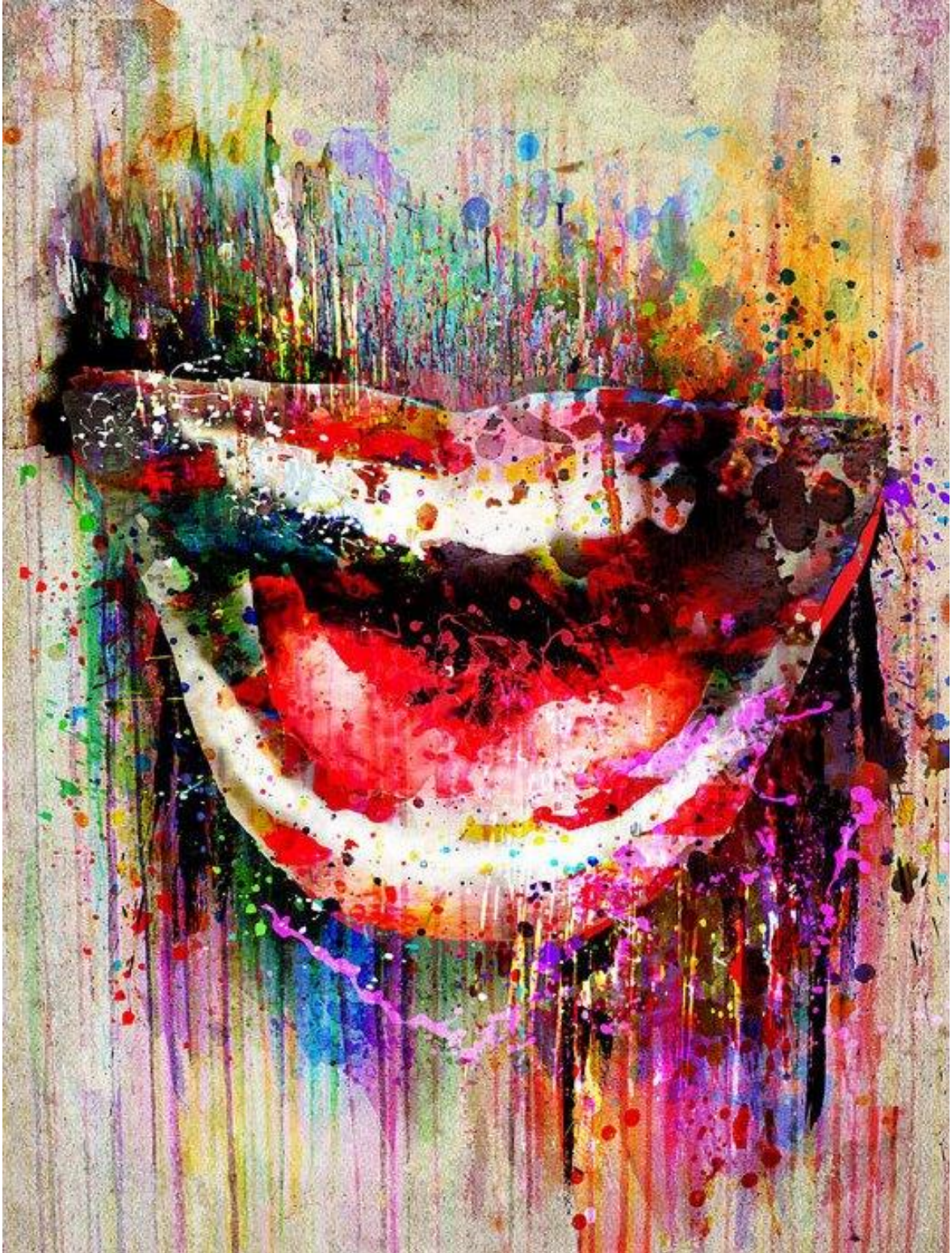


# *Laughter, Smiles, Tears*



# The function of laughter is to intimidate by humiliating

## Laughter and sobs

From Bhagavan Das. *The Science of the Emotions*. Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1924 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Ch. VIII, COMPLEX EMOTIONS, pp. 226-37. (A searchable PDF of the 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., of 1908, can be found in our Constitution of Man Series.)

Laughter, as has been generally recognised by psychologists, is the physical manifestation of a sudden and excessive recognition of one's own superiority.<sup>1</sup> Where this consciousness is accompanied by Repulsion, the laugh becomes "the laugh of ridicule." Where the repulsion and the sense of superiority are strong, we have "the laugh of scorn," the beginning of which is the Sneer. Where the ridicule is light-hearted, not deep-rooted, only chaff and banter, where it is moreover openly and unmistakably pretended and make-believe, "the laugh of jest and joke," of "fun and good humour and good company" results.

But we very seldom find the loud laugh combined with genuine, deep-seated, real, earnest Benevolence. The smile is the nearest approach to laughter there.

It may be noted that while the sense of superiority is a necessary factor in laughter, an excessive degree of it, or certain special kinds of it, defeat risibility. Thus when Dignity has passed into Pomposity, or circumstances have given to it the shade of Solemnity, or even Gravity, laughter becomes as impossible as in the case of an excessive Humility, or of deadly Earnestness, or Seriousness, Dourness, Sourness, Melancholia, or dogged Pugnacity, which all result in what is known as the lack of a sense of Humour.

Ordinarily the superiority which is most accountable for loud laughter is that of physiological vitality, high animal spirits, physical strength in respect of the elemental appetites of hunger and sex, whence "horseplay" and "broad jokes."

As Laughter may be said to be the abrupt expansion, and therefore in jerks, of the physical body, in correspondence with, and as an expression of the sudden expansion of the mind,<sup>2</sup> the individual ego, in consequence of an instantaneous gain of a sense of superiority; so Sobbing may be said to be a sudden and spasmodic contraction of the same, for the opposite reason. What the orgasm of Laughter is to pleasure, that of Sobs is to pain.

Although Sobbing appears to be the exact and opposite counterpart of Laughing, it does not seem to have been noticed by psychologists.

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<sup>1</sup> Bain, *Mental and Moral Science*, pp. 257, 315; Herbert Spencer's *Essays*, Vol. I, "The Physiology of Laughter"; Harald Höfding, *Outlines of Psychology*, pp. 291-94.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the expression in *Chhândogya*, VI, i, 2, "Thou lookest great-minded, large-minded, elate-minded, with thy acquirements in learning."



It has been thought by some that Laughter is peculiar to the human being and is not observable in animals. This has been contradicted by others who have pointed out that “even monkeys smile and laugh,” and also that “that which man expresses by laughter may be expressed by animals in other ways, *e.g.*, by wagging the tail.”<sup>1</sup> Yet we may well say that laughter and sobbing are more prominently observable in human beings and are a specific characteristic of them.

This seems to be so because of the self-consciousness, the ego-feeling, involved, which is obviously more developed in man. This ego-feeling takes shape as Self-Complacency in Laughter, and as Self-Pity in Sobbing. This self-consciousness and the accompanying sense (incipient or developed) of difference between ego and body, and the implied control of the latter by the former, (very manifest in the dignified or the pompous person who must not behave like common folk), causes, so to say, the restraint and the confinement of the expansive or the contractive energy to the throat and chest in the human being, and the rest of the organism is inhibited from movement. In the animal, the child, and the uncontrolled adult on the other hand, the energy becomes freely diffused over the whole body, and the entire organism responds to the feeling, and manifests it either in capers, friskings, rushes, and screamings of joy, or in writhings, rollings, crouchings, rushings about, and shriekings of pain and grief. It may be noted that caperings and laughter do not occur simultaneously, nor writhings and sobs.

Even in the case of ordinarily self-controlled adults, we find, on occasions of extreme stimulation, behaviour like that of children and animals; though ordinarily, while the children are capering about, the elder looks on with a broad smile; or where they lament loudly, he sheds silent tears.

## Usefulness of laughter for the young

But whatever may be right and proper for the elders to do, in the matter of keeping up long and grave faces, (and we shall deal with this question in the last chapter of this work), it is certainly quite correct and very good for the youngers to have a hearty and even noisy laugh now and then. For them, the counsel to “laugh and grow fat” holds good. But, of course, moderation must not be forgotten, here as elsewhere; nor should actual positive hurt and harm to another be made the occasion for unholly cachinnation.

Laughter is egoistic, always, without a doubt; but the young have a right, almost a duty, to be egoistic (to a carefully regulated extent only, though); otherwise they would not grow, physically and also mentally in a certain sense. And growing is always at the expense of someone else. For the youngers, it is, and ought to be, at the expense of the elders — so the elders should feel, willingly and gladly, to strengthen them in their self-denial for the sake of the growth of their younger generation. But the youngers should feel — at least grateful and reverent towards their elders while

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<sup>1</sup> Harald Höffding, *Outlines of Psychology*, p. 292

so growing at their expense! Such are the paradoxes of human psychology and human relations.<sup>1</sup>

## Smiles and tears

Smiles and tears require some examination. Jīvas smile for joy and smile sadly; they weep in gladness and they weep in pain. What is the meaning of this?

The “smile of joy” has already been incidentally and briefly explained in connection with Kindness. The essential psychological meaning of “the expansion of the features in a smile” is a consciousness of “moreness,” of “superiority.” The receiver of a gift smiles after the receipt; or, when before, then at the assured prospect of it. The giver smiles before the gift; or, when after, then by sympathy and feeling of oneness with the recipient. In the first case the recipient becomes “more” than he was before. The giver feels that he is more than the object of his charity and kindness and has the power to relieve his want. This last smile, the bender smile of Benevolence, is very nearly allied to and always ready to pass into the tears of pity. The “smile of sadness” also expresses the sense of superiority of him who smiles at the cause of his sadness, but without Repulsion, rather with patience, with resignation, with hope of future Love. The “cynical smile,” “the smile of bitterness,” is, of course, a near relative of the “laugh of scorn.”

“The tears of joy,” like the “tears of pity,” may mean either only an overflow of the superfluous possessions of the self — but without a definite object, as in the other case, and only as a general expression, of goodwill to all and readiness to give to any that need; or they may really be, as they often are, tears of pity for one’s own past self, weak and worthy of pity before the cause of joy made it large and strong.



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<sup>1</sup> [Bhagavan Das’ analysis of Bergson’s monograph on Laughter has been placed at the end of this document.]

## Great Teachers seldom laugh, or not at all

From Bhagavan Das. *The Science of the Emotions*. Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1924 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Ch. XII, HIGH APPLICATION OF THE SCIENCE OF THE EMOTIONS, pp. 509-13. (A searchable PDF of the 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., of 1908, can be found in our Constitution of Man Series.)

### Avoidance of much laughter

Do not let us laugh very often or very loud. There are more grounds for sorrow than for laughter in our present world. The great Teachers have laughed but seldom or not at all. Laughter *means* a sudden and excessive feeling of superiority and moreness, as explained before. People often laugh in Scorn. We should no longer be actuated by Scorn.

But they laugh in Joy and pure Good-humour too, as it is called. May we not laugh with them?

Let us analyse that Joy and that Good-humour, and then determine for ourselves. Very often that Joy means the Joy of gain at the expense of another. “Even in jest?” we ask. Yes. The laughter of jesting consists in this: that one person *makes believe* that he himself is superior and another is inferior; this is done to bring out fictitious points of his own superiority and those of the other’s inferiority, and so to secure a laugh. This “laugh at another’s expense” is harmless, or supposed to be harmless, only so long as it is understood that the whole is a make-believe, and that there is no real superiority or inferiority on either side. But, apart from the merits or otherwise of so making-believe, and approaching falsehood even in jest, we see how often jest passes into earnest, and why? In trying to bring out the points of inferiority of others, people too generally pass from the fictitious to the real, and touch sore parts; and the result is that the laughter rapidly changes from the humorous into the bitter. Let us not go near such dangerous shallows. What sad mistakes arise in life between the nearest friends! Expressions and gestures of Sympathy and Goodwill are mistaken for the very opposite. How great the danger, then, of the self-assertion involved in even the laughter of jesting becoming hurtful.<sup>1</sup>

The great teachers laughed seldom.<sup>2</sup> But they have smiled very often; smiled in tenderness and sadness; sad to see another’s pain, tender to relieve it; smiling because of their ability to do so, or at the unreality of the pain and its fleetingness; and in any case, smiling because of the increased “moreness” of the Self in themselves instantly acquired by the recognition of its identity with the Self in the person before them. As a general rule, the violent outward physical laugh is the laugh of the gross sense of

<sup>1</sup> See an illustrative story, that of Mankanaka, in the *Kūrma Purāna*, II, xxxv; and the verse quoted at p. 235, *supra*, from the *Bhāgavata*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the descriptions of the Buddha in Ashva-ghosha’s *Buddha-charita*, in Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*, and in Karl Gjellerup’s story, *The Pilgrim Kamanita*.

the moreness of the material separated self, while the quiet, tender, inner, “spiritual” smile is the smile of the subtle sense of moreness of the spiritual united self. And yet there is inevitably a touch of comparison in the purity of the latter also, a comparison of the strength of the united self which has overpowered and transcended the strength of the not-self, the separated self, and it is this comparison which — being misinterpreted naturally as invidious by the evil natures in which the separate self is strong — causes the hatred of “spiritual faces” which in unhappily not an uncommon phenomenon amidst materialistic present humanity.

Let us distinguish well between this smile of tenderness and the smile of bitterness or of despair wherein the self snatches, it may be, a fictitious consolation for actual present loss, from its own imagined greatness and another’s littleness. And so distinguishing, we shall see why

Mockery is the fume of little hearts,

And

Manners are not idle, but the fruit  
Of loyal nature and of noble mind.<sup>1</sup>

## And of much talk

And for reasons similar to those which make jesting and laughing dangerous, are also much talking and discussion dangerous. Let us ask a question when we really require some information; let us listen attentively to the reply, ponder it carefully, and ask again, if necessary. But why should we expound our own views uncalled for? The danger of self-assertion is there. But, if we are desired to state our views on any question, then we may certainly do so, if we can help another thereby, giving our statements in the way of the answers we ourselves would seek if putting questions. Because of the danger of self-assertion and *ahamkāra* hiding within much speech is silence golden.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tennyson: *Guinevere*. Compare *Uttara-Rāma-Charita*:

“The sages name ‘demoniac’ the speech of the inebriate and the arrogant; it is the very womb of wars, it is the death of the world.”

And, *per contra*:

“The speech which milks the auspicious mother-goddess of Wealth, which drives away the witch of sordid Poverty, which brings good name and nullifies all sins, that good cow-mother of all things fortunate, is known to the wise as *Sūnritā vāk*, the gentle and courteous speech.”

<sup>2</sup> *Manu*, vi, 47:

“Speak when asked, and asked in the right manner.”

“Where you desire friendship, avoid three things — controversy, business-relations, private visits to the spouse.”

“Learning, wealth, power — in the hands of the wicked lead to wrangling, to arrogance and to oppression; — in the hands of the good, to wisdom, to charity, and to the protection of the weak.”

## Bhagavan Das on Bergson's essays on Laughter

From Bhagavan Das. *The Science of the Emotions*. Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1924 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Ch. VIII, COMPLEX EMOTIONS, p. 230 *fn. et seq.*

*Laughter* is a collection of three essays by French philosopher Henri Bergson, first published in 1900. The original French title is *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*, "Laughter. an Essay on the meaning of the comic."

Bergson has written a very interesting monograph on *Laughter*, an English translation of which was first published in 1911. He discusses what he regards as the various predominant types of the Comic, and makes a number of generalisations as to these, *viz.*, the Comic in General, in Forms, in Movements, in Situations, in Words, and in Character.

The last pages of the work show that at bottom his view is the same as that of the other psychologists, as regards the egoistic, self-glorifying, and non-benevolent nature of laughter.

Evidently there is nothing very benevolent in laughter, it seems rather inclined to return evil for evil . . . Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed . . . It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness . . . In this sense, laughter cannot be absolutely just. Nor should it be kind-hearted either. Its function is to intimidate by humiliating. Now, it would not succeed in doing this, had not nature implanted for that very purpose, even in the best of men, a spark of spiteful ness or, at all events, of mischief. Perhaps we had better not investigate this point too closely, for we should not find anything very flattering to ourselves. . . . We should see that this movement of relaxation or expansion is nothing but a prelude to laughter, that the laugher immediately retires within himself, more self-assertive and conceited than ever, and is evidently disposed to look upon another's personality as a marionette of which he pulls the strings. In this presumptuousness we speedily discern a degree of egoism, and, behind this latter, something less spontaneous and more bitter, the beginnings of a curious pessimism which becomes the more pronounced as the laugher more closely analyses his laughter . . . The billows clash and collide with each other as they strive to find their level. A fringe of snow-white foam, feathery and frolicsome, follows their changing outlines. From time to time, the receding wave leaves behind a remnant of foam on the sandy beach. The child, who plays hard by, picks up a handful, and, the next moment, is astonished to find that nothing remains in his grasp but a few drops of water, water that is far more brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought it. Laughter comes into being in the self-same fashion. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is a froth with a saline base. Like



froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself, But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter.

This full quotation has been made from Bergson, a philosopher of much influence in the West at the present time, in order to support the statement in the text, that laughter is not compatible with real benevolence. In Bergson's own words, it is self-assertive, conceited, presumptuous, egoistic (elsewhere he uses the adjective impertinent also), even when it is merely playful and relaxative; in other cases, it tries "to intimidate by humiliating" others, which is certainly not a benevolent process, even though it may be necessary in certain circumstances. Because of this, does its fruit of pleasure turn to ashes in the mouth of the philosopher who looks before and after and analyses the egoism underneath and sees its pettiness and paltriness: and in the mouth of the non-philosopher, by the natural reaction and revulsion which is the result of the working of the Unconscious before it has become Conscious, before the Self has found and known it-Self.

All actions, good and bad, ever done in the past, by the *jīva* are known to the Self, and remain stored up in it. When it sees that the time is ripe for the fruition of any, then this Inner Self inspires the *buddhi*, the [conscious and unconscious] mind of the *jīva* so that the latter brings about the proper fruit for itself.<sup>1</sup>

But these excellent remarks with which Bergson concludes his book seem to be inconsistent with some others which he makes at its outset. Thus,

Here I would point out, as a symptom equally worthy of notice, the *absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the Comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion.

If by feeling and emotion, he means deep or serious or sad or sympathetic feeling or emotion only, then his remark is obviously right. But, then, it would amount to a truism. Surely the self-assertiveness and conceit and presumptuousness, which he admits at the back of laughter, are also feelings or emotions in the broad sense. Scornful laughter has even a *deep feeling* of pride behind it. As Höffding also has remarked,

Strong and suddenly excited *self-esteem* suddenly breaks out in laughter.

This mood of conceit or self-esteem can scarcely be called "thoroughly calm and unruffled," or one of "indifference."

Good humour, high spirits, self-satisfaction (such as results from a good meal, or a successful financial gamble, or a triumphantly bloody victory over a hated enemy) all equally mean that elated and inflated state of "superiority" which is the indispensable condition of laughter.

The "fifty-one kinds" of laughter, referred to in a Hindi farce, (in contrast with as many varieties of weeping), and all the varieties of the laughable that are discussed

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<sup>1</sup> *Mahābhārata*, "Shānti," ch. 304



by Bergson and others, the “mechanical inelasticity,” the inability to respond with living quickness and adaptability to changing circumstances, which Bergson discerns as the principal feature running through all varieties of the Comic — all mean that someone has, suddenly and unexpectedly, “made an ass of himself,” has done or said something silly, has “made a fool of himself” or been “made a fool of by another,” made less than, made inferior to, what he appeared or was supposed to be. All jesting and joking imply this. To laugh over a witticism is to laugh *with* the utterer of it, and *at* the butt of it. But the gods of Homer laugh consumedly, not at Hephaestus’ wit, but at his lameness; and children and uncultured minds have continued to imitate these surprising gods all along. Indra’s court, in the Purānic heaven, has a famous pair of low comedians on its permanent establishment; they are appropriately named Hā-hā and Hū-hū; and their function is to make jokes at the expense of newcomers. Ahamkāra, egoism, the seat of the sense of power, the feel of superiority, in its dual form of Shiva-Rudra, Love-Hate, Lust-Wrath, indulges in the *attā-hāsa*, the guffaw, in Purānic symbology, on occasions of the triumph of lust over its victim, or of wrath over its object. Always laughter implies the degradation of someone, as Bain rightly points out; and the laugher is either the degrader himself, or in sympathy with him.

A Sanskrit verse embodies a prayer to be saved

. . . from recklessness and loud laughter of dire quality,

and other verses suggest that

. . . to counteract the proud elation and sense of one’s own greatness which result from the contemplation of those below us in life, we should realise our smallness by looking at those who are above us.

When in joy, turn your eyes to those in greater joy; when in sorrow, look at those in greater sorrow;

— so may undue elations and depressions, laughters and sobs, be both avoided.<sup>1</sup>

It may be noted that if laughter is corrective, as Bergson reiterates, surely it is so only incidentally, and not purposively, not by the intention of the laugher. Few, if any, laugh with the deliberate object of administering correction thereby to the butt.

Another interesting point referred to by Bergson may be discussed here. He says,

In a society composed of pure intelligences, there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter; whereas highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter.<sup>2</sup>

This is only saying in other words what been said more powerfully and also more accurately by someone else, viz., that

To the man of thought, the world is a comedy; to the man of feeling, a tragedy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Bhāgavata*, VI, viii, 16

<sup>2</sup> p. 4

<sup>3</sup> [Paraphrasing Jean Racine’s “Life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel.”]

The inaccuracy lies in Bergson's supposition of even the possibility of the existence of a society in which there may be laughter but no tears. Metaphysically, such a state of things is impossible. The world-process is always and everywhere dual, ambivalent. It is not possible that there should be light only, and no darkness; pleasure only, and no pain. Also "pure intelligence," without any affective and without any conative quality in another impossibility by the nature of things. And if there is any affective element present, then risibility and lachrymosity must both be present.

Bergson goes on to say,

Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said or done; act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word give your sympathy its widest expansion; as though at the touch of a fairy wand, you will see the flimsiest of objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything.

Now, if this is so, why is it so? Is it not because the disinterested spectator feels "superior" to the whole show? "I am not affected by all this," "it does not touch any weak point in me." But the sensitive sympathiser at once becomes the *locus* and focus of all the woes of the world, which press upon him much more heavily than its rejoicings.

But here we ought to remember that the disinterested spectator is of two kinds,

- The selfish, egoistic, self-complacent, "superior" person with *some other* interests than those involved in the scene he is beholding; and
- The wise philanthropist and philosopher who is *all*-interested, is equally benevolent to *all* interests, sees that all, laughter as well as tears, are ways of self-realisation of the Universal Self.

The former regards the particular scene before him, in the fate of the actors of which he is disinterested, as show and fun and comedy; his own private and personal affairs are not such at all, to him. The latter regards the whole world-process, including the affairs of the body he is incarnate in, with all its tears and all its smiles, as one vast and incessant *Lilā*, Play, Drama, Comedy if you like, but better Tragi-Comedy; and his smile is an ambivalent sad smile, his laugh a tearful laugh, his innermost mood a laughless and tearless Peace, "All is well," "Thy [*i.e.*, My] Will be done [and is being done]," "Everything has its own place in the Universe," "Every fact is its own justification"; but the activities of his body are always more in sympathy with the tears than with the smiles.

