

Humour and humanism. The role of funniness in an imperfect life

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between humour and humanism. We argue that humour is a pivotal part of human life, and demonstrate that it plays a significant role in the writings of various humanist authors. The very phenomenon and acknowledgement of the phenomenon of humour functions as a counterargument against those critics, especially posthumanists, who claim that the subject of humanism is an overly rational isolated atom. Our rigorous philosophical analysis will show that humour is an essential human feature, often neglected by such critics. Furthermore, our humane position on humour will offer an important complementation to the ethics of humour. In a humanist framework we defend the broadness of humour and argue against fixed universal rules. Instead, we believe that the ethics of humour is very much about respecting the other as a full human being.

Keywords: philosophy of humour, humanism, imperfection, posthumanism.

1. Introduction

The role of humour in understanding humanity has puzzled philosophers for millennia. In ancient times, amusement and laughter were regarded with reservation among philosophers like Plato (2003 [c. 375 BCE]) and Epictetus (2009 [125 CE]), although Aristotle (1970 [350 BCE]) recognized that they could be beneficial for one's health. The medieval era did not bring about a significant shift in this blend of scepticism and health benefits of humour (Classen, 2010). However, since the Renaissance, particularly among humanist thinkers (Erasmus, 1971 [1511], More, 2012 [1516]), the importance of humour in the entirety of the human condition has risen to a significant role. In this article, we continue this ethical-aesthetic-theoretical tradition by analysing how humour can be understood as a sign of both human greatness and limitedness. This very peculiar phenomenon shows how the mental capabilities of human beings are simultaneously great but ridiculously flawed. We argue that the very existence of humour and laughter in human life offers a serious counterargument against certain challenges humanism has met, in particular those posed by posthumanists.

Our argument stems from the rather general observation that humanism has been accused of being overly rationalistic, too isolated and falsely subject-centered (e.g., Braidotti, 2013; Manne, 2016; Kojève, 2020). Critics like Michel Foucault (2004) and Jacques Derrida (2008) claim that humanism's whole conceptualization of human being is flawed. The criticism goes that the humanist tradition, especially since the Enlightenment, presents humanity in a false light by focusing merely on the role of reason in human life (see also Heidegger, 2008 [1927]; Geroulanos, 2010). Typically, these arguments are directed at René Descartes and his infamous *cogito ergo sum* argument, as well as at Immanuel Kant and his rationalist position on humanity. We believe that the criticism is neither accurate nor fair. In the multifaceted humanist tradition, humour has been a very central element, and we believe that analysing humour and its interpersonal nature helps to show that humanism's conceptualization of human being is neither isolated nor overly rationalistic. To do so, we will broaden the discussion towards such central humanist philosophers as Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas More and Friedrich Schiller, and how they treat humour in their humanist philosophies. We will back up this historical line with such modern philosophers as Lydia Amir and Simon Critchley.

In general, we understand humanism as a philosophical tradition that aims at understanding the mysteries of humanity, giving dignity to all human beings, as well as making the world a better place for everyone (see Fromm, 2006 [1962]). Briefly put, humanism is both an epistemological and ethical project. Of course, the roots of humanism are long and deep, and different kinds of warm and humane thoughts have been formulated for thousands of years ago, both in West and East (see Pinn, 2021). For instance, in ancient Rome, the poet Terence wrote "I am a human being and nothing human is alien to me."¹ This phrase has been repeated by various humanist philosophers like Karl Marx (1865) and Erich Fromm (2006 [1962]). We interpret the slogan as a cornerstone for humanist thought: it suggests that it is at least in principle possible to understand each other because we are all human beings; we share the same existential basis in the world. This does not necessarily mean that an atheist white male professor from the United States would share the actual living conditions and problems of a Muslim housewife from Afghanistan, but nevertheless they face similar existential questions: how to live a meaningful life, how to find sensible relations to other human beings, how to find their place in the world, and so forth. Furthermore, humanism believes in human dignity and perhaps even perfection (see Norman, 2004) for both individuals and societies. It is very possible that actual perfection will never be achieved, but this ideal encourages people to aim at building something better for themselves and others. In this article, we take the position that human perfection is actually an ethical process, and not merely a framework for enhancing such human capabilities as strength, intelligence, memory and so forth (cf. Chadwick, 2012).

The main suggestion of this paper is that humour is possible because human beings are optimally imperfect creatures. We argue that humour shows what limited creatures we human beings are, but at the same time, it shows that our rational capabilities are in some other sense exceptional (see also Hietalahti, 2021). Furthermore, there can be no private humour (in a Wittgensteinian sense, for a detailed take on the private language argument, see Wittgenstein, 1986 [1953]) so humour is an inherently interpersonal feature. It is worth mentioning that even if humour is essentially a social feature, it clearly has an intrapersonal function as well (see Martin et al., 2003; Heintz & Ruch, 2019) which helps a person to cope with various kinds of negative life events. Also, the humour can be self-enhancing and affiliative, as has been noted by Elena Samfira and Ionel Samfira (2023). In our estimation, these intrapersonal and self-efficacy aspects are intimately connected to the interpersonal status of humour on a philosophical and conceptual level. For instance, even if we laugh at our own follies in a solitude

¹ Originally, "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto", by Terence (Publius Terentius Afer), in *Heauton Timorumenos*, Act 1, scene 1, line 77.

or try to cope with our own ridiculousness, the humorous observation stems from how we compare the silliness of ourselves to, say, the broader expectations, and how we perceive ourselves differently in comparison to them. The self-related functions and mechanisms of humour do not overrule the basic conceptual standpoint; as we form our conceptualisations of the world always in relation to other human beings, language, and such, philosophically speaking, humour is built on this basis. If these basic ideas are correct, and if humanism agrees that humour is one of central features in human life (see Amir, 2014; 2019), then, there is at least one branch of humanism that does not hold that human beings are overly rational or isolated beings.

In this article, the very concept of humour is understood to be as open-ended as humanity itself (see Hietalahti & Pennanen, 2023). Because humour is an evolving and dynamic phenomenon, we believe it is not necessarily best conceptualised in the terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, which would imply that there would be precise conditions for humour that hold over millennia. That said, our more open approach respects the valuable work done among humour research, and especially the theoretical efforts on the so-called incongruity theory and its modern versions (see Morreall, 2020). According to the incongruity theory, humour is (potentially) triggered when something goes wrong, so to speak. To put it in a more analytical form, humour is based on the tension between expectation and what actually happens (Cundall, 2022); this cognitive dissonance is rooted on a mismatch between scheme and perception. Obviously, not all incongruent occasions are humorous (see Morreall, 2009), but we shall leave a detailed analysis of the differences between humour and other incongruent occasions, such as the grotesque or horror, for other studies. The relevant idea for the purpose of this article is that something unexpected is present in humour. This unexpectedness or perhaps unfittingness requires, in our estimation, openness also on a conceptual/theoretical level. Of course, it is possible to joke about, say, oneself (see Martin et al., 2003), and in this case, there is probably no surprises for the joke teller. Even so, we can interpret that the incongruity is perceived between the individual and society's expectations, his or her own wishes in relation to common ideals, or some similar mismatch. The unexpectedness is related to the perception that there is something unfitting between a thought and the actuality. Laughter, in this article, refers to laughter triggered by humour, and not by, say, intoxication or tickling.

Our primary motivation for writing this article stems from the observation that neglecting the phenomenon of humour when trying to understand humanism, and the human condition in general, is a serious oversight. Humour, we claim, shows that the criticism presented against the humanist understanding of subjectivity misfires, and that there is a long tradition in humanism that leans towards the idea that human beings are creatures of humour in a very sophisticated philosophical sense (despite our tendency to laugh at the most appalling jokes). Our main argument is that humour has been and is an essential element in understanding humanity, and this line of thought has been present in philosophical humanism for centuries. The key research question, then, is: how does humour shape our understanding of the human condition? Our hypothesis is that humour shows how human beings are not one-sidedly rational nor isolated entities, but rather earthly creatures driven by both reason and impulse.

2. Humanism challenged

Before discussing humane humour, we must understand first the essentials of humanistic thought. Nowadays, humanism has a poor reputation as it has been accused of various failings throughout the centuries and also very recently. In religious circles, for the critics, it was seen as highly questionable to praise humanity and leave omnipotent beings out of the picture; for instance, Christianity has not always been very sympathetic towards the idea that humanity

would be in the centre of human life or academic studies instead of God.² Some of the most notorious examples of this are the cases of Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei (see, e.g., Finocchiaro, 2021), who were persecuted by the church because of their scientific views about nature. The philosophical issue with them was that for Bruno and Galilei, human being is the main author of knowledge, and not, say, revelation by God or the word of the Bible.

Nowadays, another kind of criticism is targeted at humanism in relation to other life forms and lifeless nature (e.g., Manne, 2016). Posthumanist thought³ challenges the central role of human beings and claims that there is not any kind of superior essence in humanity in comparison to other forms of life. Briefly put, according to religious critics, humanism is blasphemy; according to posthumanist critics, humanism gives too much credit to humanity, and especially the role of reason in human life.

The criticism has not been limited to the two aspects mentioned above. For instance, in political spheres, humanism has been accused of failure because it was unable to prevent the horrors of the Second World War (see Geroulanos, 2010) as well as of the recent war in Ukraine (Piirimäe, 2022). This kind of criticism holds humanism guilty because of its ostensibly soft values. According to its critics, humanism wants to understand everyone and claims that every human being is of infinite worth, and because of this, humanism is unable to condemn those who use violence. Interestingly, there are also those who consider Nazism as a form of humanism. According to the popular historian Yuval Noah Harari (2014; 2016), Hitler's regime represented biological humanism that aimed at the perfection of humanity by racial means, that is, by destroying those claimed to sub-human, like the Jewish population, handicapped, Romani, and so forth. Furthermore, from the perspective of feminist critique, humanism appears to be very problematic because it leaves approximately half of human individuals, that is, females and other sexes, out of the picture (see de Beauvoir, 2011 [1949]).

At this point we can summarize that humanism is, for some, too selfish, too soft, too violent, too narrow and too wide. A versatile bunch of criticism, one may agree. Kieran Durkin (2023) summarizes that humanism is now under much heavier attack than ever before. Unfortunately, because of the page limit, we cannot discuss in detail all these criticisms and cannot thoroughly respond to all the accusations. For this reason, we will handle a more philosophically interesting challenge, that is, the problem of the humanist subject, and what the significance of humour is in understanding this creature.

Anti-humanists⁴, transhumanists⁵ and posthumanists⁶ challenge humanism by claiming that the subject in this philosophical tradition is overly one-sided. Especially after René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, humanism has been under heavy attack; critics claim that the humanist subject is an isolated atom and that humanists do not understand the significance of networks for subjectivity. According to this criticism, humanists give too much weight to rationality and leave emotions aside. For instance, Diane Marie Keeling and Marguerite Nguyen Lehman (2018) claim that for humanists, the human subject is intentional, conscious, autonomous;

² One should be aware that there is Christian humanism that refers to the idea about humanity as a mirror image of the God; that is, every human is equal (e.g., Fromm, 1991 [1966]).

³ Obviously, there is a great diversity within posthumanism (see Keeling & Lehman, 2018), and we cannot go into detail about all the forms of this thought here.

⁴ In this article, anti-humanism is understood as a philosophical doctrine that focus on structures over individuals; probably the most famous being Foucault (2004 [1966]), who claims that human will vanish from scientific understanding.

⁵ In this article, transhumanism is understood as a philosophical doctrine that aims to foster humanity through technological enhancements. For instance, Harari (2016) and many other transhumanists (see Chadwick, 2012) believe that the perfection of humanity can be achieved through such enhancements.

⁶ In this article, posthumanism is understood as a philosophical position that challenges the philosophical foundations of humanism by arguing that humanity is a false basis for understanding the world. For instance, Rosi Braidotti has been a very active critic of humanism in the respect (see Braidotti, 2013).

humans are the dominant source of agency, their intellectual minds control the body, and their reason is the basis of human capabilities. In opposition to this framework, for posthumanists, the subject is dependent on its environment, and its reason is constituted through interactions; the human subject is entangled with its environment in various ways.

The previous rough picture of humanism is generally shared among posthumanist critics (e.g., Derrida, 2006; Haraway, 2008; Braidotti, 2013; Manne, 2016). However, here we need to point out that this general position is false, or at least flawed. True, philosophers like René Descartes and Immanuel Kant argued that human beings are rational creatures, but this is hardly the whole story. First of all, one can list dozens of different versions of humanism from libertarian to socialist, and from Christian to existentialist humanism (see Pinn, 2021; also Hietalahti, 2022). Not all forms of humanism consider the human subject as isolated and separated from human or natural networks. For instance, in socialist humanism, it is essential to acknowledge how profound is the need for relatedness with other human beings and with nature as well (see Fromm, 2006 [1962]). Furthermore, humanism can agree that we are biological creatures with biological urges that cannot be taken from the totality of the human life (see Ellis, 2019). In addition to our rational aspects, we are very earthly creatures who often act irrationally, or at least with a flawed judgment (in comparison to a rigid frame of reason), and all this is bound the wholeness of humanity.

Despite evident differences between various forms of humanism, there are some common denominators that are usually shared by humanists, like the significance of reason, the muddiness of human life, the infinite worth of humans, equality, dignity, fight against oppression, belief in human perfection (while paradoxically accepting that a truly perfect human does not exist), and so forth. Of especial importance here is that, at least since the Renaissance, the human subject has been far from an absolutely autonomous, or solely reason-driven creature. Let us start with a poem from the era of Enlightenment, by Alexander Pope from 1733, “An Essay on Man”⁷:

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the stoic’s pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reasoning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;
Still by himself abused, or disabused;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

(Pope, 2000 [1733])

Pope’s view of humanity is not a deviation from any so-called canon of humanism, and his ideas have been relevant for humanist thought for centuries (see Toulmin, 1992). Summarizing Pope’s poetical formulation, humans are paradoxical creatures. They know all kinds of things and yet, they are prone to make mistakes. They have the ability to do the greatest good but also the most

⁷ Pope here uses “man” as a synonym for human being; we have decided to leave the fragment of the poem in its original form and not to edit it to more neutral/non-gender-dependent form.

horrible deeds. Human beings are in doubt, torn between passions and reasons, bodily strivings and intellectual ideas. And what is most interesting for this paper, they are the “jest and riddle of the world”.

Obviously, Pope’s poem is outdated in many ways: he writes about gender-biased “man”, and claims that humans would be the great lords of all things and sole judges of truth. As it is with many classical philosophers, the correction from “man” to “human” is easily made and the old-fashioned style of writing does not diminish the whole argument or perspective. A modern humanist can easily point out that humans are not great lords of all things and judges of everything in any authoritarian sense. The *Homo mensura* principle (i.e., human being is the measure of all things) has been heavily criticized since the age of Protagoras (see Plato, 1999 [380 BCE]) if it is understood in its simplest sense, that is, that every human individual would be the sole author of truth and that if their truths are in contradiction, they both would still hold. Here we propose a more nuanced and warmer pragmatist interpretation (see Pihlström, 2020). In a very Kantian sense, human beings cannot gain an outsider’s perspective; they are metaphysically bound to their position in the world. That is, humans are those creatures who develop this language, and the only ones who possess the concept of truth; no other known form of life has developed the concept of truth. So, the *Homo mensura* principle refers to our conceptual understanding of the world. This position is impossible to escape as we cannot take, say, a bat’s perspective on the world (see Nagel, 1974). And as will be shown, our position in the world is often quite ridiculous.

One central aspect in humanist philosophy has been and still is the limitedness of humanity, but also that we can exceed at least some of our limitations. First of all, we are bound to our existential situation and cannot get rid of it. However, this bond does not equal determinism and we can change the route of our lives. In making plans, we often fail, but earlier failures do not limit us from trying again or trying something new. Humanism is keenly aware that we are not perfect creatures, but we still aim at perfection (e.g., Fromm, 2006 [1962]; Mirandola, 1965 [1486]). We have the possibility to act within our apparently fluid limits, and perhaps sometimes break them. In a very practical sense, for instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1986 [1953]) claimed that a human being would never walk on moon; that limit has been broken decades ago. But in a more philosophical sense, we believe that limitedness and limitlessness mean that there is no fixed human essence, and that we are our own lords and ladies in this poetic sense. In a very similar manner to the above-mentioned Pope, only some 250 years earlier, Pico Della Mirandola wrote about the same idea from the assumed perspective of God:

We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess as thine own, the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou will fix the limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the centre of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher natures which are divine.

(Mirandola, 1965 [1486], pp. 4-5)

Again, the rhetoric is somewhat problematic here in relation to other worldly beings, but what is of importance here is that humanity does not have a fixed core. This idea has gained support for centuries, and, for instance, in *Being and Nothingness* (2008 [1943]) Jean-Paul Sartre argued in a very similar manner that human beings are essentially free; humans have to mould

themselves and what they will become. And in this process, we can go very wrong, for instance, in ethical or ecological senses. In the following sections, we argue that freedom, accompanied by responsibility, is the basis for human humour as well.

3. Optimally flawed creatures

In the previous chapter, we discussed the humanist subject and how it is shaped by both reason and emotion. In this sense, human beings are neither overly rational nor isolated but are, in many ways, silly creatures with a fundamental need for connection with others. From this kind of humanist perspective, it seems that humour is based on our capabilities and limitedness (Amir, 2019). To understand the humanist perspective on humour, we will now compare humans to other forms of life, whether real or imaginary.

To begin with, a sense of humour requires, amongst other things, a worldview and conceptual thinking. If the incongruity theory is correct about the basic hypothesis (i.e., humour stems from a conflict between cultural categorisations, etc.), it implies that a perfect, all-knowing and immortal creature, such as the Christian God⁸, cannot have a similar sense of humour to that of human beings. For instance, Charles Baudelaire (1956 [1855]) pointed out that because the omnipotent entity knows everything, there are no surprises for it in the world. So, if this being knows all particulars and humans do not (see Kaukua, 2022), and if humour is related to a pleasant cognitive shift (see Morreall, 2009), God does not experience humour, because it is perfect, and thus, cannot have cognitive or other kinds of shifts either. So, this ideal perfection⁹ blocks humour at least at the level of experience. Humour requires imperfection.¹⁰

On the other hand, other animals do not seem to have a similar sense of humour to that of human beings. In a humanist framework, we suggest that this difference stems from humans' cognitive capabilities, or to put it other way, reason or epistemic position in the world. In an Aristotelian sense, the body does not err (and animals clearly have bodies), but reason may very well be flawed, and other animals do not have what Aristotle calls the "rational soul" (Aristotle 1882 [350 BC]). Therefore, the silly mistakes of reason are very human. To put it another way, we seem to have much more complex conceptualizations of the world than other animals, so we do possess much more knowledge than them. Nevertheless, our intelligence is far from perfect, and this opens the warped door for humour in human life.

Obviously, as is widely agreed among humanist authors (e.g., Norman, 2004; Critchley, 2002; Fromm, 2006 [1962]), human beings are creatures of nature, so the sense of humour is nothing outside of evolution; it is not a mystical or magical feature. Therefore, it is understandable that there can be some traces of this feature in some other animals. For instance, rats laugh, and those rats who laugh more frequently, enjoy each other's company more (Panksepp & Burgdorf, 2003). Clearer examples of laughter can be found in other primates like chimpanzees, who can release a very similar physical reaction to human laughter. Nevertheless, it is evident that laughter does not equal humour, and from the sound of laughter it cannot be

⁸ Here we refer to the concept of God, and do not take any stance whether this being exists or not.

⁹ Here, we do not refer to perfectionism as a psychological tendency or striving towards flawlessness or concerns over mistakes (see Samfira & Samfira, 2023), but to the meta-level position on capabilities in relation to knowledge and to the possibility to have emotional and cognitive shifts.

¹⁰ One can ask whether an all-knowing god could amuse itself with pure facts about people, say, like that no one can kiss his or her own elbow. This would not include any surprises. Perhaps it could, but this would require a cognitive shift that god probably does not experience, and furthermore, god's epistemic position is so different from that of human beings that it should be explained why this kind of fact would be amusing for god, as it knows all the things in past, present and future. An assumption that god would enjoy elbow facts or perhaps logical contradictions, is based on a likeness with a human sense of humour, but because of the vast differences in worldviews, epistemic positions, conceptual frameworks, and such, this assumption is problematic.

concluded that the subject possesses a sense of humour. Sure enough, various animals do play (see Bekoff & Byers, 1998); a tendency not that far away from humour. For instance, various mammals playfully attack each other to train in proper ways of attacking. To put it in other words, they make a mock attack and the target of the attack, typically a sibling, understands that there is no real danger in the attack, so they do not make serious counter attacks. Human beings often use the same means in humour; something apparently hurtful is said in a humorous form, and to make sure that the intention behind the verbal attack was innocent, we often add a *clausulae* “it was only a joke” (see Koivukoski, 2022).¹¹ Furthermore, there is some evidence that certain animal species are intentionally humorous. An anecdotal example is the gorilla called Koko who learned some 2000 signs of American Sign Language. It has been reported that Koko might have used sign language humorously; for instance, when she was asked “what is hard?”, Koko responded “Rock. And work” (see Patterson & Gordon, 2002). Furthermore, one can find various video clips from different platforms in which primates appear to laugh to funny accidents. Of course, these are circumstantial evidence at best, and they are reported by human beings, so it all comes down to human interpretation. Even so, it seems to be at least possible that some animals are capable of a somewhat primitive level of humour and they can express their humorousness. How intentional this is, is of course a matter of (human) interpretation.

Despite the potential similarities between human beings and certain other species, it is evident that no other animal possesses such a broad spectrum of humour (as far as we know). People write comedies, produce Saturday Late Night shows, watch stand-up performances, publish joke books, understand situational humour, mock themselves, communicate humorously, and so forth. As Patrick Giamario (2023) puts it, we live in the Age of Hilarity. Based on this general observation, we may assume that other animals do not joke with each other in the same quantity nor quality as human beings, and humour is not as central a feature in their lives as it is human life. When one thinks about it, humour is present in every phase of human life: we try to find our mates through humour, we find amusing things in birth and death, and basically nothing human is beyond the scope of humour (Critchley, 2002; Kinnunen, 1994). And this scope is very broad as it has been shown by Willibald Ruch and his research team (2018) in empirical tests: their study shows how the use of different comic styles is related to character formation, vitality and verbal intelligence, just to mention a few factors. The range from sarcasm to satire, from cynicism to nonsense, and so forth shows how a versatile phenomenon humour is. It is evident that people differ in tones and styles, but nevertheless, humour touches most of us in one way or another. Lydia Amir (2014) further argues that humour is intimately related to such admirable ideals like self-knowledge, truth, rationality and wisdom. In her analysis, joy is one of the greatest assets in human life.

It is reasonable to assume that the unique quality of human humour in comparison to potential animal humour comes down to cognitive capacities. Because humans can observe, formulate and understand paradoxes, and because humour is about dissonance between conceptualizations and perceptions, it is at least logically possible to joke about everything. Every single human concept can be presented in a humorous light. Animals are not capable of this depth and breadth of humorous thinking. A rather simple question wraps up the previous issue: can you imagine an animal that does not possess a sense of humour or in whose life humour does not play any kind of role? Or, vice versa, can you imagine an animal from whose life humour cannot be separated without losing something essential? This might be a rather anthropocentric interpretation, but we believe it is not necessary for other animal individuals to joke about anything. But what about human beings? Is something essential missing, if there is

¹¹ To be sure, we are not particularly convinced by this explanation for vicious bantering; here we merely describe a typical form of communication for the argument’s sake.

no humour at all in an individual's life? Is this even possible, assuming that the individual lives some 80 years and lives his or her life in a human community? We suppose it is agreeable to think that humour belongs to an average human life.

In this sense, humour is a very peculiar and essential human thing. Its prerequisite is that we have a conceptually based worldview that is not closed, i.e., we know all kinds of things but not everything. And because we do not know everything, we can always learn something new, and find our former conceptualizations flawed and try to forge some kind of new, more precise understanding. This process will probably never end. We describe this humorous human condition as optimally flawed.

4. Humorous humanism

The previous chapter explored certain prerequisites for humour and how it appears to be a relatively unique human trait. Now, we will examine how humanists have discussed this distinctive feature to demonstrate that the humanist tradition recognizes human flaws as essential elements of the human condition. So, how does the humanist tradition react to the phenomena of humour and laughter? As discussed above, according to various criticisms, humanism is often seen as a promoter of overly rational, isolated and arrogant agency (see section 1), and if this is true, there is a very little room for humour in human life if we consider the basic foundations of humour (human flaws, relatedness, limited knowledge). In the opposition to the criticism, we believe that the described position is false. For instance, humanist philosophers like Thomas More and Erasmus of Rotterdam discussed the human condition very vividly and in a very important way for understanding modern humanism as well. For both More and Erasmus, humour seems to be an essential feature in social life. In his *Utopia* (2012 [1516]), More defends the right to say out loud silly things without the fear of violent punishment. Erasmus (1971 [1511]) is even more (no pun intended) straightforward when he criticizes fixed forms of reason, e.g., overly serious religious speeches or political stances, and claims that foolishness is a much more central part of human life than narrow reason. Despite its bad reputation, folly should be praised, claims Erasmus.

Stephen Toulmin (1992) points out that, in the Renaissance, scepticism and uncertainty about life were very much accepted as part of human life. His argument goes that because of Descartes' yearning for certainty, humanism lost its sceptical roots, and the triumph of scientific reason was achieved in the Enlightenment with Kant's works. Toulmin's historical picture is obviously somewhat limited, but nevertheless, it paints a picture in which exact knowledge is prioritized over scepticism; or, if translated into the terms of this article, where seriousness beats humorousness. However, Toulmin's story about humanism forgetting its sceptical roots in the Renaissance, is not entirely true at least anymore. For instance, Kant pointed out the problem of humour for reason, and in his general philosophy, it is evident that human beings cannot reach the "world in itself" (Kant, 1890 [1781]); this means that we are always bound to our own existential situations in the world, or to put it in more Kantian terms, reason operates with our fundamental categories. This position we are unable to escape, and it is within this the sphere where humour arises.

The limitedness of humanity has been accepted by both classical and modern humanism. For instance, if Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (1965 [1486]) believes in the possibility of human perfection, then it logically means that human beings are currently imperfect. The same holds for such later humanists as Karl Marx, Erich Fromm and Jean-Paul Sartre¹². They all have

¹² Sartre is an exceptionally peculiar case, as his philosophical thinking tends to vary from publication to another. In some of his works, human beings are very alone on an existential level, but then, he discusses how important it is for us to respect others (compare his works 1982 [1960]; 1991; 2007 [1946]; 2008 [1943]).

questioned the idea of isolated subjects, and in a very Hegelian sense argue that humanity is always built on relationships. For example, Fromm's concept of the "social character" shows that in order to be autonomous individuals, we must be related to other human beings (see Fromm, 1994 [1941]). Following this line, such an essential feature as freedom is at its core a social freedom (see Honneth, 2014; also Hietalahti et al., 2016). We believe that the human position in various interpersonal networks is fundamental for a sense of humour as well. In psychological studies, it has been shown that the sense of humour is developed in relation to others (see Ruch, 1998; 2020). So even if everyone has a unique sense of humour, it cannot be realized without other human beings (see Hietalahti, 2021; on humour's social aspect see Provine, 2000). Humour then, essentially, is an interpersonal relationship between two or more individuals, and the feature called sense of humour is fundamentally based on social relationships. Of course, people can be amused by themselves in solitude, but even so, on a fundamental existential level, humour and laughter stem from our relatedness to other people.¹³ As a sidenote, the sociability of humour has been proven also in empirical works that show how we tend to laugh more often in the company of others than in solitude (e.g., Provine, 2000).

To keep our argument approachable, we can simply state that the critique of humanism has thus far ignored the fact that humanist authors do acknowledge the importance of humour in human life. And if our discussion about humour as a signal of human flaws is correct, then this imperfect feature has been noted in the humanist tradition. This means that claims that humanism is overly rationalistic and does not understand the significance of networks are, then, one-sided to say the least. Many a humanist author discusses humour (see below), and therefore implicitly agrees to the interpersonal aspect of humanity. Not all of them write about this explicitly, but even so, their (hidden) premise is that human beings are not isolated nor overly rational subjects outside of networks, but fundamentally social and flawed creatures whose limited reason and erroneous conceptualizations form the basis for humour in general.

In the face of various accusations humanism has faced (e.g., that it is overly rationalistic and atomistic), the Renaissance humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, is an important reminder of the alternative spirit of humanism. In his *Praise of Folly* (1971 [1511]), Erasmus discusses silliness as a central feature of human life. Wherever reason appears to be too rigid, Erasmus does not remain silent, but criticizes especially religious and political leaders. In his works, laughter steps in the room and shows how limited, shall we say, this kind of instrumental reason is. In a sense, Erasmus predicts Henri Bergson's (1913) later theory of laughter in which people laugh when somebody acts like a machine; human beings should be lively and creative creatures and there is nothing funnier than if someone's thinking and behaviour is just a mechanical repetition of old habits and one-sided opinions. For Erasmus (1971 [1511]), this one-sided rationality is highly dubious, and he claims that human life is constituted of all kinds of things, which can be summarized under the concept of folly. Erasmus claims that humorous observations are besides being funny, also inspiring. In his letter to Thomas More, Erasmus formulates his general position on humour like this:

Jokes can be handled in such a way that any reader who is not altogether lacking in discernment can scent something far more rewarding in them than in the crabbed and specious arguments of some people [...] [T]he intelligent have always enjoyed freedom to exercise their wit on the common life of man, and with impunity, provided that they kept their liberty within reasonable limits. [...] Furthermore, if every type of man is included, it is clear that all the vices are censured, not any individual.

(Erasmus, 1971 [1511], pp. 59-60)

¹³ Sartre (2008 [1943]) makes a similar point about our ability to experience shame. Whilst we can experience shame alone, our ability to do so relies on our having developed being-for-others and shame is fundamentally an interpersonal phenomenon.

In this passage, Erasmus makes a three-fold argument in favour of humour. First, jocular form is often much more rewarding than, say, dry formal arguments. Second, humour can offer valuable insights on the common flaws most of us share, as long as this is done in a tactful way. And finally, third, humour is not out of the scope of ethics, and we can evaluate it in relation to values. Michael Screech (1999) has noted that Christianity might have been a very different religion if Erasmus's ideas would have gained a little more support back in the day. Nowadays, the general reputation of Christianity is rather grey and dull, whereas Erasmus wanted to breathe more silliness into religious rituals. (Apparently it was a close call, but what can you do?)

In our interpretation, this humorous trait of humanism comes very close to how Max Horkheimer's (2013 [1946]) criticism of "instrumental reason". If reason is used only for gaining control and/or wealth and other not-so-essential matters in the world, something crucial to human life will be missed. In a similar spirit, Thomas More (2012 [1516]) reminds us that overly-strictly followed fixed rules will diminish human plurality; the rules and customs of one society cannot dictate what is good and joyful in life. If politicians and religious leaders demand seriousness, humour offers a strong argument against that framework.¹⁴

In the hands of Erasmus and More, humour is a pivotal part of social criticism. Therefore, at least on a meta-level, humour is closely bound to critical social philosophy as well as ethics, because they both try to offer some ideas on how to make a world a better place. Logically, then, humour also can and should be evaluated ethically too. Both Erasmus and More understood that joking can also involve problematic aspects, and in particular, Erasmus acknowledges that humour can turn out to be malevolent; he claims that humour is not outside of ethical consideration, but in the end, closely related to our broader values of life. A similar idea can be found from More, when he mentions that we should accept that those who are different than us, can still be humorous in a vibrant, lively way.¹⁵ In short, both Renaissance humanists defend human beings as flawed creatures who have the potential to follow ethical ideals and aim at perfection. In an ethically acceptable or praiseworthy life, there is room for both somewhat impulsive silly behaviour and wise moral choices. In our interpretation, they seem to claim that neither aspect should dominate the whole life.

Balance being the key word here, another humanist philosopher, Friedrich Schiller (2004 [1794]) takes this a step further and claims that in the perfectly harmonized balance between reason and emotions opens a possibility *to play*¹⁶. Schiller believes that this playful harmony is a state in which humour can be born; humour is the expression of certain kind of human perfection, a perfection in which neither reason nor emotion solely dictates human actions. Furthermore, humour is the key element in entering Schiller's peculiar kind of utopia, the aesthetic state (Schiller, 2004 [1794]).

Schiller's ideas are noteworthy because, in his philosophy, humour appears to be a certain kind of peak of humanity that can lead to an ideal society. We do not believe that Schiller argues that this kind of utopia would be achieved simply through joking, but on a meta-level, this all means that humour is an essential feature in the so-called perfect human life. This can happen only if reason does not dictate one-sidedly our living, but there is room for emotions and

¹⁴ Nowadays, especially populist politicians use humour to foster their agenda (see Weaver, 2022), but it is possible to offer humane guidelines for their humour too (see section 5).

¹⁵ More himself refers to mentally handicapped and wants to let them to speak their thoughts and express their emotions freely, and that they should not be afraid of physical punishment, if they happen to say something silly.

¹⁶ Schiller's Finnish translator Pirkko Holmberg points out that one possible translation of the original German word "Spiel" could be "kuje" in Finnish, which basically means in English a frolic, a lark or perhaps a prank. In any case, Schiller's "Spiel" refers to more than games or playing; it is certain kind of imaginative playfulness, a possibility to think beyond current social limitations and to act humorously. Here we will apply also the term "humour" even if Schiller himself does not use the same term, but evidently refers to a very humorous feature of humanity.

impulses as well. If we accept that humour belongs to the core of humanity, as various humanist authors do, then we must accept uncertainty, scepticism, and other such epistemological aspects of human life. This formulates a rather clear position or argument against the overly rationalistic framework portrayed by the critics of humanism.

The position described here is not only historical but very much alive also in contemporary philosophy too. For instance, Martha Nussbaum (1986) has discussed the balance of order and disorder in life, and in this she comes very close to Schillerian idea of playful balance. Equally, Lydia Amir (2019) argues that we should understand human beings as *Homo risibilis*, a species centrally related to laughter and humour. She claims that it is precisely humour that helps to implement in practice high ideals that otherwise might elude people; it teaches us lucidity that enables us to regain our humane, earthly and at the same moment spiritual dignity (Amir, 2021). Simon Critchley (2002, p. 111) beautifully describes human beings as ridiculous creatures who laugh at themselves, and how this wretchedness is our greatness. In a similar spirit, Richard Norman (2004) demands that we must recognize our fragility and limitedness but in a somewhat hopeful manner. Norman claims that we often fail to live an ideal human life and to respect the humanity those around us: “These are grounds for sober realism, but not for despair” (Norman, 2004, p. 157). One reminder of this fragility is constantly present in tragedy, but its counterpart comedy is also present in our lives. Norman (2004, p. 159) carries on and claims that humour is essential to humanism because it gives us the chance laugh at life in the middle of encompassing despair. In his analysis, this is the central theme of in the song by Billie Holiday, *Laughing at Life* (1940):

Don't mind the rain drops
Wait till the rain stops
Smile through your tears, laughing at life
No road is lonely, if you will only
Lose all your blues laughing at life
Live for tomorrow, be happy today
Laugh all your sorrows away.

Norman is right to acknowledge Holiday, but we should add that not all humanists want to laugh sorrows away, but instead stress the importance of experiencing life at its fullest, respecting both joyful and melancholic aspects of life. For instance, Helmuth Plessner (1970 [1940]) shows how close laughter and crying come to each other as they both are peculiar expressions of a psychosomatic crisis. Despite the oft-repeated idiom “laughter is the best medicine”, we should be wary of such ideological statements and try not to praise humour too much; in the branch of philosophical humanism we are discussing here, both humour and sorrow have an important role in the totality of human life.

5. Humane humour

So far, we have argued that humour is an important feature in the tradition of humanism, and that both historical and contemporary humanist authors consider it an essential feature in human life. Obviously, this is not all that humanism has to say about humour; it is not enough to state that humour in general is relevant for humanism—humanism must take a position on the problematic aspects of humour as well. After all, humanism as we understand it is very strongly value-orientated tradition so it cannot shy away of making well-argued statements about humane humour.

In the field of humour research (see Raskin, 2008), it has been noted that not all humour is praiseworthy. Ever since Plato (2003 [c. 375 BCE]) and Epictetus (2009 [125 CE]), philosophers

have mentioned that laughter has its problematic aspects as it can threaten what can be called the good life. One of the darker aspects of humour is its tendency to suppress those in weaker positions. Oft-quoted Thomas Hobbes gives perhaps the sharpest formulation of the so-called superiority theory, when he claims that: “Laughter is nothing else but sudden arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (Hobbes, 2008 [1650], pp. 54-55).

Hobbes is often misinterpreted as considering *all* humour as a sign of superiority (see Lintott, 2016), but nevertheless he describes one aspect of laughter triggered by humour: it expresses our superiority towards others or our former selves. To be more precise, Hobbes discusses a passion that has no name, and calls it laughter. Logically put, this does not mean that all laughter is triggered by superiority, but rather that one unnamed passion is closely related to the yearning to feel oneself superior over others in the competitive form of life. Henri Bergson (1913) in his otherwise optimistic work points out that humour may be scornful, but does not handle this aspect very thoroughly. Michael Billig (2005) stresses Bergson’s point and claims that nowadays people are overly optimistic about humour, and sheds light on the various inhumane aspects of humour. Currently, there is plenty of discussion about racist (e.g., Weaver, 2011; Anderson, 2005; Carroll, 1999) and otherwise stereotypical humour (e.g., Blum, 2004; Hall, 1997) that is plainly cruel towards minorities or those in lesser positions of power within society.

Here, we can agree that humour is not in any sense an unproblematic phenomenon, and a humanist should not make ideological claims about its goodness. So, if we are to embrace humour as an essential part of a flourishing human life, how ought we to deal with the darker aspects of humour? There have been some attempts to claim that jokes that express sadistic tendencies do not belong to the category of humour (e.g., Comte-Sponville, 2001; Swabey, 1961; Morreall, 2009), and there have been theoretical attempts to state that all humour is benevolent by its nature (McGraw & Warren, 2014). Unfortunately, these kinds of optimistic approaches seem to contradict the basic ideas of incongruity theory, and if we follow its logic, humour can be both malevolent and benevolent (see also Hietalahti & Pennanen, 2023). Therefore, humanism needs a different strategy for understanding humour and its role in (a good) life.

Some guidelines have been formulated for humane humour. In his own version of humanistic humour David Feltmate (2019) formulates ideas on how a secular (atheist) humanist should joke about religions. Despite his gentle approach, we do not think that humane humour should be restricted merely to the sphere of religion and atheism. In a more substantial approach, Emily Toth (1981) suggests in her so-called first humanist rule of humour that one should not joke about things that the target of the joke cannot change. These include such permanent features as colour of the skin and sex. Obviously, Toth’s guideline is slightly outdated as it is possible to, say, change a person’s sex nowadays. Furthermore, one probably cannot change their species, but we think it is acceptable to ridicule the stupidity of the human race in a joke (e.g., in relation to climate change). Here, a more charitable interpretation is that Toth basically refers to those features that are relatively permanent and are highly significant for a person’s identity.

Despite its evidently humane tone, Toth’s guideline is not universally valid. The greatest comedians are able to joke about difficult and sensitive issues in a humane, respectful manner. Fixed restrictions on what it is permissible to joke about, prohibiting for instance, jokes about racial or gender issues do not respect the very nature of humour, nor does they fit with the branch of humanism discussed in this article. If we believe in the basic humanist tenet that nothing human is alien to us, then all possible topics can be handled in a humorous and respectful manner.

There are some other equally promising but not universally valid guidelines for humane humour. For example, Simon Critchley (2002) suggests that it is always better to joke about oneself than others, but it has been noted that self-ridiculing can be used in a manipulative way too (see Hietalahti, 2015). Again, a good rule of thumb but not a foolproof law. The same holds for those who believe that it is morally acceptable to “punch up” in humour but condemnable to “kick down”. Whilst this is a generally sensible idea, but because humour is so versatile and social hierarchies are fluid, the guideline does not cover all the possible humane ways to express humorous ideas (see Hietalahti, 2024).

To complement the previous humanist approaches to humour, we would like to suggest that humour should be evaluated in the spectrum of “inclusive/exclusive” as well. The problem with the other previously discussed ethical guidelines is that they may lead to unnecessarily one-sided assumptions of, say, members of different cultures. If a white middle-aged atheist male thinks that a black elderly Christian female is too delicate to hear a biting joke, and therefore one should not tell the joke, he may be formulating opinionated and hasty assumptions about the other. After all, it may very well be that the elderly person is a humorous character and enjoys biting humour. These kinds of assumptions are in danger of being hazardous, and they may lead to excluding the other from the scope of (humorous) humanity. Instead, humour encourages us to be open to change value (see Rad et al., 2019). In relation to this openness, Critchley points out that humour reminds us how familiar things could be perceived from a new perspective. In our fundamentally social world, humour shows who we have been, who we are, and what we could be in the future (Critchley, 2002, pp. 86-87).

We suggest that one should not make hasty cultural generalizations about (the sense of humour of) the other, but try to learn to know and understand them. Humour could be one connecting element in this process. If we consider a sense of humour as a universal human feature, then we should assume that those who are different than us, very probably understand and even enjoy humour. But at the same time, we should not try to dominate anyone with our own taste in humour, but instead, acknowledge the possibility that people do enjoy comedies and jokes in different ways from ourselves (on the complexity of the sense of humour, see Ruch 1998). Instead of judging humour, we should agree that every individual has their unique sense of humour, and recognize the potential similarities and differences in humorous worldviews. Here we suggest that the potential joint points are easily found when humour touches on some globally shared aspects of humanity; potentially the above-mentioned existential needs (see section 1) to be related and find a meaningful way to live this life. This approach would respect the Kantian principle that every human being should be treated always as an end, and it is in line with the basic principles of the incongruity theory. To sum up, an English person has the potential to understand and enjoy Chinese humour, and an Afghan can share similar humorous insights with Swedes.

Even if humour has its darker aspects, humanists do not need to demand that humour should always be sensitive in the narrowest sense of the term. A particularly interesting case for humanism is roast culture (see Saavedra Torres et al., 2024). In roasting, it is a given that participants mock each other in the most offensive manner. The language used is intentionally harsh and even the most intimate and private matters are taken as fair targets for ridicule. Here, we shall assume that there can be positive aspects in roast performances despite the offensive nature of the occasion. The problem, then, would be if a participant in the roast assumes that they cannot ridicule in any shocking manner a member of a certain minority group because of their colour of the skin, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or such because of the sensitive nature of the particular issue. In such a case, the person performing the roast makes a problematic assumption of the other. They assume that the other is not capable of a similar humorous exchange as the performer. If we agree that humour is an essential aspect of humanity, and if we agree that a sense of humour is one of the constitutive features of human beings, then

we should be open to the possibility that members of different cultures are capable of humour as well. In this sense, superficially highly offensive humour has the potential to be inclusive despite the very harsh tone of the performed jokes. This type of humour can potentially be a significant symbol for sameness on a humanist level and that we all share the same roots of humanity despite our particular differences. Humour has the potential to both respect differences and at the same time remind us that we are all in the same boat, for instance, in the scope of existential needs and such.

Of course, it is a matter for discussion of its own whether, say, a European understanding of the significance of humour is the only correct one, and that if European ways of expressing and performing humorous thoughts is morally praiseworthy. Be this as it may, within that cultural context, Europeans should be ready to accept the idea that people from different social and cultural realities can be on the same humorous line with them at least on a meta-level.

In our interpretation, what is central for interpreting the significance of humour in the philosophies of such humanists as Erasmus, More, Kant, and Schiller, as well as Lydia Amir and Simon Critchley, is that we should treat human beings with dignity, but this is not necessarily limited to the superficial topics of humour. More importantly, we should ask whether we accept the targets of jokes, or those whom we have left outside of humorous consideration, as humans equal to ourselves. In addition, we should be open to hear the other and how they see the worth of humour in their lives; in practice, this means that we are ready to accept that our position on humour is not necessarily the only right or possible one. In a nutshell, we must be open towards others and critical towards ourselves.

Obviously, it is possible that some people hold problematic convictions about humour; for instance, if a misanthrope aims to cause as much pain and humiliation with their humour, this can be rightly criticized. A humanistic position on humour does not mean that all manifestations of humour are accepted or praised, but implicitly includes a strong demand for *humane humour*. Even if humour on a conceptual level is based on paradoxes and in this theoretical sense expresses certain imperfect or even chaotic aspects of humanity (in opposition to rigid reason), it still belongs to the realm of ethics, and we can and should make ethical statements on humour and its significance for a good life.

6. Concluding remarks

In this article, we have argued that humour is a pivotal part of human life, and demonstrated that it plays a significant role in the writings of various humanist authors. The very phenomenon and acknowledgement of the phenomenon of humour functions as a counterargument against those critics who claim that the subject of humanism is an overly rational isolated entity. A long tradition in humour studies vividly underscores the importance of humour and laughter for the human condition. This highlights how deeply we are connected to networks, grounded in our earthly existence, and how joyfully impulsive we can be. Yet, our capacity for reason remains a remarkable feature, and this makes us capable of humour.

We posit that humour is a sign of human imperfection. Following the core ideas of the so-called incongruity theory, humour reveals that human reason has its limits, and because of our limited conceptualizations, human beings are inherently ridiculous creatures in the most philosophical sense of the word. If humanism acknowledges humour as an essential human feature, it also embraces the idea of human limitedness. We stress that the idea of human imperfection (in relation to, say, an omnipotent creature) is understood here in the broadest possible sense, meaning that humour can be perceived and experienced even in a stable, fulfilling life. In other words, one can still find things to joke about, even when life is proceeding

as planned and is entirely satisfying. Therefore, human imperfection is a broad category that encompasses even a content individual life.

In addition, we have discussed a potential form of humanist ethics of humour and suggested that humanist clausula of humane humour should recognize the aspect of inclusivity and exclusivity when evaluating the ethical aspects of humour. Within a humanist framework, we have defended the broadness of humour and argued against rigid, universal rules. Instead, we believe that the ethics of humour involves respecting others as full human beings. In this sense, humane humour does not condemn all superficially harsh humour.

We acknowledge that the approach proposed here is probably as not as straightforward as the other similar guidelines (e.g., do not joke about what the target of the joke cannot change; punch up; laugh at yourself). However, this complexity is the cost of humanist approach that aims to understand complicated humanity and muddy social reality. This perspective demonstrates that the humanist tradition does not view individuals as overly rational, isolated beings but instead affirms the necessity of interconnectedness in being fully human. Humour is an essential part of this holistic view, reminding us of the importance of being open to change—regarding ourselves, others, and even the concept of humour itself.

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