**Simon Goldhill**

It is tempting to meet Simon Goldhill’s critique with a stodgy philosophical argument about the epistemic virtues of schematic and wholly artificial petri-dish environments for getting an initial grip on reality. The physical sciences thrive on such imaginary schematic settings. The fundamental axiom from which all modern physics sets forth concerns wholly schematic objects (comprising only mass, velocity and spatial dimensions, devoid of color, smell, temperature, use or value) in unreal environments devoid of any external force or effect. Analytical philosophy also boasts to be of this world by virtue of its credibility with respect to the formally austere, other-worldly schemas and models it contemplates.

Tempting, but untrue of *The View From Within*, which, though analytical, purports to be about full-blooded human selfhood. Parts of Simon Goldhill’s butt-kicking critique of the book’s philosophical stance, as we shall see, are highly valuable – philosophically valuable. But to see exactly how and why it needs to be subtilized some. Ridicule cannot be met by subtilizing, only by counter ridicule. But then it is the ridicule-related part of his argument that misses the point.

*The View from Within* is not an argument about how our mind is, or can be changed. If it was, everything Goldhill says in his superb, hard-hitting paper, would have been squarely on target. He summarizes this part of his argument thus:

It is … a striking development of [Fisch and Benbaji’s] argument to insist that such *transformative change of normative frameworks* “is a feat no one can perform alone” [299]. Instead, they argue, what is needed is an “external, intersubjective dialogical context of trusted critics” [299]. They imagine – and this is both an argument and a vision –  “individuals…conducting their sensitive and thoughtful inner dialogues and self-monitoring in the company of trusted normative critics, in which they find themselves prompted to articulate their commitments, and challenged by individuals who are committed differently” [299]. *Frameworks change, that is, as a nice collaborative process, based on trust and self-reflective dialogue.*

But not ridicule. The “intersubjective, dialogical context” is one of trust, reflection, and rationality – a “social and personal comradeship” [225]. The social and psychological contextualization *for a process of transformation* is imaged, it seems, as a symposium, but without wine, women, song, and laughter – without an Alcibiades to crash in from outside … without competition, cultivated violence or excluded passions. *How does normative thinking change?* Why should a model of collaborative, dialogic, socially embedded thinking – as Fisch and Benbaji attractively promote – hope to function without a little more mess in the process? What place is there in this account for charisma – the Socrates factor? What place for humiliation or bullying? What place for the complicities and coerciveness of humour? For sexual desire? For laughter? (All also the Socrates factor…) *What would happen to their account, in short, if a broader notion of cultural history were allowed to provide a framework for their analysis of socially-embedded thinking?*

According to Goldhill, the question we set ourselves, as the first three italicized sentences make amply clear, is: how does normative thinking change, or how is a transformative change of normative frameworks achieved? The question he then puts to us is: why on earth limit such change in advance to the impact of intersubjective, dialogical contexts of trust and reflection to the exclusion of the no less potentially transformative impact of charisma, humiliation, bullying, competition, cultivated violence, sexual desire, and the coerciveness of humor – a question he answers rhetorically in the quote’s closing sentence.

But the question we set ourselves is much narrower, and far more modest than “how does normative thinking change, in general? – to which all the above and much more can contribute decisively, as well as other mind-numbing or mind–enticing factors like boredom, familiarity, greed, honor and trauma. The question we set ourselves is precisely the question Wittgenstein raises and despairs of in *On Certainty*, as do Kuhn in *Structure* and Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – namely, can, and if so, how can a normative framework transition be deemed to be *rational*. Wittgenstein, as we note,[[1]](#footnote-1) saw only two possible outcomes for verbal sword-crossing (he dubs *bekämpfen*) across great normative divides: either each stays put while deeming the other “a fool or heretic”, or one of them is “persuaded” to change his mind - a term Wittgenstein explicitly reserves for “what happens when missionaries convert natives”. Reasoning, he claims, is in such cases to no avail. “At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*,” he concludes. The modest undertaking of *The View from Within* is to make the case for a third, reason-based option between Wittgenstein’s two – the existence of which the entire philosophical community explicitly or implicitly denies.

For one thing, what ridicule, bullying, humiliation and the “coerciveness” of humor have in common is that they achieve their transformative aim by belittling their victim, by making him look bad. The destabilizing impact of reasoned normative critique does so, we argue, by empowerment, by portraying its addressees in the best way possible in order to prove him wrong. Ridicule, etc. instigate normative realignment by stimulating self-disgust, normative critique does so by prudently attempting to stimulate confident self-reckoning.

However, over and above the question of coerced mind changing, Goldhill’s essay raises two additional pertinent and related points: one to do with the relevance of humor to our project, and one to that of the messiness of the historically contingent world, in which the kind of framework changes we discuss actually take place.

The clichéd answer to the second question is a simple yes, as the detailed case-study explored in Fisch’s sequel to the book,[[2]](#footnote-2) and that presented in Niccoló Guicciardini’s contribution to the present volume amply prove. But a closer look at humor renders that “yes” less clichéd, and Goldhill’s challenge more profound. But to this end we need to take a different view of humor than that adopted by Goldhill.

We agree with everything Goldhill says (following Aristotle, Freud, Berger and Critchley) about humor, but insist (following Schopenhauer - of all people!) that there is more. Humor can certainly be used, and frequently is used aggressively to satirize, humiliate and ridicule, and in these coercive capacities to serve defensive social ends such as keeping outsiders out. It can also serve as an important relief vent, as Freud insisted. But there seems to be more to it than that.

First, humor is a totally unique *human* phenomenon. There is much that other animals enjoy and reward with squeals of pleasure, but nothing that resembles laughing at a joke. Getting a joke, may have social implications, but it is first and foremost an essentially cognitive achievement. Second, unlike any other feat of understanding, the one sure way to spoil a joke is to explain it. Here too, Goldhill focusses exclusively on humor’s social functions, but not all jokes are insider jokes. Strickland Gillilan’s “Lines on the Antiquity of Microbes” (sometimes simply entitled “Fleas”) is considered the shortest poem ever written. It reads: Adam, Had ’em. This is pure clever fun devoid of any aggressive or social undertones. No other feat of the understanding is spoiled by explaining it. Logical fallacies, tricky arguments, poems and mathematical proofs are not spoilt when explained. What is it about jokes that are spoilt by making them explicit?

Third, no other cognitive achievement comes accompanied by an uncontrollable bark of laughter capable of playing havoc with our very self-control, that seems to erupt from deep within our animal part.

Sour, grim, and lacking a sense of humor himself (his examples are terrible!) Schopenhauer’s account of the ludicrous is fascinating.[[3]](#footnote-3) Like all living creatures humans are firmly welded to the present, incapable of any movement forward or backward in time. Like them we are also endowed with elaborate sense organs to take in the kaleidoscopic sensual dazzle of the here and the now. But like no other creatures, humans can transcend their present-fixedness, revisit and learn from the past and anticipate and plan for the future, by means of a particular form of language. As opposed to actual apples, the *concept* of an apple allows us to derive lessons from yesterday’s crop, and plan for tomorrow’s pickings. But conceptualization, Schopenhauer cautions, come at a very high price. To perform their function, concepts necessarily schematize and flatten. Concepts are almost totally emptied husks that represent only what all apples share. The concept “dog”, quips Schopenhauer, lacks, and hence fails to capture, everything that makes my Fido so special.

Humans go through life judging what they see, forming their opinions, theories and plans by means of a vocabulary of dismally hollow and lifeless representational schema, that some philosophers fool themselves into deeming them the very essence of things. Our concepts’ dismal failure to fully represent the actualities to which they are applied forms the basis for everything we deem ludicrous. At the heart of everything we find funny lies a conceptual failure. Every joke consist of a concept first applied to a concrete situation, which subsequently flies in its face. For Schopenhauer, who believed human conceptualization was responsible for everything all that is bad in the human condition, jokes represented proven moments of reason’s inadequacy, to which the sensual animal within us responds with a gloating howl.

Schopenhauer’s misanthropic contrasting of the reasoned and the real would seem the perfect match for Goldhill’s complaint that philosophers like us should get out more. It certainly explains why it’s funny. But Schopenhauer’s point is more worrying than he makes out, and, at the same time, has undergone a radical change since he made it. It is more worrying, because, at least from the neo-Kantian quarters form which our book sets forth, there is no humanly meaningful line to be drawn between our reasoned and animal sensibilities. Even the most immediate human experience is concept mediated. We don’t see green streaks and splotches that we then interpret as woods for better or for worse. We simply see woods! Cultural historians conceptualize what they encounter no less than philosophers. Their experience is no more animal than ours. But it can challenge our broader generalizations and schema.

Pace Schopenhauer, the great despiser of logic and women, such challenges, issued from outside philosophy’s professional conversation, we now realize, is not rationality’s downfall, but it’s very lifeline – which is precisely the argument of our book! Humiliating ridicule, mocking satire, and bullying just don’t do it for us. Aristophanes’s *Clouds* pokes cruel fun at philosophy and science, but unlike *Gulliver’s Travels*, can in no sense be said to *contribute* to philosophy or to science.[[4]](#footnote-4) But getting out, into the concrete world of social and cultural historical case-studies, especially with as witty and insightful a guide as Simon Goldhill, can, as his essay amply proves, teach us much while laughing out loud!

1. *The View From Within*, pp. 262-264. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Menachem Fisch, Creatively Undecided: Toward a History and Philosophy of Scientific Agency, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017, chess. 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Schopenhauer presents his theory of the ludicrous first in *The World as Will and Representation*, vol.1, §13, and more fully in vol.2, ch.viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the philosophical significance of Swift’s Gulliver, see Menachem Fisch, “Gulliver and the Rabbis: Counterfactual Truth in Science and the Talmud”, *Religions*, 2019, 10(3), 228; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030228> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)