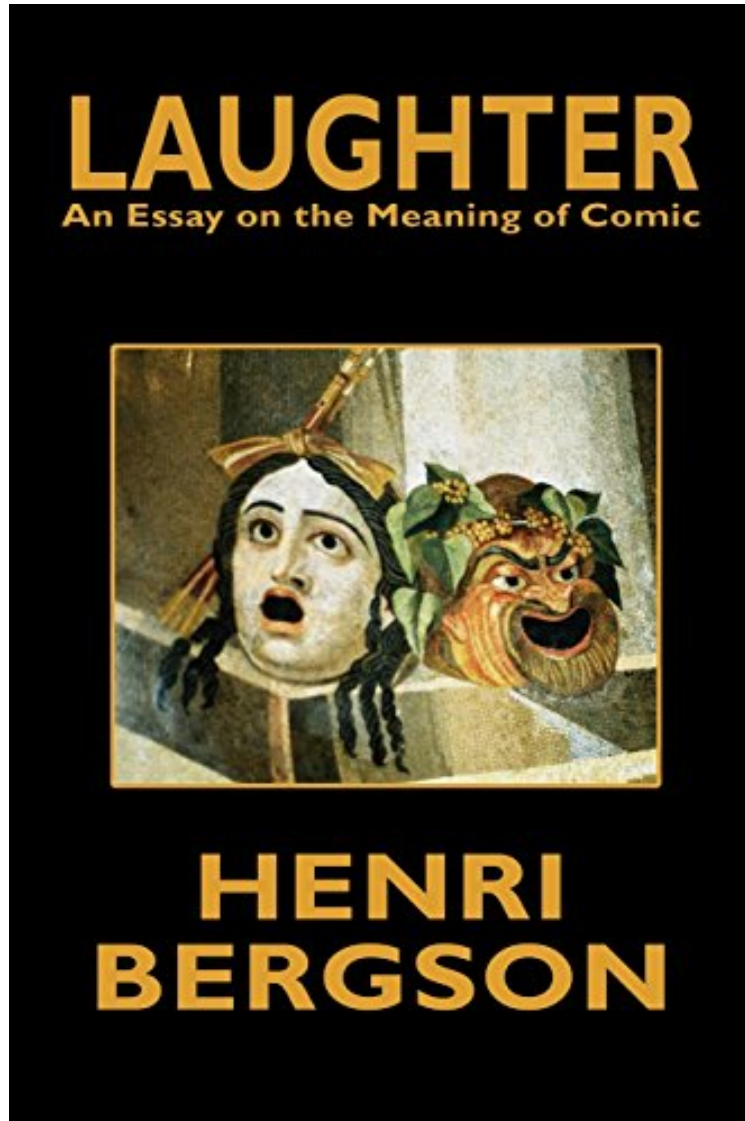


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Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic

Henri Bergson

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Henri Bergson : Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. An Enlightening, If Narrowly-Conceived Thesis By Garth Amundson Bergson's analysis of the comic dwells obsessively on one theme: that witnessing any act of thoughtless repetition, carried out without regard for the specific nature and unique demands of an actual situation facing the individual, can make us laugh. That is to say, we are tickled to see people act with insensitivity to the real nuances and characteristics of life. In these instances the actor seems more machine-like than human, foolishly applying a rule

without appreciating whether or not there is any actual need to do so. The resulting inflexible behavior seems a parody of a true human response, and it is this that evokes humor, says Bergson. Hence, we are amused by something like, say, customs officials who meet passengers swimming ashore from a catastrophic shipwreck that has just occurred offshore, and, instead of offering assistance, immediately demand to know if they have anything to declare. Of course, it is a characteristic of modernity that daily life is run according to abstract regulations and schemes designed to standardize the human condition: such is life in urban, industrialized environments, where people run their days by referring to clocks, rather than attending to the cycles of nature, for example. This has an unforeseen potential for humor because it leads to absurd attempts to accommodate the rule at the expense of basic human needs: there is something both distressing and subtly funny about a factory worker who is only allowed to leave his post to urinate twice a day, as he puckers up his face and twists his legs in a weirdly cockeyed stance so as to continue to work the assembly until the predetermined moment for a bathroom break arrives. The point is that such abstract social regulating schemes have little or no connection to the actual human organism, including its desires, natural rhythms, and simple needs for care and concern, something that tends to make us feel crushed in the cogs of some vast social machinery. Yet, this dehumanized state can be funny, too, as depicted in Charlie Chaplin's film "Modern Times". Bergson's thesis is perhaps a relevant and important observation in an age increasingly dominated, not only by mindless and empty routines, but by technology, such as the computers that are increasingly insinuating themselves into daily life. I detect a liberatory theme in Bergson's little volume, one derived from our ability to dismiss the insanity of a standardized, routinized existence through laughter: his thesis provides a reason to chuckle at the "Hal 2000" computer in Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey", rather than to reflexively and fearfully submit to what we feel to be its malevolent control of our lives. Perhaps it is human values that will triumph over the dehumanizing aspects of the machine age, after all! Although there is much more to the phenomenon of comedy than can be accounted for in the single element of thoughtless repetition, Bergson's argument is forceful and convincing.

What does laughter mean? What common ground can we find between the grimace of a merry-andrew, a play upon words, an equivocal situation in a burlesque and a scene of high comedy? What method of distillation will yield us invariably the same essence from which so many different products borrow either their obtrusive odour or their delicate perfume? The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation. Our excuse for attacking the problem in our turn must lie in the fact that we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life. We shall confine ourselves to watching it grow and expand.