

Laughing Bodies:
An Exploration of Laughter as a Means of Insight

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ABSTRACT

Located within the emerging scholarship on religion and humour, as critically examined in chapter one, this thesis demonstrates the importance of the non-serious in the study of religion. Through an exploration of laughter as a means of insight, I argue that there is a specific form of laughter, articulated within this thesis as *insight laughter*, that has not previously been identified, thoroughly considered, or had its value recognised. This reconceptualisation of laughter is significant as it challenges the classificatory orders of knowledge by recognising and arguing for the value of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding. Grounded in the psychological and philosophical theory of William James, chapter two argues that insight laughter is a form of embodied knowledge and that the same dynamic shift of streams of consciousness, from the peripheral to the central consciousness, are found in this specific form of laughter. The insight that results from laughter offers an alternative perspective and, as such, presents the potential for change. In order to demonstrate the centrality of the body for insight laughter, and thus the creation of knowledge, this thesis engages with laughter within three thematic areas: religious experience, gendered experiences (of laughter), and ethics. These three areas offer a graduated analysis of the ethical understanding of gender and the body. Chapter three provides a critical engagement with the philosophy and practices of Osho and the Rajneesh Movement to address the presence of the non-serious in religion and explore whether laughter can be considered a religious experience. In order to reflect on how the politics of the body affects the reception of laughter within religious experience and beyond, chapter four considers the gendered experience of laughter through the examples of anasyrma, laughing witches, and feminist laughter, identifying the potential of insight laughter as a means of disrupting patriarchal structures. Finally, chapter five offers a consideration of how the ethics of the body, broadly conceived, has led to the value of laughter being negated. I will counter this position by demonstrating the value of laughter in ethics. As such, this thesis demonstrates how each of these themes challenges how the body, consciousness, and knowledge is understood and demonstrates how the laughing body can provide a rethinking of the creation of knowledge.

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ABBREVIATIONS

(CW) - *The Correspondence of William James*

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis positions itself within the emerging scholarship on religion and humour, but distinguishes itself by moving away from the emphasis on humour and instead focuses on laughter.¹ In the late 1980s, humour studies emerged as a new field, with an international journal and an annual conference being founded in 1988 and 1989 respectively.² Humour studies provides a space for the interdisciplinary study of humour and the related phenomena of laughter, comedy, joke-telling, and other associated aspects. When outlining the objectives of *Humor: The International Journal of Humour Research*, the editor Thomas E. Ford notes that humour studies “draws upon a wide range of academic disciplines including anthropology, biology, cultural studies, computer science, education, communication, film and media studies, gender studies, history, linguistics, literature, mathematics, health and medicine, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology” (Ford 2020). Notably absent from Ford’s list of disciplines is religious studies. However, as an interdisciplinary space, more recently humour studies has seen a growing interest in the relationship between humour and religion.³ Indeed, since commencing my thesis in 2017, interest in the relationship between humour and its related phenomena and religion have grown steadily, culminating in the founding of the *Humour and Religion Network* in 2019. Thus, whilst located within the emerging scholarship on religion and humour, this thesis differentiates itself by moving away from the current emphasis on humour and the comic (e.g. Niebuhr 1946; Cox 1969; Hyers

¹ Throughout my thesis I will endeavour to use the English spelling of the term ‘humour’, except when the word appears in a direct quotation or a source title that uses the American spelling ‘humor’. I will also take this approach towards other words which can be either Anglicised or Americanised.

² In 1988, the *International Society for Humor Studies* was founded, alongside the establishment of the interdisciplinary journal *Humor: The International Journal of Humor Research*. The first *International Society for Humour Studies Conference* was held in 1989. More recently, the *Australasian Humour Studies Network* was founded in 1997 and an additional journal, *The European Journal of Humour Research*, was founded in 2013.

³ For example, a number of conferences – some of which have led to related publications – have begun to emerge. In 2018 Radboud University held a three-day conference: *Humour in the Beginning: Cultural Interaction of Laughter and the Comic in the First Phase of Asian religions, Christianity and Islam*; in 2020 Paul Martin (University of Bristol) and I (University of Kent) hosted a one-day virtual symposium: *The Sacred and The...Profanity: Exploring Religion and Ritual in Humour and the Obscene*; in 2020 The Woolf Institute hosted five webinars: *Shtick! Humour, Satire and Religion*; and in 2021 Utrecht University held a two-day online workshop: *Faith in Jest: Humour and Religion in the Early Modern World*.

1969, 1970, 1981, 1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1996; Berger 1997; Morreall 1999; Arbuckle 2008; Geybels & Herck 2011; Martin 2011) to instead focus on laughter (this distinction will be considered in chapter one). Whilst there have been some considerations of the relationship between religion and laughter (e.g. Kuschel 1994; Sanders 1995; Gilhus 1997; Screech 1997; Bussie 2007; Conybeare 2013), this thesis seeks to contribute to and develop this research.

In order to demonstrate the importance of the non-serious in the study of religion, this thesis provides a reconceptualisation of laughter. *The thesis argues that there is a specific form of laughter, that has not been previously identified, thoroughly considered, or had its value been recognised, and I have termed this specific form of laughter insight laughter.* This reconceptualisation of laughter opens up questions regarding how we understand and locate the body and consciousness in the creation of knowledge and understanding. As such, the significance of claiming that laughter is a means of insight is that it challenges the Western philosophical hierarchies of knowledge that privilege the mind over the body in the creation of knowledge. Through a philosophical critique of the body and gender, my concept of insight laughter demonstrates how the priority that has been given to the mind and to particular (ethical) concerns regarding the body has led to the overall exclusion of the laughing body as valuable in the creation of knowledge. This thesis rejects the classificatory orders of knowledge that gives pre-eminence to the mind over the body; instead, it reconfigures the place of the laughing body in the creation of knowledge and argues for the value of the body through insight laughter. In a similar vein to the work of Jane Gallop, rather than looking beyond the body and focusing solely on the mind in the creation of knowledge, within this thesis the laughing body will be “treated as a site of knowledge, a medium for thought” and insight (Gallop 1988: 3-4). This thesis, in short, rescues the importance of the laughing body for a new understanding of insight in the history of ideas.

An Overview of Laughter, Related Phenomena, and Religion

Although currently increasing, contributions from religious studies occupy a relatively small space within the broader field of humour studies. This may result from the fact that historical comments on laughter within Western thought, theology, and religion were

generally brief and fragmented. Moreover, laughter has previously been treated from an indifferent, suspicious, or oppositional viewpoint. In positioning laughter (and related phenomena) as incompatible with living a religious life, opposition to laughter was often grounded in wider theological concerns regarding the body, the view that laughter could lead to sin, particularly within Christianity, as well as ethical concerns regarding the object of laughter (these issues can be seen in the works of Aristotle, Plato, The Greek Church Fathers, and chapter one will provide an overview of this literature). This approach feels particularly discordant given that contemporary Western society generally adopts a positive attitude towards laughter; laughter is actively sought and expected when we spend time with our friends, partners, and family, as well as through the entertainment we choose, thus making the comic a form of business. As a result, during my research I asked myself why laughter was so often disregarded as an object of study. Whilst historical considerations of laughter were written to oppose the presence of laughter, I wondered whether the overt presence of laughter in today's society continued to contribute to its relegation to the realm of the non-serious and thus the purportedly non-useful. Indeed, this thesis seeks to argue that there is merit in studying the non-serious, not only because it is a prominent feature of human experience but because, in considering laughter, it becomes apparent that the tendency in the West to reject the value of the body in the creation of knowledge has led to the potentiality of laughter as a means of insight to be overlooked.

Contemporary scholarship that approaches laughter from the methodology of Western thought, theology, and religion, has tended to view laughter more positively and has sought to identify and question the importance of laughter in religious traditions (e.g. Cox 1969; Moltmann 1973; Hyers 1981; Sanders 1995; Berger 1997; Gilhus 1997; Bussie 2007; Martin 2011; Conybeare 2013). However, works on the subject of religion and humour and its related phenomena are often treated as an isolated project (notable exceptions to this are Conrad Hyers and Ingvild Gilhus who have both explored the place of laughter, humour, and the comic across different religious traditions).⁴ As a result, and

⁴ Victor Raskin argues that, because of the need for job security and expectations within academia, all scholars of humour are 'part-timers' (Raskin 2008: 3). Anecdotally, when attending a humour studies conference for the first time, I was advised by – a successful academic within the field – to have a mainstream interest within religious studies, alongside my interest in laughter, if I wanted to succeed.

perhaps also due to the fact that the research is taking place in an emerging field, foundational concepts are reiterated in each text, wider scholarship from humour studies is generally ignored, and a brief survey of historical literature tends to begin each work. This can lead to repetition and means that many of the explorations of humour and religion adopt a broad-brush approach. Additionally, many of these studies are undertaken from within a single tradition (e.g. Zen Buddhism in Hyers 1970, 1989a, 1989b; Catholicism in Kuschel 1994; Judaism in Knox 1969; Dauber 2017; Mormonism in McIntyre 2019; or Islam in Schweizer & Molokotos-Liederman forthcoming⁵) or they offer a history of laughter, humour, and the comic and their relationship with religion⁶ more generally (e.g. Berger 1997; Gilhus 1997; Geybels & Herck 2011). This approach leads to important questions, such as: what role does laughter, humour, and the comic play in religious and cultural traditions; are religious figures reported as laughing; is humour present in scripture(s); and whether laughter and humour are shown to be acceptable in religious traditions.⁷ Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a thorough response to all of these questions, my thesis seeks to join the debate, to provide a definitive contribution to the literature on religion and humour, and to provide a foundation for future scholarship. My thesis offers a radical rethinking of the position of laughter and its contribution to our religious and ethical understanding. Through its exploration of the specific form of laughter, known as insight laughter, my thesis offers a fundamental reconsideration of the creation of knowledge by locating it in the body.

Additionally, this thesis is also seeking to establish the value of the non-serious within religious studies and the history of ideas. There is a privileging of seriousness that ultimately leads to the exclusion and dismissal of the non-serious from important discussions and scholarship. Ingvild Gilhus notes that, “[a]lthough there exists no

⁵ In my capacity as Media Officer for the *Humour and Religion Network* I have been involved in promoting this book but a date for publication was unconfirmed at the time of submitting this thesis.

⁶ It should be noted that the term ‘religion’, in this thesis, is used as a classificatory term, following the thinking of William James. More specifically, it is in-line with James’ claim that, for example, ‘religious’ emotions are only natural human emotions directed to something classified as a religious object: “religious love is only man’s natural emotion of love directed to a religious object” (James [1902] 2002: 24). This approach is further supported by more contemporary scholars such as: Russell McCutcheon (1997), Richard King (1999), and Timothy Fitzgerald (2000).

⁷ This latter question is of particular interest when considering ‘Jewish Humour’. Although beyond the scope of this thesis, there is a growing interest in understanding Jewish humour and what leads a joke to being positioned as representative of Jewish humour (e.g. Telushkin 1992; Baum 2017; Dauber 2017).

agreement on what religion is, there seems to be an agreement on it being a serious business and no laughing matter” (Gilhus 1991: 257). Indeed, Conrad Hyers refers to this as a “conspiracy of silence” existing across religious traditions (Hyers 1970: 3). The reconsideration of laughter found within this thesis will demonstrate that laughter is important because it can provide a means of offering new insights and contribute to our religious and ethical understanding. Peter Schuurman asserts that religion is subject to the *seriousness fallacy*, namely the view that “real religion must be sombre, reverent, earnest” (Schuurman 2019: 157).⁸ This view is held despite the evidence that many religious traditions, religious practices, and religious communities are filled with laughter, humour, and play. This fallacy has infiltrated the study of religion and Schuurman notes that “scholars seem shy to investigate foolishness; it may [be] a liability to credibility” (Schuurman 2019: 241); as such, the playful features of religious traditions are missing from, in his case, megachurch research.⁹ I would argue that the problem extends beyond this scope to the study of religion more broadly. In viewing religious traditions through a restrictive lens, by focusing solely on the sombre, reverent, and earnest features of religious traditions, scholars of religion are overlooking an important and present feature of religious traditions, the non-serious and its value in showing how the bodily act of laughter can lead to religious and ethical understanding. Through my consideration of insight laughter, I hope to go some way to addressing this gap and demonstrate that further research in this area is both possible and necessary.

Laughter occupies a peculiar place in religious and philosophical traditions; it is often considered too frivolous to offer any valid contribution to the contemplation of human experience and the rejection of the value of the body in the creation of knowledge means that laughter is regularly overlooked as an object of study. In order to illuminate this problem, this thesis engages with insight laughter within religious experience, gendered experience, and ethics.¹⁰ Each realm challenges how the body, consciousness, and

⁸ Indeed, William James stated that: “For common men ‘religion’, whatever more special meanings it may have, signifies always a *serious* state of mind” (James [1902] 2002: 30).

⁹ Schuurman offers an ethnographic case study of the Canadian megachurch The Meeting House and the charismatic leader Bruxy Cavey. For a more detailed consideration of the text see: Graham forthcoming.

¹⁰ It would be reasonable to suggest that insight laughter has the potential to extend beyond these three thematic areas, into, for example, politics. However, I have chosen these three areas, because they each challenge how the body, consciousness, and knowledge is understood and they offer a graduated analysis of the ethical understanding of gender and the body. Beginning with a critical analysis of Osho, who engages laughter as religious experience it is possible to demonstrate how gender and, perhaps surprisingly, the

knowledge is understood and demonstrates how the laughing body can challenge the existing hierarchies of knowledge. The examples I have selected are the result of my desire to listen and to learn from marginalised voices. A similar exercise was carried out by the theologian Jacqueline Bussie, in her identification of *tragic laughter*. Bussie recognised that: “virtually all of the voices [she] was hearing...were male” and argued that “people with relative positions of power might find laughter intimidating because either consciously or unconsciously, they understood it as a threat to their own power or that of their group” (Bussie 2007: 3). As a result, Bussie sought to listen to the “voices of the marginalized”, finding these voices in “the literature of the oppressed” (Bussie 2007: 3-4). I, too, in listening to and rescuing marginalised laughter, have identified a specific form of laughter: insight laughter. Indeed, in critique of the dominance of male voices in the literature and the lack of examples of women laughing, chapter four of this thesis seeks to highlight both the importance of and the existence of the laughter of women, as well as of female scholarship that explores laughter as a feminist tool. This thesis has sought to find and listen to the laughter rarely given an opportunity to be heard and has taken this laughter seriously. As such, this thesis gives prominence to the laughter of a New Age Religion (chapter three), the laughter of women past and present (chapter four), and of those seeking to challenge dominant ethical norms (chapter five). Each chapter will enable me to demonstrate how laughter intersects with questions of the body, gender, consciousness, and the creation of knowledge and understanding. In considering this laughter, this thesis addresses a gap in current scholarship and draws attention to new and previously overlooked voices.

Before exploring this thesis further, it is important to address a potential misapprehension regarding the focus of this thesis. To be clear, this thesis centres itself on laughter, *not* on humour, comedy, the comic, the ludicrous, the funny, wit, irony, satire, or jokes etc. This is an important distinction to make for a number of reasons. First, I am concerned with laughter and its relationship to the body. As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, my concept of insight laughter is grounded in the body and so it is

body are often overlooked in engagements with laughter; by addressing and identifying the intersection of the body, gender and laughter, the necessity of the ethical dimension of laughter becomes apparent and, ultimately, enables gender and body to come to the forefront. As such, each thematic area demonstrates how redeeming the laughing body can provide a rethinking of the creation of knowledge and understanding.

necessary to centre this thesis in the physiological act of laughter, rather than peripheral concepts and related phenomena, such as humour. Moreover, the recognition of the importance of the body becomes central for exploring the place of laughter within the religious and ethical realms and for considering the gendered nature of the experience of laughter. Second, my decision to focus on laughter addresses a gap in the current literature. As will be outlined in chapter one, laughter is generally understood and considered as a response to humour or comedy, it is treated as a by-product. Thus, laughter tends to be mentioned, only briefly, within wider considerations of humour (e.g. Morreall 1983; Bremmer & Roodenburg 1997a; Critchley 2002), the comic (e.g. Bergson [1900] 2008; Giappone, Francis & MacKenzie 2018), and jokes (e.g. Freud [1905] 2002; Douglas 1975a; Cohen 1999); it is not treated as the object of study. However, in positioning laughter as the object of study, it becomes apparent that laughter need not be the result of something humorous or funny. Indeed, much of the laughter that is explored in this thesis is not the result of a humorous event but results from a moment of shock or surprise. Third, clarity regarding the distinction of the interrelated terms (e.g. laughter, humour, and the comic etc.) is often missing in works within both religious studies and humour studies. More specifically, scholarship often uses these terms interchangeably; there is little consensus or consistency in the use of each term; and despite book titles indicating that they will offer studies of laughter, many instead provide studies of humour or the comic, with only passing references made to laughter (notable exceptions include: Plessner 1970; Provine 2000; Parvulescu 2010). As such, it is important to recognise that whilst it can be interrelated, laughter is distinct from, and can be wholly unconnected to humour, and so warrants being *the* object of study.

Given the prevalence of laughter in our lives, there is often an assumption of our innate understanding of it. However, the challenge of identifying a general theory of laughter quickly becomes apparent. Whilst many have tried, I do not subscribe to the view that there is a one size fits all theory of laughter and I would also suggest that many theories of laughter are in fact theories of humour (e.g. Monro 1951).¹¹ In recognising the inevitable ambiguity of laughter (its forms, its object, its motivations, its intentions, its

¹¹ Chapter one provides an overview of the key historical and contemporary theories of laughter and humour; see also Morreall 1983.

context, its consequences etc.), this thesis will not focus on laughter as a general phenomenon nor will it seek to offer a general theory of laughter. Instead, this thesis will argue that there is a specific form of laughter that has not been previously identified. I have termed this *insight laughter*, a form of laughter that effects consciousness through the embodied process. As suggested in the name, this form of laughter enables insight – understood to be a new thought, perception, understanding, recognition or realisation – to occur. This insight is the result of a shift that occurs in our streams of consciousness; the bodily act of laughter shifts thoughts from our peripheral consciousness to our central consciousness and this increased level of attention enables new insights to occur. My concept of insight laughter is grounded in the psychological and philosophical theory of William James, more specifically his work on the stream of consciousness. In chapter two, I will argue that the same dynamic shift of streams of consciousness, from the peripheral to the central consciousness, are found in insight laughter. Moreover, James’ works support my view that there is an important relationship between embodiment and consciousness, as I seek to demonstrate that insight laughter is a form of embodied knowledge. This embodied knowledge often reflects, or indeed offers, a critical commentary on the reality of life, ethical norms, and expectations. As such, it has the potential to drive the person who experiences insight through laughter to action. It must be noted that I am not attempting to argue that laughter is the only way of achieving insight, rather I am suggesting that insight is often assumed to be the result of serious, rational, contemplation and so non-serious means of achieving insight, such as laughter, are overlooked.

Defining Insight Laughter

In identifying the specific form of laughter known as *insight laughter* it is necessary for me to outline this concept further. First, it is necessary to provide an understanding of what is meant by insight. Although a term in common use, there is no single definition of insight. However, it tends to be associated with the experience of sudden comprehension, though it must be noted that insight may also emerge over periods of time.¹² The

¹² The assumption that insight is sudden is reminiscent of a critique that is often levelled at William James and his works on religious experience; whilst religious experiences may be short, instantaneous moments, they can also be understood as much longer processes of becoming.

mechanisms for achieving insight are often difficult to identify: some argue that insight only occurs after an impasse, whereas others suggest that preparation, followed by a break, is required for insight to occur, some suggest that insight occurs after approaching an existing problem from a new perspective, and others argue that so-called 'a-ha' moments are simply a mode of analytic thinking (see Sternberg & Davidson 1995 for an overview of key theories of insight).

Two studies of insight are of particular interest for this thesis as they make brief reference to laughter whilst positioning humour as a means of insight. Whilst these two studies do not dwell on laughter, nor centre their exploration of insight in laughter, they warrant consideration. Arthur Koestler (1949) considers how insight, which he terms "the eureka process", often results from creative processes. He describes the process of *bisociation*, the view that insight results from the recognition of the interconnectedness of two different lines of thought, whose association has not previously been recognised, and that this recognition leads to a re-ordering of our understanding. He notes the example of Archimedes' discovery of volume whilst sitting in the bath and claims that: "The eureka process does not consist in inventing something new out of nothing, but in bringing together of the hitherto unconnected" (Koestler 1949: 258); indeed, it is not only our immediate environment, but our social context that influences our insights. Whilst Koestler suggests that humour (as well as artwork, literature, poetry and philosophy) are creative means of achieving the eureka process, for Koestler, laughter serves no practical purpose in achieving the insight, laughter is solely the "discharge of redundant energy" (Koestler 1949: 66).

Perhaps the most extensive study of insight was undertaken by Bernard Lonergan (1957), his exploration offers an overview and engagement with a number of means of insight, from mathematics to common sense, and from science to metaphysics. Lonergan identifies insight as an act of understanding that can occur in various realms. He also suggests that there can be transformative effects from insight, "if insight occurs, it keeps recurring, and at each recurrence knowledge develops, action increases its scope, and situations improve" (Lonergan 1957: 8). Like Koestler, Lonergan acknowledges humour and satire as potential means of achieving moral insight (Lonergan 1957: 624-626). However, due to the vastness of his study he does not dwell on the place of laughter in

insight, offering only the brief remark that: “[laughter] can dissolve honoured pretence; it can disrupt conventional humbug; it can disillusion man of his most treasured illusions, for it is in a league with the detached, disinterested, unrestricted desire to know” (Lonergan 1957: 626). Thus, in both Koestler and Lonergan the potential for insight in laughter is overlooked. This may result from their adherence to the existing hierarchies of knowledge; their consideration of insight is grounded in the mind and thus in the role of humour, rather than recognising the potential of the body and thus laughter, for producing insight.

In this thesis, I will use the word insight to mean that a new thought, perception, interpretation, realisation, or understanding occurs; insight is essentially the acquisition of a new understanding that results from embodied consciousness. Insight laughter covers this acquisition of new understanding which occurs instantaneously in the moment of laughter; as thoughts in our peripheral consciousness enter our central consciousness, they become the focus of our attention and are fully recognised. Whilst we could recognise this moment, not simply as an ‘ah-ha’ moment but as an ‘a-ha-ha-ha’ moment, the insight from this laughter is more than simply ‘getting the joke’, it is a recognition of something previously unknown. Although laughter is generally associated with happiness and comic amusement, it is important to recognise that this realisation may not be pleasant. In fact, it can be shocking, disruptive, jarring, or disconcerting. This results from the fact that insight laughter tends to offer a critique of something unsatisfactory in the status quo. In chapters three, four, and five, this critique is located in responses to religious, feminist, and ethical matters, because these examples offer the opportunity to challenge our understanding of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding in these realms. Moreover, following the insight, there is the potential for change; the mechanism of insight laughter offers opportunities to behave and think differently in the future. Following the laughter, the insight can, of course, be subject to further contemplation or reflection, in recognising shortcomings, action may then be required. It should be noted that the degree to which insight laughter leads to changes in behaviour remains open throughout this thesis as it is dependent on individual responses.

Insight occurs during some but not all laughter. Whilst defining laughter may seem overly simplistic, given the continuing ambiguity of terminology, I want to be explicit about my use of the term laughter. By laughter, I am referring to the physical bodily experience of laughter: the facial expressions, the sounds, the affected breathing, the bodily convulsions. I do not wish to be overly prescriptive as I recognise that the physiological expressions of laughter will vary, as individuals laugh differently. However, I would suggest that there needs to be sufficient intensity within the laughter to enable the shift in consciousness to occur; a shift created through the embodied process of laughter. As such, a smile is unlikely to be sufficient. Given the physicality and physiology of laughter, as well as the effect that the body has on consciousness and the potential for insight to occur, the body is essential for my concept of insight laughter. Throughout this thesis I consistently return to the place of the body; not only its physicality but its location within a society.

In summary, insight laughter is a specific form of laughter where there is a build-up of tension, a shock, followed by a sudden release that involves losing conscious control of the body, the intensity of the laughter leads to a shift in consciousness, that enables previously unconsidered or new thoughts to enter from the peripheral consciousness to the central consciousness. This increased level of attention leads to instantaneous insight and has the potential to lead to changes in behaviour. In recognising the potential of insight through the body – through laughter – it is possible to identify implications for the politics of the body and religious understanding, through engagements with the nature of gendered perceptions of the body and the place of the body within ethical engagements.

Methodology

As this thesis aims to reconceptualise laughter, as well as to demonstrate the value of the non-serious within the study of religion, I have chosen to locate this thesis within the broad disciplinary field of religious studies. However, throughout the thesis a number of different disciplines are drawn upon, in order, to both construct and demonstrate my concept of insight laughter and its importance for embodied understanding. This reflects the multidisciplinary and multimethod nature of religious studies as a discipline; religious studies is a discipline that draws on many others, including history, philosophy,

psychology, and sociology. On this basis, the methodological approach adopted within this thesis is the history of ideas or, as it is also framed, intellectual history (e.g. Whatmore & Young 2016). The history of ideas provides an opportunity to undertake research that extends beyond a single disciplinary lens, given that it is an approach that recognises that “ideas are commodities which enter into interstate commerce” (Lovejoy 1948: 3).¹³ ‘Religion’ (hereafter not in inverted commas) is itself a complex classificatory category inside this history of ideas: “‘Religion’ or ‘religions’ are used in a vast variety of contexts and include so many different things that they have no clear meaning” (Fitzgerald 2000: 8). As such, I have chosen not to limit the examination of laughter to any one discipline within the field of ‘religious studies’ and to deploy the idea of religion as a classificatory term in relation to the variety of cultural and philosophical traditions that shape the history of ideas.

Such an approach stresses that ideas can be considered as a means of ordering and rationalizing eclectic research focuses. Unlike other histories, the history of ideas does not seek to offer a chronology but instead recognises that “there are displacements and transformations of concepts...the history of a concept is not wholly and entirely that of its progressive refinement” (Foucault [1969] 1970: 5). Moreover, it develops a critical philosophical approach to the continuity and discontinuity of ideas (e.g. Foucault [1969] 1970). The object of research within this thesis is laughter and its potential as a means of insight. However, on the basis of a history of ideas, the approach focuses on drawing together subject areas which are studied in relative isolation (Lovejoy 1948) and stressing the situatedness of ideas – as tools used by communities to make sense of their worlds (e.g. Wilson 1980) – rather than seeking temporal, geographical, or even chronological, coherence.

The methodological approach adopted within this thesis is based on an understanding of the history of ideas as a process of interpretation that also seeks to include voices and experiences that are often overlooked in its survey of history. It looks for ideas within texts (e.g. books, scripture, myths, newspapers, etc.) and other relics (e.g. art) and hopes

¹³ I recognise that there is no single formula for a methodology grounded in the history of ideas and that the term can be/has been used ambiguously. However, there are a series of recognisable principles that have informed my approach.

to recover their meaning from the intentions and context of the utterance (Bevir 1997). So, while my desk-based research draws principally on Western philosophical and religious thought and theology throughout history, to demonstrate how expressions and perceptions of laughter have changed and emerged in their specific contexts, it is drawn into conversation with unfamiliar thought, namely the recognition of the value of the body, in order to emphasise the lived realities of laughter. Indeed, the ambiguity and incongruity of laughter become apparent when we see it interplay with and occur in locations where the embodied reality impinges on ideas about religious experience(s), gendered experience(s), and ethics.

In summary, then, the interdisciplinary approach of religious studies allows the multifaceted nature of laughter to be fully considered as an embodied reality. Moreover, as my methodological approach focuses on the history of ideas, and draws upon texts from religious and philosophical history in order to reposition laughter, it provides a useful lens through which to consider the place of the body in insight laughter and in relationship to religious experience, gendered experience, and ethics. Exemplifying insight in these three key areas allows me to focus on the core nature of the value of insight as embodied. As each area is shaped by the ethics of the body, questions of the body cannot be separated from religious experience, gender, and ethics. It is by redeeming the body in these areas that the centrality of the body for insight laughter, and thus the creation of knowledge, becomes evident. Thus, perhaps, ironically, despite rejecting laughter from the realms of religious experience, gendered experience and ethics, because of its bodily nature, it is laughter that provides insight into these realms, precisely because it is embodied – insight laughter brings us back to the body.

Thesis Outline

The main research questions that have driven this thesis are: What is the significance of laughter for human experience? Can laughter achieve, transmit, or express insight? What is the importance of the body for insight laughter? The five chapters of my thesis explore my research questions by examining insight laughter as a specific form of laughter that offers value to religious experience, gendered experience, and ethics, and by

demonstrating how the laughing body can challenge the existing hierarchies of knowledge through its creation of insight.

Chapter one presents an exploration of the significant scholarship on laughter. It addresses the following important questions: how is laughter defined? How has laughter been considered previously? What challenges, concerns, and gaps exist within previous scholarship? Chapter one highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the existing literature, and notes that a key challenge of considering laughter is its entanglement with peripheral concepts such as humour, joke-telling and comedy. In recognising this entanglement, it becomes clear that there is minimal scholarship that focuses solely on laughter; much of the scholarship conflates the various concepts and/or focuses on the object of laughter rather than the laughter itself. This gap becomes even more acute when considering literature on laughter within the field of religious studies. Whilst an awareness of scholarship on humour, joke-telling, comedy etc. is an important foundation for this thesis, I argue that laughter is a phenomenon that deserves attention of its own. Thus, this thesis seeks to break from the focus of existing scholarship and offer an in-depth consideration of laughter, through an exploration of a specific form of laughter previously unidentified: insight laughter.

Chapter two will demonstrate that there is existing suitable theory to support my concept of insight laughter. I introduce the works of the philosopher and psychologist, William James, in order to demonstrate how James' works on the fringe of consciousness, attention, emotion, habit, conversion, and mysticism can act as a useful basis for thinking about insight laughter. Moreover, James' work supports my view that there is an important relationship between embodiment and consciousness. Whilst James did not make the link between consciousness and laughter, his work on the streams of consciousness provides the framework and terminology for insight laughter, as I argue that it is the embodiment of laughter that enables the shift in consciousness and thus insight to occur.

Chapter three explores the potential of laughter as religious experience. It asks: can laughter be considered a religious experience? Can laughter be adopted as a technique to gain religious insight? Drawing on the philosophy of Osho and the practices of the

Rajneesh Movement as a unique case study, I demonstrate the distinctive quality of insight in (some forms of) laughter and seek to deepen studies in religious experience. Whilst I recognise the controversial reputation of Osho, I believe that his philosophy and practices are a useful example for this thesis because he provides an access point to some of the complex issues of insight laughter. He provides a voice from the margins and enables us to see some of the key issues of insight laughter through the manifestation of what is different and culturally awkward. Osho offers an alternative perspective, a voice that, in order to spark controversy, tries to break with the traditions before him, but the reality is that in seeking to distance himself from other traditions he brings the reader closer to them and we are able to explore new perspectives regarding the place of laughter in Osho and beyond. An exploration of Osho's teachings highlights how laughter can enable insight to occur and thus play an important role in religious experience. More specifically, this chapter considers Osho's embracing of laughter in comparison to other religious figures (such as Jesus and the Buddha) who are often positioned as being in opposition to laughter. Osho's adoption of laughter as a technique, and his emphasis on shock value, helps to recentre and reemphasise the importance of the body for laughter. It must also be recognised that Osho provides the first (but not the last) example in this thesis of a dismissal of the centrality of rationality and seriousness for achieving insight. Osho embraces laughter as an important feature of religious experience, in spite of its exclusion historically. Whilst Osho is a useful case study there are limits to his engagement of laughter; he does not critically engage with, nor fully recognise, the importance of the body for laughter and ignores the issue of the gendered experience of laughter.

Chapter four provides an exploration of the gendered experience of insight laughter. It considers key questions, such as: how can we understand the gendered experience of (insight) laughter? Is it possible to learn through laughter? Is there such a thing as feminist laughter? Drawing on accounts of women's laughter in myths, history, and contemporary Western society, I examine how expectations surrounding how women and men should laugh vary and note that these variations are often reflective of wider concerns and inhibitions regarding the body, as well as revealing the place of men and women in a given society. I begin this chapter with a consideration of three mythical and one contemporary account of 'anasyrma' (exposing the female sexual form through the

lifting of skirts) that leads to laughter, in order to highlight the centrality of the female form as a vehicle for insight when it is not viewed through a pornographic or erotic gaze. I then provide an analysis of select accounts from the historical records of the Salem Witch Trials, to demonstrate the suspicion that laughing women often faced, particularly when their laughter was indicative of insight not possessed by others. Before ending the chapter with an exploration of the increasing use of the motif of laughter in the works of French poststructuralist feminists, and beyond. I propose four distinct ways that laughter is used as a feminist strategy: resistance, disruption, revolution, and creation, in order to argue that there is a distinct form of feminist laughter, that is essentially a laugh of insight. Again, in this chapter, we see how laughter acts as an alternative means of insight. Laughter plays an essential role in lived experiences and here we see it demonstrates the potential to offer new ways of thinking and to challenge the patriarchal structures that continue to exist within society. I believe that in order to truly reconsider laughter, it is necessary to revisit the laughter that has generally been overlooked; I want to recognise the presence of insight laughter that has echoed throughout history and give voice to the silenced laughter of women of the past as well as highlighting the valuable place of insight laughter for the contemporary feminist. Laughter has the capacity to achieve new insights, though I conclude this chapter by recognising that eventually we must go beyond our laughter and take action based on our new insight. Laughter, alone, is not enough.

Chapter five explores two ways of thinking about ethics in relation to insight laughter. First, the chapter explores what it means to laugh ethically and how we can understand the nature of inappropriate laughter. It asks: what are the ethics of laughter? Is insight laughter ethical? I propose that any evaluation of the ethics of laughter must be three-fold, it must consider: the context, the intention, and the consequences of the laughter. Second, the chapter considers the extent to which laughter can create an ethical insight and the potential it has to lead to changes in behaviour, by asking: do inhibitions regarding the body effect the value that is placed on laughter? Can laughter add value to ethical considerations? Can laughter offer ethical insights or does it simply reinforce the status quo? Can ethical insight laughter lead to changes in moral behaviour? In this chapter laughter finds itself at the juncture of emotion, reason, and ethics. In recognition of this, I revisit ethical concerns regarding the body and laughter and seek to challenge the historical negation of the body. Rather than being excluded from ethics on the

grounds that laughter is an out-of-control physiological response, and therefore irrational, I seek to redeem the body, in order for the potential of laughter as a means of insight, as a legitimate means of producing ethical knowledge, to be recognised.

CHAPTER ONE

LAUGHTER: THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA

Laughter is an important feature of human experience, yet its pervasiveness in our lives often leads to an assumption that we understand it.¹⁴ As a result, the concept of laughter has not been questioned or considered in sufficient detail. In order to understand the importance of the specific form of laughter that I have identified, namely insight laughter, it is necessary to reflect on laughter more broadly. This chapter will address key issues and questions that enable a deeper understanding of laughter to be established, as well as identifying the gaps within the literature that I am seeking to address in this thesis.

Beginning with an overview of the existing scholarship on laughter, I will outline how laughter has previously been defined in relation to humour and the comic. As the focus of this thesis is laughter, I will demonstrate that a key challenge of considering laughter is its entanglement with peripheral concepts such as humour, joke-telling, and the comic. Moreover, I will show how this challenge is further complicated by the conflation of these terms in the existing scholarship. Indeed, whilst the formulation of three key theories of laughter and humour has sought to bring coherence to the piecemeal study of laughter, I will argue that the theories are insufficient as they tend to centre on humour not laughter. Whilst I will offer a critique of these theories, I am not attempting to offer an alternative all-encompassing theory of laughter in this thesis, but rather to provide a reconceptualisation of laughter, to offer an exploration of a specific form of laughter that I term insight laughter. Indeed, I remain unconvinced that a single theory of laughter is possible. Instead – and in keeping with the multidisciplinary and multimethod approach of religious studies and my methodological approach of the history of ideas – the multifaceted nature of laughter will be evidenced through a brief consideration of laughter across a multitude of disciplines. This overview will identify the need for laughter to be treated as the object of study and reveal how the occurrence of laughter is

¹⁴ The average adult laughs eighteen times per day (Martin & Kuiper 1999: 355).

not dependent on the presence of humour, the comic, or jokes.¹⁵ Consequently, this thesis distinguishes itself from the existing scholarship by focusing on laughter. More specifically, it provides a reconceptualisation of laughter as a means of insight in order to demonstrate the importance of the non-serious in the study of religion.

Following this overview, I will provide a more detailed critical analysis of the existing literature, in order to begin rethinking laughter. Through the identification of fragmented comments on laughter which I have located within a thematic framework, I will demonstrate how laughter intersects with questions of the body, the mind, emotion, society, and ethics. More specifically, this critical analysis will evidence the importance of the body for insight laughter, as well as identifying how the location of laughter in the body has led to it being overlooked as a means of insight. This, I argue, is the result of the existing Western hierarchies of knowledge that privilege the mind, and thereby exclude the body from the creation of knowledge; the negation of the body in the creation of knowledge has led to the omission of laughter being considered as a means of insight. Moreover, the ethical concerns that begin to be identified in this chapter, and that will be developed further in chapters four and five in particular, demonstrate how attempts have been, and continue to be, made to restrain the free flowing of laughter. As a result of framing my work thematically, and in line with my methodology of the history of ideas, my explorations of the writings on laughter will not be chronological or restricted to specific historical periods, rather it will be necessary to move between different periods depending on the theme that is being explored.

Having established the need for my reconceptualisation of laughter, I will end this chapter with an exploration of three texts: Georges Bataille's *Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears* ([1953] 1986), Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* ([1966] 1970); and Debra Diane Davis', *Breaking Up [At] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter* (2000), that have each influenced the creation of my concept of insight laughter. Whilst these authors begin to recognise the potential for laughter as a means of insight, I will demonstrate that they do not go far enough, as they fail to identify the importance of the body in this process of insight. By

¹⁵ In his study of laughter, Robert Provine documented over 1,000 instances of laughter and noted that only 10-20% resulted from something even vaguely funny (Provine 2000: 40-43).

engaging with laughter in a cerebral (rather than bodily) manner, these scholars – despite linking the body to knowledge in their wider works – do not recognise the importance of the body for insight or laughter sufficiently.

Laughter and Related Phenomena

Interrogating Terms

Often laughter is not considered as an object of research in and of itself. Many thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, the Greek Church Fathers, St Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche did not choose to undertake focused studies of laughter. Instead, their musings on laughter are brief and emerge from their explorations of other themes such as art, theatre, and play. As a result of the short nature of their interventions, their thoughts on laughter – either in relation to laughter in a specific form or as a whole – remain underdeveloped. In more contemporary works, laughter continues to remain elusive as an object of study in and of itself (notable exceptions include Plessner 1970; Provine 2000; Parvulescu 2010). Instead, laughter is more frequently discussed in relation to the object of laughter, such as humour (e.g. Morreall 1983; Bremner & Roodenburg 1997a; Critchley 2002), the comic (e.g. Bergson [1900] 2008; Giappone, Francis & MacKenzie 2018), and to jokes (e.g. Freud [1905] 2002; Douglas 1975a; Cohen 1999; Lockyer and Pickering 2009). Laughter is not treated as *the* object of study, but rather the result or by-product of perceiving humour, identifying something funny, or responding to a joke. As a result, scholarship tends to give it little consideration, instead focusing on the cause of laughter and why it is considered funny. In order to address this gap within the scholarship, this thesis focuses on laughter. In bringing us back to the body I will demonstrate, not only the centrality of the body for laughter, but the importance of the embodiment of laughter for challenging how the body, consciousness, and knowledge is understood.

Another challenge is that the terms laughter and humour are often used interchangeably. Indeed, Alan Roberts' recent work, *The Philosophy of Humour* (2019), interrogates the cyclical nature of definitions that are found within works on humour. In recognising that “people often speak as though humour, amusement and funniness are roughly the same

thing”, Roberts attempts to offer revised definitions of these terms that are not dependent on each other (Roberts 2019: 4). For Roberts, these terms are “closely-related but distinct...the same goes for associated words such as ‘joke’, ‘laughter’ and ‘slapstick” (Roberts 2019: 4-5). Despite acknowledging the close relationship of the terms, unfortunately, Roberts declares that he “will be purposefully neglecting laughter in this book” (Roberts 2019: 8). This approach is not unusual; often writers on the subject of humour overlook laughter. Moreover, writers do not explain what they mean by laughter. Perhaps, as indicated earlier, this is due to a (mistaken) underlying assumption that we possess an innate understanding of laughter.

Given that my thesis centres on laughter, I believe it is fundamental – prior to our progression into the complex field of laughter – to establish a clear understanding of laughter and my use of the term in this thesis. As such, I claim that the key distinguishing feature of laughter, on the one hand, and humour, the comic, and jokes etc., on the other hand, is physicality. Thus, to echo my introduction, when using the term laughter, I am referring to the physical bodily experience: the facial expressions, the sounds, the affected breathing, the bodily convulsions – in all its variations. Laughter is focused on and experienced through the body and this thesis will address this critical gap by focusing on embodiment and laughter. This contrasts with humour, the comic, and jokes which are second order concepts, in the sense that they are epiphenomena of the body, that often, though not always, provoke laughter. Whilst humour, the comic, and jokes may often be linked to laughter, they are ultimately distinct. Indeed, as will be evidenced throughout this thesis, laughter does not need something funny to prompt its occurrence, but often results from shock or surprise. Given the importance of this distinction, in this thesis, I will endeavour *not* to use the terms laughter and humour (inclusive of related phenomena) interchangeably.

Theories of Laughter and Humour

The challenge of understanding laughter is not new. Indeed, the first century Roman rhetorician Quintilian declared:

I do not think that anybody can give an adequate explanation, though many have attempted to do so, of the cause of laughter, which is excited not merely by words or deeds, but sometimes even by touch. Moreover, there is great variety in the things which raise a laugh, since we laugh not merely at those words or actions which are smart or witty, but also at those which reveal folly, anger or fear...

(Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 6.3.7)

Centuries later, it seems that the task of understanding laughter has yet to have been resolved satisfactorily. Indeed, in his attempt to establish an all-encompassing theory of laughter, which will be considered further later in this chapter, Georges Bataille declared: “it may even be that the domain of laughter is finally – or so it seems to me – a closed domain, so unknown and unknowable is the cause of laughter” (Bataille [1953] 1986: 89).

In spite of the challenges, three key theories, which emerged within philosophy but are now embedded within humour studies, were formulated: the *Superiority Theory*, the *Incongruity Theory*, and the *Relief Theory*.¹⁶ An overview of the first two theories is found within, what could reasonably be positioned as, the first comprehensive study of laughter, *An Essay on Laughter: Its Forms, Its Causes, Its Development, and Its Value*, by the philosopher James Sully in 1902. Although Sully acknowledges that laughter can lead to a sense of relief, he did not position this as a theory of laughter; though it must be noted that his text was written prior to Sigmund Freud’s 1905 work, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which gave the *Relief Theory* more prominence. Building on the work of Sully, philosopher David Monro (1951) wrote his own comprehensive study of laughter and provided an overview of the three theories of laughter and humour that have since been popularised.¹⁷ However, it should be acknowledged that most of the contemporary scholarship on laughter and humour ground their readings of the three theories in John Morreall’s 1983 work, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, the first of Morreall’s many books on

¹⁶ There are additional theories, such as *The Play Theory*, which posits that humour is the result of play and that play is an important part of life as it releases us from everyday trials and tribulations. There is also *The Dispositional Theory* that argues that humour leads to an inclination to laughter, even if it does not actually result in laughter (see Morreall 1983 and Carroll 2014b for an overview of these theories). However, as these two theories do not possess the same prominence within the scholarship and are subject to the same criticisms as the three theories identified I will not seek to elaborate further.

¹⁷ Having outlined the three theories David Monro seeks to synthesise the theories. He proposes an alternative theory, which argues that humour is grounded in the inappropriate: “any situation that is normally called funny is also felt to contain an element of inappropriateness...[however] all inappropriate things are not funny” (Monro 1951: 255). This theory essentially pivots on the semantics of incongruity and like the other theories focuses on humour or the funny, rather than laughter.

laughter, humour, and the comic.¹⁸ As these theories have been outlined and critiqued in a number of texts (e.g. Sully 1902; Monro 1951; Clark 1970; Scruton and Jones 1982; Morreall 1983; Lippitt 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Billig 2005; Carroll 2014b), I will consider the theories and their critiques only briefly in order to introduce them directly to the reader.

First is the *Superiority Theory*, which is generally considered to be the oldest theory of laughter and humour (Morreall 1983: 4); it claims that we laugh as a result of identifying a deficiency in another and thus experience a feeling of superiority. Its beginnings are often suggested to be found within Plato and his claim that we often laugh at people and their follies (*Philebus* 48a-50d, *Republic* 5.452d), and the theory is continued in Aristotle's claim that "the laughable is the species of the base or ugly" (*Poetics* 1449a). However, this theory is generally attributed to the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' writings on laughter are brief and occur as part of a wider exploration of human emotions (Hobbes [1640] 1994 & [1651] 1968). Hobbes claims that: "the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly" (Hobbes [1640] 1994: 54). The implication being that laughter is grounded in the perception of another's suffering, inadequacy, or deformity. Despite, the boldness and moral dubiousness of the claim, that all laughter is grounded in such negative feelings, some contemporary scholars such as Francis Buckley continue to argue that: "a *superiority* theory best explains why we laugh. Laughter signals our recognition of a comic vice in another person—the butt" (Buckley 2005: 4, original emphasis).

Second is the *Incongruity Theory*, which claims that we laugh as a result of the perception of something, be it words, actions, or objects, that conflicts with our expectations. This theory is generally understood to have emerged from the works of the philosopher Francis Hutcheson, who wrote three letters on the topic of laughter, in an attempt to dispute Thomas Hobbes' earlier writings on the subject. Hutcheson suggests that Hobbes' account of laughter intended to be an all-encompassing theory of laughter and that this

¹⁸ At the time of submitting this thesis, John Morreall has six books and seventy articles on the subject of laughter, humour, and comedy (Morreall 2020).

is the reason for its failure (Hutcheson 1750: 6); indeed, this criticism continues in contemporary writings (e.g. Monro 1951; Morreall 1983; Billig 2005). However, this criticism is somewhat unfair, as although Hobbes does not explore other motivations for laughter, he does critique other writers for their reductionism of the motivations behind laughter. Furthermore, the brevity of Hobbes' exploration of laughter and its placement within a wider discussion of emotions, suggests that he was not attempting to write an all-encompassing theory of laughter. In response to Hobbes, Hutcheson sought to devise his own theory of laughter and claimed that we laugh as a result of "the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea" (Hutcheson 1750: 19). However, it was the Scottish philosopher and poet, James Beattie, who was the first to explicitly use the term 'incongruity' in his consideration of laughter (Morreall 2014: 125). According to Beattie, laughter occurs when there is: "an uncommon mixture or relation and contrariety, exhibited, or supposed to be united, in the same assemblage" (Beattie 1764: 454). He also adds that, laughter can only occur if the identification of incongruity does not lead to a stronger emotion which would quell the laughter: "Incongruity does not appear ludicrous, when it is so qualified, or circumstanced, as to raise in the mind some emotion more powerful than laughter" (Beattie 1764: 454). Given its importance, the relationship of laughter and emotion is considered in further detail later in this chapter. In a similar vein, Beattie's contemporary, Immanuel Kant, claimed that: "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*" (Kant [1790] 2012: 254, original emphasis). Having perceived the absurd,¹⁹ Kant suggests that an expectation becomes nothing and so we laugh. However, whilst the expectation disappears it does not become nothing, rather it becomes something, something unexpected. As will be explored in chapter five, Kant's contribution to scholarship on laughter is of particular interest for this thesis as he explicitly rejects the potential for laughter to play a role in the creation of knowledge, as a result of the grounding of laughter in the body. Returning to the identification of the unexpected, Arthur Schopenhauer posits that: "the cause of laughter in every case is

¹⁹ The belief that laughter can be caused by the perception of the absurd is echoed in the later writings of those such as Bergson ([1900] 2008) and Freud ([1905] 2012).

simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation” (Schopenhauer [1818] 2011: 85); it is the contrast between the expected concept and the unexpected object that provokes laughter. Indeed, Søren Kierkegaard also claims that “the comic always lies in [the perception of] a contradiction” (Kierkegaard [1846] 2009: 296). Thus, according to the *Incongruity Theory*, laughter is provoked by the unexpected.²⁰ Sometimes, Henri Bergson is included as a proponent of the *Incongruity Theory*, though his identification of what is incongruous is very specific, it is the perception of: “something mechanical encrusted on the living” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 24). Bergson suggests that “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is slightly *human*” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 10, original emphasis). He argues that laughter is caused by mechanical inelasticity – it is the perception of mechanical words or gestures in a human that is comic: “the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 21). Whilst certainly applicable in some situations, Bergson’s position fails as an all-encompassing theory of laughter. This may be the result of his decision to ground much of his study, and therefore examples, in relation to the comic on the stage. Although Bergson seeks to argue that the stage “is both a magnified and simplified view of life” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 37), I would contend that this mechanical inelasticity is not as prevalent in the everyday things that lead people to laugh as Bergson would suggest. Although subject to continual criticism, the *Incongruity Theory* is currently the dominant theory amongst contemporary scholars of humour, though the caveat that laughter is only one potential response to incongruity is often added (e.g. Koestler 1964; Clark 1970; Carroll 2014b).

Third, is the *Relief Theory*, which states that there is a build-up of internal energy that is released through laughter. In *The Freedom of Wit and Humour*, the Earl of Shaftsbury suggests that laughter is a means for men to “relieve themselves in their constraint” (Shaftsbury [1711] 2001: 71). This idea is developed further by Herbert Spencer’s work, *On the Physiology of Laughter*, where Spencer argues that emotions, and laughter,

²⁰ Early considerations of laughter also highlight the necessity of the unexpected. For example, Aristotle claims that we laugh because of the joke-teller “misleading the hearer beforehand” (*Rhetoric* 3.1412a). Similarly, Cicero claimed that: “the most common kind of joke is when we expect one thing and another is said; in which case our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh” (*De Oratore* 2.255).

generate nervous energy in the body which leads to muscular excitement and bodily action. However, unlike other emotions, Spencer argues that laughter does not lead to practical action. Instead, laughter simply “results of an uncontrolled discharge of energy” (Spencer [1860] 1911: 229). Similarly, John Dewey claims that laughter is the release of muscular tension, and “[t]he laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief” (Dewey 1894: 559). However, Sigmund Freud is the most famous proponent of the *Relief Theory*. In his exploration of jokes, Freud claims that society expects us to suppress feelings and forbidden thoughts and that this suppression requires energy. As such, when we laugh at a joke that contains a taboo subject, we save this psychical expenditure and that creates a sense of pleasure and ultimately laughter: “*saving in effort spent on inhibition or suppression*’ seemed to be the secret of the pleasurable effect of tendentious jokes” (Freud [1905] 2002: 117, original emphasis). Whilst the *Relief Theory* has not gained the same traction as the other theories, (some instances of) laughter continue to be recognised as providing a moment of light relief from feelings of tension or sadness.

Positioning these theories as theories of laughter is misleading, as each of these theories is concerned with what we laugh at and why we laugh at it; the theories are concerned not with laughter but with the object of laughter which is often identified as a form of humour. As such, I would argue that the theories do not fully consider laughter and can be more appropriately positioned as considerations of humour. Moreover, it is questionable as to whether or not these are actually theories, and indeed, whether any of the proponents associated with these theories intended to offer a theory of humour or laughter at all. As rightly noted by Michael Billig:

the *Superiority Theory* is not so much a theory but rather a series of brief observations made by a number of different philosophers and theologians, that were later positioned as a theory by those who wished to challenge the view that laughter is grounded in these negative motivations.

(Billig 2005: 38-39, original emphasis)

Indeed, this criticism could apply to all three theories as they are all composed from a combination of fragmented comments made by a variety of thinkers, who themselves often recognised the limits of their studies. The purported proponents of the three theories are often read selectively and/or reduced to fit the identified theory, thus

removing the nuances from many writings on laughter. Additionally, all three theories have faced criticism as a result of their inability to account as the source for all types of laughter; the ambiguity of laughter means there are always anomalies.

In this thesis, I seek to avoid reducing authors on laughter to one of these theories – unless I believe that there is substantial evidence to do so – as these theories are much more permeable than others position them to be. Moreover, as the theories focus on the object of laughter, which is often humour, they do not go far enough in terms of offering a theory of laughter. Ultimately, I do not believe there is a single cause of laughter. It is evident that despite ongoing attempts to reduce laughter to a single theory, it ultimately “eludes capture by any overarching theory...laughter is too fluid, too unruly to dogmatize; it fractures whatever system would seek to contain it” (Campbell 2015: 197). Indeed, it is as a result of this ambiguity that it is necessary to consider laughter in its specific forms. As such, in this thesis I reconceptualise laughter in order to argue that laughter can be a means of insight. In focusing on the physical act of laughter much of the analysis within this thesis will focus on the importance of the body and the role the body can play in the creation of knowledge and understanding. However, when considering insight laughter, it will become apparent that even specific forms of laughter maintain some ambiguity.

Locating Laughter

As a result of the multifaceted nature of laughter, different disciplines have sought to consider laughter and its effects. This is significant as it demonstrates laughter can be, and has been, considered from a range of perspectives, including the physiological, psychological, anthropological, sociological, literary, philosophical, theological and religious. Each discipline offers a different perspective for understanding laughter; to overlook the various perspectives would mean that the nature of laughter is not truly understood. As a result, this thesis will draw on sources from across various disciplines, however, given the disciplinary location of my thesis, and the fact that I have identified the importance of the body for insight laughter, I will tend to focus on literature from within physiology, philosophy, and religious studies.

The physiology of laughter has long been a subject of interest, though this is unsurprising given the physicality of laughter and its grounding in the body. Essentially, physiological studies have sought to understand *how* we laugh. Attempts to answer this question have tended to focus on what happens to the body when we laugh, with studies identifying not only the external effects of laughter, e.g. the facial expressions, bodily spasms, and sounds, but also the internal effects of laughter, e.g. the impact on the organs, circulation, and breathing (Joubert [1579] 1980; Spencer [1860] 1911; Darwin 1872; Provine 2000; Ruch & Ekman 2001). Moreover, some physiological studies have sought to question the evolution of laughter and consider whether it is a solely human trait (e.g. Darwin 1872).²¹ There has been a particular interest in the evolutionary benefits of tickling and the resulting laughter (e.g. Darwin 1872; Harris 1999; Provine 2000 & 2004) and there is an interest in establishing whether there are any health benefits to laughter (e.g. Cousins 1976; Provine 2000; Cho & Oh 2011).

Building on the physiological studies of laughter, psychological explorations have tended to place a greater focus on humour, positioning laughter as the result of identifying something funny. There have been a range of things that have been considered within psychology, from the process of producing a joke to identifying the challenge of remembering jokes; from questioning why humour appreciation differs to considering whether a sense of humour is a personality trait; from exploring laughter during infancy and childhood to questioning whether there are mental health, or wider wellbeing, benefits to the regular engagement in humour (e.g. Freud [1905] 2002 & [1927] 1961; Grotjahn 1966; Chapman & Foot 1976; Martin & Ford 2018; Gibson 2019). As the emphasis of this research is on humour, its production and its effects, it does not provide a clear understanding of laughter, but is useful for foundational knowledge of related phenomena.

Despite Bronislaw Malinowski's claim that "[a]nthropology is the science of the sense of humour" (Malinowski 1937: vii), anthropology has spent relatively little time considering humour and laughter. The studies that have taken place have questioned the universality

²¹ Charles Darwin was aware of Herbert Spencer's earlier work on laughter and sought to add to it. However, Darwin placed an emphasis on the evolutionary nature of laughter in humans *and* animals.

of laughter, suggesting that laughter is a universal feature and a recognisable sound across the world (Apte 1985). In contrast with the universality of laughter is the identification of the particularity of humour; when considering humour, the importance of cultural context and language comes to the forefront, for example, it has been recognised that translating a joke often removes the humour (Driessen 1997). Alongside cultural context, anthropologists have tended to focus on the joke-teller and their relationship with others who engage and respond with laughter (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1940 & 1949; Douglas 1975a & 1975b). More broadly, anthropological studies of laughter have raised questions of belonging, boundaries, and cultural context (e.g. Apte 1985; Driessen 1997; Carty & Musharbash 2008).

In a similar vein, sociological studies of laughter have sought to explore the role of laughter and humour within society, and treat them as social phenomenon (Zijderveld 1983; Berger 1997; Kuipers 2006). There has been an interest in how laughter can help to navigate social interactions and relations, noting that laughter is often an important feature of friendships, romantic relationships, and the identification of ingroups and outsiders (Ziv 2010). Moreover, there is a recognition of the desire to share humour and an expectation that laughter should be communal, indeed, laughing alone can lead to the assumption that someone is “probably crazy” (Cosser 1959: 171). Similarly, studies have shown how social and cultural context is essential for not only getting a joke, but for knowing when laughter is, and is not, an appropriate response (Kuipers 2006).

Many of the questions regarding the reasons for laughter, that have been asked by philosophers, have also been asked by literary theorists.²² Indeed, literature offers an array of material on laughter; it provides representations of laughter and it also leads to laughter from its readers/audience. Literature enables the reader to understand “who laughs at, and with, whom, where, when, why, and how” (Pfister 2002a: viii). It is, then, not surprising that literary theorists have embraced the range of literature to uncover historical attitudes towards laughter, humour, and the comic: “literature is a site where

²² There have been a range of studies that focus on specific authors and their works, to identify their position on laughter, humour and the comic, such as: Samuel Beckett (Pfister 2002b; Weller 2005), Geoffrey Chaucer (Johnston 2002; Perfetti 2013), and William Shakespeare (Ghose 2008). However, such considerations fall beyond the scope of this thesis.

various historical anxieties about laughter become legible” (Parvulescu 2017). Not only does literature highlight historical anxieties, it also identifies present social concerns. Lisa Colletta, whose research includes humour theory and social satire, argues that literature containing dark humour offers “a defence and a weapon, a formula of personal survival” (Colletta 2003: 7). However, she argues that it cannot offer the reader justice or moral guidance, rather it highlights the instability and unfairness of life. It possesses the power to offer a coping mechanism, but it cannot and does not have the power to bring about change. Indeed, it is not only in literary studies but literature itself where explorations of laughter can be found, perhaps the most famous example is Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980). Although the story is about a murder investigation in the Middle Ages, the murder occurs in order to protect the discovery of Aristotle’s second book of *Poetics* which, although lost, is widely believed to have contained a theory of comedy (Halliwell 2008: 326). Here the positioning of laughter as a subject of philosophy was deemed dangerous enough to kill over. As such, surrounding the narrative are discussions of the power of laughter as has been explored by Greek philosophers, Biblical writers, and the Church Fathers. Throughout the novel, Eco raises key theological questions regarding laughter, for example: is laughter a gift from God? Is laughter a sign of Satan? Did Jesus laugh? Literary studies undoubtedly raise interesting questions, however, given that the literary focus tends to be on humour or on comic characters, as opposed to the physical act of laughter itself, it will not form the major focus of this thesis. Moreover, as literary sources approach the subject of laughter in relation to characters, and characterizations, that are neither contemporaneous nor subject to social norms that exist outside their fictional world, there are limitations to their usefulness. Whilst I do not draw on the broad field of literary studies and recognise the limitations of texts, I have chosen to draw on classical texts and myths that centre on laughing bodies within this thesis, because they have shaped later attitudes to both laughter and the body.

Ludwig Wittgenstein once claimed that a philosophy book could be written consisting of nothing but jokes (Malcolm 2001: 27-28), and whilst there are few humorous philosophical treatises, there are many philosophical works that consider the topic of laughter. As previously noted, the challenge with these considerations is that they are fragmented and relate to broader subject matters than laughter. Yet, as outlined above, one of the key contributions from philosophers is their attempt to understand why we

laugh, and the answer to this question has led to the formulation of the three key theories of humour that continue to perpetuate but are grounded in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Hutcheson, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Bergson. In addition to these theories, philosophers have sought to question whether laughter is a feature unique to humans (e.g. Aristotle *Poetics*; Schopenhauer [1818] 2011; Hazlitt ([1841] 1907); Bergson [1900] 2008; Nietzsche [1901] 1967; Plessner 1970); the relationship of laughter to emotion (e.g. Hutcheson 1750; Beattie 1764; Sully 1902; Monro 1951; Morreall 1983; Goldie 2000; Solomon 2008); and, perhaps most prominently, sought to question the ethics of laughter and humour (e.g. Goldstein 1995, 2001; Gaut 1998; Benatar 1999, 2014; Smuts 2010; Carroll 2014a, 2014b; Roberts 2016).

This overview of the various disciplinary considerations of laughter has demonstrated the different perspectives regarding laughter and its occurrence, its purposes, and its effects. Laughter cannot be considered through the lens of a single discipline, instead it is a vast subject that warrants further consideration. More specifically, it has evidenced the frequency with which the study of laughter is entangled within wider considerations of humour and related phenomena. As a result, it is evident that there is a significant gap within the existing scholarship, laughter needs to be treated not only as the object of study, but its distinction from humour, the comic, or jokes must be recognised.

Laughter and The Study of Religion

Literature in the field of religion, humour, and related phenomena has been steadily growing in recent years, but it remains a relatively overlooked area of contemporary scholarship. Moreover, as noted previously, considerations of laughter and religion are more generally found in literature that is exploring the relationship between humour and religion (exceptions include: Kuschel 1994; Sanders 1995; Gilhus 1997; Screech 1997; Bussie 2007; Conybeare 2013). When attempting to establish the lack of literature on the subject of humour and religion, Hans Geybels asks: “who could name any commonly available literature about humour in Christianity?” (Geybels 2011: 13). Whilst this may be a slight overstatement of the problem, as Christianity has tended to be the focus within studies of religion and humour, this question could certainly be asked in relation to other religious traditions, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and more broadly in

terms of New Religious Movements. Despite the scarcity of sources, there has been a growing interest in the presence and importance of humour in Zen Buddhism, with Conrad Hyers declaring that: “In no other tradition could the entire syndrome of laughter, humor, comedy, and ‘clowning’ be said to be more visible and pronounced than in Zen” (Hyers 1989a: 14; see also e.g. Blyth 1959 & 1969; Hyers 1970, 1989a, 1989b, 2000; Matthews & Hattam 2004; Whitehead 2014; de Silva 2018). As well as an emerging interest in Islam and humour, that considers the presence of humour in early Islam, the importance of the comic figure Nasruddin, and the acceptability of humour within Islam more broadly (e.g. Shah 1977; Maghen 2006; Marzolph 2011; Schweizer & Molokotos-Liederman forthcoming), there has been a growing interest in the classification of Jewish Humour (e.g. Knox 1969; Telushkin 1992; Ziv 1998; Baum 2017; Dauber 2017), and a recent study of the place of humour in Mormonism (McIntyre 2019). Whilst these studies provide useful starting points there is more that can be said. As such, this thesis seeks to begin a discussion of laughter in relation to New Religious Movements (chapter three) and in doing so draws on a range of different religious traditions in order to critically consider the place of laughter in various religious traditions.

Laughter (and humour) have been considered in theological thought throughout the ages. However, the comments that remain from historical accounts are generally brief and fragmented.²³ Historical considerations of laughter appear to have been written as a means of expressing concerns regarding laughter. Indeed, because much of the literature advocates for the tempering of laughter, contemporary literature tends to suppose that the Church has been opposed to laughter throughout the ages (e.g. Morreall 1989; Sanders 1995; Gilhus 1997; Bussie 2007; Arbuckle 2008). However, this position lacks nuance. As noted by Anca Parvulescu, “the very fact that such a range of normative texts on laughter exists is a sign not that there was no laughter but indeed that there was too much” (Parvulescu 2010: 45). As a result, whilst there may have been attempts to temper and moderate laughter by the Church, there was not an attempt to eradicate laughter entirely, indeed, many of the authors who apparently opposed laughter have been described as both laughing and provoking laughter.

²³ See for example: Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogue*), Gregory of Nyssa (*Against Eunomius*); Gregory of Nazianzus (*On God and Man*), Basil of Caesarea (*Asketikon*), John Chrysostom (*Against the Games and Theatres*), Augustine (*Sermons*), and Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*).

Early Western attitudes, both philosophical and theological, are explored in Stephen Halliwell's 2008 work, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*. Halliwell emphasises, what he perceives to be, an oppositional approach to laughter. Indeed, the early thinking on laughter – and its potential dangers – found within Plato and Aristotle are believed to have laid the groundwork for the suspicious treatment of laughter in the early Christian tradition and beyond (Morreall 1987: 3; Sanders 1995: 26; Bussie 2007: 2). In his 1997 works, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, Michael Screech continues to analyse the suspicion with which laughter was treated throughout the Middle Ages, and the continuing belief that God expects Christians to be serious and in control of a disciplined body. The perception of a history of “grim theologians” continues (Berger 1997: 197-204) and much of the contemporary literature seeks to interrogate the purportedly uneasy relationship of humour and Christianity further. However, it becomes clear that it was not religious communities but religious hierarchies that expounded views regarding the dangers of laughter (Sanders 1995: xi; Bussie 2007: 3). Moreover, many of the studies focus on the acceptability of humour and laughter in the everyday, rather than as features of religious traditions.

For scholars who have sought to position laughter and humour as not only compatible with but a feature of everyday Christian life, the starting point is often to establish some authority for this claim, namely through attempts to identify laughter and humour in the Bible. There are references to laughter in the Bible, though it becomes quickly apparent that this laughter is not a response to something funny. Indeed, references to laughter include the condemnation of laughter (e.g. Ecclesiastes 2:2, 7:3, 7:6), examples of derisive laughter (e.g. Psalm 2:4; Psalm 37:13), the encouragement to laugh with joy (e.g. Psalm 126: 2), and the acknowledgement that there is a right time to laugh (e.g. Ecclesiastes 3:4). There is also the recognition that laughter is positioned as a reward in the afterlife: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:21). Whilst this is generally welcome, in light of the importance of the body for my thesis, it is worth asking: if we experience disembodiment upon death how will we laugh in the next life? The notion that laughter is a reward of the afterlife also raises questions about the virtue of laughter in this life, which speaks to the nature and morality of interactions shaped by laughter. Indeed, chapter five will explore how the ethics of the body – often grounded in religious concerns – has impacted the place of and engagement with laughter. Similarly, there have

also been attempts to identify humour in the Bible (e.g. Hyers 1987; Whedbee 1998; Arbuckle 2008). However, identifying humour from the past is not easy and at times remains unconvincing. Building on the desire to ground laughter and humour in authority, there is often a specific focus on Jesus and questioning whether Jesus laughed or used humour (e.g. Trueblood 1964; Hauck 1970; Viney 1997; Longenecker 2008). I will consider this question further in chapter three, in order to identify the potential for laughter to be an attribute of religious figures and thus a significant feature of religion.

Given the privileging of the serious in many religions, John Morreall (1999) argues that different religious traditions adopt either comic or tragic visions of life. However, I am unconvinced that any tradition can be defined as comic or tragic in its entirety; the comic (and the tragic) is a feature of human existence and the levels of engagement vary not solely in traditions but in individuals. There seems to be a growing desire to redeem the place of laughter and humour in Christianity. For example, Doris Donnelly sought to rescue laughter from condemnation and overcome the “centuries of humourless Christianity” (Donnelly 1992: 397), in order to argue that “divorcing humor from religion is potentially destructive of true religion” (Donnelly 1992: 388). Moreover, some, such as Conrad Hyers, have sought to argue that a comic spirit is essential for living a Christian life; not only does it enable Christians to look beyond their present situation, it also enables them to view the world with fresh perspectives (Hyers 1981 & 1987). Similarly, Harvey Cox explained that “the comic, of course, has to do with more than the funny. It is a perspective on life” (Cox 1969: 149). Likewise, Peter Berger has sought to redeem the comic spirit. For Berger, religious and comic experiences interrupt our everyday life, they offer the opportunity to enter into “a counterworld” (Berger 1997: 207). Whilst recognising that the comic does not always have religious implications, when accompanied by faith Berger claims that “the comic becomes a great consolation and a witness to the redemption that is yet to come” (Berger 1997: 215). Thus, whilst the comic cannot end suffering, when accompanied by faith, the comic offers a “signal of transcendence” that gives the promise of the end of suffering in the next life (Berger 1997: 214).

Although he does not acknowledge a comic spirit, Reinhold Niebuhr identifies the importance of laughter for humanity, but he suggests that its relationship with religion is

marginal. Whilst humour and religion “both deal with the incongruities of our existence” (Niebuhr 1946: 112), for Niebuhr, humour can only provide a response to “immediate incongruities” whereas “[f]aith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence” (Niebuhr 1946: 112). This position shares similarities with Søren Kierkegaard, who also identifies humour in contradictions (or incongruities) of life and who claimed that, “[h]umour is not faith but is prior to faith” (Kierkegaard [1846] 2009: 244). However, Niebuhr’s claim overlooks the fact that people often laugh at ‘ultimate incongruities’ such as sickness, death, and religion. This position contrasts with those who seek to embrace incongruity as part of a wider comic vision of life. For example, Gerald Arbuckle suggests that “incongruities [are] expressions of divine humour” (Arbuckle 2008: x).

Advocates of laughter often position it as resulting from Christian spiritual joy (e.g. Moltmann 1973; Hyers 1987; Kuschel 1994; Arbuckle 2008; Martin 2011; Conybeare 2013). For example, Jürgen Moltmann sought to “reassert the value of aesthetic joy” and advocated for play and laughter to be central features of the Christian faith (Moltmann 1973: i). Similar claims can be found in the writing of James Martin, who also advocates for “the value of joy, humor, and laughter in the spiritual life” (Martin 2011: 2). Indeed, Gerald Arbuckle suggests that the “laughter of the heart” results from “contemplat[ing] the incongruities of life and express[ing] this meditative reflection in laughter, smiling, or simply an inner joy or peace” (Arbuckle 2008: 27). This shares similarities with Catherine Conybeare’s “laughter of delight: a great, irrational, infectious welling-up of joy” (Conybeare 2013: x). Although associating laughter with joy is deemed to be positive, these authors tend to attribute limitations to laughter. Laughter must always be joyful and never derogatory, offensive, or malicious: “As long as [laughter] remains firmly in the first category of ‘joyful’ and does not transgress into ‘mocking’, human laughter is a gift from God, a spontaneous expression of delight at the world” (Martin 2011: 21). Similarly, Karl-Josef Kuschel, argues that Christian laughter should not be “destructive... nihilistic...at the expense of any truthfulness...mocking...above downward...[or] cynical” (Kuschel 1994: xx-xxi). And, although focusing on humour, Arbuckle states that:

We need to distinguish negative and positive humour so that it can be viewed in a continuum. At one pole of the continuum there is negative humor marked by bitterness, hostility, humiliation...At the other pole there is positive humor characterized by pleasantness, joy, and happiness...

(Arbuckle 2008: 4)

Despite attempts to appear moderate and pro-laughter, the suggestion that there is good or bad laughter echoes the earlier Christian writers on laughter who also recognised laughter has various forms. In this sense, laughter is neither innately good or bad; I will return to the morality of laughter briefly in this chapter and offer a more in-depth consideration in chapter five. There are some scholars who go further than seeking to devise a dichotomy of good and bad laughter. The most explicit example being within Jacqueline Bussie's 2007 work, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo*. Through an analysis of literature, Bussie argues that laughter can be a means of theological resistance, of challenging the status quo, and giving a voice to the oppressed. Laughter is an important theological tool because it offers moments of disruption.

Whilst many considerations of laughter, humour, and religion, focus on its acceptability in the everyday life of the religious, fewer studies consider the place of laughter in religion. An important exception is Ingvild Gilhus' 1997 work, *Laughing Gods Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion*, which is a foundational book that seeks to outline the role of laughter across various religious traditions throughout history. Gilhus argues that laughter is culturally determined and so it is important to plot the evolution of the place of laughter in religion, including its place in myths, rituals, and festivals. Her book is an important starting point for any study of laughter and religion as she opens up important questions. For example, when exploring the place of the body in both laughter and religion, Gilhus positions the body as "a large symbolic system through which thoughts and feelings about humans and their world are played out" (Gilhus 1997: 3). As it is only 150-pages, this book is unable to offer a detailed exploration of laughter, yet the broad nature of this work means that Gilhus opens up many possibilities for future research within the field. Indeed, her brief consideration of Osho and the Rajneesh Movement (Gilhus 1997: 125-128) highlights the potential for a more detailed study of laughter within this New Religious Movement; in chapter three I draw on Osho and the Rajneesh Movement in order demonstrate the potential for laughter as a means of insight.

There have also been edited collections that have sought to engage in the study of humour and religion and demonstrate that “there is not only an important, but necessary, interrelationship between the comic and the sacred” (Hyers 1969: 3; see also Geybels & Herck 2011). Both collections make a convincing case for this emerging area of research requiring closer attention. However, these collections are indicative of the subject being treated as a one-off venture rather than a committed area of study by scholars.

Donald Capps argues that religion and humour are “estranged bedfellows”, but he finds this odd as both religion and humour provide psychological benefits and this, he suggests, means that they should be allies (2006). Moreover, Capps argues against the view that there must always be suspicion amongst religion and humour and makes a “case against any blanket mistrust of humour on religion’s part, and a case for religion taking expressions of humor on a case by case basis” (Capps 2006: 437). There have also been recent psychological studies that have sought to identify a link between humour and religion. Vassilis Saroglou’s various studies demonstrated that humour is negatively affected by religion (Saroglou 2002a), both in terms of humour creation (Saroglou & Jaspard 2001; Saroglou 2002c) and humour appreciation (Saroglou 2002b). However, the grounding for Saroglou’s experiments did not offer accounts of authentic uses of humour but rather examined whether humour is used to navigate Rosenweig’s Picture Frustration Test. Perhaps for this reason the more recent studies by Bernard Schweizer and Karl-Heinz Ott indicate that the distinction between Christian and atheist humour is not as apparent as would be assumed; the only distinctions of humour appreciation were evident in examples of blasphemous humour (Schweizer & Ott 2016 & 2018).

Rethinking Laughter

Given the limited number of studies and fragmented comments on laughter in Western theology and religious and philosophical thought, I will now extrapolate many of these fragments to offer greater coherence, which I would argue is currently lacking. By seeking to draw out the fragmented comments, thematically, into a framework it will be possible to review the pre-existing literature on laughter from a variety of disciplines, as well as identify the originality of this thesis. My framework will consider four key aspects of human laughter: the body and the mind; emotion; the social; and the ethical and moral.

Considering laughter and the body will help us to understand the experience of laughter through its physiology, and, more importantly for the thesis, identify why the body is so important for laughter. Whilst chapter two will introduce the psychological and philosophical theory of William James, that enables me to argue that insight laughter is a form of embodied knowledge, this chapter focuses on the bodily experience of laughter more broadly. Both body and mind also need to be considered in relation to the roles played in the experience of laughter and the conscious and unconscious nature of laughter. Moreover, my concept of insight laughter is dependent on the shift in consciousness that can occur when we laugh. Considering emotion will not only provide a deeper understanding of what laughter is (i.e. is it an emotion?), but how an understanding of laughter can benefit from an understanding of emotion. By exploring the notion that laughter is social, it will be possible to understand the role of laughter in social dynamics and interactions. Finally, I will consider laughter in the ethical and moral sphere, identifying how concerns regarding the body have affected the perception of laughter.

Laughter as a Human Trait

Laughter is often positioned as being an integral feature of humanity; it is possible because of our physiology, it is a response to our emotions, and it is a feature of our social and ethical nature. For these reasons, the human being is often described as a “laughing animal”.²⁴ Of course, laughter is not the only feature that has been identified as distinguishing humans from animals. Indeed, much of the peculiarity of humanity is found in our consciousness, our ability to reflect, our language, and our social nature; all of which are important, if not essential, for laughter to occur. Thus, in recognising the importance of laughter for humanity, laughter has frequently been positioned as a solely human trait; laughter is a feature that is not shared with animals (Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogue*; Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*; Schopenhauer [1818] 2011; Hazlitt [1841] 1907; Bergson [1900] 2008; Nietzsche [1901] 1967; Grotjahn 1966; Plessner 1970; Critchley 2002).

²⁴ This term was first used by Aristotle (*On the Parts of Animals*, 3.10.673a) but is frequently adopted by those who suggest it is only humans who can laugh.

However, this view has been countered by ethologists and biologists who have suggested that apes, baboons, and monkeys (Darwin 1872; Meyer et al 2007; Ross et al 2009), rats (Mercogliano 2008), and even dogs (Lorenz 1949; Douglas 1975b) can laugh. When studying the laughter of animals, it is often observed during play and/or the result of tickling. Similarly, human laughter can result from play or tickling but it also goes beyond this to include additional provocations such as a response to something funny, derision, nervousness, and surprise.²⁵ In acknowledgement of the more recent scientific discoveries that appear to support the view that (some) animals can laugh, scholars such as John Morreall have suggested that, rather than laughter, it is the capacity to perceive humour that is unique to humans: “[animals] lack a capacity for humor, because they lack our rationality” (Morreall 1983: 99). Whether or not animals laugh or can identify humour is not the focus of, nor essential to, this study, but it does highlight the desire, for many, to preserve laughter as a distinctly human trait and this is suggestive of the underlying importance of laughter for humanity. Yet despite its importance there are limitations and ethical concerns attributed to human laughter because of its grounding in the body. Indeed, Helmuth Plessner argues that laughter provides a constant reminder of our human nature: “*At one and the same time, he is his body and in or with a body*” (Plessner 1970: 148, original emphasis).

In positioning laughter as a distinguishing feature between humans and animals, it must be noted that a similar distinction has been sought in relation to humans and gods: if laughter is a human quality can god(s) laugh? Indeed, Plato refuted the idea that gods laugh; as laughter was too unbecoming for humans let alone the Gods (*Republic* 3.388e-389a). Because of the assumed correlation of laughter and humour, the starting point is often: do God(s) have a sense of humour? As noted earlier, the Christian-centric nature of scholarship means that answers to this question tend to be grounded in relation to the Christian God (e.g. Peels 2015). Whilst some wish to see God attributed with a sense of humour, others argue that God cannot laugh because God cannot be surprised, God is omniscient and so God cannot be outwitted. Others note that it is possible to laugh without the presence of something funny, and highlight how God’s laughter in the Bible

²⁵ For a more extensive list of things that can provoke laughter see Anthony Ludovici (1932); Ludovici lists thirty-two provocations of laughter, noting a further two that he has chosen to omit: laughing due to hysteria and laughing due to insanity.

often possesses a derisive tone. There is also the additional issue of God's embodiment. If laughter is dependent on the body and God is omnipresent how can or does God laugh?

Body and Mind

The experience of laughter is grounded firmly in the body: "laughter is a phenomenon which is expressed in and through the body" (Le Goff 1997: 45). Despite the importance of the body for laughter, the role of the body has received little sustained attention and is rarely referenced in any great depth amongst non-scientific texts. However, I will offer an outline of the literature that has considered the body and laughter to date in order to emphasise its importance.

Understanding the physiology of laughter is to understand *how* we laugh. Laughter often starts in the mouth, perhaps with a smile or a widened mouth exposing gums and teeth, wrinkles appear around the eyes, rosiness in the cheeks, respiration can become laboured with gasps for breath, upper limbs move (clapping, rubbing hands together, slapping thighs, gripping stomachs, and swaying), the head can be thrown back, and the spine can cause the body to become bent double. The duration of laughter can be brief and fleeting, or it can build and grow in intensity, often the level of intensity affects the physicality of the laughter. The effect of laughter on the muscles is explored by Herbert Spencer, the British philosopher and sociologist, in his work, *On the Physiology of Laughter*. According to Spencer, "laughter is a display of muscular excitement" that is caused by "strong feeling, mental or physical" (Spencer [1860] 1911: 229). Spencer suggests that feelings need to be discharged; this discharge occurs through a variety of internal channels, which ultimately leads to muscular excitement. Likewise, Henri Bergson notes that laughter "contracts, expands and shakes our limbs" (Bergson [1900] 2008: 12) and the concept of an internal release during laughter is also found within the writings of Sigmund Freud. Freud offers an exploration of jokes, reaching the conclusion that it is the saving of psychological expenditure, which is normally required to suppress inhibitions, that creates a sense of pleasure and ultimately laughter (Freud [1905] 2002: 117). Laughter is thus positioned as a release, and Spencer, Bergson, and Freud have, for this reason, been associated with the *Relief Theory* outlined above.

Laughter is both seen and heard. In fact, the neuroscientist Robert Provine, suggests that: “laughing is, in essence, a movement that produces a sound” (Provine 2000: 5). Sound is often the first indication of laughter, though the sound of laughter varies from quiet to loud, high to low pitched, and, from brief to extended in duration.²⁶ As a result of the variations of laughter, there are numerous terms that are used to differentiate the different types of laughter, e.g. cackle, chortle, chuckle, giggle, guffaw, howl, roar, shriek, snicker, snigger, snort, titter etc. Each term offers an indication of the sound and intensity of the laugh, but the terms are also suggestive of the intentions behind the laughter; each term also has a moral connotation. Given the absence of (rational) language and the animalistic nature of the noises, the sound of laughter is sometimes said to demonstrate a lack of decorum, in order to meet societal expectations, it should therefore be avoided or at least moderated: “the civilising process has pruned laughter to a moderate size: we laugh moderate, civilised laughs” (Parvulescu 2010: 24). Indeed, Manfred Pfister, a scholar in English literature, notes that laughter provides a reminder of our corporeal nature, and, as a result it has been subjected to control throughout history (Pfister 2002a: vi). In order to demonstrate the effect that concerns regarding the body have had on laughter, chapter five will consider the etiquette and ethics of laughter, and argue that the historical negation of the body has left the importance of laughter to be overlooked, particularly within the study of religion.

Additionally, it should be noted that laughter is affected by the body that is laughing. For example, the embodiment of laughter often differs as a result of the various expectations surrounding how women and men should laugh. Emily Douglas argues that “there is a distinctive way of *laughing like a girl*” (Douglas 2015: 147, original emphasis), and therefore, I would add, a distinctive way of *laughing like a boy*. The key difference between the gendered embodiment of laughter is the restrictions that are placed on women’s laughter, in comparison to the freedom with which men can laugh. A fuller consideration of the gendered experience of laughter, in chapter four, will evidence how views and inhibitions relating to the body have affected gendered experiences of

²⁶ Despite the range of sounds that can occur during laughter, they are all recognisable to the human ear as laughter (Provine 2000: 55-74).

laughter, as well as demonstrate how laughter raises important questions of the intersection of the body and gender.

Laughter can be all encompassing of the body, not only does it provide external sounds and signals, but it is also believed to have internal effects on circulation and the organs. René Descartes, in his writings on the passions²⁷ considers laughter and describes a rush of “blood coming from the right-side cavity of the heart through the arterial vein suddenly and repeatedly inflates the lungs, forcing the air in them to rush out through the windpipe, where it makes an inarticulate, explosive sound” (Descartes [1649] 1985: 371). Similarly, Immanuel Kant describes “an alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic portions of our intestines, which communicates itself to the diaphragm (like that which ticklish people feel)” (Kant [1790] 2012: 256; see also Kant [1798] 2006: 161). Indeed, for Kant this internal movement leads to health benefits, it offers a stability or balance within the body. The suggestion that laughing can provide a health benefit continues today; statements such as ‘laughter is the best medicine’²⁸ are commonly used, and laughter therapy/yoga/workshops are promoted as means of improving physical and mental health. Indeed, the use of laughter as technique in meditation will be considered further in chapter three. There are also studies that show how a sense of humour and regular laughter can have health benefits (Cousins 1976; Cho & Oh 2011). However, the extent of the health benefits offered from laughter remain questionable: “*laughter no more evolved to make us feel good or improve our health than walking evolved to promote cardiovascular fitness*” (Provine 2000: 189-190, original emphasis). Despite his initial scepticism, Provine concludes that, whilst evidence may be lacking, the relief and distraction laughter brings is certainly a health benefit of sorts (Provine 2000: 207).

In order to consider the role of the body more fully, it is important to understand why we laugh, not just how we laugh. Indeed, as evidenced throughout this chapter, this question is often central to most scholarship on humour that centres on the object of laughter.

²⁷ Although the term ‘passion’ is sometimes used interchangeably with the contemporary term ‘emotion’, they are distinct concepts. Passion carries forward a complex tradition and relationship with morality. There is a substantial amount of literature that explores the distinction between the passions and the emotions, and considers them within a moral framework (e.g. Rorty 1982; Taliaferro 2013; Vallerand 2015).

²⁸ It could be suggested that one of the first references to laughter as a health benefit is located in the Bible (Donnelly 1992: 395): “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine” (Proverbs 17:22).

Laughter can be a response to physical stimulation, particularly tickling, and a number of studies have sought to consider why we laugh when we are tickled (e.g. Monro 1951: 21-25; Sully 1902: 177-185; Provine 2004). However, mental stimulation is more frequently encountered as a means of provoking laughter. In order to understand laughter, it must be recognised that laughter “is a phenomenon that involves both body and mind” (Berger 1997: 46). For this reason, Charles Darwin declares that laughter is a response to the “tickling of the mind [which] is curiously analogous with that of [tickling] the body” (Darwin 1872: 199). Alongside Darwin, Kant also positions laughter as a bodily reaction to the stimulus of the mind (Kant [1790] 2012: 253).

In fact, Fredrich Nietzsche seems to draw a correlation between laughter and wisdom; Nietzsche advocates for transcending serious methods of knowledge and instead embraces the non-serious method of laughter.²⁹ Unfortunately, Nietzsche did not devise a theory of laughter, but instead made scattered references throughout his works and so his advocacy for laughter whilst promising is somewhat underdeveloped.³⁰ Perhaps his most extensive comments on laughter are found within the narrative, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody* (1883-1891), which will be considered further in chapter three but I will introduce briefly now. Within this text Nietzsche identifies two forms of laughter: the ‘laughter of the herd’ and the ‘laughter of the heights’.³¹ The former is a laughter which is often communal and derisive in nature, it is laughing at someone or something, and may serve the purpose of a social corrective. The latter laughter is the laughter of the individual, it is a response to questions of truth and understanding of the world – a laugh that could, perhaps, be considered insightful.

The importance of the mind for laughter was introduced earlier in this chapter, in relation to the perception of incongruities as frequently leading to laughter. However, it is worth

²⁹ “Taking seriously - In the great majority, the intellect is a clumsy, gloomy, creaking machine that is difficult to start. They call it ‘taking the matter seriously’ when they want to work with this machine and think well. How burdensome they must find good thinking! The lovely human beast always seems to lose its good spirits when it thinks well; it becomes ‘serious’. And ‘where laughter and gaiety are found, thinking does not amount to anything’: that is the prejudice of this serious beast against all ‘gay science’. - Well then, let us prove that this is a prejudice.” (Nietzsche [1887] 1974: 257).

³⁰ For more detailed considerations of Nietzsche’s views on laughter, see for example: Gunter 1968; Hatab 1988; Lippitt 1992; Weeks 2004; Kress 2008.

³¹ John Lippitt interprets the laughter of the heights as the making of life “so joyous that [s]he would be perfectly happy to live the same life over and over again, for all eternity” (Lippitt 1992: 40).

considering John Morreall, who sought to introduce his own theory of laughter that centres on the mind. For Morreall:

Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift...laughter is neither the psychological shift itself nor the pleasant feeling produced by the shift. Laughter is rather the physical activity which is caused by, and which expresses the feeling produced by, the shift.

(Morreall 1983: 39, original emphasis)

Thus, laughter is positioned as being “based on a conceptual shift” (Morreall 1983: 60) it can be a surprise (for children) or the recognition of incongruity (for adults). However, Morreall’s theory is subject to the same criticisms of the broader *Incongruity Theory*, and the additional challenge that the psychological shift that takes place during laughter is not always ‘pleasant’. Laughter can occur when humans are surprised, nervous, and/or derisive and in these moments the laughter is not necessarily pleasant.

It is evident that any exploration of laughter should take into account its corporeality and, in this thesis, I will continue to advocate for the importance of the body for laughter. Moreover, the relationship of the body and the mind is essential for my concept of insight laughter, as I position laughter as a form of embodied knowledge. In centring the body, I am challenging the existing expectations for the creation of knowledge; I will argue that it is the bodily experience of laughter that leads to a shift in consciousness that enables insight and the opportunity to rupture habitual thinking and behaviour.

Laughter and Emotion

The relationship of laughter and emotion is complicated. Morreall highlights that there is an ongoing discussion regarding what laughter is, with conflicting thoughts regarding whether laughter is or is not an emotion (Morreall 1983: 2). As such, this section will consider whether laughter is an emotion, or whether it is signalling an emotion. Additionally, it will explore the literature that considers the effect emotions can have on the experience of laughter.

Before exploring the relationship of laughter and emotion, it is necessary to understand what (an) emotion is, though a complete analysis of emotion is outside the scope of this

thesis. John Corrigan, a scholar of religion who has written extensively on the subject of religion and emotion, states that “emotion is a fundamental part of human experience” (Corrigan 2007: 11-12). It has been studied across a range of disciplines from neuroscience to psychology, history to anthropology, biology to philosophy and theology. However, much like laughter, “emotion [is] taken for granted as something that ‘everybody knows’, or universally experiences or conceives in the same way, [this] discourages exploration into the personal and cultural bits and pieces that lie behind the scene of an emotional event” (Corrigan 2007: 8). Despite the sense of universality, there is much debate about what is meant by emotion. A simple understanding of emotion is that they are a class of feelings, often perceived by their expression through the body. Whilst it is generally accepted that most emotions are conscious, it is also acknowledged that some emotions are unconscious. Moreover, it is undecided whether emotions are passive and unruly or subject to cultivation and control.³²

As will be explored in more detail in chapter two, in 1884, William James asked “What is an Emotion?”, concluding that an emotion is the bodily reaction: “*the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion*” (James 1884: 189-190, original emphasis). This is contrary to, in James’ own words, “common sense” and contemporary theories of emotion, which suggest that it is the state of mind that causes the bodily response (James 1884: 190). The body, for James, is essential for emotion: a “purely disembodied human emotion is a nonentity” (James 1884: 194); it is as a result of feeling bodily sensations that we experience emotions. According to James, emotions are distinguishable by the perception of the specific bodily expressions. However, emotions vary, not only in their bodily expression, but in their duration and intensity, and many emotions share bodily expressions. In order to differentiate emotions, we need to look beyond body and mind and consider the social aspect of emotion. Indeed, James considers emotion beyond the physical body in his later works; he explores, for example, “religious emotions” (believing there is no such thing as a religious emotion only natural human emotions directed to

³² For more detailed explorations of the various understandings of emotions, see for example: Goldie 2000; Zhu & Thagard 2002; Solomon 2008.

something classified as a religious object) in relation to the body, as well as its cognitive and social dimensions (see Carrette 2007).

In order to experience an emotion, we must believe something, i.e. we must believe we are in danger to feel fear. What causes the emotion also varies but there is often an intentional object; emotions are often directed at something or someone (including oneself). They are highlighted in our social interactions and, as a result, it is perhaps not surprising that there are social norms for emotions; expectations of how they should be expressed and when they should be expressed. If it is unacceptable to be experiencing a particular emotion in certain circumstances, we will often try to rationalise it (i.e. I am angry because you spoke to me in an inappropriate way) so the emotions are deemed reasonable and thus socially acceptable. The rationality of emotion is often questioned; emotions are generally seen as distinct from rationality and as potentially interfering with reason (see e.g. Bagnoli 2011 who explores this further). Despite this, as a result of his neurological studies, Antonio Damasio (1999) suggests that emotions play an important role in our everyday reasoning.³³ Emotions can lead us to make decisions, judgements, and even spur us to action; sometimes these judgements benefit from the emotion and on other occasions they can lead to hasty judgements that have not benefited from rational thought.

As well as playing a role in making judgements, emotions are sometimes posited as being a judgement. Martha Nussbaum suggests that emotions are “appraisals that have an evaluative context” (Nussbaum 2013: 6). For Nussbaum, emotions are not only responses to situations but they can be motivational; considering the political cultivation of emotions, Nussbaum notes that they can “have large scale consequences for the nation’s progress towards its goals” (Nussbaum 2013: 2). Emotions can lead to positive, and negative, action. Indeed, a division is often made between positive or good emotions and negative or bad emotions, as such, emotions find themselves associated with virtues and vices, respectively. This leads to moral connotations becoming attached to emotions.

³³ Subjects in his study had brain lesions which led to diminished capacity to experience emotions. Damasio suggests that emotions are cognitive as the emotional impairment meant the subjects ability to make practical decisions was hindered.

Whilst the role of emotions and morality should be considered, it is too reductionist to consider an emotion innately good or bad (Bagnoli 2011: 2).

The concept of emotion is clearly complex, but is laughter an emotion? This question is not new, indeed, one of the earliest considerations of laughter, which was mentioned earlier, was undertaken by the first century Roman rhetorician Quintilian and he asked this very question. Quintilian reached the conclusion that laughter is an “emotion which it is difficult, if not impossible, to describe” (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 6.3.6). Although Quintilian positions laughter as an emotion, he recognises the challenge of doing this. Reaching a similar conclusion, albeit hundreds of years later, Francis Hutcheson stated that: “action, passion, or affection, I know not which of them a philosopher would call it” (Hutcheson 1750: 16). However, more generally, laughter is not positioned as an emotion, but as an expression of an emotion (e.g. Goldie 2000; Solomon 2008; Parvulescu 2010).

When laughter is positioned as being the expression of an emotion, it is most commonly associated with joy or happiness. Although he disagrees with the presumption, Helmuth Plessner notes that “according to general opinion, laughter belongs to joy, gaiety, merriment, joviality, and cheerfulness” (Plessner 1970: 70). Indeed, in his study, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Charles Darwin explores laughter. For Darwin, laughter signals an emotion, more specifically: “laughter seems primarily to be the expression of mere joy or happiness” (Darwin 1872: 196). Despite the reduction of laughter to a signal of a single emotion, Darwin notes that “the subject is extremely complex” (Darwin 1872: 198); unfortunately, he does not identify or elaborate on the complexities. Furthermore, despite referencing the fact that laughter is “primarily” caused by joy (the inference being there are other causes), Darwin chooses not to explore other emotions that may provoke laughter. Rather he concludes: “With respect to joy, its natural and universal expression is laughter” (Darwin 1872: 216). Darwin is not alone in his association of laughter and joy. For example, Sully claims that “laughter must, it is evident, amount to gladness or joy” (Sully 1902: 71); Reinhold Niebuhr, states that “laughter, is one expression of joy” (Niebuhr 1946: 123); and David Monro notes that “laughter is often no more than an expression of high spirits” (Monro 1951: 28). It must be acknowledged that although these (and other) considerations of laughter have tended

to begin with a consideration of laughter as an expression of joy, they often proceed to acknowledge the ambiguity of laughter and the fact that it can also express other emotions too, such as surprise, nervousness, derision etc. As will become apparent, much of the laughter within this thesis, is not the result of something funny, but rather it results from a moment of shock or surprise.

Rather than refuting the view that laughter is the result of joy on the grounds of reductionism, the philosophers, social critics, and members of the Frankfurt School of thought, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, deny there is any association between laughter and joy, claiming “moments of happiness are without laughter” (Adorno & Horkheimer [1944] 1997: 140). Whilst such opposition to laughter may seem surprising to the modern reader, Adorno and Horkheimer were highly critical of mass entertainment. For them, ‘the culture industry’ projects positive images and messages that are believed by society; this placates society and so individuals do not see or question reality and the presence of suffering. In contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer, this thesis seeks to argue that laughter can go beyond placating members of society, and through the emergence of new insights can lead individuals to change their thinking and behaviour. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the promotion of laughter by the entertainment industry leads society to actively pursue it. However, they do not believe laughter is a benefit, for them it is a sickness: “there is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about” (Adorno & Horkheimer [1944] 1997: 140).

Laughter has also been considered as an expression of emotions, other than joy. For example, Thomas Hobbes explored the correlation between laughter and a number of emotions before concluding that laughter is a sign of ‘glory’ (Hobbes [1640] 1994: 54 & [1651] 1968: 125). Both of Hobbes writings on laughter occur as part of a wider exploration of human passions. Initially Hobbes’ positions laughter as a sign of “a passion which hath no name” transmitted through the contortion of the face (Hobbes [1640] 1994: 54). Despite positioning laughter as something that others have found difficult to understand and as a result is reduced incorrectly by others, Hobbes proceeds to suggest that laughter “is always joy” (Hobbes [1640] 1994: 54) yet offers no further elaboration. He then appears to change his mind and concludes that: “the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in

ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly” (Hobbes [1640] 1994: 54). This is an interesting conclusion for a number of reasons. First, Hobbes began from the position that laughter is the contortion of the face that is a sign of an undefined passion. For Hobbes laughter is not a passion in and of itself but a sign of a passion. Second, Hobbes then proceeds to suggest laughter is a sign of joy. The modern reader would, unsurprisingly, assume that joy itself is the previously undefined passion, as joy is generally regarded as an emotion. Furthermore, joy as provoked from a feeling of superiority is not the usual perception of joy. Yet joy is not a passion identified and defined by Hobbes, it is glory. In his earlier discussions of the passions Hobbes positions ‘glory’ as a passion defining it as: “the passion which proceedeth from the imagination or conception of our own power, above the power of him that contendeth with us” (Hobbes [1640] 1994: 50). In this section Hobbes does not define ‘sudden glory’ but it would be reasonable to suggest that the term sudden is simply reference to the speed with which one experiences the onset of the passion of glory. Also, given that laughter is positioned as being a sign of (sudden) glory it is interesting that Hobbes chose to write about laughter as distinct from his writings on glory a few sections earlier. However, Hobbes seems satisfied with his position, as when he returned to the subject of laughter over ten years later, he confirmed his position that: “sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter” (Hobbes [1651] 1968: 125). Thus, laughter, for Hobbes, is the physical embodiment of a passion, namely glory, and it is a sign to the world about the emotions that are being experienced.

Descartes also positions laughter as an “external sign” of a passion, but not as an expression of joy. He claimed that “joy can’t cause laughter except when it is moderate and mixed with an element of wonder or hatred” (Descartes [1649] 1985: 371). The reason why joy does not cause laughter, for Descartes, is physiological: “in great joys the lungs are always so full of blood that they can’t be swollen any more by renewed surges of it” (Descartes [1649] 1985: 371). The mixture of hatred proposed by Descartes, and the sense of superiority identified by Hobbes, has led to the suggestion that laughter is an expression of aggression (Ludovici 1932; Adorno & Horkheimer [1944] 1997; Lorenz 1966; Billig 2005; Buckley 2005), including “sexual aggression” (Freud [1905] 2002: 95), and as being a signal of “triumph” (Monro 1951: 32; Rapp 1951: 21). Laughter can also be an emotional expression of surprise (Sully 1902: 126-128; Morreall 1983: 43-44),

nervousness (Sully 1902: 65-70; Monro 1951: 25), embarrassment (Monro 1951: 27-28; Plessner 1970: 107-111; Billig 2005: 200-235), and relief (Sully 1902: 200-201; Morreall 1983: 20-37).

As well as being provoked by an emotion, it is often argued that the general emotional state of an individual can affect their capacity to laugh. It is often suggested that laughter occurs more frequently when there is an appropriate, more specifically a 'pleasant', mood of the mind (e.g. Hutcheson 1750: 27; Darwin 1872: 199; Sully 1902: 71). However, a pleasant mood is not always a requirement, laughter can occur when we are emotionally distressed – in fact, the act of laughing can relieve the distress, even if only momentarily. Thus, we can laugh when upset, frustrated, angry, stressed, grieving, or shocked. As will be demonstrated in chapter four, the rupture of laughter in times of anger, when sulking, or even grieving, can lead to the breaking of habitual thinking and behaviour.

The role of emotion in provoking laughter is further complicated when we consider that experiencing emotions can prevent or stop laughter. Hutcheson notes that if we experience emotions such as pity towards another, we are much more likely to cry than to laugh (Hutcheson 1750: 11). Similarly, James Beattie suggests that we cannot laugh at the incongruities we perceive if we feel emotions such as “moral disapprobation, pity, fear, disgust, [or] admiration” (Beattie 1764: 455). Here, laughter is deemed to be impossible when another emotion is being experienced; when another emotion is directed at the object of our potential laughter. For example, if we witness someone falling over and laugh, but then become concerned that the fallen has injured themselves, our laughter often ceases. As a result of the nullifying effect of emotions such as pity, Noël Carroll argues that comedy consciously attempts to reduce any perception of danger or pain (Carroll 2014b: 30). As well as effecting the likelihood of laughter occurring, emotions can also stop laughter in its tracks. For example, disgust or revulsion can stop laughter from occurring (Carroll 2014a: 251). Of course, there are also times when “offence can trail behind amusement [and laughter]” (Smuts 2010: 340). Why does laughter stop if a (new) emotion is experienced mid-laugh? Is it the emotion or some thought that stops laughter? If laughter requires an absence of feeling, and/or stops if an emotion is felt when we are laughing, is it as a result of a shift in our consciousness? Or perhaps the reason laughter stops as a result of emotion is due to its manifestation in the

body? As explored earlier, laughter is perceived through bodily expression; the same has also been shown with emotion(s). It could therefore be suggested that the reason we stop laughing, if an emotion such as pity is felt, is that the bodily expression of laughter is superseded by the bodily expression of the emotion in question. It should also be noted that, as a result of the ambiguity of laughter, some emotions can also enhance or increase laughter; Morreall notes that we may laugh more if someone we dislike falls into a swimming pool than someone we have great respect for (Morreall 1983: 47).

In recognising the interference of emotions on laughter, Henri Bergson suggests that in order to laugh there must be “the *absence of feeling*” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 10, original emphasis); we must suspend all emotions to be able to laugh. Likewise, Ronald de Sousa suggests that laughter is “incompatible with emotion” (de Sousa 1987: 237) and Morreall also notes that laughter can be provoked when we are emotionally disconnected: “it is often possible to laugh only where we do *not* get emotionally involved with the laughter stimulus and do *not* have pent up emotions” (Morreall 1983: 26, original emphasis). In contrast with the position that the act of laughing can lead to a loss of self or a loss of rationality, Bergson looks at the state of mind and our emotions that enables laughter to occur. For Bergson, we must suspend emotion and tap into our intelligence in order to laugh. If we require intelligence to laugh this suggests there is intention behind our laughter; this raises interesting questions regarding the morality of laughter, which will be touched on briefly in the following section and considered more fully in chapter five.

While recognising that laughter is associated with a variety of emotions, in this thesis I do not wish to argue that laughter is an emotion, but rather seek to recognise that laughter is closely aligned with emotion(s). A similar position is adopted by Robert Solomon (2008) and Robert Roberts (2010) who both include laughter in their exploration of emotions, but position laughter as distinct. The relationship of emotion and laughter is of particular importance for my thesis, because both laughter and emotion are grounded in the body and it is the necessity of the body for laughter that will prove important for insight laughter to occur. In chapter five, I will explore how insight laughter highlights the connection between ethics, emotion, and the body, and how overcoming concerns regarding the body enables the significance and potential of laughter as a means of insight to be recognised. Having begun to consider the social effects of emotion, it is

now necessary to explore the notion that laughter is social, in order to further understand the role(s) of laughter in society.

The Social Power of Laughter

Human beings are social creatures and laughter is often understood as a “social phenomenon” (Morreall 1983: 114; see also e.g. Bergson [1900] 2008; Zijderveld 1983; Berger 1997; Le Goff 1997; Kuipers 2006; Ziv 2010). Indeed, for Bergson “our laughter is always the laughter of the group” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 11). Whilst we can and do laugh alone, we are much more likely to laugh in company.³⁴ Laughter also has the capacity to be contagious. In fact, sometimes it is not even necessary for there to be an understanding of what is being laughed at to cause someone else to laugh; we may laugh simply because we see someone else laughing (Morreall 1983: 115). In considering the social nature of laughter it becomes clear that not only does laughter help us to navigate societal norms and relations, but societal norms and social relations help us to navigate laughter, i.e. they help us to identify what to laugh at, when to laugh, where to laugh, and how to laugh.

Moreover, as laughter is the result of “the customs and ideas of a particular social group” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 11), the thing that provokes laughter is often relative to a society and this emphasises how sociality is related to certain situations, places, and times. Historical context is therefore essential for understanding laughter. As a result of the distinctive nature, “laughter can inform us about the structures of a society and its modes of operation” (Le Goff 1997: 49). All societies have boundaries and laughter is often a means of identifying when a boundary has been crossed: “laughter marks the crossing of a boundary between the proper and the improper, it signifies a movement of transgression” (Bray 2004: 66).

Laughter is an important tool for helping humans to navigate social interactions and relations. Laughter has the power to make or break relations (Billig 2005; Ziv 2010; Hurley, Dennett, & Adams 2011); it can deeply offend and upset someone, just as much as it can strengthen friendships and romantic bonds. Indeed, the recognition of the

³⁴ We laugh approximately thirty times more when in company than when alone (Provine 2000: 45).

importance of laughter for our social relations is evident in the desire for romantic partners who laugh and who can make us laugh (Provine 2000: 32-35). When we laugh with someone else or with a group of people there is a sense of intimacy, group identity and cohesion, and “the shared sense of those in a *community*” (Cohen 1999: 28, original emphasis). However, if we do not join in the laughter, we are indicating our disapproval and distance from the group (Billig 2005: 175-199). Both laughter and the absence of laughter provide strong social signals. Similarly, if we are the object of laughter, then we are made to feel excluded. It is here we see the distinction between ‘laughing at’ and ‘laughing with’ (de Sousa 1987: 243). Whilst some argue that laughing at someone is always morally dubious, it may depend on who is provoking the laughter and why.

As noted by Morreall, “each instance of laughter is inextricably tied up with social and power relations and framed within a social situation” (Morreall 1983: vi). Laughter can be used as a coping mechanism or as a tool to fight oppression. The historian Mary Townsend notes that using humour (and one would assume the intention of the humour is to provoke laughter) can both “incite rebellion” or “soothe unruly spirits” (Townsend 1997: 201). Moreover, humour and satire can give a voice to the powerless, offering “a lively underground culture of dissent” (Townsend 1997: 200). Similarly, Jacqueline Bussie argues that laughter can be used to counter oppression:

laughter interrupts the system and state of oppression, and creatively attests to hope, resistance, and protest in the face of the shattering of language and traditional frameworks of belief. Simply put, the laughter of the oppressed functions as an invaluable means of ethical and theological resistance.

(Bussie 2007:4)

Laughter can cross divisions of class, gender, and race, and it can identify the need for change and offer an opportunity for action. Indeed, I argue that insight laughter offers opportunities to behave and think differently in the future. However, I recognise that laughter does not always lead to action: “on the one hand it is revolutionary, expresses repudiation and mistrust, and on the other it paralyses revolutionary plans because laughter relaxes and removes tension” (Landmann cited in Kuschel 1994: 105-106). As such, laughter can be thought of as prompting action or docility in society.

Such is the ambiguity of laughter, that it can both disrupt and impose order. Laughter can have a conservative function; it can maintain the status quo and the traditional way of doing things, it can moderate the pace of change, and it can be a means of passing judgement and enforcing social (and moral) standards. For example, if we witness something that conflicts with societal expectations then we may laugh, and “what we have laughed at, we are not likely to adopt” (Sully 1902: 271). Because laughter can act as an instructional message, Bergson notes that laughter “pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 17). As such, maintaining the status quo of a society through laughter may mean an individual adapting their behaviour; laughter can provide a gentle prompt towards these changes. The possibility of expressing laughter as a phenomenon that normalises certain behaviours and conceptualisations of what is socially permissible raises some interesting questions about gender. As such, Emily Douglas (2015) states that laughter can be considered a significant phenomenon for feminists to analyse precisely because it reveals things about power and control over women’s bodies. In chapter four, I will consider the intersection of women, their bodies, and laughter as I recognise that, due to patriarchal viewpoints, each of these features have been marginalised and neglected and warrant further consideration.

Ethics and Morality

As indicated above, laughter can play an important role in enforcing societal expectations, and this is particularly evident when considering the ethical expectations of a society. Laughter, particularly when it results from ridicule, is deemed to be an effective tool for identifying and highlighting the moral and character flaws of an individual: “ridicule fulfils a key social role in maintaining morality, taste, and good manners” (Billig 2005: 78). This position emerges in the works of Plato who saw laughter as a means of highlighting an individual’s vice (*Republic*, *Philebus*), and continued through the works of Aristotle (*Rhetoric*), the Greek Church Fathers (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogue*), and other philosophers and theologians throughout the centuries such as the Earl of Shaftsbury ([1711] 2001), Francis Hutcheson (1750), Reverend Sydney Smith (1848), Dugald Stewart (1849), Henri Bergson ([1900] 2008), Reinhold Niebuhr (1946), Michael Billig (2005), Francis Buckley (2005), and Noël Carroll (2014b).

In addition to laughter acting as a means of enforcing moral expectations within society, laughter itself is subject to ethical scrutiny.³⁵ As noted by Jure Gantar, “the critical treatment of laughter never suffered from a lack of ethical, moral, or even moralistic perspectives” (Gantar 2005: 5). Considerations of the morality of laughter often centre on the appropriateness of what we are laughing at, where we are laughing, who we are laughing with, why we are laughing, and how we are laughing. The reasons for the suspicion of laughter vary, from concerns regarding the negative intentions behind laughter; the potential for laughter to be a gateway to (sexual) sin; the irrationality of laughter; the bodily nature of laughter and the loss of control that occurs. As such, there are often attempts to create binaries of laughter (Gantar 2005: 32), to identify laughter that is morally good or bad (e.g. Kuschel 1994: 93; Berger 1997: 57; Arbuckle 2008: 4). In chapter five, I question the innate goodness that is often attributed to insight and, sometimes laughter, to suggest that insight laughter has the potential to fall anywhere on the moral spectrum.

Alongside the binaries of laughter, a consistent thread when considering the ethics of laughter is moderation, we see the beginnings of this in the works of Plato and Aristotle, and it then become adopted by the early Church and continues to perpetuate through ethical norms. In his *Laws*, Plato suggested that moderation is important when expressing any emotion, including laughter. Aristotle applied his concept of the mean to laughter and comedy: the mean is wittiness, the excess buffoonery, and the deficient boorishness (*Eudemian Ethics* 3.1234a). The vulgarity of buffoons, who are only concerned with provoking laughter and not the victim of their laughter or the virtue of their jesting, is to be avoided. However, it is no better to take offence easily or avoid the use of humour as this is boorish. The ideal position is to “jest with good taste” and maintain a virtuous disposition, that is to be witty (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.8.1128a). Although Aristotle believes there is a definite distinction between wittiness and buffoonery, he fears that this separation has become blurred in society where buffoons are wrongly labelled as witty. However, he accepts that defining what is acceptable and virtuous jesting is

³⁵ Although my interest is in the ethics of laughter, much of the literature considers the ethics of comic amusement (Carroll 2014a); the ethics of humour (Benatar 1999 & 2014; Gaut 1998; Goldstein 1995 & 2001; Buckley 2005; Smuts 2010; Carroll 2014b; Roberts 2016); or the ethics of jokes (Bicknell 2007; Cohen 1999; Lockyer & Pickering 2009). Whilst there are overlaps, they are distinct categories and I consider them, and their entanglement with the ethics of laughter, further in chapter five.

impossible as “tastes differ on what is offensive and what is amusing” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.8.1128a).

When tempering laughter there has tended to be a particular emphasis on the need for children and women to moderate their laughter. Both Plato and Aristotle believed it was important to dissuade childhood laughter. Plato described the necessity of a lawgiver to educate the youth on how to control and restrain pleasures such as laughter, otherwise they will succumb to them in adulthood (*Laws* 1.635c-d). Despite Aristotle’s more liberal approach to laughter, he agreed with Plato that it was the duty of the lawgiver to protect children from witnessing lampoons and comic performances (*Politics* 7.1336b). Aristotle suggests that the youth are not ill-natured but simple-natured; they seek sensual pleasures and are hopeful but naive. Despite their apparent ability to embark on things in excess, Aristotle describes the character of the young as witty due to their fondness of laughter (*Rhetoric* 1.12.1389a-b). Continuing the tradition of the moderation of laughter the Greek Church Fathers expressed particular concern regarding the laughter of women.³⁶ Female laughter such as a titter or giggle was perceived as suggestive and associated with prostitution and so laughing was believed to lead women to scandal (e.g. Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogue*; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration XXXVII*; John Chrysostom, *Against the Games and Theatres*). However, despite the desire to regulate laughter, the Greek Church Fathers struggled to abstain from laughter entirely, actively engaging in laughter that was morally corrective and/or ridiculing other religions.

Whilst contemporary society may feel like it is more liberal, it must be recognised that there are still general precepts that are followed when we consider the appropriateness of laughter. For example:

Laugh, when it’s funny, grow up and stop snickering at dirty jokes, don’t laugh at cripples (unless you are one yourself), and *show respect*. To show respect means

³⁶ It should be noted that the Greek Church Fathers were concerned with the act of laughing for a number of other reasons too, including, but not limited to, the absence of Jesus’ laughter in the New Testament; fears regarding the morality of many objects of laughter, i.e. sexual content of joking; and concerns regarding the loss of bodily control and decorum. I would also note, that despite many scholars positioning the Greek Church Fathers as wholly antigelastic (e.g. Adkin 1985; Gilhus 1997; Halliwell 2008), I would argue that to position the Greek Church Fathers as wholly opposed to laughter would mean overlooking a number of their own uses of laughter – including with their congregations and as a means of criticising other religions.

not to laugh, snicker, titter, chortle, giggle or even chuckle when it's Too Sad, when it would be Unkind, when it would Offend a Sacred Memory, and when it might be taken to Insult a Mother, a Country, or a Religion.

(de Sousa 1987: 228, original emphasis)

Though these precepts offer guidance, there remains room for interpretation. Moreover, it seems that “the ‘politically correct’ laughter of our times is, like the morally and theologically correct laughter of earlier times, a laughter hedged in on all sides by norms and restrictions” (Pfister 2002b: 182). The moral and social controls that surround laughter provide some fascinating tensions when we come to consider the place of the value of laughter as insight.

The Potential for Insight

Laughter is often described in terms which suggest disruption: a “burst” of laughter, “side splitting” laughter, “cracking up” with laughter, and even “dying” with laughter (e.g, Davis 2000; Bussie 2007; Parvulescu 2010). This disruption describes the bodily act of laughter, the loss of control of the body, and the uncontainable sound of laughter. Laughter disrupts the body and through this disruption, I argue, it can break habitual thinking and behaviour. My concept of insight laughter seeks to show how the bodily act of laughter can lead to a shift in consciousness that offers insight and the opportunity to amend ways of thinking and behaving. Recognition of the disruptive nature of laughter is not new, indeed, as outlined above it is the disruptive nature of laughter that often leads those in power to attempt to control it. There are a number of key thinkers that introduce laughter as disruptive and who have provided a starting point for my own theory of insight laughter. However, as will be evidenced, their concept of laughter is not grounded in the body but rather is treated conceptually; in order for the value of laughter as a means of insight to be recognised we must also identify the value of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding.

The philosophical and literary disruptions that emerged from post-structuralism created a new moment and opportunity to think about laughter. As such, it is the works of a series of post-structuralist thinkers that have provided me with an opportunity to reconceptualise laughter. It is these thinkers that have enabled me to reconsider laughter,

to revisit the disruptive element, and ultimately, to reposition the body as playing a role in the creation of knowledge.

First is the philosopher Georges Bataille, who in 1953 delivered a series of lectures on the concept of the 'un-known', exploring its relationship with eroticism, the sacred, and emotional responses, such as laughter.³⁷ Bataille's interest in laughter was initially sparked by his reading of Bergson's *Le Rire* with both interest and dissatisfaction. Bataille states that he was disappointed that Bergson chose to focus on just "one particular aspect of the risible which he terms the comic" rather than offering a general theory of laughter (Bataille [1953] 1986: 89-90, 93-94). As such, in his own works, Bataille sought to overcome the challenge faced by those before him, he sought to write a theory of *all* laughter. Unfortunately, he did not achieve this ambition. Instead, he identified a specific form of laughter, a type of 'mystical laughter' (Amir 2016: 14).³⁸

Bataille questioned whether laughter was a way of understanding the world: "suppose that that which induces laughter is not only unknown, but unknowable. That which is laughable may simply be *the unknowable*. In other words, the unknown nature of the laughable would be not accidental, but essential" (Bataille [1953] 1986: 90, original emphasis). In making the laughable unknowable, Bataille's theory of laughter is, put simply that, "*the unknown makes us laugh*" (Bataille [1953] 1986: 90, original emphasis). In order to prove his theory, he suggests that he could "show that in every case of laughter we pass from the domain of the known, from that of the foreseeable, to that of the unknown and the unforeseeable" (Bataille [1953] 1986: 91). Bataille suggests we view the world as, and believe our knowledge of it to be, stable, or consistent: "knowledge requires a certain stability of things known" (Bataille [1953] 1986: 89). Any shaking of this stability and invasion of the unknown can lead to laughter:

³⁷ "When I now speak of un-knowing, I mean essentially this: I know nothing, and if I continue to speak, it is only true of that sort of knowledge which leads me to *nothing*. This is particularly true of that sort of knowledge which I am now considering before you, since it is in order to set myself before this *nothing* that I do talk of it, to set both myself and my listeners in confrontation with this *nothing*" (Bataille [1953] 1986: 95).

³⁸ For more detailed explorations of the place of laughter in Bataille's work, see: Borch-Jacobson 1987; Privitello 2007; Bordun 2013; Amir 2016. Despite recognising laughter as an important feature of Bataille's thinking, these works all overlook the absence of the body in his conceptualisation of laughter.

We laugh, in short, in passing very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which everything is firmly qualified, in which everything is given as stable within a generally stable order, into a world in which our assurance is overwhelmed, in which we perceive that this assurance was deceptive. Where everything has seemed totally provided for, suddenly the unexpected arises, something unforeseeable and overwhelming, revelatory of an ultimate truth: the surface of appearance conceals a perfect absence of response to our expectation.

(Bataille [1953] 1986: 90)

Thus, for Bataille laughter enables us to question the stability of what we believe we know, and to offer new truths. For Bataille laughter can reveal alternative interpretations and perceptions of the world. Additionally, similarities can be drawn with the *Incongruity Theory*, the belief that laughter results from the perception of something, be it words, actions, or objects, that conflicts with our expectations. However, the expectations that are not met in the case of Bataille relate to ultimate truths not the mundane.

Although Bataille sought to unify laughter and philosophy, he also drew a similarity between his theological background and his own experience of laughter: “there was nothing in my experience of laughter which was not to be found in my former religious experience” (Bataille [1953] 1986: 95). There is an element of transcendence to his laughter. However, Bataille does not indicate how this ‘mystical laughter’ can occur, nor consider the impact of gaining knowledge of the unknown. For Bataille, laughter is an experience that “produce[s] in us that effect of inner upheaval, of overwhelming surprise” (Bataille [1953] 1986: 89). However, Bataille seeks to distance himself from the physiological experience of laughter; Bataille does not consider or acknowledge the importance of the body for laughter. Indeed, he positions his form of laughter as distinct from the body: “this experience of laughter is rather remote from the common experience of it...this experience may be quite detached from those movements described by medical men” (Bataille [1953] 1986: 95). Bataille overlooks the experiential nature of laughter and its location in the body. The body is central to my understanding of laughter, and I do not believe that the body needs to be transcended – as in Bataille’s thought – to offer insight, rather insight laughter demonstrates how the body can play a significant role in the creation of knowledge. It is the bodily act of laughter that shifts thoughts from our peripheral consciousness to our central consciousness and this increased level of attention enables new insights to occur.

Second is Michel Foucault's identification of laughter as having a revelatory nature. The suggestion that laughter has the ability to shatter pre-existing thought(s) is noted in his preface to *The Order of Things*:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.

(Foucault [1966] 1970: xvi, original emphasis)

The passage Foucault references is found within a Chinese encyclopaedia and it outlines a taxonomy of animals.³⁹ The approach taken differs greatly from modern taxonomies of animals, and in reading the text it highlights “the stark impossibility of thinking *that*” (Foucault [1966] 1970: xvi, original emphasis), thus driving the reader to laugh. For Foucault, it is in incongruities that laughter can be found (Foucault [1966] 1970: xix);⁴⁰ the suggestion being that laughter can shatter old understandings and reveal new ones. Indeed, Michel de Certeau notes that when Foucault was reading and discovered a new perspective or something unexpected “he would roll with laughter” (de Certeau 1986: 194). Here laughter draws attention to an issue that requires further reflection; the rupture of habitual thinking does not need to end with laughter but can continue beyond it. Despite the potential for laughter to be positioned as a means of insight, Foucault does not dwell on laughter nor does he offer any in-depth consideration of its capacity in either theory or practice; although a foundational figure in thinking about the body and knowledge, Foucault does not explore the link of laughter to the body.

Third is Debra Diane Davis', *Breaking Up [At] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*, which in a similar vein to Bataille, seeks to challenge the stability with which we perceive the world. Davis promotes the concept of laughter as offering new ideas beyond the 'known'. Despite its title, this is not a book about laughter in and of itself. Rather, laughter is used as a trope

³⁹ The passage reads: “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies...” (Foucault [1966] 1970: xvi).

⁴⁰ Whilst Foucault is not referring to the pre-existing theories of humour, it is worth remembering the *Incongruity Theory* outlined earlier in this chapter.

for disruption and provides a means for exploring Davis' ultimate concern: the influence of poststructuralist theory in rhetorical scholarship, practice and pedagogy. Although laughter is not the subject of Davis' text, her positioning of laughter as a means of "breaking up" is worth considering further, particularly in light of my own thesis which is concerned with the capacity of laughter to enable insight to occur. From the outset Davis' performative text seeks to break up the norms of a structured piece of writing and underlines her intentions to shatter expectations for the reader; indeed, the disruption is visible on the page.⁴¹

Davis argues that discourse is constrained by the conceptual frameworks of our society; she suggests that educators sanitise discourse when teaching, focusing on the repetition of ideas, and staying within the comfort zone of their own knowledge. There is a reluctance to challenge. Thus, to disrupt this, to move beyond these norms which are accepted without question, to enable new questions to be asked, Davis calls for "a rhetoric of laughter, a rhetoric of 'cracking up'" (Davis 2000: 17). For Davis, there is a lack of appreciation for (the power of) laughter. Davis wants the reader to engage positively in laughter, to move away from the comfort of "the knowing smile/or the controlled chuckle" and to embrace the irrepressible laughter which "cracks us up" (Davis 2000: 3). Whilst Davis' concerns are with the embracing of new rhetorical methods (applying them to ethics, feminism, and politics), her foundations lie in the power of laughter to "break up", to "crack up", to "disrupt". Laughter, Davis writes, "is to be spoken by *language on the loose*: no/thing is excluded, censored, or negated" (Davis 2000: 95, original emphasis). The limits of language, of society, are muted by laughter; laughter breaks and transcends these limits paving the way for new knowledge. In chapter four I consider how laughter can be used by feminists as a means of discourse, but argue that it needs to extend beyond its current position within textual analysis, to become connected with and grounded in the physical laughing body.

Much like Bataille suggested, for Davis, laughter offers an understanding of the unknown. She describes "laughter as an ex-plo-sion of the border zones of thought" (Davis 2000:

⁴¹ Throughout the book Davis uses a variety of fonts, font sizes, and design features to combat academic conventions of texts; the performative style adopted by Davis is influenced by Jacques Derrida's *Glas* (1974) and Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book* (1989).

2, original emphasis). This echoes my own position (grounded in the theory of William James) that the displacement that occurs when we laugh can draw our attention to thoughts that were previously on the fringe of our consciousness. However, for Davis, we think before we laugh, and think again when we have finished laughing, but we cannot think during laughter as the convulsion of the body leads to a temporary loss of self. Despite her desire for the change that can be brought about by laughter, Davis notes that this shattering laughter carries a risk: it is “destructive” (Davis 2000: 9); negative consequences are a possibility from this laughter.

These three thinkers indicate that laughter has the capacity to challenge our perceptions of the world, to transcend our everyday realities, and – though this term is not used – to enable insights to occur. However, the laughter proposed by Bataille, Foucault, and Davis is grounded in textual, conceptual, and cerebral laughter, rather than bodily laughter. As I will argue throughout this thesis, to overlook the place of the body for the experience of laughter is to overlook something significant. The body should not be excluded from our experiences and the creation of knowledge, but rather must be recognised as playing a significant role. Indeed, the role of the body as a site of knowledge is explicitly demonstrated in insight laughter.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to offer a deeper understanding of laughter and its location within the wider scholarship on humour and the comic. In recognising the frequent treatment of laughter as a by-product of perceiving humour, identifying something funny, or responding to a joke, it is evident that laughter deserves to be freed from these concepts and treated as the object of study in its own right. Moreover, it has identified the importance and potential of laughter and the non-serious in the study of religion. As such, I have demonstrated the need for a reconceptualisation of laughter that emerges from traditions of the embodied mind. In the next chapter, I will ground my concept of insight laughter in the psychological and philosophical theory of William James, in order to argue that insight laughter is a form of embodied knowledge. More specifically, I will claim that the same dynamic shifts of streams of consciousness, as found in James, from the peripheral to the central consciousness, are found in this specific form of laughter.

Although James touches on laughter throughout his works, he does not offer a theory of laughter, yet his thinking will enable me to demonstrate the process of insight laughter and thus evidence the value of the body for the creation of knowledge and understanding.

CHAPTER TWO

INSIGHT LAUGHTER, WILLIAM JAMES, AND THE FRINGE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

This thesis argues that there is a specific form of laughter, that enables insight – understood to be a new thought, perception, understanding, recognition or realisation – to occur. Before identifying the presence and exploring the significance of insight laughter within the realms of religious experience, gendered experience, and ethics, this chapter will establish the grounding of my concept of insight laughter in the psychological and philosophical theory of William James. James was an American philosopher, psychologist, physician, and scholar of religion, whose writings helped to frame the formation of psychology and contributed significantly to the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, physiology, and religious studies. In order to draw out the central claim of this thesis, I will develop James’ work on the psychology of consciousness; I will argue that the same dynamic shift of streams of consciousness, from the peripheral to the central consciousness, is found in insight laughter. Moreover, the importance of the body for the experience of insight laughter is further supported by James’ recognition of the relationship between embodiment, emotion, and consciousness. It is these movements of consciousness that will frame the idea of insight laughter and allow me to demonstrate the role of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding.

I have chosen James because he is one of the foundational philosophers of consciousness and a scholar who has opened up consciousness and the study of religion. James’ observations and phenomenological accounts of psychological processes gives him a sense of the processes of consciousness. More specifically, James is vital for my argument as he establishes a relationship between embodiment and consciousness. This enables the necessity and importance of the body to be recognised and provides a frame for the unexamined aspect of laughter, namely insight. As such, rather than attempt to unfold all

of the concepts that arise from James' vast array of writings, I will focus on key aspects, that enable me to position insight laughter as emerging from philosophical traditions of the embodied mind, as originally developed in *The Principles of Psychology* (henceforth *Principles*) and explored in his later works.

In his study of ridicule, the social scientist Michael Billig suggests that James "ignored the subject" of laughter (Billig 2005: 103). Whilst it is certainly true that James did not theorise laughter, nor make the link between laughter and consciousness, James does explore laughter in a number of his works. Given that the references to laughter are scattered throughout his work, and have not previously been compiled, in this chapter I demonstrate my excavation of laughter within James' works and offer a careful and detailed reading of the key references to laughter. Indeed, I believe Billig has overlooked the unique insight and value of James' comments on laughter. As such, I have uncovered the specific moments that James did engage in laughter, as they provide useful reference points for my own concept of insight laughter.⁴² This chapter will consider the relative omission of laughter in James' works, suggesting that this is of interest for two reasons. First, James was aware of, and involved in, intellectual debates regarding laughter, as revealed in his correspondence to Henri Bergson and other friends. Second, James had a keen interest in the study of emotion, and as identified in chapter one, laughter and emotion are closely aligned. Despite their brief and fragmented nature, this chapter will identify the key references to laughter in James' work, in order to demonstrate the link between laughter and consciousness.⁴³ More specifically, it will establish a Jamesian framework, inclusive of the fringe of consciousness, attention, emotion, habit, conversion and mysticism, as the basis for thinking about insight laughter. Thus, this chapter will demonstrate how James offers the grounding for my concept of insight laughter; it will enable me to argue that it is the bodily experience of laughter that leads to changes of consciousness that allow us to see new things, to gain new insights.

⁴² On a personal note, regarding the character of James, Ramón Del Castillo, claims that James "was not a joker...but as it is well known he exhibited a fine sense of humour" (Del Castillo 2012: 66).

⁴³ The aim of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive list of all references to laughter within the James corpus, rather it will seek to identify key considerations of laughter that help to ground my own concept of insight laughter.

James, Bergson, and Friends

Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was a French philosopher whose thinking, particularly on consciousness, became of great interest to James. Whilst it seems to have taken James some time to get to grips with Bergson's writing: "...one must re-read Bergson to see just what the dickens he does mean", a mutual admiration of one another's work grew (*CWJ* X: 160). At first James' appreciation of Bergson's works was expressed to members of his family and friends, but before long James and Bergson struck up a penmanship and eventually a friendship. There is surviving correspondence between the two dated between 1902 and 1910 (*CWJ* IX: 93), though it is believed that the pair did not meet in person until 4 October 1908 (*CWJ* III: 367).

James owned and actively annotated many of Bergson's works. However, there is (for the purposes of this thesis at least) a notable absence, Bergson's 1900 work *Le Rire* (*Laughter: The Meaning of the Comic*), which is not included in James' personal library.⁴⁴ Whilst *Le Rire* is often overlooked in favour of Bergson's more 'serious' philosophical works, it is a foundational text in humour studies. As identified in chapter one, Bergson developed an understanding of the comic as dependant on incongruity and argued that laughter plays the important social function of social and ethical correction. Given James' admiration of Bergson's thinking, alongside their friendship, it is interesting to ask: did James read *Le Rire*? The answer is not as clear cut as one would hope. There is no mention of *Le Rire* in James' correspondence to Bergson and the book is seemingly absent from his personal library. However, James was aware of the book and this is evidenced in James' correspondence to his friend, the American critic and essayist John Jay Chapman. Indeed, the only available references to *Le Rire* emerge in this exchange of letters. In late 1909 Chapman offers to send James a copy of his own essay, 'The Comic', which in Chapman's own words is a "sort of old-fashioned genteel essay" (*CWJ* XII: 395). James responds with great enthusiasm. Almost a month later, Chapman informs James that he has: "read half of Bergson's *Le Rire* – & no man ever lived who didn't say his whole say in the first half of the book..." (*CWJ* XII: 420-421) – his disparaging comments do not end there. Chapman

⁴⁴ Ermine L. Algaier IV recently undertook the extensive exercise of documenting the 2,862 books present in the Harvard-owned collection of James' personal library. Although this bibliography lists a number of Henri Bergson's books, *Le Rire* is not included (Algaier 2019: 102).

goes on to claim that Bergson fails to grapple with the subject, that he could have substituted his use of the word “comic” for the word “tragic”, that the text “begins nowhere & ends nowhere”, and concludes by remarking that “I think anyone is a mistaken ass who takes his thinking seriously” (CWJ XII: 421). James seems to agree with Chapman’s general criticisms: “your change of the word ‘comic’ into the word ‘tragic’ throughout his book is *impayable*, and I have no doubt it is true. I have only read half of him, so don’t know how he is coming out” (CWJ XII: 425, original emphasis). James does not write about *Le Rire* in his correspondence again. This correspondence is interesting as it demonstrates that James not only had an awareness of *Le Rire* but that he had read at least half of the book, and perhaps went on to finish reading it at a later date. Indeed, Ramón Del Castillo suggests that James would have enjoyed the text as it “follows a method similar to the method he followed in [*The*] *Varieties [of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature]*: don’t try imprisoning the comic spirit within an abstract definition; rather try to get close to it by means of examples” (Del Castillo 2012: 108). However, reading Bergson’s *Le Rire* it becomes clear that the examples have been selected to fit Bergson’s theory, rather than his theory emerging from the examples. Moreover, whilst James is not as (explicitly) disparaging of *Le Rire* as Chapman, he does not demonstrate the same level of enthusiasm as that expressed towards Bergson’s other philosophical works.

James clearly has no aversion to reading on the subject of laughter and the comic; he recognises it as a subject worthy of academic observations, and yet he does not consider it fully himself. James proceeds to ask Chapman again for his article, for Chapman’s “foolishness on the same subject” (CWJ XII: 425). Upon receipt, and shortly after reading, James writes to Chapman:

Wonderful! Wonderful! Shallow, incoherent, obnoxious to its own criticism of Chesterton & Shaw, off its balance, accidental, whimsical, false; but with central fires of truth 'blazing fuliginous mid murkiest confusion', telling the reader nothing of the comic except that it's smaller than the tragic, but readable and splendid, showing that the man who wrote it is more than anything he can write! Pray patch some kind of a finale to it & send it to the Atlantic!

(CWJ XII: 430-431)

Although published in 1910, there is no further discussion of these articles in their correspondence.⁴⁵ In his article, 'The Comic', Chapman argues for the similarity of comedy and tragedy: "The stuff of which tragedy and comedy are made is the same stuff" (Chapman 1910: 161); Chapman felt this recognition was absent from Bergson's work. By plotting the importance of comedy and tragedy from Classical Greece to Shakespeare, Chapman concludes that comedy is stimuli, a vehicle for truth, and a means of transmitting moral messages (Chapman 1910: 164-172). Unfortunately, Chapman does not consider the relationship of laughter to comedy as, in his opinion, laughter "must remain forever a spontaneous mystery" (Chapman 1910: 164).

It is perhaps even more surprising to consider that James did not look at laughter himself, when in addition to the works of Bergson and Chapman, as demonstrated in chapter one, there is a range of post-Darwinian literature on the subject of laughter. As a result, it is worth noting James' wider intellectual circle who also wrote on laughter. For example, Herbert Spencer's 1860 work, *On the Physiology of Laughter*, appears to have been brought to James' attention by Edwin Starbuck, though there is no evidence of James responding to this letter or making any comments on the text (CWJ X: 109). Additionally, passages on laughter can be found within Alexander Bain's *The Emotions and the Will* (1865) and his *English Composition and Rhetoric: A Manual* (1866), as well as within Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) and John Dewey's *The Theory of Emotion* (1894).⁴⁶ It is known that James read Darwin, as he states this in his correspondence (CWJ IV: 517), but no reference to the exploration of laughter in Bain, Darwin, or Dewey's writing is made explicitly by James in his works.

⁴⁵ Although the 1909 correspondence between James and Chapman only references *The Comic*, James' mention of Shaw and Chesterton suggests Chapman also sent James his article *Jesters*. Despite the name, this article was not a discussion of jesters or jesting but a rather personal critique of Bernard Shaw and G.K. Chesterton as "crude", "vulgar" and having "no intellectual independence" (Chapman 1910: 152). According to Chapman's letter to James on 19 June 1910, *Jesters* was initially part of *The Comic* but was left out of the *Hibbert Journal* in error (CWJ XII: 395).

⁴⁶ Bain considers the various stimulations for laughter, both physical and mental. He considers how laughter is often believed to result from feelings of superiority, the recognition of incongruity, and feelings of relief (see chapter one for a summary of these three theories). However, Bain emphasises that laughter results from the need to escape the serious, solemn, and grave feature of life (Bain 1865: 247-252; see also Bain 1866: 104-109). For a consideration of Darwin and Dewey's comments on laughter see chapter one.

There is one other text on laughter that James was aware of, his friend James Sully's comprehensive work on laughter, *An Essay on Laughter: Its Forms, Its Causes, Its Development and Its Value* (1902). Sully kept James apprised of its progress (*CWJ* X: 587), and once completed he appears to have sent a copy to James. In one letter, Sully notes that he hopes James will not be bored by his book and highlights that not only do his friends seem to be paying little attention to it but "reviewers think one should not think about laughter" (*CWJ* X: 599). Sully suffered the same challenge that many authors on laughter have faced, being able to evidence the importance and necessity of taking laughter seriously. Here we see the exclusion of laughter from the serious realm of philosophy; a position I will also seek to combat in this thesis. Although there is no existing correspondence from James offering any words of encouragement or commenting on the content of the book, James did write to James Mark Baldwin, an American psychologist and editor of the *Psychological Review*, stating that Sully's book "ought to be reviewed" (*CWJ* X: 340). Unfortunately for Sully no review was published in the *Psychological Review*, or its sister publication the *Psychological Bulletin*, though it was reviewed in *The Monist* (1903). Whilst it would be too much to suggest that laughter was dominating scholarship, it was certainly a presence in philosophical circles. Given James' interest in human behaviour and emotion, and his apparent enthusiasm for his friend's writings on laughter, it is surprising that he did not choose to write more extensively on the subject himself.

Laughter, Physiology, and James

In order to situate the value of James for my concept of insight laughter, I will introduce the psychological and philosophical theory of James and demonstrate how the relationship of embodiment, emotion, and consciousness provide a useful frame for my concept of insight laughter. As noted above, James made a significant contribution to a number of disciplines, as such it is important to adopt an interdisciplinary dialogue when reading his works.⁴⁷ James was, and continues to be, an important figure in (American)

⁴⁷ In his works, James played an important role in the formation of disciplines, such as psychology, and he worked outside of the traditional academic boundaries. As such, Francesca Bordogna describes James as "a 'serial' transgressor of boundaries" (Bordogna 2008: 5). She suggests that James' cross-disciplinary approach was part of a wider vision; James hoped for a "completely unified system of knowledge" not just within the academic world but within wider society (Bordogna 2008: 10). Thus, James' cross-disciplinary

psychology. His key achievements in the field include: establishing the first US experimental psychology laboratory, teaching the first course on physiological psychology, and his composition of the multi-volume work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). In this text James sought to define psychology as a natural science, though in his own opinion he was unsuccessful.⁴⁸ Unlike other authors at the time who were seeking to compose 'histories' of a formally established discipline of psychology, James was aware that psychology was on a journey of discovery and it had not yet fully evolved (Shamdasani 2005: 29).

For James, physiology was essential for psychology. His physiological psychology sought to challenge the disciplinary boundaries and offer an understanding of humans through the observation of the effect of physiological changes on states of consciousness (Richardson 2007: 165-168). As will be demonstrated, the effect of the physical bodily expression(s) of laughter on states of consciousness will be essential for understanding my concept of insight laughter. Jeremy Carrette notes that "the roots and inner fabric of James' thinking are always based on physiological insights", as such he describes James as "a physiological thinker" (Carrette 2013: 31 & 34). The presence of physiology in James' work is, perhaps, unsurprising, as James studied physiology at Berlin University

approach was not a happy accident but intentional, he was seeking to unify knowledge. Despite this desire, scholars such as Eugene Taylor, recognise that many read James in a piecemeal form, focusing on the individual texts that are deemed relevant to their own discipline; Taylor warns against reading James from a particular perspective and encourages scholars to read the whole corpus (Taylor 2005: 23). Similarly, Jeremy Carrette notes that: "we read James *on* pluralism, but rarely read James with pluralism" (Carrette 2013: xvi). Moreover, it is not only psychology, physiology, and philosophy which underpin his works, there are also religious and theological threads throughout (Carrette and Lamberth 2017: 204). Notwithstanding the growing acceptance that James cannot be consigned to a single academic discipline, there remains disagreement as to his central contribution and approach. Eugene Taylor (1996) argues that psychology was at the core of James' thinking, not just in his earlier works of *Principles* (1890) and *Psychology: A Briefer Course* (1892) as it is often suggested, but throughout his entire works. However, William Barnard describes *Principles* as "the philosophically richest of James' works" (Wilshire 1968: x). Additionally, Taylor suggests that James was concerned with the scientific study of consciousness and it was from this that his metaphysical position of radical empiricism emerged (Taylor 1996: 4). Whilst, David Lamberth seeks to argue that James' greatest contribution is evident in his final work, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909); Lamberth positions it as a culmination of James' many years work and suggests that it is in this text that we find James outlining a metaphysics of experience which is dependent on his radical empiricism and pluralism (Lamberth 1999). In addition to these texts, there are of course various studies which highlight key concepts found within James, such as: mysticism (Barnard 1997); ethics (Slater 2009); habit (Leary 2013; Malone 2013), alongside studies which focus on James' specific works, such as: *The Principles of Psychology* (Wilshire 1968; Johnson & Henley 2013), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Taylor 2002; Proudfoot 2004; Carrette 2005), and *The Will to Believe* (O'Connell 1997; Slater 2009).

⁴⁸ James states that he is "disgusted" with the *Principles* as, despite its length and the time it took to produce, it fails to establish a science of psychology (CWJ VII: 24).

(alongside philosophy and psychology) and he was awarded an M.D. degree in 1869. Although he never practised medicine, a few years later he taught anatomy and physiology and later physiological psychology.

James was inspired by the work of Charles Darwin and his theory of natural selection.⁴⁹ As such, a key aim was identifying “the evolutionary function of consciousness” (Taylor 1990: 7; see also Taylor 2005). James was familiar with, and owned, many of Darwin’s works, even reviewing Darwin’s *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* in 1868. However, James’ exposure to Darwin’s ideas went beyond his texts; he was also surrounded by teachers and friends who knew Darwin personally. Indeed, Darwin’s son (William Erasmus Darwin) became a friend of the James family and, as a result, some of James’ work is believed to have been shared with (Charles) Darwin himself (Taylor 1990: 8-10). Some of James’ earliest known comments on evolution are found in reviews that he wrote, though they were not signed by him and so they are not widely known (Taylor 1990: 11).⁵⁰ The American philosopher and psychologist, John Dewey, a contemporary of James, explored the influence of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) more broadly. He noted that whilst it “marked an epoch in the development of the natural sciences” (Dewey 1910: 1), the effect of this works led beyond a change in understanding how animals and plants evolve towards a rethinking of knowledge; no longer was the position that nature and knowledge were fixed, certain, and final. Philosophy could now look at specific values as they relate to their specific conditions and science can add to this knowledge (Dewey 1910: 1-19). Thus, it is clear that Darwin influenced the way

⁴⁹ For a detailed exploration of the scholarship that outlines Darwin’s influence on James see: Taylor 1990.

⁵⁰ The first review, written in 1865, was of T.H. Huxley’s *Lectures on the Elements of Comparative Anatomy. On the Classification of Animals, and on the Vertebrate Skull*. Huxley outlines his support for natural selection though he added a caveat; he accepted Darwin’s hypothesis: “*provided* it shall be found compatible with the fact of sterility between animals of different species”; James noted that at the time of writing the answer to this was unknown (James 1865a: 290-291, original emphasis). James supported this position, partly, it seems, as a result of a growing uptake of the theory occurring amongst contemporary scholars (James 1865a: 291). His second review was of A.R. Wallace’s *The Origin of Human Races*. Wallace also supported Darwin’s theory of natural selection, however, he sought to distinguish between the natural selection that occurs in animals and the natural selection that occurs in humans. According to Wallace, because humans have the capability to adapt their habitat and are social and sympathetic creatures who support members of their race, natural selection is slower and less evident in human beings. It is worth noting that James did clash with Social Darwinists throughout the 1860s and 1870s. For James, the concern was not only with society, but with the individuals of a given society and the effects their choices had on social evolution (Taylor 1990: 14; see also Dewey 1910). Returning to his review, James exclaims that Wallace’s theory “seems most reasonable, indeed obvious” (James 1865b: 263).

philosophy approaches knowledge and more specifically, for the purposes of this thesis, James' understanding of physiology and consciousness.

The Fringe

Given that my concept of insight laughter is grounded in the body, James' approach of physiological psychology provides a useful means for demonstrating the importance of the mind-body for insight laughter. Indeed, insight laughter provides an opportunity to see the effect of physiological changes of laughter on states of consciousness and, in doing so, recognises the value of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding. As such, I argue that insight occurs due to a change, a shift, in consciousness that results from the bodily experience of laughter. In order to understand this change in consciousness further, it is essential to consider James' theory of consciousness.

According to James, there are five characteristics of thought:

1) Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness. 2) Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing. 3) Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous. 4) It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself. 5) It is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects – chooses from among them, in a word – all the while.

(James [1890] 1918: 99)

These five characteristics underpin James' theories of consciousness, habit, conversion, and emotion. In order to understand the changes that occur in the personal consciousness, James explains that the *fields of consciousness* vary. The central consciousness is that which is clear in our focus and has our attention, whereas objects in our peripheral or fringe consciousness are not fully perceived. James describes this peripheral consciousness as: "psyche overtone, suffusion, or fringe, to designate the influence of a faint brain-process upon our thought, as it makes it aware of relations and objects but dimly perceived" (James [1890] 1918: 109, [1892] 1984: 151). He explains that our neural processes vary in intensity – the "intensity waxes, culminates, and wanes" and there can be multiple processes present at the same time (James [1892] 1984: 152; see Fig.1.).

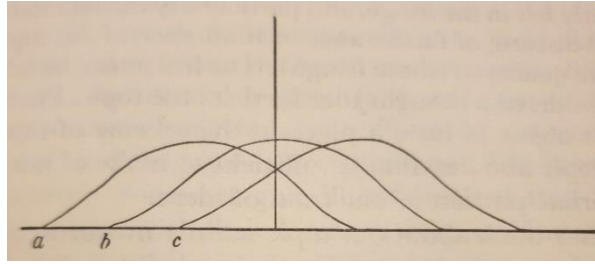


FIG.1. *A diagram by James that represents the flux of various neural processes.*

(James [1892] 1984: 151)

James offers an example of something present in our fringe consciousness. He suggests that the “first instantaneous glimpse of someone’s meaning...[is] a distinct state of consciousness” (James [1892] 1984: 149-150) and, through a shift in consciousness, it moves from our fringe consciousness to our central consciousness, it becomes the focus of our attention. Although James does not make the explicit link between consciousness and laughter, it is this notion of the fringe of consciousness that provides the theoretical grounding for my concept of insight laughter. More specifically, and in keeping with James’ physiological psychology, I argue that the bodily act of laughter allows us to access the peripheral or fringe consciousness and that which was previously “dimly perceived” to enter our central consciousness. Considering this concept of the fringe in James’ works enables an examination of the implications of this for the new model of insight laughter that I am proposing and the importance of looking at this concept.

James suggests that: “we receive a shock from the incongruity, and the drowsy assent [of the fringe consciousness] is gone” (James [1890] 1918: 111, [1892] 1984: 153), the object in our peripheral consciousness enters the central consciousness and has our full attention. Indeed, chapter one demonstrated that laughter is sometimes the result of the perception of incongruities (e.g. Hutcheson 1750; Beattie 1764; Kant [1790] 2012; Schopenhauer [1818] 2011; Bergson [1900] 2008; Koestler 1964; Clark 1970; Carroll 2014b). Whilst insight laughter need not result from the perception of incongruities, as noted in my earlier definition of insight laughter, it does result from a shock. Thus, I suggest that the sudden shock of insight laughter is sufficient for a shift in consciousness to take place, for ideas to leave the fringe consciousness, to enter the central consciousness, and to lead to new insights.

Indeed, insight laughter acts as a means of drawing our attention; when we experience insight laughter our increased level of attention leads to instantaneous insight, and has the potential to lead to changes in behaviour. Similarly, James is interested in our experience of the world and how it is informed by the *attention* we pay to the world around us. He suggests that we view the world differently because our attention “picks out certain ones as worthy of its notice and suppresses all the rest” (James [1890] 1918: 119). For James, our experience results from what we pay attention to, more specifically we choose what we pay attention to: “without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground intelligible perspective, in a word” (James [1890] 1918: 170). However, this choice could be considered to be limited, as it is often the result of our habitual selection of attention, we train our attention to focus on certain objects and ideas. In addition to selective interest is *reasoning*, which “is but another form of the selective activity of the mind” (James [1890] 1918: 120). Throughout our lives, our attention becomes more restricted as a result of our habitual interest or repeated selection. However, James notes that

the things we attend to come to us by their own laws. Attention creates no idea; an idea must already be there before we can attend to it. Attention only fixes and retains what the ordinary laws of association bring ‘before the footlights’ of consciousness.

(James [1890] 1918: 187)

When exploring attention, James returns to his concept of transient consciousness, noting that: “the stream of our thought is like a river” (James [1890] 1918: 187). Given our tendency to pay attention to the same things, sometimes we need something to assist with a shift in attention, to allow ‘the stream of our thoughts’ to flow in a different direction. Whilst James is not prescriptive about the different means of shifting attention, I would argue that laughter is an example of a means of a shift in consciousness. The bodily act of insight laughter shifts attention, it brings things that were on the fringes of consciousness into the central consciousness, and in doing so a new thought, perception, understanding, recognition or realisation occurs.

Whilst I argue that laughter is one means of enabling insight I, of course, recognise that there are others. Similarly, James notes that there are different ways of thinking to

achieve the same aim and that “the important thing about a train of thought is its conclusion...when the conclusion is there, we have always forgotten most of the steps preceding its attainment” (James [1890] 1918: 110; see Fig.2.). In adopting the view that there are different ways of thinking, it offers the possibility of recognising the value in the non-serious, that laughter and the non-serious is a valid means of achieving insight, of thinking in a different way. Indeed, it could certainly be said that the prevalence of laughter in our lives often leads us to forget the insight it can enable us to achieve; we take the capacity for granted.

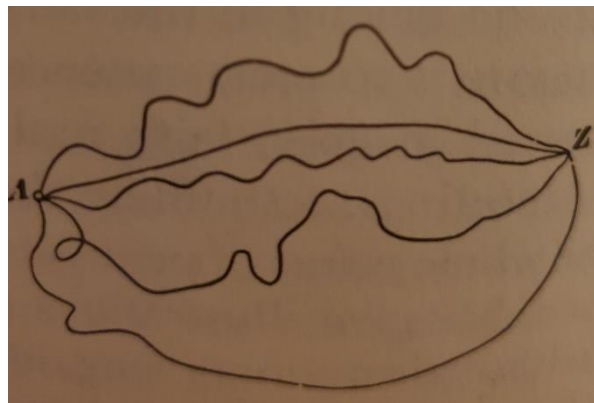


FIG.2. *A diagram by James demonstrates five different people reaching the same conclusion but via various thought processes.*

(James [1892] 1984: 154)

James explores the important relationship of actions and feelings: “action and feeling go together, and by regulating action, which is under more control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not” (James 1899: 201). For James, relaxation of the body can aid the relaxation of the mind: “*unclamp*, in a word, your intellectual and practical machinery, and let it run free: and the service it will do you will be twice as good” (James 1899: 221). As a relaxed body benefits the mind, I claim that the bodily release of laughter also relaxes the mind, thus allowing the mind to be opened to new ideas. Indeed, I contest that whilst insight is often positioned as resulting from serious, rational, contemplation, there are also non-serious means of achieving insight. As such, I argue that insights occur during insight laughter precisely because the mind is not anticipating or striving for knowledge in the moment of laughter. As noted in chapter one, there is some debate about the emotional state or mood required for laughter to occur. It is generally accepted that a relaxed state and pleasant mood means laughter is more likely

to occur (e.g. Hutcheson 1750; Darwin 1872; Sully 1902). However, it is sometimes suggested that laughter occurs when we are not emotional (e.g. Bergson [1900] 2008; de Sousa 1987). Of course, laughter can also occur in a heightened state of negative emotion, such as sadness or nervousness, but regardless of the mood when laughter takes place, with laughter there is a release of tension, even if only momentarily.

Emotion

As outlined in chapter one, laughter and emotion have a complicated relationship. However, having recognised the close alignment of laughter with emotion, a consideration of James' thoughts on emotion and laughter will offer further support for my argument that the body is essential for insight laughter. Moreover, continuing with James' physiological psychological approach, it will be possible to further consider how insight results from a shift in consciousness due to the bodily experience of laughter. As previously noted, James did not undertake a study of, nor seek to theorise, laughter. However, he does make brief references to laughter, particularly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, in his studies of emotion. James' core examinations of emotion will be explored in order to identify how and why James referenced laughter and to identify how these fragmented comments can offer support for my own concept of insight laughter.

As with much of James' work, his ideas and concepts evolved over time and his study of emotion is no different. James offers an indication of his theory of emotion in his 1880 article, *The Feeling of Effort*. In this essay James explores the experience of effort, paying particular attention to the role of the body in this experience namely, "the physiology and psychology of volition" (James 1880: 3). For the purposes of this thesis, it is worth noting that here, James makes reference to the fact that we can "laugh, from the fear of laughing" (James 1880: 21). This is a theme that James returns to in his later writings on emotion, when he recognises that any attempt to repress laughter tests our volition and often leads to the emergence of more forceful laughter: "stopping the expression of an emotion often makes it worse. The funniness becomes quite excruciating when we are forbidden by the situation to laugh...Expressing either emotion freely however, gives relief" (James [1892] 1984: 332; see also James [1890] 1918: 485). Although James is not seeking to make any claims in relation to theories of laughter and humour, as introduced in chapter one, James'

positioning of laughter as offering a moment of relief does resonate with the *Relief Theory*, which was emerging in the works of James' contemporary Herbert Spencer. As noted above, James was told about Spencer's work on laughter, but it is unclear if he ever read it. Moreover, I have identified how insight laughter can result from a build-up of tension that is suddenly released.

James' theory of emotion did not emerge until 1884, when he wrote his well-known essay, *What is an Emotion?*. James then returned to the subject in his later works, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892, henceforth *Briefer Course*). James is well aware of previous psychological and physiological explorations of emotions and their expressions, making reference to those such as Charles Darwin, Sir Charles Bell, and Alexander Bain throughout his works.⁵¹ In contrast to prior explorations of emotion, which James describes as "nothing but dictionaries of synonyms" (James [1892] 1984: 325), James does not try to offer a descriptive account of all emotions and their various forms, but rather seeks to focus on the causes of emotions. Therefore, James intentionally avoids offering in-depth accounts of individual emotions and their responses, including laughter.

In his 1884 essay, James introduced a theory of emotion which, in his own words contradicted the common-sense approach often adopted by those writing on the subject of emotion.⁵² Rather than proposing that bodily expressions are manifestations of emotions, James sought to argue that emotions are experienced as a result of our bodily expressions: "*the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion*" (James 1884: 189-190, original emphasis; see also James [1890] 1918: 479, [1892] 1984: 326). For James:

⁵¹ Much like Bergson, though not to the same level of detail, each of these thinkers explored laughter within their works on emotion (Bell 1806; Darwin 1872; Bain 1965 & 1866).

⁵² This theory of emotion is often known as the James-Lange Theory, in recognition of the independent formation of a similar theory of emotions by both William James and the Danish psychologist Carl Lange. When James became aware of Lange's work, *The Emotions* (1885), he described it as a "brilliant little work" (Richardson 2007: 284).

we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry or fearful, as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth.
(James 1884: 190; [1890]1918: 479; [1892] 1984: 198: 326)

Given his position, namely that the bodily expression precedes the emotional experience, James' main interest lies with emotions which "have a bodily expression" (James 1884: 189, [1890] 1918: 480, [1892] 1984: 326). James notes the physiological effect(s) of emotions, not only in terms of visible outward bodily expressions, but also internally on: "the bladder and bowels, the glands of the mouth, throat, and skins, and the liver...the heart-beats and the rhythm of breathing...[and] co-operation of the voluntary muscles" (James 1884: 192). Though James does not mention laughter explicitly here, it could certainly be said that laughter is a fitting example of the bodily experience of an emotional reaction; though the experience of laughter varies it can and does affect bodies internally and externally, as demonstrated in chapter one.

As emotions have internal effects, and we do not have control over our organs or circulatory systems, James recognises a potential challenge, regarding the capacity to truly imitate emotions (James 1884: 192, [1890] 1918: 484). James notes that it is possible to "feign laughter without being amused", however, he suggests that sometimes imitation can lead to the emotion (James [1890] 1918: 484-485). This raises questions of authenticity. Moreover, in relation to my concept of insight laughter it is important to consider whether or not imitated laughter can lead to insight, or whether it is necessary for imitated laughter to become 'authentic' laughter for a shift in consciousness to occur. I will return to this question of authenticity in chapter three when I consider the active cultivation of laughter in the Rajneesh Movement.

For James it is clear: "a purely disembodied emotion is a nonentity...emotion dissociated from all bodily feeling is inconceivable" (James 1884: 194, [1890] 1918: 480, [1892] 1984: 328). In identifying the importance of the body for emotion, James returns to his physiological psychology, highlighting how consciousness is affected by the body: "it makes us realise more deeply than ever how much our mental life is knit up with our corporeal frame, in the strictest sense of the term" (James 1884: 201, [1890] 1918: 486).

It is this concept of embodied consciousness which is foundational for my study of laughter and the role of the body and consciousness in offering insight.

In his 1884 essay James mentions laughter on just three occasions. The first reference is when James uses laughter as an example of demonstrating the difficulty some people have in understanding how, in removing the bodily expressions, an emotion becomes a cold impersonal cognitive experience:

Many cannot be made to understand the question. When you beg them to imagine away every feeling of laughter and of tendency to laugh from their consciousness of the ludicrousness of an object, and then to tell you what the feeling of its ludicrousness would be like, whether it be anything more than the perception that the object belongs to the class 'funny', they persist in replying that the thing proposed is a physical impossibility, and that they always *must* laugh, if they see a funny object. Of course the task proposed is not the practical one of seeing a ludicrous object and annihilating one's tendency to laugh. It is the purely speculative one of subtracting certain elements of feeling from an emotional state supposed to exist in its fulness, and saying what the residual elements are.

(James 1884: 193)

There are a few things of note in relation to this passage, which is similarly reflected in James' *Principles* (James [1890] 1918: 480) and *Briefer Course* (James [1892] 1984: 329). James asserts that laughter is a response to a ludicrous object, something funny. Whilst it is undeniable that we often laugh having perceived something funny, this is a relatively narrow view of laughter. It also seems rather restrictive for James who would undoubtedly have had an awareness of the various causes of laughter, even at a rudimentary level of the association of laughter with the emotion of joy as found in Darwin's work.⁵³ Indeed, Billig suggests that "James could have plausibly claimed that we feel happy because we laugh" (Billig 2005: 104).⁵⁴ The reasonableness of this suggestion is found in both Carl Lange's decision to use smiling and laughter as examples of expressing joy in his own exploration of emotion (Lange [1885] 1922: 44) and the fact

⁵³ Although James explicitly identifies the ludicrous as the cause of laughter here, in *Principles* James includes passing reference to laughter that is identified as "scorn[ful]", "contemptuous", and "mocking" (James [1890] 1918: 126, 156, 541).

⁵⁴ See also Helmuth Plessner who notes: "The question of the James-Lange theory of the emotions – do we laugh because we are cheerful or are we cheerful because we laugh?" (Plessner 1970: 71). Although I am not aware of any consideration of laughter and James' theory of emotion, Noël Carroll offers a brief consideration of the potential conflict of a neo-Jamesian view of comic amusement and the incongruity theory of humour that he is advocating (Carroll 2014b: 65-68).

that there are modern experiments which support this theory.⁵⁵ Regardless, James' union of laughter and the ludicrous is not unusual, as noted in chapter one, a significant amount of literature positions laughter in this way, despite it being a simplification of laughter and its stimuli. Additionally, it is clearly challenging to consider the possibility of repressing the bodily expression of laughter, and the repression of the bodily expression of laughter appears as a recurring theme in James' work (James 1880: 21, [1890] 1918: 485, [1892] 1984: 332-333). Similarly, in his exploration of *instincts* James notes that "it is particularly hard not to imitate gaping, or laughing, or looking and running in a certain direction, if we see others doing so" (James [1890] 1918: 463). The communal and social element of emotion, and laughter, can be seen here. It is also important to note that James is not expressing any disapproval of laughter; he almost reassures the reader that he is not attempting to rid humans of their propensity to laugh. Indeed, in his *Principles*, we learn that James identifies laughter as a human feature, noting humans have been called "the laughing animal" (James [1890] 1918: 439), echoing those such as Aristotle before him.

Although the majority of James' 1884 essay focuses on emotions which have a bodily expression, James also introduces the concept of "subtler emotions". By this, James is identifying emotions that occur as a result of a surge in the brain rather than the body. An example of a subtler emotion would be intellectual delight (James 1884: 201, [1890] 1918: 486, [1892] 1984: 333). James acknowledges that whilst it is rare to experience intellectual feeling unaccompanied by bodily sensations, it is possible.⁵⁶ It is therefore necessary to consider whether James' second reference to laughter, which recognises that it is possible to identify something as funny but not laugh, is positioning the perception of the ludicrous as a "subtler emotion", much like the aesthetic pleasure of viewing a painting. Indeed, this position could be supported by James himself, as when describing the subtler emotions James states:

⁵⁵ For example, one experiment asked participants to bite on pens with varying degrees of strength, those who bit down harder employed facial muscles used for smiling and reported feeling happier than those biting lightly (Strack & Stepper 1988).

⁵⁶ Jeremy Carrette notes that there is also an often-overlooked feature of emotion in James, namely the social element. Whilst the body remains essential for James' thinking on emotion, his later work considers the framing of emotions through a socially contextual lens, i.e. he offers "both a physical understanding of emotion and an understanding of emotion as grounded in the 'social environment'" (Carrette 2007: 420).

unless in them there actually be coupled with the intellectual feeling a bodily reverberation of some kind, unless we actually laugh at the neatness of the mechanical device...our mental condition is more aligned to a judgement of *right* than to anything else. And such a judgement is rather to be classed among awareness of truth: it is a *cognitive* act.

(James 1884: 201-202)

It may seem rather odd to consider laughing at the “neatness of the mechanical device”, mechanical devices do not – at least on the surface – seem particularly humorous.⁵⁷ Perhaps as a result of this oddity, in his *Principles* and *Briefer Course*, James changes the reference point, rather than a “mechanical device” James refers to “laugh[ing] at the neatness of the demonstration or witticism” (James [1890] 1918: 486, [1892] 1984: 333). Moreover, he adds “it is in fact a mere intellectual perception of how certain things are to be called – neat, right, witty, generous, and the like” (James [1890] 1918: 486, [1892] 1984: 333); maybe funny could be added to this list.

The third reference to laughter results from James’ discussion of brain injuries. In a footnote, James states that those who have experienced brain injuries are much more easily provoked to laughter (as well as to tears and temper-fits):

the cortical permeability seems reduced, so that excitement, instead of propagating itself laterally through the ideational channels as before, tends to take the downward track into the organs of the body. The consequence is that we have tears, laughter, and temper-fits, on the most insignificant provocation, accompanying a proportional feebleness in logical thought and the power of volitional attention and decision.

(James 1884: 199, [1890] 1918: 485)

Whilst James is describing the experience of those with brain injuries, he does so in order to highlight how this experience differs from the ‘normal’ experience of laughter.

James returned to the subject of emotion a few years later, writing a chapter entitled ‘The Emotions’ in his 1890 *Principles*. Following on from his preceding chapter ‘Instinct’, James

⁵⁷ Albeit, likely a coincidence, in his 1900 book *Le Rire*, Bergson appears to echo this point, we “laugh at the mechanical arrangement” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 45). For Bergson, it is the perception of the incompatibility of the mechanical and the living being which is comical. Indeed, both James and Bergson’s association of machinery with the comic is reflective of their location in a particular point of time in history; it captures attitudes to machines that may not resonate in today’s society.

highlights how emotions often accompany instincts, and much like instincts, emotional reactions affect us physiologically (James [1890] 1918: 477). James deliberately brought the ideas from his various works together and this chapter is based on the 1884 text. For the purposes of this thesis, I will not dwell on the similarities in regards to laughter, as many have already been referenced above, but I will identify differences that introduce new or amended references to laughter in order to demonstrate how the correlation of the body and emotion can offer a greater understanding of insight laughter.

References to laughter are slightly more frequent in James' *Principles* and *Briefer Course*.⁵⁸ Very early on in *Principles*, James positions laughter as an "emotional reaction" (James [1890] 1918: 477). James offers laughter at a ludicrous object to demonstrate that: "emotional reactions are often excited by objects with which we have no practical dealings" (James [1890] 1918: 477). For James, we laugh at the sight of a ludicrous object but we do not do anything to the object as a result of our reaction. This point is, presumably, made to support James' distinction between emotions and instincts; emotions are experienced in the body and are primarily rooted within the experiencing subject, whereas instincts are also experienced in the body but tend to lead to action on the outer environment (James [1890] 1918: 477; [1892] 1984: 324). Because James is making a point about emotional responses as occurring in relation to a vast array of stimuli and as existing beyond instinct and impulse, James – as with his 1884 text – does not offer an indication as to whether or not laughter can be the result of anything other than the perception of a ludicrous object.

James returns to the physicality of emotional expressions noting that when we list emotions and take the time to describe their manifestation on the face and body we often (falsely in his opinion) assume that there exist generic experiences of each emotion. James suggests that there are variations in our emotional reactions: "every one of us, almost, has some personal idiosyncrasy of expression, laughing or sobbing differently from his neighbour, or reddening or growing pale where others do not" (James [1890]

⁵⁸ As *Briefer Course* is an abridged version of *Principles* it is not surprising that much of the material is similar. However, it is interesting that James chose to include and at times expand on the previous references to laughter despite it being a much shorter text, James could clearly see value in including his explorations of laughter.

1918: 479). James is certainly right regarding the multitude of ways in which not only different people, but even individuals, can laugh.

In addition to the various physical manifestations of emotion, the objects of our emotional reactions can also vary: “we should find a like variation in the objects which excite emotion in different persons” (James [1890] 1918: 479). For James, it is the “objective stimuli” which is the distinguishing feature of emotion. Here James gives the example of jokes, highlighting how jokes can provoke various emotional responses: “jokes at which one explodes with laughter nauseate another, and seem blasphemous to a third” (James [1890] 1918: 479). Again, James posits laughter as a response to a ludicrous object, in this case a joke, but he acknowledges that what is deemed humorous can vary.

Whilst it is not an explicit reference to laughter, James displays a continuing interest in jokes, noting that we are more likely to enjoy a joke with alcohol:

if both the jest and the wine work together, they supplement each other in producing the emotional effect, and our demands on the jest are the more modest in proportion as the wine takes upon itself a larger part of the task.

(James [1890] 1918: 484)

It seems reasonable to assume that the “emotional effect” in question here is laughter. Indeed, in his earlier lecture, *The Effects of Alcohol* (1895), James notes that sober individuals are often “cold, morose, tired” and then having consumed alcohol they become “laughing, and gabbling and gobbling as full of enthusiasm as you can be” (James [1895] 1988: 50). For James, alcohol tends to offer “spurious hilarity with sickness afterwards” (James [1895] 1988: 51). It should also be noted that James returns to his consideration of alcohol in his later 1902 work *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*. Here James suggests that alcohol not only effects our mood, but it can expand consciousness: “drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes...it brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth” (James [1902] 2002: 271). Alcohol, and other intoxicants, are positioned as facilitating the shifts of consciousness from the periphery to the centre.

Given James' grounding in Darwinian evolution, James suggests that emotions may be remnants of previously useful actions (James [1890] 1918: 489).⁵⁹ For example, James notes:

So slight a symptom as the snarl or sneer, the one-sided uncovering of the upper teeth, is accounted for by Darwin as a survival from the time when our ancestors had large canines, and unfleshed them (as dogs now do) for attack.
(James [1890] 1984: 489)

Although James is referring to human responses to violent situations, and so does not make this link, as noted in chapter one, laughter can be associated with aggression and so the snarl may be connected to the smile.

Providing an overview of James' thoughts on emotion, and his (albeit brief) comments on laughter, has demonstrated the intersection of embodiment, emotion, and consciousness, and its relevance for insight laughter. In order to extend James' analysis further, we can also explore how laughter relates to other aspects of his physiological psychology, namely habit and conversion.

From Habit to Conversion

As noted earlier, James argues that our attention becomes restricted due to our habitual interest or repeated selection. As such, there is often a need to shift our attention and to break our habitual behaviour and thinking. Given that insight laughter results from a shift in consciousness and leads to a new thought, perception, understanding, recognition or realisation, I will argue that insight laughter can be understood as a means of breaking habitual thinking, and can also offer the opportunity to amend habitual behaviour. Indeed, in much the same way that habit can lead to moral fruits, insight laughter often has an ethical undertone. Thus, a deeper consideration of habit in James will enable the potential for insight laughter and the opportunity it offers for changes in behaviour to be considered further.

⁵⁹ James also suggests some emotional reactions can actually cause more harm than benefit. For example, in times of danger some emotional reactions likely arose by accident, and that "there remain many reactions which cannot so be explained at all" (James [1890] 1918: 490; [1892] 1984: 335-338).

Habit is an undercurrent in many of James' writing, but it is perhaps most apparent within his *Principles*.⁶⁰ David Leary suggests that James' interest in habit and its utility stemmed from a personal rather than professional interest in the first instance (Leary 2013: 179). During the 1860s James experienced a period of depression (unfortunately depressive episodes became a recurring feature in James' life), he desired a purpose, and felt that adopting a habitual life would provide direction and aid his productivity (Leary 2013: 184). However, James' attempts to live a habitual life were not wholly successful.⁶¹

For James, habit is an essential feature of human existence and “the phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed” (James [1890] 1918: 50). This plasticity applies not only to the body but also to the mind. James describes habits as paths, the more times a path is followed the easier it becomes (James [1890] 1918: 51). According to James, “we are thus mere bundles of habit, we are stereotyped creatures, imitators and copiers of our past selves” (James 1899: 66). Humans have to make many decisions and habit simplifies these thought processes as well as reducing the effort required. Although habit “diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed” (James [1890] 1918: 53), habits are not unconscious. James notes that there is always some level of consciousness; if a habit goes wrong, for example if we miss a loop when knitting and talking, we have an awareness of this (James [1890] 1918: 55).

⁶⁰ Although only his notes remain, in James' 1878 Lowell Lecture, *The Brain and the Mind*, we can begin to see the formation of James' understanding of habit. He suggests that habits are desirable, learnt through repetition, are important for moral education, and as they take place in the lower hemispheres, they ultimately liberate the higher hemispheres for “higher flights” (James 1878: 18-19). Following this lecture, James published an article entitled ‘Habit’ in the *Popular Science Monthly* (James 1887a); it is this same text that appears in his *Principles* three years later. Later that same year, James provided a definition of habit in a short article for the *Manufacturer and the Builder* (James 1887b). In *Principles* James devotes Chapter IV to habit, but he also explores the formation of pathways in Chapter III and suggests that reflex (or habitual) actions account for human activity in Chapter V. James returned to the subject of habit in his *Briefer Course*, given the size of this text (which is 880 pages shorter than his *Principles*) the decision to include a whole chapter on habit emphasises its importance for James. Though there are small amends much of the content is similar to his earlier *Principles*. It is rather, as will be seen, not until his *Talk to Teachers* that some additional thoughts on the subject of habit are added.

⁶¹ “James on habit, then, is not the smug advice of some martinet, but the too-late-learned, too-little-self-knowing, pathetically earnest, hard-won crumbs of practical advice offered by a man who really had no habits—or who lacked the habits he most needed, having only the habit of having no habits—and whose life was itself a ‘buzzing blooming confusion’ that was never really under control” (Richardson 2007: 240).

James was aware that Darwin and others had discussed habit in relation to evolution, and so he began to consider “what are habits good for?” (Leary 2013: 186). Although habitual behaviour can provide the benefit of streamlining lives, because habit can lead to habitual thoughts, a potential downside is that it can lead to routine thinking. As such, James – given their influence on young minds – encourages teachers to facilitate imaginative thinking in their students:

[in] dry and prosaic minds, almost all the mental sequences flow along these lines of habitual routine repetition and suggestion...[in] witty, imaginative minds, on the other hand, the routine is broken through with ease at any moment; and one field of mental objects will suggest another with which perhaps in the whole history of human thinking it had never once before been coupled.

(James 1899: 81)

It is interesting that James chooses to reference “witty”, a term that is generally associated with intelligent forms of humour; is James recognising the capacity for wit, humour, and the laughter that follows, to play a role in disrupting habitual thinking? Indeed, whilst I would echo the importance of imaginative thinking, it is the means by which this habitual thought can be broken that is of particular interest for my concept of insight laughter. Given its capacity to bring about a new thought, perception, understanding, recognition or realisation, insight laughter could be said to break habitual thought, to break the “routine” by causing a rupture and a shift in consciousness. Indeed, James states that “the old order of his habits will be *ruptured*; and, if the new motives are lasting, new habits will be formed, and build up in him a new or regenerative ‘nature’” (James 1899: 77, my emphasis). Laughter ruptures not only the body but situations. As noted in chapter one, the disruptive nature of laughter enables it to challenge our perceptions of the world, to transcend our everyday realities, and as this thesis argues, to offer insight. Moreover, in shattering habitual thinking, insight laughter offers the opportunity for behavioural change.

Whilst habitual thoughts and behaviour sometimes need to be broken, James perceived an important correlation between habit and morality. He believed that in forming our habits, we are also forming our characters: “every smallest stroke of virtue or vice leaves its never-so-little scar...Nothing we ever do is, in strict scientific literalness, wiped out” (James 1899: 77-78, [1890] 1918: 58-59, [1892] 1984: 138). In his personal copy of

Briefer Course, James wrote a maxim attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson at the top of the chapter on habit: “Sow an action, and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny” (Richardson 2007: 315). Moreover, because there is an ethical element of habit, we must be wary of “fashioning our characters in the wrong way” (James [1890] 1918: 58).

James recognised that the impetus to change often emerges from an emotional response (James [1890] 1918: 58), and as noted earlier, for James, emotions are embodied. Laughter, like emotional responses, are dependent on the body. As such, I would argue that insight laughter could also be considered as offering an impetus to change. As will be explored more thoroughly in chapter five, insight laughter can play a role in shaping moral character. Insight laughter can help to break bad (moral) habits by drawing attention to a new understanding of a situation or a previously unrecognised sense of right or wrong; in recognising the need for change it is then possible to commit to the formation of new moral habits and behaviours. It must be noted that, despite the best of intentions to stop a bad habit and start a new habit, James suggests that action is rarely taken: “no matter how good one’s sentiments may be, if one have not taken advantage of every concrete opportunity to act, one’s character may remain entirely unaffected for the better” (James 1899: 70). Given the importance of pragmatism in James’ thought, it is perhaps not surprising that James pressed the importance of action, focusing on the practical consequences or fruits of habitual changes.⁶²

In reference to Professor Bain’s *The Moral Habits*, James identifies a number of ways in which we can cease old habits and acquire new habits. First, “we must take care to launch ourselves with as strong and decided an initiative as possible” (James [1890] 1918: 57), we must act decisively and be committed to our adoption of new habits. Second, we must “never suffer an exception to occur till the new habit is securely rooted in your life” (James [1890] 1918: 57), if we experience a lapse in our good habits then we can undo our previous hard work. Third, we must “seize the first opportunity to act on every resolution

⁶² James argues that pragmatism is “a method of settling metaphysical disputes...to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences” (James [1907] 2000: 25). It is: “*The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories’, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts*” (James [1907] 2000: 29, original emphasis). For James, it is the consequences of experiences that have value.

you make” (James [1890] 1918: 58), we must act quickly and not delay our commencement of new good habits or our ceasing of old bad habits. Despite outlining the manner in which habits can be shaped and stopped in *Principles*, in his later work, *Talks to Teachers On Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*,⁶³ James felt the need to respond to the criticism that he had positioned habits as being so ingrained that it was impossible to acquire new habits or experience a sudden reform or conversion (James 1899: 76). James refutes this claim, stating that whilst we can ‘train’ ourselves to overcome the habits which are ingrained in us, “sudden conversions, however infrequent they may be, unquestionably do occur” (James 1899: 76). Whilst James’ reference to conversions here is brief, he describes them as “such critical and revolutionary experiences that they change a man’s whole scale of values and systems of ideas” (James 1899: 77). Thus, the transformation of (habitual) conversions is profound. Here, James introduces the term “conversion” to refer to the formation and adoption of new habits. Although the concepts of habit and conversion are generally considered to be distinct, they frequently converge and mirror each other within James’ writing. In fact, I would argue that James often uses the terms in a related way; when James describes a habitual change, he is describing a conversion, likewise his descriptions of conversion are descriptions of habitual changes.

There a number of other similarities between (changes of) habit and conversions which can be identified in James’ writings. According to James, both habitual changes and conversions: can be unintentional and spontaneous or intentional and cultivated (e.g. James 1899: 76, [1902] 2002: 172); their importance is evidenced in their “fruits”, which are often ethical in nature (e.g. James [1890] 1918: 56, [1902] 2002: 172), though they can have spiritual or non-spiritual effects (e.g. James [1890] 1918: 58, [1902] 2002: 165). Additionally, it is worth noting James’ use of the terms; often in discussions of habit James makes references to conversion and likewise when discussing conversion, he makes reference to habit (e.g. James 1899: 76, [1902] 2002: 176). Moreover, James uses similar examples to evidence the concepts, e.g. the shift from alcoholism or drug dependency to

⁶³ *Talk to Teachers* is the application of the (then) new discipline of psychology to educational theory and classroom practice. In his lecture, *The Laws on Habit*, James explores the importance of, and the duty of the teacher to, build good habits in their students: “the teacher’s prime concern should be to ingrain into the pupil that assortment of habits that shall be most useful to him throughout his life. Education is for behavior and habits are the stuff of which behavior exists” (James 1899: 66).

sober living (e.g. James [1890] 1918: 57, [1902] 2002: 145-146). At the core of the concepts of habits and conversion is change; we adopt, amend, or overcome habits and we alter our thinking or behaviour as a result of a conversion.

Adopting this approach, leads to a reconfiguration of the concept of conversion in particular, as it erodes the religious connotations that often cling to the term. Conversion indicates the process of change, but it often has religious connotations and is understood as the changing of one's religion or beliefs: "if the change be a religious one, we call it a *conversion*, especially if it be by crisis, or sudden" (James [1902] 2002: 142, original emphasis). This comes to the forefront when considering James' 1902 work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*.⁶⁴ Sonu Shamdasani challenges readings of *Varieties* that position it as only providing accounts of religious experiences and, instead, suggests that it should be "*considered to be a study of states of transformation*" (Shamdasani 2005: 33, original emphasis). Shamdasani is unsurprised that the conversion experiences are positioned as religious experiences, as many of the first-hand testimonials include Christian phraseology and iconography (Shamdasani 2005: 33). However, he highlights that the subtitle to *Varieties* is 'The Study of *Human Nature*' and argues that conversion experiences should be treated more broadly (Shamdasani 2005: 33, my emphasis). This also echoes James' own comments on the importance and peculiarity of conversion(s) in human experience, outside of the remit of religion or spirituality (James [1902] 2002: 165). For Shamdasani: "the narratives that James compiles show experiences of transformations of the self and its experience of the world" (Shamdasani 2005: 34-35). In reading *Varieties*, as proposed by Shamdasani, it enables the transformative (conversion) experiences to avoid being restricted to just one form of experience. Thus, individual experiences can be considered in the context in which they occur, as well as in relation to the effects on the individual. Indeed, Shamdasani offers validity to my claim that in insight laughter there is a shift from peripheral (or fringe)

⁶⁴ Although published in 1902, *Varieties* was first delivered as a series of lectures in 1901 and 1902 for the Edinburgh Gifford Lecture Series. When reading *Varieties*, there are similarities with the content of James' earlier 'psychological' text *Principles*, and it is evident that his theories of consciousness begin to gain weight. Grace Jantzen posits that *The Varieties of Religious Experience* could be considered to be the third volume of James' earlier *Principles* with both texts emphasising the importance of all human experiences and the exploration of different states of consciousness (Jantzen 1989: 295-296). Indeed, adopting *Principles* as a foundational text that not only introduces James' initial thinking on a range of topics but also acts as guidance for any reading of his later works, is useful when considering his concepts of habit and conversion.

consciousness to central consciousness; this shift in consciousness parallels conversion experiences and transformations more broadly conceived by Shamdasani. As such, whilst I consider insight laughter as religious experience in chapter three, I also recognise that the (potential) transformations can also be located in what we can classify as non-religious experiences too.

Just as James' interest in habit initially stemmed from his personal life, the concept of conversion seems to have been ever present in the James household. James' father, Henry James Sr., underwent his own (religious) conversion and his brother, Henry James Jr., remembers the repetition of Henry Senior's instruction to "Convert, convert, convert...to convert and convert everything that should happen to us, every contact, every expression, every experience" (H. James Jr. 1913: 215). Although the conversions are mentioned in relation to habitual changes in his earlier works, conversion experiences are predominant in his *Varieties*. In *Varieties* James describes conversion as follows:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring about such a moral change about.

(James [1902] 2002: 137)

In this definition, it is clear that conversion experiences vary, from the speed of the conversion to the cause of the conversion, but central to the conversion experience is the resulting moral change. As noted in the earlier consideration of habitual changes, moral change is important to consider in relation to insight laughter, as the resulting insight can bring about a new sense of right and wrong and therefore offers the potential to amend (habitual) behaviours.

According to James, features of a conversion can include: a "state of assurance", a "loss of all the worry", a "sense of perceiving truths not known before", a sense of "clean and beautiful newness", and an "ecstasy of happiness" (James [1902] 2002: 176-177, 181). The feature of "perceiving truths not known before" is of particular interest in considering how James' concept of conversion can help to understand insight laughter,

given that the new thoughts, perceptions, understanding, recognitions or realisations that result from insight laughter can lead to a change or transformation of behaviour and habits.

James suggests that these moral or spiritual transformations can take one of two forms.⁶⁵ The first is conscious and voluntary, this form of conversion is often “gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits” (James [1902] 2002: 148). Once more, a correlation between James’ concept of habit and conversion can be seen; conversion here appears to be the gradual production of habits, albeit that they are positioned as being moral and spiritual in nature. Much like practising a practical and mundane habit, like playing the piano, James suggests that both moral and spiritual habits can be developed with practice. The second form of conversion occurs in an involuntary and unconscious way, it “*bursts* through all barriers and sweeps in like a sudden flood” (James [1902] 2002: 155, my emphasis). It could be suggested that insight laughter is an example of a “burst” from the unconscious, the same process of peripheral consciousness is in operation, which leads to the potential for new moral or spiritual habits.

For James, it is important to note that conversions are “real, definite, and memorable” for the subject (James [1902] 2002: 163); he does not view his role as evaluating the authenticity of the individual experiences but to provide descriptive psychology. As such, during James’ exploration of conversions James uncovers a tension between psychology and theology; a desire by some to position experiences as resulting from something physiological and others from divine intervention.⁶⁶ In his opening passage on

⁶⁵ James is influenced by Edwin Starbuck who suggested that there are two forms of mental occurrence: a ‘volitional type’ and a ‘type by self-surrender’ (James [1902] 2002: 148).

⁶⁶ James is aware that he is not the first to encounter this tension. Starbuck states that theologically “man’s extremity is God’s opportunity” and physiologically “let one do all in one’s power, and one’s nervous system will do the rest” (James [1902] 2002: 151). Similarly, Professor George Coe also questions the source of conversion experiences. There is also an undercurrent of this tension in the secondary literature. James is often positioned as ending his interest in psychology with the publication of *Principles* in 1890, yet it has been argued more recently (e.g. Taylor 1996: xi) that psychology remains present within his later works. Indeed, in the introduction to *Varieties* James states: “I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist. Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed...as a psychologist, the natural thing for me would be to invite you to a descriptive survey of those religious propensities” (James [1902] 2002: 8). Despite positioning himself as a psychologist, *Varieties* often finds itself studied by theology and religious studies scholars. As noted earlier, many of James’ works are subject to selective readings. It is important when reading this text to recognise

conversion, James acknowledges that there may be a difference of opinion in regards to the need for, or existence of, direct divine operation in conversions (James [1902] 2002: 137) and he continues to explore this throughout *Varieties*. However, a definitive position is difficult to establish. On the one hand, James recognised that sudden conversions, in particular, are an important phase of religious experience. As a result, conversions, in the religious or spiritual sense, are often perceived as “a miracle rather than a natural process” (James [1902] 2002: 164); voices, lights, visions, and the surrendering of personal will are all features of these conversion experiences. Moreover, he states:

Let us hereafter, in speaking of the hot place in man’s consciousness, the group of ideas to which he devotes himself, and from which he works, call it the habitual centre of his personal energy. It makes a great difference to a man whether one set of his ideas, or another, be the center of his energy; and it makes a great difference, as regards any set of ideas which we may possess, whether they become central or remain peripheral. To say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.
(James [1902] 2002: 142)

James indicates that it is ideas that are at the habitual centre of personal energy which effects where attention is placed and what drives behaviour. Thus, a ‘conversion’ is dependent on a change in the ‘habitual centre’. On the other hand, whether or not there is a religious element, James states that conversion is an important element of human nature:

were we writing the story of the mind from the purely natural history point of view, with no religious interest whatever, we should still have to write down man’s liability to sudden and complete conversion as one of his most curious peculiarities.
(James [1902] 2002: 165)

Moreover, James acknowledges that there are regenerative changes which have “no general spiritual significance, but only a psychological significance” (James [1902] 2002: 171) for the individual undergoing the conversion experience.

this tension and have an awareness of James’ position and the manner in which he draws on multiple disciplines.

For James, it seems, that conversions can be spiritually and psychologically significant for the individual, and conversions can and do occur with and without religious interest. Regardless, for James, the main concern is not so much what ‘causes’ the conversion (i.e. psychology suggests the forces are part of the individual and theology the experience descends from the deity), but rather the value of the conversion experience. James questions whether the temperamental origin diminishes the significance of the sudden conversion when it occurs. In his consideration, James references Professor George Coe’s conclusion that “the ultimate test of religious values is nothing psychological, nothing definable in terms of *how it happens*, but something ethical, definable only in terms of *what is attained*” (James [1902] 2002: 172, original emphasis). Adam Phillips highlights the correlation between James’ theory of pragmatism and his concept of conversion, suggesting that at their foundation is a concern with, not the source of beliefs, but the results of the beliefs, and “with the relationship, in James’ terms, between the will to believe and the will to change” (Phillips 2017: 27-28). Again, the importance of the ethical realm is emphasised. As with much of James’ work, it is not simply the experience itself but the effect of the experience; the action taken once the (conversion) experience has ended. Much like habits, whilst conversions may be permanent, James acknowledges that some conversions are transient, “numerous backslidings and relapses” may occur (James [1902] 2002: 183).

As noted, James’ earlier exploration of the phenomenon of habit appears closely aligned with his understanding of conversion and both concepts are influenced by his understanding of streams of consciousness and the fringe. As such, both habit and conversion enable an understanding of laughter and its capacity to offer insight. According to James, whether the conversion be psychological or theological, the subconscious is required for all conversions,⁶⁷ but not everyone is as equally susceptible to conversions:

if the Subject have no liability to such subconscious activity, or if his conscious fields have a hard rind of a margin that resists incursions from beyond it, his

⁶⁷ It is worth noting that this does not remove the possibility of a divine role in conversions: “if *there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them” (James [1902] 2002: 173, original emphasis).

conversion must be gradual if it occur, and must resemble any simple growth into new habits. His possession of a developed subliminal self, and of a leaky or pervious margin, is thus a *conditio sine qua non* of the Subject's becoming converted in the instantaneous way.

(James [1902] 2002: 173)

James identifies the capacity and speed with which conversions and habitual changes can occur and here, once more, we see the correlation that James draws between conversion and the acquisition of habits. In considering the importance of the subconscious, James explores the role of the *fields of consciousness*,⁶⁸ namely that there are many objects which are present in our consciousness at any given time:

as our mental fields succeed one another, each has its centre of interest, around which the objects of which we are less and less attentively conscious fade to a margin so faint that its limits are unassignable. Some fields are narrow fields and some are wide fields. Usually when we have a wide field we rejoice, for we then see masses of truth together, and often get glimpses of relations which we divine rather than see, for they shoot beyond the field into still remoter regions of objectivity, regions which we seem rather to be about to perceive than to perceive actually.

(James [1902] 2002: 166)

James explains that individuals have constitutional differences in the width of their fields, and they can be further affected by mood, such as tiredness and illness. The fields and streams of consciousness, particularly the concept of central and peripheral consciousness is developed further here: "As life goes on, there is a constant change of our interests, and a consequent change of place in our systems of ideas, from more central to more peripheral, and from more peripheral to more central parts of consciousness" (James [1902] 2002: 141). For James, there is a fluidity to our consciousness. However, he recognises that psychology struggles to explain "*how* the excitement shifts in a [wo]man's mental system, and *why* aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central" (James [1902] 2002: 142, original emphasis); neither an outside observer nor an individual subject can explain how the internal change occurs.

⁶⁸ Earlier in this book, James – perhaps rather confusingly – uses the term 'soul' not in the ontological sense, unless the reader wishes to understand it in this manner, but as "a succession of fields of consciousness" (James [1902] 2002: 141). This use of the term soul in relation to the psychological fields of consciousness, once more highlights the tension between theology and psychology.

In exploring the shift from peripheral to central consciousness, James uses terms such as “peal”, “up-rushes”, and “burst” to describe the energies that enter the ordinary consciousness from the subliminal parts of the mind (James [1902] 2008: 142, 167-169). These shifts from the peripheral to central consciousness can lead to changes in our understanding of the world: “we have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought *peals* through us for the first time, or the act has suddenly turned into a moral impossibility” (James [1902] 2002: 142, my emphasis). Whilst these terms echo those used to describe the physicality of laughter, I would go beyond identifying the similarity of language in order to argue that laughter is a mechanism for a shift in consciousness; the “peal” or “burst” of insight laughter enables concepts in the peripheral consciousness to enter the central consciousness, thus drawing attention to a new meaning.

This suggestion is further supported by James’ claim that emotional excitements often bring about changes: “emotional occasions, especially violent ones, are extremely potent in precipitating mental rearrangements...emotions that come in this explosive way seldom leave things as they found them” (James [1902] 2002: 143). As such, it would not be unreasonable to argue that insight laughter could be positioned as a form of emotional excitement. Indeed, it is the recognition, by James, of the centrality of the body for emotion, alongside the identification of the effect the body can have on mental rearrangements and shifts in consciousness, that provides the grounding for my concept of insight laughter.

Additionally, by claiming that:

a new perception, a sudden emotional shock, or an occasion which lays bare the organic alteration, will make the whole fabric fall together; and then the centre of gravity sinks into an attitude more stable, for the new ideas that reach the centre in the rearrangement seem now to be locked there, and the new structure remains permanent.

(James [1902] 2002:143)

James’ explorations of habit and conversion bring together his wider thinking on consciousness, attention, the body, and emotion. More specifically for this thesis, it is demonstrative of the means by which insight laughter may occur; insight laughter can be

the cause of the shift in consciousness that offers the potential for personal transformation, be it habitual change or conversion.

Mysticism

In the sense that conversion revealed the issue of habitual consciousness, considering mysticism enables fields of consciousness to be revisited and raises the issue of radical transformation of consciousness. Thus, considering James' understanding of mysticism enables further correlations of shifts of consciousness to be identified, and offers additional support for the potential of insight laughter within different fields of consciousness. Indeed, the scholar of religion Ingvild Gilhus claims that "laughter and mysticism go hand in hand" (Gilhus 1997: 132; see also Gilhus 1991: 272), and, in chapter three, the issue of religious insight gained through laughter will be examined through the laughing guru Osho.

James' understanding of mysticism is renowned, with most contemporary explorations of mysticism making at least a passing reference to James' work on the subject. Towards the end of *Varieties* James introduces mysticism, claiming that "personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness" (James [1902] 2002: 266). Again, we see variation in the states of consciousness and the potential to shift or flow between these different states. However, James is most interested in the question(s): "what does the expression "mystical states of consciousness" mean? How do we part off mystical states from other states?" (James [1902] 2002: 266). Once more consciousness is central for James. Moreover, James is concerned that the term 'mysticism' is often used vaguely and seeks to offer his own definition. However, it should be noted that, as so often with his work, James is insistent on the definition being used "for the purpose of the present lectures" (James [1902] 2002: 266-267) – this fact is often overlooked by scholars (as noted and recognised in King 1999 and Carrette & Lamberth 2017).⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Despite James' recognition of the breadth and variety of mystical experiences, and the fact that he noted his definition only served the purpose for these lectures/chapters, these four qualities are often depicted as offering an all-encompassing definition of mystical experiences. William Barnard suggests that it is "possible that James did not provide a detailed rationale for this brief listing of the phenomenological characteristics of mystical experience because he was less concerned with the descriptive task than he was

James offers a model of mysticism, identifying four qualities of mystical experience. Through a consideration of James' model of mysticism, we can see the underlying concern with insight; mystical experiences can offer an individual insight. Mystical experiences are described as *ineffable*, it "defies expression...mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect" (James [1902] 2002: 267). They are also said to possess a *noetic quality*. Thus, they are concerned with:

states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.

(James [1902] 2002: 267)

This feature is the most relevant to my concept of insight laughter, as a correlation could be drawn between the noetic quality of mystical experiences and the results of insight laughter. Both enable insights to be achieved through shifts in consciousness. James frequently returns to insight as an important feature of mystical experiences: "all verge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance" (James [1902] 2002: 272). For James, "consciousness of illumination is for us the essential mark of "mystical" states" (James [1902] 2002: 287). In fact, Del Castillo, although focused on humour rather than laughter, considers whether "comic insights and actions could be compared with mystic revelations"; he concludes that they are distinct because "the comic perceptions are never considered a divine gift, as the religious or mystical ones could be" (Del Castillo 2012: 87). Whilst I do not agree that the comic must be distinct from the religious or mystical – indeed, I will consider laughter as religious experience in chapter three – I do not wish to claim that insight laughter *is* a mystical experience but rather that there are parallels in the experience. Much like conversion,

with creating a workable explanation of mystical experience" (Barnard 1997: 63). Grace Jantzen (1989) also criticises the wholehearted adoption of James' concept of mysticism on the basis that – despite James' desire to focus on the experiences of mystics themselves – he ignores the social and historical context in which the accounts were given, as a consequence, the societal power structures that may have impacted the mystics often goes unacknowledged. A similar concern is raised by Richard King who notes that it is important for us to understand mystical experiences through their social and institutional history (King 2005: 118). Additionally, Jantzen notes that the accounts included by James are often selected passages from much longer accounts. As a result, Jantzen is concerned that rather than the accounts offering the theory, James' preconceptions found accounts to match: "his quotations from the mystics illustrate his preconceived categories, and do not after all constitute a fresh exploration of the experiences and teachings of actual mystics" (Jantzen 1989: 299). Jantzen concludes that what James deems to be central to the mystics' experiences differ from what the mystics themselves deem to be important (Jantzen 1989: 300).

James acknowledges that mystical experiences could have “religious pretensions” or “no special religious significance” (James [1902] 2002: 268). For James, mystical experiences that lack religious significance often occur as a result of exposure to the arts, such as poetry, or nature (James [1902] 2002: 269); it could be suggested that insight laughter could occur when exposed to something comic or indeed something shocking. For James, mystical experiences are also *transient* and so last only briefly and they are *passive*: “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power” (James [1902] 2002: 267). For James, “these four characteristics are sufficient to mark out a group of states of consciousness” (James [1902] 2002: 268).

Much like his earlier exploration of conversion experiences, James suggests some mystical experiences are spontaneous and sporadic, whereas others are cultivated experiences. James positions “methodical cultivation [of mystical experiences] as an element of religious life” applicable to a range of religious traditions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity (James [1902] 2002: 281).⁷⁰ James suggests that yoga is one such method and he positions yoga as “training in mystical insight” (James [1902] 2002: 281).⁷¹ According to James, it is also possible for our mystical consciousness to be induced by intoxicants and anaesthetics such as nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas (James [1902] 2002: 271).⁷² Indeed, James’ own experimentation with nitrous oxide (which he took in order to better understand Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s philosophy) led to an experience of “intense metaphysical illumination...only as sobriety returns, the feeling of insight fades” (James 1882: 206). According to James’ 1882 studies,

⁷⁰ James chose to draw on a range of religious traditions throughout his works, and the influence of, in particular, Asian traditions is noted by Taylor (1978) and King (2005).

⁷¹ King warns against “the representation of ancient yogic traditions as forms of mysticism”, noting that “the history of yoga in South Asia represents a vast panoply of different traditions, practices and world-views” (King 2005: 116-117). For example, Buddhism is not so much focused on the “cultivation of so-called ‘altered states of consciousness’” rather the focus is on the development of analytical insight/wisdom, equanimity and calm. Moreover, some traditions place the flux of consciousness on the everyday and so yoga can eradicate such states, not cultivate them (King 2005: 117). King adds that “it is going too far to say that there is *no* discussion of consciousness and different mental states in the literature of the various yogic traditions of South Asia. On the contrary, there are many highly technical and systematic accounts of ‘consciousness’ and the mind (often viewed as separate ‘functions’ in many South Asian systems of thought)” (King 2005: 119, original emphasis). Thus, we must be careful not to assume that it is a simple task, or potentially even possible, to translate ancient thought into modern psychological terms.

⁷² Here, we are also reminded of James’ earlier assertion in *Principles* that when under the influence of alcohol, laughing at jokes is more common (James [1890] 1918: 484; [1895] 1988: 50) and his claim earlier in *Varieties* that alcohol can expand consciousness (James [1902] 2002: 271).

when under the influence of nitrous oxide “the centre and periphery of things seem to come together” (James 1882: 206); a claim that we have seen James develop in his later works, in his concept of fields of consciousness, that has been foundational in this chapter. During the experience James exclaimed that: “That sounds like nonsense, but it is pure *onsense!*” (James 1882: 207) and describes the experience as “terminating either in a laugh at the ultimate nothingness, or in a mood of vertiginous amazement at a meaningless infinity” (James 1882: 208). Though James grounds the shifts in consciousness in the taking of nitrous oxide, I would suggest the laughter he experienced should not be overlooked.

Indeed, this was not the last time that James would overlook the potential of laughter. Within his consideration of religious experiences, James references what he terms the “ultra-radical opinion” of Havelock Ellis who claims that: “Even the momentary expansion of the soul in laughter is, to however slight an extent, a religious exercise...” (Ellis cited by James [1902] 2002: 57 & 38). However, James is unconvinced by this claim. He maintains the oft accepted position that religious experiences should be “solemn, serious, and tender...If glad, it must not grin or snicker...[or] jest” (James [1902] 2002: 31); the potential for insight in the non-serious, particularly in laughter, is unfortunately dismissed by James. However, in chapter three, I will further consider the potential for laughter to be a religious experience.

James is well aware that many who have claimed to have experienced mystical states have been disregarded by the medical profession as suffering from hypnoid states, degeneration, or hysteria.⁷³ James acknowledges that some, if not all, mystical experience may be the result of these conditions, but he is not concerned with disproving or passing judgement: “to pass a spiritual judgment upon these states, we must not content ourselves with superficial medical talk, but inquire into their fruits for life” (James [1902] 2002: 290). As with much of James’ work, just like in his earlier exploration of habit and conversion, his interest in pragmatism emerges; James is once again concerned with the

⁷³ Following one account, James states: “these words, if they do not awaken laughter as you receive them, probably stir chords within you which music and language touch in common. Music gives us ontological messages which non-musical criticism is unable to contradict, though it may laugh at our foolishness in minding them” (James [1902] 2002: 296). The laughter James refers to here seems to be of a disparaging nature.

practical aftereffects, the transformation, and in terms of mystical experience he states that “its fruits must be good for life” (James [1902] 2002: 281). James notes that mystical experiences can lead to “the formation of a new center of spiritual energy” (James [1902] 2002: 291), and, as I am arguing, this is similar to the habitual centre of energy that is formed during conversions. Furthermore, James adds that “mystical conditions may, therefore, render the soul more energetic in the lines which their inspiration favors” (James [1902] 2002: 292). This position appears to mirror James’ concept of attention, suggesting that the mystical experience leads to a shift of focus or attention based on the insight gained from the mystical experience.

In identifying mystical states of consciousness, we are reminded of the transitiveness of consciousness which appeared in James’ *Principles*. Indeed, the importance of streams of consciousness is recognised by Jantzen, who states that:

if there are super-natural powers, and if these powers can in any way communicate with human beings, then such communication will take place, according to James, at the fringes of consciousness; hence it is these fringes which must come in for the closest attention.

(Jantzen 1989: 301-302)

Indeed, this chapter has sought to recognise the importance of these fringes of consciousness, not only in James’ work, but I would like to claim for insight laughter.

Whilst acknowledging the limitations of James’ writings on mysticism as providing an overarching theory of mysticism and the problem of mysticism as a classificatory framework,⁷⁴ it is useful for thinking about insight laughter because there appear to be parallels with insight laughter and mystical states of consciousness. However, I have not sought to claim that insight laughter is a form of mystical experience, but rather offer a deeper understanding of the interrelation of consciousness, body and emotion. This relationship will be considered further in chapter three through the philosophy of Osho and the positioning of laughter as religious experience.

⁷⁴ A discussion that has been developed by Jantzen (1989) and King (1999).

Conclusion

This survey of key concepts within James' multiple works on states of consciousness has demonstrated that, despite the surprising absence of an explicit exploration of consciousness and laughter in James' own writings, his work on the psychology of consciousness offers a useful means of drawing out the central claim of my thesis: that there is a specific form of laughter, termed *insight laughter*, and that this form of laughter enables insight – understood to be a new thought, perception, understanding, recognition or realisation – to occur. By demonstrating the importance of the body for emotion, as well as recognising the effect of physiological changes on states of consciousness, James' thinking on consciousness has enabled me to show that the insight that occurs through laughter is the result of a shift in our streams of consciousness; the bodily act of laughter shifts thoughts from our peripheral consciousness to our central consciousness and this increased level of attention enables new insights to occur. The body plays a significant role in the creation of knowledge. Moreover, James' understanding of habit and conversion has supported my view that this insight, regardless of its suddenness, offers the opportunity for personal, moral, and spiritual transformations. Indeed, Shamdasani's positioning and reading of conversion experiences as transformations, gives justification and grounding for my own claim that during insight laughter shifts in consciousness offer the possibility for (spiritual, ethical, and personal) transformations.

What we can see in the process of consciousness is that the fringe emerges in the practice of laughter that becomes insightful. As such, James provides a phenomenology of my concept of insight laughter. Having established the supporting theory for my concept of insight laughter, and justified it in light of this process of consciousness that parallels the structure of laughing in some way, I will now provide the specifics of insight, adding content to my Jamesian phenomenological reading of insight laughter. The remaining chapters will frame insight in a series of contexts that give further justification for my claim, as I seek to demonstrate how the bodily act of laughter can be a means of insight.

CHAPTER THREE

LAUGHTER AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: OSHO AND BEYOND

This thesis has identified the tendency in scholarship to privilege seriousness and thereby exclude the non-serious from the study of religion. The tendency to engage with features of religion that are “sombre, reverent, [and] earnest” (Schuurman 2019: 157) illustrates the desire to depict the mind as a conduit of religious understanding, whilst the body remains associated with irrationality, desire, and transgression. Continual efforts are made to marginalise the role of the body as a site of, and a creator of, knowledge and understanding. In seeking to challenge the Western philosophical hierarchy of knowledge that places the mind over and above the body, this thesis seeks to redeem the body and demonstrate its potential in the creation of knowledge, through a consideration of the example of insight laughter. As such, my reconceptualisation of laughter challenges how the body, consciousness, and knowledge is understood.

Engagement with the non-serious requires overcoming the marginalisation of the body and recognising the embodied nature of thought. As demonstrated through the theoretical grounding of my concept of insight laughter in the psychological and philosophical theory of William James, there is an important relationship between embodiment and consciousness. Identifying the potential for insight to result from the body, through laughter, raises important questions regarding the politics of the body, religious understanding, and the value of laughter in religious experience. To illuminate this further, this chapter will begin to identify, explore, and question the location of insight laughter within (the discourse of) religious experience, through a critical engagement with the philosophy of Osho (1931-1990)⁷⁵ and the practices of the Rajneesh

⁷⁵ Throughout his life, Osho has been known by many names: born Chandra Mohan his family later added Rajneesh (from the root *raja* or *king*); during the mid-1960s he became a spiritual teacher and was known as *Acharya* (meaning teacher or impartor of knowledge); in 1971 he changed his name to *Bhagwan* (‘the Blessed One’, or enlightened/awakened one) Shree Rajneesh as a public declaration of his enlightenment

Movement.⁷⁶ Although arguably a marginal and controversial figure, I have chosen Osho and the Rajneesh Movement because it is a religious movement that actively engages in and with laughter, and thus, opens questions for wider issues in the study of religion and laughter.⁷⁷

Notwithstanding this, the use of laughter within Osho's philosophy and the practices of the Rajneesh Movement has limitations. As such, it does not fully exemplify my concept of insight laughter. Indeed, whilst Osho opens up the opportunity to explore the place of laughter in religious experience and he provides a useful example for demonstrating the potential of insight laughter, Osho does not go far enough. In fact, I argue that Osho offers a peculiar rendering of laughter that seems to both support and deny the body. Osho touches on the body but does not grasp it. By this I mean that on the one hand, Osho identifies the importance of shock and presents laughter as a technique for enlightenment. Osho advocates for the place of the non-serious in religious experience, he sought a release from "the relentless rationalization of all areas of life" (Gussner 1993: 48). On the other hand, Osho does not critically engage with the body, he overlooks the politics of the body in relation to both gender and ethics. Moreover, at times, and particularly in reference to the laughter of other religious figures, Osho appears to remove the need for the body during laughter entirely, instead offering a cerebral conceptualisation of laughter. Thus, although Osho embraces laughter, his inconsistent and uncritical engagement with the laughing body means that he does not fully recognise the body as the site and creator of knowledge.

some twenty years earlier; in 1989 he was concerned that Bhagwan was being misunderstood to mean 'God' and he once more changed his name, initially to Buddha (which perhaps unsurprisingly led to dissatisfaction from outsiders), then to Shree Rajneesh, then to Osho Rajneesh, before settling on Osho (Goldman 2005: 127). Although there are various interpretations of the name Osho, *The Friends of Osho* "trace the derivation to William James' word *oceanic*, which implies dissolving into the whole of human existence - in other words, being at one with everything there is" (Goldman 2005: 127). However, this is a misunderstanding of both Osho and James. Whilst Osho attributed the term "oceanic" to James, he did not claim to derive his name from the term. Moreover, the term "oceanic" was not created by James but rather Sigmund Freud, e.g. *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Another suggestion is that it is "a Japanese word for a master teacher of mediation" (Gussner 1993: 54). For ease and consistency, I will refer to him as Osho in this thesis.

⁷⁶ Although known as the Rajneesh Movement for many years, following Osho's death, it became known as Osho or the Osho Rajneesh Movement. For consistency, and because it was the name of the movement at the time which is focused on in this thesis, I shall use the Rajneesh Movement throughout.

⁷⁷ It should be noted that the engagement with laughter in a religious context is not wholly unique to Osho. It has been adopted by other traditions and their leaders, perhaps most famously in the Toronto Blessing.

Osho does, however, present a valuable starting point for introducing foundational questions regarding laughter and religion, that will be developed throughout the remainder of this thesis. For instance, Osho provides a useful means for challenging the purported seriousness of other religious traditions as he recognises the value of laughter and the non-serious, more broadly conceived, as an important feature of living a religious life. Moreover, Osho adopts an eclectic approach by pivoting Eastern and Western thought. During his daily lectures he spoke about various religious traditions and philosophies, offered commentaries on scriptures, and explored different rituals and practices. As Osho draws upon religious traditions and philosophies in both the East and the West and delights in transgressing these 'boundaries', it will be possible to position his philosophy and practices in relation to wider religious traditions and to identify the challenges and resistance to perceiving laughter as a means of religious insight. These issues are important because they demonstrate the potential of insight laughter beyond Osho. Whilst it must be noted that Osho is not indicative of all religious experience, his engagement with laughter means he provides a unique test case for considering laughter as a means of insight.

In order to provide coherency to Osho's idiosyncratic approach, this chapter will consist of four parts. First, I will introduce Osho and the philosophy of his movement; identifying the challenges of using Osho, as well as the benefits, will provide an important introduction and foundation for this chapter. In particular, Osho provides a stark contrast to the oft adopted position that the path to profound knowledge should be a serious and solemn one. However, as noted above, the absence of critical engagement by Osho means that whilst valuing the non-serious, he does not fully recognise the importance of the body in the creation of the emerging insights. The underlying tension and the juxtaposition of laughter and seriousness throughout his works evidences his positioning of laughter as a central feature of not only his teachings but life. For Osho, laughter is an essential means of gaining wisdom and even enlightenment. Although Osho makes reference to enlightenment, I will contend that he is advocating for – what I have termed – insight laughter. I am not dismissing the potential of laughter to lead to enlightenment but recognise that the concept of enlightenment may extend beyond the limits of insight laughter, which leads to the occurrence of new thoughts, perceptions, understandings, recognitions, or realisations. Moreover, enlightenment could be considered to be a form

of insight, particularly when considering its presence within religious thought and practice.

Second, I will consider how Osho positions himself as distinct from other religious figures, such as Jesus and the Buddha, and their purportedly serious demeanour. This enables me to challenge the oft accepted position that religions and their figureheads, must be depicted and treated seriously in order to be deemed authentic. Indeed, despite Osho's desire to liberate religious figures from the shackles of seriousness, even he seems to find the image of their laughing bodies too challenging, instead offering depictions of their laughter as transcending the body. Third, I will consider how Osho draws on the tradition of Zen Buddhism in order to identify the importance and necessity of shock for laughter. In fact, my own concept of insight laughter often results from a moment of shock or surprise. It is the shock of laughter that is disruptive and that leads to a shift of thought from the peripheral to the central consciousness, thereby offering the opportunity to amend (habitual) ways of thinking and behaving. Finally, I will consider a key distinction that emerges in Osho's work, the distinction between profane laughter and profound laughter, or as Osho terms it 'ordinary laughter' and 'cosmic laughter'. This distinction supports my own view, that there are different forms of laughter that lead to different effects. Through an exploration of some of Osho's meditative practices, I will consider how Osho adopts laughter as a technique, and question what this means for the authenticity of spontaneous and cultivated laughter. Additionally, an exploration of Osho's teachings and various meditative practices will further evidence the importance of the body for insight laughter. Though I will challenge Osho's positioning of the body as a means to an end, it will also demonstrate the conflict that often occurs between the mind and the body in other religious traditions and identify the distinction between the desire for decorum and control versus disruption and freedom of thought. In embracing the latter, it is possible to see how laughter can transgress the serious and the rational and lead to religious insight. This framework will allow the differences that surround laughter within various traditions to be drawn upon to consider how the cultural place of laughter might enable a critical understanding of laughter in religious traditions; it will also highlight how laughter can be harnessed as a means of gaining insight within religious experience when the value of the body in the creation of knowledge is recognised.

The Challenges of Using Osho

Osho was an enigmatic figure,⁷⁸ surrounded by controversy,⁷⁹ who continues to have public and popular appeal even after his death.⁸⁰ Given the infamy of the Rajneesh Movement,⁸¹ particularly when it was located in Oregon, United States, during the 1980s, many scholars have chosen to look at the history of the movement and a number of ethnographic and sociological studies have been undertaken.⁸² These studies often make brief and passing references to the presence of laughter within the movement, though, considerations of the laughter have remained marginalised.⁸³ Despite the overt presence of laughter in the Rajneesh Movement, laughter has been overlooked by previous scholars in favour of the more ‘serious’ dimensions of Osho. This chapter will seek to highlight and consider laughter as a prominent feature of Osho’s philosophy and the rituals and practices of the Rajneesh Movement in order to demonstrate insight laughter in practice, rather than offering any further examination of the controversies and complexities of the movement, except in so far as they pertain to the study.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ For biographical accounts, see for example: Joshi 1982; Osho 1985c & 2000a. For accounts from ex-members of the Rajneesh Movement, see for example: Milne 1986; Gordon 1987; Shunyo 1991.

⁷⁹ For example, when the Rajneesh movement was located in Oregon (United States) there were allegations of: breaching US Land Law legislation (Abbott 1990); systematic harassment and conflicts with neighbours (Latkin 1991: 365); vote-tampering through the recruitment and temporary housing of homeless people at Rajneeshpuram, as well as mass salmonella poisoning of the local town restaurants (Goldman 2005: 126-127), assassination attempts (Thompson & Heelas 1986: 28), and immigration fraud (Carter 1987: 161). Some (e.g. Abbott 1990; van Driel & van Belzen 1990; Latkin 1991) claim that it was the culmination of controversies that led to the collapse of Rajneeshpuram, in Oregon, in the mid-1980s. During its time in Oregon there were also allegations of brainwashing and manipulation (e.g. Mullan 1983: 138-143; Feuerstein 1990: 69; Latkin 1992: 261-269). It should be noted that allegations of brainwashing are not unique to the Rajneesh Movement, such allegations are frequently levied at New Religious Movements (for considerations of brainwashing see: Barker 1984; Heelas 1996; Zablocki & Robbins 2001).

⁸⁰ Although the peak of the Rajneesh movement was during the 1970s and membership has declined since then, the Rajneesh movement has remained a pervasive force beyond Osho’s death. Today, in addition to Pune, there exist small centres in the United States, Australia, and across Europe, with many of Osho’s teachings continuing via the Osho website: www.osho.com. Indeed, Osho has continued to have popular appeal: Lady Gaga has publicly endorsed Osho’s teachings during interviews, and the current Osho Meditation Resort is visited by contemporary celebrities such as Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook (Goldman 2014: 176-177).

⁸¹ A state wide survey in Oregon conducted between 1985-1986 found that 99% of respondents had heard of and had some understanding of the Rajneesh Movement (Latkin 1992: 261).

⁸² Much of the research on the Rajneesh movement has been written from sociological and anthropological perspectives and focuses on research completed during the 1980s when the movement’s main location was Oregon. See for example: Thompson & Heelas 1986; Carter 1987 & 1990; Latkin 1987, 1990, 1991 & 1992; Palmer 1988; Palmer & Bird 1992; Palmer & Sharma 1993; Goldman 2005, 2009 & 2014; see also Aveling 1994 for an Australian perspective.

⁸³ One exception is Ingvild Gilhus who devotes a chapter to Osho’s views on laughter and his desire to position laughter as “a liberating force” (Gilhus 1997: 134).

⁸⁴ Osho’s use of provocation, offence, and shock tactics will be explored throughout this chapter.

Whilst I will draw on the historical, ethnographic, and sociological studies of the Rajneesh Movement to inform my own study, my main focus will be on the primary sources of Osho. The sources that will be drawn upon will be a selection of the written sources that have been attributed to Osho, as well as the written records of Osho's speeches that have been collated by his followers.⁸⁵ However, this approach is not without its difficulties. First, is the number of texts which are attributed to Osho, with estimations of over 1,000 (Goldman 2014: 186). Second, is the nature of the texts; since 1974, when located in Pune, Osho's lectures have been recorded and filmed and many of the written texts that are attributed to Osho are actually transcripts of these lectures, and recordings of his sayings and anecdotes (Goldman 2014: 186). Moreover, his lectures were often in the format of question-and-answer sessions with his followers. As a result, rather than each text reading as a coherent book, the themes often change every four or five pages and similar ideas, themes, and comments can be found scattered across the hundreds of sources. Third, Osho was an eclectic leader, who sought to bring together traditions from the East and the West. When lecturing Osho often spoke about various religious traditions and philosophies, including but not limited to: Christianity, Buddhism, Hassidism, Jainism, Judaism, Islam, Sufism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. Not only did he explore these traditions, but he also offered commentaries on scriptures, such as the Bible and the Upanishads as well as on practices such as yoga. His eclectic approach may have emerged as a result of his upbringing in India, in a Jain family, and his extensive studies in philosophy (Gordon 1987: 21-29).⁸⁶ Essentially, Osho's philosophy is a melting pot: "a tasty spiritual stew flavoured throughout with Zen Buddhism" (Goldman 2014: 186). Many influences for his views on laughter can be found in this "spiritual stew"; it is important to recognise that Osho's views on laughter are – like his wider philosophy – drawn from a variety of sources.

At times Osho's writings on laughter seem consistently inconsistent, particularly when exploring other religious traditions and their attitudes towards laughter. When using

⁸⁵ There are also a large number of audio and video recordings of Osho. However, in recognition of the need to limit the scope of this chapter due to the vast number of sources that are available, as well as the fact that the majority of the written works that are attributed to Osho are transcripts of the same audio and video recordings, I have chosen to focus solely on the written sources.

⁸⁶ Osho's approach of bringing Eastern wisdom and traditions to a Western audience was not wholly unique, but part of a wider trend in the 1960s (Heelas 1996; Coney 2000; Rudert 2010).

Osho to open up the various traditions and their views on laughter, it is important to recognise, and at times be critical of, the way in which he chooses to frame and characterise other religious traditions. For example, given the importance of the body for my concept of insight laughter, and for Osho's own practices, it is necessary to be aware of Osho's treatment of Christianity and the regularity with which he uses offence and shock tactics to mock the inhibitions of Christianity towards the body. It is also worth noting that often Osho's followers were unfamiliar with some, if not all, of the traditions, scriptures, and teachings that were being referenced, and Osho made no attempt to highlight when and if he was drawing on other traditions when he was speaking and writing. Osho acknowledged that the result of drawing and commenting on various traditions was contradiction and so he offered his followers the choice to accept and reject whichever parts of his philosophy they did not believe. As a result, there was no single, shared belief system for members of the Rajneesh Movement (Thompson & Heelas 1986: 33; Carter 1990: x; Fox 2000: vii).⁸⁷ It is important to recognise that Osho's interweaving of religions causes a tension within his philosophy, and it is his approach to laughter (as well as within his wider philosophy) that opens upon the question and politics of comparative religion. Fourth, and finally, Osho's approach is, as indicated above, often convoluted, contradictory, and fluid.⁸⁸ When describing his philosophy, Osho said:

I have been constantly inconsistent so that you will never be able to make a dogma out of me. You will simply go nuts if you try. I am leaving something really terrible for scholars; they will not be able to make any sense out of me. They will go nuts – and they deserve it, they should go nuts!

(Osho 2000a: 261)

⁸⁷ Although Osho stated that he was against prescription and attempts to formalise his teachings, he composed his own 'Ten Commandments' and whilst they were not explicitly taught to followers the commandments remained foundational to his teachings (Goldman 2014: 186). Moreover, during the Rajneesh Movement's time in Oregon, a book entitled *Rajneeshism* (Rajneesh Foundation International 1983), emerged and positioned the movement as a 'new' religion. Osho later denied any involvement with the text, suggesting it was the work of Sheela (who was, for some time, Osho's secretary, spokesperson, and highly regarded by the movement until she feared the collapse of the commune and fled in secret), he declared 'Rajneeshism is dead', and ordered all copies of the book to be burned (Thompson & Heelas 1986: 29). However, perhaps surprisingly, in 1984 Osho delivered a series of talks that were titled and later published as *The Rajneesh Bible* (Osho 1985d; Urban 2015: 120-122).

⁸⁸ For his followers Osho's: "habit of saying one thing one day, and something completely different the next, revealed the relativity of truth and their master's superior outlook" (Gilhus 1997: 133; see also Bharti 1981: 68-69).

Although this claim is reflective of Osho's desire to be perceived as unique, disruptive, and transcending boundaries of thought, the reality is that the challenges faced by scholars exploring his work are no different than the challenges of exploring any religion, tradition, or philosophy. In spite of the identified challenges and critical concerns, I believe there is much to be gained by considering Osho's thoughts on the subject of laughter. His positive attitude to laughter is unwavering and he frequently returns to it as an important attribute for both humanity and (his eclectic understanding of) spirituality. As noted in chapter one, Michel Foucault and others have acknowledged that laughter holds an important epistemic value for learning, knowledge, and gaining insight, and Osho can further this understanding in religious thought and practice. Indeed, the term "laugh" appears over 3,500 times in his works, demonstrating the prominence of laughter in his teachings and the practices of the Rajneesh Movement, as well as highlighting the importance of considering this feature of his philosophy.⁸⁹

In the following subsections, I will explore the influence of various religious traditions, philosophies, and figures in the formation of Osho's philosophy of laughter and use these influences to explore the differences that surround laughter, and the role of insight, within different traditions. More specifically, I will consider how Osho aids the identification of insight laughter within religious thought and practice and consider its potential as a means of insight beyond the Rajneesh Movement.

The Laughing Guru

Although Osho's philosophy is often convoluted, contradictory, and fluid, underpinning his philosophy is the belief that enlightenment is a possibility for everyone. Indeed, Judith Fox makes the claim that Osho seeks to show his followers "how to move from the periphery to the centre" (Fox 2000: 3). The language here is resoundingly similar to James' streams of consciousness, as introduced in chapter two, and my own claim that the insights obtained through laughter result from a shift from the peripheral to the central consciousness. As such, there is a meeting of traditions – Fox interprets Osho through the lens of James yet makes no reference to his influence. Likewise, Osho's

⁸⁹ There are also over 1,800 references to "joke/joking" and over 400 references to "humor".

teachings seem to draw on James' theory of the streams of consciousness but again he offers no explicit recognition of James' influence. Yet Osho's identification of the importance of laughter and the shifts in consciousness enables me to demonstrate the potential for insight laughter in religious thought and practice.

As the leader of a New Religious Movement Osho is a marginal or peripheral figure in the study of religion. Moreover, his association with various controversies has led to debate as to whether he was "a charlatan or a genuine spiritual teacher" (Fox 2000: 47). As I noted in the introduction, this thesis seeks to listen to voices that have been marginalised and to listen to the laughter within these spaces. As such, I do not seek to argue for the authenticity of Osho, for that is far beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, I will offer a consideration of the alternative approach that is found within Osho's philosophy and the Rajneesh Movement, and the significance of adopting laughter as a viable means of obtaining religious insight.

Osho was a charismatic speaker, he frequently laughed during his lectures and was renowned for telling jokes, humorous anecdotes, and generally being playful with his followers (Gordon 1987: 12; Carter 1990: x; Shunyo 1991: 201; Aveling 1994: 76; Gilhus 1997: 129). The ethos Osho sought within his ashram(s) was one of playfulness with jokes, humour, and laughter all actively encouraged. Osho wanted his environment to be distinct from other places of worship; he described churches, mosques, and temples as devoid of laughter (Osho 1980d: 183). His goal seems to have been a success, with one sannyasin describing the ashram, in Pune (at the time, Poona), as: "a funhouse and a madhouse. A bawdyhouse and a temple. There's music and dancing and laughter" (Thompson & Heelas 1986: 20). Given Osho's desire to tell jokes, it is useful to recognise and engage with Mary Douglas' consideration of the role of the joker. She positions jokers (the joke-teller) as "a privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity...the joker is not exposed to danger" (Douglas 1975a: 158). As the leader of the Rajneesh Movement, Osho was endowed with authority but his use of humour and joke-telling allowed him to push the boundaries of acceptability, to highlight inadequacies, and to transmit religious understanding through an alternative means. Indeed, Douglas suggests that the joker is "a kind of minor mystic" (Douglas 1975a: 159); someone that is in transition, that goes beyond the boundaries of acceptability, and

through creative forces offers new truths. Indeed, Ingvild Gilhus also claims that “[i]t is no accident that mysticism often exists in company with a rich sub stream of humour, jokes, and laughter” (Gilhus 1991: 272). Whilst Douglas suggests that the joker’s power is limited because they stumble across new truths by accident, in Osho we see the intentional and deliberate harnessing of humour, joke-telling, and ultimately laughter in order to facilitate religious insights and spiritual transformations. However, his image as a laughing, humorous, joking, playful guru was challenging for some of his followers, as evidenced by the questions that they asked Osho.⁹⁰ There seemed to be confusion over Osho’s approach, namely the use of jokes, playfulness, laughter, and the overall lack of seriousness, as well as concerns that they lacked the ability to laugh ‘in the right way’. In addition to answering frequent questions on the subject, Osho also provided detailed descriptions of the necessity of playfulness, as well as the usefulness of laughter and the adoption of laughter as a meditative technique. A consideration of these techniques, later in this chapter, will help to raise key questions and inform an understanding of insight laughter.

As will be demonstrated, by positioning himself as a laughing guru, Osho is able to distinguish himself from, and place himself in contrast to, other religious figures such as Jesus and the Buddha who are usually portrayed as serious and solemn. Additionally, he offers his followers an alternative, by aligning himself with Fredrich Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and the Sufi mystic Nasruddin who actively advocate for laughter, humour, and joke-telling. Thus, prior to considering Osho’s adoption of laughter as a means of insight, it is useful to consider the persona of Osho as a laughing guru further.

⁹⁰ Osho regularly held Q&A sessions with his followers. Examples of questions posed to Osho regarding his playful approach include: “Why are you not serious? Why are you always joking?” (Osho 1980a: 118); “You seem to be the first enlightened master who tells jokes – why is it so?” (Osho 1979a: 248). Examples of questions posed to Osho regarding the challenge of laughing for followers include: “Why is it so difficult for me to laugh?” (Osho 1980a: 98); “Why do I take myself and everything so seriously?” (Osho 1980c: 183).

A Laughing Jesus?

Throughout his works Osho frequently returns to the question: did Jesus laugh?⁹¹ It must be noted that Osho was not the first to ask this question,⁹² nor was he the first to propose that Jesus did indeed laugh.⁹³ However, the suggestion that Jesus did laugh was relatively unheard of until the 20th century (Gilhus 1997: 125). Indeed, whilst Osho was developing his philosophy and persona as a laughing guru, his contemporaries were engaging in theological debate about Jesus and the presence of laughter in his life (e.g. Trueblood 1964; Hauck 1970; Eco 1980).⁹⁴

Osho's consideration of (a laughing) Jesus rests on his interpretation of the Church's depiction of Jesus as a wholly solemn and serious figure. As we have noted there is a continuing perception of authentic religion as being grounded in the serious and the solemn, and this is further evidenced by the depiction of religious figures. Osho is attempting to highlight the absurdity of this view and offer an alternative. However, the fact that Osho has been dismissed by many may be indicative of the continuing reluctance to engage in a religion that has at its heart laughter, humour, and play. As noted earlier, even Osho's own followers found his image as a laughing, humorous, joking, playful guru challenging.

At times Osho adopts the trope of a serious Jesus in order to position himself as distinct from Jesus and other religious figures, such as the Buddha, as will be outlined below. In contrast to Jesus, Osho seeks to declare that he is not solemn but playful, humorous, and embraces laughter:

⁹¹ See for example: Osho 1974: 140 & 275, 1976b: 9-10, 1979b: 176-177, 1979c: 43-44, 1980a: 98; 1981b: 159.

⁹² Many of the Greek Church Fathers (2nd – 5th centuries) were concerned with the appropriateness of laughter. John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea cautioned against laughter, in part, because Jesus is never depicted as laughing in the Canonical Gospels.

⁹³ In some of the Gnostic Gospels Jesus is described as laughing. For example, in *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* and *Apocalypse of Peter* Jesus is depicted as laughing on the cross, and in *The Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospel of Judas*, and *Apocalypse of Peter* Jesus is depicted as laughing at his disciples and the questions they pose to him (see: Stroumsa 2004 and Gilhus 2011 for an outline of laughter in Biblical-Demiurgical texts).

⁹⁴ See also the later works of e.g. Viney 1997; Longenecker 2008; Nel 2014.

If you go to other so-called masters they create fear. You cannot laugh in front of them, it will be taken as an offense. You have to have a serious and sad face; you have to appear very serious. Look at the churches, mosques, look at the so-called masters with long faces...

(Osho 1974: 140)

Osho fervently promotes the view that the Church opposes any suggestion that Jesus laughed, had a sense of humour, and/or told jokes:

Christians say Jesus never laughed. What a lie! And they have been lying for centuries and with such theological acumen, with great scholarship. They have been lying very piously, very religiously. Have you ever come across a picture of Jesus or a statue in which he looks happy, blissful, joyous? Impossible! You can't conceive of a joyful Jesus – after two thousand years of Christian propaganda the whole figure of Jesus has become distorted.

(Osho 1979c: 43)

Whilst Osho paints the image of Christian displeasure at the thought of Jesus laughing, the question as to whether Jesus laughed has received, in the history of Christian theology, relatively little attention. Historically, stating that Jesus did not laugh was a relatively undisputed position. However, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, depictions of Jesus were liberated, with Jesus being described as a “comic savant” (Funk 1996), a “riddler” (Thatcher 2006), and even a “clown” (Cox 1969). Moreover, there is a growing belief that Jesus’ disciples – and anyone listening to him – would have found humour in his preaching and even laughed (e.g. Viney 1997; Nel 2014; Patella 2015). However, the debate as to whether Jesus did or did not laugh continues.

Osho explores the reasons why he believes the Church chooses to portray Jesus as a man who did not laugh and he challenges this view. For Osho, given Jesus’ lifestyle, which involved socialising with members from across the social strata, including children, it would have been impossible for him not to laugh in these situations: “Jesus never laughed in life? – and he enjoyed drinking and eating, he enjoyed gamblers and prostitutes, and he enjoyed all kinds of people, and he never laughed?” (Osho 1979d: 113).⁹⁵ Osho suggests that in depicting Jesus as laughing, particularly in social settings, there is the concern that he will be perceived as profane rather than divine: “Christians say Jesus

⁹⁵ Similar ideas are also found in e.g.: Osho 1976b: 9-10, 1979b: 177, 1979c: 43-44, 1981b: 159.

never laughed – because how can Jesus laugh? If he laughs, he becomes profane, he becomes ordinary” (Osho 1974: 140). This position is reliant on the view that laughter is a solely human quality, rather than an attribute which can also be possessed by the divine. In chapter one, we saw that there is also a division between those who perceive laughter to be a solely human quality, and those who perceive it to be a quality possessed by animals too. Osho positions laughter as a unique quality of humanity, that it distinguishes humans from animals: “only man can laugh, no animals are capable of it” (Osho 2003: 46). Moreover, there is uncertainty as to whether God can laugh: “Nobody has ever heard that God has laughed either” (Osho 1987c: 283). Yet if laughter is perceived to be a human attribute and if it is believed that Jesus was fully incarnated as a man, then just as he could walk and talk, he could laugh. This capacity does not need to be viewed as diminishing his divinity. Indeed, I believe claiming that Jesus engaged in the physiological act of laughter is easily acceptable, but what is, perhaps, more debateable is what Jesus would have perceived it appropriate to laugh at. Although it was not an issue that Osho dwelled on in any great depth, the question of whether (the Christian) God laughs has been considered more widely (e.g. Niebuhr 1946; Kuschel 1994; Patella 2015; Peels 2015). Moreover, there are accounts of God laughing in the Bible (e.g. Psalms 2:4; Psalms 37:13, 15; Psalms 59:8), whilst none of the accounts describe the nature/form of the laugh, the laughter tends to be one of scorn or derision directed at sinners. In accepting that God does laugh, perhaps the greater concern is the reason for God’s laughter: does God have a sense of humour? Is God’s laughter playful, joyful, or scornful?

Despite Osho’s descriptions of Jesus’ laughter taking place in seemingly ordinary surroundings, that of a man socialising or teaching or playing, at other times he seems to imply that Jesus’ laugh was not human but perhaps divine. Whilst it appears implicitly, it seems that a key distinction between these two forms of laughter is the role of the body; the suggestion being that humans laugh through the body, whereas divine laughter transcends the body. When speaking to his followers Osho begins by exclaiming: “Don’t listen to the Christians who say he [Jesus] never laughed; it is impossible” (Osho 1977b: 252). Although he begins by asserting a strong aversion to the depiction of a non-laughing Christ, upon identifying this position Osho goes onto to suggest that Jesus’ laughter may have been imperceptible:

His laughter may have been very subtle; you may not have heard it, that much I can understand. His delight must have been very subtle and profound. You may not have been able to see it, that I can understand. His celebration must have been so deep that you cannot go that deep, and you cannot feel it. He lived out of his heart, he lived out of his depth. You may have missed [it]...

(Osho 1977b: 252)

The laughter being described here does not appear to be bodily laughter. There is no description of a contorted face, nor of bodily convulsions, nor of affected breathing, nor of the uncontrollable sounds that often accompany laughter. Indeed, Osho implies that Jesus' laughter may have been so subtle that it was unseeable, unnoticeable, it existed as an almost imperceptible sound. Whilst laughter has an important aural feature it is more than this, it is grounded in and erupts from the body. Indeed, despite claiming that he is challenging the perception of religious figures as solemn and serious, Osho mitigates this purported liberation – he offers them the opportunity to laugh but undermines and even dismisses the importance of the body in this laughter. He limits the laughter to the cerebral. Osho also equates this divine laughter to a feeling of (profound) delight. As noted in chapter one, laughter, within Christianity, is often associated with joy or delight.

In addition to this laughter of delight, Osho makes reference to Jesus as having laughed on the cross:

The reason Jesus didn't weep when crucified...but rather laughed and smiled, is because they had become totally disidentified with their bodies. There was no other reason than this. It was not really Jesus who was being crucified. Jesus was watching his body being crucified from within, and this he did from the same distance as the people standing around him – outside, away from his body. No one from the crowd screamed, none of them cried, "Don't kill me!" Why? – because there was a distance between them and Jesus' body. Within Jesus too, there was a distance between the element that watches and his body. Hence Jesus also didn't cry out, "Don't kill me!"

(Osho 1985a: 163-164)

Again, Osho positions Jesus' laughter as disembodied, his laughter transcends his body. Whilst it is surprising to see Osho reject the body, given that he has sought to highlight the inhibitions that surround the body in Christianity and to challenge this view, Osho is, in fact, building on a tradition that came before him.

Imagining Jesus laughing as he is crucified offers a dramatic contrast with the prevailing imagery of the crucifixion. However, it must be recognised that Osho's description is not unique but rather it is reminiscent of the content of two Nag Hammadi sources, *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (c300CE) and *Apocalypse of Peter* (c250CE). Both sources adopt a docetic theology, namely the view that Jesus only appears to have a physical body, to physically suffer and die whereas, in reality he is incorporeal, spiritual, immortal. In the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* Jesus describes how it was not him on the cross, it was not he who drank the vinegar, or wore a crown of thorns: "I was rejoicing on high over all the excesses of the archons and the offspring of their error and their conceit. I was laughing at their ignorance" (Gibbons & Bullard 1996: 365). The text goes on to describe Jesus mocking the archons for their lack of knowledge; this derisive laughter stems from an insight that Jesus possesses and others do not. Likewise, in the *Apocalypse of Peter* it is stated: "...who is glad and laughing? And is it another person whose feet and hands they are hammering?" (Brashler & Bullard 1996: 377). This initial laughter appears joyful, unlike the derisive laughter above, yet as the text progresses Jesus is described as laughing at those who crucified the physical body for their blindness at the situation, their inability to see that it is not the real Jesus who is being crucified (see also Stroumsa 2004 & Gilhus 2011). It is interesting to note that here Jesus' laugh is positioned as taking place outside of his human body, thus implying that the body and the physiology required for human laughter is not a necessity for divine laughter. Jesus' laughter appears to transcend the requirement for a body. Unfortunately, the texts provide no description of this laughter and so it is not possible to understand its manifestation nor fully comprehend this divine laughter.

The fact that Osho repeatedly returns to the imagery of a laughing Jesus could be perceived as a continual effort to offer a controversial counter position to the Church. However, Osho seems aware of this potential criticism: "I am offending people because I am trying to live religion not according to their ideas...Jesus used to joke, but don't tell it to Christians, they will not understand. They can understand only the Jesus who was crucified" (Osho 1979a: 250). Perhaps, instead, it could be said that Osho is trying to offer a 'new' and seemingly positive depiction of Christ, analogous to his perception of himself, as a laughing guru. Osho notes that wise men, including Jesus, are often depicted as possessing: "a certain quality of sublime foolishness" (Osho 1976a: 104). Indeed, Osho

highlights how Jesus was often the subject of laughter (Osho 1976b: 125). This image of “sublime foolishness” is resonant of a *holy fool*, namely someone who appears to act in a bizarre manner, a way opposed to (social and religious) convention, conservatism, and tradition, in the name of God and as a result often finds themselves an outcast from society and their own tradition. Whilst this is an important concept it is not one that pertains directly to laughter.⁹⁶

Thus, for Osho, the concept of a laughing Jesus is a multifaceted one. He interprets the ‘official’ depiction of Jesus in two ways. On the one hand, he refutes the Church’s depiction of Jesus as a solemn figure, advocating, instead, for a Jesus who laughed in both a human and divine manner. Though it is important to recognise the conflict that emerges regarding the role, or lack thereof, of the body during divine laughter. On the other hand, Osho uses the Church’s depiction of a serious and solemn Jesus to distinguish himself from Jesus, and present himself as a guru who embraces laughter, humour, jokes and playfulness.

Thus Laughed Zarathustra

Osho draws on the figure of Zarathustra to further highlight the power and importance of laughter as a means of demonstrating an understanding of the world, transgressing boundaries, and as a distinguishing feature of a ‘truly’ religious figure. Osho notes that Fredrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody* (1883-1891) is one of his favourite books (Osho 1985b: 2) and Osho provides detailed commentaries on the text in *Zarathustra: A God That Can Dance* (Osho 1987b) and *Zarathustra: The Laughing Prophet* (Osho 1987c). As noted in chapter one, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a valuable source for any consideration of laughter, recognising the

⁹⁶ In order to focus on laughter, rather than the general behaviour of religious figures, this chapter will not explore the concept of *holy fools* in any great detail. However, it is worth noting that these figures have featured in most world religions, in some shape or form, and may go by other terms such as tricksters, proponents of crazy wisdom, or be positioned as mad by the society in which they lived (and sometimes those after). It is a tradition which has thrived particularly in the East, specifically Russia. Enid Welsford (1987) offers a detailed exploration of the social and literary role that fools have played throughout history; whereas Georg Feuerstein (1990) and Jessica Milner-Davies (2009) explore the figure of the fool in various religious traditions. Feuerstein seeks to unravel the truth behind the concept of what he terms ‘crazy-wise adepts, holy fools, and rascal gurus’, though he positions Osho as an “unenlightened...manipulative individual” (Feuerstein 1990: 141).

multifaceted nature of laughter it offers a consideration of the social functions of laughter as well as the potential connection of laughter and wisdom. In Nietzsche's Zarathustra, we see that a "laughter of the heights" is proposed, a laughter that emerges beyond the human and from "one transformed, illumined" (Nietzsche [1883-1891] 2005: 86, 138). There is a potential identified in laughter that Zarathustra thinks is being overlooked by humanity and so he encourages others to laugh, "learn to laugh at yourselves!" (Nietzsche [1883-1891] 2005: 256 et seq.). Indeed, Zarathustra's laugh recognises the futility and tragedy of life; rather than position laughter as a feature of the comic, here laughter is positioned as a recognition and response to the tragic (see Hatab 1988).

Osho positions the Nietzschean Zarathustra as the same as Zarathustra, the founder of Zoroastrianism (also known as Zoroaster):⁹⁷ "Zarathustra had been almost forgotten. It was Nietzsche who brought him back, who again gave him birth, a resurrection" (Osho 1985b: 4). The positioning of Zarathustra and Zoroaster as one and the same has been a subject of wider academic debate, with some suggesting that Nietzsche's Zarathustra is based on the historical figure and others suggesting the figures share only a name (see Heidegger & Magnus 1967 for an overview of this debate).

In regards to the figure of Zoroaster, Osho draws attention to his birth: "the first thing Zarathustra did as he moved out of the womb, he laughed" (Osho 1985e: 190; see also Osho 1979d: 113, 1983: 39).⁹⁸ Osho positions this laughter as "rebellious", "physiologically impossible", and "shocking" (Osho 1980e: 190), but ultimately, he interpreted it as an indication of Zarathustra's perception of the absurdity of the world: "At what joke was the baby Zarathustra laughing? The cosmic joke, at the joke this whole existence is" (Osho 1985b: 1). Osho's concept of the 'cosmic joke' – which will be returned to later in this chapter – may have its grounding in the writings of Nietzsche and his declaration that: "For the present, the comedy of existence has not yet 'become conscious' of itself" (Nietzsche [1887] 1974: 74). Nietzsche seems to be suggesting that humanities' serious disposition leads it to focus on the tragic features of life and so overlook the

⁹⁷ For clarity when referring to Nietzsche's character I shall use Zarathustra and when referring to the founder of Zoroastrianism I shall use Zoroaster.

⁹⁸ There are numerous sources that describe Zoroaster as having laughed at birth, but many accounts (often from other faiths such as Christianity) treat this laughter with suspicion rather than as a celebration. See Hambartsumian (2001) for an outline of key accounts and interpretations of Zoroaster's laugh.

comedy of existence. For Osho, Zoroaster's laughter was evidence of his enlightenment at birth: "Zarathustra was born wise, he was born enlightened, that's all" (Osho 1979d: 114). Once more for Osho enlightenment, or insight, is depicted in the form of a laugh.

Many of the features that have been identified within the teachings of Osho can be found within his interpretation of the Nietzschean text and at times Zarathustra appears to be a blueprint for Osho's own persona. For example, Zarathustra is positioned as life affirming (Osho 1983: 39), he identifies the importance of the body for living a spiritual life (Osho 1987b: 96), adopts a playful rather than serious attitude (Osho 1987b: 10), and embraces laughter (Osho 1987c: 6). Indeed, Zarathustra declares himself "The Laughing Prophet" (Osho 1987c: 281), much like Osho perceived himself as 'The Laughing Guru'.

Osho notes how Zarathustra highlights the opposition that has often faced laughter (and dance⁹⁹), suggesting that religious traditions are opposed to laughter in this world and instead are in favour of living a serious and solemn life (Osho 1987c: 281). Osho's commentary offers support for his desire and encouragement of a playful way of living: "The truly wise man is not serious, he is playful because he understands that the whole of existence is playful" (Osho 1987b: 10). Agreeing with Zarathustra, Osho suggests that the prohibition and restraint that is imposed on laughter is "the greatest sin against man" (Osho 1987c: 282). Indeed, elsewhere Nietzsche claimed that: "Perhaps laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom, perhaps only 'gay science' will then be left" (Nietzsche [1887] 1974: 74). Despite rejecting seriousness as the only means of obtaining knowledge and suggesting that laughter may indeed play a role in the production of wisdom, Nietzsche unfortunately offers no indication as to how this laughter, and wisdom, is to be achieved. Pete Gunter suggests that Nietzsche is arguing for laughter that follows the overcoming of an obstacle, more specifically the obstacle of seriousness (Gunter 1968: 504). Moreover, despite identifying laughter as a valuable source of knowledge, Nietzsche fails to address or recognise the role of the body in laughter. As noted previously, this absence of the body often finds itself reflected in Osho's engagement with laughter, which overlooks the wider politics of the body. Thus, whilst

⁹⁹ Although this chapter has focused on laughter, many of Osho's discussions of laughter also include references to dance and the importance of dance as an alternative means of meditation and/or spiritual practice.

Osho and Nietzsche seem to recognise that laughter can play an important role in our engagement with the world and the production of wisdom, they fail to recognise the centrality of the body.

A Serious, Smiling, or Laughing Buddha?

The figure of the Buddha has undergone different manifestations. Osho recognised how the image of the Buddha has changed throughout history, as Buddhism moved from India to China, Japan, and beyond:

If you look at Japanese and Chinese paintings of Buddha, they don't look like the Indian Buddha. They have changed him totally. If you look at Indian paintings of Buddha, his body is proportionate, as it should be. He was a prince, then a buddha – a beautiful man, perfect, proportionate. But look at a Japanese painting of Buddha: they have distorted the whole thing. A big belly? – Buddha never had a big belly. He never had a big belly, but in Japanese paintings, scriptures, he is painted with a big belly because a man who laughs must have a big belly. Belly laughter... How can you do it with a small belly? – you cannot do it. They are joking with Buddha, and they have said such things about Buddha... Only very deep love can do that, otherwise it looks insulting.

(Osho 1974: 278)¹⁰⁰

Here Osho treats the image of the refined, princely historical Indian Buddha with reverence, rejecting the images found in Japanese and Chinese art. Indeed, Osho positions any contrary depiction of Buddha as a joke, that can only be understood as demonstrating love or an insult. Additionally, when addressing depictions of the Indian Buddha, Osho states that “Buddhists say that Buddha does not even smile” (Osho 1980a: 99; see also Osho 1979a: 52, 1997: 124). Osho seems to support this solemn depiction of the Buddha, suggesting that the Buddha is beyond emotional displays of laughing (and crying) (Osho 1979b: 172-175). Moreover, much like the figure of Jesus, Osho uses the image of the Buddha as a serious figure, to distinguish himself, to position himself as a man of laughter: “Don't be too serious at all. My message is that of rejoicing. That's where I am different from Buddha. Buddha is a serious person...He is very serious, utterly serious. You cannot conceive of him ever laughing” (Osho 1979a: 52).

¹⁰⁰ For similar ideas within Osho's works, see for example: Osho 1979a: 250; 1979b: 175; 1980d: 185.

Osho then shifts from the suggestion that the Buddha does not laugh, to the view that the Buddha does not *need* to laugh. Moreover, Osho positions the Buddha's laughter, not as bodily, but as a feature of his being: "there is no need for him to laugh; his whole being is feeling the laugh" (Osho 1987d: 147-148). A comparison could be made to Osho's earlier depiction of Jesus' divine laughter as body-less. It is significant that Osho does not explicitly mention the body when discussing their laughter but he does explicitly state the absence of it for both the Buddha and Jesus. By removing the need for the body during laughter, not only does Osho leave us with a cerebral conceptualisation of laughter, he also removes the challenge of the body politic, and ultimately fails to recognise the importance of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding.

Osho adds that the Buddha does not laugh because there is no tension: "A buddha laughs without laughing because he has no tensions. He does not accumulate the energy in tensions that can explode in laughter" (Osho 1987d:148). Here the suggestion is that, in order to laugh, there needs to exist a tension. Osho returns to this concept in other works, describing laughter as a means of relaxing following the release of tension that has been building (Osho 1980a: 182). The positioning of laughter as offering a release from pent up tensions appears to echo the *Relief Theory* of humour and laughter. As introduced in chapter one, a proponent of this theory is Sigmund Freud, who proposed that jokes enable inhibitions to be overcome; laughter is a signal of the pleasure that is experienced from the sense of relief at the fact that the energy that is normally used to suppress inhibitions is not required (Freud [1905] 2002: 117). Osho's use of Western psychology throughout his teachings and his practices is distinctive; he draws on both the East and the West in order to "fuse psychological and spiritual techniques of transformation" (Thompson & Heelas 1986: 10; see also Puttick 2000: 207-209). This influence of Western psychology is, perhaps, most evident in the presence of catharsis in Osho's meditative practices, as we will consider later in this chapter (Fox 2000: 2). In fact, it is evident that Osho was aware of Freud's works on joke-telling; in one of his lectures, he states that: "he [Freud] has written a book, *Analysing Jokes and Their Psychology*" (Osho 1990: 214).¹⁰¹ Whilst Freud's book theorises joke-telling in great detail, Osho only seems to reference Freud

¹⁰¹ Osho mistitles the book. The original title is: *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, though it is also known as *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905).

explicitly in relation to discussions regarding the aggression that can lie behind a joke, rather than the release of tension that can occur (Osho 2000b: 210). Whilst the influence of Freud's theory may appear only implicitly in Osho's teachings, it certainly seems as though Osho is exploiting the Freudian model. Indeed, in his own joke-telling, Osho frequently uses aggressive and taboo content in order to shock and disrupt his followers' expectations and comfort.

Inconsistencies emerge in Osho's depiction of the Buddha. On some occasions Osho clearly opposes the suggestion that the Buddha smiled or laughed, on other occasions Osho suggests that the Buddha did smile, but not laugh: "A smile can stay forever – not laughter. So you can find a buddha smiling but not laughing. He knows the art of how to keep balance" (Osho 1975a: 143). It is perhaps surprising to see Osho advocate for balance, a middle ground approach, given his frequent desire for transgressing boundaries and embracing the disruptive nature of laughter. Moreover, Osho's contradictions continue when, on another occasion, Osho implies that the Buddha did laugh, and that it is the interpretation of Buddhists that has led to the depiction of Buddha as a serious figure, not him: "If I say Buddha laughed, Buddhists, particularly the Hinayana Buddhists, will be angry...these people have distorted his image totally; they have made him look so sad, they won't allow him to laugh" (Osho 1979a: 250).

The temperament of the Buddha has, in wider Buddhist scholastic debate, tended to be framed within concerns of the appropriateness of laughter for Buddhist monks and nuns.¹⁰² Though Buddhist scholars have also asked: did the Buddha laugh? It is generally accepted that whilst the Buddha did laugh, his laughter only took place in his early years, his years of indulgence within the palace walls. As such, it is believed that following his enlightenment the Buddha became opposed to laughter (Hyers 1989a: 16). Indeed, in *The*

¹⁰² According to some Buddhist teachings, laughter should be regulated. For example, *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka)* states that monks and nuns should not engage in loud laughter (Horner 1966: 44, 48-49, 68, 127), that they should not tickle others as it may lead them to laugh (Horner 1966: 33 & 62), nor should they make others laugh by using 'wrong-speech' (Horner 1966: 237). In *The Numerical Discourse of the Buddha (Anguttara Nikaya)* there are warnings against laughter that exposes the teeth as it is perceived as childish. However, smiling with joy is acceptable (Bodhi 2012: 342 & 1234), there is also advice that the sound of and engagement with women's laughter can make living a celibate life a challenge (Bodhi 2012: 702 & 1082). In *The Supreme Net: Discourses on 'What Not to Do' (Brahmajāla Sutta)* monks are forbidden from "talking frivolously" (Paw 2004: 14) and "watching entertainment" (Paw 2004: 16) presumably due to the potential for laughter.

Life of the Buddha (The Buddha-carita), the Buddha is said to ask: “What rational being, who knows of old age, death and sickness, could stand or sit down at his ease or sleep, far less laugh?” (Aśvaghoṣa 2005: 53).¹⁰³ The view that laughter is inappropriate when there is suffering in the world is an interesting one; should joy, pleasure, and laughter cease as a result of suffering in the present world?¹⁰⁴ As we will consider in more detail in chapter five, the context in which laughter takes place is often viewed as important when considering its appropriateness, yet the view that laughter should only take place in a context in which there is no suffering is challenging. Indeed, it is this promotion of seriousness in the face of life’s adversities that Osho seeks to challenge.

As with many explorations of the suitability of laughter, the body which is laughing, as well as how it is laughing, is an important factor in determining the appropriateness of laughter, thus revealing underlying attitudes towards the body and gender. As identified in chapter one, there have been attempts to produce taxonomies of laughter. This supports my view that there are different forms of laughter, including my reconceptualisation of laughter as a means of insight. According to Bharata, a 4th century CE Indian scholar, there are six forms of laughter: the slight smile (*smita*) is a subtle smile with no teeth being exposed; the smile (*hasita*) is a smile involving a slight movement of the lips, may involve a blushing of the cheeks, and only the tips of the teeth can be seen; the gentle laughter (*vihasita*) is the expression of joy on the face, a slight sound may be made and it should take place in a suitable occasion; the laughter of ridicule (*uphasita*) involves the expression of the whole face: the eyes, nose and mouth expand and the head

¹⁰³ The laughter described in this text is the laughter of women who surround the Buddha, as a means of entertainment: “There the women delighted him with their soft voices, their beautiful pearl garlands, their playful intoxication, their sweet laughter, and their stolen glances concealed by their brows” (Aśvaghoṣa 2005: 29) and later as a means of temptation: “Another, with beautiful full bosoms, and having her earring waving in the wind, laughed loudly at him, as if saying, ‘Catch me, sir, if you can’” (Aśvaghoṣa 2005: 50). Thus, there is a flirtatious or sexual nature to the women’s laughter. Reference is also often made to the *Dhammapada* which states: “What laughter, what joy, when the world is burning? Will you not see a light, You who are shrouded in a darkness?” as evidence of a total condemnation of laughter by the Buddha. However, Walpola Rahula highlights the importance of context, he describes the context here as consisting of “a heedless group of women in a state of drunkenness visited him [the Buddha] and began to dance and sing shamelessly in his presence” (Rahula 1981: 156). Thus, it is the laughter of women which appears to be of particular ethical concern.

¹⁰⁴ This same question is also considered in the Christian tradition and was explored by Gregory of Nyssa, a Greek Church Father. He claimed that whilst there is sin in this current earthly world, it is inappropriate to laugh: “who would not spend all his life in lamentation and sadness...” (Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*: 109). A more recent consideration of this same concern is found in Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology and Joy*, when Moltmann asks: “how can we laugh, how can we rejoice without care, when we are worried, depressed and tortured by the state of the world in which we live?” (Moltmann 1973: 26-27).

and shoulders also begin to move; the vulgar laughter (*apahasita*) brings tears to the eyes and causes the body to shake violently; the excessive laughter (*atihaisita*) involves the whole body, is loud, and excessive (Bharata [n.d.] 1950: 111). Bharata was writing in the context of performing arts and suggested that this hierarchy of laughter is reflected in the laughter of different classes in society: the first two forms would be engaged in by the aristocracy, the middle two by the average man, and the bottom two by the lower classes. Bharata also states that women are more susceptible to laughter and he drew a correlation between erotic desire and the comic (Bharata [n.d.] 1950: 110 & 116). The union of laughing women with the erotic is a frequent trope in religious literature on laughter – as we will see in chapters four and five of this thesis. Although designed to highlight the laughter of different areas of society, the prevalence of Bharata’s work led to it being adopted, by some, as a hierarchy of appropriate laughter in Buddhism. Thus, it began to be suggested that if the Buddha did laugh, it was only in accordance with *smīta* or *hasīta* i.e. he would only have smiled (Hyers 1989a: 34 & 2000: 622; Clasquin 2001: 98). Following this allowance, it was then suggested that Buddhist monks and nuns were allowed to laugh in accordance with the middle tier, i.e. gentle and ridiculing laughter, and that the unenlightened would most likely engage in the more derogatory forms of laughter, i.e. vulgar and excessive laughter.

In accepting that the Buddha did laugh, or at least smile, this raises additional questions: what would he laugh at? Would he laugh at the perception of something humorous? Did he smile because he could see and understand the truth of enlightenment? Did he laugh in recognition of the absurdity of life? Did he laugh at the unenlightened for their foolishness? Conrad Hyers notes that there are conflicting positions within the Buddhist tradition, on the one hand, it is suggested that the Buddha’s laughter arose from: “the degraded and not the subtle...it was a smile in the sense of the Buddha’s exaltation over the bonds of ignorance and desire, and a subsequent perception of their folly” and, on the other hand, the Buddha is said to smile from a state of compassion, it is a smile of knowing (Hyers 1989a: 154-155). Thus, even if it is accepted that the Buddha did smile, the reason why continues to be debated. Although Osho did not (explicitly) draw on Buddhist texts or scholastic debate, given the various positions he adopts in relation to the Buddha and his disposition towards laughter, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that he was aware of these long-standing debates.

Images of the Buddha have certainly varied throughout history and reflect differing gradations of laughter; the tall, slim, and serious¹⁰⁵ depictions of the Buddha in India, and early Chinese art, transformed into the large, big bellied and laughing portrayals of the Buddha found in China in particular. The image of a big bellied jolly 'Laughing Buddha' (Mi-lo-Fo in Chinese) did not emerge until the 10th century but is now frequently seen represented as statues in Buddhist temples in China. In recent years it has also become the prominent image of the Buddha in Western popular culture, being perceived to be a good luck charm, according to folklore, and an act of ethnic cultural identification for many living in the West (Shin 2010: 36).

This now familiar image of the 'Laughing Buddha' is based on a (semi-legendary) 10th century monk named Pu-tai (Hotei in Japanese and Podae in Korean). Believed to have died in 916 or 917CE, Pu-tai was a monk known for wandering from town to town rather than staying within a monastery. His name, Pu-tai, translates as "cloth-bag" and he was known for always carrying a large cloth sack with him. In the bag he stored food that he had begged for, along with gifts that he freely gave to children, some also say that the fabric provided him shelter, though there are also stories of Pu-tai's 'one-ness' with nature and his ability to predict the weather. He was renowned for his joyful attitude and the contents of his sack were said to represent prosperity and good luck. Pu-tai claimed to be an incarnation of Maitreya and he was believed to grant wishes for people (see Chapin 1933 for a detailed history of Pu-tai).

Osho is interested in the story of Pu-tai, though refers to him by his Japanese name, Hotei. He describes Hotei's wandering spirit, his desire to play with the children in the villages he visits, and his use of kōans with fellow masters (Osho 1977a: 37 et seq.). Osho embraced the playful character of Hotei and claims that Hotei was known as the Laughing Buddha because he laughed once enlightened:

People asked him, "Why are you laughing?"

He said, "Because I have become enlightened!"

¹⁰⁵ Some images/statues do portray a subtle smile.

“But,” they said, “we can’t see any relationship between enlightenment and laughter. What is the point of laughing?”

Hotei said, “I am laughing because I was searching for something which was already in me. I was searching the seeker; it was impossible to seek it. Where can you seek the seeker? How can you know the knower? It was like a dog chasing its own tail or you chasing your own shadow; you cannot catch hold of it. It was so ridiculous; the whole effort was so absurd, that’s why I am laughing. I have always been a buddha, now it seems very strange that for millions of lives I remained unconscious. It seems unbelievable how I went on missing myself. Now that I have known, a great laughter is arising in me.”

And it is said he continued to laugh until his death; that was his only message to the world.

(Osho 1979b: 28)

The origins of this story, as told by Osho, are unclear. Whilst Hotei was often portrayed as having a joyful disposition, the depiction of him as a monk who wanders while constantly laughing seems to more closely mirror the tale of ‘The Three Laughing Monks’. According to Chinese folklore, three monks wandered from village to village, saying nothing, but only laughing; their laughter was contagious and said to represent their enlightenment.¹⁰⁶ This was a story that Osho was also aware of, as he referenced it in one of his lectures (Osho 2003: 56-58). It is interesting that in Osho’s telling of this story, he not only positions the figure as Hotei, but he includes the confusion of the villagers, who cannot see a connection between laughter and enlightenment. Whilst a connection between laughter, or at least humour, and enlightenment is something that is understood in traditions such as Zen Buddhism, for Osho’s mostly Western audience this would likely have been new. It is also important to consider Hotei’s response; Hotei’s recognition of the futility of searching far and wide for something that was inside himself all along. Similarly, a key feature of Osho’s own philosophy and meditative practices is that what we are looking for is already within, but because we take the search too seriously, we overlook this, and therefore require a more playful disposition to find it. Despite recognising that this was a “great laughter” and one that continued “until his death”, Osho does not explore the nature of the laugh, for example: what did it sound and look like?

¹⁰⁶ Stories of the three laughing monks vary, see for example: Hyers 1989a: 47-48; Aveling 1994: xvii-xviii; Clasquin 2001: 98-99.

Was it embodied? Was it transcendental? Although advocating for the centrality of the body, Osho seems to overlook the role of the body in laughter in his storytelling.

This consideration of three key religious figures, Jesus, Zarathustra, and the Buddha (in various manifestations) has evidenced that a tension exists between the desire to perceive religious figures as solemn and serious and the potential for these figures to have (actively engaged in humour and to have) laughed. The potential of these figures appears to be grounded in questions of their humanity; the location of laughter in the body provides a reminder of their corporeality, it is indicative of their humanity, and suggests that they were as bound to their bodies as humans. Indeed, even Osho – who criticises other religions for their anti-body rhetoric – appears somewhat reluctant to locate their laughter in the body. But does it matter whether Jesus, Zarathustra, and the Buddha were men of silent and serious contemplation or men who smiled and laughed so hard their bellies shook? Do they enter a new plain of understanding, knowledge, and insight if they are perceived as serious or indeed laughing?

Laughter and Shock

As we have seen in the works of, for example, Georges Bataille ([1953] 1986), Michel Foucault ([1966] 1970), Debra Diane Davis (2000), Jacqueline Bussie (2007), and Anca Parvulescu (2010), laughter is disruptive. For the purposes of this thesis, this disruption is vital because the laughter often emerges from a moment of shock that is followed by a sudden release of tension and it is the intensity of the laughing body that can lead to a shift in consciousness that enables insights to occur. As such, I want to consider the importance of shock further, through an exploration of Osho and Zen Buddhism, a tradition that influenced his own approach.

An important feature in Osho's teachings and practices was the use of shock tactics as a means of awakening his followers (Carter 1990: 44). Osho believed that "each master has to decide how to shock" in order to awaken their followers (Osho 1980f: 131). As such, Osho loved to shock his followers, whether this be through the physical jolting of the body during a meditation, offence caused as a result of his rhetoric, or an emotional response to a joke. Indeed, the result of these shock tactics was often laughter; a sudden and

immediate response to the unexpected. As noted throughout this thesis, whilst laughter can result from the perception of humour, it often results from a shock or surprise, in the moment of shock the body dominates and takes over when we laugh. According to Osho, shock tactics awaken the mind: “I am here to *shock* you. And in those shocking experiences your mind will stop. You will not be able to figure it out: and that is the point where something new enters you” (Osho 1980f: 131-132, my emphasis). This view shares a correlation with my concept of insight. I argue that insight need not occur only through solemn, rational, contemplation, rather it can occur when the mind stops trying to think and instead responds to the body. As such, I am elevating the body in order to recognise its capacity to create knowledge and understanding through laughter – something we also begin to see in Zen Buddhism.

The Origins of Zen Buddhism

Zen Buddhism is an important influence on Osho’s philosophy and he frequently draws on the Zen tradition’s use of laughter and humour to support his own teachings (Fox 2000: 7; Goldman 2014: 186; Urban 2015: 142). In considering Osho’s references to Zen Buddhism, it is possible to recognise how laughter can be considered as a means of achieving, transmitting, and expressing insight, and even enlightenment. As noted earlier, enlightenment could be said to go beyond my concept of insight laughter and so I will instead position enlightenment as a form of insight for the purposes of this case study.

For Osho, the Zen tradition embodies laughter, humour and playfulness in a way that he desires for his own philosophy. Osho regularly positions laughter as a positive feature of mankind and even as an important religious trait: “laughter is one of the most essential qualities of a religious man” (Osho 1980a: 99). This claim is made in an attempt to distinguish himself from other world religions and traditions which he perceives to be too serious (Osho 1989: 147). Again, the presence of the deep tension that exists between laughter and seriousness is evident. In much the same way that I am arguing that insight can be achieved through non-serious means such as laughter, Osho’s embracing of laughter also leads to the possibility of new insights, that would be closed to those who adopt a more serious disposition. Indeed, the following words spoken about Zen Buddhism by Conrad Hyers could as easily be said about Osho and his philosophy: “while

one may be accustomed to seeking for signs of enlightened attainment in the sober features of deep meditation and intense absorption, in Zen Buddhism one may...be presented with images of gaiety, lightheartedness, and mirth” (Hyers 1989a: 35).

The identification of a connection between Zen Buddhism and humour has increased in popularity in the last century and is found within the works of Osho and beyond. For example, Reginald Blyth (1959 & 1969) provides a collection of historical humorous stories, proverbs, and poems from China, Korea and Japan and begins to highlight the presence of humour in Zen Buddhism as a result; Conrad Hyers (1970, 1989a, 1989b & 2000) is a key proponent of the relationship between humour and the Zen tradition drawing on art and literature to highlight the close relationship between humour and enlightenment; Andrew Whitehead (2014) builds on the work of Hyers to highlight the importance of humour and pedagogy in Japanese Zen Buddhism; and Padmasiri de Silva (2018) argues that humour is used in Zen Buddhism in order to break down dualistic thinking and collapse the overreliance on categories and dichotomies for conceptualising the world. Whilst this recognition is important, often the focus of these studies is on the presence of humour (i.e. the stimuli for the laughter), as such the laughter is treated as secondary and left relatively unexamined. This thesis seeks to address the unexamined aspect of laughter, and to recognise that whilst humour may be a vehicle for containing knowledge, it is laughter that enables the insight to occur, it is the laughter that breaks routine thinking through a shift from the peripheral to central consciousness. Thus, without the laughter the insight may never occur.

A key entry point for considering Zen Buddhism and laughter is the purported origin of Zen Buddhism. In his works, Osho frequently (e.g. Osho 1974: 265-291, 1976e: 206-207, 1985b: 74-75, 1987d: 80-81) retells the story that he believes to be “the source from where the whole tradition – one of the most beautiful and alive that exists on earth, the tradition of Zen – started” (Osho 1974: 267). A summary of the story, according to Osho’s various accounts, is as follows: the Buddha was expected to deliver a talk and thousands of followers travelled from far and wide to hear him speak. Upon his arrival, his followers saw that he was holding a flower. Time began to pass and the Buddha said nothing, he simply sat and stared at the flower he was holding. As the silence continued for some time

the crowd began to grow restless. Mahākāśyapa¹⁰⁷ was in the crowd and unable to restrain himself he laughed loudly. The Buddha beckoned him over, passed him the flower, and said to the crowd: “I have the eye of the true teaching. All that can be given with words I have given to you; but with this flower, I give to Mahākāśyapa the key to this teaching.”

Following his telling of this story, Osho makes the unfounded claim that this story has been generally ignored: “many Buddhist scriptures never relate this anecdote, they have simply dropped it” (Osho 1974: 269). Osho is certainly not the only person to suggest that this story depicts the origin of Zen Buddhism, though the story is generally positioned as being apocryphal (Blyth 1959: 92, 1966: 4; Hyers 1989a: 24-25; Welter 2000: 99). Indeed, this story is commonly known as *The Flower Sermon* and is one of the most famous kōans in the Zen tradition.¹⁰⁸ It is found in the *Wu-men-kuan*,¹⁰⁹ which is a collection of 48 ‘cases’ published in 1229 (Suzuki 1970: 264-265).

According to the *Wu-men-kuan* the story is as follows:

The World Honoured One long ago instructed the assembly on Vulture Peak by holding up a flower. At that time everyone in the assembly remained silent; only Mahākāśyapa broke into a smile. The World Honoured One stated: ‘I possess the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the wonderous mind of nirvana, the subtle dharma-gate born of the formlessness of true form, not established on words and letters, a special transmission outside the teaching. I bequeath it to Mahākāśyapa.’
(cited in Welter 2000: 75)¹¹⁰

Despite the importance of this story in the Zen tradition it has received relatively little critical attention (Welter 2000: 76). Moreover, when it has been considered, the focus has been placed on the introduction of the key Zen tenant of “the silent transmission of

¹⁰⁷ A disciple of the Buddha.

¹⁰⁸ Originating in China, “the term kōan (C. *kung-an*, literally ‘public cases’) refers to enigmatic and often shocking spiritual expressions based on dialogical encounters between masters and disciples that were used as pedagogical tools for religious training in the Zen (C. Ch’an) Buddhist tradition...What is unique about the kōan is the way in which it is thought to embody the enlightenment experience of the Buddha and Zen masters through the unbroken line of succession” (Heine & Wright 2000: 3). For a historical overview of the kōan and its forms and functions see for example: Foulk (2000), Loori (2006), and Suzuki (1970).

¹⁰⁹ The *Mumonkan* in Japanese.

¹¹⁰ Whilst this is the most well-known version of the story other versions exist. For a list of the various texts that include accounts of this story see: Shūten 1922: 301-303.

Buddhist truth between master and disciple as ‘a special transmission outside the teaching’” (Welter 2000: 75), rather than the role of the smile in the story. It should be noted that whilst Osho’s account(s) of this story depict Mahākāśyapa as laughing, most versions of the story describe Mahākāśyapa as smiling.¹¹¹ In considering the reasons for the difference between the traditional Zen accounts and Osho’s account(s), it could be argued that there is a power differential between a smile and a laugh. Whilst, both a smile and a laugh are expressed through the body, perhaps laughter could be seen as more disruptive as it breaks the silence, whereas a smile maintains the silence but more subtly breaks the scene. Indeed, just as my concept of insight laughter argues that the occurrence of insight requires the intensity of a laugh, a smile is insufficient, to cause the shift from the peripheral to the central consciousness, Osho also requires the physical intensity of the laugh. Yet Osho does not recognise the effect that different bodies have on the capacity to laugh with such freedom. Additionally, Osho may simply have chosen to depict Mahākāśyapa laughing because it fits with his own narrative of the importance of laughter and its ability to transgress expectations. According to Osho:

Laughter has been condemned continually as childish, as insane; at the most you are allowed to smile... Laughter is total. The smile is just an exercise of the lips; the smile is just a mannerism. Laughter knows no mannerism, no etiquette – it is wild, and its wildness has all the beauty.

(Osho 1987c: 355)

Whether a laugh or a smile, the reaction is incongruous, shocking, unexpected and disruptive. However, the ‘wildness’ of the laughter seems essential for Osho’s telling of the story.

It has been suggested that the purported significance of the Buddhist smile or laugh is the result of Western interpretations of Eastern practices and a desire to “share the joke to receive part of their supposed superhuman knowledge” (Gilhus 1997: 122). Indeed, despite his recognition of the importance of humour for Zen Buddhism, Blyth argues that “it would be a great mistake to think that Kasyapa smiled as a sign that he understood something or other” (Blyth 1966: 80). There are of course many ways to read the

¹¹¹ In addition to Osho, to date I have only found one author who suggests that Mahākāśyapa *may* have expressed “a grin or guffaw” (Blyth 1959: 92) rather than a subtle smile. Whilst there may be more accounts that adopt this position it is certainly not the most dominant narrative.

incongruity of the smile in this story, some more profound than others. It could, for example, be said that this story is simply signifying repression: a monk trying to stifle a laugh that he knows is inappropriate in the context. Yet if the story is read from the perspective that the body can play a role in the creation of knowledge and understanding, it is not a question of “superhuman knowledge” as suggested by Gilhus, but simply human knowledge. Thus, in spite of the warnings of Blyth and Gilhus, I believe that Mahākāśyapa’s laughter could be interpreted as an example of insight laughter.

In addition to recognising *The Flower Sermon* as an origin story, the kōan has also been considered to represent the character of Zen Buddhism: “the essence of Zen is humour” (Blyth 1959: 87, 1969: 198; see also Hyers 1989a: 24-25). The proposition that a tradition emerged not from seriousness but instead from playfulness certainly seems significant; there are other means by which Mahākāśyapa could have depicted his enlightenment and yet it was a smile (or laugh) that was chosen. There is no privileging of the serious, instead play, the comic, and laughter provide a foundation and a unique entry point into the tradition.¹¹²

According to Albert Welter, this kōan was central to the formation of Zen Buddhism as it demonstrated a shift away from the view that “the textual tradition was the sole legitimate vehicle for transmitting Buddhist teaching” and towards the alternative concept of “‘mind-to-mind transmission’, focusing on the enlightenment experience occurring in the context of the master-disciple relationship” (Welter 2000: 78). In order for the concept of ‘mind-to-mind’ transmission to be deemed credible the genesis had to be with the Buddha and so this kōan may have been created to fit the desired narrative.

¹¹² It is worth noting that some literature promotes the view that Zen Buddhism is the only place where humour can be found in Buddhism. However, this position is being challenged with the recognition that intentional humour can be found in Indian Buddhism, even in seemingly unlikely places such as the legal canon (e.g. Rahula 1981; Clasquin 2001; von Hinüber 2006; Schopen 2007; Clarke 2009). Indeed, Michael Clasquin notes that: “There is a consistent perception even among scholars that humour hardly existed in ancient India” (Clasquin 2001: 100). He proposes four reasons for this. First, the nature of the humour. The humour is often scatological and erotic (at times pornographic) in nature and as many of the translations still read today were undertaken by Victorian and Edwardian scholars these passages tended to be omitted or edited. Second, passages are often theologised until nothing funny remains and there is a denial of comic intent in the passages. Third, over time decisions have been made as to which texts should survive, and it is often the serious texts that have been chosen. Finally, humour is often specific to a certain time, place or culture and so contemporary readers can struggle to identify humour (Clasquin 2001: 100-102; see also Siegel 1987: 68). Thus, any perception of a deficiency of humour is likely due to later editing rather than the intentions of the original authors.

Indeed, the acceptance that wisdom can be transmitted without words is important for my own thesis, and the suggestion that insight can be gained not through words alone, but through the body, through laughter. As such, the significance of the smile/laugh in this story will now be further interrogated, alongside a consideration of what the smile/laugh represents for Osho, Zen Buddhism, and for my own concept of insight laughter.

In his commentaries, Osho suggests there are three dimensions to Mahākāśyapa's laughter. First, Mahākāśyapa laughed "at the foolishness of the whole situation: a buddha silent and nobody understanding him, and everybody expecting him to speak. His whole life Buddha had been saying that the truth cannot be spoken, and still everybody expected him to speak" (Osho 1974: 279). Here the laugh is directed *at* others, at the absurdity of the situation they are in and the fact that they fail to recognise this absurdity. It appears to be a profane or ordinary laugh and perhaps unbecoming of someone who is enlightened. Mahākāśyapa laughs as a result of knowing more than others, in the recognition of the crowd's shortcomings, their self-ignorance. This type of laugh echoes throughout the literature on humour, as introduced in chapter one, it is a laugh of superiority at the recognition of a deficiency of another.

Second, Osho suggests that Mahākāśyapa "laughed at Buddha also, at the whole dramatic situation he had created, sitting there with a flower in his hand, looking at the flower, and creating so much uneasiness and restlessness in everybody" (Osho 1974: 279). Again, this laughter is seemingly profane or ordinary and the result of the superior knowledge of Mahākāśyapa. It could also be said to share similarities with Osho's description of Hotei's laugh, as introduced earlier in this chapter. Whilst Osho suggests that the laughter is directed *at* the Buddha, this laughter is not disparaging, instead it may be more appropriately positioned as laughing *with* the Buddha; Mahākāśyapa, unlike the rest of the crowd, is 'in on the joke', he too shares the insight. This position is particularly interesting if we consider the role of the Buddha in this story. In this interpretation, the Buddha could be said to have orchestrated the occurrence of the smile/laugh; just like the reception of a joke is dependent on the context, the delivery, and the atmosphere, the same could, perhaps, be said of enlightenment.

Third, Osho states that Mahākāśyapa “laughed at his own self – ‘Why couldn’t I understand up to now? The whole thing is easy and simple’” (Osho 1974: 279). Here Mahākāśyapa directs his laughter inwards, *at* himself, he laughs at his own previous ignorance. Thus, Osho presents the laugh as an expression of Mahākāśyapa’s enlightenment. In his commentaries, Osho positions the flower as a receptacle, a vessel for the Buddha’s consciousness (Osho 1974: 284). However, why is it the flower and not the laugh or smile that is positioned as the receptacle? Whilst the laugh could be considered as following the enlightenment, I would contend that the insight (or enlightenment) results from the laughter. Mahākāśyapa gains the insight through the jolt of bodily laughter.

Thus, Osho offers three reasons for Mahākāśyapa’s laugh: he is laughing at the crowd’s ignorance, he is laughing with the Buddha as they share the same insight, and he is laughing at his own prior lack of understanding. However, the reasons proposed by Osho appear divisive, creating a sense of us and them, namely those who are enlightened/in on the joke (the Buddha and Mahākāśyapa) and those who are not (the other followers). However, as I have indicated, I would argue that Mahākāśyapa’s laughter is indicative of a laugh of insight. His laughter not only breaks through the silence but the laughter results in the occurrence of insight.

Osho was aware that the message of Zen Buddhism is beyond words. He acknowledged that there is often a desire for words to be used to transmit and explain profound truths as this is what we, as humans and social beings, understand most easily (Osho 1975b: 30). Indeed, it is this position, this emphasis on and privileging of rational contemplation, of the mind as the creator of knowledge, that I have identified as a barrier to both the engagement with, and study of, laughter within religious traditions. Yet, as in the Zen tradition, for Osho words are not always required or even sufficient. He proclaimed that sometimes: “the thing is so big that you can cry, or *laugh*, or dance – but you cannot say it” (Osho 1976c: 17, my emphasis). Thus, laughter can transgress words in order to be recognised as an alternative means of insight.

To summarise, we can see that Mahākāśyapa’s laugh was triggered, not from an external source or stimuli such as a joke, but internally from the knowledge that he had received

through wordless transmission. The recognition of the wordless transmission of religious wisdom draws out the correlation in Osho to support my claim that insight can be gained through laughter. In the next section, the use of external stimuli, namely the use of kōans, jokes, and meditation will be explored as alternative means of inducing insight. Indeed, Osho's own implicit use of, and similarities to, James' streams of consciousness will also become more apparent.

Laughter as Technique

Building on the close relationship of shock and laughter, Osho positions laughter as technique. In harnessing laughter as technique, laughter is used as a means of religious practice that has the potential to lead to – according to Osho – enlightenment and in terms of my thesis insight. Osho uses laughter as technique in three key ways. First, is the way Osho draws inspiration from the Zen kōan tradition in order to integrate shock and laughter into his teachings. Second, this time drawing on the Sufi mystic Mulla Nasruddin, is Osho's adoption of joke-telling as a vehicle for transmitting religious understanding. Third, is Osho's integration of laughter into meditation. Each of these techniques will be considered in turn below in order to consider how insight laughter can be present within religion.

Using Kōans

Osho recognised the importance of the Zen kōan tradition in demonstrating the transcendence of language. Whilst he did not explicitly use kōans, Osho embraced verbal and physical techniques to provoke the spiritual transformation of his followers. Osho notes that “Zen masters, when they ask a question, don't expect an answer verbally – they expect some gesture of spontaneous understanding” (Osho 1977a: 237). Indeed, this “gesture of spontaneous understanding” is often in the form of laughter; the appearance of laughter as an ‘ah-ha’ (or perhaps an ‘ah-ha-ha-ha’) moment is a frequent feature in Zen kōans, as is the provocation of laughter from others by those who are already enlightened. However, laughter was not the only device used by Zen masters, in order to “awaken practitioners from the sleep of habituated life” (Feuerstein 1990: 49). For instance, there are examples of silence, insults, slapping, and kicking etc.; the similarity

between these techniques (including laughter) is the incongruity and the shock factor that they produce in the relevant scenarios, the shattering of expectations. Here it is useful to remember James and the manner in which our attention becomes restricted as a result of our habitual interest or repeated selection. As noted in chapter two, we often need something to rupture our routine thinking and to provide a shift of attention. In Zen Buddhism, it is shock tactics, including laughter, that can help with this awakening. Thus, in Zen Buddhism it could be argued that we are witnessing examples of insight laughter.

Zen masters and monks are regularly found to be laughing, playing the fool, and telling jokes or humorous anecdotes. According to Hyers, in the Zen tradition: “Laughter and humor may function both as a technique for precipitating spiritual understanding and as an expression of new levels of insight and freedom” (Hyers 1989a: 17-18; see also Laude 2005: 123). Humour was used as a means of developing disciples and ultimately offers the possibility of enlightenment. There are many examples of monks using humour to transmit insight to their followers.¹¹³ Whilst it should be noted that there is a recognition from scholars of the importance of humour in transmitting insight, the laughter is rarely examined or considered to play a role in the occurrence of the insight. I believe this is an oversight. For example, whilst Reginald Blyth acknowledges the presence of laughter in many of the Zen Buddhist teachings, he does not believe it is important to understand the reason why laughter has such a frequent presence. He states that whether the laughter is the result of “scorn or shame or bewilderment or some secret enlightenment is not the point” (Blyth 1959: 87). However, I believe it is exactly the point. It is important to consider the laughter of Buddhist monks and to question whether this laughter is used to achieve, transmit, or express enlightenment and insight. Moreover, I would argue that whilst humour may act as stimuli for laughter, there are other means of provoking laughter and, ultimately, I am claiming that the insight is dependent on the laughter.

The above exploration has demonstrated that laughter is an important feature of the Zen tradition, and its (generally) positive engagement with laughter means that it is not surprising to find Osho’s views on laughter being heavily influenced by it, even if he does not use kōans himself. However, it is necessary to highlight one distinction; whilst much

¹¹³ See for example: Blyth 1959; Siegel 1987; Hyers 1989a for collections of these stories.

of the literature within and on Zen Buddhism emphasises the importance of humour and the comic as the cause of the laughter and in spite of Osho's own love of jokes and humorous anecdotes, Osho does not position humour as a necessary feature of, or stimuli for, laughter. For Osho, the act of laughing, unprompted by humour, can itself lead to insight and this will be explored below in the section on meditation, but first joke-telling will be considered.

Telling Jokes

Throughout his works Osho frequently tells the (often humorous) stories of Mulla Nasruddin, the Sufi mystic. As noted by Osho, the history of Nasruddin is often debated, including his country of origin and whether he was a historical figure or fictional device (Osho 1976f: 226; see also Shah 1977). Regardless, for Osho, Nasruddin is an important figure because he: "brought religion and laughter together" (Osho 1985b: 49), something Osho pursues in his own teachings.

Osho also uses Nasruddin to promote his vision that life is a cosmic joke and he notes that beyond the façade of folly is wisdom (Osho 1976g: 225). Osho encourages his followers to familiarise themselves with these stories, noting that the initial appearance of folly and foolishness in the stories is a means of hiding the wisdom within: "he teaches through humor. Each of his anecdotes is pregnant with tremendous meaning, but you will have to uncover it" (Osho 2005: 58). Using Nasruddin as an exemplar, Osho challenges the perception that folly and wisdom are incompatible and distinct: "Wisdom is not only serious, it is playful too. And foolishness is playfulness" (Osho 1978: 138). He opens up the potential for insight to be achieved beyond serious and rational means, in this case through laughter. Indeed, the scholar and author Idries Shah notes that Nasruddin tells "metaphysical jokes (that is, tales and quips intended to jolt the consciousness)" (Shah 1977: 15). Whilst Shah does not elaborate on this claim, he has highlighted the potential for profound truths to be contained in jokes. I would add that the profound truths held within these jokes can be released and ultimately realised through insight laughter. The laughter that results from these jokes can lead to, what Shah positions as a jolt in the consciousness, much like I refer to a shift from the peripheral to the central

consciousness, that enables new thoughts, perceptions, understandings, recognitions or realisations.

Mary Douglas also considers “the joke form as a vehicle of religious thought” (Douglas 1975a: 153). She explores the potential for joke-telling to be understood as a rite, or a ritual. However, in identifying that “rites impose order and harmony, while the joke disorganises”, she concludes that a joke is an “anti-rite” (Douglas 1975a: 154-155). Douglas, is perhaps simplifying joke-telling and their effects. Whilst the laughter – or indeed the silence – that follows a joke can certainly rupture a situation and disorganise, I do not think we should overlook the potential for joke-telling to be a unifying experience. Whilst we must recognise the ambiguity that can be at play, as was considered in chapter one and will be explored further in chapter five, jokes create insiders and outsiders and laughing together can be an important bonding experience for a society or community; one that reinforces social norms or breaks them down.

The use of humour as pedagogy is a feature of Osho’s own approach, whether through the explicit use of Nasruddin and his tales, or his own wider use of jokes and humorous anecdotes. For Osho, humour is a useful pedagogical device because it relaxes the mind:

[the stories] are a device to teach you the sacred-most [sic] through humor. And it can be taught only through humor, only through humor because only humor can relax you. God can be known only in deep relaxation. When you laugh you disappear as an ego. When the laughter is really authentic, a belly laughter – when your whole body throbs with its orgasmic energy, when the laughter spreads to all of your being, when you are simply lost in it – you are open to God.

(Osho 2005: 59)

Despite the possible wisdom hidden in these jokes, Osho notes that many who read or hear the stories of Nasruddin simply think that he is a fool, or read an anecdote, laugh and think that it was just a funny joke. For Osho, “no joke is just a joke” (Osho 2005: 58), rather it takes wisdom to look further into the meaning of the joke to truly understand it. Whilst it seems too much to claim that *all* jokes contain some hidden meaning, jokes and humour often provide a vehicle for religious, political, and moral messages. Indeed, despite the purported wisdom behind the jokes, it has been suggested that in reality Osho’s jokes: “did not necessarily have a profound spiritual depth, any kind of joke would do...the joke

had priority; the spiritual point was put to the joke afterwards...The jokes were often taken from joke books” (Gilhus 1997: 129; see also Bharti 1981: 9).

For Osho cosmic laughter can result from jokes: “I go on telling jokes to you because jokes carry more than any scriptures” (Osho 1995a: 266). He positions the laughter at a joke as more insightful than reading scripture(s); this is controversial and evidence of Osho’s desire to highlight the place of laughter in his philosophy in contrast to other traditions. It also feeds into the distinction between laughter that is initiated by humour, and that which is not. Osho explains that jokes tend to work on two levels:

on one level everything is simple and ordinary, nothing is special, then suddenly there is a turn at the end, the punch line; at the end there is suddenly a turn, you never expected that this was going to happen ...When the sudden turn comes that you never expected...everything has changed, and the change is so ridiculous, illogical, irrational – you explode in laughter. If you understand a joke you understand it immediately, without any effort on your part. It is just like satori or samadhi.

(Osho 1975a: 279)

Osho makes a correlation between the immediacy of getting a joke and the profound awakening of satori (see also Laude 2005: 124-125). Indeed, once the joke is over and has been laughed at, it should be remembered: “You should not just laugh and forget them, you should make them a part of your understanding” (Osho 1976f: 226); reflection on the laughter can lead to amendments to future thinking or behaviour. This is because, often, jokes enable us to reflect on the self (Osho 1976f: 224). The view that our laughter can offer a reflection of our inner character will be considered further in chapter five. Whilst it is clear that Osho uses Nasruddin’s ready-made humorous anecdotes with hidden meanings, Osho clearly adopts this approach more widely in his teachings and embraces joke-telling as a means of transmitting religious understanding.

As noted earlier, the importance of laughter for Osho has generally been left unexamined. However, one exception is Ingvild Gilhus (1997) who, in her chronicle of laughter, devotes part of a chapter to Osho. During her brief exploration of Osho and laughter, Gilhus notes that laughter in the Rajneesh Movement provided “an awakening” (Gilhus 1997: 131). However, Gilhus’ exploration of Osho draws on just a few sources, is brief and so is unable to fully interrogate the contradictions and fluidity of Osho’s ideas, and it is

also overly focused on joke-telling. Gilhus suggests that Osho has “divided laughter into three categories: (1) belly laughter which is an immediate reaction to a joke, not taking the detour of explanation; (2) laughing from the head, in which understanding goes before laughter; (3) laughter which imitates others’ laughter” (Gilhus 1997: 132). Whilst this categorisation of laughter offers a useful starting point, Osho’s engagement with laughter is much more multifaceted than this. Moreover, the forms of laughter identified by Gilhus only apply “whenever a joke is told” (Osho 1975a: 279), not in relation to his use of laughter more widely.

Meditation

Laughter is present in a number of Osho’s meditative practices and it is an essential feature in his: *Laughing Meditation*,¹¹⁴ *Dynamic Meditation*,¹¹⁵ and *Mystic Rose Meditation*.¹¹⁶ Each of these three forms of meditation positions laughter as an important experience and catalyst for enlightenment; it is through this laughter that new insights, new ways of thinking and of seeing the world, can be achieved. Here we see laughter being used as a religious technique. Osho directs laughter in order to achieve enlightenment, rather than it being an end to itself. Although Osho does not identify a specific form of

¹¹⁴ *Laughing Meditation* will be focused on later in this section.

¹¹⁵ Instructions for *Dynamic Meditation* are as follows:

First Stage: Ten minutes of deep, fast breathing through the nose. Let the body be as relaxed as possible; then begin with deep, fast, chaotic breathing – as deep and as fast as possible. Go on breathing intensely for ten minutes. Don’t stop; be total in it. If the body wants to move while you are breathing, let it; cooperate with it completely.

Second Stage: Ten minutes of catharsis, of total cooperation with any energy that breathing has created. Let the emphasis be on catharsis and total letting go. Just let whatever is happening happen. Do not suppress anything. If you feel like weeping, weep; if you feel like dancing, dance. Laugh, shout, scream, jump, shake – whatever you feel to do, *do it!* Just be a witness to whatever is happening without you.

Third Stage: Ten minutes of shouting *hoo-hoo-hoo*. Raise your arms above your head and jump up and down as you continue to shout *hoo-hoo*. As you jump, land hard on the soles of your feet so that the sound reaches deep into the sex center. Exhaust yourself completely.

Fourth Stage: Ten minutes of stopping dead, *as you are*. Now freeze. In whatever position you are in, stop completely. Energy has been awakened through breathing, cleansed through a catharsis, and raised through the Sufi mantra *hoo*. Now allow it to work deeply within you. Energy means movement. If you are no longer throwing it out, it will begin to work within.

Fifth Stage: Ten to fifteen minutes of dancing, of celebration, of thanksgiving for the deep bliss you have experienced” (Osho 1976d: 233-234).

¹¹⁶ *Mystic Rose Meditation* was only introduced in 1988 but was highly received by followers (Aveling 1994: 198). Instructions for *Mystic Rose Meditation* are as follows: “...to take place three hours a day over a period of three weeks: one week of laughter, one week of tears, and one week of silent witnessing. There is no interaction among the participants and no “therapist” but only a facilitator [normally Osho himself] who has been trained in conducting the process” (Osho 2000a: 410).

laughter as occurring in his meditative practices, I would argue that Osho was seeking to adopt meditative practices to invoke insight laughter. Moreover, it is in his meditation practices that he brings the body to the forefront of his laughter.

Osho's meditative practices were subject to change over time. When Osho adopted the role of a spiritual master in 1964 he initiated meditation camps to help others obtain the enlightenment he claimed to have experienced years earlier.¹¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Osho's own enlightenment experience in 1953 was the result of an intensive period of meditation, fasting, prayer, and austerity. Nevertheless, he actively discouraged austere approaches to meditation within the Rajneesh Movement. Osho initially described his enlightenment as an "explosion" (Joshi 1982: 65), however in later accounts he describes himself as laughing post-enlightenment:

I laughed that day because of all my stupid, ridiculous efforts to attain it. I laughed on that day at myself, and I laughed on that day at the whole of humanity, because everyone is trying to achieve, everybody is trying to reach, everybody is trying to improve.

(Osho 2000a: 102-104)

Here, the description of Osho's enlightenment is similar to (his accounts of) both Hotei and Mahākāśyapa, as considered earlier in this chapter. In 1970, Osho made a shift towards a new meditation technique that involved deep breathing and the active movement of the body in order to experience catharsis; he described this as *Dynamic Meditation* (Thompson & Heelas 1986: 17). Just like Osho's philosophy, his various meditative practices were inspired by other religions and traditions, particularly Zen Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, and Hinduism.¹¹⁸ Osho promoted over 60 different meditation techniques, from laughing to dancing, breathing to smoking, and from sitting to staring (Osho 1995a). The meditation techniques varied in popularity and Osho explained that there was not one single approach that could lead to the transformation of self, instead participants should choose the meditation they felt suited them best (Osho 1976d: viii, 1981a: 9).

¹¹⁷ For a full account of Osho's enlightenment see: Joshi 1982: 49-75.

¹¹⁸ Whilst many of Osho's meditative practices were believed to be original, Osho frequently adopted and adapted meditative practices from other traditions. For example, he embraced Anapanasati Yoga from Buddhism, and used the sounds of 'hoo' from Sufism and 'aum' from Hinduism (Osho 1995a).

For Osho, meditation is a “natural state” but it is a state that most do not know how to access (Osho 1981a: 4). As such, the methods and techniques he provides are a means of training, they facilitate “a jump into the unknown” and for higher levels of consciousness to be reached (Osho 1976d: xvii). Ultimately, the meditative practices enable his followers to think, and behave, differently. The methods proposed by Osho, including laughter, serve a purpose; they increase alertness and facilitate the awakening (or insight): “The more vigorous the method, the less your calculative mind will be needed. The more vigorous it becomes, the more total, because the vitality is not only of the mind – it is of the body, of the emotions” (Osho 1976d: xvii). The intersection of body, mind, and emotion is certainly present in laughter. Indeed, my reconceptualisation of laughter seeks to challenge how the body, consciousness, and knowledge is understood, by demonstrating that the body plays a pivotal role in the creation of knowledge and understanding. In insight laughter it is possible to see how the body effects consciousness, the bodily laughter leads to a shift of thoughts from the peripheral to the central consciousness, and the creation of insight.

As previously noted, Osho sought to promote an environment filled with laughter, humour, and playfulness. Though she does not explicitly identify the connection with humour and laughter, Judith Fox states that: “the communes which arose around him tended to reflect ‘the aesthetics of Zen’” (Fox 2000: 7). It could be suggested that Osho was also inspired by the practices of Zen monks, as in addition to the origin story of Zen Buddhism, and the wider use of shock tactics, kōans and humour, laughter is often described as being present within sacred Buddhist spaces such as monasteries:

There is more honest ‘belly laughter’ in a Zen monastery than surely in any other religious institution on earth. To laugh is a sign of sanity; and the comic is deliberately used to break up concepts, to release tensions, and to teach what cannot be taught in words. Nonsense is used to point to the beyond of rational sense.

(Humphreys 1940: 90; see also Berger 1997; Arai 1999)

This presence of laughter provides a contrast to the Buddhist teachings, that advocated for Buddhist monks and nuns to regulate their laughter, as identified earlier in this chapter. Osho, also, frequently describes the presence of laughter in Zen monasteries: “In Zen monasteries the monks are taught that the first thing to do in the morning is to laugh,

begin the day with laughter” (Osho 1976e: 151; see also Osho 1974: 276, 1977a: 230). Osho’s depiction of the presence of laughter in Zen monasteries and as being positioned as a meditative technique echoes his instructions for his own *Laughing Meditation*:

Every morning upon waking, before opening your eyes, stretch like a cat. Stretch every fibre of your body. After three or four minutes, with eyes still closed, begin to laugh. For five minutes just laugh. At first you will be doing it, but soon the sound of your attempt will cause genuine laughter. Lose yourself in laughter. It may take several days before it really happens, for we are so unaccustomed to the phenomenon. But before long it will be spontaneous and will change the whole nature of your day.

(Osho 1995a: 108)

Although the laughing meditation prescribed here is individual and actively cultivated. Osho also held group laughing meditation sessions and during these sessions the laughter was deemed to be more spontaneous: “for no reason, people would sit and start laughing. At first they would feel a little awkward that there was no reason – but when everybody was doing it...they would also start” (Osho 2003: 46).

Thus, once more influenced by the Zen tradition, Osho sought to make laughter the focus of a number of his meditative practices, he sought to use laughter as a technique. It seems rather odd that Osho is advising his followers to cultivate spontaneous laughter. Whilst laughter is positioned as a useful technique, Osho does not want it to be forced but spontaneous. This raises some important questions: is there a distinction to be made between spontaneous and cultivated laughter? Can spontaneous laughter be cultivated? Is one form of laughter more authentic than the other?¹¹⁹ Returning to my definition of insight laughter, it could be argued that the key issue is whether the laughter reaches the required intensity to lead to a shift in consciousness. This would, I suggest, be more likely once the laughter becomes authentic rather than forced or imitated, but that ultimately the trigger for the laughter could be spontaneous or actively sought.

As noted previously, I recognise and do not discount the fact that insights can be achieved through solemn and rational reflection. However, I argue that the body can play an

¹¹⁹ These questions contribute to a wider debate regarding the authenticity of religious experiences and whether or not something that begins forced can become spontaneous (e.g. James [1902] 2002).

important role in the creation of knowledge and that – in keeping with William James’ (1899) thinking – the relaxation of the body can facilitate the mind to be opened to new ideas. Indeed, the release of tension during insight laughter is one such example of the body’s effect on consciousness. According to Osho, “[i]t is impossible to laugh and think together. They are diametrically opposite: either you can laugh or you can think. If you really laugh, thinking stops. If you are still thinking, laughter will be so-so, lagging behind” (Osho 1995a: 107). For Osho, part of the power of laughter is that it leads to a non-thinking state: “If you are possessed by laughter, thinking stops” (Osho 2000a: 242). I challenge the view that it is necessary for thinking to stop entirely, and instead suggest that perhaps it is the conscious effort of thinking that is absent in insight laughter.

Hugh Urban describes Osho as promoting an “embodied spirituality” that is at the “intersection between *physical fun and religious transcendence*” (Urban 2013: 42, original emphasis). Perhaps insight laughter could be understood in these terms. For Osho, the body is essential during meditation, by emphasising the importance of the body for his meditative techniques he seeks to distinguish himself from other religious traditions:

Bodily tension has been created by those who – in the name of religion – have been preaching anti-body attitudes. In the West, Christianity has been emphatically antagonistic toward the body. A false division, a gulf, has been created between you and your body...The body is the enemy, but you cannot exist without it.
(Osho 1976d: 58-59)

In his teachings Osho frequently highlights the existence of inhibitions relating to the body within Christianity. For Osho any desire to control or restrict the body is detrimental to engagement with the divine and the totality of existence. For Osho, the disruption of the body allows (the normally) reserved and constrained body to break free, to stop thinking, to laugh, and experience an awakening: “the moment you laugh – it does not come from the mind, it comes from the beyond” (Osho 1998: 98). For Osho, the body, mind, and spirit are united: “I divide you into body, mind, spirit as a method only. You are not divided – these boundaries do not, in fact, exist – but in order to help you to understand things, the division will be useful” (Osho 1976d: 57; see also Osho 1980b: 20, 1981a: 8). It is through this union of the body, mind and spirit that Osho believes it becomes possible to expand consciousness: “Laughter is not one-dimensional; it has all the three dimensions of man’s being. When you laugh your body joins it, your mind joins

it, your being joins it. In laughter the distinctions disappear, the divisions disappear” (Osho 1987c: 281-282). Osho advocates for a fluidity: “Meditation changes your consciousness. First, it destroys the barrier between your conscious and unconscious...the destruction of the barrier means the expansion of your consciousness” (Osho 1976d: 114). If we return to James’ embodied consciousness as introduced in chapter two, we see that insight is achieved precisely because consciousness is affected by the body. Through the example of laughing meditation, it is possible to see how changes in consciousness that result from the body allow us to see new things, to gain new insights.

Osho embraces the body in meditation, as a result he openly engages the body in various practices as a means of religious experience, laughter being one such example. However, despite his critique of other religions and their anti-body politics, Osho seems to be attempting to use the body in order to transcend the body; he does not fully recognise the role of the body in the process of awakening, or insight. Gilhus positions Osho as adopting a dualistic system, that Osho’s “dynamic techniques were apparently applied to the body, but in reality, they were aimed at consciousness. The body was, when all was said and done, only of limited interest” (Gilhus 1997: 128). Regardless, Osho is right to draw attention to views, and potentially inhibitions, regarding the body. Indeed, in chapters four and five I will offer a more thorough consideration of how the perception of the body can affect the place of laughter in religious, ethical, and social contexts.

Cosmic vs Ordinary Laughter

As noted earlier, Osho considers the thinking versus non-thinking state(s) during laughter. He does so in order to make a distinction between what he defines as “ordinary” laughter and “cosmic” laughter. For Osho, ordinary laughter has essentially been corrupted: “When laughter comes out of thinking it is ugly; it belongs to this ordinary, mundane world, it is not cosmic. Then you are laughing at somebody else, at somebody else’s cost, and it is ugly and violent” (Osho 1974: 280). The distinction made by Osho further demonstrates my position that there are taxonomies of laughter and that not all laughter leads to insight. Moreover, it highlights the ambiguity of laughter, sometimes it

is desirable and other times it is cruel, unwarranted, and even immoral – as has been demonstrated in chapter one and will be considered further in chapter five.

For Osho, ordinary laughter has a target and it emerges out of thinking. This form of laughter seems to echo the laughter identified by proponents of the *Superiority Theory* of humour and laughter, that positions laughter as the result of a feeling of superiority to another. As introduced in chapter one, this may be the result of their misfortune, purported stupidity, or simply an attempt to denigrate another. In positioning laughter as belonging to the “ordinary, mundane world” Osho seems to place limits on its capabilities; Osho does not associate this laughter with the insight that can be gained from the laughter he encourages through jokes, shock, kōans, and meditation. Although Osho does not acknowledge it explicitly, there seems to be an ethical component to this distinction of ordinary and cosmic laughter, as if worldly laughter may pose ethical questions but cosmic laughter is purer and of greater ethical value. As an aside, it is worth noting that Osho was a libertarian when it comes to ethics, and it was certainly not unusual for Osho to tell offensive stories and jokes. Indeed, the shock of such jokes played an important role in his teachings.¹²⁰ For Osho, offence was a useful means of shocking and disrupting the expectations of his followers.

Unlike ordinary laughter, cosmic laughter does not have a target: “When laughter comes out of silence you are not laughing at anybody’s cost, you are simply laughing at the whole cosmic joke – it is really a joke!” (Osho 1995a: 266). Here, Osho suggests that cosmic laughter must emerge from silence, there must be no target, and despite the lack of thinking the laughter is a laugh of realisation, or indeed insight, at the absurdity of life. Given Osho’s cosmic laughter appears to share some parallels with insight laughter – both indicate an understanding beyond things as they immediately appear – it is useful to consider Osho’s framing of the key features of cosmic laughter further.

¹²⁰ Osho barely engages with the ethics of joke-telling and only briefly explores the subject of ‘wicked jokes’, as part of a wider discussion of the mystic Atisha who was believed to have declared: ‘Don’t make wicked jokes’. In this brief exploration, he believes that the only concern is the intention of the joke-teller (Osho 1987a: 143-147).

First, let us consider the role of the silence. It is interesting that Osho suggests that cosmic laughter should come from silence (perhaps like the laugh of Mahākāśyapa); this positions laughter as innately disruptive, its occurrence always shocking and shattering. In fact, attempts to be silent lead to the active suppression of laughter; as laughter is a distraction that can lead to the loss of the silence that has been cultivated laughter may be feared. Here Osho is not only referring to the literal, external, experienced silence, but an inner silence, an inner stillness. Osho describes this inner silence as being “at the centre”, whereas on “the periphery, [there is] celebration and laughter” (Osho 1995a: 267). For Osho, it is important to become “capable of moving from the periphery to the center and from the center to the periphery very smoothly” (Osho 1995b: 75). Here we see again that there seems to be an engagement with James’ theory of streams of consciousness, which positions consciousness as fluid and, as a result, leads interests and ideas to move from our peripheral consciousness to our central consciousness (and potentially back again). Osho was aware of William James and on one occasion described him as “[o]ne of the most important American psychologists” (Osho 1975a: 161), yet as is so often the case with Osho, he fails to acknowledge his sources in his teaching. Although not acknowledging James’ influence, Osho appears to be supporting the view that laughter may indeed be an ideal mechanism for enabling concepts in our peripheral consciousness to enter our central consciousness. Indeed, I have argued that it is the same dynamic shift of consciousness that is present in insight laughter.

Second, we can consider the positioning of cosmic laughter as target-less laughter. Marion Goldman argues that there are two key features of Osho’s philosophy. First, the surrender of the individual ego. Second, the integration of the individual’s material and spiritual selves (Goldman 2014: 186). I would propose that in Osho’s cosmic laughter these two features are at the forefront. Osho identifies the ego and resistance to losing it as a challenge for meditation; if meditation is taken too seriously then it can lead to the inflation of the ego instead of the ultimate goal of enlightenment (Osho 1995b: 2). Osho believes that society promotes the strengthening of the ego, whereas he is advocating for the loss of the ego; it is in ‘losing’ the ego that it is possible to see: “The universe is one, it is unity. Nothing is divided. Everything is connected with everything else; it is a tremendous connectedness” (Osho 1995a: 293). Thus, in taking (laughing) meditation too seriously we are failing to rid ourselves of our ego and instead feeding it. Likewise,

when we laugh at others (i.e. there is a target of our laughter) this also feeds our own ego (Osho 1976a: 102). However, laughing, in the 'right' way(s), can destroy the ego; namely, in laughing at oneself and through cosmic laughter (Osho 1976a: 102).

For Osho, laughter is available to everyone, "it needs no talent, no learning, no discipline" (Osho 1980a: 162). Laughter enables religious experience to be found in an elevated everyday experience – something that was rejected by James (see chapter two) when he dismissed Havelock Ellis' suggestion that laughter may be a feature of religious experience. Osho's desire is for the laughter to be "total", it is not a polite smile or a brief giggle but an all-consuming full-bodied laugh:

Real laughter has to be just like a small child laughs. Watch his belly shaking, his whole body throbbing with it. He wants to roll on the floor because it is a question of totality. He laughs so much that he starts crying; he laughs so deeply that the laughter becomes tears, tears come out of him. Laughter should be deep and total.
(Osho 1976a: 103)

Osho explains that laughter should come from the belly, not the head, and he associates the ability to laugh freely with children. Whilst he does not acknowledge it explicitly, the freedom with which children can laugh likely results from their lack of understanding of, and to a degree their freedom from, the politics and ethics of the body.

Third, we can consider the lack of thinking. It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that non-thinking (cosmic) laughter can lead to insight but, when we laugh, we are not intentionally thinking. Instead, we are responding to our body; laughter ruptures thoughts, it shifts our attention, and allows the insight to occur. It is the bodily act of laughter that leads to the shift of ideas from our peripheral to our central consciousness. Fourth, is the sense of realisation, or insight that occurs. Osho frequently makes the declaration that "life is a cosmic joke" (e.g. Osho 1974: 9, 1987a: 145, 1995b: 3). The idea that life is a cosmic joke is that life is absurd, and when we realise this, it enables us to recognise that we should not be taking life so seriously, we should seek a new way of living:

Life as such should be taken as a cosmic joke – and then suddenly you relax because there is nothing to be tense about. And in that relaxation, something starts

changing in you – a radical change, a transformation – and the small things of life start having new meaning, new significance.

(Osho 1995b: 3)

For Osho, realising the absurdity of life should not fill us with nihilistic despair but with a laugh. Indeed, it is through laughter, that this realisation can come to fruition. Much like in Zen Buddhism, it could be said that “[l]aughing at this absurdity is the first step to transcending it. And, perhaps, the final one too” (Clasquin 2001: 112-113). Indeed, whilst I have identified the importance of insight laughter I recognise that laughter is not the final step, in chapters four and five I will explore how it is sometimes seen as necessary to go beyond our laughter in order to commit to changes in our thinking or behavior. As outlined above, just as Osho was drawn to the use of humour in the Zen tradition, as a means of acknowledging that making sense of the world is futile, meditation was also a technique that Osho embraced to help recognise the absurdity of life. In identifying an alignment between Osho and Zen Buddhism, it is worth noting the similarities between Osho’s approach and Julia Matthews and Robert Hattam’s claim that: “For the Zen teacher, the focus of their work with students is revealing the ‘cosmic joke’: but then unfortunately ‘we just don’t get it’, and so they require strategies that get under our guard, and humour is one of these” (Matthews & Hattam 2004: 12). Like Zen masters, Osho positions laughter as a technique, be it through kōans, jokes, or meditation. For Osho laughter offers the opportunity to see the absurdity of life: “*Meditation is not an experience, it is a realization*” (Osho 1995a: 314, original emphasis). This realization could be identified as insight.

Conclusion

In considering Osho and the Rajneesh Movement’s engagement with laughter it has been possible to demonstrate the distinctive quality of insight in (some forms of) laughter and to recognise the value of the non-serious in religious experience. Despite his eclectic and inconsistent approach, Osho’s distinctive (but not wholly unique) presentation of laughter as an essential feature of living a religious life has challenged the need to position religious figures as solemn and serious; identified the possibility of laughter to be harnessed as a technique through kōans, meditation and jokes; and has reinvigorated the potential of laughter in religious and cultural traditions more generally.

Whilst Osho may be positioned as a protagonist of insight laughter, and has proven to be a useful case study, there are some key issues which remain underdeveloped and relatively unexamined in his teachings. As such, he does not offer a full exemplification of my concept of insight laughter. Of particular concern is the absence of any critical engagement with the body and the oversight of the importance of the body in the creation of insight. Despite Osho's desire to reject the anti-body rhetoric of other religious traditions and to recentre the body in his philosophy and practices, as I have made clear, Osho does not fully recognise the importance of the body for laughter. Instead, he positions the body as a means to an end (namely enlightenment) and on some occasions Osho overlooks the body and its gendered nature entirely, instead offering cerebral depictions of laughter – something we will also encounter in feminist engagements with laughter in the next chapter.

My concept of insight laughter is dependent on the body. I argue that it is the embodiment of laughter that affects our thinking and so to reduce laughter to the cerebral is to overlook the value of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding. In order to address these concerns and the politics of the laughing body further, it is necessary to consider both the role of gender in the experience of laughter and also the effect that the ethics of the body has on the place of laughter in religious, ethical, and social contexts. Thus, in the next chapter I will undertake a critical engagement of the gendered experience of laughter in order to provide an understanding of insight on the cusp of women, emotion, and body.

CHAPTER FOUR

GENDER IN INSIGHT LAUGHTER

Throughout history the act of laughter has been gendered. By this I mean that the embodiment of laughter often differs as a result of the various expectations surrounding *how* women and men should laugh. As demonstrated in this thesis, the body is important for insight laughter because laughter is a physiological experience and it is the body that plays an important role in the creation of knowledge and understanding. Given this importance, it is surprising to find that the subject of gender and laughter is a relatively recent consideration. Rather than the act or experience of laughter being considered, scholarship has tended to focus on the gendering of humour and comedy to establish whether humour appreciation, comedic abilities, and the identity of joke-tellers and listeners are gendered (e.g. Palmer 1994: 68-78; Provine 2000: 26-35). Whilst these explorations offer a useful starting point, this chapter focuses on laughter as it is through the act of laughing (rather than a consideration of the object of laughter) that the body comes to the forefront and considerations of gender can be explored more fully.¹²¹ Indeed, laughter is an effective way of reading gender because cultural understandings of laughter operate at the intersection of women and the body.

Through the framework of embodied consciousness, my concept of insight laughter demonstrates how laughter can lead to insights, due to a shift from the peripheral to the central consciousness; it is the body and the embodied sensory apparatus that enables these new thoughts. In identifying the importance of the body for my concept of insight laughter, I want to consider whether there are different dynamics at play when embodiment is gendered. A consideration of the gendered bodily experience of laughter

¹²¹ I recognise that gender is a social and cultural construction, rather than relating solely to an individual being female or male, and that the correlation of laughter and the body opens up these wider questions of sexuality, identity, and gender. However, this is not the focus of this chapter. As such, when I am considering sex organs I will seek to use male and female and when I am referring to lived experiences I will use women and men.

will enable the importance of the body to be recognised and considered in relation to varied experiences of insight laughter. This consideration will be informed by an exploration of the wider place of men and women in society, and how views and inhibitions relating to the body have affected gendered experiences of laughter. This chapter will demonstrate how laughter can help us to rupture and amend our habitual thinking, in order to achieve new insights. However, it will also highlight that, whilst laughter can help bring us towards new truths and realities, we cannot laugh indefinitely; we must go beyond our laughter and take action in order to bring about change. Indeed, I argue that my concept of insight laughter can be understood as a means of breaking habitual thinking and, as such, it offers the opportunity to amend habitual behaviour. However, these behavioural changes require effort and action.

As with so many comments on laughter, considerations of gender and laughter are often fragmented and brief, particularly in relation to the experience of laughter for women. However, this chapter will seek to go beyond offering a brief history and instead will identify a number of recurring themes that will be explored in more detail. In doing so, this chapter will also build on the consideration of laughter and religion, as found in chapter three. The framework of this current chapter will consist of three parts. First, I will explore examples of the act of *anasyrma* (exposing the female sexual form through the lifting of skirts) that leads to laughter in various myths, as well as in the American Goddess movement, in order to argue that not only is the laughing body central to insight laughter but that when the female form is viewed as a body, beyond the limits of the pornographic or erotic gaze, it can be an important stimulus for insight laughter to occur. Second, I will offer a consideration of the way in which women's laughter has found itself treated with suspicion, because of the perception that it emerges from an unruly body and an uncontrolled mind. A critical analysis of the historical records of the Salem Witch Trials will consider how the embodiment of emotions, through displays such as laughter, was essential in highlighting the presence of malevolent forces within women accused of witchcraft. Third, I will explore the increasing use of the motif of laughter in the works of French poststructuralist feminists, and beyond, suggesting that laughter is used as a feminist strategy in four distinct ways: resistance, disruption, revolution, and creation. The motif of laughter in feminist works is, to date, relatively underdeveloped and unconsidered. I will argue that there is a distinct form of feminist laughter, that is

essentially a laugh of insight – even if it is not explicitly positioned as such by the authors. Given the centrality of the body for my concept of insight laughter, it is important to note that a challenge to the positioning of feminist laughter as a form of insight laughter is its predominant focus on the text as a space and the discursive disruptions of this space. As many of the feminist authors are emerging from poststructuralist discourse analysis, their consideration of laughter is often framed within an analysis of texts. Whilst I will consider how feminist scholars have adopted laughter as a feminist strategy, I will argue that their use of laughter needs to have a greater focus on the body. It is the recognition of the embodiment of laughter that enables us to get to the heart of the cultural framework of laughter and provide an understanding of insight on the cusp of women, emotion, and body.

I have chosen these (three) examples because they are each indicative of laughter at the site of the female body and offer revealing accounts of the presence of insight laughter. As noted previously, in this thesis I have sought to consider marginalised voices. In this chapter, I have chosen to focus on the laughter of women precisely because they have been overlooked in previous considerations of laughter. However, it must be recognised that identifying the (real) reason for someone's laughter, particularly the laughs from history that have tended to be overlooked, is a challenge. Despite this, I believe it is important to reflect on these forgotten histories and voices because they provide powerful records of the intersection of women, their bodies, and their laughter; an intersection of themes that are all marginalised and neglected through the patriarchy. Moreover, in light of the importance of the body, as has been evidenced in this thesis, each section will ultimately contribute to a deeper understanding of insight laughter and works towards answering the following questions: does gender affect the experience of (insight) laughter? Can the body of another offer a means of gaining insight through laughter? Has the union of laughter and sex affected the experience and recognition of insight laughter? Do inhibitions regarding the body effect the perception that laughter should be embraced as an effective technique for achieving insight or be silenced?

Laughter and Sex

Sexual Joking and Skirt-Raising Laughter

Women are frequently positioned as being the reluctant object of men's jokes (Willett, Willet & Sherman 2012: 217) and, whilst this is often the case, there are also occasions when women choose to provoke laughter by making themselves the object of it. In the following section, I will consider a particular motif that can be found in Egyptian, Japanese, and Greek myths, that centres on women using their bodies to cause others to laugh. I will argue that the laughter they intend to provoke is one of insight. The women's behaviour in moments of seriousness shocks the other figure(s). This shock helps to release the build-up of tension and their laughter could be understood as leading to a shift in consciousness that results in instantaneous insight. The motif in question is the unexpected revealing of the female form by both women and goddesses through the lifting of their skirts to expose their vulvas. The act of *anasyrma* refers to the exposing of the female genitals through the lifting of skirts.¹²² Whilst there are examples of men exposing themselves, these acts are not generally understood to be *anasyrma*, instead they tend to be interpreted as acts of abusive, offensive, crude and uncultured behaviour. This contrasts with the female act that is generally positioned as unexpected, forbidden, and powerful, although sometimes shameful (Olender 1990: 99; Dexter & Mair 2010: 125; Suter 2015: 21-22). Thus, there is a different politics of the body at play; the exposure by men is an abuse of power, whereas the exposure of women is a subversion of power. *Anasyrma* is found throughout history and across the globe in various rituals,¹²³ statues/artwork,¹²⁴ and stories.¹²⁵ Often *anasyrma* is positioned as either an apotropaic

¹²² For an overview of the history of *anasyrma* see for example: Blackledge 2004 and Dexter & Mair 2010.

¹²³ For example, in Africa, the Ihanzu have fertility rites that include obscene joke-telling and women dancing nude (Dexter & Mair 2010: 38) and accounts of similar rituals are also found in Italy before the twelfth century (Blackledge 2004: 11).

¹²⁴ One example are the various statues of a woman with no head, who instead have a face in the place of her groin, that were unearthed in Turkey and believed to be representative of the mythical figure of Baubo (Elder 1996: 277-279; Blackledge 2004: 26-28; see Fig.4.). Another example, is the figurines of the Sheelana-gigs, figurines of women displaying their genitalia, who can still be found in Medieval architecture, such as some churches in England and Ireland (Elder 1996: 320-323; Kelly 2006: 124-137; Blackledge 2004: 29-33; see Fig.5.).

¹²⁵ Three myths that include *anasyrma* that leads to laughter will be explored in more detail in this chapter.

device to scare away evil spirits¹²⁶ and/or the enemy,¹²⁷ or as a fertility rite.¹²⁸ However, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus solely on a few existing examples of the acts of anasyrma that lead to (insight) laughter.

Each of the three myths that will be considered (*The Contendings of Horus and Seth*; *The Myth of the Rock Cave*; and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*) are short, with only a few lines devoted to the act of anasyrma and the proceeding laughter. Despite their brevity, the texts are complex and raise questions of authority, power dynamics, subjectivity, politics, the body, the status of women, the agency of women, and the nature of the laughter. Previous considerations of these three myths have tended to emerge from discussions on the history of anasyrma (Dexter & Mair 2010; Brownie 2016), the iconography of the vagina (Ardener 1987; Blackledge 2004), or during an analysis of the myth as a whole, as the act of anasyrma is often just a few lines/verses (Bleeker 1973; Matsumae 1980; Olender 1990; Breen & Teeuwen 2010; Suter 2015). Due to this, the focus of the analysis is often placed on the purported power of the vulva, alongside questions regarding the reasons for this act, and a supposition of the erotic nature of the anasyrma; the resulting laughter is often acknowledged but left relatively unconsidered. However, there are some exceptions. Anasyrma that leads to laughter has been noted in various disciplines, such as religious studies (Gilhus 1997), science and healthcare (Blackledge 2004), and Egyptology (Morris 2007). In these three studies, the presence of laughter in these myths is recognised as offering various degrees of significance. For example, Ingvild Gilhus suggests that the act of anasyrma provides the opportunity for a release of tension through the “opening up of the female body” (Gilhus 1997: 35). For Gilhus, the women

¹²⁶ An example of the use of anasyrma as a means of scaring away evil spirits or demons can be found in a Japanese myth that describes two women being chased by a group of demons. A goddess sees their situation and advises the women to expose themselves. This is a great success; the demons fall about laughing and the women are able to escape (Morris 2007: 210). It is interesting to consider that the female’s nudity does not further their vulnerability but rather offers them the opportunity to escape. Similar stories can also be found in France and artwork by Charles Eisen depicts the devil recoiling in fear at the sight of a woman lifting her skirt (Blackledge 2004: 9).

¹²⁷ For example, Plutarch describes the Greek hero Bellerophon retreating in response to the women who raised their skirts directedly at him, rather than the men who pleaded with him not to take revenge (Plutarch, *Moralia* 248A-B). Likewise, in Ireland, there is the tale of Cú Chulainn who was abusing his power and he only stopped when the local women exposed themselves to him (Dexter & Mair 2010: 38-39). Also, again in Ireland, there is an account of feuding farmers who only retreat due to one of the female family members lifting up her skirt (Blackledge 2004: 10-11).

¹²⁸ For example, in Ancient Egypt, women would lift up their skirts to a sacred bull, known as the Apis, in order to increase its vitality (Elder 1996: 278; Blackledge 2004: 13-14; Morris 2007: 201).

who participate in anasyrma embody an erotic power that also has a regenerative and creative force. The laughter is an expression of a sexual response and Gilhus notes how the union of sexuality and laughter continued beyond the myths to become an important part of rituals and festivals that were devoted to figures such as Demeter (Gilhus 1997: 19, 34-35; see also Arthur 1994: 229; Elder 1996: 278). Catherine Blackledge agrees that the acts of anasyrma in these myths dispel the sombre mood that persists in the myths, as well as offering a reminder of female fertility and the cycles of life (Blackledge 2004: 19). Ellen Morris also identifies an erotic nature to the laughter that follows anasyrma; she seeks to demonstrate the narrative and etiological purposes of anasyrma in these myths suggesting that anasyrma “alluded to deeper truths and lessons that would have lost their force if pedantically explained” (Morris 2007: 207). For Morris, the laughter is an important literary device for moving the stories along swiftly whilst also offering a resolution. By building on the work of these authors, I intend to focus on the laughter that follows the act of anasyrma not only as a literary device but in order to argue that this laughter is insightful precisely because shifts in streams of consciousness (and thus insight) are linked to the body.

As noted above, the laughter that occurs in these myths is often positioned as being erotic in nature. Both Gilhus and Morris term it *erotic laughter*:

erotic laughter is a repeated motif. It is often triggered by an unexpected display of the naked female body, accompanying and often causing a dramatic turning point in a divine or/and human drama. Erotic laughter fights on the side of life against death, and inside a new beginning.

(Gilhus 1997: 19; see also Arthur 1994; Morris 2007)

Whilst I agree that the laughter results from the unexpected act of anasyrma and that the laughter plays an important role in creating a shift in events, I would challenge the use of the term “erotic laughter”. As highlighted above, acts of anasyrma were often treated not as acts of humour and frivolity but as acts of power, disrupting evil forces, and enhancing fertility. Although there is nudity prior to the laughter, the exposure of the breasts is unlikely to have been found sexual, or humorous, in light of their social function, and whilst the women’s sexual form may have been used to highlight that women have sexual desires, the actions of the women and deities are not intended to arouse sexual desire or excitement in that moment. Rather than being expressly erotic in nature, I believe that

the laughter is, in part, the result of the breaking a societal taboo. I recognise that the positioning of anasyrma as indicative of fertility is representative of a longer tradition of the goddess and the ideas of survival and renewal (e.g. Neuman 1963) and, in a sense, I am arguing that insight laughter births new ideas. However, I would also argue that there is an elevation of the female form as existing beyond sexuality and fertility. In the three myths that will be explored, the female body is imbued with insight that is released through laughter. The reader of these myths sees how laughter enables a realisation to occur, that was unable to be achieved through other (more serious) means. In each myth there is a build-up of tension, the act of anasyrma then provides a shock that disrupts the habitual mode of thinking of the figures who witness the exposure. This leads to a sudden release of the tension through their laughter. Ultimately, it is a momentary loss of control of the body and self through laughter, that offers the displacement of thought, and following the laughter each figure adopts, a new way of thinking and being. Indeed, the fact that – prior to the laughter – we see how serious methods are attempted by the other figures in the myths and these methods fail to achieve the intended outcomes, is indicative of my argument that we must look beyond serious means of achieving insight and recognise the value of non-serious and bodily means, such as laughter, in the creation of knowledge and understanding.

What is interesting in these scenarios is that these women *choose* to make themselves the object of laughter (this is also a feature of the feminist laughter that will be introduced later in this chapter). The classicist Helen King describes the act of anasyrma as: “spontaneous, frontal, temporary and directional, women deliberately aiming a gesture at a known target” (King 1986: 63).¹²⁹ The deliberateness and directedness of the act of anasyrma is indicative of the power dynamic, the women are in a position of control and power, their bodies are elevated beyond objects of sexual desire, and the knowledge they possess is offered to others through laughter. When these women and goddesses direct laughter at themselves through their own bodies, they are in control, they are in the

¹²⁹ Helen King (1986) offers a brief history of anasyrma as part of a wider consideration of Agnodike, a midwife who cut her hair and dressed as a man in order to study medicine and to be able to treat women whose modesty is said to have stopped them seeking medical attention from men – once trained she would lift up her clothes to the women in labour so they would accept medical assistance.

position of power, and they bring about not only the laughter but the insight that leads to a change in thought and events for the figures who laugh.

As the authors of each of these three myths were men (Foley 1994; Wentz 2003; Breen & Teewen 2010), it is necessary to consider whether this indicates anything about the way in which the women are positioned and what is intended to be the object of laughter in the stories. It could be argued that the women's role was simply to be the object of laughter, to be laughed at. However, in noting the ambiguity behind the intentions of the authors, I read the stories as women taking ownership of their bodies, and of inviting the laughter rather than being passive objects of laughter. Because they are proactive in its occurrence, I argue that they play an important role in enabling the figures in the myths to gain the insight through the laughter they provoke. As such, irrespective of the intention of the male authors, these are powerful stories that can be co-opted by feminism; the myths can take on a life and purpose of their own. The following section will outline the three mythical examples, alongside a contemporary non-fiction version, in order to consider how laughter at the physical unveiling of the female form can lead to insight.

First is the Egyptian tale: *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* (c1147-1143BCE). Here we see that the god Pre-Harakhti has taken offence at an insult that was directed at him and in response he took himself away, lay on his back, and sulked alone. Many attempts were made to bring Pre-Harakhti out of his bad mood but none succeeded. Then his daughter Hathor arrived and standing before her father, she lifted up her garments and exposed her "private parts", to which Pre-Harakhti laughed and ended his sulk.¹³⁰ To the contemporary reader, it may be quite surprising to consider Pre-Harakhti laughing in the face of his daughter's exposure; why would seeing his daughter's vulva make him laugh? Indeed, Morris asks: "First, why did it strike her father as funny? And second, what function does the action serve within the story as a whole?" (Morris 2007: 199). For the purposes of this thesis, I am interested in a variation of Morris' questions, namely: what can be learnt about the nature and effect of this laugh? Rather than answering this question in isolation, I will first offer an outline of two similar myths and consider them

¹³⁰ For a full account of this myth see Wentz 2003: 91-103.

together; it is not the individual myths that are of immediate importance but rather the recurring decision to use this motif of anasyrma as a means of instigating insight laughter: a laugh that leads to a new way of thinking.

Second is the Japanese Shinto *Myth of the Rock Cave*, found in the *Kojiki* (c712CE) and the *Nihongi* (720CE). Here we see a growing sibling rivalry between the sun goddess Amaterasu and her brother, the wind god Susanowo. Susanowo was wreaking havoc, destroying the work of his sister and even accidentally killing her maid. Tired, frustrated, and angered Amaterasu decided to retreat and hide in the mountains; her disappearance and thus the disappearance of the sun led to many calamities on earth and the gods and goddesses desperately attempted to bring her out of hiding, but none succeeded. As the gods and goddesses were all gathered nearby (except Amaterasu), the goddess Uzume exposed her breasts and pushed down her skirt to expose herself, causing the eight-hundred deities to laugh loudly. As she was expecting the world to be weeping in mourning of her absence, Amaterasu was confused by the sound of laughter and is said to have left her cave. Some accounts suggest she peered out of the cave and was reasoned with by the deities and others suggest her inquisitiveness led her to be tricked out of the cave.¹³¹ This myth differs slightly from the first, as it is not Amaterasu's own laughter that leads to a moment of insight and a change of events, but rather the laughter of the other deities at Uzume's exposure. The laughter of others prompted intrigue and, ultimately, a change in behaviour from Amaterasu.

The third version of the motif is found in the Greek *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (c7th BCE). Demeter is mourning the recent abduction of her daughter, Persephone, who has been taken to the underworld by Hades and, as a result, is not eating, drinking, or smiling. The hymn offers an account of Iambe,¹³² an old woman, telling obscene jokes which leads Demeter to laugh:

For a long time she sat voiceless with grief on the stool
and responded to no one with word or gesture.

¹³¹ For a full account of this myth see both the *Kojiki* (Philippi 1969: 81-85) and the *Nihongi* (Aston 1985: 38-51) which offer varying accounts.

¹³² The name Iambe echoes 'iambic', the poetic tradition of choice for satire and ritual obscenity (Foley 1994: 45; Olender 1990: 98).

Unsmiling, tasting neither food nor drink,
she sat wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter,
until knowing Iambe jested with her and
mocking with many a joke moved the holy goddess
to smile and laugh and keep a gracious heart —
Iambe, who later pleased her moods as well.

(Foley 1994: 12)

The secrets or insights that are offered to Demeter remain hidden from the reader of this myth; perhaps they are intended for divine and not human ears. Helene Foley suggests that Iambe is wise, maybe she is privy to secrets of the future, and she chooses to joke with Demeter (Foley 1994: 45). Perhaps, Iambe's wisdom recognises the potential of laughter, rather than reason, to change the impasse in this scene. Moreover, as the reader is offered no details on the content of the humorous stories or joke-telling, the reader is unable to laugh along with Iambe. Despite remaining unaware of the content, we can see that it is laughter that leads to the shift in mood, it is the laughter that leads Demeter to break her habitual thinking and leaves her with the opportunity to change her behaviour.

Later accounts of this story describe Baubo¹³³ (rather than Iambe) as drawing her robes to one side to expose herself, causing Demeter to laugh. Whilst it is generally accepted that Baubo exposed her vulva, some interpretations suggest that it is not Baubo's sexual form but inside her womb that is seen (Elder 1996: 278). Interestingly, the earliest accounts that have remained are found within the writings of two Christian authors who condemn the act of anasyrma; this makes interpreting the act through their condemning lens an additional challenge. First is Clement of Alexandria, who offers his own description of the myth and then states that he is quoting Orpheus:

Well, then (for I shall not refrain from the recital), Baubo having received Demeter hospitably, reaches to her a refreshing draught; and on her refusing it, not having any inclination to drink (for she was very sad), and Baubo having become annoyed, thinking herself slighted, uncovered her secret parts, and exhibited them to the goddess. Demeter is delighted at the sight, and takes, though with difficulty, the draught—pleased, I repeat, at the spectacle. These are the secret mysteries of the Athenians; these Orpheus records. I shall produce the very words of Orpheus, that you may have the great authority on the mysteries himself, as evidence for this piece of turpitude:

¹³³ The name Baubo is interpreted in various ways but is generally aligned with the female anatomy: 'vulva' (Foley 1994: 46), 'body cavity' or 'vagina' (Olender 1990: 98), "belly" or "womb" (Dexter & Mair 2010: 125).

“Having thus spoken, she drew aside her garments,
And showed all that shape of the body which it is improper to name, the growth
of puberty;
And with her own hand Baubo stripped herself under the breasts.
Blandly then the goddess laughed and laughed in her mind,
And received the glancing cup in which was the draught.”

(Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen* 2.21.4-7)

Second, is Arnobius of Sicca, who writes:

With these words she at the same time drew up her garments from the lowest *hem*,
And exposed to view an image of a face...
Being softened, lays aside for a little the sadness of her mind;
Thereafter she takes the cup in her hand, and laughing,
Drinks off the whole draught of cyceon with gladness.

(Arnobius, *The Seven Books of Arnobius Against the Heathen* 5.26)

Kirk Ormand notes that:

In the Homeric hymn, Iambe ‘exposes’ something that is normally kept secret verbally, by engaging in spoken obscenity. In the Orphic version, Baubo simply shows Demeter those parts that are normally hidden, physically exposing her ‘privates’. In both cases, the results are the same: Demeter laughs and lets go of her grief.

(Ormand 2015: 52)

If we consider Freud and his suggestion that we laugh following the release of tension that has built-up, as we suppress feelings and forbidden thoughts about taboo subjects such as sex, it could be argued that Demeter’s laugh results from a release of tension when Baubo reveals what is normally covered and taboo. Penny Siopis positions Baubo as the “personification of shame...[on] a keen knife edge between affirmation and negation, between assertive agency and vulnerable victimhood” (Siopis 2008: 146). However, perhaps Siopis is too reliant on the Christian accounts which condemn Baubo’s behaviour; rather than reading the anasyrma as shameful, I view it as a celebration of the power of the female form and as a deliberate, intentional, and assertive act by Baubo.

In the tale of Baubo, the reader is offered no detail on the nature of the laugh: how did Demeter laugh? What was the effect on her body? How is her laugh to be understood? George Elder interprets Demeter’s laugh as a belly laugh: “It is the ‘belly laugh’ that makes

the difference; and while the belly is part of our anatomy close to the genitals, it is also the place from which we claim that the deepest and best laughs come” (Elder 1996: 279). Identifying the proximity of the belly to the genitals is apt when considering the laughter that was provoked by anasyrma. Indeed, positioning Demeter’s laugh as a belly laugh, would suggest that Demeter’s laugh was sufficiently powerful to lead to a shift in consciousness and thus receive a jolt of insight.

The presence of laughter is explicitly written in these myths and so it is clear to the intended audience that laughter occurred. However, the reader is offered no detail on the nature of the laughter and so may not recognise why these figures laugh. The first assumption is often that the act of anasyrma is innately humorous, but as identified above anasyrma was often associated with acts of defiance, used as an apotropaic device, and understood to aid fertility; all serious matters that are not to be laughed at. Moreover, the suggestion that anasyrma is humorous may not align with the reader’s own perception of what is humorous, i.e. they may not find the act of women raising their skirts funny. So how is the intended audience meant to respond to these myths? Is the reader meant to laugh along with the characters? If so, are they laughing for the same reason? Or are they simply meant to recognise why the characters laugh, taking away some form of moral message? Indeed, the laugh of a mythical figure will be returned to later in this chapter when Hélène Cixous’ laughing Medusa will be considered as a means of feminist resistance.

The imagery of Baubo has become an important reference in philosophy and literature that considers the role of women, sexuality, and laughter. For example, in her exploration of laughter, Catherine Clément ([1975] 1996) introduces the tale of Baubo; though she explores the myth through an account offered by Sigmund Freud in his very brief notes on a patient titled, *A Mythological Parallel to a Visual Obsession* (1916), these notes also contain a doodle of Baubo by Freud.¹³⁴ We also know that Freud had a Baubo figurine in his possession, and this remains in the Freud Museum in London (Siopis 2008: 144; see

¹³⁴ Although not explicitly stated, Freud’s interest in Baubo may relate to his concept of the “uncanny”. Indeed, in her exploration of the uncanny within Freud, Diane Jonte-Pace notes the “confluence of maternity, mortality, and immortality, with life and death in the womb, with that ‘uncanny home’ that is simultaneously womb and tomb” (Jonte-Pace 2001: 146).

Fig.3. below). Clément cites Freud’s description of Baubo directly: “a woman’s body without head or breast, on whose belly a face is drawn; the lifted dress surrounds this sort of face like a crown of hair” (Freud 1916 cited in Cixous and Clément [1975] 1996: 33). This depiction of Baubo, with her vagina personified with a face, likely stems from the fifth century statues that were found at a temple for Demeter (see Blackledge 2004: 26-28 for more information on these statues). For Clément, Baubo represents the inversion of the female form. Indeed, prior to Clément and Freud, there are references to Baubo in the writing of Fredrich Nietzsche: “Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons. Perhaps her name is – to speak Greek – Baubo?” (Nietzsche [1887] 1974: 38). As such, we see how revealing truths through the female form leads to a reconfiguration of power that is recognised through the laughter that follows.



FIG. 3. *Figure of Baubo owned by Sigmund Freud.*
(Freud Museum 2018)



FIG. 4. *Baubo Figurine.*
(Wikimedia Commons 2021)

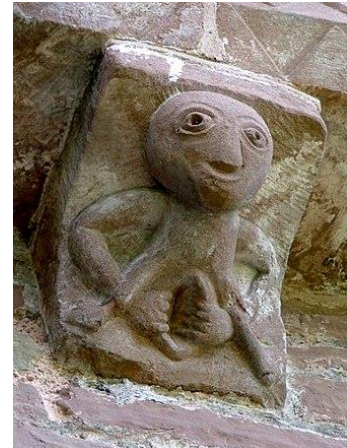


FIG. 5. *Sheela-na-gig carved on a church in Herefordshire, England.*
(Wikimedia Commons 2021)

In each of the myths, laughter redresses the balance and offers lightness in moments of disgruntlement, annoyance, and mourning. As a result, some such as Miriam Dexter and Victor Mair suggest that the purpose of anasyrma in these myths is simply for “emotional healing...one finds a powerful deity who is unhappy and who is healed by laughter” (Dexter & Mair 2010: 33 & 40). However, I would argue that there is a deeper complexity to these texts, the laughter offers more than a moment of light relief: the laughter not only breaks the sombre mood but the bodily act of laughter enables a moment of insight to occur and the figures experience a shift towards a new way of thinking. In each myth, a social shift is also taking place; the women subvert the power dynamic and they

demonstrate agency. As noted earlier by Helen King, the act of anasyrma is an intentional act, directed at an identified figure. For the purpose of these myths, anasyrma brings about a change through the jolt of laughter that results from the power of the women's bodies. The exposure of the female form is shocking and unexpected in these situations, it brings the viewing figures out of themselves and into the awareness of another and their body with the resulting laughter offering a jolt. Indeed, the laughter in these myths is essential; what would have become of the figures in each of the myths if they did not laugh?

Prior to the laughter in each of these myths, more serious methods of reason and rhetoric had been exhausted; it is the non-serious, namely the laughter, that ultimately affects events. The success of laughter on these occasions is demonstrative of my position that we should look beyond the serious and recognise the potential that exists in non-serious means, such as laughter, to bring about new insights. According to Maurice Olender and his consideration of the myth of Baubo: "effectiveness, for Baubo, is bound up with the abandonment of serious behaviour, and with her reduction to an obscene spectacle" (Olender 1990: 90). I disagree with the positioning of Baubo as "an obscene spectacle", as I instead view the unveiling of Baubo (as well as Hathor and Uzume) as an act of empowerment, primarily because of the intentionality. Moreover, I think it is necessary to exercise caution and to not assume that anasyrma is innately humorous because of the presence of nudity. Given the history of anasyrma, I suggest, it remains undetermined as to whether the act was intended to be humorous in these myths. Indeed, laughter need not always be a response to something funny; it can be a response to something surprising or shocking (as previously explored in relation to Osho in chapter three); in these myths anasyrma occurs as a means of breaking up societal norms and subverting power dynamics.

As noted earlier, I suggest that in each of the three myths, the woman or goddess who exposes herself chooses to do so, it is an expression of her own agency. More than this, I would propose that the women are also in control of the way in which they are looked at. By this I mean that their behaviour displaces the erotic gaze; they are not (primarily) subject to the male gaze of society but are instead empowered by the display of their own bodies that can be gazed upon in a de-eroticised way. The interpretations of authors such

as Gilhus and Morris seem to perceive this gaze as erotic, or perhaps even as a “pornographic gaze”: the female body is being objectified for the gratuitous pleasure of the viewer.¹³⁵ It is this position that leads eroticism to be read into the myths and the laughter that follows. In contrast to this, I wish to read the gaze as ‘illuminating’. By this I mean that, despite these women/goddess’ vulvas being openly on display, it is not for the sexual desire or gratification of the viewer but rather the transmission of insight. Their bodies are de-eroticised and used as a vehicle to cause laughter and ultimately unveil not only their bodies but a hidden truth in the laughter.

A similarity can be drawn here between, for example, the feminist group Femen who write political messages on their naked female bodies before confronting those in positions of power: “the truth [is] delivered by the body by means of nudity and meanings inscribed on it” (*Femen* 2020). For example, one protestor stood next to a waxwork of President Trump with the words: “Grab patriarchy by the balls!” in response to Trump’s own words: “Grab them [women] by the pussy!” (*The Guardian* 2017). Members of Femen politicise their bodies and thus transform the gaze with which their bodies are viewed; rather than a pornographic gaze their bodies are viewed as de-eroticised, politically active, and in opposition to patriarchy. Indeed, members of Femen are empowered through the revealing of their body. It should be noted that Femen’s messages are (often) not intended or perceived as humorous, though the shock factor of their acts may lead to a wry smile or a laugh of embarrassment due to the displacement of the male gaze and the shattering of societal expectations that is occurring.¹³⁶

Thus, there is a correlation between the chosen gaze and the writing of messages on and through women’s bodies. In these three myths the messages that are ‘written’ on

¹³⁵ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz notes that: “Gazing is enough to generate desire. That ‘the gaze’ and desire are intimately linked has been amply demonstrated by recent art and film critics. John Berger in his *Ways of Seeing* [1972] describes the relationship of the gaze, power, and heterosexual desire in European paintings of the nude. ‘Men act and women appear...Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.’” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994: 96, original emphasis). Again, in relation to cinema, Laura Mulvey has argued that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure” (Mulvey 1975: 11).

¹³⁶ For example, President Putin is seen smirking when confronted by a topless Femen protestor (*The Independent* 2013).

Hathor's, Uzume's, and Baubo's bodies are 'read' through the laughter. It is only through the laughter that the insight gained by Pre-Harakhti, Amaterasu, and Demeter, is possible – as we see, in the myths, attempts to reason with, and use rhetoric, fail to bring about a change. Indeed, the positioning of laughter as a means of writing on and through women's bodies will be returned to when I consider feminist laughter. Whilst the exposure is often incongruous with the serious situations the other figures (i.e. Pre-Harakhti, Amaterasu, and Demeter) find themselves in, it is not possible to fully understand why these stories show that exposing the female form leads to laughter. As the exposure of the female form violates social norms, and because the violation is viewed as non-threatening, anasyrma has been interpreted as humorous by some. As with much humour, there can be differences in what is deemed to be funny and so historical contexts can be particularly challenging to navigate in terms of identifying humour. Indeed, as I have noted, I remain unconvinced that the laughter that arises in these myths is a response to something funny. Instead, I argue that anasyrma is not an inherently humorous act (as indicated, often acts of anasyrma are perceived to be acts of power, to disrupt evil forces, and to enhance fertility). Rather, I suggest that the laughter results from the shock or surprise of women subverting the power dynamic and the disruption of the male order of power. In all three stories the exposure of the female form and the laughter that follows is a turning point in the story; the laughter leads the characters to recognise the futility of their sulking, hiding, and mourning. Morris notes how the laughter is used as a narrative device: "no long redemptive journeys are necessary, just a short moment of (en)lightenment" (Morris 2007: 207); thus, there is insight to be found in the laughter.

Although identifying the object or reason for laughter in a historical example is not fully possible, considering contemporary reactions to a similar event may offer some indication as to the reasons for the laughter. In her research into the religion of feminist witches and women in the American Goddess movement, Wendy Griffin describes a ritual she witnessed involving three mythopoeic images. One was the Virgin Mary: dressed in white and blue, she walked slowly around the altar, swirling her robes, and explaining that there is more to her than her purported virginal appearance:

‘The Church Fathers and their artists always dress me in blue and white. What they never tell you is that under my robes I wear a red petticoat,’ and she lifted her drape to her knees, revealing a bright red petticoat with flounces! People laughed. (Griffin 1995: 43)

Griffin notes that there was “immediate and spontaneous” laughter and so she spoke to some of the women to find out why they had laughed; they suggested that a moment of realisation occurred and that they laughed: “in recognition” (Griffin 1995: 43). This recognition, I claim, is evidence of insight laughter. The laughter provoked by the unveiling of the red petticoat led the spectators to recognise the social ordering of the desexed image of the Virgin Mary. As such, the patriarchal narrative was disrupted and something the spectators had not expected was revealed to them.¹³⁷

The Goddess movement is rooted in the female body and the priestess, who had ‘been’ Mary, suggested that:

I see many, many connections that can be made between the image of Mary...and the denigration of women. One of the things that they have done to Mary, they’ve taken away her sexuality...The small gesture of raising her robe was intended to uncover a new Virgin Mary. Her red petticoat was a metaphor that served to establish a link between the female body and the divine, in other words, between the material and the spiritual. Instead of denying the body, this image celebrated it...Thus “re-visioned,” she reclaimed her sexuality, her fertility, her autonomy, and her divinity.

(Griffin 1995: 44)

There was a message behind the priestess’ behaviour, the unveiling of the red petticoat allowed this message to be unveiled through laughter; this insightful laughter led the fellow attendees to recognise and see something they had previously not. It should be noted that the priestess offered no mention of the myths of Baubo, Uzume, or Hathor and their skirt-raising as influencing her choice of behaviour; perhaps it was merely coincidence or perhaps it was an unacknowledged inspiration. Regardless, the effect of a woman raising her skirt appears to have a lasting ability to raise laughter and unveil not only the female form but new truths, realities, and recognitions.

¹³⁷ See Naomi Goldenberg for an exploration of how Mary has been desexed in the Christian tradition (Goldenberg 1979: 75-78).

Although the three myths (*The Contendings of Horus and Seth*; *The Myth of the Rock Cave*; and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*) and the contemporary ritual of the American Goddess Movement involve the exposure of the female form, or at least the undergarments, they are not acts of sexual flirtation, incitement, or temptation and thus, I suggest, do not align with the erotic. Rather they offer moments of incongruity, surprise, perhaps foolishness, and ultimately disruption. It is always challenging to identify the (real) reason why someone laughs, and the identification of historical humour is even more challenging. For my thesis, identifying the thing that provokes laughter and questioning whether it is or is not humorous is not of the utmost importance; rather it is the act of laughing and its effects that is of concern and I have highlighted how it is through these laughs that truths, previously unrealised, are unveiled. Moreover, I suggest that this insight laughter was possible because of a positive and de-eroticised view of the female body. Whilst I recognise that there does not need to be a separation of the erotic from the sacred, I am seeking to argue that the erotic does not need to be read into the presence of nudity. As will be explored later in this thesis, when the female body is not causing laughter but, rather, laughing, it has often been associated with sexual temptation. However, the following section will explore the broader perception of the relationship of laughing women and sin. As a result, women's laughter was subject to suspicion, monitoring, and moderation, and the insight was sought to be veiled not uncovered.

Laughing at the Borders

Laughter Which Condemns

In contrast to the insight laughter that freely echoed through the myths and contemporary rituals considered above, the following section will focus on the insight laughter of women, specifically of accused witches, that was silenced. In this section I will argue that the laughter of women has been treated with suspicion and even fear, because of the insight it was recognised to possess. I will focus on a number of examples found

within the early modern period, more specifically within the Salem Witch Trials, that demonstrate the perceived dangers of these allegedly out of control laughing women.¹³⁸

Before considering the historical records, it is necessary to recognise that stereotypical and archetypal images of the witch remain prevalent in the contemporary imagination. The witch, and the hysteric, are often associated with laughter that is uncontrolled and seemingly dangerous: the witch cackles as she flies into the night sky, either having caused or prior to causing some harm or mischief to others, and the hysteric laughs unrestrained and for seemingly no reason. As a result, descriptions of a witch's laugh are often accompanied by an adjective to ensure the audience is aware of their wicked, terrifying, malevolent nature, or alternatively described as a cackle; the loud high-pitched laugh of the witch, that echoes throughout the night sky. Indeed, the image of the laughing witch continues to dominate fictional literature, television, and films; even when failing to look like a stereotypical witch with a broomstick, women who are villains are often attributed with their own malevolent laugh; consider, for example, figures in Disney films such as Cruella de Vil in *101 Dalmatians* or Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*. Although just two examples, these representations of women are commonly circulated to those in their developmental years and, thus, continue to perpetuate the stereotype. Catherine Clément even suggests that: “all laughter is allied with the monstrous” (Cixous & Clément [1975] 1996: 33); a theme that will be explored further in the section on feminist laughter later in this chapter.

As noted by Naomi Goldenberg, “[t]he word witch can conjure female carnality, deep emotion, imaginings that border on madness, the playfulness and vulnerability of infancy and old age, the perpetual birth and decay of the natural world” (Goldenberg 2004: 205). Perhaps, as a result of the strength of the term ‘witch’ it has found itself reappropriated in contemporary movements and Diane Purkiss notes the “extraordinary flexibility of the term ‘witch’ as a signifier within all feminist discourse. Constantly cast and recast...” (Purkiss 2013: 9). In addition, to this strength, “[w]itchy words can call to mind an oral aggressiveness that suggests a determined hunger and a ravenous desire for survival.

¹³⁸ I will, where appropriate, highlight similarities with the witch trials that took place across Europe and the rest of America.

Witches' wails can suggest excess, rage, majesty and crazy pride" (Goldenberg 2004: 210). Despite the range of ways in which witches can be understood and represented (be it historical, fictional, or contemporary) the "oral aggressiveness", identified by Goldenberg, appears to be a common feature.

Whilst the laughter of (accused) witches during the witch trials is not depicted as the stereotypical cackling, laughter was certainly believed to be an identifying feature of witches during the witch trials (Votmer 2016: 105; Kounine 2018: 54), and, as such, the laughter of these women was identified as a cause of concern. In this section, I will draw on examples from the Salem Witch Trials to suggest that women's laughter was feared because of the power and, ultimately, insight that it was believed to possess.

There is growing scholarship exploring the presence of emotion during the witch trials; not only the emotion(s) of the accused witch but also the emotion(s) of the accuser and others involved in the trial (e.g. Kounine & Ostling 2016; Millar 2017; Kounine 2018). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the dominance of such emotions during the trials, the focus of this scholarship has been on considerations of fear, envy, lust, malice, and anger. Building on the research to date, I will consider the presence and occurrence of laughter in these trials, recognising its intersection with these emotions, particularly fear. Moreover, I will argue that part of the fear that surrounded the laughter of the accused witches is that they possessed an insight that others did not, that their laughter possessed and indicated insight.

All but one of the examples that will be considered include the laughter of women witches.¹³⁹ Although accused witches could be either women or men, approximately 78% of the witches who faced trial were women (Karlsen 1998: 47), and so most of the existing records are of the trials of women. As the focus of my thesis is on laughter, the records of most interest are the ones which explicitly mention the occurrence of laughter. Even if not often, I find it significant that there are explicit references to the laughter of the accused witches included in the records of their trials; particularly as there are

¹³⁹ The key case studies are all records of witch trials that include reference to laughter and that took place during 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts: Martha Corey, Susannah Martin, Abigail Somes, Alice Parker, and George Jacobs Sr.

suggestions that references to laughter were sometimes removed or reduced in frequency from the records.¹⁴⁰ From these records, two questions are of particular interest: is there a reason why the occurrence of laughter appears more prominently in the trials of women witches? Is there a distinction to be made between the laughing women and the laughing men witches? As has been identified previously, there are challenges in considering historical occurrences of laughter through textual sources; Isabelle Laskaris notes the: “difficulties of extracting emotion from legal records created by male elite actors...all recorded emotion can tell us about is ‘prevailing emotional norms’ and ‘representations of emotions’” (Laskaris 2019: 416). Whilst this is true, there is still something to be learnt by understanding both the emotional norms and the representations of such emotions from these records.

It was generally accepted, and accounted for in judicial handbooks, that the accused’s outward physicality and bodily displays of emotions during their trial were representative of their innocence or guilt: “the body must reveal the guilt through certain corporeal signs, like blanching or blushing, trembling or unsteadiness, *laughing* or staring” (Votmer 2016: 105, my emphasis; see also Kounine 2018: 54). As identified above, “elite male actors” (i.e. judges, examiners, and scribes) were responsible for interpreting the emotional displays of the women on trial. All emotional displays and none could be interpreted as evidence of diabolic influence and ultimately guilt. Whilst it is not solely the laugh that demarcates the witch, in positioning laughter as an identifier of a witch, Catherine Clément notes how the act of expulsion, whether laughter, words, tears, or even excrement, is perceived as the inscription of guilt on a woman’s body (Cixous & Clément [1975] 1996: 14-16). Indeed, both expulsion and the absence of it, can be viewed as evidence of guilt: “It is a perfect trap: laughing, not laughing, being gay, being sad, being convulsed – or no longer so, being indifferent: everything is the sign of the devil” (Cixous & Clément [1975] 1996: 17). Although there are clearly a variety of emotional displays that were interpreted as evidence of witchcraft, as indicated, I will solely be considering occurrences of laughter. Whilst men undoubtedly had a role to play in the condemnation of so many during the witch trials – they were the gatekeepers and

¹⁴⁰ For example, laughter is mentioned more frequently in the draft trial records of Susannah Martin than in the final version (Kahlas-Tarkka 2012: 66).

interpreters of events in the courtrooms – it must be noted that it was not solely men but also women who accused other women (Laskaris 2019: 419). This seems indicative of the fact that women are also part of patriarchal structures and often internalise them. Rita Voltmer suggests that the courtroom allows us to witness: “the intersection of the actual emotional community of the judges and interrogators with the imagined emotional community of the witches” (Voltmer 2016: 111). Indeed, “witch-trials often revolved around the *perceived* emotion of the witch” (Laskaris 2019: 420, original emphasis).

Karen Harvey, a cultural historian, notes that the early modern period “understood and experienced emotions as embodied: feelings, moods and desires were rooted in the physiology of the human body” (Harvey 2017: 165). This understanding of embodied emotion is particularly important for my own consideration of insight laughter; I drew on the works of William James (see chapter two) in order to claim that embodied consciousness enables insight laughter to occur. Thus, the rootedness of emotions in the physiology of the body is essential to consider. Laura Kounine explains that:

Interiority as well as exteriority had to be searched for ‘evidence’. This underlines an embodied view of subjectivity, where both mind (*Sinn*) and conscience (*Gewissen*), as well as physicality and comportment, worked in tandem...eventually either the body would betray the mind or the mind would betray the body.

(Kounine 2018: 54)

It is this searching of guilt through a reading of the emotional laughing body that can be seen in the accounts that follow.

In 1692 Martha Corey¹⁴¹ who had “a reputation of being a pious, intelligent but somewhat overbearing woman” was accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts (Kahlas-Tarkka 2012: 64). It was claimed that she dishonoured the name of God, and that when she pinched her fingers, or bit her lips, and thought of her victims, they felt as if they were being pinched and bitten. Initially Corey was deposed by two local men (Edward Putnum and Ezekiel Cheever) in her home. Upon their arrival, Corey is said to have greeted the men in a “smiling manner” stating (in original Old English) “I know what you are come

¹⁴¹ For full records of the trial of Martha Corey see: The Salem Witchcraft Papers No.038.

for you are come to talke with me about being a witch but I am none". The two deponents note that her demeanour left them feeling disconcerted. Corey was said to answer in little detail but "seemed to smile at it as if shee [sic] had showed us a pretty trick". Whilst she denied causing any harm to others and offered to proclaim her faith publicly, her purportedly non-serious attitude, to what was deemed a very serious matter, was found to be not only unsettling by the men who deposed her but also evidence of her alliance with the devil. During her trial, Corey continued to plead her innocence but when she would not be listened to by the examiner, she began openly laughing at the accusations that were made against her: "She laught & denyed it...She laught...She laught again". The examiners, it seems, were maddened by her laughter: "When Mr Hathorn askt her about it she laught...Is it a laughing matter to see these afflicted persons?". Ultimately Corey's accusers believed she was in league with the devil and her laughter was further evidence of her moral corruption. This is indicative of the difficulty of establishing the nature of laughter and smiling. In fact, laughter can be both a contextual response and have the potential to lead to insight. The consequence, whilst not solely the result of her laughter, was execution. As will be explored in the final section of this chapter, women's laughter has a tendency to become associated with the consequence of death.

Beginning with her deposition, it is clear that not only laughing but smiling was evidence of the evil within;¹⁴² Corey's smile was the first embodiment of her guilt and the laughter that followed in her trial offered further support for the allegations of witchcraft. However, beyond reading her laughter as evidence of guilt, her laughter could be considered an act of resistance. In the context of the trial, her laughter – as demonstrated by the response of the examiners – was disruptive. Corey's laughter appears to be an attempt to highlight the absurdity and futility of her situation. As a result, there is a transgressive nature to Corey's laugh, it had the potential to undermine the pursuit of the allegations of witchcraft (not just in relation to her own trial but that of others) and thus the potential to weaken the community's normative hold over its members. However, no

¹⁴² Similarly, in Württemberg, Germany, records show that Anna Müller was described as smiling when she was faced with allegations of witchcraft: "The arrested woman presents herself as fresh, without tears, not once has a single tear fallen from her eyes, the majority of the time [she] shows herself with a smiling face..." (Kounine 2018: 60). As in the case of Corey, Müller's smile and general attitude of obduracy, was positioned as indicative that "she was not wholly innocent" and it "could only be read as an evil sign" (Kounine 2018: 55 & 84).

one laughed *with* Corey. Had others laughed, they may have experienced a laugh of insight that had the potential to break their habitual thinking and derail the trial. Instead, Corey's laughter was feared; I suggest that it – at least in part – was because Corey had insight that others did not; her laughter was interpreted as evidence of malevolent knowledge.

Corey was not the only accused witch to be described as laughing during her trial. Just a few months later, Susannah Martin,¹⁴³ who was described as a “difficult person” was accused of witchcraft (Gammon 2018: 16). The court records describe how crowds had gathered and that when Martin arrived many who were present began to experience fits. Martin is described as laughing at this display. However, her laughter, which was a dismissal of the judgment, angered the examiners:

Mercy Lewes pointed to her & fell into a little fit. Ann Putman threw her Glove in a fit at her.

The examinant laught.

“What do you laugh at it?”

“Well I may at such folly.”

“Is this folly? The hurt of these persons.”

“I never hurt man woman or child.”

Mercy Lewes cryed out “she hath hurt me a great many times, & pulls me down”. Then Martin laught againe.

Martin's laugh seems, at least in part, to be mocking and ridiculing the behaviour of the accusers. Despite the beliefs of the accusers Martin was in a powerless situation; her only weapon was her laughter. Much like Corey's earlier laugh, Martin's laughter is also an attempt to highlight the folly and yet severity of her situation. The historian C.L. Gammon suggests that Martin had: “the audacity to find humour in the stupidity and folly of her accusers” (Gammon 2018: 84, see also 1-2, 17). Whilst I agree that Martin was certainly identifying the folly of her accusers and the wider process of her trial, I do not think that Martin is finding humour in her situation, far from it. I would argue that her insight laughter is not a response to something humorous; rather it was likely a mixture of emotions such as fear, desperation, resignation, and the hope that someone else would recognise in her laughter the folly of her situation. Her claim: “Well I may at such folly”

¹⁴³ For full records of the trial of Susannah Martin see: The Salem Witchcraft Papers No.092.

could be read as “Well *we all* may laugh at such folly”. Yet, just like Corey, no one laughed with Martin.

At the beginning of his trial, George Jacobs Sr.¹⁴⁴ – aged 81 he was one of the oldest to be accused – laughed when the judge advised him that he was facing accusations of witchcraft: “Jacobs laugh”. When asked why he laughed, Jacobs responded: “Because I am falsely accused”. This is the only occasion of laughter recorded during his trial, but what is most interesting is that Jacobs’ laughter does not seem to be read as indicative of his guilt nor does it anger the judge or examiners. Instead, it seems to offer confusion and require clarity, hence the judge asks why he laughs; here the laugh appears to be less disruptive and contain less power than the women witches who laugh. It should be noted that each of the records considered so far, state that the accused “laughs”. As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, the embodiment of laughter can vary greatly, as the records offer no detail on the embodiment of each laugh – despite it being of crucial importance – it could be suggested that Jacobs laughed differently from Corey and Martin. Perhaps Jacobs’ laugh was more of a short ‘ha’, whereas Corey and Martin’s laughter was all-encompassing, full bodied, and loud. But, even if this was true, why was Jacobs’ laughter not a cause for concern yet Corey’s smile was? Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the embodiment of the laughter disrupted gendered expectations of the time.

Just three days after Jacobs Sr., there was another laughing accused: Abigail Somes.¹⁴⁵ Like George Jacobs Sr. when she was faced with the accusations of witchcraft, she is described as laughing. Somes “instead of bewailing itt, Broke forth into Laughter”. Somes’ reaction was interpreted as inappropriate; the suggestion being that someone who is not guilty of witchcraft would demonstrate great sorrow at such an accusation. This reading of Somes’ laughter differs from Jacobs’ laughter, which is considered to be puzzling but not indicative of his guilt by the judge and scribe. Unlike Corey and Martin, Somes’ laughter was not seen as one of resistance or obstinance, but rather one imbued with the power to cause harm. It is said that throughout her trial: “she would often Laugh, upon which Laughing the afflicted person would presently fal into a fit”. It was only when

¹⁴⁴ For full records of the trial of George Jacobs Senior see: The Salem Witchcraft Papers No.078.

¹⁴⁵ For full records of the trial of Abigail Somes see: The Salem Witchcraft Papers No.122.

Somes' laughter stopped that the fits of those around her also ceased. There are, it seems, two varieties of laughter by Somes. First, is a laugh of disbelief, like Jacobs, but her laughter was understood to be inappropriate and thus indicative of her guilt. Second, her laughter is perceived as acting as a vehicle of harm against others, causing them to fit and feel fearful.

The final example is Alice Parker,¹⁴⁶ whilst she did not laugh during her trial, it was a moment of allegedly inappropriate laughter that, in part, led to accusations of her witchcraft. One day Parker was found outside in the snow and due to the cold conditions, she was presumed dead, as she was being taken out of her wet clothes and put to bed it was said that: "She rises up & laughs in o'r faces". Again, we see how the incongruity of a woman's laughter is perceived as indicative of malevolent forces at work.¹⁴⁷

Thus, it can be argued that the inclusion of the laughter in the court records indicates its importance as a means of evidencing the allegations of witchcraft. As noted previously, the records of the trials were made by men in positions of power, who sought narratives that supported their findings of guilt. The accused's laughter is portrayed as one such form of evidence. The presence of laughter within the trials is deemed to be incongruous with the serious and potentially deadly context. Indeed, it is the apparent inappropriateness of much of the laughter (whether in response to allegations of witchcraft, seeing their accusers suffer fits, or being found in the snow) that raised suspicions regarding the accused. Moreover, their laughter was believed to be imbued with the power to disconcert, disrupt, ridicule, and even inflict harm. However, the laughter of these women is also evidence of their knowledge of the futility and folly of

¹⁴⁶ For full records of the trial of Alice Parker see: The Salem Witchcraft Papers No.097.

¹⁴⁷ Similarities can be drawn with the laughter of Elizabeth Knapp (an accused witch in New England, in 1671), who was believed to exhibit signs of possession such as laughter. It was reported that she: "would burst forth into immoderate & extravagant laughter, in such wise [ed. - ways], as some times shee fell onto the ground with... shee was in a strange frame, (as was observed by divers [ed. - several]) sometimes weeping, sometimes laughing, & many foolish & apish gestures... doe mischiefe unto others; striking those that held her; spitting in their faces; & if at any time shee had done any harme or frightened them shee would laugh immediately...[the devil] hurried her into those violent (but shee saith feigned & forced) laughers..." (Willard 1883: 7, 9 & 17). Also, in 1692, in Connecticut, an unnamed French maidservant of Daniel Westcott, is described as experiencing fits and when receiving treatment, she burst into hysterical laughter (Carlson 1999: 50). In 1648, Wethersfield, Connecticut, Mary Johnson was accused of consorting with the devil, during her trial she admitted that her master sent her "into the Field, to drive out the Hogs that used to break into it, a Devil would scowre them out, and make her laugh to see how he feazed 'em about" (cited in Karlsen 1998: 22).

their situations; an awareness that whatever their behaviour or words during their trial their fate is essentially sealed.

The feminist author Catherine Clément highlights the fear that often surrounded the laugh of witches, and hysterics, and the recognition that the cause of the fear is in the union of the otherness of these women and their ability to disrupt through laughter. Both the witch and the hysteric are displaced within societies, positioned on the boundaries they find themselves both inside and outside society, both in breach of societal norms but also free from the expectations of other women to become wives and mothers (Gilbert [1975] 1996: xvi). However, the result of their displacement is that both figures face fates of confinement and/or death. The disruption and the resistance of the laughter of these accused witches is clear, despite being placed on trial and with execution a very real possibility, these women maintained a degree of agency over their own bodies; their laughter, and thus their bodies, could not be silenced, but they could be misread.

Perceptions of what makes a witch has varied throughout history. Indeed, sometimes the suggestion that a woman was 'too' intelligent could lead her to be accused of being a witch (Levy 1997: 5). Positioning the witch as a wise-woman enables her laugh to be considered in a new light, as a laugh of insight. The witches considered above are laughing at the absurdity of their situation. As a result, it would make sense that those who were not privy to their insight may feel belittled by this laugh and even fearful. However, their laughter was a means of shattering expectations in order to unveil the truth, not something to be feared. I suggest that the accused witches' laughter was imbued with this knowledge, of the folly of the witchcraft trials and their role within them, but because their laughter was interpreted as a sign of guilt and possession of the devil, no one laughed along with them. Had the reasoning for their laughter been recognised, the fates of these accused witches, and others, may have been very different. I wonder if it could be said that these laughing witches were ineffectual in their laugh of insight because no one laughed with them. Whilst it is possible to look back and recognise the disruption, resistance, and insight that was held within their laughter, because it was not recognised at the time this mitigates its success. Indeed, whilst the laughing women witches may have been ignored, in 1692, a man named Thomas Brattle wrote a letter openly mocking the folly of the charges of witchcraft against those in Salem. It was widely circulated and

when read by a local Governor led to changes in the methods used during the trials, namely intangible evidence was no longer acceptable, and, shortly after, the closure of the courts: “...certain is it, that the reasonable part of the world, when acquainted herewith, will laugh at the demonstration, and conclude that the said S. G. [Salem Gentlemen] are actually possessed, at least, with ignorance and folly” (Brattle [1692] 1914: 172). This confirms that the power and effect of the laughter can be impacted by the (gendered) body that is laughing and that laughter is not always able to disrupt existing societal power structures.

Laughter, Body, and Women

Laughing Like A Girl

Laughter has been, and at times continues to be, gendered. By this I mean that the expectations of how, when, and why women and men should laugh differ. As will be highlighted, many of these gendered expectations revolve around the bodily experience of laughter, the outward physicality and the sounds that are made. Manfred Pfister notes that “in many cultures the norms regulating socially acceptable laughter are in themselves gendered...there is a double standard of laughter at work in many societies, which in turn reflects a wider double standard for men and women” (Pfister 2002a: vi). This “socially acceptable” laughter is both embodied in the way women and men laugh and also in what it is acceptable for women and men to laugh at. This section will focus on the embodiment of laughter, and the importance of the bodily and emotional experience of (insight) laughter. It is important to note that recognising the distinction in gendered expectations of laughter, involves also recognising that the possibility for women to experience insight laughter may be unduly limited due to a restriction in their embodied experience of laughter.

Expectations regarding laughter have become bound in expectations of etiquette, rather than the expectations regarding religious decorum that dominated Christian societies. In considering the etiquette of laughter, feminist philosopher Emily Douglas (2015) suggests that laughter can be considered a significant phenomenon for feminists to analyse, precisely because it reveals things about power and control over women’s

bodies. Douglas situates her work in a consideration of the disciplinary function of emotions, normalizing certain behaviours and making bodies docile (see also Foucault [1975] 1977); she asks: “how does laughter interact with docility and femininity?” (Douglas 2015: 146). She posits that how we (are expected to) laugh is bound up in gendered embodiments: women should giggle quietly and restrain their bodies, whereas men are free to guffaw and slap their thighs (Douglas 2015: 147; see also Pfister 2002a: vi). Indeed, even the terms used to describe laughter have a gendered element: giggling, cackling and tittering are all terms associated with women’s laughter (or perhaps children).

Unfortunately, attempts to constrain and silence women’s ‘unruly’ laughter have not stopped. For example, in 2014 the deputy prime minister of Turkey, Bülent Arinc, stated that women must be moral and decent: “she should not laugh loudly in front of all the world and should preserve her decency at all times” (*The Guardian* 2014). There are other recent examples in America too: in 2015 a group of Black women on a train in Napa were escorted off the train for laughing too loudly; an apology from the train company and police was later offered (O’Neal 2015).¹⁴⁸ In 2017 a woman was arrested when she laughed during the confirmation hearings of Attorney General Jeff Sessions; charges were later dropped (Hennefeld 2017). This latter laughter could be positioned as a laugh of insight; the woman laughed in response to the claim that Sessions had a history of fair treatment of all Americans, despite a well-documented history of advocating for anti-immigration and anti-LGBTQI+ legislation and telling racist jokes. The laughter highlighted the ridiculousness of Session’s claim that he treats others fairly. Still, laughter not only brings about a disapproving glance from disconcerted passers-by who continue to believe women should be seen and not heard, but even by the full force of the law. Compare this desire to constrain women’s laughter with the desire for women to smile when out in public; in response to the frequency with which the request to “cheer up” and

¹⁴⁸ Concerns with the laughter of these women may be an intersection of gender and race; this raises questions regarding the fear that can surround the laughter of the oppressed in a society and the desire to quell this laughter. Whilst Jacqueline Bussie (2007) addresses the laughter of the oppressed, the racial experience of laughter is currently absent from scholarship.

“to smile more” is made to women, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, a street artist, began the campaign: ‘Stop Telling Women to Smile’.¹⁴⁹

Thus, the difference between gendered expectations about laughter is the freedom with which men can laugh and the restrictions that are placed on women’s laughter. Women’s laughter, when in public or in the presence of men, should be the right volume, the right tone, the right amount of bodily response. Despite the freedom with which laughter should occur to allow its full bodily expression, particularly in order to gain insight, societal, religious, and ethical expectations mean that control is often placed on the body during laughter. Though sometimes the laughter breaks through.

Although concerned with theatre performances, Lisa Colletta suggests that comedy helps us to make sense of the various roles that women perform in society, be that mother, daughter, friend, work colleague, lover (Colletta 2003: 12). The possibility of expressing laughter as a phenomenon that normalises certain behaviours and conceptualisations of what is socially permissible raises some interesting questions about gender. Indeed, the feminine personas (and often archetypes) are evident in the feminist laughter that will be explored later in this chapter.

Laughing Feminists: Fact or Fiction?

As noted above, just as the embodiment of laughter has been gendered throughout history, so too have expectations regarding senses of humour and comic abilities. Indeed, the perception of women as lacking a sense of humour and of being unfunny continues to be perpetuated. There are various reasons for this, but one example is the ‘role’ of women in humorous anecdotes, jokes, and comedy; a great deal of humour positions women as the butt of the joke and understandably many women do not desire to laugh at themselves in this context (Brosch 2002: 159). Although declining in Western society, historically there was the expectation of women to be at home and not frequenting bars and comedy shows (Sochen 1991: 12). In considering women’s place in society, Nancy Walker notes

¹⁴⁹ This campaign is ongoing and more information can be found on the website: www.stoptellingwomentosmile.com

that: “whenever men control women’s political, economic, and personal lives, humour that makes men the target must be shared in secret” (Walker 1991: 66). Thus, whilst women did/do engage in humour it is more frequently in the private sphere and in the absence of men. Moreover, records of women’s historical use of humour are found much less frequently (Bremmer & Roodenburg 1997b: 5). As a result of their purported lack of humour, women have often found themselves excluded from the (public) comic realm due to gendered assumptions about their suitability: the beliefs that women should be ladies and ladies do not laugh (Walker 1991: 59); the perception that ‘good’ girls will not understand the (often) sexual content of male jokes and therefore cannot engage in the laughter (Barreca 1991: 1-69); and the view that women are ‘nice’ so they will not enjoy the aggressive, satirical, and ridiculing nature of a lot of humour (Brosch 2002: 159).¹⁵⁰ However, these gendered expectations are changing. As women

acquired increased power, confidence, and autonomy, they dared to become funnier – in print and in public...the twentieth century feminist movement encouraged women to discover the comic tradition which they had long possessed and encouraged them to become the subjects of comedy, its creators, rather than merely the objects of humour.

(Finney 1994: 3)

It began to be recognised that women are more than “targets” of comedy, they are “agents and audiences” (Dickinson et al. 2013: xxxi). Regina Barreca suggests that “humor is a powerful way for women to redress the balance...feminine comedy doesn’t attack the powerless; it makes fun of the powerful” (Barreca 2013: xi). Perhaps it is for this reason that it is feared so much and attempts to suppress it are made.¹⁵¹

The perception of women as being unfunny and lacking a sense of humour is found not solely in the gendered assumptions within society but also within scholarship on the subject. Until relatively recently (many men) scholars of humour, laughter, and jokes

¹⁵⁰ Anecdotally I would like to add my own recent experience attending a conference on philosophy and comedy (November 2019) when I was told by a male academic attendee that “women aren’t funny because comedy is too aggressive and too confrontational for them...”

¹⁵¹ Although it is important to recognise the wider context in which women are able to explore the world of the comic, my argument does not rest in the realm of performance and the creation of humour, jokes, and comedy but rather with the effects of laughter, whether humorous or not. For literature on: women in stand-up comedy, performing art, and contemporary art, see for example: Barreca 1988; Finney 1994; Isaak 1996.

tended to perpetuate the view than humour belongs to the male domain and women's role is simply to be the butt of the joke (e.g. Freud [1905] 2002). Gail Finney notes that when men "have written about humour, laughter, and jokes, they have meant *male* humour, laughter, and jokes" (Finney 1994: 1, my emphasis; see also Bremmer & Roodenburg 1997b: 5).

In much the same way that the myth that women are not, and cannot, be funny continues to persist, so too does the view that feminists are serious, dour, and humourless (Willett, Willet & Sherman 2012: 217). However, the feminist relationship with laughter is ambiguous (Parvulescu 2010: 18-19). On the one hand, feminists regularly face accusations of being humourless, lacking a sense of humour, and not getting the joke. Anca Parvulescu notes how the feminist is often accused of being: "[w]rapped in her seriousness, she has forgotten how to laugh" (Parvulescu 2010: 18). As a result of these preconceptions, Lydia Amir notes that some feminists try to highlight the fallacy of these depictions, whilst others agree with the assertion offering the caveat that feminine humour is only non-humorous when considered against dominant masculine standards of humour (Amir 2017: 124; see also Barreca 1988). Given that these allegations are deemed, or at least intended, to be hurtful, and the fact that attempts are made to overcome such stereotyping, is telling of the importance that contemporary society places on attributes such as having a sense of humour and being funny.

On the other hand, there is the active engagement of feminist authors with laughter, rather than humour.¹⁵² From Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, and Annie Leclerc, it has continued through the writings of feminist authors such as Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti and bell hooks.¹⁵³ Each of these writers draw on the motif of laughter as a means for women to address and respond to the patriarchal society. Thus, in the same way that feminists are subject to being the butt of the joke,

¹⁵² Whilst I recognise that there is a continuing and ever-growing engagement of women with humour and comedy in the realms of contemporary art, performing arts, and stand-up comedy (see footnote above), the authors identified here are not attempting to be funny but rather to engage with laughter in a new feminine way.

¹⁵³ The aim of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive list of all references to laughter within feminist authors, rather it will seek to identify the more in-depth considerations of laughter that demonstrate the value of laughter. However, the potential to consider additional feminist writers, such as Julia Kristeva, remains a potential avenue for future research.

feminists are attempting to reclaim laughter as a tool, and perhaps even a weapon, of their own. This use of laughter as a feminist strategy will be explored in the following subsection. Humour has, and continues to be, weaponised as a mode of resistance in times of political turmoil and oppression (e.g. Morreall 2009: 65-80), and of course the end goal of humour is often laughter. However, these feminist authors are not, necessarily, advocating for the use of humour, but rather the presence and use of laughter; their laughter could often be positioned as humourless as it is rarely directed at anything 'funny'.

The Motif of Laughter in French Feminism and Beyond

Laughter is a recurring motif in the writings of many feminist authors and it can be seen to emerge most strongly in the French poststructuralist movement. Simone de Beauvoir is one of the first to consider laughter in this context. She highlights how teenage girls are given the stereotype of constantly giggling and that this leads to the perception that their "light-heartedness...[demonstrates] a lack of decorum" (de Beauvoir [1949] 2015: 401, 421-422). She also notes that laughter is a frequent response to receiving sexual advances, seeing sexual organs, and having sex (de Beauvoir [1949] 2015: 216, 383, 421-422). Moreover, and in-keeping with the suggestion above, she states that women's suffering is a frequent feature in the jokes that men tell (de Beauvoir [1949] 2015: 514). As will be demonstrated, the motif of laughter is taken even further in the writings of: Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, Annie Leclerc, Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti and bell hooks.

Despite the importance of laughter, it must be acknowledged that the references to laughter within these texts are often brief, fragmentary, and at times underdeveloped; none of the authors were attempting to theorise laughter in its entirety. Perhaps, it is for these reasons that their feminine and feminist laughter has drawn little attention. Anca Parvulescu notes that: "a feminist 'theory of laughter' – imagining a feminism of laughter and a laughing feminism – still remains to be written" (Parvulescu 2005: 491). Indeed, in much the same way that women's laughter has been silenced throughout history, these feminist authors' commentaries on laughter have often been relegated to the footnotes. Exceptions to this are the works of Diane D. Davis (2000) and Anca Parvulescu (2010)

whose works on laughter draws attention to various feminist reflections on the subject. There is also some literature that has considered the presence of laughter in the works of an individual author, for example Hélène Cixous (Parkin 1997) and Judith Butler (Helbig 2009). These feminist authors recognise laughter to be more than a response to something funny, in fact the laughter in these texts is often a response to something that is not humorous, which shares parallels with my concept of insight laughter. This section seeks to highlight the breadth of their reflections on laughter and demonstrate why these feminist considerations of laughter should be taken seriously.

I believe that the presence of laughter across this breadth of feminist authors is notable, as it evidences support for the value of laughter, both as a means of insight but also as a feminist strategy for political comment and change. Whilst these authors advocate for laughter as a feminist strategy – in a variety of guises – they seem to overlook the insight this laughter can and does evoke. Perhaps, this results from the fact that feminist laughter is often positioned as discursive, and therefore the question and importance of the body for laughter is relatively unexplored. I believe that consideration of these authors gives access to the way laughter can be a mechanism of insight. Moreover, by exploring the role of the female body in this laughter, it takes us to the heart of the place and value of the embodiment of laughter and enables a consideration of emotion and the embodiment of laughter to take place. I will argue that these works support the view that we see something because of laughter; laughter can reveal what is previously hidden or unrecognised and we can gain insight.

As outlined above, often women's laughter has, historically, found itself suppressed, challenged, and criticised. Whilst these feminist authors seek to use laughter as a feminist strategy, perhaps inadvertently, they are giving voice to the laughter that has previously been silenced. Indeed, I suggest that the suppression of women's laughter was not simply an attempt to silence the laughter but also the accompanying insight and wisdom of the women who laughed. In addition to considering the silenced laughter of the past, it will also be necessary to consider why laughter was identified as important for women of the future by these authors; why laughter has been positioned as the embodiment of resistance, disruption, revolution, and creation.

The motif of laughter in feminist writings is varied and, whilst there is the occasional acknowledgement of each other's works (e.g. Butler 1999: 141 & Braidotti 1996: 356 both reference Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa' [1975] 1976), they tend to appear as standalone passages on laughter within much broader pieces of work and the feminist literary tradition. In considering this further it is necessary to ask: can it be said that there is 'feminist laughter'?¹⁵⁴ In the following sections, I will demonstrate that there is, and that feminist laughter has at its centre an overarching concern with change; a shift from the (historical and) present phallogocentric society to a future that enables the creation of new identities, discourses, and societal expectations. I will also argue that the motif of laughter is used as a means of bringing about this change and that it is used in four key ways: as a mode of resistance; as a mode of disruption; as a mode of revolution; and as a mode of creation. Moreover, the laughter in each of these four contexts often takes the form of a laugh of insight, even if it is not explicitly acknowledged as such by the authors: it is through these various laughs that the absurdity of the current phallogocentric world is unveiled; that habitual seriousness is disrupted; that laughter is re-engaged as a political emotion and action; and that the opportunity for the future feminine laugh of creation can emerge. Drawing on the works of the feminist authors identified above, I will address laughter in each of these contexts in further detail.

Before this analysis, I need to highlight a concern I have with the place of the body in much of the feminist writings on laughter. As has been identified in this chapter and will be returned to in chapter five, concerns regarding the laughter of women is often – at least to some degree – rooted in views and inhibitions that relate to the female body. The place of laughter in its historical contexts demonstrates a fundamental connection with the body and emotion. The body is not only inseparable from human experience, but also from laughter, as such, I believe it is surprising to find that the body is relatively overlooked within this feminist laughter, especially given the politics of the body in feminist literature.

¹⁵⁴ I ask this question in relation to the laughter found within the academic feminist tradition, though the same question has been asked by Gail Finney (1994) in relation to 'feminist' comedy.

Much feminist scholarship has sought to demonstrate “how culture can have a ‘direct grip’ on the body” (Schiebinger 2000: 2). Laughter offers the opportunity to explore this “grip” of culture on the body, it gives voice to women’s experiences of laughter and can demonstrate how women experience laughter differently from men. It could be argued that across the four feminist strategies of laughter that I have identified (resistance, disruption, revolution, and creation) the body is at the centre, as feminist laughter requires the freedom of the body to laugh unrestrained. In addition to the historical place of the female body for laughter, for my own thesis, the body is central to the concept of insight laughter.

Importantly, the (female) body is not fully integrated into the feminist authors’ explorations of laughter. The feminist laugh often appears to be a disembodied laugh; that is to say the laughter appears to be disconnected from the body. Indeed, the body is not considered in any depth, or sometimes even at all. While laughter is actively positioned as disrupting thought and even societal norms, the disruption to the female body is left unconsidered. However, it is important to recognise that poststructuralist feminism was still attempting to address the historical problem of women and the body by textualizing the body. Indeed, the feminist laughter could be said to have been positioned as a ‘discursive’ laugh rather than a laugh rooted in corporeality, i.e. it is not a physiological laugh that ruptures both body and mind but a laugh that ruptures from the page. Although a useful starting point, insight laughter requires going beyond a textual understanding of laughter, the body is required, as it is through the framework of embodied consciousness that insight laughter can occur.

There is some talk of the body, in the sense that laughter is the new language of the body and a mode of disruptive discourse, yet it seems to be disconnected from the physical body. Whilst Foucauldian discourse implies the body, in the textual analysis that is found within the selected feminist authors, the lived body is not fully engaged. The body is both there but not there; the imagery of laughing women is suggestive of laughing bodies but this remains an implicit assumption rather than an explicit presence. I want to build on this feminist discursive laughter but to go further by grounding it in the body, in a physical laugh of insight. The strategies of resistance, disruption, revolution, and creation that will be explored shortly echo a physical laugh, and yet perhaps the explicit absence of the

body reduces the force of the laugh. Much like Osho and his cerebral laughter, perhaps, the full force of the body is missed. These feminist writers are overlooking an opportunity to disrupt because they have not grasped the potential of the body to create disruption and play a role in the creation of knowledge and understanding.

Laughter as a Means of Feminine Resistance

Feminism, as a broad collection of political engagements in support of women's liberation, can be considered as a shift away from the historical, and present, ways of doing things and towards a new way and improved mode of being. Following the recognition of the need for change, the first step in this process is frequently positioned as a (feminine) laugh. The decision to identify laughter as an appropriate means for this first step is, I would suggest, due to the fact that it is often through this laughter that insights into the status quo and power relations are recognised. Of course, while I recognise there are other ways for this insight to be gained, this thesis is seeking to draw attention to the capacity of laughter for insight.

Luce Irigaray positions laughter as a means of both resistance and ultimately disruption of the dominant masculine discourse.¹⁵⁵ However, if women want to change anything, they first need to overcome the masculine language, habits, gender roles and expectations that they have become accustomed too: "If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. Begin the same stories all over again...Get out of their language...Don't be distracted by norms or habits" (Irigaray [1977] 1980: 69-70). Indeed, for Irigaray, laughter is essential in this process, as laughter enables women to identify the absurdity of phallogocentrism. In her writing, she highlights examples of these absurdities and repeatedly asks the reader: "Doesn't that make you laugh?" (Irigaray [1977] 1980: 71-72). This laughter is not a response to something funny or humorous, instead partaking in this laugh unveils absurdities, it is a laugh of insight.

¹⁵⁵ Hélène Cixous takes a similar position – as will be explored later in this chapter – as a result, literature on the motif of laughter in feminist writings often unites these two authors (overlooking Clément and others' contributions) as proponents of the same cause (e.g. Xu 1995; Perfetti 1998).

However, identifying the absurdities is not enough for Irigaray, action is required to find 'new' feminine voices. These voices are to be found within the body: "If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story" (Irigaray [1977] 1980: 76). Irigaray identifies an intimate relationship between the body and language; the phallogocentric discourse leads women to find themselves displaced from their own bodies and silenced. Irigaray wants women to reclaim and reform their language and identifies the centrality of the body for achieving this; yet she does not account for the embodiment of this laughter. If laughter is to act as a voice of the body what does it look and sound like? Laughter encompasses a spectrum of forms from a timid giggle to a full-bodied, stomach gripping, bellowing laugh. There is a power underlying this feminine laughter but Irigaray does not centre it *in* the body; it is a laughter that is felt but not seen or heard. Indeed, Irigaray seems to present laughter in accordance with patriarchal expectations that the physical manifestation of women's emotions will be suppressed.

Irigaray notes that "it is necessary to *become* a woman, a 'normal' one at that, whereas a man is a man from the outset...[and] enter into the *masquerade of femininity*" (Irigaray [1977] 1985: 134, original emphasis).¹⁵⁶ The opportunity to overcome both the silencing (or paralysis) and the necessity for masquerade for women is to be found within their own bodies:

I think the place where it could best be deciphered is in the gestural code of women's bodies. But, since their gestures are often paralyzed, or part of the masquerade, in effect, they are often difficult to 'read'. Except for what resists or subsists 'beyond'. In suffering, but also in women's laughter. And again: in what they 'dare' – do or say – when they are among themselves.

(Irigaray [1977] 1985: 134)

Thus, Irigaray positions laughter as a mode of resisting and disrupting the patriarchal society; it is an opportunity for women to transcend the masculine discourse, to go 'beyond'. Whilst Irigaray does not explore the physiological side of laughter in any detail, i.e. we do not know what this laugh looks or sounds like, she clearly positions laughter as

¹⁵⁶ See also Simone de Beauvoir's claim that: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir [1949] 2015: 249).

a gesture of the body. Here, Irigaray also identifies two opposite expressions: suffering (given the bodily emphasis, one may assume Irigaray is referring to cries of pain) and laughter; despite their difference both act as modes of bodily release.

Irigaray positions laughter as a release, not only in her writings, but when discussing her work as a psychiatrist. In an interview in 1990, Irigaray recalls discussions with her patients:

Many women believe they are 'frigid', and they are often told this is so. When a woman tells me that she is 'frigid', I laugh, and tell her I don't know what she means. She laughs too, which brings about a release, and above all a loss of guilt towards a 'frigidity' for which she feels responsible, and which means, first of all, that she has been moulded into models of sexual 'techniques' which do not at all correspond to her sexuality.

(Irigaray cited in Xu 1995: 83-84)

It is interesting to recognise, particularly in light of Irigaray's role as a psychiatrist, how her positioning of laughter as "bring[ing] about a release" echoes Freud and his *Relief Theory* of humour and laughter, though she does not explicitly acknowledge Freud's works. Here laughter acts as a strategy of recovering. Irigaray is highlighting that: "laughter can serve as an effective way of recovering the place of women's exploitation by phallogocentric discourse and disrupting the phallogocentric order" (Xu 1995: 84). Irigaray's decision to laugh *at* phallogocentric discourse ensures that laughter acts as a means of recognising and vocalising the inadequacies and untruth at its centre.

Indeed, perhaps even more forcefully, Annie Leclerc advocates for a laugh of ridicule directed *at* men. She identifies ridicule as a means of combatting the status quo and phallogocentrism, advising that women should: "deflate his [men's] values with the needle of ridicule" (Leclerc 1980: 79). Furthermore, she states that: "man's value has no value. My best proof: the laughter that takes hold of me when I observe him in those very areas where he wishes to be distinguished. And this is also my best weapon" (Leclerc 1980: 79). Leclerc's approach to laughter is different, as rather than identifying a new form of feminine laughter, she is seeking a reversal of fortunes; she is proposing to use ridicule as a tool against men, to make men the butt of the joke. As identified earlier, women's humour has often targeted men; whilst this humour often remained in the

private sphere, as a result of increased power, confidence, and autonomy this humour, or ridicule, has now entered the public sphere. The laughter that follows ridicule offers both the opportunity to resist and to be insightful; the laughter of ridicule helps to unveil things as they really are.

In keeping with Leclerc's advocacy for laughing women, and although it is not explicitly stated, Irigaray also appears to be advocating for women's freedom to laugh, to laugh a laugh unrestrained. Indeed, it is laughter in this unrestrained form that enables insight to be achieved. However, Irigaray highlights that women often find their bodily gestures either paralysed or forming part of a masquerade of the feminine (Irigaray [1977] 1985: 134). It is necessary to consider why Irigaray appears to exclude laughter from both of these fates, particularly in light of the gendering of laughter that has been explored in this chapter. I would suggest that the ambiguous nature of laughter enables it to belong to the realm of resistance as proposed by Irigaray (and Leclerc), but that this may be dependent on where it takes place, i.e. solely in the presence of women. It can also find itself constrained and/or used to placate the social order and gendered expectations of behaviour. In fact, women's laughter often contributes to the masquerade of femininity, when adopted as a tool to placate and flatter men in positions of power from a subservient position. Here we are reminded of the ambiguity of laughter; the nature of laughter is that it serves multiple purposes depending on how it is harnessed.

Laughter as a Means of Disrupting Phallogocentrism

Moving beyond the recognition for the need to change, and using laughter as a means of resistance, is both the opportunity to help others to see this need and to disrupt the status quo. Here the laughter disrupts, it ruptures thoughts and expectations; as a result, insight laughter is most explicitly present.

Hélène Cixous is often credited with bringing laughter to the forefront of feminism, as both laughter and humour have an important place in her works (Parkin 1997: 232; Bray

2004: 65; Parvulescu 2010: 102).¹⁵⁷ However, despite this acknowledgement, many analyses of Cixous' works devote only a few lines to the presence and purpose of her laughter (Santoro 2002: 87). Cixous' 1975 work: *Le Rire de la Méduse* (translated from French into English: *The Laugh of the Medusa* in 1976) has become synonymous with the motif of laughter and yet it only mentions laughter six times. For Cixous, laughter is a "feminist strategy" (Amir 2017: 124). It is within a discussion of the need for women to break free from the masculine narratives that dominate society and a rallying cry for women to stop listening to history and to adopt a new narrative, a new way of expressing themselves, a new feminine language, that we find laughter. There are, of course, echoes of Irigaray's laughter here. Cixous suggests that women are often described in terms of what they lack:¹⁵⁸

They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it is still going on. For the phallogocentric sublation is with us, and it's militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized our desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts!¹⁵⁹

(Cixous [1975] 1976: 885)

Here Cixous adopts laughter as a means of highlighting the absurdity of the situation; the absurdity of the dominant masculine narratives of society and the positioning of women as defined by their lack. This position is supported by Abigail Bray who suggests that the Medusa's laugh: "highlights the moment in the text when the maternal figure laughs at the absurdity of phallogocentric assumptions that women lack" (Bray 2004: 65). Cixous' textual analysis identifies and presents a knowing laugh.

Cixous introduces the myth of Medusa but, perhaps due to the notoriety of the myth, offers very little in terms of narrative, rather she states: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (Cixous [1975] 1976: 885). Given the plight of Medusa it would have been, perhaps even

¹⁵⁷ Although this chapter will focus on laughter, Cixous' fiction and theatre work is known for its humorous content (see Hall 2017).

¹⁵⁸ Although not Cixous' intention, here we are reminded of the view that women 'lack' a sense of humour.

¹⁵⁹ Whether intentional or not this declaration: "show them our sexts" appears to echo the exposure of the female form, through anasyrma, as found in the actions of Baubo, Hathor, and Uzume earlier in this chapter.

more, expected that Cixous would instead have chosen to depict her as crying or screaming, yet Cixous' decision to depict Medusa as laughing is indicative of the power she associates with (feminine) laughter. Unfortunately, Cixous offers no elaboration of the nature of this laugh: is it joyful, nervous, hopeful, disruptive, knowing, liberating, or even, as I am arguing, insightful? The question is left unanswered for the reader. There is undoubtedly an ambiguity to this laugh and yet it appears, I would suggest, to be a laugh of knowledge. Much like Osho encouraged his followers to recognise the absurdity of life and to laugh in the face of the cosmic joke, Cixous' Medusa has recognised the absurdity of life for women and encourages them to laugh in the face of their situation(s).

However, Parvulescu suggests that:

Medusa's story is not about Medusa. It is about us, about the 'trembling Perseuses' that we are, our faces always turned away from the face-to-face encounter with the other. Always-already petrified in our habitual seriousness, we do not need Perseus' mirror to neutralise Medusa's gaze; it is our gaze that needs work, and Medusa's laughter can help us.¹⁶⁰

(Parvulescu 2010: 107)

Here it could be suggested that the laugh of Medusa can disrupt the "habitual seriousness" of the reader. This is reminiscent of James' view that in order to escape our habitual thoughts we sometimes need something to assist with a shift in attention, to allow 'the stream of our thoughts' to flow in a different direction; here, once more, we find seriousness and habit is shifted with a laugh of insight. If Parvulescu's assertion is correct then, whilst the reader may not laugh upon reading the story, there is insight to be found within Medusa's laugh: Medusa's laugh is a knowing laugh, it unveils a truth previously hidden amongst the patriarchal narrative (of both the myth and history) and opens it up to women and their future narrative. This position suggests that there is insight to be found in another's laugh, and even a fictional laugh, as well as our own – something that was also recognised in the consideration of the three myths earlier in this chapter. Whilst this raises questions as to the necessity of the body for rupturing our thoughts through laughter, it demonstrates the ability to recognise insights that are found within laughter,

¹⁶⁰ In considering Medusa we witness a shift from the passive/female to the active/female. Perhaps it could be suggested that Medusa was (albeit unsuccessfully) seeking to weaponise the male gaze; the active gaze of desire for the female (even if monstrous) form was harnessed to lead to the downfall of man.

even if we do not laugh ourselves; we see the process of laughter leading to insight in another. Upon recognising the insight in Medusa's laugh, there is a supplementary call to action, to respond to the absurdity. For Cixous, the power of laughter is in its disruptive quality and she suggests that women can: "break up the 'truth' with laughter" (Cixous [1975] 1976: 888). The disruptive force of laughter on the body extends itself to become a disruptive force on reality; it shatters expectations and preconceptions of truth and the social order as we know it.

It is also interesting to note how Cixous unites Medusa's laughter with beauty, as more commonly laughter is united with ugliness, as a result of the distortion of the face and the crumpling of the body. Moreover, if Medusa is deemed to be a monster, the association of both beauty and laughter seems incongruous; depending on the nature of the laugh – for example an innocent giggle or a vengeful cackle – a beautiful, laughing monster may not appear as scary as first anticipated. Such is the ambiguity of the laughter that Miléna Santoro suggests that Medusa's laugh offers perspective: "laughter has both a freeing and a distancing effect. Such that what once seemed threatening is seen in its proper proportions" (Santoro 2002: 87). Here Medusa's laugh has a dual purpose. On the one hand Medusa is laughing at the absurdity of the masculine narrative, recognising that there is less to be feared than first assumed. On the other hand, the laughing Medusa is incongruous with the fear of the scary monster Perseus was due to face. Indeed, in an interview, Cixous notes that she: "think[s] that laughter is set off when we are not afraid..." (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997: 21-22). Cixous calls for women to "write through their bodies" (Cixous [1975] 1976: 886). I would position Medusa's laugh as the final reclamation of her own body, before it eventually kills her through her own petrification. Whilst Cixous highlights the power of Medusa's feminine laugh, the power is ultimately limited – it cannot change Medusa's fate. Indeed, her laugh would be a stark contrast with the stony silence that were to follow in the wake of her death.

The imagery of decapitation (although not explicit in Cixous' text but rather in the myth of Medusa) and the positioning of feminine laughter as a force to be reckoned with

continues in Cixous' later work, *Castration or Decapitation?*,¹⁶¹ that, once more, positions laughter as a feature of the interactions between women and men. Moreover, there seems to be an emerging theme that feminine laughter can have serious consequences; there is a risk to be taken in a woman's decision to laugh, the possibility of death, as we also saw earlier in relation to the witch trials.

Cixous introduces the Chinese story of the King of Wu and his concubines.¹⁶² The King of Wu had many concubines and having heard of Sun-tzu (a man renowned for training soldiers in the art of battle and author of *The Art of War*) sought his services to see whether it would be possible for his concubines to become soldiers. Sun-tzu accepts the request and commences drills with around 200 concubines. However, the women laugh at his every command; unable to control the women Sun-tzu declares that there will be severe consequences if they continue to ignore his commands. As the women continue to laugh, Sun-tzu decides to decapitate the King of Wu's two favourite concubines. Although disappointed the King of Wu accepts this, and the result of this was the ongoing silence and obedience of the remaining women. Cixous explains that

women have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them* – they lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons.

(Cixous [1976] 1981: 42-43, original emphasis)

The response to the perception of feminine disorder, as expressed through their laughter, is death: "It's a question of submitting feminine disorder, its laughter, its inability to take the drumbeats seriously, to the threat of decapitation" (Cixous [1976] 1981: 43). As noted by Lisa Perfetti: "Cixous' women do not simply refuse the general by saying 'no'. In laughing, they refuse to speak the general's language, and thus resist the discourse that constantly figure Woman as the inferior element of asymmetrical binarism – sun/moon, culture/nature, form/matter" (Perfetti 1998: 213). Thus, these women's laughter was an example of feminine discourse breaking out of the text in rebellion against the dominant masculine discourse.

¹⁶¹ This is a transcript of an interview from 1975, published in French in 1976 and translated into English in 1981.

¹⁶² For an account, see: Giles 2002: 7-8.

While Cixous explores the consequences of the laughter, highlights its power, the effect the mass laughter of women had on a single man, and ultimately its deadly consequences, little is known about the nature of these women's laughter. As a result, many questions emerge for the reader: what were the women laughing at? Indeed, does it matter why they laughed? Would that change the reading of the story? Why was their laughter so distressing for Sun-tzu? Was it the laughter or the disobedience? Was it because he was the object of women's laughter? Was it due to the fact that the laughter was en masse? Were the women aware of the power and effect of their laughter? Why is death deemed an appropriate response? Perhaps most importantly is the question: what is being portrayed through this laughter? (see also Parvulescu 2010: 102).

Although later than Cixous' writings, the outcome of the story is reminiscent of the phrase: "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them" (often attributed to Margaret Atwood).¹⁶³ There is an emerging correlation of women's laughter and death, whereas here and in Cixous' earlier text laughter leads to death, consider also the laughing witches that were introduced earlier, Cixous once described how she laughed (perhaps unexpectedly) in the face of death: "When I was little, I was told about the death of a cousin of my father, which happened shortly after that of my father in the same way: I burst out laughing. Death went through me and I laughed..." (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997: 26). Moreover, in her *La*, Cixous notes that "an irrepressible burst of laughter" can enable death to be escaped (cited in Santoro 2002: 87).

Cixous recognises the correlation that is often drawn between women and crying and instead offers laughter as a promise of hope for future generations of women:

culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be an endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a

¹⁶³ The origins of this phrase are unknown but it is often attributed to the author Margaret Atwood following a discussion she had with a male friend: "Why do men feel threatened by women?" I asked a male friend of mine...So this male friend of mine, who does by the way exist, conveniently entered into the following dialogue. 'I mean,' I said, 'men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, strangle better, and they have on the average a lot more money and power.' *'They're afraid women will laugh at them,'* he said. 'Undercut their world view.' Then I asked some women students in a quickie poetry seminar I was giving, 'Why do women feel threatened by men?' *'They're afraid of being killed,'* they said." (Atwood 1984: 413, my emphasis).

humour no one would expect to find in women-which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen. Laughter that shakes the last chapter of my text LA, 'she who laughs last.' And her first laugh is at herself.

(Cixous [1976] 1981: 55)

In addition to the promise of endless laughter, Cixous – again – identifies the disruptive effects of laughter, its ability to transgress boundaries. Perhaps unexpectedly, Cixous unites laughter and humour – whilst this union is not in and of itself unexpected as laughter and humour often go hand in hand – it is interesting as the laughter that Cixous has introduced to date does not appear to be humorous in nature. Indeed, the laughter in both the tale of Medusa and the concubines of the King of Wu end in the death of the women who laugh. Cixous is clear that feminine laughter, whilst powerful, can have severe, even deadly, consequences. Yet, for Cixous, the attribution of (a sense of) humour to women serves to distance women and men; she positions humour as belonging to the feminine, not masculine, domain. The concept of laughing at oneself is, perhaps, not new; yet it is the lens Cixous adopts that is different. Women are often expected to see themselves as the butt of the joke and to laugh, but here Cixous is advocating for women to reclaim their laughter, to *choose* to laugh at themselves. This position is reminiscent of Hathor, Uzume, and Baubo, who choose to reveal their bodies in order to provoke laughter.

What do these snippets of laughter offered by Cixous help us to understand? Well, first, it is the power that laughter is deemed to possess and even to be feared. Moreover, the strength of laughter appears to be enhanced by its use by women, whether individually in the case of Medusa or en masse in the case of the wives and concubines of the King of Wu. These examples have demonstrated the fear that men can experience when they believe that women are possessing an insight that they are not privy to. This goes beyond, but appears to be an extension of, their fear of not being 'in on the joke' to not 'being in on something much bigger' and, rather than attempting to understand, the response is to kill. Whilst Cixous recognises the dangers of laughter, it is positioned as a means of facilitating change, of challenging the dominant narratives. Laughter, here, is a tool of disruption and an expression of feminine insight.

The positioning of laughter as disruptive is also found with the works of Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (1994). During this text she identifies laughter (alongside a range of other examples such as sneezing, coughing, crying, poetry, music etc.) as a means of syncope:

an absence of the self. A 'cerebral eclipse', so similar to death that it is also called 'apparent death'; it resembles its model so closely that there is a risk of never recovering from it...At first there is a shock, a suppression: something gets lost, but no one says what is won.

(Clément 1994: 1-2)

In my concept of insight laughter, there is a recognition of "what is won", namely the new-found recognition or unveiling of reality through the shift in consciousness that occurs during the moment of laughter. In order for laughter to be considered a syncope it must be: "in bursts, unrelenting, an insatiable fire, until consciousness is extinguished. Uncontrollable laughter exhausts consciousness and makes it more tractable, more open to entering other landscapes" (Clément 1994: 7-8). Here Clément positions laughter as a means of opening up new possibilities, revealing new truths, previously unseen from a relaxed state; laughter enables new insights. This position is reminiscent of James who also believed that a relaxed body benefits the mind (see chapter two), and my own concept of insight laughter supports the view that insights can be achieved when the body and mind are not striving for new or deeper understandings.

Unlike the other feminist authors considered so far in this chapter, Clément demonstrates an awareness that laughter has been treated as an object of study for a number of philosophers: "A divine jolt, an acceptable spasm, accepted without distrust, laughter has concerned many philosophers; they sense, beyond its innocuous exterior, the seriousness of the thing" (Clément 1994: 8). Clément's positioning of laughter as "a divine jolt" supports my positioning of insight laughter as rupturing thoughts and seems to echo the laughter proposed by Osho, a laughter from beyond. Clément is also interested in Georges Bataille's comments on laughter and his claim that: "laughter is an act of knowledge...The principle is: if I laugh, the nature of things is laid bare, I understand it, it betrays itself" (Bataille cited by Clément 1994: 8). As noted in chapter one, much like many of the feminist considerations of laughter, Bataille also disassociates laughter from the body.

Given the influence of Michel Foucault on the French poststructuralist movement, it is perhaps surprising that his own references to laughter as a means of disruption (as identified in chapter one of this thesis) is largely ignored. It is only in the works of Judith Butler that this introduction is made. Butler's exploration of laughter is brief and occurs prior to her introduction of parody; she positions laughter as a means of shattering categories and binaries. She begins with a consideration of Foucault's laughter that occurs in response to comments regarding male and female homosexuality from the interviewer James O'Higgins. She notes that Foucault's response was to laugh, "suggested by the bracketing '[Laughs],' and he says, 'All I can do is explode with laughter'" (Butler 1999: 139-140). For Butler, this laugh is the result of hearing an example of the binary of "Same and Other" that he was trying to displace and suggests that Foucault's physical laugh echoes the literary laugh found within his preface to *The Order of Things* (Butler 1999: 140-141; see also chapter one of this thesis for a discussion of this passage). Butler notes that Foucault's shattering laughter shares similarities with Cixous' laughing Medusa that also "shatters the placid surface constituted by the petrifying gaze and which exposes the dialectic of Same and Other as taking place through the axis of sexual difference" (Butler 1999: 141). Here the laughter disrupts and subverts.

For Butler, gender is performative; gender is constituted by the acts or expression of gender, rather than existing in and of itself. Laughter can emerge in the recognition of this (gender) parody:

The loss of the sense of 'the normal', however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal', 'the original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realisation that all along the original was derived.

(Butler 1999: 189, original emphasis)

Thus, laughter expresses the recognition of this absurdity. Moreover, for Butler, "there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects" (Butler 1999: 200). As such, laughter disrupts and subverts in order to offer a moment of realisation, or insight.

Laughter as a Mode of Revolution

The laughter introduced so far, that is the laughter of resistance and the laughter of disruption, leads feminists to this next stage: the laughter of revolution. Indeed, it is in this laughing revolution proposed by the likes of Rosi Braidotti and bell hooks that seems to mark – at least to a degree – a shift from the discursive laughter of (at times) Irigaray, Cixous, and Clément to a more physiological laugh.

The call for laughter as a mode of feminist revolution appears powerfully in the works of Rosi Braidotti; she adopts the position that laughter should be adopted as a means of resistance against patriarchal structures. For Braidotti, laughter is an expression of and offers an opportunity to create a new (feminine) discourse, and, as such, it is an attitude within the feminist movement. Braidotti acknowledges that there is a tradition before her – she references Cixous and the comedy duo French and Saunders – that has highlighted parody, irony, and self-humour as essential for the feminist agenda's success. However, she suggests that contemporary feminists have adopted a “postmodernist gloom” and so she advocates for a return to the start of the women's movement, when: “joy and laughter were profound political emotions and statements” (Braidotti 1994: 167, 2011: 160).

For Braidotti, humour is essential to “pull through the ruptures and raptures of our times” (Braidotti 1996: 356) and she calls for feminists to “remember the subversive force of Dionysian laughter” (Braidotti 1994: 167, 1996: 356, 2011: 107, 160). According to Braidotti: “our collectively negotiated Dionysian laughter will indeed bury it once and for all, cyberfeminism needs to cultivate a culture of joy and affirmation” (Braidotti 1996: 356). For Braidotti the laugh of the collective is essential and this echoes Irigaray, who also highlighted the importance of women laughing together. In considering adopting this Dionysian laugh, the current (Apolline) order is disrupted. This laugh should contribute to a new (feminine) culture of joy: “the crisis of modernity is, for feminists, not a melancholy plunge into loss and decline but, rather, the joyful opening up of new possibilities” (Braidotti 1996: 350). Thus, Braidotti's engagement with laughter seems to differ from the authors above, in the sense that she is advocating for a women's movement that has “humour” and “merrymaking” at its core, in what seems to be a literal sense (Braidotti 1994: 166, 197, 1996: 356, 2011: 160). Whilst other scholars seem to

have a preoccupation with the relationship of laughter and death, Braidotti's laughter offers hope. Braidotti positions laughter as being present in the joy in the moment; it is positive and laughter is the required action for change.

In a similar vein to Braidotti, bell hooks notes the absence of humour in the feminist movement: "Feminism is one of those movements that nearly choked itself to death eliminating all possibility of humour, and of humorous and playful treatment of things that do have serious implications..." (hooks and Hall 2017: 55). Perhaps reason and rationality – even if only temporarily – have reached their limits and alternative non-serious approaches are now required. Like Braidotti, hooks also identifies humour as central to revolution. During an interview hooks stated that:

We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humour. Every time we see the left or any group trying to move forward politically in a radical way, when they're humourless, they fail. Humour is essential to the interactive balance that we need to deal with diversity and difference and the building of community.

(Yancy 2017: 15)

Although hooks' initial focus is the use of humour, humour is being harnessed in order to create laughter. Thus, because the humour is being used to prompt laughter, laughter remains central for revolution and the ultimate goal of social cohesion.

In revolution, laughter becomes a strategy for overcoming difference. As a result, hooks positions the absence of humour as a reason for the failure of so many revolutions. For hooks, it is the use of humour that leads to the act of laughing together that enables us to see beyond our differences:

Sharing humour is crucial to bonding across difference. Laughing together is always a way to intensify intimacy. When we can laugh at mistakes, laugh even in the midst of our tears, we affirm that what keeps us together is always more important than what separates us. Laughter often serves as a powerful intervention when the issues we are confronting are hard and painful. It offers a way to change the channel, to us 'chill' for a moment and really cool down, retuning to states of calmness that make communication possible. Shared laughter helps create the context for feelings of mutuality to emerge.

(hooks 2013: 148).

Whilst hooks recognises the need for change, she is seeking to avoid an 'us and them' approach, instead she is seeking to unite not only across genders but also across race, and identifies laughter as an important step in this process. She is advocating for laughing with each other, not at each other, in order to develop a sense of intimacy and cohesion. In acknowledging the errors of the past and the present, the revolutionary laughter leads us to a laugh of the future.

Laughter as a Mode of Creation

This laugh of the future is a laugh of creation. This 'new' laugh offers the promise of freedom from the constraints of not only past laughter, but past societal expectations. Laughter is generally recognised as being more frequent and more effective when it takes place in a group, as a collective. As a result, what we laugh at, when we laugh, who we laugh with, and where we laugh can act as a means of identifying insiders and outsiders; building group bonds but keeping others at a distance. Perhaps it is an (implicit) recognition of this that leads Irigaray to highlight the importance of women's discourse and laughter when they are together; when women are away from men, they are able to speak and act freely. Indeed, the power of laughter appears to increase when in a feminine space: "[b]esides, women among themselves begin by laughing. To escape from a pure and simple reversal of the masculine position means in any case not to forget to laugh" (Irigaray [1977] 1985: 163).

The purpose of laughter (alongside humour and comedy) is frequently identified as fun and frivolity and it is positioned as distinct from the serious and solemn contemplation that is required to gain knowledge and insight. However, insight laughter seeks to challenge these preconceptions; there can be learning in laughter, there can be insight in the non-serious. Indeed, for Irigaray, truth is not to be found in "seriousness" (Irigaray [1977] 1985: 163), but in laughter. Laughter is once more positioned, by Irigaray, as the first step towards recognising truth, and I would suggest to gaining insight: "Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression? *Isn't the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning?* Perhaps woman, and the sexual relation, transcend it 'first' in laughter?" (Irigaray [1977] 1985: 163, original emphasis). Thus, laughter has the ability

to transcend not only seriousness but the purported truth found within this masculine seriousness; to identify life not only as it really is but as it could be.

Whilst there is recognition of the power of laughter, as a mode of resistance, disruption, revolution, and creation, Irigaray identifies its limitations: “If you roar with laughter always, everywhere, we will never talk to each other. And we will continue to be violated by their words. Instead, let’s reappropriate our mouth and try to speak” (Irigaray [1977] 1980: 71). Indeed, the very physicality of laughter can arrest us, stops us in our tracks, immobilise the body. For Irigaray, laughter is the first step in recognising the absurdity of women’s realities in a patriarchal society, but women must move beyond this recognition and find their voices. Perhaps this advice from Irigaray is the implicit recognition of the ambiguity of laughter: on the one hand it can act as a mode of resistance, and on the other hand it can act as a mode of placation, i.e. the view that once we have laughed at something we no longer feel the need to take any action. As a result of the new understanding that is achieved in insight laughter, there is the potential for habitual thinking and behaviour to change. However, this potential for change must be acted upon, it requires effort, and will depend on the individual.

This ‘new’ laughter is perhaps most explicit in Cixous’ and Clément’s jointly authored text, *The Newly Born Woman*, where the ‘new’ woman is described as having “the voice of a body dancing, laughing, shrieking, crying” (Gilbert [1975] 1996: ix). This new woman is not silenced but free to laugh unrestrained. She is distinct from the historical and archetypal depictions of women as: mother, witch, hysteric. As explored above, Clément highlights the fear that often surrounded the laugh of witches and hysterics and the recognition that the cause of the fear is in the union of the otherness of these women and their ability to disrupt through laughter. Although archetypes and figures from the past can be problematic, by engaging with witches, Naomi Goldenberg notes that we can understand the intentions behind such an approach as

calling on the world to pay attention to the new words they want to say – to the words that will be sufficiently deep – in both a psychological and collective sense – that they will sound intoxicating, transformative, crazy, scary, and, above all, powerful.

(Goldenberg 2004: 203)

Thus, the perception of the witch as degenerate is rescued; her power to disrupt is embraced and the insight within her laughter recognised. Clément seeks to reclaim this disruptive historical laughter for use by the new women of the future.

Clément notes that when the witch laughs “it’s frightening – like Medusa’s laugh – petrifying and shattering constraint. There she is, facing us. Women-witches often laugh...” (Cixous & Clément [1975] 1996: 32). This echoes Cixous’ writings on Medusa and the face-to-face encounter with her laugh, as introduced earlier in this chapter: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (Cixous [1975] 1976: 885). Similarly, the laugh of the witch is positioned as disruptive, shattering. But was Medusa’s laugh really frightening? Or was Cixous mocking the fear with which Medusa was faced? Moreover, why is the laughter of the witch also positioned as something to be feared?

As we have seen in this chapter, just as Medusa and the wives of the King of Wu faced death following their laughter, the accused witch too faced death; though not solely for her laugh it remains a demonstration of the power of women, their bodies, and their laughter. Like Cixous, for Clément: “Laughter breaks up, breaks out, splashes over...It is the moment at which the woman crosses a dangerous line, the cultural demarcation beyond which she will find herself excluded” (Cixous & Clément [1975] 1996: 33). Her laughter leads her to be considered as other, because there is a transgressive nature to this laugh, it shatters societal expectations. Through this rupturing of thought truths are unveiled; perhaps it is this recognition that leads Cixous and Clément to be proponents of this feminine laugh; to position it as the laugh of the new woman.

Conclusion

The versatility of laughter means that it provides a space to identify and draw on a series of intersections. The embodiment of laughter enables us to get to the heart of the cultural framework of laughter and provides an understanding of insight on the cusp of women, emotion, and body. As such, this chapter has demonstrated that laughter can be an important feminist strategy: it can be a mode of resistance, disruption, revolution, and creation. More importantly for this thesis, it is through this feminist laughter, in its

various guises, that we find the presence of insight laughter – feminist laughter unveils the absurdity of the world and seeks to change it. It is also clear that women’s insight laughter is not the end, but the beginning; it is necessary to go beyond (and essentially stop) laughter eventually so that action can be taken.

Through a consideration of feminist laughter, this chapter has built on chapter three’s examination of the relationship of religion and laughter in order to demonstrate the need for the body to be recognised as a way to insight. Indeed, by considering gendered experiences of laughter, the body has once more been proven to be central to both enabling and experiencing insight laughter. Women’s experience of insight laughter has been brought to the forefront of this chapter, through a consideration of mythical, historical, contemporary, and the potential future of, women’s feminist laughter. The insight that is possessed and portrayed through this laughter has been demonstrated – like the insight laughter of religious experience in chapter three – to transcend boundaries and lead to new ways of thinking and being. In considering the differing experiences of insight laughter, it seems that insight laughter can be experienced by both men and women. However, due to societal expectations regarding the decorum and control of women’s bodies and fears regarding the (perception of) uncontrolled body, and thus mind, the bodily expression of women’s laughter has been subjected to more control. As such, this chapter has engaged with the intersection of women, their bodies, and their laughter (all of which have been marginalised by the patriarchy). Indeed, it is these inhibitions and fears that has led to the silencing of women’s laughter; though, if feminist laughter succeeds, it will sound aloud freely once more. However, such freedom will require understanding the ethical intersections of women, the body, and laughter and this will be the task of my final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

ETHICS IN INSIGHT LAUGHTER

This chapter seeks to explore the place of ethics in insight laughter. As a result of the privileging of the serious and rationality in ethics, there have been few considerations of the place of laughter in ethics (key exceptions are Zwart 1996 and Bussie 2007).¹⁶⁴ This chapter seeks to open up the questions and challenges about laughter and ethics, and offer a greater understanding of insight laughter: the specific form of laughter that creates a new thought or perception. As I have argued previously, insight laughter is a new thought or perception resulting from a shift in our streams of consciousness; the bodily act of laughter enables a shift in thinking from our peripheral consciousness to enter our central consciousness. In recognising the previous neglect of laughter in ethics and the specific relevance to insight, I seek to give laughter its rightful place and will demonstrate that laughter should be considered a viable means of ethical insight.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, this chapter offers a direct challenge to the Western philosophical hierarchy of knowledge and argues against the privileging of the mind and the rejection of the body in the creation of ethical knowledge and understanding. Throughout my thesis, the ethical features of insight laughter have been a key, but as yet unexamined, feature. It has been noted as explicitly missing from considerations of laughter as a means of religious experience and it provides an ethical force in the gendered experience of laughter. In order to demonstrate the value of the non-serious for ethical reflection, this chapter draws

¹⁶⁴ Much like my own approach, both authors have identified the potential of laughter to go beyond its association with humour. Hub Zwart advocates for the value of laughter in ethics by arguing that laughter can highlight the vulnerability of established morality and expose moral truths. For Zwart, laughter has an important place in ethics as it enables the unchallengeable to be challenged: “given the circumstances established morality cannot be criticized, [but] it can be ridiculed” (Zwart 1996: 10). Similarly, Jacqueline Bussie identifies the importance of laughter as a means of responding to societal power structures; laughter can be a means of disruption, exposure, and challenge. More specifically, Bussie suggests that: “the laughter of the oppressed functions as an invaluable means of ethical and theological resistance” (Bussie 2007: 4). I will draw on both of these scholars throughout this chapter; ultimately, I wish for my thesis to join these minority voices in identifying and advocating for the value of laughter in ethics.

¹⁶⁵ It is worth noting – given the concerns of this chapter – that generally, the term ‘insight’ is understood as being morally good, or at least morally neutral.

together the dimensions from earlier chapters and seeks to ensure that the contribution and value of insight laughter on ethical matters is fully considered.

There are two ways of thinking about ethics in relation to insight laughter.¹⁶⁶ First, there is the question of what it means to laugh ethically and the nature of inappropriate laughter. Second, whether laughter creates an ethical insight that can lead to changes in behaviour. It is this second question that is the main concern here, but I will approach both, because we need to understand one in relation to the other. As such, I will begin this chapter with a consideration of the ethics of (insight) laughter. When considering the ethics of laughter there are a number of key questions that arise: What is it acceptable to laugh at? Are there subjects that we cannot laugh at? What are the consequences of laughter? Who should we laugh with? Does context affect the appropriateness of laughter? Is the intention behind the laughter important? Does how we laugh matter? I will argue that any evaluation of the ethics of laughter must be three-fold, it must consider: the context, intention, and consequences of the laughter.¹⁶⁷

Having introduced key approaches to the ethics of laughter, I will then consider how an understanding of the ethics of the body can further inform an understanding of the ethics of laughter. There is an important oversight in many considerations of the ethics of laughter, namely that the negation of laughter has often been the result of wider ethical concerns regarding the body. As such, I will demonstrate how a key challenge to insight laughter results from the fact that the history and ethics of the body has dictated the ethics of laughter; the negation of the body has led to the negation of laughter and the failure to recognise the value of the body and laughter for insight. Given that ethics is often perceived to be predominately about controlled and controlling behaviour, a key question for this chapter is: how can losing control, through laughter, be compatible with

¹⁶⁶ I recognise that the terms ethics and morality are often used interchangeably (see Shaw 2015: 11-36 for an overview of the literature that explores the use of these terms). However, I am generally using the terms as follows: *ethics* can be understood as the science of morality and *morality* as the lived element, the practice of behaviour. As such, in this chapter I will be looking at the ethics of insight laughter but also considering moral aspects, i.e. looking at the moral dimensions of laughter.

¹⁶⁷ In this thesis I am not attempting to offer a wholly new and definitive ethics of laughter, indeed, variations of my proposed ethical evaluation exist in relation to humour. For example, Noël Carroll suggests: “when it comes to evaluating humour morally, it matters who is telling the joke, in what context, and with what intention” (Carroll 2014a: 243). What is distinct about my approach is that I will be focusing on the morality of the laughter, rather than the morality of the object of the laughter, i.e. the humour.

ethics? Indeed, the various concerns regarding laughter and the body are grounded in an underlying concern that a “bodily loosening”¹⁶⁸ takes place during laughter. By this, I mean that, during laughter, control of the body is lost, the body is no longer still and silent, but instead it is convulsing, experiencing restricted breathing, and expelling guttural noises. Alongside this bodily loosening, I would add, that there is also a “mind loosening”. This loosening of body and mind is evident when we laugh, which underlines my central concerns in this thesis. The changing of consciousness is demonstrated in this bodily loosening; it is as a result of the embodiment of laughter that there is a shift in consciousness through which insight can occur. As such, what I want to demonstrate in this chapter is that the body/mind loosening is not something to dismiss because it does not align with expectations of a controlled body and mind when engaging with ethics, but rather it is necessary to recognise and value the contribution laughter can make to ethics precisely because the body and mind are loosened. The body is central to insight laughter; the embodied experience of laughter is the link to the body, and it shows how laughter produces a different type of thought. In order to further evidence the challenge of the privileging of seriousness in ethical matters, I will offer a consideration of Immanuel Kant. Kant offers the opportunity to bring together questions of the body, laughter, and ethics. He provides a useful example for demonstrating how the privileging of the mind, over the body, in the creation of knowledge led to the explicit exclusion of laughter from the moral realm. Kant offers a useful means of assessing how views of the body have affected the perception of laughter, and thus, the rejection of laughter. Despite the ongoing desire to exclude, or at least overlook, laughter in ethics, I argue that it can play a valuable role, precisely because laughter is found at the juncture of emotion and reason.

The final section of this chapter will explore how an understanding of bodily loosening is necessary to recognise the current place of laughter in ethics and the potential, I have identified, for ethical insight laughter. By ethical insight, I mean that a new way of thinking in relation to a moral issue is achieved, but more than this, I would argue that this shift in thinking offers the opportunity for a transformation of the self and therefore

¹⁶⁸ Stephen Halliwell uses the term “bodily loosening” to describe concerns that the Greek Church Fathers shared regarding the loss of bodily control that occurs during laughter (Halliwell 2008: 9); given the primacy of the body for my concept of insight laughter I have adopted this term here in a broader context, that includes and goes beyond laughter in relation to the Greek Church Fathers. Moreover, I extend the emphasis beyond the body to become inclusive of the mind ‘loosening’ too.

a change in ethical behaviour. In a similar fashion to the religious insight that laughter can offer, as explored in chapter three, and the feminist insight that laughter can offer, as explored in chapter four, I will argue that laughter can be a means of achieving, expressing, and transmitting ethical insight. This is important to consider because it enables insight laughter to be seen as having a presence in the moral realm and as offering the potential to influence behaviour. It does, however, also highlight the challenges of the ambiguity of laughter. As will be demonstrated, the insight gained through laughter may lead to a reassertion of ethical codes that already exist within a society, but were previously unrealised to an individual, or laughter may lead to the subversion of societal expectations, it can confront and break down boundaries – as previously seen in the case of feminist (insight) laughter.

The Ethics of (Insight) Laughter in Practice

Michael Billig notes that contemporary authors on laughter do not face the same challenge as their predecessors; we are not needing to write about laughter in order to respond to or argue against antigelastics (opponents of laughter). Indeed, the positive connotations that surround laughter in contemporary society makes any opposition to laughter or any attempts to question the morality of laughter more of a challenge (Billig 2005: 14). My thesis has sought to centre itself on laughter, rather than the object of laughter (i.e. humour, jokes, comedy or the comic). Whilst it is my intention to continue to place laughter at the centre of my thesis, this chapter – perhaps more than others – acknowledges that there is often an entanglement of the ethics of laughing and the ethics of the object of laughter.

Whilst I am concerned with the ethics of laughter in practice, most authors have chosen to focus on the ethics of the object of the laughter, for example: the ethics of comic amusement (Carroll 2014a); the ethics of humour (Goldstein 1995 & 2001; Gaut 1998; Benatar 1999 & 2014; Buckley 2005; Smuts 2010; Carroll 2014b; Roberts 2016); or the ethics of jokes (Cohen 1999; Bicknell 2007; Lockyer & Pickering 2009). Although distinct, there are overlaps between each of these identified objects of laughter. As such, explorations of the ethics of humour generally argue that there are four attitudes that are adopted in relation to the ethics of (what is typically framed as) comic amusement. First,

comic amoralism: the view that there is no moral accountability when we joke, as humour (or joke-telling etc.) is beyond good and evil. Second, *comic ethicism*: the view that an immoral joke can still be funny, but it may impact the level of comic amusement that is experienced; an individual finds the joke less funny because of the immoral element.¹⁶⁹ Third, *comic immoralism* is the view that the immoral content can enhance the humour/comic amusement.¹⁷⁰ Fourth and finally, *moderate comic moralism*: the view that the immorality of a joke may lead it to be considered unfunny, or at least less funny because of its immoral content; the joke may decrease in its effectiveness because of the presence of immoral content (see Carroll 2014a for an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of all four positions).¹⁷¹ Whilst such framing can be useful for analysing comic amusement, in order for me to consider the ethics of laughter I need to go beyond this framework; I will consider laughter in relation to the funny and beyond, and shift the focus from the object of the laughter to the morality of the laughter itself.

Some other scholars have also sought to frame questions of morality in relation to laughter. However, these works have resulted in varying levels of success. Jure Gantar's 2005 work, *The Pleasure of Fools: Essays in the Ethics of Laughter*, offers a useful and comprehensive historical overview of many of the ethical challenges that have been presented towards laughter. His aim is to establish whether laughter can ever be ethical; he explores laughter in a variety of forms and questions the ethical nature of the laughter in various contexts. Gantar reaches the conclusion that: "all laughter can in principle be seen as unethical" (Gantar 2005: 152). Although there are undoubtedly examples of unethical laughter, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, I would argue that Gantar is too quick to reach this conclusion and, in doing so, he fails to interrogate the ambiguity of laughter and overlooks the possibility of 'victimless' laughter or laughter directed at the inanimate. I would argue that laughter is too varied to be defined as moral or immoral in its totality. Whilst Gantar does succeed in centring his work on the ethics of laughter, other scholars have found this more challenging. Although the title of Ronald de Sousa's 1987 work, *What is it wrong to laugh at?*, suggests that laughter will be at the centre of the discussion, de Sousa instead focuses on the object of laughter: "I shall be mostly

¹⁶⁹ Key proponents of *comic ethicism* are Berys Gaut (1998) and Alan Roberts (2016).

¹⁷⁰ A key proponent of *comic immoralism* is Daniel Jacobson (1997).

¹⁷¹ Key proponents of *moderate comic moralism* are Aaron Smuts (2010) and Noël Carroll (2014a&b).

interested in the Funny and our emotional response to it, rather than in laughing behaviour...[though] I shall not avoid speaking sometimes of actual laughter” (de Sousa 1987: 227). Similarly, in spite of the title of his book being *The Morality of Laughter*, Francis Buckley also notes that he will not “distinguish between humour and laughter” in his exploration of the morality of laughter (Buckley 2005: 6). The approach of these authors demonstrates the way in which these terms are often viewed as interchangeable and interdependent, rather than distinct concepts that should not be reduced to one or the other. Indeed, other scholars have sought to explain their avoidance of the discussion of laughter. For example, in identifying the variations of laughter, as not only a means of expressing amusement at something funny, but as an expression of nervousness, surprise, derision, embarrassment, or a result of intoxication (e.g. nitrous oxide), Berys Gaut argues that “the [ethical] dispute ought not be cast in terms of laughter, but of amusement” (Gaut 1998: 53; see also Carroll 2014b: 16). In spite of this challenge, I maintain that it is important to focus on laughter *specifically*; laughter can be subject to moral scrutiny. Moreover, regardless of the presence (or indeed absence) of humour it is the laughter that ultimately leads to insight. As such, this chapter proceeds on the basis of examining the relationship between ethics and laughter, and not on comedy, humour or jokes.

Indeed, whilst the presence of laughter is crucial, as without it insight laughter cannot occur, it must be recognised that the importance of the presence of laughter is emphasised due to the possibility of its absence. As noted by Billig: “laughter is meaningful in human interaction because there exists the possibility of its opposite, namely, ‘unlaughter’” (Billig 2005: 8). This concept of *unlaughter* can be understood as – not simply the absence of laughter, as there are many occasions when we are not laughing and this is not notable – but rather it is “a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded” (Billig 2005: 192). The absence of laughter is essentially an outward indication of disapproval, for example: if someone is being teased they can choose to indicate their disapproval by displaying a ‘po face’ and not engaging in the laughter (Drew 1987),¹⁷² alternatively they may groan or indicate their lack of amusement by saying oh-ha-ha-ha (Norrick 1993: 123-125). Indeed, “[n]ot

¹⁷² See also Radcliffe-Brown 1940 & 1949 for an exploration of the sociality of teasing.

joining in laughter, often criticised as a sign of being sanctimonious and repressed (which of course can also be the case), is often an unconscious refusal to accept the norms presupposed in the laughter” (Wellershoff cited by Kuschel 1994: 123). Similarly, Ted Cohen suggests that if someone fails to laugh when expected we discover that “*he is not like you...what has failed is the effort to achieve an intimacy between teller and hearer*” (Cohen 1999: 26, original emphasis). Moreover, the fact that we can choose not to laugh suggests that there is some capacity for us to control our laughter, even if this can be challenging.

In considering the morality of laughter, we can wonder if it is even possible to offer prescriptions, something that is generally avoided in literature on the subject to date. For example, can we claim that it is only morally acceptable to laugh with, and not at, people; that our laughter should always be directed at those in power rather than the oppressed; that certain subjects are off-limits and unlaughable, or will such ethical guidance be positioned as being impractical or lacking nuance? What it is acceptable to laugh at differs not only in different societies, but at different times, and for different individuals. As there is no universal agreement, understanding what it is right or wrong to laugh at has long been – and continues to be – contested. Indeed, whilst Aristotle advised that we should “jest with good taste”, he recognised that defining “good taste” is challenging, if not impossible, as “tastes differ on what is offensive and what is amusing” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 4.8.1128a). Much of the difficulty in identifying the rights and wrongs of laughter stem from its ambiguity; laughter is often more than an expression of comic amusement. Moreover, what is deemed appropriate to laugh at changes from one generation, nationality, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and race to another. There is social and subjective context to the acceptability – or morality – of laughter which shifts and changes, and it can be used, as I have suggested earlier, to challenge social norms or embed them further in society.

To Laugh, or Not to Laugh, That is the Question

Questions about the morality of laughter relate to the idea that laughter involves judgement: judgement of the person who causes the laughter, judgement of the people who laugh, and judgement of the object (or subject) of the laughter. Below I will explore

some of the key considerations that enable ethical judgements¹⁷³ about laughter to be made. As noted above, previous considerations of the morality of comic amusement have tended to focus on the appropriateness of the humour in question. However, I would propose that any consideration of the morality of laughter needs to be three-fold. First, questions regarding the morality of the content of the object of the laughter. Second, questions regarding the person who seeks to provoke the laughter. Third, questions regarding the morality of the person who laughs. I believe that the morality of each of these can vary, as ultimately, they each encompass three different responses to questions of the *context* of the laughter, the *intentions* of the laughter, and the *consequences* of the laughter.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, given the location and occurrence of laughter is bodily, each of these concerns need to be considered through the lens of the body. Whilst Aaron Smuts argues that “the primary vehicle of the harmful effects of humor is laughter” (Smuts 2010: 233), how morally accountable can we be for a physiological or emotional response? All of these judgements have the potential to be positive or negative, to identify an adherence to moral norms or offer moral transgressions. Given the centrality of laughter to my thesis, I am most concerned with the judgement of the people who laugh, though recognise that some consideration needs to be made of the object of the laughter and the person who causes the laughter as the three are inevitably entangled.

In considering the *context* of laughter, it should be recognised that laughter occurs within societal power structures. As such, questions regarding the morality of laughter tend to have variable answers depending on who is laughing, i.e. whether someone is inside a

¹⁷³ The question of what an ethical judgement is, is wider than the scope of this thesis; see Illies 2003: 1-30 for an overview of the literature on this subject.

¹⁷⁴ Although unintentional at the time of writing, a similarity could be drawn with Joseph Fletcher’s *Situation Ethics* (1997). Fletcher offers, not a system, but a set of principles for establishing the morality of a situation; he grounds moral assessments in both reason and love (*agape*), and acknowledges that what is morally good or right is dependent on the situation, the intention behind the actions, and the potential consequences (e.g. whilst lying would normally be considered morally wrong if it were done to save a life it would be the right thing to do because the intentions were good and the consequences, of saving a life, positive). Unfortunately, for the purposes of this thesis, Fletcher did not consider how situation ethics could apply to laughter, or humour (though he did use a few jokes to help further his argument). Indeed, it is also interesting to note that I have been unable to find any scholars who have chosen to explicitly apply Fletcher’s ethical principles to laughter or humour. It is also worth noting that, although much earlier than Fletcher, the philosopher Francis Hutcheson suggests that laughter is morally good when it “flow[s] from kindness” and “love” (Hutcheson 1750: 31 & 36). Similarly, Albert Rapp declared that “laughter is ridicule tempered with love” (Rapp 1951: 66). Perhaps the place of ‘love’ and laughter warrants further attention.

group or an outsider and whether the laughter is directed at shared experiences or not.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, there is the question of laughing at or laughing with, the power status of the object of the laughter, and the relationship of the individual in the conversational dynamic (i.e. in the case of a joke, are they the butt, the teller, or the listener¹⁷⁶). Laughter has the potential to “join people together and it can divide; and it can do both simultaneously when a group laughs together at others” (Billig 2005: 194). As a result, who tells the joke affects the meaning: “not only will the joke work differently (if it works at all) in different circumstances, but it may also, so to speak ‘change its meaning’” (Cohen 1999: 33). Alongside who we laugh with, where we laugh is also generally understood to affect the moral acceptability of our laughter. For example, it is often suggested that there is a distinction between what it is morally acceptable to laugh at in public and in private; Jure Gantar argues that something only becomes “ethically contentious...[when it] moves from the private to the public realm” (Gantar 2005: 11; see also Zwart 1996: 19-27; Lockyer & Pickering 2009: 9). Whilst the laughter in private may feel more appropriate, it is certainly questionable that any fundamental change has occurred and that it is in fact more ethically appropriate to laugh in private. A similar argument could be made with regards to laughter that takes place within the context of game-playing; the provision of a ‘safe-space’ to laugh at things that are morally transgressive is often positioned as more morally acceptable or even free from moral judgements.¹⁷⁷

When considering the appropriateness of laughter, it is not just the act of laughing but why we laugh; the *intention* or message behind our laughter. In identifying intention as important for assessing the morality of laughter, it is important to consider whether or not laughter is voluntary. Do we choose to laugh? For some, laughter is passive and so our moral responsibility is limited, the suggestion being that we cannot be responsible for

¹⁷⁵ Of course, jokes told by insiders and outsiders can mirror each other but the intent behind the joke differs; there is in-group comradery in the former and an attempt to insult, demean, or offend in the latter (Carroll 2014a: 243).

¹⁷⁶ These three elements could be seen to reflect Freud’s joke triad. According to Freud, jokes require at least two people: “my own self...the person in whom I find something comical...[and] a third person can join it, but is not essential” (Freud [1905] 2002: 141).

¹⁷⁷ Whilst the limits of my thesis mean that I cannot unpack the place of laughter and morality in gameplaying here, I explore this more fully in: Graham 2020.

something we cannot control. In fact, it is the lack of control during laughter that shows the value of ethical insight laughter; as I outlined earlier, it is as a result of the loss of control experienced in (some) laughter that can lead to the shift in consciousness that enables insight to occur. Laughter often feels impulsive and when we are laughing with others it is often difficult, though not impossible, to stop. Can we reflect prior to our laughter? When we laugh at something morally transgressive, do we have a responsibility to reflect on the reason(s) why we laughed? Indeed, we can laugh, when we see others laughing, without knowing why – does this make us complicit in laughing at something immoral? For others, a conscious decision is not being made in the moment of laughter, but rather our laughter reflects our moral character, it makes a statement about our moral attitudes (de Sousa 1987: 232). Some people may have the capacity to suppress their laughter but they may still have experienced a desire to laugh; should this desire be subject to moral scrutiny? In identifying intentions as an important factor, it must be recognised that there are intentions behind our laughter – even if we would prefer negative motivations to be absent from our laughter – and as such the question of moral responsibility constantly presents itself. As a result, when people laugh at something that is morally transgressive (e.g. racist or sexist jokes), it is not surprising that it may be seen as an object of moral concern.

Noël Carroll argues that, often, when we laugh together, we are signalling that we share “common standards of virtue and vice and of right and wrong – mutually acknowledged criteria of appropriateness and inappropriateness, especially regarding human thought and action” (Carroll 2014b: 83). This raises questions regarding the necessity of believing what we laugh at, particularly when humour such as jokes are often fictitious. In the case of morally transgressive jokes, Ted Cohen suggests that whilst jokes are conditional, it is not essential that an audience believes racial or gendered stereotypes but rather that they are aware of the ideas or concepts in question (Cohen 1999: 17; see also de Sousa 1987). Here joking is positioned as belonging to the imagination and thus intentions are based on fictional rather than real attitudes. However, as noted by Berys Gaut, this is unconvincing, as laughter is often based on the manifestation of real attitudes and beliefs (Gaut 1998: 57). Moreover, our response to a joke is often dependant; our own laughter is responsive to the intentions we identify behind the person who is seeking to provoke our laughter. It could be argued that most of the moral responsibility for laughter is on

the person who provokes laughter, as they have the time to consider the context, the intentions, the potential consequences, and ultimately decide whether they should or should not say or do the thing that may provoke laughter. However, it must be recognised that there can be a misalignment between what the provoker of laughter intends the audience to laugh at and what the audience actually laughs at (Anderson 2019). Whilst, as Carroll suggests, laughter may be assumed to signal agreement or shared beliefs, laughter can also be a signal of nervousness, embarrassment, surprise etc., as such the morality of laughter becomes harder to decipher. Is it possible to recognise the motivations behind laughter? Can we trust an individual to disclose their true intentions? If someone is understood to laugh in agreement rather than embarrassment this may lead to a shift in the moral appropriateness of the laughter.

In order to understand the moral ramifications of laughter it is also necessary to ask: what are the consequences of laughter? Ronald de Sousa notes that: “central to most moral systems is an interest in consequences, actual, probable, or merely possible” (de Sousa 1987: 231), and therefore I would argue it is reasonable to consider consequences in any moral assessment of laughter. Despite this recognition, de Sousa suggests that when we are considering laughter our concern should be focused on the intent behind it: “what gives offence usually does so in virtue of its motivational origins” (de Sousa 1987: 231). Whilst this position is demonstrative of the entanglement of intentions and consequences, it is possible to suggest that an absence of bad intentions does not negate the possibility of offence being taken, though it may mitigate it. Gaut suggests that: “[h]umour is subject to the demands of justice: joking must be just joking” (Gaut 1998: 51). Indeed, if someone is told that something they have said or done is not funny or that they should not laugh at something, a common rebuttal is that they were ‘just joking’ or that it is ‘just a joke’ as if this claim offers an absolution of moral responsibility. As such, Dennis Howitt and Kwame Owusu-Bempah argue that the phrase ‘just joking’ is “a device by which the teller of the joke essentially refuses to change the message, and instead passes the responsibility for the conversational difficulty to the challenger” (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah 2009: 48; see also Billig 2009: 27 & 31).

It is often argued that because laughter does not have material consequences (Bergson [1900] 2008; see also de Sousa 1987) the morality of laughter cannot be reduced to such

concerns. Clearly potential consequences of laughter are upset, shock, embarrassment, disgust and offence. Focusing on the latter, one of the challenges is that there is often a (fine) line between what we laugh at and what we deem offensive. Indeed, it can sometimes be surprising to discover that where we choose to draw the line differs from our friends and family, colleagues and strangers. As noted by Ted Cohen, “there is no formula to tell us which jokes are offensive or when it is the wrong time to put forth a particular joke” (Cohen 1999: 70-71); this concept applies beyond jokes to the provocation of laughter in various contexts and modes. Indeed, despite the emphasis that is often placed on offence, David Benatar argues against the treatment of “offence either as a decisive moral consideration or, at the very least, as a very strong moral consideration” (Benatar 2014: 38). For Benatar, offence offers insufficient evidence to prove the existence of immoral humour (and therefore laughter); there needs to be a reasonable justification for the offence. Benatar also suggests that this justification is generally absent (Benatar 2014: 39).¹⁷⁸ However, I would suggest that most people – if asked – would be able to explain why they took offence at something, for example, that it had racist, sexist, or stereotypical overtones.

It could be argued that the gravity of the consequences of laughter may vary depending on the target, namely:

whether the target of laughter is a hegemonic majority or a disenfranchised minority. That is to say, on whether laughter is a vehicle for empowerment or ideological subjugation...even satirical laughter can be ethical as long as its role is to subvert rather than to consolidate the dominant discourse.

(Gantar 2005: 38; see also Bicknell 2007; Lockyer & Pickering 2009)

Joke telling – in relation to minority groups – reaffirms prejudices and embeds them further in society: “jokes do more than merely reflect prejudices. They are active in the process of the construction of the meaning of ‘otherness’ and inferiority of social groups” (Howitt and Owsu-Bempah 2009: 59). As such, “[l]aughter could be described as an external display of our innate prejudices or, even more damningly, as a public projection of our desire to distance ourselves from the Other and suppress the difference” (Gantar 2005: 13). Countering this position, Laurence Goldstein (2001) claims that: “there is all

¹⁷⁸ See also Jacobson 1997 who explores the subjectiveness of offence.

the difference in the world between a humorous suggestion not intended to be implemented and the actual implementing of it". Benatar adds to this position, he notes that whilst the harm is not as significant as physical harm, it does not mean that the harm should be ignored (Benatar 1999: 194). Yet Merrie Bergmann, when discussing sexist humour, argues that whilst a joke may be positioned as harmless, it is "not an isolated event...it is rather one instance among many in which women are belittled or disparaged" (Bergmann 1986: 76; see also Billig 2009; Howitt & Owsu-Bempah 2009). As such, joking – and laughing at jokes – is often a part of a wider pattern of oppressive behaviour.

It is worth noting that considerations of the ethics of laughter, and humour, tend to be focused on the potential immorality or negative features, rather than the potential positive effects (Benatar 2014: 33-36). Perhaps this is the result of both the historical desire to moderate laughter and therefore highlight and focus on the dangers, as well as the contemporary perception of laughter as being something good and therefore undeserving of criticism. There are certainly benefits of laughter: it has the capacity to bring a feeling of pleasure, to lighten the mood, and to be wielded by the oppressed against those in power, and as I argue (in some instances) can enable insight to occur. Yet these benefits are not necessarily demonstrative of its moral nature. The ambiguity of laughter means that laughter cannot always be understood as moral or immoral. It is clear that to establish the morality of laughter there is no single factor that must be considered but, rather, as I have indicated, it is necessary to unravel the context, intentions, and consequences of the laughter. Moreover, in considering the morality of laughter it seems clear that there are no guarantees, "invoking laughter is [always] ethically unpredictable" (Gantar 2005: 12).

Laughter as a Moral Corrective

During insight laughter, the moment of laughter can reveal something, as such the pedagogical possibilities of laughter should not be overlooked. Indeed, the ability of laughter to highlight – and hopefully lead to the rectification of character flaws or inappropriate behaviour – can be found in the writings of theologians and philosophers

alike,¹⁷⁹ and examples were also introduced in chapter four. This approach to laughter is indicative of the view that when we laugh at someone, we help them to realise a previously unrecognised flaw which they will then seek to amend.

Such a position has been held throughout history, and perhaps surprisingly has even been adopted by those who are generally in opposition to laughter. An exception was made for laughter that is used to influence an individual to improve themselves. Indeed, it could be suggested that: “[p]urposeless laughter – or laughter for its own sake – is condemned. But laughter in the service of righteousness, including the laughter of ridicule, can be appropriate” (Billig 2005: 49). It may seem contradictory to be in support of ridicule – a form of laughter than can lead to individual embarrassment or upset – but if the three key considerations of the morality of laughter, namely context, intentions, and consequences are considered, it is possible to understand why allowances may have been made. First, the context; this is challenging as the laughter could occur in a range of contexts. However, if the laughter is amongst friends or family it could be presumed to be taking place in a comfortable context; if the laughter occurs amongst strangers this may not be the case. Second, as the intentions behind the provocation of laughter, and the laughter, are for the improvement of another, this motive could be seen to be not only positive but serving a higher moral purpose. Finally, whilst the initial consequences, may be that an individual feels embarrassed or upset, the ultimate (purported) consequence is one of self-improvement or transformation, whether in terms of social conventions, morality, or spirituality.

Francis Buckley notes that “our laughter contains valuable information about how to live” (Buckley 2005: 5), and though discussing humour, Noël Carrol likewise states that: “[h]umour, and the comic amusement [or laughter] that attends it, alerts us to the relevant social norms and serves to reinforce them. Indeed, in some cases, humour may even function to *enforce* norms – to serve as a corrective” (Carroll 2014b: 76). Such positions are not new and can be found in the works of Plato (*Philebus*) and Aristotle (*Rhetoric*). Both Plato and Aristotle saw laughter as a tool for correcting other peoples’

¹⁷⁹ Examples include, but are not limited to the following (many of whose work I engage with in this chapter): Cicero, Quintilian, Aristotle, Plato, Clement of Alexandria, Francis Hutcheson, Dugald Stewart, Reverent Sydney Smith, and Henri Bergson.

flaws; laughing at someone's imperfections would highlight it to them and they would then be able to correct their flaw and become a better person. Laughter was perceived as a tool for the "ethical shaping of the self" (Halliwell 2008: 303-304). Echoes of this approach are also found within the Greek Church Fathers; for example, Clement of Alexandria supported the use of laughter that was directed at others for the purpose of correcting their behaviour, advancing the Christian faith (through the negation of other faiths), and when uniting the Christian community. Not only was Clement an advocate of laughter as a pedagogical tool, he was a practitioner. Clement recognised the damaging effect of being laughed at, yet when he – and other Christians alike – were wielding the weapon of laughter it was deemed acceptable.¹⁸⁰

Emphasis on the corrective capabilities of laughter, often the result of ridicule, was dominant in the writings of philosophers during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Earl of Shaftesbury positioned "raillery" (joking) as a means of addressing vices; laughter was seen to be a means of highlighting the inadequacies or character flaws, it was a tolerant means of punishment (Shaftesbury [1711] 2001: 13). According to Francis Hutcheson, one of the values of laughter is its ability to highlight character flaws and correct shortcomings: "It is acceptable to highlight smaller faults as it enables people to see their folly" (Hutcheson 1750: 31). For Hutcheson, when considering the appropriateness of laughter, it is not just what we say but why we say it; the intention or message behind what we say is essential. Indeed, his exploration of intent is focused on laughter which corrects character flaws and he notes that laughter should "flow from kindness" and "love" (Hutcheson 1750: 31 & 36). It is these positive intentions that ensures the laughter is morally appropriate. For Hutcheson, a consequence of laughter that harbours negative intentions is irritation or offence: "ridicule, with contempt or ill-nature, is indeed always irritating and offensive" (Hutcheson 1750: 36). Whilst there has always existed a fine line between what is humorous and what is offensive, for Hutcheson it is the intention behind what we say which leads to a shift from the humorous to the offensive. Thus, for Hutcheson, negative intent always leads to negative consequences.

¹⁸⁰ See Graham (forthcoming) 'Opponent or Advocate?: Exploring Clement of Alexandria's Attitude(s) Towards Laughter', for a more detailed outline of Clement's position on laughter.

Similar ideas are found in the works of the 18th century Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart who states that: “the natural and proper object of ridicule is those smaller improprieties in character” and, as a result, ridicule acts as “a most important auxiliary to our sense of duty” (Stewart 1849: 245 & 247). Reverend Sydney Smith also stated that the fear of being laughed at assists to “curb upon the follies and eccentricities of human nature” (Smith 1848: 163). In each of these positions, ridicule is not treated as being morally suspect but rather as a suitable means of educating others in relation to etiquette, morality, and religion. Of course, ridicule is not the only mode of rhetoric that can shed light on moral truths, but it is certainly one such means.

The view that “ridicule fulfils a key social role in maintaining morality, taste, and good manners” (Billig 2005: 78) continued in the twentieth century with Henri Bergson advocating for laughter as a social corrective. For Bergson, “laughter [is] first and foremost a means of correction” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 91). It is both the fear of being laughed at and its actuality that leads us to change our behaviour: “Laughter ‘corrects men’s manners’” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 16). Whilst “it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement”, Bergson accepts that the motivations of individuals who laugh may not always be positive; there may be a desire to humiliate (Bergson [1900] 2008: 17). Moreover, the extent of the change or improvement of an individual appears to be an external one: “In laughter we always find an avowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least in his deed” (Bergson [1900] 2008: 66). Here is the suggestion that laughter does not necessarily lead an individual to change their will or desires, but simply to act outwardly in the way that is expected from society. Hub Zwart notes that Bergson (and others outlined above) position laughter as a social corrective that works to reinforce social norms. However, the ambiguity of laughter means that whilst it can reinforce social norms it can also work to break them down (Zwart 1996: 60). Similar thinking is found within Carroll’s work who notes that: “[h]umour may also serve as a corrective concretely. Satires unmask social absurdities in the here and now” (Carroll 2014b: 85; see also Carroll 2013: 89-90; Giappone, Francis & MacKenzie 2018).¹⁸¹ Indeed, an example of this is found in chapter

¹⁸¹ I recognise that satire has long contributed to the identification and ridiculing of individual and societal vices, follies, and shortcomings, however, given the focus of this thesis is on laughter rather than the object

four, where feminist laughter is shown to act as resistance towards and disruption of the status quo, as well as offering the opportunity for revolution and the creation of new modes of being and behaving.

The position that laughter can act as a social corrective continues to be perpetuated throughout history and the contemporary philosopher Francis Buckley argues that: “Laughter signals our recognition of a comic vice in another person – the butt. We do not share in the vice, for we could not laugh if we did. Through laughter, the butt is made to feel inferior, and those who laugh reveal their sense of superiority over him” (Buckley 2005: 4). Although laughing at others to encourage them to change their ways is deemed acceptable, there seems to be an underlying exception to laughing at someone; you must not laugh at something that cannot be corrected.

Whilst this laughter seeks to serve as a corrective, it could certainly – at times – seem tinged with some cruelty. In an often overlooked piece of his work, Reinhold Niebuhr argues that in laughing at another in order to correct their character flaws there is: “a nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance” (Niebuhr 1946: 115). However, what is essential for Niebuhr is not cruelty, but positive intentions behind the laughter. More specifically, he suggests that “[t]here is the promise of forgiveness in laughter” (Niebuhr 1946: 117). Thus, through another’s laughter, there is the opportunity to reflect and amend behaviours without fear of any further retribution.

What is clear in these cases is that we can learn about our foibles as a result of being laughed at, we learn through the laughter of another, and may even join in. This is not the first time that insight has been made possible through the laughter of another, as noted in chapter four, it was sometimes the laughter of another, following the act of anasyrma, that led key figures to amend their behaviour. However, it is also important to consider what we can learn about our shortcomings through our own laughter, through our own insight laughter. Zwart highlights that our: “laughter allows the world to become visible and accessible” (Zwart 1996: 64). Indeed, insight laughter provides the opportunity for

of laughter I will not dwell on satire here. There is already an expanse of literature focused solely on satire, see for example: Pollard 1970; Griffin 1994; and Simpson 2003.

previous unknowns to become accessible and understood through the embodied act of laughter and our shift in consciousness.

Emotions and Ethics

My claim that ethical insight is born of laughter highlights the connection between ethics, emotion, and the body. As explored more fully in chapter two, my concept of insight laughter is grounded in William James' theory of consciousness. James is of particular importance because his theory of consciousness relates to embodiment and emotion; James, as a physiological psychologist, explicitly links emotion to the body. As noted in chapter one, I do not wish to argue that laughter is an emotion, but rather to recognise that laughter is closely aligned with emotion(s). Emotion and laughter are entangled; by exploring how the history of emotion has raised a number of ethical questions, many of which are grounded in concerns with the body, it will be possible to further consider how these concerns have also manifested themselves in relation to insight laughter and the role of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding.

Historically, the relationship between emotions and ethics has been contentious. Emotions have been positioned as good or bad, as virtues or vices; some emotions such as lust, anger, and envy have been viewed as an obstacle to living an ethical life whilst other emotions, such as respect, love, and compassion have been seen to motivate ethical behaviour. Indeed, some emotions such as guilt, embarrassment or shame have been positioned as "speak[ing] the voice of moral conscience" (Bagnoli 2011: 2). In this sense, emotions are positioned as both possessing their own morality and as offering the potential to motivate and/or distract from moral behaviour; throughout this thesis, laughter has also been positioned in this way. As has been highlighted above through a consideration of laughter, "many human emotional dispositions are highly susceptible to education, and thus to culture and historical traditions" (Roberts 2007: 492). The perception of laughter as morally appropriate or not has been seen to be influenced by, and changes as a result of, the historical context in which it occurs. Indeed, the moral character of laughter has been subject to question, historically it has been positioned as a moral concern, whereas in contemporary society it is viewed more positively and as something to pursue. Moreover, because of the moral ambiguity of laughter it has

frequently been viewed as a distraction from living a moral life. Although the perception of specific emotions as good or bad are seemingly hardwired into society, recent feminist scholarship has sought to challenge this (arbitrary) dichotomy and highlight the importance of context for a moral evaluation of specific emotions. For example, Sara Ahmed (2004 & 2010) acknowledges how feminists are often perceived as 'killjoys' and so the focus is placed on the unhappy demeanour of women rather than the cause(s) of their unhappiness. Likewise, it has been recognised that Black women who oppose the status quo are frequently positioned as angry and therefore dismissed on the grounds of their purported emotional state rather than the validity of their arguments (Lorde 1984; hooks 2000; Cooper 2018). As such, Elizabeth Spelman (1989) has argued that anger is not innately immoral. Indeed, women should be angry at the injustices they face within society and use this emotion to motivate action; she does, of course, recognise there are potential risks to acting through anger.

Many of the concerns regarding the place of emotions and ethics stem from: "the old prejudice...that our emotions are irrational and interrupt or disturb our lives" (Solomon 2008: 2; see also Prinz 2004; Bagnoli 2011; Roeser 2011). The concern being that the irrational nature of emotions conflicts directly with the human capacity to act in accordance with reason, leading to distractions from or distortions of moral judgements and behaviours. As a result of this view, emotions are seen as incompatible with, and irrelevant to, ethics. Emotions are not treated seriously and therefore not recognised as having the capacity to contribute to ethics. Moreover, emotions are viewed as having the potential to "*interfere* with our reasoning and sometimes defeat our decisions... [and yet] ...complex emotions, such as respect, guilt, blame, and compassion, can be modified by reasoning" (Bagnoli 2011: 19, original emphasis). Here we see the entanglement and potential conflict of emotions and reason. Indeed, there are concerns regarding the capacity of emotions to disrupt reason and/or for emotions to provide a stronger motivation than reason. Concerns regarding laughter frequently stem from the suggestion that it is indirect conflict with reason, that it ruptures rational thought, and as such it was deemed not only to serve no purpose in ethical matters, but it should be a cause of moral concern in and of itself.

A further concern with the nature of emotions is whether humans are passive recipients or have the possibility to be in control of them, when emotions are reduced to sensations “this view treats emotions as involuntary states, before which we are helpless, and hence as a threat to moral and rational agency” (Bagnoli 2011: 6). The decision to position emotions as either passive or something that is subject to an individual’s control, raises questions of responsibility – are we responsible for our emotions? If we are responsible then this suggests that our emotions can be manipulated and moulded accordingly. Robert Solomon argues that: “we are not merely passive victims of our emotions but quite active in cultivating and constituting them. In other words, we cannot just use our emotions as excuses for our bad behaviour” (Solomon 2008: 4; see also Goldie 2000: 121; Zhu & Thagard 2002). This also applies to our emotional reactions, they too can be moderated, although this is sometimes with difficulty. Moreover, we should be proactive in the shaping and regulation of our emotions. As noted above, differing perceptions of laughter – as something which we experience passively or are in control of – also leads to questions of responsibility. If we are passive subjects of laughter then is it fair to be held morally accountable for our laughter? If we are in control of our laughter, then are we responsible for engaging in it only when it is morally acceptable to do so?

As noted earlier in my thesis, there is some debate about the emotional state or mood that is most conducive for laughter; it is generally accepted that a relaxed state means laughter is more likely to occur – of course there are caveats such as nervous laughter. Though some would argue that laughter is “incompatible with *emotion as such*” (de Sousa 1987: 237; see also Bergson [1900] 2008). Others argue that emotions can impact our capacity to laugh; it certainly seems that revulsion can stop laughter from occurring (Carroll 2014a: 251) though, conversely, “sometimes offence can trail behind amusement” (Smuts 2010: 340).

Finally, and perhaps most relevant for this thesis, is the place of emotions in generating moral knowledge. There is a growing recognition of emotions as “a form of cognition and insight” and “a source of moral knowledge” (Roeser 2011: xvii & 110). In opposition to rationalists, cognitive theories of emotions position emotions as playing a role in the acquisition of moral knowledge (e.g. Solomon 1993 & 2008; Nussbaum 2001; Roberts 2003). Ultimately, emotions are understood as playing an active role in the making of

moral judgements, as a means of motivating moral behaviours, and as a source of moral knowledge. However, as Sabine Roeser notes, it must be recognised that: “[e]motions are not infallible guides to knowledge, and this holds for all our cognitive faculties. Even a rationalist cannot claim that reason always gets it right” (Roeser 2011: 155). Moreover, “the fact that a moral insight is based on or involves intuitions and emotions does not necessarily mean that it is a gut reaction, and accordingly, that it is arational or irrational” (Roeser 2011: 162). As with all means of knowledge, nothing is perfect but, in accepting that reason is not the only means of achieving ethical insight, emotions can play a significant role, too. Recognising the significance of emotions enables me to establish the value of the non-serious for insight, as it opens up the opportunity for the body to play a role in the creation of knowledge and thus the possibility to view laughter as a viable means of achieving ethical insight, a key claim of my thesis.

Given the importance of the body for the experience of emotions (James 1884), it is surprising that contemporary philosophical considerations of emotions have tended not to focus on the place of the body, or only offer a generalised overview:

How does a given culture conceive of emotions in general (if it does)? For example, does it conceive them as occurring in the body, and if so, where (the stomach, the chest, the neck)? Or are they understood to occur outside the individual body—in the community, in animals or physical objects, or in the whole environment?
(Roberts 2007: 498)

Acknowledgement of the importance of the body when experiencing emotions draws attention to the challenges and concerns that have often surrounded it; by ignoring the body it is possible to avoid engagement with these complexities. Given my claim, that it is in going back into the body that insight can be achieved through a shift in consciousness during laughter, I am seeking to highlight the body as an important element of any consideration of emotions, ethics, and insight. It returns us to the necessity of considering how laughter is grounded in the body and, as such, provides the opportunity to explore how the value of the body effects the ethical value of laughter. Indeed, Halliwell notes that:

the physicality of laughter is never in itself the whole story and can only be judged when laughter is placed within contexts of social meaning...the interpretation of

laughter, then, requires attention to the close but not always transparent relationship between corporeal signals and the 'affective surges' which prompt and are conveyed by them.

(Halliwell 2008: 10)

In recentring the body in the experience of emotion, and in recognising the contribution of emotion to ethics, laughter can emerge free from the historical negation of the body. Moreover, the recent scholarly shift (e.g. Solomon 1993 & 2008; Nussbaum 2001; Roberts 2003) towards recognising emotions as playing a significant role in ethics enables the place of laughter as a means of ethical insight to enter a field that it was previously excluded. Thus, in challenging the privileging of the seriousness and the mind in the creation of knowledge, laughter has the opportunity to be recognised as making a contribution to ethics.

The Moral Framework of Insight Laughter

Having begun to explore the practicalities of the ethics of laughter more broadly, and having recognised the ambiguous nature of laughter within ethics, it is necessary to consider whether insight laughter carries its own moral framework. Using the three-fold approach to the evaluation of the ethics of laughter is a useful starting point, namely a consideration of the context, intentions, and consequences of the laughter, which I identified above. First, the context of insight laughter. This is perhaps the most challenging feature to analyse, as identified throughout this thesis, laughter can occur in all manner of contexts: alone or in a group, with strangers or friends, through a technique or spontaneously, laughing at or laughing with someone etc. As a result of the variety of contexts in which insight laughter can occur, it is not possible to declare that insight laughter always occurs in a morally good, or even morally neutral context. Indeed, it may be the case that insight laughter occurs in a morally dubious scenario; the occurrence of laughter has the capacity to both lead to a morally good or a morally suspect insight.

Second, the question of intentions. A frequent feature of insight laughter is the instantaneousness of the insight, that occurs during laughter. On the one hand there are examples of laughter being cultivated as a technique to encourage insight, see chapter three of this thesis, in these instances it could be argued that the pursuit of insight is a

moral good, or at least morally neutral, venture. On the other hand, many – if not most – of the examples of insight laughter are spontaneous, involve a loss of control, and are unexpected; there is no intention either to laugh or receive insight. This leads to the challenge of identifying whether there is any intention behind the laughter and indeed, whether the good/bad intentions would enhance or diminish the insight.

Third, there are consequences of insight laughter; both in the insight and in the potential for a change in behaviour to occur. Addressing the former, the term *insight* could lead to positive connotations. Moreover, in suggesting that insight laughter provides a new thought or perception, it could lead to the assumption that these new thoughts and perceptions are positive and morally good. Generally, there is an underlying perception that insight is morally good, or at least morally neutral. Insights are portrayed as achievements, as something gained. With regards to the opportunity to change behaviour, I have argued that many instances of insight laughter have an undercurrent of ethical critique; once the laughter stops, there is an opportunity to act on the insight, to instigate change, and to make moral improvements. As such I have advocated for the moral value of insight laughter. However, I recognise that within the scope of this thesis it is not possible to consider all instances of insight laughter. I accept the potential challenge that there remains the chance for an insight that is morally ambiguous or even immoral to occur; insights are not always good, nor do they always lead to moral improvement. How would we assess the moral value, through its consequences or the intentions? For example, it is very possible that someone may achieve an insight that they in turn pursue which is not morally good. Moreover, it should be recognised that interpretations of what is morally good is subject to differences of opinion. For instance, in chapter three, the laughter of Osho and the Rajneesh Movement was sometimes seen to be morally dubious, potentially abusive, and/or morally reprehensible. Osho's laughter often had its foundations in the shock factor, as such, the laughter could be in response to sexuality, obscenities, and derogations. Thus, it is too great a claim to say that insight laughter is always morally good. Moreover, behaviour is more open-ended and there is an element of choice in how to respond to the insight that occurs. Insight laughter offers the opportunity for action to be taken, but no obligation. Despite this, the potential for action is important. When considering insight laughter, I have emphasised the importance of not only the new perceptions but the effect this can have on an individual's

behaviour. Here, much like James' assessments of religious experiences, the focus is on the "fruits" (James [1902] 2002: 16-19) of the experience of insight laughter; there is a hope that this laughter leads to ethical fruits.

As a result of the potential ambiguity that surrounds the context, intentions, and consequences of insight laughter, I would suggest that insight laughter can fall anywhere on the moral spectrum. Moreover, despite the positive moral connotations that seem to cling to the term insight, there is no guarantee that the insight will be morally good. The important thing to note is that as insight laughter enables a new realisation it can increase moral awareness. Insight laughter will always be subject to moral scrutiny as it offers an individual the opportunity to amend their behaviour, regardless of the actions taken, an individual knows something they did not know before.

Laughing Bodies

Having ascertained the importance of the links between emotion, ethics, and laughter, it is clear that what is at the heart of insight laughter is its location in the body. As such it is important to return to earlier considerations around how the ethics of laughter are often grounded in the body and how the value of the body effects the ethical value of laughter. There has been a tendency to negate the place of the body and to position it as a cause of concern and something which should be controlled. In this thesis, I am seeking to redeem the body and its place in laughter and insight, however, it is also necessary to recognise the challenges that face the body in relation to laughter and ethics.

As noted previously, the starting point for many philosophers and theologians who consider laughter (and humour) is that humans are "laughing animals".¹⁸² The suggestion being that to laugh is an innately human characteristic, it is our biology.¹⁸³ Indeed, Noël Carroll notes that "evolution rarely attaches pleasure to something unless there is a cause" (Carroll 2014b: 73), as such there are evolutionary advantages of our capacity to

¹⁸² See chapter one of this thesis for an exploration of the debate on whether man is or is not the only laughing animal.

¹⁸³ Michael Billig warns that "theories of humour should not be reduced to the biology of laughter" (Billig 2005: 179). However, as this thesis is concerned with laughter, rather than humour, biology cannot be overlooked.

laugh and smile (Darwin 1872: 210). For example, as babies we are dependent on others for food, shelter, and comfort, and our capacity to laugh and smile allows us to communicate and display our contentment in these life processes. However, our laughter also goes beyond our biology; as Billig notes “[a]t some point, culture takes over from biology” (Billig 2005: 181) and it is in a consideration of the ethics of laughter that biology and culture collide. More specifically, laughter can be viewed as “an intrusion of physiology into ethics” (Gantar 2005: 27).

In considering the ethics of laughter, it must be recognised that throughout much of history ethical concerns regarding laughter have been grounded in the body; the perception being that there is “something intrinsically problematic with the physiological aspect of laughter” (Gantar 2005: 18; see also Parvulescu 2010). I argue that because laughter is an experience of the body it offers a reminder of the corporeal nature of humans, a reminder that is not always welcomed. As a result, concerns regarding the body manifest themselves in concerns regarding laughter and lead to a desire to control it. Of particular concern are: the suggested aggression that lies behind laughter as visible through the physical baring of the teeth; the purported eroticism of (female) laughter that can lead to (sexual) sin; the need for moderation and the place of smiling in relation to laughter; and ultimately the positioning of laughter as a concern because it enables the loosening of both body and mind. This latter concern is of particular interest when considering insight laughter, which argues that insight is related to new emergences in streams of consciousness, from the peripheral to the central consciousness, as a result of the bodily act of laughing; concerns regarding bodily and mind loosening lead to the value of insight laughter being overlooked.

An Act of Aggression

Throughout my thesis I have sought to position laughter and its dependency on the body as positive; we learn through the embodied laugh. However, it must be recognised that for some, it is the overt presence of the body in laughter that has led it to be a cause of concern. Some argue that aggression lies behind much (if not all) laughter (e.g. Hobbes [1640] 1994 & [1651] 1968; Freud [1905] 2002; Ludovici 1932; Adorno & Horkheimer [1944] 1997; Rapp 1951; Lorenz 1966; Billig 2005; Buckley 2005). Advocates of this

position are often considered to be proponents of the *Superiority Theory* of humour and laughter, as introduced in chapter one, this theory seeks to argue that all laughter is the response to a feeling of superiority; it is argued that laughter is always the result of disparaging or degrading another. Fortunately, the suggestion that all laughter is the result of such malintent can be tested rather simply; one only needs to consider the motivations of their own laughter and ask: are feelings of superiority present? Indeed, opponents of the *Superiority Theory* of humour and laughter claim to have asked this very question and fervently deny that their own laughter possesses any such characteristics. However, in recognition of the unlikelihood of people acknowledging their true intentions, proponents of the theory often adopt “a psychology of suspicion...don’t accept what people tell you about their desires, look for the inadmissible motives” (Billig 2005: 55).

Moreover, laughter in this context could be seen as maintaining power structures in society. In positioning laughter as related to a feeling of superiority, it suggests that laughter’s role is to enforce existing power structures. Jacqueline Bussie rightly notes that “the superiority theory fails to account for the phenomena of the laughter of the oppressed, of the supposed ‘inferiors’” (Bussie 2007: 13). The exploration of feminist laughter in chapter four demonstrated that laughter can act as a means of resistance, disruption, revolution, and creation; here I argue that laughter can also challenge the accepted moral standards of both an individual and the society at large.

The *Superiority Theory* of humour and laughter places the focus on the motivations or intentions behind laughter. Whilst I do not adhere to the notion that all laughter is the result of feelings of aggression, disparagement, or malice, I do recognise that some laughter is. As noted by Darwin, “[l]aughter is frequently employed in a forced manner to conceal or mask some other state of mind, even anger” (Darwin 1872: 212). For Albert Rapp, laughter initially emerged in “the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel” and was a communal vocalisation of victory that was used prior to the human capacity for laughter (Rapp 1951: 21). Indeed, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer declared that “[t]o laugh at something is always to deride it” (Adorno & Horkheimer [1944] 1997: 141). As such, it is fitting to echo Peter Berger who notes: “Since malice is hardly an admirable quality, this also raises an ethical issue: Is there something reprehensible about comic

laughter?” (Berger 1997: 18). Indeed, because of the negative intentions that can underpin laughter, questions regarding its morality could seem rather easy to answer; if we believe that we should never laugh at others, or that laughter should never emerge from malintent, then laughter in this form is essentially immoral. However, there are more nuances to laughter and, as such, I will return to the place of the intentions in the morality of laughter a little later in this chapter. For now, I will focus on the physical and bodily manifestation of this purported aggression within laughter.

For some, the manifestation of this aggression is present not only in the intentions behind the laughter, it is also expressed physically on our faces through the baring of our teeth. The exposure of teeth is an essential physiological feature of laughter and often, although not always, of smiling too. As a result, following Darwin, some ethologists have suggested that laughter began as a display of aggression similar to growling (Bremmer & Roodenburg 1997b: 2). Here, a smile, or laugh, is not innocent but an act of aggression, a challenge, or a threat to another. Indeed, when we are laughed at, we may feel like the victims of a verbal attack. Remnants of this aggression could be said to be found in some forms of laughter, though we may now position it as a form of playful aggression, rather than an indication of the potential for physical attack. Perhaps, it is the result of both the display and intent of aggression that leads laughter to be frequently positioned as a “weapon” (Lorenz 1966: 284; Ludovici 1932: 72; Giappone, Francis & MacKenzie 2018).

Sexual Temptation: Giggling as a Gateway to Sex and Sin

As noted in chapter four, there is a power to women’s laughter. Whilst this chapter is not seeking to focus solely on the gendered experience of laughter, it must be noted that overt concerns about laughter and the body have tended to focus on women’s laughter because, in patriarchal societies, men are associated with the mental faculties and women associated with the body. Concerns regarding the erotic nature of laughter first emerged in the thoughts of the Greek Church Fathers (particularly Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom) who argued that there was an erotic nature to female laughter; as such, it should be avoided or, at the very least, moderated. Stephen Halliwell notes that, in Late Antiquity, laughter was perceived as “an instrument of erotic seduction”; laughing, especially in the form of tittering and giggling, was perceived as

being sexually suggestive and, as such, was known as “‘prostitutes’ laughter” (Halliwell 2008: 490-491). An example of the sexualisation of women’s laughter is found in the works of Clement of Alexandria, who notes that laughter can lead women to scandal (*Paedagogue*, II.V.VII.). One of his main concerns was with the physicality of laughter. He believed that women should not reveal any flesh and when “women, making a profession...throw back their heads and bare their necks indecently” they are acting provocatively to men (*Paedagogue*, II.II. XI.). According to Clement this ‘exposure’ of the flesh is erotic. Although this passage is discussing drinking, Halliwell suggests that because laughter can also cause heads to be thrown back and expose the neck, the exposure of female skin when laughing is also erotic and can lead to sexual temptation (Halliwell 2008: 491). Clement was concerned with how the bodily expression of laughter can lead to further bodily ‘sin’. Due to the purported connection of laughter with lust, eroticism, and prostitution, there was a concern that women’s laughter could lure men into fornication and lead them away from living a Christian life.¹⁸⁴ The Greek Church Fathers undoubtedly perceived a power in laughter and expressed concerns with its abundant presence in their societies; they were not attempting to maintain a solemn, rational, and restrained society but rather to create one. It is apparent that early Christian concerns regarding women’s laughter centre on the body; there is a recognition of the physicality of laughter and concerns regarding the lack of decorum are raised. Women’s laughter is positioned as seductive and, as such, it is in need of moderation. Failure to moderate women’s laughter can lead to a more serious sin: sex. According to Gilhus: “[Clement] points forward to later Christian conceptions of laughter, in which laughter was systematically seen in connection with the lustful body, and condemned” (Gilhus 1997: 59).

Indeed, the purported relationship between laughter and sex continued to be a concern within the Church. According to medieval physiology, laughter was understood to be located in the spleen; in positioning laughter amongst the ‘lower’ organs of the stomach (i.e. bowels and sex organs); this demoted the place of laughter not only in the body but

¹⁸⁴ The positioning of female laughter as a means of distracting men from their spiritual path is not a wholly Christian position. As noted in chapter three, in *The Numerical Discourse of the Buddha (Anguttara Nikaya)*, Buddhist monks are advised that the sound of and engagement with women’s laughter can make living a celibate life a challenge (Bodhi 2012: 702 and 1082).

in society. As noted by Conrad Hyers, “by identifying laughter with the spleen rather than the brain or heart, let alone spirit, the rational and religious values of a comic sensitivity were easily dismissed” (Hyers 1989a: 18; see also Bakhtin 1984: 55). It must be noted that I am not seeking to argue that insight laughter can be found in a single location or organ in the body. Rather, I would argue – in adherence to James’ model of consciousness (James 1890) – that laughter is the result of the multiple sensory totality of the body and the mind. Insight laughter is not subject to a special demarcation but rather it is integrated and reliant on the body as a whole.

Manfred Pfister notes that: “[i]n the case of both sex and laughter, what emerges is that both their histories are mainly histories of attempts to limit, control and civilise them” (Pfister 2002a: v-vi). Indeed, the attempts to limit, control, and civilise laughter (and sex) is not evidence of a lack of laughter (and sex) but rather suggestive of its overt presence (Foucault [1976] 1978: 17; Parvulescu 2010: 45). Perhaps, it is not surprising that laughter and sex are frequently allied, as both sex and laughter are “closely linked to our corporeal nature”; they are rooted in our bodies (Pfister 2002a: vi). Indeed, in the physiological sense, there is a similarity to be drawn between the act of laughing and the experience of orgasm (Horowitz 1997: 10-12; Critchley 2002: 8). In order to demonstrate this embodiment, we can see from the Tibetan Buddhist traditions there has been “a compatible relationship between reason and orgasmic bliss...practitioners seek to utilize the blissful and powerful mind of orgasm to realize the truth and the all-good ground of consciousness” (Hopkins 2000: 271). Here the uncontrolled experience of orgasm can lead to an altered state of consciousness. Moreover, these altered states of consciousness are also understood to be accessed through bodily acts such as sneezing (Hopkins 2000: 274 & 276) and perhaps laughter could also be included here. Both orgasm and laughter are sources of pleasure, have a build-up of tension before a sudden release, and involve losing control of the body and self. There appears to be a parallel bodily experience of both (insight) laughter and orgasm; both centre on the letting go of the self and a loss of control. Thus, given the parallel nature of these experiences it is perhaps unsurprising that history has sought to unite the act of laughter with sex.

Is Smiling Satisfactory?

In an attempt to overcome the concerns regarding the overt loss of control of the body during laughter, it was often suggested that smiling is more appropriate; smiling is perceived to be a “more measured physiological alternative” (Gantar 2005: 18). Many scholars position smiling as a form of laughter; if laughter is considered to be a spectrum, a smile would be a temperate form of laughter and a full-bodied guffaw would be seen to be excessive (e.g. Bharata [n.d.] 1950; Darwin 1872; Ruch & Eckmann 2001). However, Anca Parvulescu refutes the idea that smiling and laughing are a continuum: “We most often smile when we cannot laugh; and a smile rarely develops into a genuine laugh. In fact, the ‘civilising of laughter’ is simultaneous with the production of the modern smile” (Parvulescu 2010: 7). In physiological terms, “smiling is purely facial” whereas “higher intensity levels [of] laughter involves the whole body” (Ruch & Eckman 2001: 439). Similarly, Norman Holland notes that: “laughter differs from smiling simply in that a smile does not interrupt breathing” (Holland 1982: 76; see also Koestler 1964: 59; Critchley 2002: 8). Thus, smiling is perceived solely by looking at the face, whereas laughter can be perceived by looking at another’s body and hearing the distinctive noises.

For centuries antigelastics have advocated for smiling as an appropriate middle ground, particularly in moments where there is a desire to laugh. More recently they have been entangled in concerns of etiquette for the middle and upper-classes.¹⁸⁵ One of the most well-known examples can be found in the advice Lord Chesterfield¹⁸⁶ wrote in his letters to his son: “I could heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh” (Chesterfield [1748] 1901: 36). Here we see how laughter “upsets aesthetic and moral requirements for control” (Parvulescu 2010: 39). Whilst the restraint of laughter is undoubtedly positioned as a matter of etiquette, it would be insufficient to reduce concerns regarding laughter to etiquette alone. For example, as outlined in chapter four, many expectations regarding the expressive nature of laughter, often intersect with

¹⁸⁵ Acknowledgement of the expectations of etiquette amongst the upper classes is ridiculed in the infamous Aristocrat Joke.

¹⁸⁶ The celebrated letters between Lord Chesterfield and his son note the challenges of controlling laughter and the cause of concern it was for the upper classes in seventeenth century England, as such they are frequently featured in works on laughter and humour.

societal expectations regarding those who are marginalised on the grounds of gender, race, class etc.

In positioning smiling as a morally acceptable and preferred alternative, there is an underlying assumption that smiling demonstrates control of the body, whereas laughter is indicative of a loss of control: “Laughter is the sound of the body breaking the bonds of the mind; [a] smile is the gesture of the mind reigning in the excesses of the body” (Gantar 2005: 27). Interestingly, a relatively recent experiment that asked participants to listen to comedians and to refrain from both laughing and smiling found that “*it is easier to inhibit laughter than it is to inhibit smiling...smiling is a more nuanced, subtle medium than the ballistic blast of laughter, and its threshold for activation is much lower*” (Provine 2000: 52, original emphasis). Such a view undermines the rationale for positioning smiling as evidence of an individual’s control of their body, and presumably their mind.

Smiling could also be seen as representative of inward disposition, for example, Kant suggested that

children, especially girls, must be accustomed early to frank and unrestrained smiling, because the cheerfulness of their facial features gradually leaves a mark within and establishes a disposition to cheerfulness, friendliness, and sociability, which is an early preparation for this approximation to the virtue of benevolence.
(Kant [1798] 2006: 164)

However, it should be noted that, much like laughter, a smile can occur for various reasons and therefore can mean many things. As a result, it cannot be declared to be ethically neutral; like laughter, smiling is “not without its ethical caveats” (Gantar 2005: 29; see also Billig 2005: 14-15). For example, we can smile sardonically, condescendingly, or when lying. It is clear that in recognising the unavoidability of laughter, a graduated scale of acceptability developed, indicating that laughter that is less physical and more (purportedly) in control is better; here the emphasis on moderation and decorum comes through powerfully. However, perhaps as a result of the shaky ground on which smiling sought to find itself elevated, the desire to privilege smiling over laughter does not find itself to be a primary concern of contemporary ethicists.

Consideration of the various ways in which laughter has been positioned, such as an act of aggression, sexual temptation, and as a graduated scale of physiological expression, has demonstrated the complexity of the relationship between the body and ethics. As a result of negating the body and perceiving it as something which in itself can be a cause of ethical concern, the body is viewed as a complicating factor in the ethical realm, something that should be controlled and kept distinct from ethical matters. In this thesis, I have sought to redeem the body, to elevate its status, and to identify it as a useful means for providing moral knowledge through my concept of insight laughter. For example, chapter four explicitly explored examples of both the gendered experience of laughter and the unveiling of the female form that led to moral knowledge, as a result, of the laughter that ensued. When considering the ethics of laughter, it is clear that the problem of the body is centre stage. Indeed, when exploring ethical insight laughter, the body remains central but rather than being problematic it offers an opportunity through its capacity to change consciousness. I argue that, by moving beyond the perception of the body as problematic, it is possible for insight laughter to be recognised as having the capacity to contribute to ethics; it is possible to learn from emotion and the body as well as reason and the mind, and from the non-serious as well as the serious.

Loosening of the Body and the Mind

It has become evident that the ethical concerns that surround the body, and thus laughter, are grounded in an underlying concern that a “bodily loosening” takes place during laughter. When we laugh the decorum with which our body was previously held is lost; it convulses, is noisy, and bodily functions, such as breathing, appear to be beyond our control. Additionally, as noted, there is a resulting “mind loosening” that can occur when we laugh. Indeed, it is as a result of the embodiment of laughter that a shift in consciousness occurs. It is in the sudden burst of laughter that we are able to see beyond our ordinary perceptions and that enables thoughts from our peripheral consciousness to enter our central consciousness; it is in this shift that there is the potential for ethical insights to occur. Whilst the concerns regarding the loss of control of the body appear overtly in many historical considerations of the ethics of the body, the concerns regarding

the “loosening of the mind” are less explicit.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, concerns regarding the loosening of the mind appear to be presented as concerns regarding a loss of self: “the laughing person has been described as abandoning himself or herself to the body response” (Ruch & Eckman 2001: 428; see also Plessner 1970). Laughter is “a symptom of the mind losing control over the body” (Gantar 2005: 27). A correlation appears to be being drawn between a controlled body and a controlled mind; if the body is still then the mind is still, likewise if the body is out of control then so is the mind. It is a fear of this lack of control that leads to a desire to restrain the body and thus the mind. It also raises the question of usefulness, suggesting that the body and mind are at their most useful when controlled and still. Ethics often has a large element of control, as being concerned with controlled, and controlling, behaviour. As such, it advocates for careful contemplation and anything perceived to be out of control or non-serious, such as laughter, is excluded on the grounds that it is incompatible. Of course, because laughter is a physiological process and therefore inseparable from the body, it provides a useful example to highlight the ongoing desire to control both body and mind and to identify what is and is not of value in the realm of ethics and the creation of knowledge. Moreover, laughter is perceived as a concern, but it has the capacity to overcome and fracture this desire for control – laughter cannot be fully controlled, it has the capacity to shatter.

There is a purported sense of comfort in maintaining one’s own, and witnessing another’s maintenance of mental control, which is perceived through the maintenance of bodily control. Evidently some people become uncomfortable and on edge when they witness laughter that is either out of control and/or seemingly out of context; it is perceived as being disruptive and thus people are suspicious of it. Indeed, it is the positioning of laughter as irrational and as demonstrative of a loss of control that has led to the assumption that laughter can serve no purpose in the serious matter of ethics. I am seeking to overcome such an assumption and instead argue that because laughter offers a unique juncture between emotion and reason, it can serve a useful role in offering ethical insights. As such, rather than separating laughter from the ethical realm it should be considered as a fundamental part of it.

¹⁸⁷ Of course, it is not only in the act of laughter that we find evidence of loosening control that leads to insight. For example, in dreams insights may occur independently of rational thought (e.g. Windt & Voss 2018).

Moreover, an ongoing concern has been that the “bodily loosening” could be perceived as the mind losing control of its thoughts; laughter is purportedly a distraction from serious contemplation, whether in the moral or religious realm. This echoes, as noted above, the concerns that often surround emotions more generally. When laughing an individual could be perceived as being temporarily “out of themselves” and taking individuals away from rational thought, bodily decorum, and focusing on God. However, as we have seen, this view is grounded in concerns of the body, for example in Christianity: “[t]here has been a tendency to concentrate on the body as an instrument of the devil, despite the fact that it is also an instrument of salvation” (Le Goff 1997: 46). Much like Jacques Le Goff, I argue that it is important to redeem the body; it is only through a recognition of the value of the body in the creation of knowledge that laughter and its capacity for insight can be identified and understood. Laughter should not be dismissed because it does not align with the expectations of a controlled body and mind when engaging with ethics; it is precisely because the body and mind are loosened that laughter can offer new insights and make a contribution to ethics. As such, it is necessary for the historical negation of the body and the continuing privileging of the mind in the creation of knowledge to be overcome.

Explicitly Excluding Laughter From Ethics

The exclusion of laughter from ethics tends to be identifiable by its (notable) absence; put simply laughter is not a visible presence in established literature on ethics. Despite this there are occasions when the exclusion is evident, a useful example of the explicit and intentional exclusion of laughter from ethics as a result of its bodily nature is found in the works of Immanuel Kant. Whilst Kant adopted a prescriptive approach to ethics, believing that there are categorical imperatives, namely objective unconditional moral principles to be followed in all circumstances, his remarks on laughter do not consider the ethics *of* laughter.¹⁸⁸ It is perhaps surprising that not only does Kant not offer a prescriptive

¹⁸⁸ It must be noted that in his later work Kant does suggest that there is a distinction between “sociable” laughter that seeks an atmosphere of cheerfulness and “hostile” laughter that is directed at someone. Though the latter is not necessarily immoral, Kant suggests that laughing at “the expense of a simpleton is unrefined...[and] proof of bad taste as well as obtuse moral feeling on the part of those who can burst out laughing at this” (Kant [1798] 2006: 164). However, these brief asides could not be said to constitute an ethics of laughter.

approach to the ethics of laughter but he offered laughter (and jokes) immunity from the moral realm (Kant [1790] 2012: 220).

Kant addresses the subject of laughter in two texts. First, in his 1790 *Critique of Judgement* and, second, in his 1798 *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Kant's relatively brief considerations of laughter are found in relation to joke-telling during dinner parties and naiveté, though he focuses on the former.¹⁸⁹ Kant emphasises the importance and necessity of the body for laughter. However, he does not explore the external expression of laughter, rather, he focuses on the effect of laughter on the internal organs, describing:

an alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic portions of our intestines, which communicates itself to the diaphragm (like that which ticklish people feel). In connexion with this the lungs expel air at rapidly succeeding intervals, and this bringing about a movement beneficial to health...

(Kant [1790] 2012: 256; see also [1798] 2006: 161)

Like others, both before and after him, Kant makes the dubious claim that laughter has demonstrable health benefits (see chapter one of this thesis). However, it is not the health benefits which are of interest but rather the location of laughter in the body.¹⁹⁰

Kant notes that when we laugh “ultimately nothing is thought” (Kant [1790] 2012: 253); he reaches this conclusion on the grounds that laughter is experienced through the body: “the animation in both cases¹⁹¹ is merely bodily, although it is excited by ideas of the mind” (Kant [1790] 2012: 253). He does not recognise the capacity for the body to effect consciousness and thus to effect thinking. For Kant, laughter is a bodily response to mental stimuli; we laugh because we are unable to identify reason, or what we expected, in the imaginary presented to us; we laugh as a result of perceiving something unexpected or absurd or incongruous.¹⁹² Thus for Kant: “*laughter is an affection arising from the*

¹⁸⁹ Kant is said to have believed that “the conversation at dinner goes through three stages – narration, discussion, and jest” (Wallace 1899: 40).

¹⁹⁰ It could be argued that Kant is referencing the male body here, as he positions laughter as “masculine”, and crying as “feminine (with men it is effeminate)” (Kant [1798] 2006: 154).

¹⁹¹ The other “case”, in question here, is music.

¹⁹² Although Kant's remarks on laughter are limited and often centred on its occurrence at dinner parties it is common amongst humour scholars to associate Kant with the *Incongruity Theory* (e.g. Morreall 1983). However, as Kant in no way offers nor seeks to offer a comprehensive theory of laughter, let alone position himself as an intentional advocate for a specific theory of humour, I would suggest this association is tenuous.

sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Kant [1790] 2012: 254, original emphasis).

Although Kant recognises that laughter is the result of a stimulus of the mind, he argues that thought is absent during laughter because it is in the body. Here we see how the mind is attributed with and therefore privileged in the creation of knowledge, whereas the potential of the body is unconsidered. Moreover, because laughter is bodily, Kant argues that laughter should not be subject to moral scrutiny. Kant defines laughter, humour, and jests as a "pleasant art", which means there is no reflection; it is simply an attempt to seek pleasure in the moment (Kant [1790] 2012: 220). For Kant, this absence of reflection leads to a sense of immunity from the moral realm: "no one will be answerable for what he says, because they are only concerned with momentary entertainment, and not with any permanent material for reflection or subsequent discussion" (Kant [1790] 2012: 220). This statement is important for my own thesis for two reasons. First, Kant is stating that laughter should not be subject to moral scrutiny, that there cannot be nor should there be an ethics of laughter because it is pursued for entertainment purposes only. It is clear from the analysis so far that this thesis challenges Kant and his view of the body; laughter can be subject to ethical evaluation and entertainment certainly has the capacity to be morally suspect. Second, Kant suggests that because laughter is grounded in the body it is non-serious, it does not seek a rational end, it offers no "material for reflection". However, I have argued that the body can play an important role in the creation of knowledge and that it is evidenced through laughter, which can offer moments of insight. Moreover, we can reflect on our laughter and this reflection offers an opportunity for (moral) change. It is the perception of laughter as non-serious, irrational, and unreflective that leads Kant (and I would argue others, particularly in the long tradition emerging from Christianity and Western philosophical thought) to exclude laughter from ethics. However, I will continue to argue that to exclude laughter from ethics is to overlook an important feature of (some) laughter.

Achieving Ethical Insight

As noted above, there has often been an underlying expectation that the consideration of ethical matters is dependent on reason and rationality, rather than emotion and the body;

ethics is grounded in the serious. Moreover, the negation of the body has led to laughter being overlooked as a means of insight; listening to the body has been relegated to the 'irrational' realm. However, I have argued that because the body is an essential part of human experience it should not be ignored or negated. It is important to value the body, as the body provides the opportunity for insight laughter and thus the creation of knowledge and understanding. In returning to, and redeeming, the body, we can learn from it. I seek to overcome the positioning of laughter as an ethical concern in and of itself, and instead position laughter as a means of creating ethical insight. I argue that the body must be redeemed, as it is only through recognising and positioning the body as a valid means of creating ethical knowledge that insight laughter can be considered. Moving past the historical negation of the body, a body deemed to be out of control should not be feared but embraced as a potential means of gaining ethical knowledge. Rather than only seeking insight in moments of calm, we should embrace the opportunities for learning in moments of disruption. It is often when our mind is not focused on the matter at hand that a moment of insight can occur. Laughter provides this opportunity as it occurs at the juncture between emotion and reason and, as such, it can serve a useful role in offering ethical insights and should be considered a fundamental part of ethics. I seek to address the neglect of the place of laughter in ethics because, when we bring emotion back to the body, laughter can enter and demonstrate its potential through bodily and mind loosening.

Laughter and Ethical Truths

Having considered the ethics *of* laughter, it is necessary to explore the relationship of laughter *and* ethics, namely how laughter has the capacity to lead to ethical insights and moral transformations. I seek to argue that laughter can be a means of ethical insight – in much the same way that I demonstrated earlier that laughter can be a means of insight within the context of religious experience and broader social matters relating to gender.

Ethical insight can be understood as a new perception or way of thinking regarding an ethical matter, that results, as I have outlined, from a shift that occurs in our streams of consciousness. As a result of this insight, the individual who laughed may also seek to amend their behaviour and a moral transformation can take place. As such, ethical insight

laughter is not only a shift in thinking but also in action. Moreover, whilst ethical insight laughter may be the result of something funny; de Sousa suggests that comedy has the capacity to “bring us closer to reality, not further away...as an avenue to knowledge, it has the advantage of always seeking fresh perspectives” (de Sousa 1987: 246). I would argue that it is a direct result of our laughter, at the comedy or an alternative source, that provides the insight here; it is the laughter that is an “avenue to knowledge”, as it is the bodily act of laughter that enables the laughter to occur through a shift in consciousness. Insight laughter does not have to be a response to something funny, it can occur in moments of surprise or shock. However, identifying examples of this are harder to come by as a result of their spontaneity and perhaps everyday nature. What is recognised here is the “fresh perspectives”; the result of insight laughter is just this, something previously unrealised becomes realised during the laughter.

Much like religious experience, as considered in chapter three, the search for ethical truths is often positioned – particularly in the realms of theology and philosophy – as a serious endeavour, free from lightness, frivolity and laughter. However, Jacqueline Bussie argues that laughter has a transformative power and is a tool used by the oppressed to challenge the status quo. As such, she claims that: “Laughter ‘from below’, far from being frivolous and trifling, belies an utmost seriousness” (Bussie 2007: 15).¹⁹³ Similarly, in his book: *Ethical Consensus and the Truth of Laughter: The Structure of Moral Transformations*, Hub Zwart argues convincingly against the common perception that laughter and morality are incompatible, instead suggesting that laughter can act as a means of challenging dominant moral discourses: “crucial ruptures in the history of morality were accompanied by and made possible by laughter” (Zwart 1996: 10). Zwart’s position supports my own view, that laughter is disruptive. However, as demonstrated in my earlier chapters, I note that laughter can challenge beyond the moral realm, its ruptures can lead to the disruption of patriarchal structures within society and to previously unrealised religious or spiritual insights. Moreover, whilst laughter can lead

¹⁹³ It is worth noting that Mikhail Bakhtin’s examination of popular humour and folk culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance argues that “laughter makes no exception for the upper stratum, but indeed it is usually directed towards it” (Bakhtin 1984: 88). Bakhtin positions laughter as a tool of the oppressed masses, but he restricts its use to specific occasions, namely during festivities. Moreover, he positions laughter, not as resulting from individual bodies but from the “social consciousness of all the people” (Bakhtin 1984: 92).

to ruptures in dominant moral discourses, laughter can also lead individuals (and groups) to recognise more profound moral truths that do not require or lead to the destabilisation of dominant discourses. It is here that the ambiguity of laughter is present; laughter has both the potential to counter dominant discourses and to reemphasise dominant discourses. As a result of this ambiguity, it is necessary to consider the place of laughter not only as a means of disrupting dominant moral discourses but also as enabling individuals to see moral truths they had previously not considered. Additionally, I have sought to consider the place of the morality of laughter; unlike Zwart (and Kant) I do not wish to position laughter as excluded from moral scrutiny.¹⁹⁴ Despite these criticisms, Zwart offers an excellent starting point in his claim that: “[i]t is in the experience of laughter...that the vulnerability of established morality finds itself exposed, that moral truth reveals itself to us, and that moral subjectivity is in fact produced” (Zwart 1996: 8). Indeed, I have sought to argue that ethical insight can occur during laughter, that a new way of thinking relating to a moral issue can be achieved and that this shift in thinking offers the opportunity for a transformation of the self and therefore a change in ethical behaviour. As such, insight laughter should be seen as having a presence in the moral realm and as offering the potential to influence behaviour.

In considering the laughter of an individual, our laughter can often be perceived as a reflection of our inner character and, as noted, it is something that we often seek to control. Simon Critchley notes that “[p]erhaps one laughs at jokes one would rather *not* laugh at. Humour can provide information about oneself that one would rather *not* have” (Critchley 2002: 74, original emphasis) and, as a result, it can highlight a requirement for change. Rather than humour providing information about oneself, I suggest it is the laughter that enables the realisation to occur and that humour is not a necessary component. Moreover, this rightly returns us to the question: can laughter lead to the ethical transformation of an individual? As outlined above, being laughed at, or laughing more generally, may lead to the improvement of your moral character, but it may not. Insight laughter offers the opportunity for the ethical transformation of an individual, but the decision to change behaviour based on ethical insight is the choice of the individual,

¹⁹⁴ Whilst Zwart does not make this claim explicitly, the absence of any consideration of the morality of laughter is taken as indicative of his position.

it is not a guaranteed outcome, nor is a transformation always for the better – this is dependent on how we would evaluate the insight that the laughter brings to consciousness.

Conclusion

In recognition of the historical negation of the body on the grounds that the loosening of the body is something to be feared and thus controlled, this chapter has sought to redeem the place of the body, and thus the place of laughter. This thesis argues that the body can play an important role in creating knowledge. It is by embracing the possibilities of the body and of challenging the boundaries of emotion, reason, and ethics, that it has been possible to identify the value of the non-serious and to reposition laughter as a means of knowledge creation within ethics. Whilst acknowledging the moral ambiguity of laughter, I have identified a number of features that must be considered prior to the ethical judgment of laughter, namely: the context of the laughter, the intention behind the laughter, and the consequences of the laughter. Laughter, rather than the object of laughter, has been central to the consideration of ethical questions and judgements. Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated that laughter can act as a valid means of achieving ethical insight; the laughing body can lead to a shift in thinking that provides the opportunity to transform the self through changes in ethical behaviour.

Although this chapter has explicitly explored ethical insight, much of the laughter that has been considered throughout this thesis has demonstrated the realisation of ethical concerns and/or strived for ethical improvements. For example, in considering laughter as religious experience in chapter three, it was evident that a recognition of the absurdity of life, through laughter, could enable a change in an individual's behaviour. Likewise, chapter four demonstrated that whilst female laughter was often positioned as evidence of a woman's immorality, the reality is that female laughter often has the power to expose inequalities and to pass critical comment on society. Thus, it must be recognised that there is an ethical component in all realms of insight laughter.

CONCLUSION

In the beginning God created laughter...

This thesis has considered various dimensions and examples of laughter and its location within the history of ideas. While touching on aspects of the Biblical texts and related studies, due to the existing scholarship on laughter and humour in the Bible (e.g. Hyers 1987; Whedbee 1998; Arbuckle 2008), this thesis has not yet sought to focus on and explore specific biblical passages in detail. However, the Bible does provide an important and early example of laughter. Indeed, it is in the laughter of Abraham and Sarah that, I will argue, we find one of the earliest accounts of not only laughter, but of insight laughter. Whilst there have been many considerations of the biblical laughter of Abraham and Sarah (e.g. Resnick 1987; Sanders 1995; Screech 1997; Laude 2005; Conybeare 2013), I have chosen to consider this story in my conclusion because it is demonstrative of insight laughter, it exemplifies the effect that the politics and ethics of the body has on our valuation of laughter and, as such, it provides a useful concluding summary of the central argument of this thesis.

In Genesis 17-18 we find the first (two) occurrences of laughter in the Bible. Indeed, the early inclusion of laughter may be indicative of the importance and prevalence of laughter in both human and religious experience. In Genesis 17 we see that Sarah and Abraham are well into their old age, aged 90 and 100 respectively. Despite being beyond the usual child-bearing years, God appears to Abraham and tells him that he will give him a son. Abraham's response to this declaration is to laugh: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" (Genesis 17:17). God does not rebuke Abraham's questioning, but instead confirms, or perhaps reassures Abraham, by stating: "your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac" (Genesis 17:19). It is worth noting that in Hebrew 'Isaac' means 'he laughs'.

In Genesis 18, unlike Abraham, Sarah is not directly in the presence of God, when she laughs, instead, she is behind a tent curtain and it is unclear if she is even aware that God is the one speaking to Abraham. From the tent she hears someone (who the reader knows is God) proclaim to Abraham that: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (Genesis 18: 10). In this account, there is no laughter from Abraham. However, just as we saw Abraham laugh in Genesis 17, here we see that Sarah laughs: "Sarah laughed to herself, saying 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'" (Genesis 18:12). Both Abraham and Sarah explicitly state that hearing they will conceive a child is a surprise because they are both in old age. However, a key distinction between Abraham and Sarah's laughter is that God does not explicitly acknowledge Abraham's laughter, despite the fact that he appears to experience an explosive fit of laughter, whereas God does acknowledge Sarah's laugh, even though it does not take place in his direct presence. Rather than speaking directly to Sarah, God reiterates Sarah's question and challenges Abraham, asking: "'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:13). Although behind the tent curtain, Sarah chooses to respond. She is described as denying laughing and stating: "I did not laugh"; with God responding "Oh yes, you did laugh" (Genesis 18:15). This denial has tended to be interpreted as evidence that Sarah knew she should not have laughed, but there is no evidence that Sarah was aware that Abraham was in the presence of God and that she was laughing at God's suggestion. Indeed, although God draws attention to Sarah's laughter, this does not stop God's promise coming true.

Abraham and Sarah's laughter is both expected and surprising: on the one hand, the concept of conceiving and giving birth at 90 years old is understandably laughable, on the other hand, God is positioned as omnipotent and anyone who was faithful would recognise there are no limits to God's power. As identified throughout this thesis, laughter is ambiguous, so it is necessary to ask: what kind of laughter is taking place? Moreover, does the fact that God does not acknowledge Abraham's laughter suggest that there was a distinction between the intentions and acceptability of Abraham and Sarah's laughter?

Perhaps, surprisingly, the ambiguous nature of their laughter is often overlooked. Many commentators seek to distinguish Abraham and Sarah's laughter and fail to recognise that their laughter can be viewed through a variety of lenses. As such, in response to God's

rebuke of Sarah, many commentators have sought to condemn her laughter and to advocate for, or even celebrate, Abraham's laughter. For example: Irven Resnick, who notes that he is drawing on the Christian tradition before him,¹⁹⁵ claims that Abraham's laughter was filled with "joy, wonder, or admiration", whereas Sarah's laughter demonstrated "a lack of faith" (Resnick 1987: 91); Barry Sanders claims that Abraham laughs in "disbelief", whereas Sarah's laugh is "scornful" (Sanders 1995: 43); Michael Screech argues that Abraham's laughter was "joyful and trusting", whereas Sarah's laughter was "faithless scoffing" (Screech 1997: xx-xxi); and Patrick Laude claims that Abraham's laughter is the result of "joy, surprise, or relief", whereas Sarah's laughter is "a kind of incredulous laughter, the laughter of human powerlessness and lack of faith" (Laude 2005: 145-146). Here the distinction between the positive descriptions of Abraham's joyful and faithful laughter is contrasted with Sarah's scornful faithless laughter. Catherine Conybeare declared that recognising the distinctive interpretations of the laughter may lead to "a somewhat banal point about the gender bias [of commentators]" (Conybeare 2013: 23), I do not find such a recognition to be banal, but instead significant and revealing of fundamental values. Despite the similarities behind the motivations of their laughter, ethical connotations are attributed to the laughter; negative ethical connotations are applied to Sarah and positive connotations are applied to Abraham. Surely if Sarah was laughing *at* God then Abraham was also laughing *at* God? Moreover, would an angered God proceed to reward (Abraham and) Sarah with a son?

I want to frame this text in a particular way, I want to consider the laughter through the lens of insight. Both Abraham and Sarah experience shock or surprise that leads to laughter, something we have seen throughout this thesis. I believe that this shock or surprise needs to be distinguished from an absence of faith, as being (perhaps pleasantly) surprised is not necessarily indicative of scepticism. Moreover, rather than a moment of disbelief, I would argue that both Abraham and Sarah's laughter could be read as a moment of insight; it could be understood that their laughter led to a shift in consciousness that enabled them to realise the power of God to grant them a child, even

¹⁹⁵ The motivations behind the laughter have long been debated within both the early Jewish and Christian tradition (e.g. Philo of Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria, Basil of Caesera, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose of Milan) and there are similarities between Jewish midrash and the later Christian tradition (Bussie 2007: 23).

in seemingly absurd circumstances. In a similar vein, Patrick Laude suggests that Abraham's laughter was "a sudden understanding of the disproportion between 'human impossibility' and 'Divine All-Possibility'" (Laude 2005: 146). Unfortunately, he does not afford the same potential to Sarah's laughter. For Laude, Sarah's laughter remains demonstrative of a lack of faith. Positioning both Abraham and Sarah's laughter as one of insight does not negate the potential for other emotions, such as surprise or joy, to be present or provoke the laughter, but rather it is indicative of the insight that occurred during their laughter.

It is also important to recognise the distinction of the embodiment of Abraham and Sarah's laughter. Although there is only a brief description, we see that Abraham "fell on his face and laughed". Did Abraham fall on his face in an attempt to stifle his laughter in the presence of God? Was this a laugh in the mode of prostration? Was his laughter so all-consuming that he fell to the floor in an uncontrollable fit? The fact that Abraham's whole body seems to be consumed by the laughter suggests the strength of the laughter. Compare this laughter with Sarah's, which was "to herself" and we can suppose that Sarah's laughter was not all consuming, but more restrained. Perhaps, here, we are witnessing an early distinction of gendered expectations regarding the bodily experience of laughter; whilst men can laugh freely women's laughter must be restrained.

This brief exegesis of the laughter of Abraham and Sarah offers a culmination of a number of key ideas within this thesis and confirms the thesis claim that the wider negation of the body has led to the rejection of laughter in the creation of knowledge and understanding. Laughter is associated with negative disruption rather than positive production. Moreover, it demonstrates how the bodily experience of laughter is gendered, that laughter can be attributed with ethical connotations (whether real or imagined), that laughter can be an important feature of religious experience, and that ultimately bodily laughter can offer the potential for insight.

Identifying the Significance

This thesis has sought to displace the privilege afforded to the mind in the creation of knowledge and understanding. In order to achieve this, it has used the theory of William

James to ground insight laughter in a conceptual framework that recognises the relationship of the body, consciousness, and knowledge. This framework has enabled my reconceptualisation of laughter to demonstrate the epistemic value of a specific form of laughter which I have termed insight laughter. As a result, this thesis has challenged the Western philosophical hierarchy of knowledge; it has redeemed the body in order to demonstrate the value of embodied laughter in the creation of knowledge. Moreover, in highlighting how the bodily act of laughter can contribute to religious and ethical understanding, this thesis has sought to demonstrate the importance of the non-serious in the study of religion and to recognise the need and potential for further research in this area.

In seeking to demonstrate the value of laughter, it has become clear that it is necessary to overcome the historical negation of the body, as many of the concerns regarding laughter result from wider gendered and ethical concerns regarding the body. By considering a range of examples, this thesis has demonstrated the historical and enduring trepidation that surrounds the laughing body. This apprehension leads to a conflict between a desire to suppress and a desire to harness the disruptive power of laughter. As identified in chapter one, the disruptive nature of laughter led to an emerging recognition of the potential for laughter as a means of insight (e.g. Bataille [1953] 1986; Foucault [1966] 1970; Davis 2000) and yet the decision of these thinkers to provide cerebral conceptualisations of laughter preserved the exclusion of the body from the creation of knowledge. Whilst using these thinkers as a starting point, this thesis has sought to advocate for bodily laughter, in light of the recognition that insight laughter depicts an example of the fruition of the relationship of the body and consciousness in the creation of knowledge and understanding.

Although I recognise the value of the body in the creation of knowledge, the reduction of laughter to the cerebral continued to emerge as a theme throughout this thesis. Even amongst purported advocates of the body, such as Osho, the visceral imagery of the laughing body was – at times – positioned as laughter that transcends (the need for) the body. Similarly, despite the politics of the body being a prominent feature in feminist literature, it was surprising to recognise that many of the feminist engagements with laughter were also cerebral and/or limited to textual analysis.

Despite the overlooking of the value of the body for laughter, the critical engagement with a range of examples of laughter has made it possible to challenge existing ways of thinking. For example, chapter three challenged the narrative that the study of religious experience should be centred on the serious features of religious traditions and demonstrated the necessity of engaging with the non-serious features of religious traditions, not only in Osho and the Rajneesh Movement but beyond. Thus, our religious and ethical understanding can be furthered through the active engagement with the non-serious. In my consideration of laughter through a feminist lens, chapter four demonstrated how feminism enables us to reconceive Western patriarchal ways of thinking. Moreover, it demonstrated the potential for laughter to be an important feminist strategy for the future, by providing an understanding of insight on the cusp of women, emotion, and body. Finally, through a recognition of the ethical intersection of women, body, and laughter, chapter five demonstrated that, despite the (often) intentional exclusion, laughter can make a valuable contribution to ethics when we redeem the body. As such, this thesis has offered the opportunity to rethink laughter, to demonstrate its capacity to disrupt and displace habitual thinking and to offer the potential to transform behaviour. Moreover, my reconceptualisation of laughter has redeemed the potential of the body in the creation of knowledge and understanding.

Where Next?

This thesis has highlighted that there is a complicated relationship between laughter and religious and philosophical traditions. However, it is because this relationship is so complicated that it deserves to be interrogated further and there are a number of potential avenues for future research. This thesis has offered a reconsideration of laughter and focused on it in the specific form of insight laughter. However, I recognise that the ambiguity of laughter means that there are other ways of conceptualising laughter and there is the potential for other forms of laughter to be considered within the history of ideas that also incorporates philosophical and religious ideas. Additionally, I believe there is the potential to consider the place of laughter within 'everyday religion'. In a similar vein to Graham Harvey's 2013 work, *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*, which considers how religion pervades everyday experiences, an anthropological consideration of laughter in the everyday life of believers could shed

further light on the relationships between both humans and the sacred. Whilst there has been some recent research on whether faith or non-belief affects what is identified as funny (e.g. Saroglou 2002a & 2002b; Schweizer & Ott 2016 & 2018; McIntyre 2019), I believe there is the opportunity to centre this exploration on laughter; as has been demonstrated in this thesis, we must recognise that our laughter extends well beyond the funny.

Thus, my reconceptualisation of laughter in the realm of insight has provided an opportunity to rethink our understanding of ourselves, to identify the opportunity for the body to play a central role in the creation of knowledge and understanding and to highlight the need to integrate the non-serious in the study of religion.

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