

# Essay on Laughter

Norbert Elias

Edited by Anca Parvulescu

We all smile and laugh occasionally. To do so is as much part of a normal human existence as to eat or drink. But while one can invariably understand the part played in our life by eating and drinking, it is much more difficult to grasp that of smiling and of laughing. Many other living things eat and drink; few of them can smile or laugh.

Norbert Elias started working on “Essay on Laughter” in 1956. He wrote drafts for parts of this essay, in English, while on the sociology faculty at University of Leicester. There are ninety-one manuscript pages in the “Laughter” folder at Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar. The manuscript consists of three plans for the essay, drafts of a few sections, handwritten notebooks, a lecture, and newspaper clippings. We are publishing this essay with permission of the copyright holder, Norbert Elias Stichting, Amsterdam.

Elias often wrote multiple versions of the same paragraphs. The manuscript is typed, but there are numerous handwritten edits, additions, and notes. In the editing process, when possible, I chose the version that seems to be the last Elias completed. In a few instances, in an attempt to recuperate the complexity of Elias’s thinking across his multiple drafts, I created composite paragraphs out of the various versions. Editing included eliminating typos and other errors, adding punctuation, condensing some sections (marked in footnotes), eliminating repetitions, and bringing together sections on the same theme. Elias’s footnotes are unmarked, while editorial notes are marked as such. We formatted the essay with a view to retaining the unfinished, fragmentary nature of the manuscript. While the essay has a beginning and while its incomplete middle fragments can be retraced in Elias’s various plans, it does not have a conclusion. Elias did not propose a solution to the “riddle of laughter.” In his autobiographical *Notes on a Lifetime* he foregrounded the importance of this project to his intellectual trajectory; see Norbert Elias, *Notes on a Lifetime*, in *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Stephen Mennell et al., 18 vols. (Dublin, 2014), 17:3–70.

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The range of smiling and laughing is truly astonishing.<sup>1</sup> Both the situations and the manner in which we smile or laugh vary so much that it is hard to say what they all have in common. Smiles may be light-hearted and playful or sad and melancholy; they may be spontaneous, deliberate, or forced. They may express the gladness of one's heart, affection and love, or affectation, polite attention, nervous hesitation or social embarrassment. Laughter may be the laughter of exultation and triumph or that of derision and gloating, the laughter of irony or romping and teasing; it may be the side-splitting laughter of merriment, the hilarious laughter of rejoicing and good cheer; the spontaneous and uproarious laughter of children or the near restraint of polite adults; the controlled and thoughtful laughter of the sophisticated or, gay and soft, the laughter of young lovers. It may have the form of a horse laugh or a hollow laugh, a pleasant peal of laughter or a shout and a burst. One may chuckle, chortle, giggle, cackle, burble, snigger and titter, or even smirk, simper, guffaw, and cachinnate.

There seems to be no end to these variations. Perhaps the most perplexing quality of laughter is its use in connection with seemingly incompatible and antagonistic attitudes. Laughter may be a sign of love or a sign of hatred. We may laugh affectionately with someone and cruelly at someone. And sometimes a laugh may express, rolled in one, affection as well as hostility. Laughter, although certainly part of man's natural inheritance, is obviously a more complex mental phenomenon than hunger and thirst, though perhaps not more complex than love, which is exceedingly variable in its manifestations and, I am told, may sometimes turn into hostility and hatred.

Do these various shades and forms of laughter have anything in common? Is it possible to detect a unitary basic function for the whole genus of laughter? One cannot answer this question, if one can answer it at all,

1. Elias prefaced his exploration of the spectrum of human laughing and smiling with an observation of the limited facial expressivity of animals.—ED.

NORBERT ELIAS (1897–1990) was one of the most prominent sociologists of the twentieth century. His work (not including this essay) has recently been published as *Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Stephen Mennell et al., 18 vols. (Dublin, 2006–14). ANCA PARVULESCU is professor of English at Washington University. She is the author of *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (2010) and *The Traffic in Women's Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe* (2014).

without considering the most obvious characteristics of laughter. Variable as laughter may be, elusive as a subject of thought, there are certain characteristics that all kinds of laughter seem to have in common.

Laughter is usually an immediate, unpremeditated reaction. Normally, the explosion follows whatever it is that makes us laugh as promptly, or even more promptly, as the sneeze follows the snuff. And it is almost as short-lived. It is wholly bound up with the present moment. While we laugh, all thoughts of what lies behind and before us fade into the background. Provided the fit is free and hearty enough, we are defenseless. Laughter does not agree with any strenuous exercise. We are not ready for physical combat as long as we laugh. The serious long-term business of life recedes from our mind; and attention is focused on what goes on here and now. All energies are absorbed in the enjoyment of the present. All other activities are interrupted; we do nothing else; we laugh.

The quiet rhythm of our normal breathing, which we hardly notice, is suddenly broken. There is a short sharp intake of breath. Then we let off steam. In a series of rhythmical jerks and jolts, we expel more air than we inhale until, in the case of a hearty laugh, we are out of breath and are perhaps flushed; for the blood runs more freely and copiously through our head. By pushing air from the lungs through the vocal cords, which are partly compressed, we let them vibrate in a particular manner; we make odd noises like ha, ha, ha or haw, haw, haw or, more gently, tse, tse, tse. The surge of laughter may be brief, a mere interlude in a running conversation, a slight respectable eruption of people who keep a firm hold of themselves. It may be half stifled and squashed before it attains its vigor and pops out like a damp squid with a squelch and a gurgle. Once on its way, the impulse to laugh is powerful; to battle against it often produces strained noises odder than laughter itself. Untrammelled, the waves of laughter rise steadily, reach a climax, and then die down like breakers at sea, wiped out by a sudden gust of wind. It may be that the first wave is followed by a second and a third. We allow ourselves to be overcome by laughter. Then it is over. Refreshed, with the aftertaste of the pleasurable experience still on our tongue, we return to the business at hand.

Smiling and laughing slide easily into each other. Except for the sound, the facial expressions characteristic of a gentle laugh and a broad smile are not very different. There is, as Charles Darwin, James Sully, and others have pointed out, a series of gradations leading from the faintest and

most civilized smile or chuckle to the horse laugh.<sup>2</sup> A full laugh, it is true, runs through the whole person, as the smile does not. It may involve movements of the arms and the trunk. If produced by tickling, people may wriggle and writhe. Laughing children often throw their arms about. Grown-ups may hold their sides and slap their thighs or poke their elbows in their neighbor's ribs. Thomas Carlyle's Baron Teufelsdröckh could still laugh from head to heel.<sup>3</sup> In Victorian England, polite society condemned a full-throated, sidesplitting laugh as indecorous and vulgar. The civilizing process has pruned laughter increasingly to a moderate size, as it had done before in the East.<sup>4</sup> Whenever such a process goes far enough, the more ebullient, boisterous forms of laughter tend to disappear. Only children and the poorer classes are left to laugh boisterously with their whole body, and, with the retreat of poverty, perhaps only children and vagabonds.

Even so, laughter is always a change in the whole person. Whatever the social conventions, laughter involves movements of the muscles of the abdomen, chest, and throat not utilized in the production of a smile. And the pivotal element of both, that by which we recognize a smile as a smile and without which a laugh would not be a laugh, is a rather complex and highly specific pattern of change in our face.

The mouth broadens. As long as one smiles faintly, it may still remain closed. The mouth opens more and more as we pass from a small to a broad smile and from a good to a rich laugh. The lips, relaxed, are pulled outward and upward by a force that appears to come from the corners of the mouth; drawn out, they become a trifle thinner. The upper lip is pressed against the upper row of teeth, which become partly visible. This is one of the most characteristic features of laughter: the teeth are shown, though not threateningly; they are kept in check by the tightly drawn upper lip, like a weapon playfully shown in a state in which it cannot be used. The lower jaw drops; it may even tremble a little. While the mouth opens and broadens, the lower lip forms a wider arch around the upper lip. As they are both drawn towards the side of the face, they join there, tapering off to a rather sharp angle. Near their point of juncture, small, hardly

2. See James Sully, *An Essay on Laughter: Its Forms, Its Causes, Its Development, and Its Value* (New York, 1902), and Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London, 1872).—ED.

3. See Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (Boston, 1836).—ED.

4. The description of one of the chapters in one of Elias's plans for the essay reads: "the civilizing of laughter as part of the civilizing process generally."—ED.

visible muscular nodes are slightly raised; beneath them, the corners of the mouth form little shadowy hollows. As the corners of the mouth are pulled back and slightly lifted, the soft tissues of the cheeks are raised. Dimples may form at the side of the face where looser portions of the skin are dragged against portions that are less mobile. The furrows that run from the wings of the nose down to the corners of the mouth, the naso-labial folds, curve, deepen, and become more visible.

If people laugh, their lower lids are raised, the eyes recede a little; they are often half closed and not focused on anything in particular. Like the laughing mouth, the eyes in laughter become more oblong; the angles at which the eyelids meet at their outer corners, like that of the lips at the outer corners of the mouth, become more pointed; the wider arches formed by the upper lids of laughing eyes seem to match that formed by the lower lip of the laughing mouth, only here it is usually the upper lid that forms the wider arch matching that of the lower lip. Below the eyes, shaded furrows and creases underline these changes—so do, radiating from the outer corners of the eyes, the well-known crow's-feet.

Not all changes in the face are of equal significance. The general pattern of a laughing face leaves a wide margin for variations. Not only individuals, not only social groups differ in their manner of smiling and laughing, but also natural groupings, such as men and women and people of different ages.

The changes that come over the round wrinkled faces of the very young when they smile or laugh are as rudimentary as they are transient. The mouth broadens rather clumsily. When it opens, there are hardly any teeth to show. The corners of the mouth are rather shapeless, perhaps a little wet, and still unaffected by any constraint, their movements still wholly spontaneous and rather slight; only the lightest of shadows nestles in these corners when they are pulled outward and upward. When the cheeks are raised, there is hardly any trace of the furrows that will later run between them and the wings of the nose towards the angles of the mouth. The skin of the cheeks passes smoothly, without folds and creases, into that of the lower eyelids. And little, if anything, is to be seen of the crow's-feet.

By contrast, in the faces of older people, creases and folds have come to stay. Movements made over the years, again and again, whether in grief or amusement, constraint or desire, or while thinking or reading or watching attentively, have left their traces in the modeling of the skin, which has lost its resilience. The eyes have sunk a little deeper into their orbits.

Around them, as elsewhere, the skin has shrunk. And among the crannies and wrinkles that are always there, the signs of smiling and laughing seem to be less vivid and less clearly marked; the shadows change and deepen in folds and furrows, which are permanent.

The picture is quite unmistakable. It may vary from individual to individual. Learning different social conventions may modify it to some extent, but on the whole the modifications are relatively slight. The broadening of the mouth, the dragging of the corners of the mouth backward and upward, the lifting of the cheeks, the crow's-feet in the corners of the eyes are common property of mankind. However varied the signs, our recognition of smiling and laughter, when we encounter them, is instantaneous. Except perhaps in the case of very small children, who seem sometimes to hover uneasily between crying and smiling, one can rarely misread the signs in the face of a living person, though it is not always equally easy to distinguish these signs in photographs, where their three dimensional aspects are only shown by proxy.

The picture is quite unmistakable. Hand in hand with it goes an equally varied yet essentially equally simple and specific sound pattern. Both are somewhat difficult to describe. Our fount of words, our conceptual schemas are not well developed for such a task. One is often groping for words. It might be different if we could sell smiles and laughs, some fetching higher, some lower prices, according to quality. How quickly would a highly differentiated vocabulary develop to mark such distinctions! Or if smiling and laughing had other social functions, which made verbalization useful. As it is, the visual and audible pattern of laughter is so familiar to us, it is so much taken for granted, this curious constellation of features and sounds, that it seems to present no problem.

Have we learned to move our muscles in this particular fashion simply by imitating our elders and betters when we were children? Have in the past some clever ancestors of ours invented this kind of facial gymnastics in order to show their neighbors that they were amused and, if so, what put it in their head to indicate their amusement just in this particular way, by drawing back the corners of the mouth, by half closing their eyes and by producing crow's-feet? Why choose as a signal this expression in the face? Why express it at all?

On the other hand, if laughing and smiling are not simply learned expressions, if underlying all these varieties of laughter by social convention

and individual experience there is some common human reaction pattern that is not learned, what is its function? If there is such an inherited and innate or endogenous basis for smiling and laughing, how did it come about that this not easily describable feeling tone, which we try to catch by means of words like *amusement*, *delight*, or *pleasure*, is so solidly coupled with this specific change of features? Is there an affinity among crow's-feet, upwards and backwards movements of the corners of the mouth, rhythmical sounds like ha ha and ho ho, and the inner state that they are said to express? Do we learn to associate the two, the facial movement and the supposed inner state, through experience? It is certainly extremely difficult to imagine that one could, by training or social convention, change the significance of these facial movements and that one could establish a social convention according to which crying and weeping would be established as a manifestation of amusement and merriment and smiling and laughing as an expression of dejection and sorrow.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the problem of laughter is so often misconstrued.<sup>5</sup> We take it for granted, for instance, that the peculiar configuration of movements in our face, which forms an essential part of smiling and laughter, is merely the outward expression of an inner feeling state and that this inner state is, as it were, the essence, that which we have to explain, while the facial expression, as we call it, is merely regarded as something secondary, a consequence for which this inner state is the pivotal cause.<sup>6</sup> The very term *expression* suggests as much. We rarely ask

5. The plans Elias wrote for the essay include a section titled "The Problem." In one, Elias described the stakes in identifying the problem: "What is disconcerting in studies of laughter is that there is, compared to the physical sciences, little continuity in research. Still, I shall give a brief outline of the way in which the problem has been formulated and in which it has been tentatively answered in selected cases. For the formulation of problems is often a feather in one's cap, if it is concise, even if the proposed solution goes astray. Alternatively, you have people who give excellent answers to the problem which they have set themselves to solve, while unfortunately the problem they try to solve is badly thought out or misconceived."—ED.

6. In *Notes on a Lifetime* Elias foregrounded the importance of his early training in medicine and philosophy before his turn to sociology:

Later, I worked at one time on problems to do with laughing and smiling. They show in paradigmatic form, it seemed to me, how people are biologically attuned to each other, in a way that should not be overlooked even when one is primarily concerned with attunement acquired by learning—that is, social adaptation. Thanks to the knowledge I acquired during my years studying medicine, it seemed to me entirely natural not to separate the social aspects of human smiling and laughing from what might perhaps be called their biological aspects.

In this context, Elias returned to his critique of expression: "it is an example of the *homo clausus* [the closed man] mentality, which inclines us to think that anything directed outwardly, that is, especially towards other people—in this case the signal board of a face—is a kind of accidental

why what we call or rather what we experience as an inner state and its visible expression on the face are so closely linked together. Why is our makeup such that the feeling, the emotional tone—or however you would like to call it—that accompanies smiling and laughing is bound up with this particular facial configuration or, for that matter, with any movement of muscles in the face or elsewhere at all? Can it be that because, subjectively, according to the present form of experiencing ourselves—our inner state—the individual feeling appears to us as more important and relevant than the changing patterning of our face, which we show to others, we tend to regard the former as causing agent and the aspects of laughter that are visible and audible to others as mere expression, of lesser significance?

If we, for a moment, abandon the priority assigned in our experience to feeling states, if we regard the emotional tone and the facial configuration as equivalent and inseparable aspects of a momentary change in a person as a whole, the picture and the problem transform themselves. In that case, the fact that the unmistakable change of a person is part of a very ancient, common heritage of man assumes a new significance. Everywhere this quaint contraction of certain muscle groups in our face and, in the case of laughter, in our throat, is recognized by others as a sign—as a sign of what?

It indicates, you might say, simply that the person who laughs is amused, whatever that might mean. But it also indicates something else, which one understands, though as a rule not consciously and articulately, as one understands the meaning of linguistic communication, if one speaks the same language.

Laughter, even though it might be hostile and aggressive, indicates to the beholder that the person who laughs is not in a state ready for physical attack. If you are in danger of being physically assaulted, make the attacker laugh (if you can). For the time being, he will be unfit to go on with his assault. Momentarily, laughter paralyses or inhibits man's faculty to use physical force.<sup>7</sup> And, although this peculiar aspect of laughter may not be

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accompaniment to the solitude of that person's inner existence. In reality the communicative signalling of feelings to other people is a primary feature of the human constitution." Elias concluded: "No doubt all this only became clear to me much later, but then it became one of the main pillars of my theory of civilisation and of my sociological thinking in general" (Elias, *Notes on a Lifetime*, 17:9–10).—ED.

7. This is the part of Elias's manuscript that Michael Schröter foregrounded in the German-language article in which he described Elias's project; see Michael Schröter, "Wer lacht, kann



recognized in an articulate manner, it is understood well enough without verbalization, implicitly, in the practice of life the world over. This aspect may appear irrelevant today because those who think about such problems live in societies where the danger of being physically assaulted by others is normally very slight. There is so much else to be said about laughter that this aspect, though perhaps recognizable, seems not of very great relevance. But if one sets out to discover the more elementary function of this human phenomenon, can it be that this more primitive aspect helps us see at least the problem with which we are confronted in better perspective?

For if indeed underlying all the various social modifications of laughter, which can be acquired as language can be acquired, there is an unlearned archaic movement pattern, part of the biological makeup of man, then we have to go back in order to understand it to a state of mankind where physical violence played quite a different part in the life of man than it plays today.

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Let us see what the learned have to say.<sup>8</sup> Enough solutions to the riddle of laughter have been put forward to fill a library. All I would like to do here is to put before you some sample solutions, to let you see how people throughout the centuries, again and again, had a go at this riddle, though some were obviously more convincing and nearer the mark than others, and to gain a clearer picture of the main lines of approach to the problem. Brief and selective as such an assembly of samples must be, it may help us see at least what the main difficulties are; and seeing the difficulties is often half the battle.

Let me begin with an explanation of laughter I particularly like. In 1615, an Italian doctor, Basilio Paravicino, published a little *Discorso del riso*.<sup>9</sup> His main proposition is this: laughter has been given to man so that he can restore his soul weakened and fatigued by the meditations of the intellect. If he would go on thinking, using his intellect continuously, he would impair the acuteness of his mind. In the end, he might no longer be able

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nicht beißen: Ein unveröffentlichter 'Essay on Laughter' von Norbert Elias," *Merkur* 56 (Sept. 2002): 860–73.—Ed.

8. Elias wrote versions of a section of the essay reviewing existing theories of laughter.—Ed.

9. See M. Basilio Paravicino, *Discorso del riso* (Como, 1615). On the margins of the notes he took on Paravicino, Elias wrote, in capital letters: "DID IN FORMER DAYS THE WHOLE BODY LAUGH?"—Ed.

to sustain his usual meditations. One can understand why man alone has been given laughter; man alone has intellect and is capable of reflection. What sleep is to the body, the exhilaration of laughter is to the mind. One may wonder a little what Paravicino made of the laughter of people who, unlike himself, were not given very much to meditation, but one cannot help feeling a good deal of sympathy with his explanation of laughter. Of course, it presupposes the belief in the dual nature of man as a body and a mind; and it implies that the ultimate answer to problems such as this can be found by trying to guess what went on in the council of the deity, when laughter was given to man.

Gradually, the kind of problem that one tried to solve changed in a way that appeared, in principle, susceptible to verification; the problem of laughter became, as we say, more scientific. Instead of asking what went on in the creator's mind when he gave man laughter, one began to ask what goes on in man's mind when he laughs and what makes him laugh. This was, and still is for most people, the core of the riddle that his own laughter seems to present to man.

To make intelligent guesses in an attempt to solve this riddle has been for a long time the job of philosophers. Gradually, during the nineteenth century, biologists, psychologists, and sociologists began to do some spadework in this field. Today we have, on the one hand, a great mass of fairly accurate but unconnected observations about limited aspects of laughter, without any coordinating framework, a map showing how these disjointed bits of knowledge link up with each other. And we have, on the other hand, a great many overall theories about smiling and laughing in general, none of which fit more than part of the facts that are known. The connection between these two strands of knowledge is still rather slender.

Reflections on laughter, you may rightly think, focus attention on a very limited and not particularly significant manifestation of man. Yet, what one regards as significant, and as the problem, in laughter and therefore the solution one proffers is in most cases one-sidedly determined by and shows off very neatly the wider system of experiences, ideas, and values that is held incommunicado and is never really put to the test.<sup>10</sup> And,

10. Elias wrote an extended note on the treatment of dead writers and thinkers. Ideally, he proposed, instead of "reproducing a dry sentence and holding it out to ridicule by showing how wrong it was," we would "reconstitute for one's own and others' enjoyment, as far as one can, the experiences and conditions which made people think of laughter in this or that manner."—ED.

although even in the mainly philosophical theories of laughter, sound and often very detailed observations abound, they are almost invariably made in such a way that they lead towards an explanation of laughter that fits the already existing systems of assumption about man and nature in general. There is never any reciprocity. The manner of observing details is attuned to already existing general ideas. But the latter are not exposed to the test of detailed observation and, if necessary, attuned to them and revised. The perplexing proliferation of theories of laughter and the almost complete lack of steadiness and continuity in the development of these ideas is in no small degree due to this lack of equilibrium in the relationship between general hypotheses and specific observation, the continued preeminence of the former in relation to the latter.

Although at first sight these solutions may seem very different and perhaps irreconcilable, on closer inspection one can discern some central themes that in various guises return. Of these central themes, around which most theories cluster, I should like to choose three, which may help us on our way.<sup>11</sup> Each seems to cover part, but none all the various forms of laughter that one can actually observe. This variability of what is after all one and the same movement pattern is precisely the difficulty that one encounters if one studies this problem.

Let us take as examples the ideas about laughter of the two great philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant, one the defender of a strong and unlimited monarchical régime, the other, in his heart's heart, its opponent, even though, in the Prussian kingdom where he lived as a state-paid professor at Königsberg University, he was hardly able to express his opinions in these matters.

For Hobbes, the staunch defender of royal prerogative and autocracy, the state of nature is a state of war.<sup>12</sup> All men, according to him, are moved either by pride or by fear. Only by submitting to a strong sovereign can there be peace; society exists, as he puts it, "either for gain or for glory; that is, not so much for love of our fellows as for love of ourselves."<sup>13</sup> It is curious to see how this bend of mind, this specific system of general ideas and values, illuminates one aspect of laughter in such a way that Hobbes's

11. Elias's three clusters are superiority, incongruity, and play.—ED.

12. See Richard Peters, *Hobbes* (Harmondsworth, 1956), p. 168.—ED.

13. Hobbes, *Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society*; quoted in Peters, *Hobbes*, p. 168.—ED.

explanation, defended or attacked, has remained alive throughout the centuries, and, even today, it can hardly be dismissed with a shrug of one's shoulders simply as wrong, however insufficient it might be. Laughter, for Hobbes, is the expression of a passion that is joyful but for which we have no proper name. It is always caused by something new and unexpected, which produces a "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves; by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."<sup>14</sup> What happens, if one laughs at someone, is that one triumphs over him. We do not laugh when we or our friends are the subject of jests; anticipating many modern methods of making people laugh, Hobbes adds that, in order for laughter to be without offence it must be about absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons.

Hobbes focuses attention on the element of aggressiveness, on the note of triumph over others, which one may discern in an outburst of laughter. His explanation has been at the center of the controversy around laughter ever since. On hearing this formula, one certainly has the impression that Hobbes has got something there. If one were to express his thesis in today's language, one might say: We laugh if we experience a sudden pleasant access to a feeling of superiority, derived from the awareness of an inferiority in others, or, as Hobbes is careful to add, in ourselves in the past.

Is that enough? One can hardly say that laughter is provoked only by a sudden awareness of inferiority in others nor does such an awareness of inferiority in others necessarily make us laugh.

In the following centuries, this explanation of laughter, the idea that it always has a sting in its tail, its relation to the pleasure aroused by the sudden access to a feeling of superiority, found favor and expression in a variety of forms. Joseph Addison, in a slightly attenuated form, took it up in the *Spectator*.<sup>15</sup> Even George Eliot suggested that the "wonderful and delicious mixture of fun, fancy, philosophy, and feeling, which constitutes modern humor," probably stems from "the cruel mockery of a savage at the writhings of a suffering enemy," and she adduced this as an example of humanity's progress.<sup>16</sup> And, in a recent article, someone has actually ventured to suggest that in times past laughter may have been the noise

14. Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth, 11 vols. (London, 1839), 4:46.—Ed.

15. See Joseph Addison, "Laughter and Ridicule," *Addison's Essays from the Spectator* (London, 1870), pp. 305–7.—Ed.

16. George Eliot, "German Wit: Heinrich Heine," *Westminster Review* 65 (Jan. 1856): 2.—Ed.

made by the victor and crying that of the defeated. We do not have any proof of that. We are on safer ground with observations of children who, if they are not broken in rather early, often laugh quite unashamedly in triumph over others and at other people's misfortunes. A study of children who were asked to tell a funny story or experience that has made them laugh showed, according to C. W. Kimmins, that the misfortunes of others are often the cause of laughter and form the basis of many funny stories.<sup>17</sup> With seven-year-old children, about 25 percent of the boys' stories and 16 percent of the girls' are of this nature. As adults, we no longer laugh so often on occasions like these in actual life, not at people we know personally or whom we actually see humiliated or in distress. Instead, we have developed a great many special institutions where we can go and be entertained by professional laughter makers, specialists whose repertoire is filled, at least in part, with minor degradations and misfortunes of others and at whom or with whom we can laugh in a rather impersonal way.

Shall we say, then, that Hobbes, with his "sudden glory" theory, has really got hold of the key to the problem of laughter? There can be little doubt that in his time the people among whom he moved did laugh aggressively at others whom they knew, with undisguised triumph and far more openly and, as we might feel, cruelly than we do. In Hobbes's circles, laughter often had an edge and a point, sharp like those of a dagger, and it was meant to hurt, wound, and humiliate. Think of Buckingham writing a bitter farce in the manner of John Dryden and having it performed with one of the actors dressed up like Dryden and imitating his hesitant speech and other mannerisms, and inviting Dryden to the performance, sitting with him in a box to enjoy his discomfort at the outbursts of laughter all around him.<sup>18</sup>

Or think of Thomas Killigrew's satire of an elderly and unskillful gamester, whom he called Lady Love-all: "I peeped once to see what she did before she went to bed; by this light, her maids were dissecting her; and when they had done, they brought some of her to bed, and the rest they either pin'd or hung up, and so she lay dismembered like an Anatomy school."<sup>19</sup> To us, this is slightly distasteful but completely impersonal. But the circles

17. See C. W. Kimmins, *The Springs of Laughter* (London, 1928), p. 95. I condensed Elias's notes on Kimmins.—Ed.

18. See George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, *The Rehearsal* (London, 1671). Elias wrote after a few pages: "Years later, in 1683, when Buckingham fell from power, Dryden got his own back. His portrait of the Duke in 'Absalom and Achitophel' is still there for all to read." See John Dryden, "Absalom and Achitophel" (London, 1681).—Ed.

19. Thomas Killigrew, *The Parson's Wedding* (London, 1663).—Ed.

for whom the pieces we now call Restoration comedies were written were very small. Author and audience belonged to them. For all we know, a lady to whom common gossip attributed this form of adornment and disguise may have been in the audience, and everybody was aware of it.<sup>20</sup>

Hobbes's explanation of laughter has been attacked and criticized on many grounds—sometimes as utterly wrong, at other times as one-sided or as missing the main point. “If we observe an object in pain,” wrote Francis Hutcheson, “while we are at ease, we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing and yet there is occasion for Hobbes's sudden joy. It must be a very merry state in which a fine gentleman is, when well dressed, in his coach, he passes our streets, where he will see so many ragged beggars, and porters and chairmen sweating at their labour, on every side of him. It is a great pity that we had not an infirmary or a lazar-house to retire to in cloudy weather to get an afternoon of laughter at these inferior objects.”<sup>21</sup> Hutcheson saw in laughter a reaction to the contrast between dignity and meanness. There is nothing like it, he thought, for deflating false grandeur and bringing our imagination or the violence of our passion to a conformity with the real importance of our affairs. Thus, if Hobbes saw laughter as an expression of the triumphant individual's pleasantly inflated ego, Hutcheson, who was a professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow University, saw in it an instrument of social control, which might help correct such unrealistic and socially undesirable qualities as the illusion of self-aggrandizement. He already saw, though perhaps not as clearly as others after him, the discrepancy between two layers of experience: one the product of our imagination, the other real. His conception of laughter, far more representative than that of Hobbes of middle-class groups without much political power, had a strong moral undertone. His explanation belongs to a long line of theories, by no means all with a moral undertone, that lays stress on incongruities as a stimulus of laughter. They cluster around the idea that it is the sudden awareness of being whisked from the expected into an unexpected and discrepant context that makes us laugh. As another writer of the eighteenth century, Mark Akenside, put it:

Where'er the power of Ridicule displays  
Her quaint-ey'd visage, some incongruous form,  
Some stubborn dissonance of things combin'd,  
Strikes on the quick observer.<sup>22</sup>

20. Elias's handwritten notes focused on Restoration comedy and raised the question of the emergence of English humor.—ED.

21. Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter* (Glasgow, 1750), p. 11.—ED.

22. Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination: A Poem in Three Books* (London, 1744).—ED.

Kant's conception of laughter, like that of Hutcheson, is part not only of a philosophical but also a social polemic, directed in the first place against those who give themselves airs: aristocrats, courtiers, and members of the ruling circles who suffer illusions of grandeur. His often quoted definition, "laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing," although a very characteristic example of incongruity theory, unfolds its meaning only if one also reads his comments and explanations.<sup>23</sup> He insists that it does not in the least provoke laughter if an expectation reveals itself as untrue. It is literally the reduction to nothing or, in our language, perhaps to nonsense that arouses laughter. "The bubble of our expectation was extended to the full," as he puts it, and suddenly bursts into nothingness. What is it that one expects to hear?

One expects the usual manner of utterance guardedly veering towards artificiality and fine pretense and, lo and behold, there is nature unspoilt and innocent, which one did not in the least expect to encounter and which he who discloses it did not mean to reveal. . . . Take the case of the heir of a wealthy relative trying to make preparations for his relative's funeral on a most imposing scale, but complaining that things would not go right for him because (as he said), 'the more money I give the mourners to look sad, the more pleased they look.' At this we laugh outright and the reason is that we had an expectation which is suddenly reduced to nothing.<sup>24</sup>

One cannot help thinking how much there is in Kant that foreshadows Sigmund Freud's theories of slips of the tongue, mistaken actions, and wit; some idea, which is ordinarily repressed, breaks out momentarily and unintentionally lifts, without our conscious intentions, the curtain of our controls. But the faint similarity of approach brings out more clearly the differences in the implied evaluations. Both Freud and Kant envisage a connection between laughter and the sudden revelation of an otherwise hidden layer of man. As Kant puts it, appearance, which usually assumes such an importance in our judgment, is suddenly turned to nothing. The rogue in us stands revealed. Yet something infinitely better than any accepted code of manners, namely, the innocent purity of mind (or at least the tendency towards it) is after all not completely extinguished in human nature and infuses seriousness and reverence in this play of judgment.

23. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilkraft* (1790), *Werke*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, 11 vols. (Berlin, 1912–23), 5:199; trans. J. C. Meredith under the title *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Oxford, 1911), p. 199.

24. *Ibid.*, 5:200; *ibid.*, p. 200.

Since, however, the phenomenon lasts only a short while, since the cover of our art of dissimulation is drawn again soon enough, there is a touch of affectionate compassion, playful in its ways, in all of this.

Kant very much enjoyed good cheer and he liked to laugh. Yet laughter certainly is not a rational act. There was his problem. Kant describes how the sudden fall of an expectation into nothingness makes the mind oscillate. It goes, as it were, backward and forward over the situation, as if to say: Now, what has happened? Where did I go wrong? This oscillation of the mind communicates itself to the intestines. It causes a corresponding shaking of the intestines. One can almost see how Kant shook with laughter and, afterwards, thinking over what had happened to him, formed it into a theory. The shaking of the intestines is what gives us pleasure. This is an attempt to link what we call physical and mental aspects of laughter, one of the earliest I have come across.

We know that Kant liked to laugh. But how different was his company and the type of laughter that he saw and liked from that of Hobbes! Herr Professor was often enough an honored guest at weddings, confirmed bachelor that he was. One of his favorite “jokes” was to sing at a wedding, perhaps with his companions, a song that proved, by means of sharp and irrefutable syllogisms, that the best thing was to remain unmarried. He always added, “Of course, excepting such a nice, worthy couple as this.” If one of his companions said “always excepting such a worthy couple,” he repeated, to the amusement of all, “such a worthy couple.” This is a homely form of humor, *altväterlich*, as one of his biographers says. This is exactly the thing we have to see; how in this provincial atmosphere, far removed from the living centers of the present civilization, Kant found, pondered, and developed ideas that, dressed in *altväterliche* language, delved deeply enough into the sea to be still topical today.

In one form or another, a second group of writers on laughter cluster around the idea that it is the sudden awareness of something being whisked from the expected into an unexpected and discrepant context that makes us laugh.<sup>25</sup> For Kant, it was the sudden reappearance of nature under the mask of social conventions and artificialities that provides one major reason for laughter. Alexander Bain spoke of the relief and the uproarious delight that we feel if a forced and, in essence, unreal form of seriousness and solemnity suddenly comes in contact with triviality and

25. Elias wrote a few pages drawing out the contrast between Kant, Freud, and Bergson.—Ed.



vulgarity.<sup>26</sup> Herbert Spencer, for whom the laughter that follows certain perceptions of incongruity was only one of several varieties of laughter, referred to the mirth that ensues when the short silence between the andante and allegro in one of Ludwig van Beethoven's symphonies is broken by a loud sneeze, as an illustration of his often quoted thesis that "laughter results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small—only when there is what we may call a *descending* incongruity."<sup>27</sup> For Henri Bergson, the two contexts whose encounter and clash produces laughter were those of life as contrasted to something purely mechanical. You probably know his famous formulas: "something mechanical encrusted upon the living," or "rigidity clashes with the inner suppleness of life."<sup>28</sup> There remains a family similarity in the various incongruity theories. They differ only in relation to *the two contexts or planes whose sudden and unexpected association in the experience of the perceiver is held to produce laughter.*

There is a considerable tendency to explain laughter as a concomitant or a derivative of an inclination to play. Many just and stimulating observations and ideas have been put forward to prove the relationship between the nature of play and the nature of laughter. Kant already conceived of laughter as a play of ideas. Boris Sidis contended that the play instinct, as he called it, was dominant in laughter.<sup>29</sup> We laugh in play. . . . The energy spent in laughter should be felt as not tending to any useful purpose. It must be spent for its own sake, for the love of it.

How just is it to say, as Sully did, in one of the most suggestive and comprehensive books on this subject, wrongly neglected today, that laughter, like the play impulse, frees us from external restraint, from the sense of compulsion, of a must in the ear, whether embodied in the voice of a master or in that of a higher self? "I shall hope," Sully wrote, "to show later that laughter has a like value, not only as a source of physiological benefit to the individual, but as helping us to become fit members of society."<sup>30</sup> Sully followed a track that takes us closer to the heart of the riddle. At the same time, he states explicitly one of the ideas that runs implicitly

26. See Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London, 1859).—Ed.

27. Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative* (New York, 1864), 2:460.—Ed.

28. Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London, 1911), p. 44.

29. See Boris Sidis, *The Psychology of Laughter* (New York, 1913).—Ed.

30. Sully, *An Essay on Laughter*, p. 146.

through most theories of laughter and that is in fact characteristic of the whole level of thinking of which these specific theories are merely some representatives. He starts from the assumption that one has to explain two separate aspects and functions of laughter: *the function laughter has for the individual, often identified with its physiological function, and, derived from it, the function laughter has for society*. This dichotomy is often intertwined with or based on two sets of seemingly contradictory observations, which leads us to the last of the central themes I wish to mention: the social function of laughter. For many discourses on laughter, the central problem remains the nature of the stimulus for the laughter of an individual and the nature of the feeling aroused in the individual by this stimulus. But some authors, while starting from the individual, include in their considerations what one might call the social aspects of laughter.

Many observations have suggested that laughter is a means of freeing us from external and, with it, social constraint, that it represents a slight revolt, to repeat Sully's words, against the voice of a master or that of a higher self, which we may call conscience. Those who stress the faculty of laughter as an expression of relief from social restraints could look to G. K. Chesterton, who, in his *Defense of Nonsense*, sums it up most neatly when he speaks of the "escape into a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness."<sup>31</sup> You would think that this aspect would have appealed to Bergson particularly: the need for social conformity, the dead hand of bureaucracy, and many other social institutions encrusted (to use Bergson's words) on the living. And yet Bergson was the most outspoken representative of the thesis, put forward before him, that laughter is one of the means by which a group enforces conformity and compels its members to toe the line. He writes towards the end of his book, not entirely unaffected by the ideas of his contemporary, Émile Durkheim: "Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken within it." In the end, Bergson comes to a startling and, in a way, paradoxical conclusion that has been often overlooked: *laughter itself is a mechanism*. One cannot be quite sure whether this conclusion was intended or whether Bergson has fallen here, not quite voluntarily, into a trap of his own ratiocinations. Laughter, he says rather sadly, is simply the result of a mechanism set up by nature or, what is almost the same thing, by our long acquaintance with social life. It goes off spontaneously and returns tit for tat. It has no time to

31. G. K. Chesterton, *A Defense of Nonsense and Other Essays* (New York, 1911), p. 5.—Ed.

look where it hits. Laughter punishes certain failings somewhat as disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent and some who are guilty. . . . In this sense, laughter cannot be absolutely just. Its function is to intimidate by humiliating. . . . Here, as elsewhere, nature has utilized evil with a view to good. He concludes: "Laughter . . . is a froth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find the substance scanty and the aftertaste bitter."<sup>32</sup>

What, then, are we to believe? Is laughter an expression of our revolt and a relief from social constraint? Or is it a social corrective, punishing us if we do not conform? Are there not examples of both these functions? The riddle deepens.<sup>33</sup>

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Can it be that we seem not much nearer to a more satisfactory solution to the question of laughter because the question itself was and still is in some ways inadequate and misconceived?<sup>34</sup>

The few samples of the main theme around which theories of laughter are grouped do not exhaust the field. But, varied and often enough contradictory as they are, the majority of these explanations of laughter have something in common: the heart of the problem that they are intended to solve is the same. As a rule, the specific changes directly accessible to observation, above all the characteristic changes of the face around the mouth and the eyes, tend to be regarded as effects or, as it is usually put, the expression of a hidden change, as we say, inside the person who laughs. Many theories of laughter are, therefore, mainly intelligent guesses about these changes inside a person (a feeling state, an emotion or an affect) and their causes. Their aim is to explain one of two things and very often both together in a variety of combinations: *They try to determine the inner state or event of which the expression, all that strikes our senses when a person laughs, is thought to be the upshot; and they try to determine the stimulus outside the person who laughs, which is thought to be the causal factor of this inner state or event.*

32. Bergson, *Laughter*, pp. 197, 200.

33. Elias's manuscript goes through a few pages of notes on William Blatz and William McDougal; see William E. Blatz, Kathleen Drew Allin, and Dorothy A. Millichamp, *A Study of Laughter in the Nursery School Child* (Toronto, 1936), and William McDougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (Boston, 1926).—Ed.

34. Elias wrote a short section of the essay under the subtitle "A Change of Problem."

It is along these lines that most theories of laughter are constructed. Some writers try to define the inner event that they think finds expression in laughter more in psychological terms, some more in physiological terms, and some concentrate, in the first instance, on the properties of the external stimulus. But they all seem agreed on the fact that the change in our physiognomy, the characteristic face and countenance of the person who laughs, is merely an accessory of an internal event and that the latter, together with the stimulus that produces it, is the actual clue to the riddle of laughter. In defining it, so it appears, one has solved the riddle.

There are many reasons why this is the kind of question so many people ask about laughter and this is the kind of answer that satisfies their curiosity and brings their questioning to an end. It is representative of an old and powerful tradition of thinking. It may have become blurred or merely disguised by various devices in scientific thinking, but it becomes manifest if not in the content at least in the manner of thinking over a wider area than it may appear.

Thus, as you can see, in these approaches to laughter, there lingers an almost unchallenged type of explanation. The activities of our muscles, the movements we make in our faces and our throat when we laugh, are more or less treated as if they were the movements of a puppet; in order to explain them, one wants to get, as it were, at the puppet player. The explanatory model used in these theories is still reminiscent of that used by John Donne when he spoke of man in his "poor Inn," of "souls in their first built cells . . . packed up in two yards of skin."<sup>35</sup> Here we have an idea that, in a faded and emasculated form, still seems to determine the direction of a good many philosophical and psychological inquiries, among them some of those on laughter.

This does not mean that writers whose explanations of laughter took this form necessarily shared Donne's convictions. Hobbes certainly would have repudiated any suggestion of this kind and so, no doubt, would have Freud. It is not the substance of their explanations but the general model of explanation they used that shows the characteristics of this residual animism. It is a tradition of thinking fossilized in a thousand and one familiar verbal usages. What could sound more right than phrases like *laughter is due to* or *is an expression of* joy, malice, superiority-feeling,

35. John Donne, "The Second Anniversary: Of the Progress of the Soul," *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Roger E. Bennett (Chicago, 1942), ll. 172, 175–76.—ED.

inner conflicts, saving of psychological energy, or relief of tension? And, yet, what exactly do we mean when we use phrases like these? Do we mean that the inner events to which we refer are immaterial motive forces and the laughter pattern on our faces their corporeal effect? Do we envisage the former pulling the strings that move our mimetic muscles more or less in the same way in which Donne once envisaged the brain as the “soul’s bedchamber” from whence “those sinewy strings which do our bodies tie / Are ravelled out.”?<sup>36</sup>

My difficulty, at this moment, is that I believe familiar phrases like these to be far more questionable and ambiguous than they appear; the same is true of the explanations that proceed along similar lines. Implied in both is an evaluation that makes it appear that the change in the countenance of a person who laughs is a mere adjunct and appendage of some other, more substantive and important changes inside the organism. Yet there is little in the factual evidence that has been brought to light so far that encourages us to think so. Can one set out the problem in a way less affected by the implied evaluations of our animistic heritage, which have become so deeply engrained in our language?

We know that laughter involves changes at various levels in the person who laughs. There are changes, to mention some, in the blood circulation and the intestines, changes of feeling, of the awareness of others and ourselves, and, of course, changes in our respiration and our face. One can say that the whole organism is involved when a person laughs and that changes of different parts and at different levels form an ensemble. But, of this ensemble, the hub, that which is specific of laughter and nothing else, is a specific facial and respiratory pattern. It is here, it appears, that one has to start, if one sets out to explore laughter.

Laughter surely is more than an individual phenomenon. It is a universal human behavior pattern surpassing ethnic and racial boundaries. Can it be that we have not been able to develop a more fitting and adequate working hypothesis because we start our quest at the wrong end? Instead of asking about the individual feeling that produces laughter and the stimulus to this individual feeling, a difficult question because its answer varies from case to case, might it not be more illuminating if one could start from the function laughter has as part of the natural equipment of

36. Donne, “Metempsychosis: The Progress of the Soul,” *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ll. 393, 503–4.—Ed.

man and proceed from there to the diversity of laughter in different social groups and different individual people? How would one set out to answer such a question?

One would have to go on a voyage of detection that would lead through many different fields and disciplines and would have to try to join together the seemingly unconnected pieces of the puzzle. That is what I intend to do. I invite you on a voyage of detection. Of course, it will be an abbreviated journey, for we have not much time.<sup>37</sup> We will have to draw on the resources of many academic disciplines; for laughter has many facets; it is biological as well as psychological and sociological.<sup>38</sup> One of the most obvious and most easily accessible facets of the phenomenon of laughter is the configuration of patterns on our face. One cannot get at the problem of laughter without giving some thought to the problem of the human face.

It is the momentary change of a whole person that one has to consider. One can take laughter, so to say, at face value and can simply ask: what actually is the function of this specific change in the face and respiration of a person, which may extend to the arms and the trunk and the legs, in the life of the person who laughs and of the species that has evolved with this peculiar endowment as one of its characteristics? It may be that from this starting point one can find a better thread through the maze of fact than if one starts at the other end, by dismissing the obvious as an accessory of a hidden essence. It may well be that starting from the vantage point of the laughing face and its function one may, in the end, get a clearer idea of the more intangible changes in mood and feeling that form another facet of the change in the laughing person.

The problem is simpler than it appeared. It is not to explain the peculiar configuration of man's face, which is characteristic of laughter, by reference to some other aspect of the organism, of which it is the expression or the effect. The problem of laughter, in other words, is inextricably bound up with the problem of the human face. How is it that, of all animals, man alone has developed a face so mobile, so infinitely variable, and,

37. Elias further explained his focus on laughter: "There will be no time to consider such late forms in the development of that which makes us laugh as, for instance, what we call 'humour.' I had a choice between talking about this late form of laughter or starting at the beginning; for various reasons, I have decided for laughter pure and simple, leaving the problem of humour and wit perhaps to another occasion." Elias worked on a separate "Lecture on Humour and Wit."—Ed.

38. I condensed Elias's description of the interdisciplinarity of the project.—Ed.

as we say, expressive that those of all other organisms appear by comparison masklike? Although the faces of apes are more mobile than those of cats and dogs, and those of cats and dogs more mobile than, for instance, of crocodiles and carps, measured by human standards even the expressions on the faces of gorillas and chimpanzees have a small range; they are rather repetitive, fairly gross, and often wearisome, like a twice-told tale.

It is understandable that in a society like ours, where people are forced to dissimulate and restrain and often conceal their true feelings, the question foremost in the mind of people is, what goes on behind the façade? What goes on inside? We constantly try to read faces to see what they, as the nice phrase goes, betray of the so-called inside. But scientific questions cannot be fashioned to cater to the needs of a transient society. If the prevailing focus is on the intentions, feelings, traits, characteristics, and properties expressed on a face, the wider question is why man, of all creatures, has developed a face capable of so many different expressions. How did it come that man is an organism in which something can be expressed in the face? Why should it be necessary for what goes on inside, as we say, to be expressed at all?

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About the human face.<sup>39</sup> We all are, of course, very familiar with faces; and familiarity is apt to breed contempt or, if not contempt, at least lack of surprise. We are not lost in wonder at the sight of human faces, although in many respects they are quite different from those of all other creatures; we take them very much for granted. But if one stands back for a moment and looks at human faces as if one saw them for the first time, simply as a piece of nature, surprising enough things seem to happen to our perception.

There is, first, the dawning awareness of one's helplessness to express adequately in words what one perceives. One might do it with a brush and colors on canvas. But if one works, as I have to, with words, one soon becomes aware, in the presence of a face in action, of the relative poverty of the linguistic tools at hand. The variability of the human face is so great, the possible configuration of features so diverse, and the continuous changes in the landscape even of a single living face so manifold that our verbal equipment often falls short of our requirements if one tries, in words, to do justice to what one perceives. Liberally provided as it is, our

39. Elias wrote a brief section of the manuscript under the title "The face." He wrote reading notes in a notebook under the title "Laughter (Face)."—ED.

fund of classifying adjectives and substantives is not differentiated enough to allow for more than a few adjectival and substantival characterizations of laughs and smiles. In order to convey to others the exact shades of such attitudes, in most cases we have to describe the whole situation in which these attitudes occur. Of course, watching the face of a person who is not actively communicating with others, whose features are momentarily frozen and relatively still, one may find words to describe it. It is the face in action that is difficult to catch.

Preoccupied, as one usually is, with the distinguishing characteristics of different faces, one often fails to perceive the strangeness of the human face as such, which is, in fact, merely one aspect (though a very central aspect) of the strangeness of man. Is there any other part of the universe where it is possible to find in so small a space such an immense variability of features and so many delicately shaded changes of scenery, swift and at the same time smooth? The range of shades in smiling and laughing alone is wide enough. Yet this is only one small class of scenic changes that may be seen on the face in action.

Whatever else it might be, laughter is a specific configuration of the human face. Can one say what is the natural equipment by means of which man can produce in his face the multitude of finely grained changes of which laughter is one? Can one say what the wherewithals of laughter and of the other changes in the landscape of the human face are?<sup>40</sup>

I am using here, as I hope you will see, the subject of laughter as a limited and therefore more easily manageable key-problem for the opening of a wider problem area that concerns man as a whole.

After all this, you will probably say, with a pang of disappointment, that I seem to treat laughing rather as a serious matter.

40. Elias followed up with four manuscript pages in which he described the evolution of facial muscles in reptiles and primates, largely notes from William K. Gregory, *Our Face from Fish to Man* (New York, 1929), p. 42. Elias also took notes and wrote a few pages of observations on G.-B. Duchenne de Boulogne, whose 1876 study of expression he admired: "Apart from his obsession with single causes, he was often well aware of the fact that expressions are due to a highly varied, combined or, as we would call it today, synergistic activity of many muscles, though he was prevented by his mono-causal thinking and perhaps by his method of experimentation, of stimulating single spots, to come to grips with that part of the face where the interwovenness of muscle fibres and the integration of muscles has gone further than anywhere else, the region of the mouth" (G.-B. Duchenne de Boulogne, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, trans. R. Andrew Cuthbertson [Cambridge, 1990]).—ED.