carry out many of the tasks of slaves and cannot be ridiculed for they are citizens and ridiculing them would violate the commonality of pleasures and pains (*Rep.* 464a). See section 2.3.
[43] My italics.
[44] See Halliwell, "Greek Laughter" 328.

βωμολόχος is subversive in the soul because it is the expression of a vice and so it hinders the development of virtue in the agent's soul and thus his pursuit of happiness. Moreover, unlike the laughter of the εὐτράπελος, which expresses play in the correct way, the laughter of the βωμολόχος expresses play in an incorrect way, specifically in an excessive way. And so, instead of preparing the agent for serious activity, this excess of play distracts the agent from serious activity and thus from engaging in all of the virtues that belong outside the realm of relaxation.

The laughter of the βωμολόχος is also subversive in society for he strives after humour "at all costs", not caring if this involves inflicting pain on the object of his fun (1128a5-7) and sparing "neither himself nor others if he can raise a laugh" (1128a34-35). Furthermore, since Aristotle maintains that "the jest is a sort of abuse" and that there are certain things which the lawgivers should have forbidden us even to make a jest of (1128a29-33), we can be certain that, while the εὐτράπελος avoids making a jest of such things, the βωμολόχος is not able to resist and so engages in a form of abusive behaviour.[45] And so, unlike the laughter of the εὐτράπελος which has positive consequences for his own social standing while never endangering the social standing of those he jokes with, the laughter of the βωμολόχος has the opposite effect: he breaks down social bonds by inflicting pain on his fellow citizens and since he spares neither himself nor others, he endangers both his own social standing and the social standing of those he makes fun of. Similar to the authors of Old Comedy, he targets the habits and practices of upright citizens, thereby undermining virtuous practices and the law.

[45] See *Laws* (935c8-d1) and section 2.4 where Plato makes a similar link between abuse and ridicule.

While both Plato and Aristotle acknowledge laughter's potential for subversion in the state, Plato seems more preoccupied with subversion in the state on the "macro level" while Aristotle seems to be more interested in subversion on the "micro level". What I mean by this is that, at least in the *Republic*, Plato acknowledges the potential of subversive laughter to lead to the overthrow of the state. For instance, the Allegory of the Cave shows how the laughter of the mob can degenerate into violence and ultimately lead to the murder of the philosopher-king (*Rep.* 516e7-517a6).[46] But in the *Ethics*, Aristotle seems more concerned with how subversive laughter can erode the fabric of society by negatively impacting one's social standing, causing conflict between individual citizens during their recreation. However, I think that this points not to a major difference in the philosophers' theorising about laughter but rather to their different agendas: while the *Ethics* is above all an enquiry into the human good, the *Republic* aims to construct an ideal (just) state. And so it follows that the *Ethics* has a greater interest in human relationships than the *Republic* while the *Republic* is more interested in the running of the state than the *Ethics*.

Just as the level of knowledge/education and the level of control of the agent determines whether laughter is playful or subversive for Plato,[47] the same holds true for Aristotle. After asserting that the εὐτράπελος will say and listen to the things that befit a gentleman, Aristotle notes that the joking of a well-bred man differs from that of a vulgar man just as the joking of an *educated* man differs from that of an *uneducated* man (1128a20-22). Thus, we can infer that the education of the well-bred man is at least partially responsible for his ability to practice εὐτραπελία. The education Aristotle refers to is more specifically moral *paideia* since the moral virtues belong to the non-rational part of the soul and moral *paideia* is concerned with the

[46] See sections 2.3 and 2.5.
[47] See sections 2.3 and 2.4.

training of this part of the soul. I agree with Fortenbaugh ("Emotion" 90-91) that early *paideia* is just as interested in the ways people interact as in developing good dispositions such as courage and temperance: "Proper modes of social interaction are to be taught to young persons, so that they come to know and to value positively good manners." Thus, moral *paideia* plays an important role in encouraging and nurturing the social virtues of friendliness, truthfulness, and wittiness (εὐτραπελία). And we can similarly infer that the lack of education of the vulgar man plays a significant role in making him a βωμολόχος.[48]

Related to the level of education of the agent is the level of control of the agent. Unlike the εὐτράπελος who is in control of his sense of humour, always making the right jokes at the right time, the humour of the βωμολόχος is characterised by a lack of control. In his summary of the character of the βωμολόχος, Aristotle refers to him as being "the slave of his sense of humour (ὁ δὲ βωμολόχος ἥττων ἐστὶ τοῦ γελοίου)" (1128a34-35), an emphatic expression of lack of agency.[49] This lack of control can certainly be related to poor moral *paideia* for if the agent is not sufficiently habituated in correct modes of social interaction, it is improbable that he will have developed the self-control necessary to achieve the difficult task of exercising the mean of εὐτραπελία.[50]

I will finish this section by briefly looking at another type of inappropriate laughter. In Book VII of the *Ethics*, Aristotle excuses those who are overcome by "violent and excessive pleasures or pains" (ἰσχυρῶν καὶ ὑπερβαλλουσῶν ἡδονῶν ἡττᾶται ἢ λυπῶν) such as people like

[48] It is interesting to note that when Aristotle first introduces the βωμολόχος, he describes him as vulgar (φορτικοί) (1128a5).
[49] Cf. *Rep.* 606c5-8.
[50] Walker's (106-118) epitheumetic reading of εὐτραπελία, in which he notes wittiness's similarities to the virtue of temperance is helpful for understanding how wittiness and its corresponding vices are characterised by self-control.

Xenophantus who try to restrain their laughter but end up bursting into a guffaw (1150b7-12). The reason Aristotle excuses such people is that they make an effort to suppress their laughter but are eventually overcome by their desire to laugh. The fact that Aristotle excuses such outbursts of laughter shows that he considers laughter to be a very powerful force.[51] Although this kind of laughter is inappropriate, it is not subversive in the soul, for the agent really does not desire to laugh and so his laughter is not caused by a lack of control or a lack of education but rather by the sheer physical impetus to laugh. Furthermore, this kind of laughter is not subversive in society, for even if the agent insults a fellow citizen with his laughter, it is unintentional, and so he is likely to make amends with anyone he insults. This type of laughter is reminiscent of Plato's theorising about laughter in *Republic* III. There laughter is also framed in the language of "violence" (ἰσχυρὰν) and being "overcome" (κρατουμένους) (388e5-389a1). However, Plato does not differentiate between outbursts of laughter that the agent tries to prevent and those that the agent welcomes. Rather he proposes censorship of the poets as a kind of preventative medicine against all forms of violent laughter.[52]

I think that Plato's and Aristotle's different attitudes towards this kind of violent laughter hinges on their different attitudes towards the body. Although an analysis of the philosophers' attitudes towards the body is beyond the scope of this thesis, suffice to say, laughter is very much of the body and of the soul for Aristotle. Earlier, in my discussion of the buffoon, I mentioned that Aristotle regards the ridiculous as "not far to seek" (ἐπιπολάζοντος). Halliwell ("Greek Laughter" 313) translates "ἐπιπολάζοντος" as "on the surface" and holds that Aristotle seems to have more in mind here than that laughter is always readily available: "Beyond its

[51] This contrasts with the laughter of the buffoon who Aristotle does not pardon because he makes no effort to curb his laughter but actively seeks opportunities to raise a laugh, showing no concern for what is appropriate.
[52] See section 2.3.

common(place) status, Aristotle identifies laughter as a sort of constant temptation to human beings, something that lies around, as it were, on the surface of their lives and to which their natures readily give way" (Halliwell, "Greek Laughter" 313). Halliwell ("Greek Laughter" 313-314) goes on to assert that underlying Aristotle's awareness of the temptation of laughter is his belief that laughter is "deeply rooted in the *body*" and that this makes laughter an intrinsically human experience to Aristotle.[53] Plato on the other hand, holds a negative view of the body, regarding it as a burden and a distraction from contemplating the Forms (the Platonic life purpose) rather than an important part of our humanity.[54] I think that Plato's distrust of the body accounts for why he regards violent laughter with all of its bodily convulsions as subversive, regardless of the intention of the agent. In the next section I will look at Aristotle's attitudes towards comedy and argue that he takes a more positive approach to comedy than Plato because while Plato believes that the poetic imitation of his day has a negative impact on real life, Aristotle is more optimistic about the effect that art has on life.

3.3 Comedy and the importance of education

In sections 2.3 and 2.4, we saw that Plato holds a very negative view of comedy. In *Republic* X he bans poetic imitation from the *Kallipolis* in order to protect the citizens and the state from subversive laughter while in the *Laws* he drastically reforms comedy to ensure that it encourages playful laughter rather than subversive laughter. While Aristotle also acknowledges the dangerous potential of comedy, he does not ban or even reform comedy. In the *Politics,* he writes that education will render the citizens immune from any harm:

[53] See *Part. An.* 3.10, 673a8, with 28 and Halliwell ("Greek Laughter" 313-316) on laughter being both physical and psychological.
[54] See *Phaedo* (65e6-66a6) and *Phaedrus* (250a5-c6) for Plato's most emphatic criticisms of the body.

> But the younger ones must not be allowed in the audience at lampoons (ἰάμβων) and at comedy (κωμῳδίας), before they reach the age at which they will now have the right to recline at table in company and to drink deeply, and at which their education will render all of them immune to the harmful effects of such things. (1336b16-19)

He then goes on to say that "all that comes first we like better" and so "we ought to make all base things unfamiliar to the young, and especially those that involve either depravity or malignity (μάλιστα δ' αὐτῶν ὅσα ἔχει ἢ μοχθηρίαν ἢ δυσμένειαν)" (1336b33–35). Thus, young people, before they have received a proper education, are vulnerable to the harmful effects of comedy, because seeing the "depravity or malignity of comedy" "first", i.e. from a young age, they will develop an appetite for such forms of humour in their own lives. Moreover, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle characterises the young as those who "love laughter" (1389b11). And so, comedy has the potential to turn the young into buffoons who engage in subversive laughter for firstly, they will laugh at the wrong things, employing the depraved and malign jests of comedy in their own lives and on the other hand they will laugh to excess, their youthful inclination for laughter having been nurtured by the jests of the comic stage.

In section 3.2 I discussed the importance of moral *paideia* for nurturing and encouraging the moral virtues including εὐτραπελία. Similarly, it is this kind of education which is necessary for protecting the citizens from the harmful effects of comedy.[55] In the *Ethics*, Aristotle writes that it is essential to inculcate correct habits or attitudes from youth: "It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference" (1103a14-04b). In this case, the habits which one should form in relation to comedy are clearly not to love the depravity and

[55] See *Nic. Eth.* 1179b4-10 and Hutchinson (213) on the inefficacy of argument and the efficacy of moral *paideia*.

malignity of comedy to the extent that they infiltrate one's own social interactions, thereby enabling one to engage in εὐτραπελία and playful laughter rather than βωμολοχία and subversive laughter in one's own life. Elsewhere in the *Ethics*, Aristotle writes that his emphasis on the importance of upbringing and moral *paideia* is following in the footsteps of Plato (1104b11-14).[56] Since this is the case, why then is moral *paideia* not sufficient protection against the harmful effects of comedy for Plato? In other words, why does Plato feel the need to totally banish comedy in the *Republic* and drastically reform it in the *Laws*? I think the answers to these questions hinge on the philosophers' beliefs about the relationship between life and art.

In sections 2.3 and 2.4, we saw that for Plato life and art are inextricably linked and that poetic imitation inevitably has a negative impact on real life. His chief charge against comedy and all forms of imitative poetry in *Republic* X is "its power to corrupt all but a very few *good* people" (605c6-8). This implies that regardless of one's upbringing and education, unless one is a remarkable individual, one will be vulnerable to corruption by comedy.[57] And in the *Philebus* (50b), at the end of his account of comedy as a mixed pleasure, Plato writes that "in mournings and tragedies and comedies, not merely on the stage, but in all the tragedy and comedy of life, and in countless other ways, pain is mixed with pleasure." Thus, Plato equates the comedy of the stage with the comedy of life. Moreover, Plato's equation of these two types of comedy helps to explain why he insists in the *Laws* that every comedy must have some "novel

[56] See *Laws* 653a ff. and *Rep.* 401e-402a on the importance of early education for Plato.
[57] See section 2.3 on how comedy corrupts the soul.

feature".[58] He is clearly worried that if certain jests become familiar from the comic stage, the citizens will not be able to resist using them in the comedy of their daily lives.[59]

Unlike Plato, Aristotle is more optimistic about the effects of poetic imitation on real life. In the *Poetics* he writes that poetry need not have "the same standard of correctness as politics" (1460b13–21). We can infer from this that poetry need not have the same standard of *moral* correctness as politics, i.e. the ethics of public and private life (Destrée, "Jokes" 43).[60] This is possible because Aristotle is confident that, by receiving the correct moral *paideia*, the citizens are able to keep the boundary between life and art intact, rather than allowing what they see on stage to have a negative impact on their daily lives. Furthermore, although I agree with Halliwell ("Aristotle's Poetics" 274) that it is impossible to reconstruct Aristotle's theory of comedy based on the surviving evidence, there are nevertheless scholars who believe that Aristotle posited a comic as well as a tragic *katharsis.*[61] For example Sorabji (290-291) suggests that comedy provides a *katharsis* of contempt. If this is the case, then it is possible that comedy is not only harmless to the educated agent but can even positively impact the agent by purging his soul of bad feelings such as the "depravity or malignity" which Aristotle associates with comedy. To sum up, comedy for Plato always has the potential to corrupt the soul of the agent and cause subversive laughter because he thinks that the poetic imitation of his day inevitably has a negative impact on real life. By contrast, Aristotle is confident that with the right moral *paideia* the agent can enjoy immunity or perhaps even *katharsis* of

[58] See Destrée ("Jokes" 48-50) for a comparison of comedy in the *Laws* and *Politics*.
[59] This is a problem because while the jokes of comedy as prescribed in the *Laws* target non-citizens who are truly ridiculous, thus encouraging the playful laughter of the audience, if the citizens use such jokes in their own lives they are likely to target fellow citizens who regardless of whether they are truly ridiculous or not should not be mocked. And so, the playful laughter which results from the jests of the comic stage is transformed into subversive laughter when the citizens misuse such jests in their own lives.
[60] See Heath who argues that there is no reason to think that for Aristotle the same rules apply to life and the world of theatre.
[61] Believers in comic *katharsis* include Bywater (xxiii and 152), Rostagni, and Sorabji (290-291). Unbelievers include Gudeman (145) and Zeller (772).

negative emotions rather than giving in to abusive jokes and subversive laughter in his own life.

3.4 Superiority and Incongruity

In section 2.5 I showed that the origins of the modern Superiority Theory of laughter can be traced back to Plato and that for Plato there are two types of superiority – unjustified superiority which is always subversive and justified superiority which is always playful. Aristotle's philosophising on the laughable similarly foreshadows the Superiority Theory and also allows for unjustified and justified superiority. In the *Poetics,* Aristotle writes that comedy "tends to represent people inferior" to existing humans (1448a16-18) and that it involves the "mimesis of baser but not wholly vicious characters: rather, the laughable is one category of the shameful. For the laughable comprises any fault or mark of shame which involves no pain or destruction" (1449a32-36). Thus, Aristotle accepted the Platonic connection of laughter with mistakes (*Phileb.* 48e9) while restricting this to mistakes that are neither painful nor destructive. He also dropped the connection of the laughable with envy (*Phileb.* 48a8-50b6) and focused on the stage rather than on life in his definition of comedy. Thus, we laugh because we delight in recognising our own superiority over the characters on stage who are "worse" and "inferior" to us and who make mistakes. However, this kind of superiority is justified because there is no unjust emotion such as *phthonos* involved and the mistakes that the characters make are neither painful nor destructive.[62] Furthermore, as demonstrated in section 3.3, the agent is protected from the harmful effects of comedy through moral *paideia* and so any feelings of superiority he may feel must be justified.

[62] See Fortenbaugh ("Emotion" 20-21)

Aristotle associates the laughable with superiority in the humour of life as well as in the humour of the comic stage. In the *Rhetoric,* during his discussion of the characteristics of youth, he writes that young people "love laughter, whence also their love of wit; for wit is educated arrogance (ἡ γὰρ εὐτραπελία πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις ἐστίν)" (1389b11-12).[63] Elsewhere in the *Rhetoric,* Aristotle associates ὕβρις with superiority. In his discussion of anger, he says that there are three kinds of slight, "contempt, spite, and insult (ὕβρις)" (1378b15) and that those who engage in ὕβρις do so because of the feelings of superiority it evokes: "the cause of pleasure for those insulting is that they think that by treating others badly they are themselves the *superior* (that is why the young and the rich tend to insult; for in their insults they feel they are superior)" (1378b16-17).[64] While I agree with Halliwell ("Greek Laughter" 324) that the phrase "educated arrogance (ὕβρις)" "frames *paideia* as the modification of potentially dangerous instincts into socially acceptable forms,"[65] I do not agree that it is wrong "to conclude that for Aristotle *eutrapelia* is itself an expression of superiority" on the grounds that it is not outright ὕβρις. Young people engage in ὕβρις because they enjoy the feelings of superiority it evokes. And they enjoy wit, educated ὕβρις, because they are lovers of laughter. Thus, we can infer that wit makes them feel superior and their delight in their own superiority is expressed through laughter. And so, I propose that while both forms of ὕβρις express superiority, educated ὕβρις is an expression of justified superiority while uneducated ὕβρις is an expression of unjustified superiority.

And so, the playful laughter of the εὐτράπελος is an expression of justified superiority, for although he delights in his own superiority, his ὕβρις is modified by education and so he never

[63] This recalls the statement in the *Ethics* (1128a20-22) that the jesting of an educated man differs from that of an uneducated man
[64] My italics.
[65] See sections 3.2 and 3.3.

goes too far in expressing his superiority over others. Moreover, when he is the victim of a witty joke, he laughs with the successful agent because unlike the boor who cannot take a joke and unlike the buffoon who takes jokes too far, he has been educated to enjoy a tasteful joke, even if he is the object of the joke.[66] On the other hand, the subversive laughter of the buffoon is an expression of unjustified superiority for as we saw in section 3.2, the buffoon is uneducated and so engages in uneducated ὕβρις. Thus, there is no limit to his delighting in superiority over others, and in his thirst for laughter he will put up with being made inferior by abusive jokes which he should not accept.

I will finish this section by briefly noting that not only does Aristotle's theorising about laughter converge with Plato's, it also contributes something entirely new to humour theory – it foreshadows the Incongruity Theory of laughter which can be summarised as "the perception of something incongruous – something that violates our mental patterns and expectations" (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor"). In the *Poetics* (1453a30-38), Aristotle writes that we get pleasure from comedies in which "those who are deadliest enemies in the plot, such as Orestes and Aegisthus, exit at the end as new friends, and no one dies at anyone's hands". I agree with Destrée ("Jokes" 46) that the pleasure we get from such a play must come from the incongruity of the scene, where we are left completely surprised by such an incongruous ending. In the *Rhetoric,* Aristotle also hints at the Incongruity Theory, especially when he gives examples of puns and says that we find such things amusing because "the thought is paradoxical" and not "in accord with our previous opinions" (1412a19-1412b). Frederick Ahl, in his book *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (17) writes that "puns…deceive because people generally expect language, and indeed nature, not to confront

[66] See *Nic. Eth.* 1128a28-29 where Aristotle writes that the εὐτράπελος makes and listens to the same types of jokes. See Fortenbaugh ("Mean-Dispositions" 219).

them with doubles. Puns pluralize and destabilize meaning…by undermining people's confidence in their own perceptions". Thus, in the case of puns and other forms of wordplay, the pleasure is in figuring out the meaning, i.e. in resolving the incongruity and regaining confidence in our own perceptions. According to this understanding of humour, amusement is similar to puzzle-solving (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor") and is clearly an intellectual exercise.[67] Thus, incongruous humour is a pleasure of the intellect, i.e. it awakens the understanding by surprising it with paradoxical words, thoughts, or situations.

Incongruous humour can provoke either subversive or playful laughter depending on its content and so is employed in different ways by both the βωμολόχος and the εὐτράπελος.[68] For clearly some wordplay and paradoxical situations will be vulgar and befitting of the βωμολόχος while others will be tasteful and befitting of the εὐτράπελος.[69] In Book I of the *Ethics,* Aristotle writes that "the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies reason" (1098a7-9) and so reason is the key to the best human life (Brown xi). Thus, the agent who practices incongruous humour tastefully, i.e. the εὐτράπελος, doubly benefits his soul by engaging in the virtue of εὐτραπελία *and* further exercising his rational faculties by awakening his understanding with paradoxical words, thoughts, or situations. However, the agent who engages in vulgar wordplay or paradoxical situations, i.e. the βωμολόχος, although he too exercises his rational faculties, does not do so well, for the vulgar language he employs is inappropriate and not benefitting of the well-bred man. Moreover, tasteful incongruous humour cannot endanger the social standing of the agent's fellow citizens and therefore cannot be

[67] See contemporary psychologists Schultz and Suls who claim that what we enjoy in humour is the resolution of incongruity rather than the incongruity itself.
[68] I am referring to incongruous humour used in daily life. Laughter evoked by the comic stage is always playful so long as the agent has received the correct moral *paideia* (see section 3.3).
[69] However, even inappropriate wordplay is preferable to outright vulgar abuse and ridicule because one cannot enjoy a (vulgar) pun without using one's intellect.

subversive in society for the humour arises from some piece of wordplay or paradoxical situation and so is entirely detached from those things which citizens might find personally offensive, i.e. all forms of ridicule. Rather this form of humour and the laughter it provokes has the potential to bring citizens together for the object of their laughter will always be some form of incongruity rather than one another.[70] However, when incongruous humour is used inappropriately, although humour still arises from wordplay or a paradoxical situation rather than from the mockery of a fellow citizen, fellow citizens of the agent can nevertheless take offence at the vulgarity of the language or situation, thereby causing conflict and thus subversion in society.

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how Aristotle's philosophising on laughter emerges, converges, and diverges from Plato's explicit theorising about laughter. While his inclusion of εὐτραπελία as a moral virtue in the *Ethics* points to a more positive attitude towards laughter than Plato, he is nevertheless intensely aware of the difficulty of achieving the mean of εὐτραπελία and engaging in playful laughter and the temptations of βωμολοχία which elicits subversive laughter. Moreover, I showed that, similar to Plato's emphasis on knowledge for protecting the soul and state against subversive laughter, Aristotle sees moral *paideia* as key for protecting the soul and society against subversive laughter both in the comedy of life and the comedy of the stage. Finally, I showed that while Aristotle, like Plato, foreshadows the Superiority Theory of laughter, he also supersedes Plato's contribution to modern humour theory by hinting at the Incongruity Theory of laughter. That Aristotle does not see the two "theories" as mutually

[70] This excludes the boor (ἄγροικος) who wrongly takes offence at any attempt to raise a laugh. See section 3.2.

exclusive can serve as encouragement for modern humour theorists who wish to adopt a “hybrid model” of humour rather than being confined to one theory or another.

4. Conclusion

In this thesis I have shown that laughter demands serious philosophical attention from both Plato and Aristotle because of its double-sided potential – used incorrectly it can cause subversion in the soul and state while used correctly, it can be a source of moral and societal improvement. Although Plato's explicit theorising about laughter strikes a profoundly negative note, laughter is nevertheless prevalent in the drama of his dialogues. He even employs the techniques of the comedy of his day (Aristophanic comedy)[71] in some of his dialogues while condemning such techniques in his "theory" of laughter in *Republic* X (605c-607a).[72] And while I agree with Halliwell ("Greek Laughter" 307) that "Aristotle's is the most sophisticated attempt made in antiquity to reach a philosophical accommodation with laughter, indeed literally to make a virtue out of it," it is nevertheless an accommodation that remains constantly alert to the possibility of virtue (εὐτραπελία) slipping into vice (βωμολοχία). The philosophers' ambivalent attitudes towards laughter is a symptom of the ambivalent nature of laughter itself, existing between the body and the mind. However, I have shown that for both Plato and Aristotle, laughter is never free from subversive potential and requires strict regulation if it is to be playful and thus morally and socially positive. I also showed how Plato and Aristotle influenced the modern Superiority and Incongruity theories of laughter, and that under both theories of laughter there is the possibility for either subversive or playful laughter.

[71] See Trivigno 13, 31.
[72] See section 2.3.

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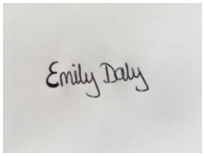
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Declaration of Originality of Authorship of a thesis submitted for examination in the MSt in Ancient Philosophy in the academic year 2020-21

I, Emily Daly affirm that my submitted thesis entitled "The Subversive Power of Laughter: Plato and Aristotle on Humour" is my own original work, except where otherwise stated, and that I have only shown drafts of it to my supervisor, Prof Karen Margrethe Nielsen, in approximately four hours of supervision, and that I have received help in its preparation from Dr/Prof NA

Signed:  Date: 30th June 2021