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on deleuze's political philosophy

> Tragedy is a close-up, comedy a long shot.
> *Buster Keaton*

introduction

"When we speak about the comic, we face a mess," Agnes Heller remarks at the beginning of her excellent book, *Immortal Comedy*.[1] A mess because the comic itself admits of so many different formulations and definitions; because around the comic cluster so many other equally obscure terms and concepts: humor, laughter, the ridiculous, jokes, etc.; and, finally, a mess because philosophy has very slowly, and so only recently, deigned to devote attention to the comic. In comparison, tragedy as a concept and genre is relatively clean – bloody, certainly, but its shape is delineated clearly and it has a pleasing overall form.[2] The particular constraints of its depiction of those people better than ourselves being undone renders its action homogeneous. Even its characters are types – which aids, of course, in recognition – and its components are carefully arranged, composed into a coherent and even organic whole. Indeed, it is this whole that most distinguishes tragedy both from other dramatic forms and from the events of life that it bears a mimetic relation to, however problematic that relation might be.[3]

> The author – just like a god – throws the characters of his tragedy into a shared situation, where they begin to act for or against one another, always mutually dependently, so that they all finally become and fulfill their shared destiny, unto death.[4]

Comedy, on the other hand, seems hopelessly ill-formed. It is concerned with people who are worse than ourselves, perspectival to an extreme degree, and so heterogeneous in its manifestations as to scarcely admit of a family resemblance between instances, let alone a definition. It seems neither as compelling as tragedy nor as likely to produce a sense of wonder at the world. Because it's such a mess, comedy looks like something that should be straightened up by – and for – thought, and so it is often sighted, flickering like a wisp, at the margins of philosophical discussions but it never becomes the focus.

Despite its messiness, then, comedy has a kind of stubbornly persistent fascination for

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philosophers and one way of pursuing this interest is, of course, thematic: one might attempt to draw definitions for such things as: comedy, comedic drama and literature, or even laughter and its provocations. This approach can certainly highlight interesting elements of the philosophical engagement with what Heller calls "the comedic phenomenon." But there is another kind of engagement with philosophy and comedy that asks about the very persistence of comedy as a philosophical concern; a concern that philosophy constantly runs up against but rarely, if ever, takes up directly. Is there something about the philosophical image of thought that is responsible, in whole or in part, for its own ignorance of comedy and the comic?[5] That such an image of thought exists is shown simply by the existence of a philosophical tradition whose authors, texts, and ideas are organized into a single kind of action, whether conceived dialectically or not. Comedy, then, may be something that philosophical thought excludes necessarily, something that, to speak provocatively, harbors a force that would disrupt the systematicity of philosophical thinking.

Dramatization and comedy are recurring themes in Deleuze's work in the 1960s and, from his book on Nietzsche in 1962 through *The Logic of Sense* in 1969, remarks on humor and comedy are closely bound to ethical and political concerns. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, he speaks of the "true" and "false" senses of the tragic in order to frame his interpretation of Nietzsche as a whole, but the distinction acquires its immediate importance from its bearing on the question, "what is justice?" In 1967, in *Coldness and Cruelty*, he describes legal critique as possible only in terms of irony and comedy. And, in 1969, in *The Logic of Sense*, the series on humor is followed and explicated by the series "On the Moral Problem in Stoic Philosophy." This final discussion makes clear what binds these disparate discussions together: comedy is a mode of dramatization that facilitates a morally relevant experience that does not necessarily or immediately engender an act of judgment. For Deleuze, comedy is a demonstration that provokes an experience of wonder at a world that is not organized by the concepts and judgments of subjectivity.

Such an understanding of comedy is, in many ways, startlingly Aristotelian. For more than a century following the influential readings of scholars such as Lessing and Bernays, readings of Aristotle's *Poetics* were dominated by the claim that tragedy is morally instructive.[6] The crux of this claim was an interpretation of the key term *katharsis* as something strongly akin to a medical purgation which was supplemented by an analogy between medical and moral health. While true of Plato, this claim fails to find adequate justification or support in the *Poetics* and, more recently, it has been shown that Aristotle argues that the *katharsis* engendered by mimetic tragedy has the character of an intellectual clarification.[7] The spectator who undergoes the *katharsis* produced by a successful dramatic production sees the drama as a unified whole, one that depicts a recognizable but universalized representation of the world, and submits this whole to judgment. Importantly, what is here submitted to judgment is, in the best tragedies, not a caricatured or exaggerated depiction but a well-wrought representation of the world. The understanding gained is therefore applicable to experience. This world that is offered for the intellectual contemplation of the audience is not altered or skewed in such a way that it provides the viewer with a readymade judgment but is, like the real world, capable of moving the viewer to wonder.[8] Here, Aristotle and Deleuze part ways. For Aristotle, wonder entails a proper path to the discovery of truth; for Deleuze, wonder is itself the disclosure of an ethical truth.

But why does Deleuze privilege comedy, specifically in relation to ethical questions? Although Aristotle's discussion of comedy is lost, there are strong indications that Aristotle regarded tragedy and comedy as formally quite similar and thought that their difference lay almost exclusively in their subject matter, and so also in the emotions that were involved in the respective *katharses*.[9] However, the preservation of the treatment of tragedy has resulted in a treatment of mimetic art by the

philosophical tradition that privileges tragedy to the almost complete exclusion of comedy (and, of course, historical drama). In his work, Deleuze encounters tragedy in Nietzsche for whom the reinterpretation of tragedy was of prime importance in working out a non-Platonic philosophy. Such a philosophy would be one that responded to the question of whether existence has a meaning by reframing this question itself as a problem: *who asks* whether existence has a meaning? When Deleuze argues that this genealogical reframing is essential for understanding Nietzsche he thereby privileges the question of the meaning of tragedy. In Masoch, then, Deleuze finds another thinker whose theatrical depiction of law and subjectivity echoes Nietzsche's "true" sense of the tragic. No longer bound by Nietzsche's own preoccupations, Deleuze describes the critical thinking of Masoch and Sade as comedic. There is no attempt made in *Coldness and Cruelty* to justify the characterization of Masoch and Sade as comedic but the critical operation of both authors is to suspend the operation of the law without imposing a new law. In *The Logic of Sense*, the previous discussions are taken up and reworked in relation to Stoicism. Humor is given an explicitly ethical dimension and described as a mimetic communication that suspends judgment.[10]

Deleuze uses comedy in the construction of a counter-tradition that is critical of a very specific tendency in the image of thought that constitutes and organizes the dominant tradition of philosophy. That tendency is for thought to constitute a rectification of experience. On this account, the given is in some way flawed or, at best, insufficient, and thought supplements what Deleuze sometimes calls "the concrete" with concepts and ideas – concepts such as justice and rights, ideas such as the Good and the Best – that re-coordinate the world into something "fixed" (in both senses of the word).[11] Deleuze argues that this action of judgment – or justification – is subject to three limitations: it can never ground itself; it is resistant to new forms of experience; and it can never act to change the suffering that it explains. Comedy, precisely in and through its messiness, serves as a critical lever for bringing to light and questioning the implicit action of justification and judgment that organizes a certain tradition of philosophical thought. In terms of the three limitations laid out above, this would entail the possibility of a thinking without ground; a thinking that is not resistant to novelty and the new; and a thinking that engages with and challenges suffering rather than conceptualizing and reflecting on it.

nietzsche and the true sense of tragedy

Nietzsche – and perhaps Deleuze as well – is more closely associated with tragedy than comedy.[12] Nietzsche's first book is devoted to tragedy and the first section of what is, arguably, Deleuze's most influential book, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, is entitled "The Tragic." But what does Deleuze mean by this? In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* the tragic is a problem of the dialectic. "The dialectic proposes a certain conception of the tragic: linking it to the negative, to opposition and contradiction."[13] In dialectical thought – and Deleuze understands Hegel to be Nietzsche's primary example – the tragic names the resolution of an opposition enabled by the discovery or revelation that opposition is the negative element of an essence. Opposition is thus rectified without being annulled once it is shown to be only a transitory stage of thought and existence. This transition is effected by means of the concept of negation that, Deleuze argues, Nietzsche exposes as a particular kind of sense given to thinking and existence, and the one that gives this sense to thinking and existence is one that cannot endure them, and so wills their negation and replacement. Against the dialectic, Nietzsche proposes a different image of thought. "For the speculative element of negation, opposition or contradiction Nietzsche substitutes the practical element of difference, the object of affirmation or enjoyment."[14] This substitution rejects the dialectical rectification of thought and existence and substitutes a kind of endurance of worldly forces and their conflicts. "Nietzsche

substitutes the correlation of sense and phenomena for the metaphysical duality of appearance and essence and for the scientific relation of cause and effect."[15] Importantly, then, Nietzsche's substitution is just that – it has the character of an experiment, a hypothesis, and, although it bears a sense that differentiates Nietzsche from dialectical thought, this substitution is not a rectification; it does not propose a deeper essence beneath the phenomena of the world. The aim of the first section of *Nietzsche and Philosophy* is to make clear the stakes and scope of this experimental substitution in terms of tragedy conceived as the struggle to make sense of the world.

The tragic, then, has two quite distinct senses which Deleuze refers to as the true and the false senses of tragedy. So important is this distinction between the two senses of tragedy that Deleuze writes that "[every Nietzschean] must show whether he has understood or failed to recognize the true sense of the tragic."[16] One might reasonably ask, however, what makes one interpretation the "true" one and the other "false." The differentiation of the true and the false is, first of all, not one subtended by a single essentializing field. "The differential element is both a critique of the value of values and the positive element of a creation."[17] It is a critique of the value of values because Nietzsche's thinking of worldly differential forces has nothing other than the plural play of these forces as its object. It does not posit an essence either transcendent to – or subtending – the world. This is what accords it the status of the "true" since tragedy ceases to be tragic once the suffering that it depicts is justified. But it is the second aspect of the differential element that accounts for the distinction between the true and the false senses of the tragic. The dialectical sense is false insofar as it denies its own interpretive character. Its conclusions that rectify and judge are to be granted a permanence and constancy that they deny to their objects. Genealogy, by contrast, is eminently and self-avowedly perspectival. The true sense of the tragic is an appropriative interpretation of existence that enters into the differential play of forces – repeating and intensifying it – rather than negating it by securing or grounding it in an act of rectification. It is true not because it gets things right about tragedy; it is true because it affirms itself *as an interpretation*. The dialectical false sense of tragedy is a conception in which the tragic is "defined as original contradiction, its Dionysian solution, and the dramatic expression of this solution."[18] This interpretation still found expression in *The Birth of Tragedy* where the reinterpretation of tragedy in terms of Dionysian and Apollonian forces is interpreted as a "solution" to suffering.[19] Existence still requires redemption and tragedy is a "revenge" of thought upon experience. The true sense of tragedy abandons this need. It's not a matter of becoming better viewers of tragedy but rather of seeing the dialectical conception of tragedy as an instantiation of *ressentiment* that has infused every aspect of human thinking with "the instinct for revenge."[20] The true sense of the tragic affirms suffering without resolution.

Suffering is the frustration of willful force. Facing and acknowledging it without demanding its rectification seems monstrous. Understood dialectically, suffering is an error in need of correction. For Nietzsche, suffering has the character of a fact that does not raise the idea of rectification at all. If force is appropriation, then there is something appropriated: another force that "suffers" a reinterpretive diminution of its activity. Suffering, then, is ubiquitous and primary. To place suffering itself in question and not merely ask about particular instances of conflict is to ask: "Does existence have a meaning?" This question of suffering is, Deleuze emphasizes, the highest question of philosophy for Nietzsche. It simultaneously poses the problem of interpretation (what is the meaning of existence?) and evaluation (what kind of meaning is it?). "Strictly speaking, [this question] means 'what is justice?'"[21] The two senses of tragedy are therefore two ways of posing the question, "what is justice?" They are two ways of thoughtfully responding to the action, the dramatization of existence. On the one hand, informed by *ressentiment*, the false sense of tragedy squeezes

existence into a dialectic of redemption; this sense of tragedy supplements existence with a ground or higher truth that unifies and justifies it. On the other hand, subtracting this coordinating device and affirming existence as irreducible and unsupplemented, sufficient to itself, "true" tragedy is an engaged and willful thinking of the development and collapse of forms amidst the general play of forces. It is this "true" sense of tragedy that will be developed in Deleuze's later discussions of humor and the comic.

masoch and the counter-force of law

Nietzsche and Philosophy makes clear from the outset that there are important ethical and political questions whose very formulation is profoundly altered by genealogical thinking. The two senses of the tragic which characterize genealogical and dialectical thinking each retain the character of provoking thought that Aristotle attributed to them. Dialectical thought uses wonder as a provocation for the implementation of a judgment of the world that translates the play of forces into a system that valorizes only some of them. Genealogical thought, on the other hand, thinks the world without judgment, interpreting it without translating it into an extra-worldly system. In his 1967 essay on Masoch, *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze returns to this question of judgment as an emphatically moral and political question.[22] Instead of tragedy (in either of its senses), Deleuze now speaks of comedy and the comic, a terminological shift that solves the problem of the awkward determination of one sense of tragedy as the "true" one (which invites the return of dialectical thinking) and retains the dramatic character of genealogical thinking (which asks after the character of the force that wills in an interpretation). However, the problems again find their privileged expression in fictional stories. "[T]rue problems of law [*droit*] can only be recovered under the perverted forms that Sade and Masoch have given them, by making novelistic elements of them in a parody of the philosophy of history."[23]

In its central sections, *Coldness and Cruelty* stages the difference between Masoch's humorous account of the relation between law and contract and Sade's "ironic" account in order to raise the question of law and judgment. "[T]here has only ever been one way of thinking the law, a comedy of thought, composed of irony and humor."[24] Masoch and Sade are, for Deleuze, inverse tendencies of legal subversion. Deleuze begins his history of the concept of law with Plato for whom the law was coordinated between the Good, which served as its principal and transcendental foundation, and the Best, which was both the effect of the law and the earthly image of the Good.[25] Irony and humor correspond to two problematizations of this classical conception or, as Deleuze writes, "[i]rony and humor essentially form the thought of the law."[26] It is ironic that the authority of the law is in fact null and it is instead the authority of the Good that is "infinitely superior." This ironic thought of the law is exemplified by Socrates' friends who laugh because Socrates dies for the Good while appearing to obey the law. Humor is more difficult to discern and Deleuze provides no example of it. The law is humorous to the extent that one takes seriously the letter of the law and discovers that the effect of the law is precisely the disorder that it is intended to guard against.[27] Humor is a distancing from the law in the direction opposite that of irony: the one who obeys the law because it ought to be modeled on the Best that is in turn a reflection of the Good.

In the classical interpretation of the law both humor and irony are critical possibilities whose distinctiveness lies in the way that they expose the difference between the law, the Good, and the Best. It is this difference that makes the transformation of the classical conception of the law possible. The modern conception of the law is formulated by Kant. There are two dimensions to Kant's transformation of the relation between the Good, the law, and the Best. First, the law becomes absolute; in Kant, the moral law is valid and authoritative by its form alone, not by reference to a transcendental ground. Second, "[the law] acts without being known."[28] The force of the law prescribes a

duty that is absolutely distinct from any question of consequences. The law no longer obtains sanction from the Best understood as the aim of good will of the just; what is left of the law is only its form, something that by definition cannot be an object of thought.[29] In the classical conception of the law humor and irony were two modes of thinking its relation to the Good and the Best, but in the modern conception of the law these relations are gone. There is no higher principle than the law: it is itself the Good. Similarly, the Best understood as the end or goal willed by the just person disappears because the pure form of the law cannot be related to particular circumstances without compromising its purity. The just person therefore becomes guilty in the sense described by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*. There, Freud shows that the modern truth of the law cannot be formulated without exposing its constitutive paradox. On the one hand, the law that appears to exist in order to forbid the willful action of the drives in fact exists as a product of this prohibition. On the other hand, the law that appears and claims to be essentially different from desire is actually repressed desire. The modern mode of existence that corresponds to both aspects of this paradox is, of course, guilt. For Freud as well as Kant, there is only a regression of drives behind the law and this groundlessness cannot be willed and affirmed without also affirming the drives whose exclusion makes possible the creation, continuation, and authority of the law.

Although the relation between the Good, the law, and the Best is radically altered in the modern conception of the law introduced by Kant, humor and irony do not disappear. Instead, they are reworked as converse critiques of guilt. For Deleuze, Sade's work is that of a distinctly Kantian irony. In Sade, the infinite pursuit of the Good that might ground the law is brought to an end with the invention of Evil; not "moral evil" but the reign of institutions rather than laws. Whereas laws paradoxically rule out the conditions of their own constitution in order to justify their authority over action, institutions form "a dynamic model of action, authority, and power" and so allow for perpetual reworking without sacrificing authoritative force.[30] "Laws bind actions;" Deleuze writes, "they immobilize and moralize them."[31] Institutions, on the other hand, shape, direct, and authorize actions but they do so without regard for finality. They follow a jurisprudential approach in which authority is granted by precedent but this authority is never absolute. An institution is an organization that it is always possible to reorganize. Masoch's work exploits another paradoxical aspect of the modern conception of the law. The law implicitly acknowledges the persistence of the act or acts that it forbids, and indexes these acts to particular punishments. The masochist inverts this index in order to obtain the cost for the desired consequence. The humor of the masochist is the reversal of the will for the Best. The masochist's affection for contracts in which punishments are antecedent to offenses (and, indeed, secure the latter) caricatures the will for the Best. The humorist is, for Deleuze, "the logician of consequences."[32] Both irony and humor exploit the absolute character of the modern law. Irony privileges the law over the Good; humor privileges willful desire over the law. Each questions the law's attempt to rectify the diversity of the world by returning to the experience of the world prior to the moment of judgment.

After the book on Nietzsche and the essay on Masoch, Deleuze publishes the two books that he will describe as his attempts to do philosophy (rather than to treat the philosophical thoughts of others): *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*. In these works, themes such as fiction and mimesis, humor and comedy, continue to play an important role. In 1967 Deleuze sets out the principal claims of *Difference and Repetition* in a lecture entitled "The Method of Dramatization," while in *Difference and Repetition* itself there are strong echoes of his analysis of humor and irony in the discussion of stupidity in the chapter on "The Image of Thought." In 1969, a central section of *The Logic of Sense* is devoted explicitly to humor. At first glance, this discussion does not play a role as central to the argument of the text as a whole as the two discussions of comedy treated

above. At the same time, however, the discussion of humor in *The Logic of Sense* does take up again – and further develop – the ethical relevance of humor and comedy introduced in the essays on Nietzsche and Masoch. Three things stand out about this discussion of humor: humor and irony are now both conceived as different possibilities of critiquing transcendence, not the law; humor is sharply distinguished from irony and accorded a higher value; and, most significantly, Deleuze argues that humor's critical power has important ethical and political implications.

comedy and the surface

The Logic of Sense is concerned principally with language but, as Deleuze indicates in the brief Preface, the nature of sense entails a strange explication. "[S]ense is a nonexisting entity"; to point to sense is to miss the point as sense is the power that gives indication its determinacy.[33] A possible definition – that sense is what holds words or things together – is itself held together by sense, making the definition circular. Thus sense "maintains very special relations with nonsense" and Deleuze's presentation takes the form of a dramatization of the relation of sense and nonsense.[34] The logic or theory of sense is laid out in a series of paradoxes that functions in a way analogous to a mime's performance.[35] The mime's attention to the fragments of actions is able to convey the sense of that action in its unity in the same way that attention to the fragments or moments of sense can convey sense. The argument of *The Logic of Sense* is primarily a historical and epistemological one. It traces several historical attempts to account for sense – notably in the Stoics and in Husserl – and it critically engages with these attempts in order to work out an account of the constitution and operation of sense. Both of these aspects are fitted to the frame of Lewis Carroll's work. There is a third aspect of *The Logic of Sense*, however, that is not as readily apparent as the other two: the problem of sense is also an ethical problem. It is in relation to this third, ethical aspect of sense that humor and comedy are deployed in a way that makes use of – but also extends and develops – the discussions in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* and *Coldness and Cruelty*.

Deleuze writes that in Stoic "action" one does not act "in order to have done all that which depended on one in order to attain the end," but instead "*wills the embodiment* and the actualization of the pure incorporeal event in a state of affairs and in his or her own body and flesh."[36] This kind of action reverses the usual polarity. Instead of acting to convert the future into a willed present, one acts to convert the present into the willed future of an existent past. "Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us."[37] It is not a matter of selecting the appropriate valuation for events – and so deciding that some warrant rectification while others do not – but of accepting action as the always present opportunity for creating new meanings, new instances of sense. To be worthy of what happens to us is to will "in accordance with the laws of an obscure, humorous conformity: the Event."[38] What, then, does the humorous will accomplish that the tragic – and even the ironic – will cannot?

The discussion of humor in *The Logic of Sense* begins in "The Three Images of Philosophers" where Deleuze reworks and develops claims from the Nietzsche and Masoch essays, as well as *Difference and Repetition*. The first two images are familiar: there is the Platonic image of the philosopher, "a being of ascents," in which morality and philosophy are conjoined in a thinking "always determined as an ascent and a conversion;" and there is the Nietzschean image of the philosopher, a spelunking sort of thought that Deleuze evokes with the names of Diogenes Laertius, Empedocles, Hölderlin, and others.[39] Conceived in opposition to the Platonic heights that coordinate and then work to rectify the diversity of the world, Nietzsche conceives of a different kind of ethical thinking that looks to the depths to find a different conception of the diversity of experience: an immanent measure that wills nature as it is. In these two images one can clearly recognize the

dialectical and the genealogical thinkers of *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. The third image of philosophy is, however, new to *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze describes this orientation as one in which "*there is no longer depth or height*," and which differs from Nietzschean genealogy insofar as it is unconcerned with the question of justification.[40]

Deleuze recounts Diogenes Laertius' report that Diogenes the Cynic refused to condemn even practices such as cannibalism and incest because these alleged wrongs are both instances in which particular combinations are forbidden – of eating flesh that is human or of copulating with flesh that is too similar to one's own – a prohibition that doesn't make sense, that appears ridiculous, when one adopts a more detached mindset and considers that all flesh – animal and human – is ultimately composed of the same elements. How can changing their combination cause the same elemental interactions to become harmful? Chrysippus summarizes this line of thinking as follows (these are Deleuze's words):

> the unity of corporeal causes defines a perfect and liquid mixture wherein everything is exact in the cosmic present. But bodies caught in the particularity of their limited presents do not meet directly in line with the order of their causality, which is good only for the whole, taking into consideration all combinations at once. This is why any mixture can be called good or bad: good in the order of the whole, but imperfect, bad, or even execrable, in the order of particular encounters.[41]

Diogenes' refusal to condemn cannibalism and incest is therefore simply the adoption of a viewpoint of the order of the whole rather than that of the order of the particular. The sort of Stoic resignation that follows from this perspective is, however, apparently incompatible with the ethical outlook found in the Stoic tragedies. There, something like the monstrous dinner of Thyestes seems to expose the depths to judgment both in the action of the play and in its presumed instruction to the audience. Against such a moralizing characterization of Stoic drama, Deleuze sets the figure of Hercules, Seneca's hero, who continually returns to the surface after sojourns into both the lofty heavens and the monstrous abyss.[42] Instead of these ultimately illusory boundaries, a new demarcation arises at the surface: "between things and propositions themselves. It is a frontier drawn between the thing such as it is, denoted by the proposition, and the expressed, which does not exist outside of the proposition."[43] Hercules, for Deleuze, dramatizes a thinking that is not only non-dialectical, since it returns to the surface rather than appropriating that surface from a position of transcendence, but also non-genealogical because it dispenses with the will. Echoing his work on Masoch, Deleuze proposes that this new thought, working strictly at the surface, be called "perversion."

Like much of *The Logic of Sense* this discussion moves very quickly – and very allusively. Indeed, Deleuze himself seems to recognize the shortcomings of his presentation when, two series later in the Twentieth Series "On the Moral Problem in Stoic Philosophy," he remarks that the earlier discussion of the Stoic challenge to the search for moral justification "moved too quickly."[44] The intervening series on humor has made possible some clarification and serves as a decisive moment in Deleuze's book, with the following series primarily and explicitly concerned with ethical issues rather than ontology or epistemology. What emerges through this discussion is that humor is now conceived as "a descent without destination."[45] In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, genealogical thinking was opposed to dialectical thinking, an opposition exemplified by the two senses of tragedy. In *Coldness and Cruelty*, the "true" sense of tragedy is replaced by humor and irony as the two valences of the critical thinking of the law. In both humor and irony, however, a concern for rectification persists. In *The Logic of Sense*, humor is a kind of thinking that is not organized by a will for judgment and rectification. It is no longer the converse of irony (as it was in *Coldness and Cruelty*). Irony always retains a sense of direction; it brings the Good down to earth by revealing its superiority over

the law and, in *Coldness and Cruelty*, humor does as well. In *The Logic of Sense*, however, humor is distinguished from irony and becomes a movement of thinking otherwise than towards a goal or destination. It presents without purpose.

Humor is treated primarily as a possibility of language in *The Logic of Sense* and it is set off against irony, described now as a critical operation made possible by the claim that the proper function of language is the signification of Ideas. Irony supposes that language is, in fact, devoid of signification and that any signifier that does exist is to be found only in the infinitely higher and remote Ideas. The "descent" of humor, a denial of irony's ascent, is one that consists of a "designation and a pure 'monstration,'" a pure showing.[46] What this "monstration" cannot be is the exhibition of an example – which would return the signified Ideas to their lofty position of authority – and so what is shown must be immediately "prolonged in consumption, pulverization, and destruction, without there being any chance of arresting this movement."[47] If this sounds like a rather fruitless exercise, and perhaps not even a very humorous one, that's because it is. Humor, here, justifies itself negatively: by showing that the simple reversal of the vector of thought employed by irony is equally sterile: "it is clear that language can no more be based on denotation than on signification," Deleuze concludes.[48] What remains is for the critical force of humor to be directed not contrary to irony but to persevere at what Deleuze calls "the surface" – "where pure sense is produced."[49]

Two questions organize Deleuze's discussion of the surface where humor persists. The first question is about the surface itself: what makes language possible? The vector of humor points first away from ironic signification and then again away from the depths of denotation. What, then, is discovered at the surface? Deleuze, here, is at his allusive best. In the space of barely a page he appeals to the Stoics, to the difference between Zen, on the one hand, and Hinduism and Buddhism on the other, to time conceived alternately as Aion or Chronos, and to that paragon of clarity, Mallarmé. Indeed, he concludes this account of the surface by remarking that it "inspires only a silent and immediate communication, since it could only be spoken in the resuscitation of all the mediate and abolished significations and denotations."[50] If this question seems to arrive at a kind of dead-end, the second one is more productive. Since language is made possible by the surface as well as the speaker, the second organizing question is: who speaks (at the surface)?

The answer lies in a possibility opened by the adventure of irony. Classical irony is first tasked with undoing the idea that the one speaking is the individual subject. It is given a threefold task: "to tear the individual away from his or her immediate existence; to transcend sensible particularity toward the Idea; and to establish laws of language corresponding to the model."[51] This is Deleuze's description of Socratic irony, exemplified by the struggles with the Sophists in Plato's dialogues. Ultimately this is a "dialectical" irony in which the Idea serves as a mediator for the individual to be recovered in truth at the end. This first figure of irony thus follows a now-familiar ascending path. Modern irony emerges with Kant who, Deleuze argues, extends classical irony to its logical conclusion. Since the individual is always assured a place in the world through the action of irony, the Idea is always "the idea of the *sum total of possibility*," an Idea that Kant argues, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is the determinate Idea of God.[52] The creation of derivative individuals by the divine power establishes a "pure rational language" that "renders possible the ascent of the individual to the universal form."[53] Finally, in the third figure of irony, the individual becomes the person. This shift is summarized by Deleuze as one in which irony "grounds itself on the finite synthetic unity of the person and no longer on the analytic identity of the individual."[54] In Romantic irony, exemplified by Kierkegaard, the individual is able to play at innumerable roles, each of which is insufficient to dramatize, to actualize, what Kierkegaard calls "the eternal ego."

In each case irony appears critical, yet Deleuze emphasizes that it remains steadfastly

tied to the individual whose unity is exempted from disruption. However, the disruptive force that animates irony is not inherently restricted from troubling the constitution of the individual who deploys it. This critical force is groundless and, initially, "represents tragic thought and the tragic tone with which irony maintains the most ambivalent relations."[55] Ambivalent because, as Deleuze emphasizes in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, there are two senses of the tragic. Here, the genealogical one emerges initially as the individual is unworked by language but this unworking, uncorking, negative from the perspective of the production of meaning, is the beginning of the moment of creation. Irony begins with the real language of the speaker which it grounds and represents in an ideal language that serves as a model for the real one. But both of these languages are fissured by what Deleuze calls an "esoteric language," a language that undercuts the ideal nature of the model and the individual identity of the speaker. Deleuze summarizes this fissuring as follows: "[t]he tragic and the ironic give way to a new value, that of humor."[56] What, then, ultimately, is humor in *The Logic of Sense*?

conclusion: comedy and justice

At the conclusion of his discussion of humor, just before rattling off a whole list of things that humor "is," Deleuze writes that "if irony is the co-extensiveness of being with the individual, or of the I with representation, humor is the co-extensiveness of sense with nonsense."[57] Speaking ironically – saying something other than what is meant – entails that the referent that grounds and secures meaning be fully accessible to the speaking subject. Only in such a case can the speaker exploit the non-identity of the referent and the referring expression. Humor, Deleuze argues, is a liberation of the power to rework sense in ways other than those that preserve individuality and identity. It is a selected but not a willed power and it is the obverse side of the reconciliation of meaning and expression. For Deleuze, irony and humor are two ways of playing out the indeterminacy of sense, in a way similar to the way in which the two senses of the tragic were contrary ways of playing out the indeterminacy of suffering in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, and irony and humor, in *Coldness and Cruelty*, were contrary ways of playing out the indeterminacy of the law.

Historically, this comic play has been strictly curtailed and, on Deleuze's reading, the justification of this curtailment forms a substantial portion of the tradition of ethics, political philosophy, and even legal theory. His exasperation with this sort of theorizing is clearly on display when, in the *Abécédaire* interview in 1988, Deleuze states that "those who are satisfied to recall human rights and the respect for human rights … well … they're imbeciles."[58] An overwhelming share of traditional ethical thought works to overcome a gap between experience and the Good, a gap determined by the will to rectification that animates such thought. Its willful nature is on display in the relative priority and worth that it accords to ideas and the world. Humor reverses and critiques the will to rectification and propels thinking to "the surface," the name that Deleuze gives to the domain of thinking that is populated with both ideas and things and that is no longer coordinated by a desire to secure the legitimate authority of the former over the latter.

Deleuze uses humor and comedy to develop new ways of thinking about three sorts of ethical problems. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, comedy, in the guise of the "true" sense of tragedy, responds to the problem of suffering. It responds by critiquing its form – one that implies the need for some sort of supplement to reality that would incorporate suffering by denying its particularity and treating it as a "case." For dialectical thinking, suffering is rectified by the application of the law but this rectification is partial, only ideally complete, and in its imposition – of punishment, constraint, restrictions – actually creates suffering. How, then, is it comical to accept or even to will suffering in its particularity? Without law, suffering is the symptom of a form of life that is no longer vital, that has reached a kind of dead-end, and its mechanical repetition, now without any constraints, is funny. What is

funny is a world of struggle without suffering – a kind of ontological slapstick. In the essay on Masoch, comedy critiques the law which the Nietzsche essay has shown to be complicit in suffering. How is it comical to violate the law? Without law, suffering is unjustified, there is no reason for it and, then, without suffering, there is no longer any need for the restitution of the law. The comical critique of the law brings about precisely what the law attempts to achieve: a world that needs no rectification. In *The Logic of Sense*, comedy is a critique of the very form of traditional ethics, preoccupied with what an agent ought to do. How is it comical to deny ethical prescriptions? Every rectification is an injustice, it necessarily fails to balance goods and harms, and so holds out the unattainable world without suffering as possible even as it enforces the necessity of suffering.

In the past several years there has been a growing interest in applying Deleuze's philosophical arguments to political theory. One common point of reference for many of these applications is Deleuze's frequent references to jurisprudence.[59] Throughout his career Deleuze engaged in an idiosyncratic but persistent struggle with a kind of ethical dogmatism, an image of thought that fettered not just creative thinking but also the sort of practical thinking that might dissolve the concrete instances of human suffering. Like jurisprudence, comedic thinking begins with a genealogical thinking of the legitimating force of judgment. This critique makes clear the distinction between judgment and the world by highlighting judgment as an act of interpretation. The world is thereby apprehended in wonder, without judgment. In tragedy, wonder forestalls the judgment that orders the whole of the story. In comedy, wonder forestalls action as the world is submitted to thought without a call for judgment. The world is as it is and the spectator of comedy is tasked with living in it, not passing judgment on it. As Paul Patton argues in *Deleuze and the Political*, jurisprudential thinking forsakes transcendental norms in favor of what Deleuze later, in the writings coauthored with Guattari, will call "deterritorialization." Comedic thought or wonder does not abandon rectification in a fit of nihilism; what is rejected is the image of a finished law, an ordered domain of the Good. Such a world is a dead one, like a drama stripped of its story.[60] The ethical activity of comedy works to open thinking to new forms of experience that are selected according to their power to produce other new forms. This shift in ethical thinking is, at bottom, a reorientation in thinking and the world; "there is, in a certain respect, no change except a change of the will, a sort of leaping in place (*saut sur place*) of the whole body which exchanges its organic will for a spiritual will."[61] Is the resulting world one without suffering? Certainly not. But by attending to the chance character of suffering, to the non-absolute character of the structures that create and that even seem to require it, and then, propelled by ironic detachment, prospect for other distributions, other worlds and meanings, not only might the wagers being made become humorous, but the sheer multitude of reworkings that we might undertake might elicit joyous laughter.

disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2005) 5.

2 Ibid. 4–5.

3 Ibid. 5.

4 Ibid.

5 "The image of thought" is Deleuze's term for the form of philosophical thinking that characterizes the dominant tradition of Western philosophical history. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Nietzsche is characterized as creating a new image of thought, opposed to the previous "dogmatic" one (Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, rev. ed., trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam

(New York: Columbia UP, 2006)). In *Proust and Signs* ([1963], trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000)) Deleuze describes Proust's work as "vying with philosophy" and challenging the neutral image of thought in the latter with a kind of thought that is forced to think by encounters with signs. *Difference and Repetition* ([1968], trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia UP, 1994)) contains the most extended discussion of the image of thought. There, expanding on his previous discussions, Deleuze organizes the image of thought into eight "postulates." The question raised here is, then, whether this neutral and dogmatic form of thought, according to this form, accounts to some extent for the lack of philosophical interest in comedy (especially when compared to the philosophical interest in tragedy).

6 The history of the interpretation of the *Poetics* is quite complicated. My remarks follow the detailed discussions found in Leon Golden's *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* and in Joe Sachs' "Introduction" to his translation of the *Poetics*. Golden argues that Bernays is responsible for the view "that the final product and goal of our involvement with tragedy is the *therapeutic* purgation of pity and fear" (Leon Golden, *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992) 2), while Lessing argues "that *katharsis* must represent a form of *moral purification*" (14). Golden points out that the principal supporting text for Bernays is a passage from the *Politics* that describes the therapeutic purgation of pity and fear as an instrumental (rather than final) goal of music, used to restore equilibrium to listeners in a heightened emotional state. Similarly, he argues that Lessing's argument rests on a passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that corresponds to no text in the *Poetics* and leaves unexplained how *katharsis* could "fine tune excess *and* deficiency of emotional response" (15). It is the *Metaphysics* that, for Golden, provides the most support for an interpretation of mimesis in the *Poetics*. Since the *Poetics* is concerned with mimesis essentially, and since, according to the famous first line of the *Metaphysics*, all human beings by nature desire to know, the claim that mimesis arose as a natural way for human beings to understand the world, made at 1448 b 4–17 in the *Poetics*, establishes that the purpose or end of the *katharsis* that a spectator experiences from a mimetic work of art is the pleasure of intellectual learning and discovery. Similarly, Sachs describes tragic *katharsis* in the following way:

> This is not a refinement of sensibility that makes our feelings subtler and less coarse; it is a direct and solid impact of two forces that any human being can feel. It does not clear pity and fear out of our systems, but leaves them with us in a strange new combination. By no means does it clear anything up. (Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus/Pullins, 2006) 13)

The intellectual pleasure is not found in the discovery of a lesson but in an experience of wonder that involves both coming to know something unknown and experiencing that new knowledge as disorienting.

7 Golden justifies this interpretation by showing that, contrary to Bernays' claim that *katharsis* can be understood only in medical terms, Plato's *Sophist* gives an intellectual meaning to the term and could have plausibly served as the source for Aristotle's use of *katharsis* in the *Poetics* (Golden 22–24).

8 Sachs stresses that the experience of wonder is a temporary suspension of judgment (16).

9 Golden points out that, in the *Poetics*,

> Aristotle emphasizes that the essential reason for the pleasure we take in *all forms of mimesis* is that the act of learning is not only the most pleasant to philosophers but to all other human beings as well, even though their share in it is more limited. Thus, the *essential* pleasure of comic *mimesis*, like the essential pleasure of tragic *mimesis*, *must* lie in the intellectually illuminating process of "learning and inference." (71)

10 To summarize this movement: in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze interprets the two senses of the tragic as two modalities of responding to the question of justice – of whether the world has meaning or purpose; in *Coldness and Cruelty* (in *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone, 1991)) comedy is a critique of the law conceived as an instrument for restraining and ordering the world; finally, in *The Logic of Sense*, humor is the attitude of the one who, through a comedic understanding of the world, refrains from judging it (Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin

Boundas; trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia UP, 1990)).

11 Deleuze's most deliberate use of "the concrete" is in a 1990 letter to Jean-Clet Martin, reprinted at the beginning of the latter's *Variations: La Philosophie de Gilles Deleuze* (Paris: Payot, 1993). Deleuze writes: "I have then only one thing to say to you: do not forget the concrete, return to it constantly" (8). The concrete designates whatever forces thinking into activity and Deleuze stresses the difference between a thinking that begins from the concrete and one that begins from concepts (the latter almost unavoidably following the dogmatic image of thought).

12 A notable exception to this tendency is, of course, Jacques Derrida, whose essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" clearly shows the influence of Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*:

> Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. (Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 292)

13 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 11.

14 Ibid. 9.

15 Ibid. 3.

16 Ibid. 38.

17 Ibid. 2.

18 Ibid. 12.

19

> Here at this moment of supreme danger for the will, art approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can redirect those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live; these representations are the sublime, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the comical, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 40)

20 Ibid. 34.

21 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 18.

22 The English translation consistently renders the relatively straightforward French term *juste* (meaning "just," in the sense of justice) as "righteous," often obscuring the plainly ethical and political character of Deleuze's discussion.

23 Gilles Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: Le Froid et le cruel* (Paris: Minuit, 2007) 71. The English translation of this essay is loosely translated and is misleading in many places. English translations here are my own unless noted otherwise.

24 Ibid. 75.

25 The history that Deleuze sketches is cursory and lacks any detailed justification. However, if the "true" form of the law can only be recovered from beneath the perverted forms that Sade and Masoch have clothed it in then presumably Deleuze is both justified and bound to produce an account of the law that is as idiosyncratic as its sources.

26 Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch* 72.

27 Ibid. 77.

28 Ibid. 73.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid. 77. Deleuze's discussion of institutions in "Coldness and Cruelty" extends and develops a discussion that began in his book on Hume, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*. There, he argues that the "main idea" of Hume's critique of the social contract is that

> the essence of society is not the law but rather the institution. The law, in fact, is a limitation of enterprise and action, and it focuses only on a negative aspect of society. The fault of contractual theories is that they present us with a society whose essence is the law, that is, with a society that has no other objective than to guarantee certain preexisting natural rights and no other origin than the contract. Thus, anything positive is taken away from

> the social, and instead the social is saddled with negativity, limitation, and alienation. The entire Humean critique of the state of nature, natural rights, and the social contract, amounts to the suggestion that the problem must be reversed [...] The institution, unlike the law, is not a limitation but rather a model of actions, a veritable enterprise, an invented system of positive means or a positive invention of indirect means. (Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin Boundas (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 45–46)

31 *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch* 78.

32 Ibid. 78–79.

33 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* xiii.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid. Later, in the "Twentieth Series on Stoic Philosophy," Deleuze will explicitly liken the Stoic sage to a mime: "This is how the Stoic sage not only comprehends and wills the event, but also *represents it and, by this, selects it*, and that an ethics of the mime necessarily prolongs the logic of sense. Beginning with a pure event, the mime directs and doubles the actualization, measures the mixtures with the aid of an instant without mixture, and prevents them from overflowing" (*Logic of Sense* 147).

36 Ibid. 146.

37 Ibid. 149.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid. 127.

40 Ibid. 130.

41 Ibid. 131.

42 *Hercules Furens*, Seneca.

43 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* 132–33.

44 Ibid. 143.

45 Laurent De Sutter, *Deleuze: La Pratique du droit* (Paris: Michalon, 2009) 37.

46 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* 135.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid. 136.

50 Ibid. 137.

51 Ibid. 137–38.

52 See especially Book 2, chapter 3 of the Transcendental Dialectic: The Ideal of Pure Reason (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1998)).

53 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* 138.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid. 139.

56 Ibid. 141.

57 Ibid.

58 Pierre-Andre Boutang, "G as in Left/Gauche" in *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).

59 Some examples: De Sutter; Rosi Braidotti, Claire Colebrook, and Patrick Hanafin, eds., *Deleuze and Law: Forensic Futures* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alexandre Lefebvre, *The Image of Law: Deleuze, Bergson, Spinoza* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009); Paul Patton, *Deleuzian Concepts: Philosophy, Colonization, Politics* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010).

60 In his translation of the *Poetics*, Sachs renders *muthos* as "story" rather than the more customary "plot." He justifies his choice by stating:

> The word "plot" may suggest a skeletal framework of events onto which a poet can impose an illusion of life, but stories are genuine wholes that already have a life of their own; this is precisely what Aristotle means when he says that the story is like the soul of the tragedy (1450a 38–39). (4)

61 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* 149.

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