THE COMIC MIND OF WILLIAM JAMES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I contemplate humour as an essential ingredient of William James's philosophical temperament. First, I compare James and Santayana in terms of their diverse humours. This comparison allows me to characterize tentatively the contrast between irony and comicalness. Second, I explain the connection between James's own humour and the difference between cynic and sympathetic temperaments as he described them. Third, I explore with Bergson and Chesterton the ethical dimension of the ironic and the comical. Fourth, I examine the relations between irony, humour and faith, a topic that requires not only some comparisons between James and Kierkegaard, but also with Niehbur's view of laughter and religion.

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> "The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."
>
> Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*.[1]

INTRODUCTION

I would like to propose here that taking James seriously demands a certain reconsideration of the type of humour that he embodied and inspired. My idea is that James's humour was not ironic, since it was tinged by an affectionate stance, alien to distant and cool spirits.

In order to make clearer the relevance of humour, and the contrast between types of humour, I will begin discussing some aspects of the antagonism between James and

Santayana.[2] I think that the intricate relation between them could be seen as a clash between two very diverse styles of humour that helps us to understand much better the deepness of James's humour. Both Santayana and James did like to laugh and made others laugh. They were not like those philosophers who feel their profundity and rigour threatened by laughter. However, Santayana and James laughed in two different ways, and this disparity has a lot to do with their respective philosophical temperaments. We can understand philosophical temperaments, indeed, in terms of the style in which each philosopher laughs and makes other laugh, voluntarily and involuntarily. Of course, philosophical temperaments can be defined by different traits, but laughter should also be considered among them, and types of humour taken, if not as another criterion, at least as a significant symptom. Despite some philosophers will never admit that humour can be as deep as philosophy, or that philosophy sometimes can be as amusing as humour, transferences between both spheres are intriguing. Rephrasing a wisecrack by Terry Eagleton in his "The Critic as Clown",[3] one could say that if after all philosophical seriousness can be put into the funny, then that seriousness was not as serious as it seemed. Moreover, if the funny can be an adequate medium for such seriousness, then one can also think that humour is not as light as it seemed at first sight. If humour becomes deep without losing its character, then it could equal the serious in elaboration but paradoxically, exceeding it in simplicity.

Now let me connect a little more some philosophical types with types of humour. James was not a joker, it is true, but as it is well known he exhibited a fine sense of humour. Ralf Barton Perry highlighted James's peculiar "way of making fun of people, himself included", and his "delightful absurdity and peculiar art of loving caricature." Perry also commented:

> There where light as well as serious forms of James's vivacity. He wore bright
> neckties. He had a highly developed sense of fun, and was usually himself its
> principal fomenter. He had his days feeling "particularly larky", but some
> degree of larkiness might be expected at any time. Thus he wrote to Flournoy
> as he was completing his second series for the Gifford Lectures: "the old spirit
> of mischief revives in my breast, and I begin to feel a little as I used to"— In
> the family circles to which James belonged laughter was a major activity. Its
> waves and detonations not only cleared away the vapors of neurasthenia, but
> were fatal to any "airs" of pretension or pose. There was wit, but it was gayety

and elaborate nonsense which was the characteristic domestic product. In the days of James boyhood, when juvenile theatricals were in order, it was he, according to the testimony of his brother, that supplied "the motive force", imagined "the comprehensive comedies", and served as "the constant comic star." [4]

Perry described here essential marks of James unique type of humour. However, the crucial point is that this frame of mind in James was neither a passing feature of a young and immature comic star, nor it was just an external ingredient of an old and mature philosophical star. James's mood was much more than a consequence of his unusual and weird education or than a picturesque and accessory envelopment of his thought. It was both an elaborate composition and an ingredient of his logic, an art of living and a procedure of thinking.

As Jacques Barzun also observed, many readers think that their failure to follow James's ideas is due to defects in James's logic, when the real difficulty was another.[5] "Gaps and contradictions can be found […] some by conflict unresolved", but "in that regard they resemble the writings of every thinker without exception". The real problem

in James as writer of philosophy is his irrepressible humour. He shares with Swift, Lamb, Samuel Butler, Shaw, Chesterton, and Mark Twain the disadvantage of having used yet one more rhetorical means which, though legitimate in itself and generally pleasing, somehow distracts all but the fittest readers. Most people seize on it as an opportunity to escape from the serious thought just preceding and thus miss the seriousness in the next, the humorous one. The great humorist always runs the risk of not being taken thoughtfully, while the normal men of ideas, faithful to solemnity, invariably are.[6]

From this perspective, James's humour was a serious issue, in spite of the fact that it can occasionally be seen as a distraction from the deepness to which it actually serves. Humour is often understood as a mere exhaust valve of thinking, as a waste of superfluous energy, or as a mechanism of relaxing. In the case of James, however, humour was more like a mechanism of lighting, connected to a relatively fragmented but illuminating style of thinking. As Chappman said

His mind was never quite in focus, and there was always something left over after each discharge of the battery, something which now became the beginning of a new thought. When he found out his mistake or defect of expression, when he came to see that he had not said quite what he meant, he was the first to proclaim it, and to move on to a new position, a new misstatement of the same truth —a new, debonair apperception, clothed in non-conclusive and suggestive figures of speech […] a logic that was not the logic of intellect, but a far deeper thing, limpid and clear in itself, confused and refractory only when you tried to deal it intellectually. You must take any fragment […] by itself, for the whole meaning is in the fragment. If you try to piece the bits together, you will endanger their meaning.[7]

However, if James's humour was an instrument to delve into reality, never an evasion from it, it always expresses an existential way of being, perhaps even a sign of certain moral character. As Barzun also suggested, James's lightness was tinged by weightiness, and his sense if humour never operated as a protection

Cheerfulness, gaiety, the habit not so much of repressing as of resisting gloomy thoughts —all this may be dismissed as marks of the shallow optimist, but… James was precisely not that. Indeed, to Chappman's discerning glance, a deep sadness lay behind James's playfulness […]. His humour […] came, if not from, then with his reasoned view that "better" is not fated but possible. Such an attitude proved its worth by being contagious […]. In short, it was not modern humour, self-derisive, as a prophylactic.[8]

Barzun's remarks are particularly accurate here, because, firstly, he places James's humour as a mood distant both from too idealistic optimism but also from too realistic scepticism, and secondly, because what Barzun classifies as prophylactic humour is closer to irony than any other variety of humour. If one disguises the funny with seriousness one can be prophylactic. But if one reveals the seriousness hidden in the funny, one can get more involved in a deeper and many times quite an embarrassing dimension of reality. While irony separates spirit from reality, keeping a cautious distance from it, other types of humour avoid distances and carelessly connect spirit with a reality that turns embarrassing. Ironists can be self-derisive in

some circumstances, yet only in order to maximize their own protection from reality. Humorists, on the contrary, are self-derisive due to their sometimes too indiscriminate engagement with reality.

JAMES AND SANTAYANA

Probably this is the reason why the elegant Santayana had a brilliant but cruel perception of James's sense of humour. For Santayana the problem with James was not an irrepressible mocking character, but rather an uncontrollable spontaneity and an irrepressible love for oddity. There was in James, surely, an expansive and impatient openness, an anxious will to take in and enjoy any possible situation which sprang from his over-belief that any particular point of view and experience could always posses a shred of truth in it. Perry talked of a "cosmic sympathy by which he rejoiced in strange and varied otherness"[9] that, certainly, some of his adepts and followers —almost seriously—took as a sign of holiness. Santayana, however, always laughed at this urgent tendency to human contagion, taking it as a symptom of a histrionic and unbalanced sensibility:

> For one thing, Williams James kept his mind and heart wide open to all that might seem, to polite minds, odd, personal, or visionary in religion and philosophy. He gave a sincerely respectful hearing to sentimentalist, mystics, spiritualists, wizards, cranks, quacks, and impostors… He thought, with his usual modesty, that any of these might have something to teach him. The lame, the halt, the blind, and those speaking with tongues could come to him with the certainty of finding sympathy; and if they were no healed, at least they were comforted, that a famous professor should take them so seriously; and they began to feel that after all to have only a leg, or one hand, or one eye, or to have three, might be in itself no less beauteous than to have just two, like the stolid majority.[10]
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> The judgments of William James were indeed impulsive, and his descriptions impressionistic, based on a penetrating but casual spurt of sympathy or antipathy […].[11]
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> His love of lame ducks and neglected possibilities […] took the form of charity and breadth of mind, then seemed rather the doctor's quick eye for

bad symptoms, as if he had diagnosed people in a jiffy and cried: "Ah, you are
a paranoiac! Ah, you have the pox!".[12]

These passages contain extraordinary portraits of James, in spite of, or rather because they are really tinged by irony. They get to capture not only remarkable traits of James's character, but also essential ingredients of his pluralistic philosophy. Santayana's descriptions exaggerate the contractions involved in James's sympathy, as if the very exultation in his acts would be the mark of an incurable weakness, and therefore a mistaken device of compensation against an alleged deficit. To the eyes of Santayana, indeed, a real understanding of facts and lives, of situations and persons, cannot be based on illuminations and insights. If philosophy wants to adopt a full comprehensive point of view, as he called it, it requires something else than sudden insights and effusive raptures. The understanding of how things and people *really* are cannot be grounded on picturesque and lyrical diagnosis. In the case of James, however, the impulse to see too much good in everything —the indiscriminating approval that he was prone to feel towards everything— forced him to reject prematurely any external point of view. As Santayana proclaimed

[James] was worried about what ought to be believed and the awful deprivations of disbelieving. What he called the cynical view of anything had first to be brushed aside, without stopping to consider whether it was not the true one.[13]

Here we face some important questions: What did James himself understand by cynical view? What had the cynic type of thinking to do with other types described by him? And, if —as Santayana said— James's eye was more akin to a charitable doctor's view before troubles Was a *clinical view* just the opposite to the *cynical view*?

I will try to answer these questions later, but before we leave Santayana behind in our discussion, let us make clearer some important points. First, James's idea of sympathy was not as simplistic as an ironist like Santayana believed. Even if James came occasionally closer to absurdity he was not the sort of old-fashioned romantic that neo-classicists as Santayana sometimes recognized in him. James never glorified madness in a romantic vein, as if mental illness were synonymous with genius. And he did not precisely because he knew very well that insanity is not a joke, and that too often it is really irreconcilable with a good

life. A clinic eye, *pace* Santayana, can be interested in more things than a melodramatic celebration of the odd and the extraordinary. Second: James was quite aware of the confines of our imaginative powers and affective capabilities. This acceptance, however, far from being the same as passiveness is its very opposite since it draws the lines of action, instills attitudes that prepare for it, distinguishes friendly and unfriendly forces and eventually prepares for new and in-between things.[14] However, Santayana never did full justice to this other bitter side of James, the James who talked very seriously about our inexorable blindness and our limited sympathy, and the James that saw tolerance as a virtue that helps to avoid the injuries provoked by an almost incurable blindness, rather than the result of overcoming this same blindness. What Santayana also didn't understand is that James never considered this acknowledgement of our ignorance, this acceptance of our limits, as a motive for existential withdrawn, aloofness, or pessimistic scepticism. On the contrary,

> The 'man of the world's' scepticism… is at its finest in those generous characters who show it with regard to fortune, what she gives and what she withdraws and with regard to particular misdemeanours and shortcomings of their friends, which are not allowed seriously to alter the general impression of their character in the long run. Such people can laugh at fate, are flexible, sympathize with the free flow of things, believe ever in the good, but are willing that it should shift its form. They do not close their hand on their possessions. When they profess a willingness that certain persons should be free they mean it not as most of us do with a mental reservation, as that the freedom should be well employed and other similar humbug but in all sincerity, and calling for no guarantee against abuse which, when it happens, they accept without complaint or embitterment as part of the chances of the game. They let their bird fly with no string tied to its leg.[15]

Without doubt, Santayana would have smiled again before this type of declaration, as, from the cynic point of view —the perspective of an alleged external observer— there are always invisible strings that have tied free soul's legs. In other words: even if James acknowledged some frames of acceptance, Santayana would distinguish between the cynic tempers who, unable to reach grapes, decide they were sour, and the sympathetic characters who hope that the very nature of facts forces to turn calamities and evils into benefits and goods, as if the very conflicts in one level of reality moved them to another where they can be redeemed.

It is not surprising, in consequence, that when Santayana adopted his most distant poses, James expressed his most acrimonious critique about Santayana, notwithstanding all the admiration he felt for him. Santayana —he said— is "the oddest spectator of life —seems as if he took no active interest in anything".[16] Or as he also stated in a letter to Eliot:

> Santayana is… a spectator rather than an actor by temperament, but apart from that element of weakness, a man (as I see him) of thoroughly wholesome mental atmosphere. He is both a 'gentleman' and a 'scholar' in the real sense of the words, an exquisite writer and a finished speaker… with his style, his subtlety of perception, and his cool-blooded truthfulness.[17]

Of course, for a cynic mind as Santayana, such a portrait might have been enjoyed just as the highest of the praises as he could add a cynic qualification to James's own assessment: he certainly was an odd spectator, but just because he played the role of a *guest* actor in the American Scene.[18] Reversing ironically James's own words against him, he could supply an ironic counter-portrait: James was an amateur actor rather than a trained actor, but apart from that element of ingenuity, he was a man of thoroughly wholesome spiritual atmosphere. James was both a genteel man, and a dear professor in the real sense of the words, a cultivated writer and a picturesque speaker, with his lack of style, his impulsiveness of perception, and his boil-blooded truthfulness.[19]

CYNICAL AND SYMPATHETIC

In this section I would like to examine the distinction that James himself made in the first chapter of *A Pluralist Universe* between a *cynical* and a *sympathetic* type of thinking. Whether a temperament (the cynic or the sympathetic), comes from a specific type of philosophical view or it is the other way around —an entire philosophy rationalizes or sublimates a temperamental attitude (cynical or sympathetic), is not at stake now.[20] Rather, I will emphasize here the relation of James's broad contrast between the cynic and sympathetic types with diverse types of humour.

Many of James's typologies are well known. In *Pragmatism* he distinguished between "tender-minded" and "tough-minded", probably the most popular of his classifications. In *Varieties* he also pointed out not only the difference between the "healthy-mindedness" and

the "sick-soul", but also the provocative opposition between what he called the "psychopathic temperament" and the "philistine type".[21] Moreover, far from acting as a happy and naive mediator between extremes, James often emphasized the difficulties of reconciliation and the permanent conflicts not only between generic types of persons, but also between contrary impulses fighting within the same person. Being true that he acted before his audience as a mediator and go-between type of intellectual, it is also true that he emphasized many times the irreconcilable and everlasting *clash* between many types.[22]

In some previous works, of course we can find classifications between types of thinking that could have some analogy with the contrast between cynic and sympathetic temper. In "The Dilemma of Determinism", for example, James seemed to associate a *cynic* temperament with French naturalism. Renan and Zola, he explained, shared with other types of thinking some fatalist presuppositions which induced ethic indifference. Both Renan and Zola,

> are athirst for the facts of the life, and both think the facts of human sensibility to be of all facts the most worthy of attention… the one ignores the distinction of good and evil, the other plays the coquette between the craven unmanliness […] and a butterfly optimism. But under the pages of both there sounds incessantly the hoarse bass of *vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*, which the reader may hear, whenever he will, between the lines.[23]

Two main facts of human sensibility —James remarks— are plainly ignored by this type of thinking: satiety and horror, the feeling that one takes no more pleasure from facts of life, and the terror at the world's vast meaningless grinding. There is "no possible *theoretic* escape" from these states of mind, no matter how cool devices the naturalist spirit can design…

> whether, like Renan, life is looked upon in a refined way, as a romance of the spirit; or whether, like the friends of M. Zola, we pique ourselves on our 'scientific' and 'analytic' character, and prefer to be cynical, and reduce the world to a 'roman experimental' on an infinite scale", in either case the world can appear to us potentially as what the same Carlyle once called it, a vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha and mill of death.[24]

The fact that James prefers to invoke the melodramatic excesses of Carlyle before giving credibility to French naturalism is quite significant, but to discuss it would lead us too far. More instructive for our purposes is that he considers as the opposite temperament to this sort of cynicism a practical mood that incorporates a delicate sensibility and a willingness to bring about some external good. The essence of this philosophy of external conduct, James adds, is not any intellectual evasion, but acceptance of things and "recognition of limits, foreign an opaque to our understanding." This sort of acceptance means that the individual can feel in peace after bringing some external good, however small or partial, since "in the view of this philosophy the universe belongs to a plurality of semi-independent forces, each one of which may help or hinder, and be helped or hindered by the operations of the rest."[25] In other words: a sympathetic temperament aware of limits, but resolute, is a temperament akin to a pluralist universe.

Anyway, regardless of the force of those remarks from "The Dilemma of Determinism", I think that what James said on the rivalry and conflict of selves in *Principles* is much more important in connection with the typology he eventually presented in *A Pluralist Universe*. The curious fact is that in *Principles* James opposed the sympathetic temper not with the cynic one, but with an existential attitude inspired by ancient stoic doctrines.

> The Stoic receipt for contentment was to dispossess yourself in advance of all that was out of your own power, —then fortune's shocks might rain down unfelt. Epictetus exhorts us, by thus narrowing and at the same time solidifying our Self to make it invulnerable[26] […]. This Stoic fashion, though efficacious and heroic enough in its place and time, is, it must be confessed, only possible as an habitual mood of the soul to narrow and unsympathetic characters. It proceeds altogether by exclusion. If I am a Stoic, the goods I cannot appropriate cease to be *my* goods, and the temptation lies very near to deny that they are goods at all. We find this mode of protecting the Self by exclusion and denial very common among people who are in other respects not Stoics. All narrow people *intrench* their Me, they *retract* it, —from the region of what they cannot securely possess. People who don't resemble them, or who treat them with indifference, people over whom they gain no influence, are people on whose existence, however meritorious it may intrinsically be,

they look with chill negation, if not with positive hate. Who will not be mine I will exclude from existence altogether; that is, as far as I can make it so, such people shall be as if they were not.[27] Thus may a certain absoluteness and definiteness in the outline of my Me console me for the smallness of its content.

Sympathetic people, on the contrary, proceed by the entirely opposite way of expansion and inclusion. The outline of their self often gets uncertain enough, but for this the spread of its content more than atones. *Nihil humani a me alienum*. Let them despise this little person of mine, and treat me like a dog, I shall not negate *them* so long as I have a soul in my body. They are realities as much as I am. What positive good is in them shall be mine too, etc., etc. The magnanimity of these expansive natures is often touching indeed. Such persons can feel a sort of delicate rapture in thinking that, however sick, ill-favored, mean-conditioned, and generally forsaken they may be, they yet are integral parts of the whole of this brave world, have a fellow's share in the strength of the dray-horses, the happiness of the young people, the wisdom of the wise ones, and are not altogether without part or lot in the good fortunes of the Vanderbilts and the Hohenzollerns themselves. Thus either by negating or by embracing, the Ego may seek to establish itself in reality.[28]

I would propose that the main issue here is not the explicit mention of antique stoic philosophy, or the rigour and exactitude with which James distinguishes between different versions or phases of it[29], but the broad description that he provided of the "rivalry of different selves" (in his own terms), or in other terms, the psychological survey of the conflict between two main economies of self-regard; two primary modes of connecting the self and the world, the former being characterized by exclusion and reduction and the latter by inclusiveness and extension.[30]

Let me now consider explicitly and with more detail the main distinction that I referred to, the one that James established in the first chapter from *A Pluralistic Universe* ("The Types of Philosophic Thinking"). He says there:

If we take the whole history of philosophy the systems reduce themselves to a few main types which, under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelops them, are just so many visions, modes of feeling the

whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience, and on the whole *preferred* —there is no other truthful word— as one's best working attitude. Cynical characters take one general attitude, sympathetic characters another […] Perhaps the most interesting opposition is that which results from the clash between […] the sympathetic and the cynical temper.[31]

According to this survey of existential drives, indeed, materialistic and spiritualistic philosophies would be the rival elaborations that result from the clash between cynic and sympathetic tempers. The spiritualistic philosophy, at once, would subdivide into two species, a more intimate and a less intimate one. The less intimate would be dualistic (theism), but the more intimate would break into two subspecies, the one being monistic (absolute idealism), the other pluralistic (James's own option: radical pluralism).[32] It is clear that in *A Pluralistic Universe* James's aim was to vindicate his own philosophy against a rival spiritualistic philosophy (absolute idealism), but it would be interesting to reconsider how he describes the sources from which the main division between the materialistic and spiritualist philosophies spring off.

The former [defines] the world so as to leave man's soul upon it as a soil of outside passenger or alien, while the latter insists that the intimate and human must surround and underlie the brutal.[33]

[…] The inner life of things must be substantially akin anyhow to the tenderer parts of man's nature in any spiritualistic philosophy. The word "intimacy" probably covers the essential difference. Materialism holds the foreign in things to be more primary and lasting, it sends us to a lonely corner with our intimacy. The brutal aspects overlap and outwear; refinement has the feebler and more ephemeral hold on reality.[34]

James admits that the contrast between the materialist and the spiritualist philosophies could "cut across by other sort of divisions, drawn from other points of view than that of foreignness and intimacy"[35] but it is clear that seeing the entire world as something distant or seeing it as something near, makes one of the most remarkable differences between these two types. Both tempers are compelled to design some order or unified vision, and the conflict is

open, since "the intimacy and the foreignness cannot be written down as simply coexisting".[36] Obviously James vindicates one more time the pre-eminence of sympathetic temper:

> The majority of men are sympathetic. Comparatively few are cynics because they like cynicism [...]. It is normal, I say, to be sympathetic in the sense in which I use the term. Not to demand intimate relations with the universe, and not to wish them satisfactory, should be accounted signs of something wrong.[37]

This way of seeing things is problematic, since this time James suggests that establishing intimate relations with the universe is a sort of natural pro-attitude, an elemental mode of being-in-the world, and that the blockade of this openness would be the cause rather that the effect of a cynic view of life. However he is not saying that this spontaneous way of seeing the world qualifies it as a paradise. On the contrary, sympathetic temper is a reasonable reaction toward a perilous, multifarious and chaotic world.[38] But independently of this, in what concrete terms could we interpret the idea of an intimate satisfactory relation with the universe? How is the massive contrast between two ways of being in the world actually experienced in real life? In *A Pluralist Universe*, James associates with each type different attitudes towards history[39], but I would say that the most striking translation of the general contrast is in terms of social consequences

> From a pragmatic point of view the difference between living against a background of foreignness and one of intimacy means the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust. One might call it a social difference, for after all, the common *socius* of us all is the great universe whose children we are.[40]

Interpreted in this way, the metaphysical dimension of cynicism and sympathy acquire a much more practical meaning.[41] To some extent, both existential modes could be taken as habits and emotional dispositions developed in a social medium.[42] We could think that both drives could oscillate inside some individuals, while in other cases one of them could dominate hierarchically their personalities. In the case of the cynical —James says— "we must be suspicious of this *socius*, cautious, tense, on guard". But in the case of the

sympathetic "we may give way, embrace, and keep no ultimate fear."[43] Sympathetic tempers trust —James affirms — and cynic tempers tend to be cautious. Sympathetic moods are more extroverted, cynics much more introverted, if we want to use a more psychological term. The former are akin to hopeful engagement, the latter prone to sceptical retirement. In each case, a whole economy of the self in its exchange with other selves is at play too.

We could even go further and attribute more social habits to each temperament. Cynics can be elegant, edifying and polite in public, although they privately despise the common desires and ends. A narcissistic impulse pressures them to save their authentic self from the crowd. In any case, even when they express their discontent, they will never act like irreverent questioners or impertinent jesters. They can practice a sweet cruelty, but never scandalously; they can display, at the same time, sophisticated sociability and brilliant witticism, good etiquette and exquisite criticism. Irony requires some imposture and some composure at once, a delicate art by which individuals can express criticism of norms at the same time that they preserve themselves from marginalization. They can be judged as elitist or as aristocratic. But in this case, they can vindicate disenchantment and moderation as a civilizing virtue. They don't see social life as an experience or a revelation, but rather as a practical compromise.

From this cynic perspective, to be sure, sympathetic tempers would seem too ingenuous, since they depend too much on common hopes. They are too emotional and sentimental, since they think that being in tune with their fellows is the checkpoint of sociability. Enthusiasm is for them a virtue, notwithstanding it can sometimes degenerate into zeal. They throw themselves into frank and open fellowship, and their criticism has more of a sincere *exhortation* than of an objective and sharp *explanation*. Their manners can result comic because of their imprudence, if not impertinence, and even if their insights cannot operate as a durable source of knowledge, at least provide a chance for an enhanced perception of human relations.

We could suggest more comparisons, but there is an important issue that should be made clear. From James's point of view, openness and trust are *not* manifestations of a naïve attitude. A world lived as a background of intimacy is still an opaque and ultimately unfathomable world. Sympathetic tempers respect too much the world to believe that human beings can carry it under their scope. Worth noting is that, for James, the acknowledgment of these limits is analogous to the tolerance and respect they show to their fellows. The relation of human beings with the cosmos is analogous to their relation with the *socius*. They trust in

achieving satisfactory relations, but "the universe, like one's neighbour, is never wholly disclosed to outward view, and the last word must be consent that the *other* should be *itself*. In metaphysics, as in human relations, the chief source of illumination is sympathy."[44] In consequence, sympathetic minds take this universe as a hospitable realm not because they comprehend it, but even in spite of their own ignorance. Feeling at home in this world is not the same as feeling that one actually inhabits an always approachable and explicable world.[45] Similarly, they don't trust because they know how to penetrate their neighbour's lives, or because they hope to include all desires and hopes of individuals into an all-inclusive community. In conclusion: Foreignness is not totally absent from a sympathetic view of the world, only that, unlike a cynic view, it is understood without adopting the delusion of an external spectator.

IRONY AND COMICALNESS

I think that the contrast between an ironic temper and a comic temper could be particularly useful to understand James's vindication of the sympathetic perspective. But you could certainly ask: Why two types of humour could help us better appreciate the opposition between the two ways of seeing the world that James distinguished in *A Pluralist Universe*?

The first reason is that humour can express in an abridged form a sort of existential mood. We can find cases of a more elaborated humour that would represent theatrically the triumph of an indifferent self over any calamity, including death. And we could also find examples of a more involuntary humour, expression of an affectionate attitude towards life and death. Diverse types of humour, indeed, administrate in different degrees the acceptance of evil, mostly dwarfing it, but in honour of very different ends.

The second reason is that humour is *social* by definition. If you want to produce laughter you have necessarily to presuppose a social background, a lot of implicit norms, and a considerable amount of common beliefs. Humour cannot exist except in a social medium. Humour, indeed, is a double-edge sword of social action: it can work as an agency of solidarity, but also as an instrument of exclusion, as a gesture of affection, and as a tool for cruelty at the same time. We laugh together making a joke of ourselves because by doing this we soften our own inflexibility, demanding a more sensitive community. But we can also laugh together when we desire to humiliate other individuals, trying to exclude them from our community. Humour always expresses a form of sociability, whether it be by affirmation or by negation, by extension or by reduction.

The question is: since James marked the difference between cynic tempers and sympathetic tempers as a difference connected with social life, could we consider varieties of humour if not as an epitome at least as an abridged expression of each type of temperaments? There could be, in addition, a more procedural reason to do this.

As it is known, James remarked in *Varieties* that hallucinations, illusions, morbid impulses, imperative conditions, fixes ideas or obsessions, borderland madness, crankiness, loss of mental balance, and many other insane conditions offer some advantage as objects of study for psychology, since they isolate "special factors of life and enable us to inspect them unmasked by the more usual surroundings."[46] Abnormal conditions —he also remarked— enable us to understand normal faculties. For example, hallucinations give the key to the comprehension of normal sensation; imperative impulses help us to understand the psychology of normal will; obsessions and delusions give the same service for the faculty of belief; crankiness represents an extreme case of emotional susceptibility, since cranky persons pass immediately into belief and action, and when they get a new idea they have no rest till they proclaims it, or in some way 'work it off'. A common person deliberates too much about a vexed question while a cranky mind looks resolutely for the action in need. Even the psychopathic temperaments —he adds— would contain "the emotionality which is the *sine qua non* of moral perception, and the intensity and tendency of emphasis which are the essence of practical moral vigor."[47]

Following James's own logic, could we also take types of humour as an abnormal expression of normal social attitudes which could help us understand them? To some extent, the fact that the joker is often taken as mad indicates that there is some relation between humour and abnormal conditions, and that a good way to comprehend the ruling social habits is to observe seriously the unruly ones. Some other types of humour, however, could seem less abnormal, since they are less eccentric and provocative, although they express too veiled an attitude towards norms and models of sociability. In consequence, we could presume that varieties of comic behaviours could illuminate under diverse lights the logic of serious actions—jokes partially revealing the limits and possibilities of social action.

Here we could invoke too numerous theories of humour (elaborated by philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists[48]), but I will pinpoint a small book written by one of James's best friends: Henri Bergson's *The Laughter*.[49] In this work, Bergson stated that laughing is an essentially human experience, and that human life itself requires laughing as one of its conditions. More exactly, laughing is an essentially *social* act, and it helps us to

understand how much our sense of community depends on the equilibrium between diverse forces.[50] Bergson is particularly eloquent in this point: social life requires from social actors both *attention* and *sensitiveness*, a constant *alert* that helps to frame appropriately the situations and the reactions to them, together with an *elasticity* that enable them to adapt themselves in consequence. "Tension and elasticity are two forces, mutually complementary, which life brings into play." Communal life, in fact, would require avoiding two danger tendencies: easy automatism of acquired habits, and reduction of interactions between individuals to the simple conditions of their mutual adjustment or reciprocal adaptation. Laughter —Bergson remarks— would just operate as a corrective gesture, demanding less automatism and inertial action, but restraining at the same time absolute eccentricity or radical separatism. In other words, laughter would be a sort of warning sign, a reminder of the need to balance centripetal and centrifugal social impulses.

Different types of laughing, indeed, can be produced and enjoyed. The smooth smile, for example, has a more intellectual and rhetorical nature, as expression of a detached type of reflection and even of a veiled attitude of disapproval. The loud laugh, on the contrary, has a more practical and corporal nature and can be provoked by close examination of facts and by odd reactions. Bergson, indeed, marks the difference in a very interesting way

> Sometimes we state what ought to be done, and pretend to believe that this is just what is actually being done; then we have irony. Sometimes, on the contrary, we describe with scrupulous minuteness what is being done, and pretend to believe that this is just what ought to be done; such is often the method of Humour. Humour, thus denned, is the counterpart of irony. Both are forms of satire, but irony is oratorical in its nature, whilst humour partakes of the scientific. Irony is emphasised the higher we allow ourselves to be uplifted by the idea of the good that ought to be: thus irony may grow so hot within us that it becomes a kind of high-pressure eloquence. On the other hand, humour is the more emphasized the deeper we go down into an evil that actually is, in order to set down its details in the most cold-blooded indifference […] humour delights in concrete terms, technical details, and definite facts. If our analysis is correct, this is not an accidental trait of humour, it is its very essence. A humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist, something like an anatomist who practises dissections with the sole object of filling us with disgust; so that

humour, in the restricted sense in which we are here regarding the word, is really a transposition from the moral to the scientific.[51]

Bergson's analysis is extremely useful for our purposes, not only because of his demarcation between a more oratorical style of humour and a sort of pseudo-scientific one, the former more linguistic, the later more experiential, but also because he decisively marks the contrast between irony and humour in terms of how one deals with the gap between *the real* and *the ideal*, between *what is*, and *what ought to be.*

We could illustrate this contraposition by considering different reactions facing contingencies, adverse situations, and evils. As Bergson says, the ironist states what ought to be done, and pretends to believe that this is just what is actually being done. A fact or situation is really disturbing but the ironist describes it as if it would not be, expressing indifference before it, or even as if it would be the contrary, a positive one.[52] Repetition of a disturbance, for example, is a comic device, that can conclude with an ironic end if the sufferer expresses an unexpected indifference when the spectator would expect desperation.[53] Ironic minds, indeed, can face catastrophes as mere setbacks, and tragedies as insignificant calamities, before admitting their weakness. They tend, in consequence, to compensate resignation with the pose of a triumph.

In social and moral terms, the evaluative stance would be similar. Ironic characters are moralists, as Bergson says, but they evaluate actions, values, ways of being, or forms of life, expressing their approvals or disapprovals in the form of an oblique or indirect judgment.[54] Strictly, irony is not mere courtesy or politeness, it is veiled criticism of injustices, faults and vices, expressed in the prose and pose of an unmoved witness. If we would take Bergson's scheme far, we could also attribute to ironic character a specific mode of sociability, since they tend to act before otherness *as if* it were sameness. No matter how odd, bizarre, or non-ordinary a conduct or situation can be, the ironic temper will pretend to believe that this is just the case.[55] In many cases, the anomalous will be steadily subsumed into the accustomed, and the abnormal *as if* were normal. Or in other terms: ironic tempers prefer abstract assimilation of the odd than intimate acquaintance with it. They accept the other, and admit that it can have its place, but not that themselves need to adopt the place of the other. An important consequence of this attitude is the model of sociability that it inspires: apparently, it is a civilized one, since "others" are not humiliated. A society of ironical citizens could tolerate differences, indeed, though this tolerance would not imply that these differences were

recognized as such differences. Respect is not the same than sympathy, after all, and it can even be a more practicable virtue.

Let me come back now to the counterpart of irony, and develop it in the same line of Bergson's description. Humoristic tempers, he remarked, can describe with scrupulous minuteness what is being done, and pretend to believe that this is just what ought to be done. A fact or situation is really disturbing but the humorist *acts* as if the situation would consequently demand further responsiveness. Repetition of a trouble or a disaster, again, can trigger a comic situation, but this time the iteration of calamity does not conclude with distance and reservation, but with an unexpected increase of answerability, and even willingness to reconciliation. Ironic minds, we have said, tend to compensate fatal fate with the pose of a triumph, but humorists act as if evils were repairable and forgivable.[56]

To some extent, comic tempers also adopt a pose of indifference and immunity before fatality, and sometimes they seem to remain triumphant after they have been cruelly vanquished. However, this sort of indifference and victory are not like the ironical ones, since their source is engagement and not distance, and its ultimate motive is not the safeguarding of the self, but rather the redemption of the situation. Comic selves, indeed, can be disjointed and deconstructed at the same time that the situation in which they become involved. Unlike a tragic hero, a comic character tends to dwarf situations, instead of magnifying it, but unlike an ironic comedian, they engage in the situation without reservation, as if they ignore both the gravity of the situation and their own limitations. In this sense, the humorist could be seen as the counterpart of a tragic hero.[57] On the one hand, they deflate the tragic situation, but on the other hand, they still take it with pathos outside the cynical view.

Whereas the ironist cynically tries to feel detached from facts, comic tempers become too absorbed by facts, trying to cope with them as they go along, in their pure —although tough— logic. Things should be better (as the ironist reminds), but being as they *are*, it is better to be coherent with them (the comic character tells us). Consistency is associated with the faculty of Reason, of course, but humorists could be seen as absolutely consistent with the sort of reality that they expose, and it is probably this sense of obligation what minimizes their excesses. Above all, comic humour involves the acceptance that human beings are always exceeded by the very facts. And this is the reason why ironists, in spite of their self-derisiveness, don't really laugh at themselves. Comic tempers, on the contrary, can laugh at themselves, since an essential ingredient of what they reveal is their own inherent insignificance. As Chesterton observed, comic humour always implies a confession of the disparity between the human dignity and the permanent possibility of indignity. Ironic wit, on

the contrary, stands for the indirect triumph of reason and of abstract justice that would denounce contradictions from an ideal point of view (a simulated elevated outside). Since ironic wit pretends to observe the scenes of human life as an independent and indifferent court, it would be equivalent to the divine virtue of justice —Chesterton added—, whilst the comical "is the equivalent to the human virtue of humility that to some extent, would be even more divine since, by the moment, captures much better the sense of mysteries."[58]

This humility, as I have suggested before, must not be mistaken with compliance or inactivity. Comic humour is grounded and inspires a stout sense of determination and trusting. Sometimes situations resolve in an equivocal but expedient composition; sometimes they remain precarious, perilous, uncertain and unresolved. But notwithstanding adversities and contingencies, comic tempers tend to feel reasonably hopeful. The solutions that they eventually manage, indeed, are fruit both of their smart ideas and of good changes in fortune, consequences of decisiveness and of good luck, of cleverness and coincidences, of resolution and change at one. Their relative successes will never mean the conquest of a powerful will, and even less the glory of a sovereign self. The small triumphs of comic tempers over the reverses of natural powers, setback of objects and hostility of human beings are in many situation consequences of almost acrobatic powers. However, unlike what happens with performances in the Circus, their skilful solutions are always product of chance. Chances defeat destiny, and the same circumstances that seem to be headed for disaster, miraculously transform themselves into a "salvation". Comic characters are quite ingenious and valiant, but it is the fortuitous combination of events, many of them incoherent, what eventually leads to a sort of "happy end". Humility, then, is the main trait of the comic character, even when seems to triumph as a hero.

Finally, and to conclude this section, let us consider the social dimension of humour in contraposition to irony.[59] We said that ironists react to the uncommon by assimilating it. Sometimes this attitude can be civilized, since it can avoid dramatic situations, and reduce anxiety. However, readapting a Jamesian *dictum* it could be said that avoiding humiliation is not the same as promoting recognition. Comic tempers, indeed, try to inquiry more about otherness and go deep into foreignness. They look for positive good, and not only for avoidance of evil. This effusive openness is problematic since, as we have also said, perception powers and imagination have limits, and in order to interact with something new or surprising we practically need to assimilate it in some degree. In spite of this, sympathetic characters adopt the pose of an intimate acquaintance, even though their own questions and

attitudes can reveal comically the confines of their own perspective. They try, at least, to be in the place of the other, and surrender their standards in favour of others. Ironists never do that, since, obviously, this sort of "conversion" could result in itself ridiculous and comic. Moreover, and this is a very important point, even when comic tempers meet the most common of things, the most familiar of beings or the more ordinary of the situations, they can turn them into something uncommon. Ironists point out how the world could look like if it weren't as it actually is. Comic characters see the world in such a way that it stops being what appeared to be. They seem to have the gift to perceive the usual as unusual, or in other words: they can see the world as *jamais vue*, or the ever-seen as never-seen.[60] Again, in Chesterton's words,

> it is one thing to describe an interview with a gorgon or a griffin, a creature who does not exist. It is another thing to discover that the rhinoceros does exist and then take pleasure in the fact that he looks as if he didn't. One searches for truth, but it may be that one pursues instinctively the more extraordinary truths.[61]

Humour, then, expresses a certain love for the ordinary, that is to say, for the ordinary as extra-ordinary and in its irreducible otherness. Comic tempers do not seek absurdity as an end by itself (although occasionally it can actually be carried by it), neither feel satisfied with easy surprise. What comic humour likes to reveal is not only the meaningless of the meaningful. It pursues to reveal the real as unreal, in order to acquire a higher degree of reality. But comic humour doesn't destroy the links with common reason. On the contrary, it necessarily presupposes quite an amount of literal meaning in order to reveal its always equivocal and ambiguous nature (in effect, a behaviour can provoke laughter because it is *too deviant*, but also because it is *too literal*. Common sense requires to *know-how* following norms and acquaintance with a whole way of behaviour).[62] Anyway, humour, in contraposition to irony, represents human beings as permanent *amateurs*, never as *connoisseurs*. Irony is an adult pleasure; while comic humour seems more childish (Freud talked extensively about this). As we have also said, ironic wit aspires to a tender-minded type of witticism, but comical jokes and situations inspire a much tough-minded type of criticism. The ironic wit emphasizes the gap between what it is and what ought to be, but to some extent it helps individuals to be more respected as brilliant and refined actors. Comic humour, in turn, also makes us conscious of gaps, but it does it by means of astonishment,

perplexity and amazement, it deflates our own performances as alleged good actors and returns us to the condition of beginners (children, outsiders, aliens, foreign, idiots).

This sort of "awakenings" can certainly reveal the uncanny hidden in the familiar, and provoke a strong feeling of estrangement and absurdity, but it can also encourage a renewed sense of sympathy. The awareness of the outrageous can paralyse us, and separate us from social life, but the comic re-elaboration can also renew our sense of sociability, and our trust and hope. Thanks to humour we can feel again "at home" but in an altered and more conscious way, since from that moment we know that homeless and wandering is actually a part of the human condition. Humour, in consequence, demarcates our illusions, but it does not destroy them; moreover, to some extent it supplies an indirect device to keep them alive. It deprives us from our familiarity with the world, but in spite of this (or rather because of this) it still invites us to establish intimacies and friendly bonds with it.

In conclusion: Bergson was right when he observed that some humorists can go *too* deep into facts, sometimes up to the point of producing distaste or revulsion, since they don't care about etiquette, decorum and good manner as much as ironists do. They are not also as elusive and allusive as cynic observers or well-trained conversationalists. They can result straight rather than eloquent, and become indiscrete and rough; even verge on vulgarity and coarseness, but only because of their impulsive curiosity and the closeness of their look. They are like an anatomist —as Bergson says— but they don't necessarily dissect facts with the sole object of filling us with disgust. This is an extreme case, where grotesque humour is used as a means of provocation or attack. In many cases, however, it operates as a mark to enlarge perception of the ordinary, intimating ways by which human intercourse could be improved. To be true, comical minds emulate or even parody the closeness of a clinical eye, but they do it with the purpose of illuminating (by their *actions*, more than by their *remarks*) if not the whole social life, at least, fragments or spheres of it. The relevant fact about humour, in definitive, is not the mere amplification of the awareness of evil, but rather the enlargement of sensitiveness. A clinical view, indeed, can be realistic and charitable at once. And if it is true that humour occasionally hurts, it ultimately looks for a cure.

FAITH AND HUMOUR

In the previous sections I have tried to reconstruct James's notion of sympathy according to some theories on humour. However, some questions could still be in the air.

Since in *A Pluralistic Universe* James associated the sympathetic temperament with a *spiritual* type temperament, someone might object that for James the archetype of such temperament would ultimately be a *religious* type. This is true, but I would suggest that we can also find reasons to reverse the terms, giving priority to the *social* dimension of the sympathetic character. To some extent, James also saw religious-like types only as one expression of certain expansive and sympathetic impulses than could acquire some other mundane expressions.[63] James also admitted, for instance, that there are people that don't have religious or mystic experiences, but that live the social life and particularly the recognition of other human beings as a radical experience. [64] But if, as I have suggested, comic humour might reveal in a exaggerated way the hidden dimension of this radical experience, what sort of analogy is there between laughter and faith? Is comic humour, after all, a mundane equivalent of religious experience?

Well, we have seen that humour can work as an agency of solidarity, and a condensed form of practical knowledge which can make more flexible social intercourse. But of course, in some extreme cases, humour can operate like an astonishing shock, interruption or exception. It can also represent an offensive breaking of norms, rules and taboos, and a dangerous questioning of authorities. Maybe in these cases, one could remark, the comic insights and actions could be compared with mystic revelations. Some jokers, certainly, seem to have a special access to other reality than that mediated and organized by fixed structures, accustomed concepts and habituated feelings. They can have eccentric perceptions of experiences and habits. They can say and do certain things in a way that does not confer them absolute immunity but it grants them a certain degree of social exemption. However, there are some important differences: the comic perceptions are never considered a divine gift, as the religious or mystical ones could be. The ability of comic jokers to partially make explicit the implicit awards them with a temporary special status, but it never provides them with a supernatural power. They make visible the invisible, but their insights could be considered a revelation only in a derivative sense, since they don't really reveal some truer world beyond this world. They only reveal what we always had before the eyes.

As Mary Douglas remarked, access to another level of social reality could make us think of the joker as a minor-mystic:

> Though only by a mundane and border-line type, the joker is one of those
> people who pass beyond the bounds of reason and society and give glimpses of
> a truth which escapes trough the mesh of structured concepts. Naturally he is

only a humble, poor brother of the true mystic, for his insights are given by accident. They do not combine to form a whole new vision of life, but remain disorganised as a result of the technique which produces them. He is distinctly gimmicky. One would expect him to be the object of a hilarious mythology […] but hardly the focus of a religious cult… he is always a subordinate deity in a complex pantheon. The joker as god promises a wealth of new, unforeseeable kinds of interpretation. He exploits the symbol of creativity which is contained in a joke, for a joke implies that anything is possible.[65]

Douglas's remarks depend on a broader anthropological inquiry, but they are extremely instructive for our characterization of some types of humour. Sometimes, jokers can temporally break the social rules, other times they can interrupt the solemn rites. And they can release —as Douglas also says— the *pent-up* power of the imagination.[66] However, their insights are to some extent given by accident and they do not combine to form a whole vision, since they are too fragmentary and momentary. A joker embedded with a definite vision of a counter-life (of an alternative community) wouldn't be a real good joker.

This qualification of jokers as minor-mystics drives me to the final ideas that I would like to suggest. The main one is neither that some jokers could have been included by James in his *Varieties of Religious Experiences,* nor that he should have written a book titled, *The Varieties of Comic Experience*. [67] The question here is whether James would have taken humour as a human experience as deep as the religious experience, or if, on the contrary, he would have considered it as a second-range sort of human experience. Or even more: if he would have considered humour as a self-sufficient mode of being, or only as a previous phase of a real religious mode of being. In other words, even if the comic temper could be much more spiritual than the ironic one, couldn't it seem for James much less spiritual than a true religious faith, lived in its full intensity? Can humour, after all, posses the tone of existential authenticity?

To make clear this point would demand a more specific consideration of the religious-like side of James's personal mood, and secondly, of the general dialectic between the comic and the religious (as for example in Kierkegaard) or the incongruence between laughter and faith (as Reinhold Neibuhr posed). Since both topics exceed the scope of this paper, however, I will finish by pointing out some brief suggestions that, obviously, would require a further and deeper development:

1) With reference to James's own "religious" temper, one should not forget that as James himself sometimes expressed, his personal mysticism was often exaggerated, when in fact it was "rather a matter of fair play to let mystical ecstasy have its voice counted with the rest."[68] In spite of this, it is also true that James's gestures and poses (rather than any positive belief), could induce in others the impression of a religious-like character. Moreover, according to many interpreters, without any secular kind of "prayer" to sustain him, James himself could not have lived and acted.[69] Chappman's portrait of James, again, seems particularly relevant on this point:

> There was, in spite of his playfulness a deep sadness about James. You felt that he had just stepped out his sadness in order to meet you, and was to go back into it the moment you left him. It may be that sadness inheres in some kind of profoundly religious characters —in dedicated persons who have renounced all, and are constantly hoping, thinking, acting, and (in the typical case) praying for humanity. Lincoln was sad, Tolstoi was sad, and many sensitive people, who view the world as it is, and desire nothing for themselves except to become of use to others, and to become agents in the spread of truth and happiness, —such people are often sad.

It is striking, however, how Chappman compensated the funny side of James with the serious one, as much as he balanced the religious seriousness that can be gathered from this character with an irrepressible hilarious tendency, a strange combination of devotion and anathema, fervour and heresy.

> The great religious impulse at the back of all his work, and which pierces through at every point, never became expressed in conclusive literary form, or in dogmatic utterance. It never became formulated in his own mind in a stateable belief. And yet it controlled his whole life and mind, and accomplished a great work in the world. The spirit of a priest was in him, —in his books and in his private conversation. He was a sage, and a holy man; and everybody put off his shoes before him. And yet in spite of this, —in conjunction with this, he was a sportive, wayward […]. Gothic sort of spirit, who was apt, on meeting a friend, to burst into foolery, and whose wit was always three parts poetry. Indeed his humour was as penetrating as his seriousness. Both of this two sides

of James's nature —the side that made a direct religious appeal, and the side that made a veiled religious appeal, became rapidly intensified during his latter years.[70]

Contrary to what Santayana did when he described with irony James's sympathetic temper, Chappman is sensitive in capturing the ambivalence of a religious-like impulse that, to some extent, is not perceived as a *authentic* one, just because the hilarity that could surround even the more solemn of its manifestations. Probably what James sometimes associated with a religion of humanity, or with a social gospel, or with a civil creed, would require both attitudes: on the one hand, the fervour and sense of mysteries associated with religion, but on the other hand, a degree of irreverence thanks to which the human has always priority over any other authority.[71] Anyway, the fact that this combination of attitudes was considered (ironically, both to atheists or believers) as an ersatz of religion, or that according to this critics James's spirituality was to religion what a torch to a fire or what a shock to a vision, is something that would require much more analysis.

2) The second issue is complex. Some types of sympathetic humour, as we have seen, are reminiscent of religious-like attitudes. Comic humour marks the limits of hope, but at the same time it simulates that it is beyond those limits. Is then a comic character an inveterate pseudo-religious character, or on the contrary, it constitutes a preamble to a serious and authentic religious view? Is humour just a mere suspension of the contradictions that it reveals and than only faith can really assume? And if a believer has an intense sense of humour, that is, if someone possesses a comic sense faith, then what does religion eventually becomes reduced to?[72]

For the first, there are some remarkable difference between religious exceptional states, and the comic exceptions. According to James, religious experience provides something special to individuals: it transforms entirely their whole lives. No dimension of their life withdraws from it, meanwhile —we could say— humour insights only can alter lives of individuals too briefly and temporally. Humor, without doubt, can give neither sense to an entire life nor redeem human suffering, just because, as I have suggested, it restores too briefly and indirectly.[73] It can supply us some temporary lightness, but at the same time it reveals more intensely our burden and weight. It blows in us a sense of freedom, but it marks our own confines at once. Without doubt, as I said above, all this questions would force us to add, besides Santayana, new interlocutors to our debate, mainly Kierkegaard and Niebuhr.[74]

Here I will only reconsider some remarks by Niebuhr who expresses sympathy for James's philosophy of religion but at the same time, expressed serious reservation about James's optimism.[75]

On the one hand, Niebuhr's point of departure is relatively close to James's perspective, since he believes that Reason and philosophical systems cannot solve the essential contradictions of existence. But on the other hand, Niebuhr is distant of the ambivalences of James when he ultimately vindicates faith as the only stance that assumes fully those contradictions. Philosophy —he says— cannot give an adequate account of large areas of chaos in the world, and particularly of man's incongruent position in universe. A man who is too small, and yet feel too great, who is subject to vast forces and as insignificant as to defy any hope, but that, in spite of the limitations of time and space, is greedy on infinity, asserting sympathy with all existence.[76] This is the essential incongruence that neither materialist nor idealist systems of philosophy can solve as they usually pretend to do whether by reducing the spiritual dimension of man to the physical one, or by constructing a system of coherence in which mind is the very stuff of the universe. But if, all in all, philosophy cannot give account of the irrationality of a too multifarious world, and of the essential chasm that man is, where are the sources of wisdom?

> Insofar as the sense of humour is a recognition of incongruity, it is more profound than any philosophy which seeks to devour incongruity in reason […].
>
> In many respects, [it is] a more adequate resource for the incongruities of life than the sprit of philosophy. If we are able to laugh at the curious quirks of fortune in which the system if order and meaning which each life constructs within and around itself is invaded, we at least do not make the mistake of prematurely reducing the irrational to a nice system. Things "happen" to us […]. There is no question about the fact that there are systems of order in the world. But it is not so easy to discern a total system of order and meaning which will comprehend the various levels of existence in an orderly whole. To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom. Such laughter does not obscure or defy the dark irrationality. It merely yields to it without too much emotion and friction. A humorous acceptance of fate is really the expression of a high form of self-detachment. If men do not take themselves too seriously, if they have some sense of the precarious nature of the human enterprise, they prove that

they are looking at the whole drama of life not merely from the circumscribed point of their own interests but from some further and higher vantage point.[77]

Niebuhr's view in this passage could seem similar in many respects to the one that we exposed above, though it diverges substantially. From his perspective, humour is certainly an expression of freedom and sympathy, but in can only procure relieve. It reduces pain, and makes it tolerable. By laughter, an unpalatable situation can become more sufferable and certain sense of dignity be preserved. But laughter cannot ameliorate insufferable forms of evil. In fact when it tries to face serious evil, it turns to bitterness and derisive condemnation, in part because it senses its own impotence, and also because it is overwhelmed by the very incongruence that exposes.[78] There can be a deep pathos, indeed, mixed with humour — Neighbour admits—, but this is the very proof that laughter reaches its very limit.

As I have suggested above, humour is sympathetic and not cynic when it expresses some sort of indulgence or forgiveness, when it inspires forbearance and not only censure, mercy and not just judgment. However —Niebuhr adds— the contradiction between judgment and mercy can never be resolved when serious evil must be responsibly dealt with. When faced with radical evil, laughter only express derisiveness, and the forbearance which it contains tends to turn out judgment into harmful indulgence. It is not humour, but what Niebuhr's names a *parental judgment* the only agency that confronts with the necessity of "relating rigorous judgment creatively to goodness of mercy", since it is a relation that can be achieved "only as the parent himself suffers under the judgments with are exacted."[79]

In other terms, humour can express both justice and mercy, but only when neither is fully nor explicitly defined. Humour is self-indulgent, since it delays or postpones a parental stance. Only an echo of humour remains in the painful experience of vicarious suffering: the indication that judgment and mercy belong together, even though they seem to be contradictory. When put on its limits, humour inexorably shows itself to be not only a by-product of self-transcendence, but the "no-man's land" between faith and despair. Humour, then, could be admissible as a prelude or vestibule to faith, and laughter as the beginning of prayer; even laugh at oneself could be the anteroom of confession and contrition.[80] However, all things considered, humour *cannot* be admitted in the temple —Niebuhr sentenced—. "There is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple […]. Laughter must be heard in the outer courts of religion; and the echoes of it should resound in

the sanctuary. But there is no laughter in the holy of holies. There laughter is swallowed up in prayer, and humour is fulfilled by faith."[81]

The difficulties with this position is, first, that even if one would admit that humour is a succedaneum of self-transcendence, why should it be faith, rather than politics or arts, the only and true way to face essential contradictions? Why should faith be the only source of an authentic management of *justice* and *love*? Second: it is true that humour is not a radical self-transformative experience, and that its judgment seems guided by a pleasure principle (as if it can come to terms with a more affable side of the parental instance). But what if the religious appeal to parental judgment (the Judgment of God) would also have something to do with evasion? Maybe humour indicates Heaven's door, but what if faith itself would close some other doors?

Pace Niebuhr, humour can express a concern about essential contradictions. Humour is not a caricature of transcendence, but a dignifying of immanence. It connects individuals with something else, but this something else is ultimately society itself with a more human face. Humour is not only a consolatory and indulgent evasion: it also foreshadows a less cruel and more caring community. And the sense of joy that laugh at ourselves inspires is not, *pace* Niebuhr, a mere by-product of the joy that being forgiven by a parental authority exclusively provides. It is also a practice of humility and of exuberance, of fear and engagement at one. And to some extent, it demands an infinite demand, since it substitutes God for the others as the last tribunal. Humour can express a serious, and even a tragic consciousness of radical evil, but it stops before sitting at the anteroom of faith, since it can be also welcomed in the waiting rooms of politics, maybe in company of serious art, and some other spheres of human action. It is not a previous stage of a superior mode of existence, faith, but a positive dimension of human experimentation; it is not an immature phase of a responsible commitment, but a permanent coming and going between the backstage and the stage, the background and the foreground of an all too human scene.[82] Seeing that repetitive displacement as a mere sign of acquiescence and irreverence is to condemn humour to much less than what it can actually inspire: the perception that human demands cancel each other out and nearly come to produce a species of nihilism, but also that they also infinitely claim for their reconciliation.

BEYOND HUMOUR

After considering both James's religious ambivalence and the tension between faith and humour, I will finish with some hypothetical remarks.

As I observed, we don't know which sort of book James could have written on the varieties of humour. Probably, he would have included many more varieties than the ironic and the comic. And probably he would have contemplated examples representative of many different orders of human life. His method would not be to look for a definition of laughter, but rather to provide a miscellaneous album of examples. Anyway, I think, he could have contrasted the cynic and the sympathetic types of humour in terms of their moral and social dimension. And probably, even if he was closer to the sympathetic type, he would not exclude the ironist as an absolutely antisocial agent. He could contemplate contexts in which irony contributes positively to elevate human beings from banality, even if its ultimate end is self-affirmation of the self, rather than solidarity.[83]

Probably James could also admit that some types of humour are the counter image of some religious moods, but I think that he would associate them more with the sweet madness of mystics and saints than with the tragic sense of history that pervade some religious minds. Probably these same religious minds would see in humour the same problem they see in mystics: they show how to be released from angst and adopt a joyful nonchalance of life, but they also induce the illusion of a view outside the world, rather than an engagement in history.[84] Niebuhr also criticized the lack in James of a serious interest in collective tragic experiences, and in the meaning of history, and his excessive concern in giving meaning to individual lives.[85] I think, on the contrary, that James's perspective was expression of a deep social concern, and that he also tried to think through the problem of man's collective destiny. He did not live the tragedies of the twentieth Century, but he was not the representative of a too optimistic XXth century, —as Niebuhr believed. He was too conscious of the problem of evil, and of the aggressive impulses of human nature, and in spite of the alleged optimistic tone of his famous little essay, he knew very well that sublimation of depredatory impulses was not easy, and a moral equivalent of war is not a receipt but an infinite demand.[86] James was too serious to take evil as a joke.

James inspired a mode of sociability grounded in direct responsiveness rather than in responsibility. In a pluralistic social universe, one could say, righteousness and affection are combined in intimate piecemeal dealings between individuals. This mode of engagement does take as its checkpoint the acknowledgment of others in their specificity, but it does not

block a commitment with broader circles of relation or communal life. Without this mode of sensibility a society can be neither decent nor civilized, it can promote neither institutions nor citizens which don't infringe cruelty.

James's sense of humor, I hope to have shown, is as much relevant to understand this mode of sociability as the sad and "religious-like" side of his character and thought.[87] Without doubt, a good society requires much more than humour, but it can hope to conciliate justice and love without invoking any divine authority. After all, humour could be one of the doors to the chaotic corridor of social hope. For James, I also think, humour would also be connected with the difficult tension between freedom and acceptance. Probably he would take humour as a human key experience, not as a numinous transfiguration, but after all as a human prefiguration of a better life. I don't think that he would take some types of humour as the mere "no man's land" between cynicism and faith. He believed that it is not possible to give rational coherence to the many orders and spheres which are manifested in experience, but he did not think that the ultimate way to give coherence to a multifarious and incongruent world was religious faith. Humour also illuminates these incongruities, existential and social, but it can be another ally of moral imagination, or maybe a minor gender of poetic justice.

Anyway, James's own joyful side —I think— also probes that humor can also be an essential trait of a mode of existence realistically grounded in acceptance, but also animated by an illusion without relief.[88]

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NOTES

[1] *Orthodoxy*, 11. James refers to this dictum in *A Pluralistic Universe.*

[2] See on this Del Castillo, R. "Portrait of an Anxiety: Santayana on James" and "Estetas y profetas: equívocos de Santayana y James".

[3] "The Critic as Clown", *Against the Grain*, 149.

[4] *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. II. 686. Perry's quotations are from *The Letters of William James*, vol. I, 305, and from Henry James's *A Small Boy and Other,* 253). James's inclination to elaborated nonsense, of course, had to do with a fact that his brother Henry once remarked, namely: "the literal played in our education as small part as it perhaps ever played in any. And we wholesomely breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions". Also the fact that, as Perry observed, James grew up in a circle in which *heresies* were more gladly tolerated than orthodoxies it also contributed to develop James's openness to eccentricities.

[5] Stylistically speaking, James's prose was full of insights, examples, remarks, contrasts and abrupt turns. However, to take this sort of discontinuity as a lack of rigour would be to miss the core of the specific logic that he tried to develop.

[6] *A Stroll with William James*, 294-295.

[7] "William James", chapter II from *Memories and Milestones*, 21-22.

[8] Barzun*, op. cit.,* 276. Chappman's quotation in Barzun's passage comes also from his *Memories and Milestones,* 28. I will come back to this passage in the last section of this paper.

[9] Perry, *op. cit.,* vol. II, 701.

[10] "Williams James became the friend and helper of those groping, nervous, half-educated, spiritually disinherited, emotionally hungry individuals of which America is full. He became, at the same time, their spokesmen and representative before the learned world; and he made it a chief part of his vocation to recast what the learned world has to offer, so that as far as possible it might serve the needs and interests of these people…". "The Genteel Tradition" (*The Genteel Tradition. Nine Essays by George Santayana*), 55.

[11] "James was a romantic individualist, generously sympathising with cranks, weakling, and impostors; they were entitled to prove themselves right, if they could, and to blaze a new trail trough other people's gardens". "Apologia pro mente sua" (*The Philosophy of George Santayana*), 499, 583. "See also "Marginal Notes on Civilization" (*The Genteel Tradition*) 146.

[12] *Persons and Places*, 232. "He was really far from free, held back by old instincts, subject to old delusions, restless, spasmodic, self-interrupted: as if some impetuous bird kept flying aloft, but always stopped in mind-air, pulled back with a jerk by an invisible wire tethering him to a peg in the ground […]. The bird flew up bravely, but when my eye was able to follow his flight, I saw him flutter, and perch, as if he had lost his energy, on some casual, bough" (*Ibid*., 401, 405).

[13] "The Moral Background" (*The Genteel Tradition),* 81. It is difficult to know what Santayana himself understood by a cynic view, but this passage from his autobiography is particularly eloquent: "Every need or passion evokes dramatic sympathy; but the contrariety among the passions gives that sympathy pause and evokes reason. Now reason, confronted with the chaos and hell of all these conflicting passions and needs, often takes a Mephistophelian turn. *Reason can never be malignant, because it is a complex of sympathies, but it may sometimes be cynical, when it shows how many needs are needless and how many passions artificial*. I confess that I often like the sayings of Mephistopheles and Iago as much as I dislike the conduct of Othello and Faust. In those sayings there is light; but in the action of these heroes there is no light, only the blind will of protoplasm to stir and to move on, or the blind errors of a bull fighting a shadow. As to the action of Mephistopheles or Iago, there is properly none. There is no human motive for it, only the traditions of a puppet-show, with devils popping up to do the mischief. And this explains the inhumanity of these stage villains. They develop reasoning in the modern drama without acquiring the generic animal needs and passions requisite to evoke reason in the human mind. The rational man cannot cease to be an animal, with the bias of his race and its passions. Reason can serve to control and harmonise these human interests; it cannot take their place" (*Persons and Places*, 512, my italics).

[14] I paraphrase to E. Burke in "Acceptance and Rejection" (chapter I, "William James, Whitman, and Emerson"), *Attitudes Toward History,* 20.

[15] Quoted by Perry, *op. cit*., vol. II, 269. This remark could be compared with some earlier and more striking statements by a younger James. Perry transcribed a note where the young James said "The expansive, embracing tendency, the centripetal, defensive, forming two different modes of self-assertion: sympathy and self-sufficingness. (The two combine and give respect?)". Coming up next, he added: "To 'accept the universe', to protest against it, *voluntary* alternatives. So that in a given case of evil the mind seesaws between the effort to improve it away, and resignation. The second not being resorted to till the first has failed, it would seem either that the second were an insincere *pis aller*, or the first a superfluous vanity. The solution can only lie in taking neither absolutely, but in making the resignation only provisional (that is, voluntary, conditional), and the attempt to improve to have its worth in the action rather than the result. Thus resignation affords ground and leisure to advance to new philanthropic action. Resignation should not say, 'It is good,' 'a mild yoke,' and so forth, but 'I'm willing to stand it for the present'" (Perry, *op. cit,* vol. I, 301-302).

[16] *The Correspondence of William James,* vol. 11, 34.

[17] Quoted by Perry*, op. cit.,* vol. II, 270.

[18] Santayana, as it is well known, felt himself like an alien among many Americans although he loved Americans like Henry James. He met Henry James in London. As he said: "Those were his last years and I never saw him again. Nevertheless in that one interview he made me feel more at home, and better understood, than his brother William ever had done in the long years of our acquaintance. Henry was calm, he liked to see things as they are, and be free afterwards to imagine how they might have been. We talked about different countries as places of residence. He was of course subtle and bland, appreciative of all points of view, and amused at their limitations" (*Persons and Places*, 287). On Santayana's reference to Henry's *external* point of view see also "The Genteel Tradition", in *The Genteel Tradition,* 54). On James brothers and Santayana see also Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity. Henry James, William James and the Challenge of Modernity*.

[19] Reading Santayana's caricatures of James, one could imagine the ultimate motive of laughter. To Santayana's eyes James seemed comical because he tried to be too flexible, when in fact his powers were essentially limited. Santayana's judgments also tend to insinuate that James was more repetitive when he tried to be more spontaneous. See my "Portrait of an Anxiety".

[20] See on the mutual dependence between philosophies and characters James's own view in *A Pluralistic Universe*, 14, but also in the first chapter of *Pragmatism.*

[21] In *Varieties* James was a critic of the "philistine" type, but in the chapter on the Healthy-mindedness he also attacked the "clerico-academic-scientific type", the officially and conventionally "correct type", the deadly "respectable type, for which to ignore others is a besetting temptation".

This temptation, obviously, does not only imply the ignorance of the "religious type", but also of many others "eccentric" types of thinking.

[22] This tension is obvious in some passages of *Pragmatism* and *Varieties*. "The tough think of the tender as sentimentalists and soft heads. The tender feels the tough to be unrefined, callus, or brutal. Their mutual reaction is very much like that that take place when Bostonian tourists mingle with a population lie Cripple Creek. Each type believes the other to be inferior to itself; but disdain in one case is mingled with amusement, in the other it has a dash of fear" (*Pragmatism*, 11). The comments on the "superiority" of sick souls at the end of chapter VI of *Varieties*, would also denote an implicit clash with too optimistic and incredulous types, although never a glorification of the suffering and evil which sick soul have to face with.

[23] *The Will to Believe*, 173.

[24] *Ibid*em. James supported this attack against Zola not only on Carlyle, but also on Emerson.

[25] *Ibidem*.

[26] "I must die; well, but must I die groaning too? I will speak what appears to be right, and if the despot says, then I will put you to death, I will reply, 'When did I ever tell you that I was immortal? You will do your part and I mine; it is yours to kill and mine to die intrepid; yours to banish, mine to depart untroubled'' How do we act in a voyage? We choose the pilot, the sailors, the hour. Afterwards comes a storm. What have I to care for? My part is performed. This matter belongs to the pilot. But the ship is sinking; what then have I to do? That which alone I can do —submit to being drowned without fear, without clamor or accusing of God, but as one who knows that what is born must likewise die" Epictetus, translation by T. W. Higginson, 1866, 6, 10, 105 [quoted by James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 298, footnote 9].

[27] "The usual mode of lessening the shock of disappointment or disesteem is to contract, if possible, a low estimate of the persons that inflict it. This is our remedy for the unjust censures of party spirit, as well as of personal malignity". Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, 209 [quoted by James, *op. cit,* 298, footnote 10].

[28] *The Principles of Psychology,* vol. 1, 298.

[29] In fact, after criticizing Epictetus, he adds as a conclusion: "He who, with Marcus Aurelius, can truly say, 'O Universe, I wish all that thou wishest', has a self from which every trace of negativeness and obstructiveness has been removed —no wind can blow except to fill its sails" (*Principles of Psychology*, 299). Here, James seems to include Marco Aurelio among the ranks of the expansive and sympathetic party. On stoicism and James, see Emma Sutton, "Marcus Aurelius, William James and the 'Science of Religions'", (*William James Studies*, 2004, vol. 4, 70-89). From old Stoicism to Spencer, see Barzun, *op. cit*., 23.

[30] It wouldn't be difficult —I think— to see this opposition in relation to other typologies of James, and more specifically with some sub-types described in Lectures IV and V of *Varieties* ("The Religion of Healthy-mindedness"). However, since here I'm trying to see the religious tempers as subtypes of an expansive general type, rather than the inverse, I will not discuss these examples from *Varieties*. I think it is more interesting to know what James had in mind when he made use of the word "cynic". Remember that, as I have said, when in *Pragmatism* James talked of opposite types, mentalities, temperaments, he had still in mind the idea that a contrast between types is a clash of impulses, forces, or drives within the same individual. In *Pragmatism* he insisted that some individuals seem able to establish a *hierarchy* of impulses, becoming more representative of one type. However, some individuals *oscillate* between two types.

Consider now what he said in *Principles* after distinguishing the stoic and the sympathetic tempers: "A tolerably unanimous opinion ranges the different selves of which a man may be 'seized and possessed,' and the consequent different orders of his self-regard, in an *hierarchical scale, with the bodily Self at the bottom, the spiritual Self at the top, and the extracorporeal material selves and the various social selves between*. Our merely natural self-seeking would lead us to aggrandize all these selves; we give up deliberately only those among them which we find we cannot keep. Our unselfishness is thus apt to be a 'virtue of necessity'; and it is not without all show of reason that cynics quote the fable of the fox and the grapes in describing our progress therein. But this is the moral education of the race; and if we agree in the result that on the whole the selves we can keep are the intrinsically best, we need not complain of being led to the knowledge of their superior worth in such a tortuous way" (*Principles of Psychology,* vol. 1, 313.)

[31] *A Pluralistic Universe*, 14-15, 15-16. James observes that *both* characters presuppose certain powers of generalization and synthesis. They are not immediate or primitive reactions toward the world, but reconstructions of multifarious experience: "Cynical characters take one general attitude, sympathetic characters another. But no general attitude is possible towards the world as a whole, until the intellect has developed considerable generalizing power and learned to take pleasure in synthetic formulas […] the intellect awoke, with its passion for generalizing, simplifying, and subordinating, and then began those divergences of conception which all later experience seems rather to have deepened than to have effaced, because objective nature has contributed to both sides impartially, and has let the thinkers emphasize different parts of her, and pile up opposite imaginary supplements" (*Ibid*., 15).

[32] *Ibid*., 19, 26.

[33] *Ibid*., 16.

[34] *Ibid*., 19.

[35] *Ibidem*.

[36] *Ibid.,* 20.

[37] *Ibidem.* He adds: "most of our existing materialists are such because they think the evidence of facts impels them, or because they find the idealists they are in contact with too private and tender-minded; so, rather than join their company, they fly to the opposite extreme."

[38] James's vision of Nature in *A Pluralistic Universe* is too far from Romantic idealizations (see *Ibid.*, 15). However, from a materialist and cynic view, his description would still seem too dramatic and non-objective. It would ultimately be —the materialist would say— a *psychological* view of how human beings e*xperience* Nature.

[39] Two attitudes towards *history* are also associated with each type. "A world with no history repels our sympathy" —James says—. Cynics, on the contrary would say that when one understand that human beings neither help nor hinder the universe, and recognize that the world stands *outside* of history, one possesses a key of real wisdom and even a door for happiness. Reason shows how much illusory history is, as it shows how many needs are needless and how many passions artificial. Sympathetic tempers, on the contrary, would tend to reaffirm the reality of histories, as well they tend to think that every need and passion, every "object of desire or aversion, ground of sorrow or joy that [they] feel is in the world of finite multifariousness, for only in that world does anything really happen, only there do events come to pass" (…) "I'm finite once for all, and all the categories of my sympathy are knit up with the finite world as such, and with things that have a history. *Aus dieser erde quellen meine freuden, un ihre sonne schneit mein leiden* [Goethe, *Faust*, I, 1663-64] (…) If we were *readers* only of the cosmic novel, things would be different: we should then share the author's point of view and recognize villains to be as essential as heroes in the plot. But we are not the readers but the very personages of the world-drama. In your own eyes each of you here is its hero, and the villains are your respective friends or enemies. The tale which the absolute reader finds so perfect, we spoil for one another through our several vital identifications with the destinies of the particular personages involved (…) the world that each of us feels most intimately at home with is that of beings which histories that play into our history, whom we can help in their vicissitudes even as they help us in ours" (*A Pluralistic Universe,* 27-28).

Here James talks of a "world-drama", but one could speculate about which genres would fit more rightly with his pluralistic view: maybe comic drama, Shakespearean comedy and also tragicomedy, less so comedy of manners, more akin to ironic minds. See on this, Del Castillo, R. "Los reinos de la ironía".

[40] *Ibid.,* 19.

[41] A much more detailed analysis of the metaphysical dimension of these distinctions can be found in the excellent work by David Lambert "Interpreting the Universe after a Social Analogy: Intimacy, Panpsychism, and the Finite God in a Pluralistic Universe" (*The Cambridge Companion to*

William James, 237-259). If I interpret well his argument, Lambert takes social life as described by James as an analogy of the relation of human beings with a finite suprahuman consciousness (a reciprocal and contingent relation). I guess that from his point of view, my reading of James would sound a little bit deflationist, since I tend to invert the terms, seeing metaphysics as a veiled way of talking about society.

[42] On the history of cynicism from antique cynics to Nietzsche see works by William Desmond, and other in the below bibliography.

[43] *Ibidem.*

[44] Perry, *op. cit.*, 389.

[45] A Cynic would consider this sort of argument as an anthropomorphic consolatory device, but they should be the ones to prove that there is available for a human being a non-human way of describing the foreignness of the world.

[46] *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* 26.

[47] *Ibid.* 28.

[48] Schopenhauer, Shaftesbury, Kant, Lipps, Jean Paul… too many names. I would remind, however, some brief comments on Freud. He compared the logic of dreams with the logic of jokes, but he also marked important differences (see comments by John Carey in his introduction to *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, vii-xxviii). What in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) Freud named as *Humor* (and particularly the so-called, *Galgenhumor*, humour of the gallows or grim-humour) would be closer to what here I will consider an ironic type of humour, since according to Freud it is *the most self-sufficient type* of wit (*Witz*). In *Der Humor* (1927), indeed, Freud mentioned the same examples of grim-humour to illustrate a type of wit that is not a mere sort of release, but has something *grandiose*, since it operate as a triumph of narcissism: the self refuses to be affected by the injuries of reality, the external world cannot really touch it, and even the most terrible situations are transformed in nothing but occasions for an economized expenditure of affect. In these cases, humour —he said— is not an expression of resignation, but of active opposition: it represents not only the triumph of the self, but the triumph of the pleasure principle over any adverse circumstance (Freud's theory of humour from 1927 implies operations between the Ego and the Superego which would require much more space to be made clearer). According to Freud, whilst irony is a sophisticated and devised production, the comical would be an involuntary production of laughter and would possess a mark of ingenuity and infantilism.

[49] One reason why James would have liked this book is that Bergson follows a method similar to the method he followed in *Varieties*: don't try imprisoning the comic spirit within an abstract definition; rather try to get close to it by means of examples, variations and developments.

[50] Bergson, H. *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,* 9.

[51] *Ibid*., 63.

[52] For example, it is raining too much, the day is really a bad day, but the ironist says: "What a wonderful day!" We can imagine a similar reaction before other bearable facts. Imagine that a steak served in an elegant restaurant is really like a stone. The ironist could say with politeness and indifference at one: "I haven't enjoyed a steak like that for a long time."

[53] Freud, by the way (*The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 224-225), mentioned a tale of Mark Twain on his brother and a cow as an example of the mechanism of "saving emotions" by which irony often operates. However, the *context* of the joke, and more exactly, the modesty of the underground den that the cow destroys time after time, combined with the patience of the poor man that *repeatedly coaxes the cow and reconstructs the den*, shows that the purpose of the funny concluding remark "this is getting monotonous" is not just "saving pity" and the reinforcement of a self-sufficient self. It also expresses if only indirectly a degree of concern, negotiation and comprehension alien to irony.

[54] They criticise the actual state of affairs in the name of a higher one, maybe unapproachable, but superior just because of this same reason: if the idealized good could be realized as a matter of fact, ironist wouldn't find any satisfaction in it.

[55] Imagine that an ironist meets an extraterrestrial with a different morphology, maybe several eyes, or only one. Before such surprise, he could says "Excuse me, sir… your face doesn't look too familiar to me."

[56] Imagine, again, that it is raining a lot. Before this fact an ironic temper —as we have said— will try to show indifference, and could walk as if the day was sunny. A comic temper could take an umbrella, but after looking seriously at it and to the dark sky, could throw the umbrella away and take a good row from the closet. Imagine again that a steak is served in a good restaurant, but it is really tough. Congruently with the facts, the comic character could take a handsaw and operate on the steak as if it were a piece of table, or a stone. Of course, this intensification could produce more laughing: if the handsaw is not enough, the comic character could take a hammer, or a set of tools, or a power-saw, which would surely destroy the table too, or in extremis, just some dynamite which would eventually soften the steak, but also destroy the restaurant, or the whole building. In spite of the result, there was good-will.

[57] See Bergson (*op. cit*., 80) on the opposition between comedy and tragedy. Comedy has to with moral or social imitable *types*; tragedy with *individuals* unique and inimitable. The first one uses common names as titles, the other proper names. As Kenneth Burke observed in *Attitudes Toward History* (42-43) in comparison with tragedy, humour downwards the situations. Or in other words: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation. It converts downwards, as the heroic converts upwards. So

meanwhile the hero promotes acceptance by magnification, making the hero's character as great as the situation that he confronts, the humorist tends to gauge the situation mistakenly. In a sense, the humorist also adopts a method of self-protection, but adopting a pose whereby the gravity of the situation fails to be registered. To this respect, comedy is something different from humour, since as Burke also remarks comedies make for a human frame of acceptance, but an essentially *human* one.

[58] "Humour", *On Lying at Bed and other Essays,* 135.

[59] We could use the same example mentioned above: imagine again an extra-terrestrial on the street, and an encounter with a sympathetic character. Why could this character become involuntarily comical from the perspective of an external observer? Probably because the character would exhibit a certain lack of moderation and caution. In the heat of the moment and too amazed by the fact that the alien possesses, for example, multiple eyes and arms, the sympathetic person could end of asking things like: "Have you also multiple sexual organs?" Tactlessness and indiscretion, then, are the comic side of the will to recognize otherness.

[60] I take this idea of *jamais-veu* from Scharfstein, B. A.: *The Philosophers. Their Lives and the Nature of their Thought.*

As Vladimir Jankelevitch said (*L'ironie ou la Bonne Conscience*), the ironist looks at reality trough a spyglass or telescope but the other way around, so the nearest objects seem the more distant. Comic tempers —one could add— look at reality as if they see through a huge magnifying glass. The magnifying glass, indeed, also introduces a distance between subject and object, but not by moving the objects away, but placing them nearer, up to the point of *de-familiarizing* and turning them relatively odd and outrageous. Amplifying, anyway, is not the only procedure of de-familiarization. Repetition and analogy can also provoke a similar effect.

[61] G. K. Chesterton, "Introduction in Defence of Everything Else", *Orthodoxy*, 3.

[62] Humour can make explicit the nonsense always implicit in the common sense, or the ambiguity of the self-evident. Humour plays always with common sense, but not only with word-games, but also through breakdown of routines, or by alteration of accustomed perceptions and automatic actions. Comicalness, also, can reveal the constructed character of what we naturally live and provoke a sudden consciousness of the conventionality of conventions, a quick awareness of the unruly behind the ruled, or of the alternative and even divergent ways of following a rule, a path, or a course of action. On the social dimension of jokes, see Virno, P. *Motto di Spirito e Azione Innovativa. Per una logica del cambiamiento*.

[63] See my "Varieties of American Ecstasy".

[64] I think, by the way, that this connection between spirituality and otherness is more obvious in the final section of *Human Immortality* (*Essays in Religion and Morality*, 100-101) than in "On a

Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (*Talk to Teachers on Psychology and to Students of Some Life's Ideals*).

[65] Mary Douglas, "Jokes", *Implicit Meanings,* 108.

[66] Douglas, by the way, offers a synthetic approach to the sources of laugh that manage to combine Bergson's point of view with Freud's.

[67] If in *Varieties* James included experiences of soldiers, and not only of saints, as examples of extreme existential fevers, Why not include humorists close to madness in a book on religion? Maybe, because humorists can laugh at both the glory of War and the glory of God. Anyway, if James would happen to write a book called the *Varieties of Comic Experience*, he would probably consider not only pieces by writers (Heine, Jean Paul, Swift, Sterne, Chesterton, Twain, Shaw), but also "testimonies" of ordinary people. I ignore if in James's days there were something similar to *I Though That My Father Was God* (the true-life 180 stories of humour and sorrow that Paul Auster selected from thousands of short stories submitted by American people to his program for the National Public Radio), but I guess that this type of source would be for him as relevant as more explicit literary comic forms. On American humour, see in above bibliography works by Hollander, Rubin and Rourke.

[68] See letter to Taush, from 1909, where after saying this, that his mysticism is overestimated, he adds: "As far as I am personally concerned, it is the ordinary sense of life that every working moment brings, that makes me contemptuous of rationalistic attempts to substitute thin logical formulas for it" (Quoted in Perry, *op. cit.,* vol. II, 677).

[69] On James's own position about the legacy of Christianity, and on different religious confessions (especially Methodism) see also Perry, vol. II, whole chapter on *Varieties of Religious Experience*. See also the interesting comparison by Howard Feinstein (*Becoming William James*, chapter 15) between the attitude towards praying by Henry James Sr. and William James. On the complexities of James's approach and attitude see Proudfoot, W. ed., *William James and a Science of Religions*, and Carrete, J. ed., *William James and the* Varieties of Religious Experience. *A Centenary Celebration*, and Suckiel, E. K.: *Heaven's Champion. William James's Philosophy of Religion.*

[70] Chappman, *op. cit.,* 25.

[71] The fact that according to some interpreters (Santayana, again, but also Chesterton) two of James's forefathers, Emerson and Whitman, turned out to be forced and even ridiculous when they treated each man as a God and God as a sort of comrade, is also connected with the ambivalence of James's alleged religiosity. As Chesterton said, humanism and religion are not rivals on the same conditions, since one is the pond and the other the fountain, the former the torch and the later the fire. In other words: Humanism still depends too much on what it tries to overcome, while it does not procure something as effective and universal as the old Christian Tradition (See Chesterton, "Is

Humanism a Religion"). Santayana, on his part, was much more sensitive to the world of Emerson, but he criticized severely Whitman's primitivism (see "Emerson" and "The Poetry of Barbarism" in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*).

[72] Lack of humour in some religions could seem a symptom of fanaticism and intolerance, but probably not because humour is irreverent but rather because it sometimes takes more seriously what religion itself only wants to take superficially. After all, thanks to humour we learn to appreciate not only the arrogance of Reason, but also of Faith.

[73] In terms of community things are also different: religious life, no matter how personally it is lived, can be transformed and absorbed by dogmas, institutions, and authorities. Humour is more refractive to organization.

[74] Kierkegaard's in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, for example: "the power in the comic is a vitally necessary legitimating for anyone who is to be regarded as authorized in the world of sprit of our day" (vol. I, 281). Also: "it does the comic an injustice to regard it as an enemy of the religious" (*Ibid.*, 522) The comic —Kierkegaard also remarks— is present in *every* stage of life, because where there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is a contradiction, the comic is present (*Ibid.*, 513-514).

And since the comic is present everywhere, every existence could be assigned to a particular sphere by knowing how it is related to the comic (*Ibidem)*. "Irony —he says— is the *confinium* between the aesthetic and the ethical. Humour is the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious." (*Ibid.*, 501-2). Or in other words: if irony moves the self from the immature immediacy (the aesthetic stage) to the mediated and mature awareness and management of contradictions (the ethic stage), humour moves the self from an immanent resolution of contradictions that, however, are only really assumed in a stage which breaks with immanence, the religious stage (*Ibid.*, 531-532n.). Irony, to some extent, keeps distance from a full recognition of contradictions, since it only reveals them indirectly, by masquerade, camouflage or disguise. Humour, on the contrary, unveils contradictions with a deeper pathos, taking them not as misfortunes, changes or setbacks, but as paradoxes intrinsic to human existence. "The *vis comica* does not suffocate pathos, but merely indicates that a new pathos is beginning" (*Ibid.*, 521). If irony helps to come to terms with finitude, humour hints a sort of pathetic release from finitude and, therefore, could be considered a previous stage before faith and transcendence (*Ibid.,* 291). In consequence, even if humour "want to try its hand at the paradoxes, it is not faith and it does not take in the suffering aspect of the paradox or the ethical aspect of faith but only the amusing aspect" (*Ibidem*). Humour does embrace a more intense and decisive relation to suffering than irony, but it eventually transmutes pain into joke, and merely revokes the suffering in the form of jest (*Ibid.*, 447).

For Kierkegaard, then, a comic perception of the world never provides a permanent mode of consciousness, as the religious one does. With faith, the individual "discovers the comic, but since in eternal recollecting he is continuously relating himself to an eternal happiness, the comic is a continually vanishing element" (*Ibid.*, 554). In conclusion, even if Christianity is the most humorous of all forms of religion and even if humour is developed from Christianity itself, humour is still humour, and existential authenticity does not seem actually safe in its hands (For other sources in addition to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* see *The Humor of Kierkegaard. An Anthology*, edited and introduced by Thomas C. Oden).

James's acquaintance with Kierkegaard was mainly mediated by Harald Höffding. See on this H. C. Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard*, 329. See also, Jonathan Chipp, *A Critical Comparison of W. James and S. Kierkegaard on Religious Belief.*

[75] See above citations from Niebuhr's prologue to 1961 edition of James's *Varieties.*

[76] "Humour and Faith", *Discerning the Signs of the Times. Sermons for Today and Tomorrow,* 113. Niebuhr quoted a passage from *The Religion of Solidarity*, by Edward Bellamy, to illustrate this existential gap or contrast.

[77] *Ibid.*, 130, 126.

[78] *Ibid.*, 114-115, 116. "The intimate relation between humour and faith is derived from the fact that both deal with the incongruities of our existence. Humour is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones. Both humour and faith are expressions of the freedom of the human spirit, of its capacity to stand outside of life, and itself, and view the whole scene. But any view of the whole immediately creates the problem of how the incongruities of life are to be dealt with; for the effort to understand the life, and our place in it, confronts us with inconsistencies and incongruities which do not fit into any neat picture of the whole. Laughter is our reaction to immediate incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life" (*Ibid.*, 112).

[79] What is true of our judgments of each other, Niebuhr adds, is true of the judgment of God. It would be interesting to compare the idea of severe parental judgment, with Freud's view of the consolatory side of the Superego in "Der Humour".

[80] *Ibid.*, 119, 111-112, 115, 131. Laughter at oneself —Niebuhr also says— is not able to deal with sins in any ultimate way, since humour does not tear down our arrogant, egoistic and irresponsible impulses. "There is something more than self-judgment in genuine contrition… it is the awareness of being judged from beyond ourselves" (*Ibid.*, 121). In definitive, even if the humorists stand off from themselves, and recognize their faults, humour is "the 'no man's land' between

cynicism and contrition", since one can continue to laugh at oneself, even after recognizing the depth of evil and the indignity of the sinner.

As Niebuhr says: "In an ultimate sense the self never knows anything against itself. The self of today may judge the self's action of yesterday as evil. But that means that the self of today is the good self. We are to judge our actions through self-judgment. But we do not become aware of the deep root of evil actions in such judgments. We may judge our sins but we do not judge ourselves as sinners. The knowledge that we are sinners, and that inordinate desires spring from a heart inordinately devoted to itself, is a religious knowledge which, in a sense, is never achieved except in prayer. Then we experience with St. Paul that 'he who judges us is the Lord.' There is no laughter in that experience. There is only pain. The genuine joy of reconciliation with God, which is possible only as the fruit of genuine repentance, is a joy which stands beyond laughter though it need not completely exclude laughter. To suggest that the sense of humour is the beginning, but not the end, of a proper humility does not mean that the final fruit of true contrition destroys all vestiges of the seed from which it sprang. The saintliest men frequently have a humorous glint in their eyes. They retain the capacity to laugh at both themselves and at others. They do not laugh in their prayers because it is a solemn experience to be judged of God and to stand under the scrutiny of Him from whom no secrets are hid. But the absence of laughter in the most ultimate experience of life does not preclude the presence of laughter as a suffused element in all experience. There is indeed proper laughter on the other side of the experience of repentance. It is the laughter of those who have been released both from the tyranny of the law and from the slavery of pretending to be better than they are. To know oneself a sinner, to have no illusions about the self, and no inclination to appear better than we are, either in the sight of man or of God, and to know oneself forgiven and released from sin, is the occasion for a new joy. This joy expresses itself in an exuberance of which laughter is not the only, but is certainly one, expression" (*Ibid.*, 121-122).

[81] *Ibid.*, 111, 131. On the tension between faith and humour see part III ("Toward a Theology of the Comic") in Berger, P., *Redeeming Laughter. The Comic Dimension of Human Experience,* but also the remarks by Simon Critchley in "Laughter's Messianic Power", chapter I of his excellent *On Humour* (16-18). Even if Critchley suggests that there might be an analogy between "true jokes" and "shared prayers", he doesn't admit that humour is the glimpse of a supernatural world: "humour is not noumenal, but phenomenal, not theological but anthropological, not numinous but simply luminous" (*Ibid.*, 17). Critchley mentions Auden's remarks in "Concerning the Unpredictable" (*Forewords and Afterwords,* 472), about the similarity between laughter and prayer: in both spheres —Auden says— men are equal; in laughter as individual members of the species, in prayer, as unique persons (in the *secular* sphere of work, on the contrary, man cannot be equal, but only diverse and interdependent). In fact, what Auden says is that a good human life is only possible it the *three* spheres are respected:

work without laughter and prayer turns into insane love of power; prayer without laughter and work into gnostic, cranky and pharisaic. And without prayer and work, the laughter turns ugly, the comic grubby, and the mockery cruel.

[82] Also the back and forth movement between the unconscious and the conscious. Humour can reveal not only what we *should be* as rational beings, but what we still *are* as animals. The *gap* between the aims of the *intellect* and the needs of the *body* is also a permanent comic motive. Humour reveals in many cases, indeed, how reason helps to control and refine perilous desires, but also how it represses good ones. Anyway I tend to think that, from a Jamesian perspective, humour would have to do with something different than a Freudian economy of desire. The problem is that to make clear this point we would need to contrast James's notion of the subliminal self with Freud's notion of the unconscious. See Taylor, E., *William James on the Consciousness Beyond the Margin*.

[83] This point would require much more comments, including some ones on Richard Rorty's idea of irony, and probably Nietzsche's ideas on the weakness of the "last men" in his *Zarathustra*.

[84] Niehuhr's retrospective criticism of James's *Varieties* would have to do exactly with this. Seeing retrospectively James's contribution —Niebuhr says in 1961— one would say that he did full justice in his chapter on saintliness "to the quest for perfection in both the medieval ascetic movement and modern sectarian Protestantism. But he does not come to terms with the charge of Reformation thought, that the quest for perfection is bound to be abortive, since even the most rigorous human virtue cannot escape the ambiguity of good and evil, with which all human is infected. His chapter on mysticism reveals in what way mystic disciplines release from anxieties and contribute to a joyful nonchalance of life. But he does not come to terms with one defect on the mystic tradition: its tendency to flee the responsibilities of history and engage in premature adventures into eternity" (*Ibid*., 7).

[85] "…History is always collective destiny. James surveys the effect of religious faith upon the health and wholesomeness of the individual, upon the capacity or incapacity to withstand the strains of life; upon the ability to give up old ways for new, and upon the ability to accept the perplexities of life not with sullen patience but with a certain amount of cheerfulness… all this criteria of religious vitality and relevance has been surrounded by collective problems and perplexities (*Ibid*., 8). I think that Niebuhr overestimates James's concern with collective catastrophes, even if he only lived, and not as a soldier, a Civil War, and not two World Wars and a nuclear Age as Niebuhr. See on James and Niebuhr, Hook, S. *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*.

[86] See on this, Del Castillo, R., "James y el malestar en la cultura".

[87] See an original reinterpretation of a Jamesian spirituality *without* God in Craig, M.: "James and the Ethical Importance of Grace". Also her book on Levinas and James.