CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Greek laughter in theory and practice

Laughter . . . is a reflex that characterises man alone and has its own history . . . We do not laugh now as people once laughed . . . a definition [of the comic and of laughter] can be only historical.

Vladimir Propp

Men have been wise in many different modes, but they have always laughed the same way.

Samuel Johnson

NATURE AND CULTURE, BODIES AND MINDS

When ancient Greeks laughed, did they take themselves to be yielding to an instinct rooted in their animal bodies or displaying a characteristic they shared with their gods? Might they have imagined, for that matter, that they were doing both those things at the same time?

In broaching such large, scene-setting questions, it is hard to avoid taking initial orientation from Aristotle’s famous obiter dictum in the Parts of Animals that humans are the only living things capable of laughter. This proposition – sometimes replaced in antiquity, and even conflated (as it occasionally still is), with the logically distinct idea of laughter as part of the essence of humans – addresses an issue which has continued to provoke debate right up to the contemporary study of animal behaviour. It would be


2 For Aristotle’s claim (Part. An. 3.10, 673a8) and its later history, see ch. 6, 315–16. Critchley (2002) 25, paraphrasing the tradition, slides from laughter as ‘proper to’ humans (i.e., in Aristotelian terms, an exclusive capacity of theirs) to laughter as ‘essentially human’. Aristotle never asserts the latter, though he does regard laughter as belonging to a fully human life: ch. 6, 307–31.
unreasonable to expect Aristotle, for all his wide-ranging biological interests, to have anticipated the findings of the modern science of ethology, which claims to identify among other primates (and possibly elsewhere too) forms of behaviour that are physically and even socially analogous to laughter (and smiling) and that can help shed light on the evolution of these types of body language among humans. But it is nevertheless surprising that Aristotle did not qualify his predication of human uniqueness in this respect. At a simple level of what might be called ‘folk ethology’, others in antiquity certainly reached divergent conclusions. It is true that the only direct denial of the Aristotelian tenet is found in the Christian Lactantius, writing in Latin in the early fourth century AD. But Lactantius’ assertion that laughter can be observed not only in the appearance of the ears, mouths and eyes of certain animals (he is presumably thinking, in part at least, of dogs) but also in their capacity to play both with humans and among themselves, can hardly have been original with him. In fact, even during Aristotle’s own lifetime Xenophon, an aficionado of hunting with dogs (a favourite activity of many wealthy Greeks), has no difficulty in detecting ‘smiles’ on the faces of eager hounds. Nor does he feel any need to elaborate the point, which must therefore have been readily intelligible to his readership, even though it is only many centuries later, in the ornate didactic poetry of Oppian, that dogs are again depicted in such terms. Aelian can similarly adduce the smiles of oxen in a way which suggests an uncontroversial perception that would probably have been familiar to farmers and others. For the purposes of imaginative assimilation rather than literal description, it was easy to picture certain kinds of animal behaviour as redolent of laughter. The Philocleon of Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, for instance, when prancing around scoffing drunkenly at his fellow-symposiasts, is compared to a frisky little ass. The accused in a fourth-century Athenian court case (to be considered

1 For modern ethological literature, and some traces of ‘folk ethology’ in antiquity, see Appendix 1. The Aristotelian commentator David (c. AD 600), *In Isag. 204.14–16*, wrongly claims that Aristotle called the heron capable of laughter in *Hist. An.*

2 Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 3.10.2, arguing that the only uniquely human property is knowledge of god; but he assumes the familiarity of ‘only humans laugh’.

3 Xen. *Cyn.* 4.3, where the (rare) verb ἐμφαινεῖν reinforces the adj. φῶναίρετος, ‘bright’, at 4.2 (cf. n. 33 below); the whole context, 4.2–4, posits expressive body language in animals (as does Ael. *NA* 5.25; cf. next note). See ibid. 5.4 for the kindred idea of animal *play* (hares frolicking in a full moon); cf. the ‘bright’ (γαλανός) face ascribed to fawning dogs at ps.-Arist. *Physiog.* 6.81b37–8, with Clarke (2005a) 43–4 for affinities with smiling. Oppian, *Cyn.* 1.507, 525, 4.363 uses κούρασθαι (ch. 2 n. 15) of the laughter-like excitement of hunting dogs; cf. the same verb of deer at *Cyn.* 2.237 (with 2.46 for a smile-like look). Oppian, *Hal.* 2.626 (different author?) has jackals ‘laughing’ over dead stags.

4 Ael. *NA* 6.10. Aelian’s ascription of scorn (*katagelai*) to the hare watching its pursuers, *ibid.* 13.14.32, is not directly facial but reads a mental state into body posture; cf. n. 91 below on owls.
in more detail later) is alleged to have displayed exultant derision for his battered enemy by performing a crowing cock-song-and-dance around him. The epigrammatist Meleager makes a disturbed lover hear (with intense vexation) the early cock-crow itself as the bird’s voicing of pleasurable laughter. And at least some people thought they heard laughter-like sounds in the neighing of horses. To such images can be added the suggestive vignettes of Aesopic fables, in which laughter or smiles are commonly ascribed to animals. Does this convention of the genre depend only on anthropomorphising fantasy, or might it obliquely reflect habits of thinking which were more diffusely present in dealings with animals? Patchy though the overall evidence may be, not everyone was as confident as Aristotle of excluding laughter from the expressive repertoire of species other than humans.

When we turn from animals to the other end of the spectrum, the situation is rather clearer. Aristotle himself, it is worth noting, held a larger view in which there was no room for belief in laughter as a trait of the divine. For him, therefore, laughter was one of the things which helped define a peculiarly human position in the world, suspended between the domains of animals and gods. But most Greeks thought otherwise. The anthropomorphic traditions of Greek religion left no doubt that laughter (and smiles) had an important place in the divine realm; a deity incapable of laughter was the exception, not the rule. The remarkable Homeric images,

7 Philocheon: Wαpsi 1505–6; cf. n. 91 below, with ch. 4., 209–30, and the ‘laughing’ as in the next note (Ar. Wαpsi 179 has the opposite, a comically ‘weeping’ donkey). Conon’s cock-crowing dance: 34–5 below. Meleager: Anth. Pal. 12.137.4 (cf. n. 89 below). Horses: Eutecnius, Para. Opp. 12.28 Tüselmann (unknown date) describes a horse’s neigh as ‘like a laugh of shared pleasure in its rider’ (οὐδ’ προσέχειν κείνος καὶ συνημένος); cf. Appendix 1 n. 24. Surprisingly, no ancient text ascribes laughter to such as monkeys/apes, despite their supposedly intrinsic inscrivability (ch. 6 n. 94; cf. 31. 41 below on Semonides’ monkey woman), though Galen, Usi parr. 1.22 (3.80 Kühn) pictures one as a playmate of children; in the Renaissance, by contrast, Erasmus ascribes laughter to dogs and monkeys: Schrech (1997) 3. McDermott (1938) 18 (no. 123), 240–1 (no. 337), detects smiling apes in visual artefacts; cf. 180 (no. 119), 231 (no. 288). But a simian’s curving mouth is no guarantee of a smile: see e.g. Robinson (1931) pl. 59.420a (with 99, no. 420).

8 Laughter/smile in animal fables: e.g. Aesop 39, 150, 226, 322 Perry, Babrius 94.6, 106.29, 107.9, 140.7; cf. the anthropomorphic laughter of donkey and ostrich in Job 39.8, 17. Akin to fable is occasional depiction of animal laughter in art: see Lissarrague (2000) 110 for a terracotta mirthful ass. On the other hand, Lucian’s mockery of Peripatetic belief in the human uniqueness of laughter, Vit. Auctio 26, depends satirically on the redundancy of pointing out that an ass cannot laugh; cf. his play on this (and the equivalence of laughter and neighing/braying: n. 7 above) at Asin. 15. For a tangential link between laughter and camels, see Appendix 1 n. 14.

9 Aristotle frames the divine in terms of contemplative blessedness, not practical activity (a conception of the gods he finds ‘ridiculous’): EN 10.8, 1178b8–22.

10 The goddess Adrasteia/Nemesis is skelthrípos, ‘grim-faced’, in Men. fr. 226, therefore without smiles/laughter (cf. n. 101 below); this symbolises implacable vengefulness; but Lucian, Apol. 6
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In both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, of collectively ‘unquenchable’ or irrepressible laughter among the Olympians – laughter, what’s more, directed by gods against other gods – are the most concentrated testimony to the character of those traditions. But they were far from unique. In addition to other passages in the Homeric poems themselves, depictions of divine laughter appear in numerous texts and in all periods of Greek literature; they will figure frequently in subsequent chapters of this book. Nor is the idea of the laughter of gods exclusively ‘literary’. As Chapter 4 will explain in detail, it informs a great deal of practical Greek religion, helping to explain the ethos of many of its festivals and rituals, not least those in honour of Demeter and Dionysus, deities both thought of as capable of laughter in rather distinctive ways. The very concept of religious festivity (ἐορτάζειν, the enactment of *heortai*) is closely entwined in Greek thought with notions of ‘play’, celebration and laughter; and it makes no sense to worship the gods in this way unless they themselves can somehow appreciate and share the spirit of laughter, as Homer and others had shown them doing. The grip of this religious mentality in the archaic and classical periods induced Plato, in a gesture of radical theological revisionism (and bodily puritanism), to argue the need specifically to repudiate belief in gods who were ‘lovers of laughter’ (*philogelōtes*) and who could be ‘overcome’ by it.\footnote{Rep. 3.388e–389a.} Some of Plato’s later followers in turn resorted to allegorical readings of Homer to resolve what they saw as the problem. Yet the tenacity of the older model of the divine within Greek culture was such that Choricius of Gaza, a rhetorician working in the sixth century AD against a mixed background of pagan and Christian values, felt able to claim that laughter, alongside rationality (*logos*), was actually one of two features which humans shared with the divine and which separated them from ‘irrational nature’, i.e. from other animals.\footnote{Choric. *Apol. Min.* 93–4 (Foerster), with Reich (1903) 204–30 on the work as a whole. A modern attempt to connect laughter and rationality can be found in Scruton (1983) 153–65.} So Choricius, as it happens, half agrees and half disagrees with Aristotle.

The uncertain, problematic relationships between human laughter and the behaviour of animals and gods supply useful preliminary illustrations of the kind of issues which must be faced in an attempt to construct a historically nuanced perspective on the status of laughter (and the distinct but closely kindred phenomenon of smiling) in ancient Greek culture. But they also provide an initial indication of how we can obtain a firmer handle on the elusiveness of laughter by situating it within larger frameworks allows her vindictive derision (*katagelan*). Other instances of non-laughing deities, such as Hom. *Od.* 8.344 (ch. 2, 82–3), are exceptional.

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of cultural meaning, value and symbolism. This entails accepting that laughter, though an evolved means of somatic expression with well entrenched, if complex, underpinnings in the brain, has its own history.\(^\text{13}\)

It is subject, in both its physical coding and its psychological implications, to the social, ethical, religious and other pressures of particular times and places. What makes laughter, and the patterns of body language in which it shapes itself, exceptionally challenging but also rewarding to study is its double-sided character. It exists at the interface, so to speak, between body and mind, between instinct and intention. Though by definition inarticulate (i.e. non-linguistic), it is nonetheless a means of communication (i.e. often *para*-linguistic) and can be far-reaching in the attitudes and values it embodies. Though often resistant to cognitive understanding, it is woven into ordinary life in ways which entangle it with such fundamental concerns as sex, religion, ethnicity, politics, food and drink. Though typically fugacious in its vocal and facial manifestations, it can function as a highly charged medium of personal and social relationships. Though sometimes involuntary, it can be either encouraged or inhibited not just according to individual inclination but under the influence of education, mores and ideology. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas has maintained, while part of a ‘universal language of bodily interruptions’ laughter nonetheless becomes subject to varying cultural thresholds of tolerance.\(^\text{14}\)

And all this means that we can look for its historical traces and cultural significance even where its immediate sounds and appearances have vanished.

This book will attempt to demonstrate, then, that it is possible and worthwhile to write parts of the cultural history of ancient Greek laughter, *gelos*, including its negative counterparts, agelastic and antigelastic conduct.\(^\text{15}\)

Neurological research shows various brain pathways are involved in physical laughter *per se* and in its expressive accompaniment to cognitive/affective states; hence the possibility that the act and the states can come apart (cf. ch. 2, 93–6, for a Homeric case in point). Damasio (2004) 74–9, 307–8, Ramachandran (1998b) 199–211 offer brief accounts; more technical discussion in Arroyo et al. (1993), McCullagh et al. (1999), Wild et al. (2003). For the idea of laughter’s ‘history’, see my Preface; cf. Pfister (2002a) vi–ix.

Douglas (1975) 86–8. The (in)voluntariness of laughter is a sliding scale, not an either/or distinction: cf. Ruch and Ekman (2001) 427–8; Winn (2001) 424 garbles the point. At one extreme stand pathological seizures *vel sim.*: Provine (2000) 165–71; cf. ch. 2 n. 105. Less extreme are barely controllable outbursts (cf. ch. 6 n. 138, with 8–10 below). At the opposite end lies conscious manipulation, e.g. ‘forced’ or sarcastic laughter. In between are many gradations. Smiling, except as pathological rictus, is usually more under (semi-conscious) control than laughter: see Provine (2000) 49–53; Kris (1964) 216–9 reads smiling psychoanalytically as a controlled (and potentially deceptive) substitute for laughter.

In addition to employing ‘gelastic’ as a general adj. for laughter-related/arousing behaviour, I use ‘agelastic’ (with the noun ‘agelast’: see nn. 100–2 below) to denote ‘non-laughing’, ‘avoiding laughter’,

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behaviour, forms of life, and systems of value. The enterprise is made more feasible by the fact that laughter happens to be a subject on which such eloquent and reflective types of ancient discourse as poetry, philosophy and rhetoric have important things to say and to show. It is an object of representation and evaluative scrutiny in a perhaps surprisingly large range of Greek texts, from Homer to late antiquity. Laughter mattered to Greek minds and lives in multiple respects – stretching, as we have already glimpsed in rudimentary outline, from their views of the body to their conceptions of the divine. It is remarkable, for instance, that virtually every major school of Greek philosophy, and many of its individually most notable practitioners, took up an explicit stance towards the uses (and/or abuses) of laughter, something that could hardly be claimed about most modern philosophy and philosophers. Why this is so should be left to emerge gradually and cumulatively, not least in Chapters 6–7. But one can anticipate to the extent of saying that laughter seems to have a set of intricate connections with the broader schemes of value – of friendship and enmity, honour and shame, pleasure and self-discipline, freedom and servility – that structure the dominant modes of expression, as well as the underlying tensions, of Greek culture. Whether, when, at whom/what, and how to laugh (if at all) constitutes a cluster of questions whose repercussions spread out into many vital regions of Greek thought and action.

To clarify how I propose to bring such questions to bear on the representation of laughter in ancient texts, I should at once add two notes of caution, one of which will impose limitations on, while the other enlarges, the scope of the enquiry. The chief limitation is that this book is not centrally about ancient views or senses of ‘humour’, nor about ancient theories of ‘the comic’. No hermetically sealed definition of humour is possible, especially in view of the historical evolution of the term and the difficulty of establishing a consistent lexicon of humour across languages, both ancient and modern. A relatively neutral approach to the subject might demarcate humour as above all the sphere of behaviour which aims self-consciously at arousing amusement in others ‘for its own sake’, which is not to deny that humour can also be used for further purposes such as persuasion, ingratiaton, deception or the exercise of power. But much argument over the

and ‘antigelastic’ to characterise a stronger, principled antipathy. (There is no Greek precedent for this last usage; in its only occurrence, ἀντίγελαν means ‘laugh back in retaliation’: ch. 10 n. 16.) Note also the adj. miogēlos, laughter-hating, Alex. Act. fr. 7.2 CA, Vita Eur. 5 (ch. 6 n. 16).

16 My enquiry extends, selectively, down to the fourth century AD, with occasional glimpses beyond. For continuing/evolving traditions of laughter in medieval Byzantium, see the stimulating perspective of Magdalino (2007).
definition of humour in any case moves beyond the level of the descriptive to that of a normative understanding of preferred/prohibited means, (un)acceptable objects, and (in)appropriate contexts for the creation of amusement. If humour, on any standard account, typically includes joke-telling, banter, many forms of play-acting and playfulness, as well as the basic materials of comic performances (from, say, solo mimicry to fully staged comic drama), this book will certainly mention numerous ancient situations to which such categories of behaviour are relevant. My aim in doing so, however, will not be to pursue the concept of ‘humour’ per se, but to tackle the wider psychological, ethical and cultural concerns which such behaviour generates within ancient frameworks of perception. Even comedy itself, and the concomitant theorising of ‘the comic’ (or ‘the laughable’) in antiquity, does not lie at the centre of my interests. When I do discuss comic drama directly (particularly in Chapters 4, 5 and 8), my focus will be fixed on what it can help us discern about larger ancient evaluations of laughter as a set of social behaviours.¹⁷

If what has just been said underlines that the phenomena of laughter include much more than the phenomena of humour, it is equally important to stress that my investigation will not be narrowly confined to actual occurrences of physical laughter, or even to the physically distinct but behaviourally cognate phenomenon of smiling.¹⁸ I shall also be persistently interested in metaphorical and metonymic laughter, a category which embraces all the ways in which gelastic vocabulary and symbolism can be drawn on to convey ethical and social judgements or to characterise states of mind. Whereas much ‘humour’ is incorporated in specific kinds of practice or marked language games (jokes, banter, anecdotes, mimicry, play-acting and so forth), metonymic laughter is a much more fluid factor in social behaviour. One immediate illustration of this is the notion of implicit or ‘concealed’ laughter as an index of superiority, contempt, or deception. Someone can be thought of as ‘laughing at’ another even when not manifesting any of the bodily signs of laughter. In special instances,


¹⁸ On the relationship between laughter and smiles, see Appendix 1. For economy of expression, I sometimes allow ‘laughter’ to cover laughter and/or smiling; but the distinction is always explicit where it matters.
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laughter can be entirely ‘in the mind’, thus invisible on the face. A wonderfully emblematic case in point is the ‘sardonic’ smile of Odysseus, within the cunning secrecy of his thumos (his motivational ‘heart’), in Book 20 of the Odyssey.\textsuperscript{19} Metaphorical laughter can be a potent vector in various kinds of social interaction.

In both its literal and metaphorical forms, laughter can serve as an expression of individual and cultural mentalities. The material addressed in this book cuts across the fields of education, politics, law, religion, war, philosophy, sex, sport, drinking and more besides. It turns out, accordingly, that to ask questions about the causes, uses and consequences of laughter is always to engage with issues ‘bigger’ than laughter’s strictly physiological dimensions. That is not to say, however, that the somatic basis of laughter is not significant in its own right. The fact that people laugh (to varying degrees) ‘with’ their bodies – in the taunting of facial muscles, the staccato rhythms of breathing-cum-vocalisation (χα χα χα being the Greek equivalent of ‘ha ha ha’), and often in accompanying gestures of physical dissolution.

The strongest laughter, in fact, is a physically arresting occurrence. It possesses a convulsiveness which takes over the person and defies restraint; its force can be so intense that one may even die of it – literally, as well as metaphorically.\textsuperscript{21} The physiology of laughter undoubtedly received some

\footnotetext{19}{20:301–2: see ch. 2, 93. Hidden laughter is recognised from a modern theoretical perspective by Zijdevelt (1996) 42. On ‘sardonic’, see n. 21 below.}

\footnotetext{20}{χα χα χα: PGM xiii.162, 473 (P. Leiden J395: n. 32 below); cf. Arnould (1990) 144. Eur. Cfc. 157 is not, pace Eirez Lopez (2000) 16, a formal vocalisation of laughter, though an actor could easily have added one; Ar. Peace 1066 is a stylised annotation; Hdas. 3.93 is probably somewhat different (Headlam (1922) 160–1). Laughter accompanied by clapping: e.g. Ion Chi. FGrH 392 f6 (ch. 3, 108–9), the Tarentines’ glee over an obscene insult at Dion Hal. Ant. Rom. 19.3.3, and Athanasius’ image of sympotic mirth at Ctn. Ar. 1.4 (26.20 PG); cf. Pan at Hom. Hymn 19.37.}

\footnotetext{21}{Literal death by laughter is claimed for the painter Zeuxis (amused by his own depiction of an old woman) in the Roman grammarian Festus (from Verrius Flaccus). s.v. Pictor, Reinach (1932) 192, no. 211; for Rembrandt’s possible reflection of this story in the late Cologne ‘self-portrait’, see Blankert (1971), Blankert (1997) 34–40, with Schwartz (1985) 354–7 for good ills.; cf. ch. 7 n. 23 for a different identification. Other reputed victims: the comic poet Philemon (test. 1, 5 PCG, with ch. 9 n. 24), a legend echoed in Rabelais Gargantua i.20 (cf. Bakhtin (1968) 408–9); the mime-writer Philistion (Studa i.s. Φιλοστίον); the philosopher Chrysippus (ch. 6 n. 103). Baudelaire (176) 155 recalls the latter (the editor’s note, 1548, is confused). Cf. Joubert (1980) 61–2, 131–3 for Renaissance thoughts on the subject, Karle (1932/3) 876 for comparative material, and Provine (2000) 182–4 for modern cases. Different is ‘laugher’ as reflex of (fatal) chest wounds: ch. 6 n. 140. So too is dying with a ‘sardonic’ grimace (cf. ch. 2 n. 100) after eating poisonous herbs, e.g. Dio Chrys. 32.99, Paus.
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close attention in the ancient world. The evidence for such enquiries is at least as old as the Problemata produced in Aristotle’s Lyceum. But as it happens the most elaborate remarks on the subject in the Greek tradition are preponderantly from late antiquity, and some of the most notable are formulated by those Christian writers whose antigelastic moral agenda will form the subject of my final chapter. In a passage of impressively scandalised fervour in one of his homilies on Ecclesiastes, Gregory of Nyssa rails against the ‘madness’ (paranoiaia) of laughter, which he says is ‘neither a form of reason nor an act with any purpose’, and which he proceeds to describe in a tour de force of distaste as involving ‘an unseemly bodily loosening, agitated breathing, a shaking of the whole body, dilation of the cheeks, baring of teeth, gums and palate, stretching of the neck, and an abnormal breaking up of the voice as it is cut into by the fragmentation of the breath’. Close (not to say fixed) observations such as these could coexist with more fanciful convictions about physiological mechanisms (in the intestines, chest and blood) underlying laughter. But there is a recurrent moralising emphasis on ideas of bodily loosening, opening and excitation.

10.17.13, anon. Anth. Pal. 7.621, or the related notion of dying ‘laughing’ from a poisonous spider’s bite at Strabo 11.4.6; Timaeus FrGh 566 664 traces sardonic laughter to a different context of death (human sacrifice to Cronus on Sardinia). Metaphorically ‘dying from laughter’: Hom. Od. 18.100 (ch. 2 n. 94), At. Clouds 1436, Pl. Estbd. 503b (ch. 6, 290), Plut. Mor. 54d, Lucian, Inv. Trig. 31 (ch. 9, 429); cf. Aretaeus, De causis 1.7.8. At. Frog 1089 is different (ch. 2 n. 3).

22 Ps.-Arist. Probl. 11.13, 900a24. 11.15, 900b7–14; cf. ch. 6 n. 143. Cic. De Or. 2.235, with irony (ch. 7 n. 5), suggests that no progress had been made understanding laughter’s physiology.


24 Simplic. In Epict. Ench. 41 (Hadot), calling laughter an ‘overflow’ (ὑπερέξοις) of exhilaration, mentions ‘swollen’ breathing and quasi-bubbling vocalisation. Heightened breathing is implied in laughing versus ἔμφραξις i.e. from deep inside the chest (a ‘belly laugh’), at Lucian, Penge. 7 (ch. 9, 464), and ‘holding back’ laughter in the chest, Ap. Rhod. Argon. 4.1723 (ch. 6 n. 138); cf. laughter in/from the ‘heart’, ch. 2 n. 34. Other physiological references to laughter: Basil, Reg. fusc. 17 (guffawing and over-excitation: 31.961 PG, with ch. 10, 514–15); Greg. Naz. Carm. 37.888.2–3 PG (‘loosening’ of the face), 37.953 PG (shaking cheeks, increased heartbeat); Greg. Nys. Hom. opif. 12 (44.160 PG; opening of bodily channels; agitation of intestines, esp. the liver); and the very late (seventh century αἰών) Meletius med. Nat. hom. 44 Cramer (from intestines to face). Further Christian evidence in ch. 10 n. 104. For physiognomy’s attention to laughter/smiles (nothing in the oldest text, ps.-Arist. Physiog.), see ps.-Polemon, Physiog. 19 Foerster (ὑπογελέων of a shifty look in the eyes; cf. ch. 6 n. 107), 20 (laughing eyes associated with deception/malice; smiling, watery eyes indicate justice, gentleness etc.), and the adaptation of Polemon in Adamantius, Physiog. 1.4 (playful laughter-lovers, philogeliotês, 1.17 (distinguishing laughter in the eyes and on the whole face; cf. 1.20); for laughter
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Even before the impingement of Christian values, the ethical traditions of Greek paganism placed so much weight on self-control and the capacity to resist (excessive) pleasure that the sheer physicality of laughter could create a presumption of moral danger. It is no accident that Thersites, a symbolic figure of ridicule incarnate from Homer onwards, receives an exceptionally full physical description in the *Iliad* that seems to match up his ugliness with the subversive unruliness of his bent for mockery. And yet even in this domain ambiguity is always present. To take the other side of the Homeric coin, and to rephrase the questions posed at the start of the present chapter: if the gods themselves, with their special bodies, could give way to ‘unquenchable laughter’, how could such yielding be always or altogether bad? 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. Yet as soon as we (or the Greeks) ask what kind of affect or emotion laughter embodies, the complexity of its psychology, and hence the cultural complexity of its uses, demands to be acknowledged. Henri Bergson’s claim that laughter is ‘normally’ accompanied by a lack of feeling or affect (‘l’insensibilité qui accompagne d’ordinaire le rire’) is at best a narrowing of focus to one kind of laughter, at worst a theoretical screening out of a mass of divergent evidence. All attempts, indeed, to construct comprehensive theories of laughter, whether in direct relation to the explication of humour/comedy or within a wider frame of reference, are radically misconceived. There is no cogent reason to suppose that laughter erupts from, or is reducible in the eyes, cf. Appendix 1 n. 29. See now the extensive reappraisal of the Polemonian tradition in Swain (2007). Differently, Anon. med. *Nat. hom.* 2.1–3.1 (Ideler) explains why some people enjoy laughing by reference to purity of blood: i.e., in humoral terms, they are ‘sanguine’. Ps.-Hippoc. *Epist.* *Ptol. hom.* *fab.* p. 281 (Ermerins) similarly connects a predisposition to laughter with pure blood and good health (cf. n. 39 below).

Goldhill (1995) 14–20 stresses a threat to self-control as an important strand in Greek concerns about laughter. The claim of Garland (1995) 76 that ‘laughter in antiquity knew no moral boundaries’ (à propos mockery of physical sufferings; cf. ch. 2 n. 30) occludes numerous considerations traced in this book.

The psychological implications of laughter’s physical forcefulness are central to Plessner (1941); cf. the reflection of his views in Critchley (2002) 7–9.