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John Lombardini

Abstract
While the loss of the second book of the Poetics has deprived us of Aristotle’s most extensive account of laughter and comedy, his discussion of eutrapelia (wittiness) as a virtue in his ethical works and in the Rhetoric points toward the importance of humor for his ethical and political thought. This article offers a reconstruction of Aristotle’s account of wittiness and attempts to explain how the virtue of wittiness would animate the everyday interactions of ordinary citizens. Placing Aristotle’s account of wittiness in dialogue with recent work within the ethical turn in contemporary political theory can help articulate what a late-modern ethos of democratic laughter might look like.

Keywords
Aristotle, humor, laughter, civic virtue, ethical turn

Recent work in political theory has increasingly attended to the place of humor in democratic theorizing and practice. Among contemporary theorists troubled by the exclusions enacted by various forms of foundationalism, irony\(^1\) and parody\(^2\) have been championed as salutary in unsettling such foundational claims while avoiding their recapitulation; others have argued for the place of humor within the public spheres of deliberative

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democracy; and scholars of ancient Greek political thought, focusing primarily on Aristophanes, have attempted to articulate the democratic potential and pedagogical value of comedy. This article seeks to contribute to this growing literature by offering a reconstruction of Aristotle’s account of wittiness (euterapelia) and exploring its potential to inform a contemporary ethos of democratic laughter. While Aristotle’s political thought more generally has been the focus of renewed attention within contemporary political theory, his specific discussion of wittiness as a virtue has remained a relatively neglected dimension of his ethical and political thought. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the loss of the second book of the Poetics impairs any attempt to assess Aristotle’s account of humor in full. Despite this loss, Aristotle’s extant reflections on euterapelia offer resources for articulating the civic importance of his ethical reflections on humor.

In explicating Aristotle’s account of euterapelia, I pursue the resonances between Aristotelian wittiness and William Connolly’s gestures toward a contemporary democratic ethos of laughter. In Identity/Difference, Connolly identifies laughter as an idealized, yet possible, outcome of our disagreements with others, one that might accompany the exposure of the contingencies of our identities. Such laughter in common can express the mutual recognition of our individual dissonances, connecting the experience of laughter to the cultivation of agonistic respect Connolly argues constitutes an appropriate orientation toward the “deep pluralism” of late-modernity. This is perhaps a curious pairing, given the tension between the deep pluralism Connolly advocates and the teleological dimension of Aristotle’s ethics. Yet, Connolly himself emphasizes the affinities between post-Nietzschean sensibilities (like his own) and teleological theories (like that of Aristotle); most importantly, both pursue an ethic of cultivation that sets them apart from Augustinian and Kantian traditions that construe morality as a set of categorical commands. Working against this backdrop, I hope to demonstrate that Aristotle’s attention to how an ethic of wittiness can be cultivated might serve as a framework for interrogating and extending Connolly’s gestures toward a late-modern ethos of democratic laughter.

The article begins by situating Connolly’s remarks on laughter within the larger theoretical framework he develops. In doing so, I argue that Connolly’s account of such laughter remains caught between an overly antagonistic mode of ironic mockery that we actively create and a fugitive form of laughter that erupts from nowhere when we recognize resonances with others of different existential faiths. In turning to Aristotle, I explicate how his account of euterapelia offers a mode of laughing and joking with one’s fellow citizens that cuts the difference between the two modes Connolly describes. By
highlighting the differences between irony and wittiness in Aristotle’s thought, I illustrate how Aristotle links the cultivation of wittiness to the ability of citizens to interact harmoniously in their daily interactions with friends, enemies, and strangers. I then demonstrate how we might unpack this civic understanding of eutrapelia along specifically democratic lines by exploring Aristotle’s alternative definition of wittiness in the Rhetoric as “educated hubris” in conjunction with Demosthenes’s fourth-century forensic speech Against Konon. Finally, I turn to Aristotle’s account of the link between friendship, self-knowledge, and ethical cultivation to demonstrate how the virtuous laughter and joking associated with wittiness can both facilitate these processes while providing a space within which the virtue of eutrapelia can be cultivated. Having explicated Aristotelian eutrapelia, I return to Connolly to compare his account of ethical cultivation with that of Aristotle and to articulate the importance of the social space of friendship for ethical cultivation. By way of conclusion, I suggest how Aristotelian wittiness might also more broadly enrich the recent “ethical turn” in political theory, as exemplified in the recent work of Stephen White.

William Connolly’s Agonistic Laughter

Connolly’s reflections on laughter flow from his articulation of an agonistic mode of democracy and the civic virtues necessary to generate and sustain it. This call to cultivate an agonistic ethos is rooted in the need to generate contestation at the level of personal and collective identity, contestation that is geared toward confronting, rather than evading, what Connolly identifies as the paradox of politics: “that we cannot dispense with personal and collective identities, but the multiple drives to stamp truth upon those identities function to convert differences into otherness and otherness into scapegoats created and maintained to secure the appearance of true identity.” This drive to convert difference to otherness and others to scapegoats—what Connolly terms the “second problem of evil”—is best countered through engagement with, and contestation of, the fundamental faiths of others. While this version of agonistic democracy would remain a form of liberalism, albeit a critical one, it seeks to reconstitute the terrain of liberal democracy as a framework within which the common purposes generated in such a political system can be “exposed, contested, disturbed, and unsettled.”

Crucial to Connolly’s vision of a more agonistic democracy is the cultivation of two key political virtues: agonistic respect and critical responsiveness. An ethos of agonistic respect guides individuals as they publicly contest the fundamental faiths of their fellow citizens, disposing them to do
so in ways that acknowledge the contestability of their own beliefs/identities; it is from this recognition of mutual contestability that the respect in agonistic respect flows, though the particular grounds for such respect will vary with the different fundamental faiths each party brings to the table. While the virtue of agonistic respect guides the interactions between individuals and groups that are already recognized and have power within the current political order, critical responsiveness is the ethos adopted by those who enjoy such recognition toward those who do not. It entails “careful listening” and “presumptive generosity” toward new political movements and constituencies struggling for such recognition. Taken together, agonistic respect and critical responsiveness shape our engagement with the “fact” of pluralism—that there are other citizens with whom we equally share our polity and yet may fundamentally disagree—and the process of pluralization—the recurring movements to enact new identities that inevitably challenge those identities that are currently recognized. These virtues inform and make possible an ethos of democracy as both a rule of governance, an egalitarian culture, and a system for disturbing and challenging the fixed identities that encrust themselves on the former two.

Having articulated this framework, we can better appreciate Connolly’s gestures toward an ethos of democratic laughter that can guide the everyday interactions of citizens within an agonistic framework. In Identity\ Difference, Connolly frames his remarks on laughter in the language of ironic self-distancing; living one’s identity in an ironic way entails recognition of the contingency built into one’s identity, one that might be cultivated through the practice of critical genealogy. Recognition of such contingency, in turn, can generate laughter at those moments when others, or we ourselves, fail to acknowledge or lose sight of such contingency. It might arise, for example, from attempts to universalize one’s own beliefs simply because they are one’s own, or to moralize difference as a means of assuring oneself of one’s own “normality.” Such laughter would be an acknowledgement of the “fugitive elements” that always exceed our particular identities and their interdependence on the concomitant differences that they inevitably produce. It is not a Hobbesian form of laughter “where I show myself to be ahead and you to be behind,” but a mode of laughing together at the shared sense in which we each inhabit our identities in paradoxical ways. In short, such laughter is a practice through which late-modern citizens might combat the second problem of evil.

What might such a gelastic engagement look like? Connolly’s “letter” to Augustine provides a puzzling example. There is a deep tone of mockery that pervades this letter, most evident in Connolly’s ironic invocations of
Augustine. Consider the following: “I beg you, O Bishop of Hippo, enlighten me where I go wrong here. Fill my mind with a deeper understanding and rid it of those distractions that cloud its vision, I who bear within me my own mortality, and who can only follow the thin shaft of light that leads into your deep soul.”20 Here, Connolly ironically deploys the same vocative case Augustine uses throughout the Confessions to position himself in relation to Augustine as Augustine places himself in relation to God. In doing so, Connolly ridicules Augustine’s outward expressions of humility and piety as laughable, as incongruous with the certainty with which he advances his beliefs and brands those who disagree as heretics. The tone of the letter, in short, seems to lie in tension with the call to “laugh together, on principle” that Connolly evokes just pages earlier. Rather, the letter invites its readers to laugh at Augustine, and Augustine to laugh at himself.21 While Connolly ends the letter with a gesture toward agonistic respect, Augustine is framed as one who is “too hellbent on conquest or conversion” and needs to be converted “to a more modest, contingent view” of his identity.22 While there is a good deal of irony in this letter, it is ironic mockery of Augustine, rather than self-irony or ironic self-distancing.

It is thus difficult to see how such irony, mockery, and the invitation to laughter driven by these two modes would be viewed as agonistic, rather than antagonistic. Indeed, Connolly’s own reflections on the letter in the preface to the second edition of Identity|Difference would appear to affirm such worries; more specifically, Connolly notes that “the strategy I adopted to mimic and expose the code of hereticalization ran the risk of reinscribing it.”23 While affirming his critique of Augustine, Connolly expresses his dissatisfaction with his general “mood of engagement” which would seem to apply to the specific tone of mockery in the letter as well. Immediately following this self-criticism, he again identifies “laughter in common” as a “way to communicate appreciation of mystery and a mood of modesty across contrasting codes of piety.”24 Yet, when Connolly returns to such laughter in Pluralism, it is shorn of the ironic mockery of the letter to Augustine. Here is his description of how “laughter across multiple lines of difference” might arise in that work:

Sometimes the diastolic rhythm of one constituency resonates strangely with the systolic beat of others. Here a seed of oblique connection emerges between partisans honoring different creeds. Thus Epicurus, a functional nontheist, advised his disciples to subdue worry about what happens after death in order to overcome that resentment of human mortality that lends a punitive cast to morality. He thus acknowledged, before the advent of Christianity, how a subterranean flow of faith in
an afterlife readily infiltrates the subliminal lives of those who officially eschew it. Several monotheists, including Kierkegaard, James, and Bergson, testify to similar dissonances, though they locate them in the forgetfulness that periodically punctuates faith in transcendence. What if many on each side of such a divide can identify a little atheist or theist periodically peeking through their dominant investments of faith? What if they then pursue connections across such chiasmatic lines? Attention to such a connection can provoke laughter . . . as each constituency engages an internal counterpoint to itself that tempers the external counterpart it provides to others.25

Gone from this account is the active figuring of the other as an object of laughter, and inviting the other to do the same to us. Absent as well are the ironic self-distancing and critical genealogy that can reveal the contingencies that give rise to such laughter. Instead, Connolly describes the laughter in the passage above as “bubbling up as if from nowhere” and as bursting “into being from a fund of abundance below consciousness.”26 Such laughter, he emphasizes, “does not require refined intellectuality.”27

Between Identity\Difference and Pluralism, then, Connolly’s vision of the laughter he seeks to foment appears to shift considerably, from a type of reciprocated laughter actively directed at others to a suddenly erupting laughter that signals the acknowledgment of shared contingency. While the first form of laughter risks spilling over into antagonism, the latter seems to presuppose the recognition of connections across lines of difference it is meant to engender. Without such recognition, such laughter might also risk spilling over into antagonism, yet with such recognition, it is unclear what laughter would add to such an acknowledgment.

It is at this point, I would argue, that attention to Aristotle can prove useful. Aristotle’s account of wittiness, like Connolly’s reflections on laughter, is concerned with negotiating the boundary between antagonism and agonism, and on tempering forms of laughter that represent the drive to dominate others. Like the Connolly of Pluralism, moreover, Aristotle rejects irony as a virtuous mode of engaging in laughter; however, Aristotle’s conception of wittiness retains a focus on both laughing at others and at oneself, and does not avoid the pain involved in being the object of such laughter. Rather, Aristotle provides a more detailed account of how such laughter can first be cultivated within the context of virtue friendship and then extended to our encounters with nonvirtue friends, strangers, and even enemies. In what follows, I first explicate Aristotle’s accounts of irony and wittiness in order to provide an explanation for his preference for the latter, one that I argue is rooted in the
role wittiness plays in mediating potential social/political conflicts. Through a historical example of such a conflict, I then unpack Aristotle’s account of wittiness as “educated hubris” before finally turning to the fundamental question of how the virtue of wittiness is cultivated.

Irony, Wittiness, and Civic Friendship

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle names wittiness (*eutrapelia*) as the virtue pertaining to laughter and joking, and as with the other virtues Aristotle discusses, it stands in relation to both an excess and deficiency. Buffoons (*bōmolochoi*) are excessive with respect to laughter; they are desirous of raising laughter on all occasions, and they care more about producing laughter than about saying something decent (*euschēmona*) or not paining the individual they are mocking. Boors (*agroikoi*), in contrast, will not utter anything laughable and are disgusted by the laughable things others say. Those who possess the virtue of wittiness—*eutrapeloi* (sg., *eutrapelos*)—will joke and raise laughter in appropriate ways (*EN* 1128a3–10).

What does it mean to laugh and joke in appropriate ways? Aristotle raises this question in the *EN*, offering two possible answers: either appropriate laughter is that which avoids pain (*mē lupein*) and gives pleasure to the hearer, or it is that which is fitting for the free man (*mē aprepē eleutheriōi*). In the *EE*, Aristotle opts for the latter: the *eutrapelos* should seek to give pleasure to the individual of good judgment (*ho eu krinōn*), and need not refrain from paining the one being mocked (1234a18–24). Though the same conclusion is reached in the *EN*, more emphasis is placed on the avoidance of pain. While it appears impossible to categorize *eutrapelia* in terms of avoiding pain and giving pleasure (because different people find different things pleasant or hateful), the *eutrapelos* will not engage in all forms of jokes and laughter (*EN* 1128a29), nor will he avoid painful laughter altogether. Just as legislators might need to prohibit certain types of joking as forms of abuse (*loidorēma ti*, 1128a30–31), the *eutrapelos*, as a law unto himself (*nomos ōn heautōi*), will be able to judge in what contexts abusive joking would be appropriate (*EN* 1128a32).

Oddly enough, Aristotle’s discussion of irony in the *EN* is completely divorced from this discussion of laughter and joking. There, Aristotle’s discussion of irony is confined to his description of the virtue of truthfulness, which entails speaking and acting in a straightforward manner. The boaster (*alazōn*), in contrast, claims qualities for himself that he either does not possess or possesses to a lesser extent than he claims, while the ironist (*eirōn*) disavows or belittles his actual qualities (*EN* 1127a20–26). This separation of
Irony from laughter and joking is perhaps explained as a reflection of the original meaning of the Greek word *eirōneia* as a type of deceitful dissembling. Yet, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle alludes to the different forms of the laughable (*eidē geloiōn*) that had been discussed in the now-lost *Poetics II*, and appears to include the ironic as one of these modes (1419b7). In fact, he even recommends irony as a mode of joking preferable to that of buffoonery, insofar as the ironist jokes for his own sake while the buffoon jokes for the sake of others (1419b9–11).

Just as irony is preferable to buffoonery, it is also preferable to its corresponding vice in the *EN*, boastfulness. Ironists, for Aristotle, tend to appear more refined (*chariesteroi*) than their boastful counterparts since they seem to practice self-deprecation in order to avoid pomposity (*pheugontes to ogkēron*), rather than for pecuniary gain (1127b22–24). In this sense, the *alazōn* is worse (*cheirōn*) than the ironist, and is situated as the true opposite of the truthful individual (1127b31–32). Yet, Aristotle also indicates that this is not true of all forms of irony. Some ironic denials, Aristotle acknowledges, may themselves appear as forms of boasting. In fact, it is only those who use irony in a measured way (*hoi metriōs chrōmenoi tēi eirōneiai*) that appear refined (1127b29–31).

This connection between irony and boastfulness is perhaps the reason why irony remains a vice, a connection that is reinforced by Aristotle’s discussion of the magnanimous individual as one who “is a frank speaker on account of his contempt [for others], and he is truthful, except insofar as he is ironic towards the many” (1124b29–30). Here, irony is figured as a device used by superiors toward inferiors. While such irony might be justified, in Aristotle’s view, in the case of the truly great-souled individual, it might also appear as arrogant and boastful to those against whom it is practiced. As itself a form of contempt, the practice of irony also carries with it the potential to anger those against whom it is deployed (*Rhet. 1379b31*). Finally, as the above comparison between the ironist and buffoon in the *Rhetoric* indicates, Aristotle views irony as a form of joking where the audience for the humor is the ironist himself. While this is precisely what makes irony more suitable to the gentleman than buffoonery, it also construes irony as a form of private joking, one where the ironist might be perceived as mocking the other for his own pleasure. Thus while the ironist might appear refined when he employs his irony moderately, he might also appear to be boasting of his superiority.

This connection between irony and superiority might explain why Aristotle decided to exclude irony from his discussion of *eutrapelia*. *Eutrapelia* and truthfulness are two of the three social virtues that Aristotle discusses at *EN IV*.6–8 as governing our everyday interactions with others.
and promoting harmonious social interaction. It is in his discussion of the third virtue, friendliness, that this emphasis is most clear. Friendliness differs from actual friendship (the discussion of which occurs in books 8 and 9) in that it does not involve any emotion or love toward those we encounter; in this sense, it is oriented toward our interactions with strangers, though it is also the state that underlies our interactions with both friends and enemies. “Friendliness” is best described as an intermediary state disposing us to cause pleasure and pain in the right way and on the right occasion to those we meet. The ingratiating person (areskos), unlike the “friendly,” will always please and never pain those he encounters; if he does so for monetary gain, he is called a flatterer (kolax); those who are peevish (duskeloi) or quarrelsome (dusideres), on the other hand, oppose others in everything and do not care at all about causing pain to others. The one who occupies the intermediate state will generally aim to avoid causing pain or to share pleasure, but will do so within the parameters of what is fine and beneficial; in particular, he will object to sharing in pleasures if they are not fine or are harmful and will choose, rather, to cause pain.

Each of the three social virtues is connected with a particular quality or sphere of social interaction—truthfulness concerns truth; eutraperia concerns the pleasure we take in amusements (en tais paidiais); and friendliness concerns pleasure in the other areas of life (kata ton allon bion, EN 1128b4–9). Yet, as we have already seen from the discussion of irony in the Rhetoric, the boundaries between these three virtues are more porous than this classification suggests. What interests Aristotle about irony in the EN is not only whether it is virtuous to tell the truth or not, but also to what extent truth-telling shapes our social interactions with others. Likewise, the witty person would not joke and laugh in ways that were overly quarrelsome (nor would he do so in ways that caused pleasure with the aim of flattering or being ingratiating). The social virtues, then, allow for us to cause pain to and be critical of strangers, friends, and enemies, but require that we do so in a reciprocal way that avoids either dominating or being obsequious to those we encounter in our daily interactions.

On this last point, Danielle Allen’s analysis of “friendliness,” friendship, and their connections to Aristotle’s account of justice is helpful. For Allen, while distributive justice concerns the distribution of goods such as wealth, corrective justice involves the distribution of the good of agency. In corrective justice, each party to the dispute is treated as equal. The social status of each individual is irrelevant; all that matters is who committed the injustice and who suffered it. What is “corrected” in corrective justice is the imbalance created by the act of injustice that marks the doer of injustice as the agent
who acts and the sufferer of injustice as the subject to be acted upon. The public procedures of corrective justice, then, are what maintain the polis as a community of citizens who rule and are ruled in turn by recognizing the equal agency of each citizen to share in ruling.

“Friendliness” and friendship also deal with the preservation of agency insofar as “friendship achieves what justice does.” In claiming that “if people are friends there is no need of justice, but if they are just they still need friendship” (*EN*, 1155a26–27), Aristotle calls attention to how friendship brings about what justice seeks to accomplish without recourse to legal procedures. In this sense, we can think of the virtue of friendliness as “a midway point between acquiescence and domination.” Those who act toward others in accordance with the virtue of friendliness neither subordinate them to the position of subjects nor allow themselves to be so subjected. Likewise, those who act toward others in accordance with the virtue of wittiness will neither joke and laugh in ways that dominate others nor acquiesce in the domination of themselves or of others.

By situating Aristotle’s account of *eutrapelia* alongside the concerns with agency raised by the connections between wittiness and friendliness, we can discern the civic dimension of wittiness as a virtue. Wittiness, like friendliness, does not just help us get along with others in our daily interactions; rather, these virtues shape our interactions with our fellow citizens in ways that respect both their and our equal agency. Insofar as the city-state is for Aristotle, and for other Greeks of the classical period, a community of free and equal citizens who share in ruling and being ruled in turn, the social virtues Aristotle adumbrates are crucial for generating and maintaining the reciprocal relationship necessary to political life—necessary, in other words, to prevent the political relationship between citizens from devolving into one of mastery and servitude. Aristotle’s conception of wittiness as a virtue indicates an appreciation for how both “everyday talk” between citizens shapes the ways in which they act toward and deliberate with each other, but also how their everyday laughter and joking function in this way. In this light, we can see how irony might disrupt the equality demanded by such a relationship insofar as it is perceived as an assertion of superiority and/or a refusal to engage with others on equal terms.

Considered from this perspective, then, the virtue of wittiness does possess a political dimension, albeit one that is distinct from Susan Collins’ recent argument that *eutrapelia* is a means of liberating the virtuous individual from the limits of political life and his attachments to the particular city in which he lives. While I agree with Collins that the laws of the city might very well be *one* of the objects of the witty person’s jokes and
laughter, I would argue that Aristotle’s primary focus is on the contribution a virtue of wittiness makes to facilitating harmonious social interactions between citizens. In this sense, the political dimension of *eutrapelia* is focused on maintaining the political community as a community of equals. Attending to Aristotle’s alternative definition of *eutrapelia* in the *Rhetoric* as “educated hubris” in the following section will reinforce this interpretation, while also illustrating its potential democratic connections.

**Wittiness as Educated Hubris**

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines *eutrapelia* as “educated hubris” (*pepaideumenē hubris, Rhet. 1389b12*). *Eutrapelia* is educated hubris insofar as the forms of laughter and mockery with which it is associated may still pain its targets and portray them as inferior with respect to the fault that has been exposed. It is educated hubris, however, insofar as it requires that much of the aggressive current in such laughter be “educated and moulded . . . into a medium of reciprocated friendship.” Those who possess the virtue of *eutrapelia*, then, will be able to laugh and joke both at and with others in ways that are critical, while allowing them to continue to interact harmoniously in the future.

To explicate this definition of *eutrapelia*, it is helpful to turn to both Aristotle’s understanding of the laughable (*to geloion*) as well as the concept of hubris more generally. Let us begin with the first. In the *Poetics*, the laughable is defined as some fault or something shameful that is both painless and not destructive (*Poet. 1449a33–35*); this definition, however, is specific to the production of the laughable through imitation for the comic stage. Elsewhere, the account of laughter as an effective rhetorical weapon in court (e.g. *Rhet. 1419b3ff.*) and Aristotle’s own use of the category of the laughable to describe and criticize competing arguments (*Met. 357a24ff.*) provide examples of forms of the laughable that may be both painful to one’s opponents and destructive of their arguments. Indeed, as noted in the previous section, Aristotle notes that a joke is a type of abuse (*loidorēma ti*), and just as legislators prohibit some forms of abuse, it may also be necessary for them to prohibit certain types of joking (*EN 1128a30–31*). In laughing at others then, or making them appear laughable (through joking, mockery, or ridicule), we are exposing their faults in ways that might mark them as inferior.

The element of superiority involved in laughter helps explain what is hubristic about educated hubris. In democratic Athens, the public charge of hubris (*graphē hubreōs*) was applicable in cases of verbal and/or physical assault where the deliberate intent was the dishonoring or disrespecting of
Another. As David Halperin argues, hubris was the “anti-democratic crime par excellence.” It was integrally connected to the sacrosanctity of the individual citizen body, or, as Josiah Ober puts it, to the democratic “right” to individual personal security, understood as “living without fear of being constrained by the actions of stronger persons within one’s own society.” It was considered a public crime insofar as an assault against one citizen was viewed as an assault against the citizen body as a whole and, in particular, as subverting the ability of all male citizens to participate on equal terms in the political life of their city. To treat a democratic citizen hubristically was to treat him like a slave, or to treat him in the same manner a wealthy ruler would treat a member of the disenfranchised lower classes within an oligarchy. In short, to treat a democratic citizen hubristically was to deny that individual the equal respect and equal dignity he deserved qua democratic citizen.

Aristotle himself recognizes the dangers hubristic actions might pose to political order in his discussion of stasis (civic conflict) in book 5 of the Politics. There, Aristotle identifies hubris as one of the seven causes of stasis (Pol. 1302b1). Underpinning this discussion is his analysis of hubris and its connection to anger in the Rhetoric where he identifies suffering hubristic treatment as one of the three forms of slighting that give rise to anger. Anger, in turn, is defined as “a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight” (1378a30–32, Freese translation). For Aristotle, then, suffering hubristic treatment can generate anger and the desire for revenge; acting on these desires can in turn lead to political disturbance, stasis, and even the overthrow of a political regime.

While hubristic laughter does not figure prominently in Aristotle’s analysis of stasis, Demosthenes’s forensic speech Against Konon provides a historical example that links Aristotle’s definition of eutrapelia as educated hubris to democratic concerns about hubristic laughter. The victim, a man named Ariston, was assaulted by a fellow citizen, Konon, and Konon’s son. He was thrown to the ground, and his lip was split open and his eye swollen shut as a result of the attack. To add, quite literally, insult to injury, Konon and his son began mocking Ariston until Konon “sang out, imitating victorious fighting cocks, and his cronies urged him to flap his elbows against his sides, like wings.” In retaliation, Ariston prosecutes Konon on a charge of assault.

While Ariston suffers physical abuse, the verbal abuse does not go unmentioned in his prosecution speech. Anticipating Konon’s hypothetical defense, Ariston warns the jurors that his assailant “is prepared to turn the issue away from the assault and the deeds that were done and try to reduce it to laughter and ridicule” (13). The defendant, he continues, will cast the incident as the playful antics of young men who, having given themselves nicknames such
as the “Erect Phalluses” (*ithuphalloi*) and “Masturbators” (*autolēkuthoi*), rove about and often come to blows over courtesans with whom they have fallen in love (14). Worst of all, Konon will attempt to move the jurors to laughter over the incident and his description of it. Ariston insists, however, that none of them would have laughed had they been present during the assault, and that none of them should laugh now in the courtroom (20).

Ariston’s claim that the jurors would not have laughed then, and that they should not laugh now, raises the question of the appropriateness of such laughter between democratic citizens. It would be inappropriate, he argues, for the jurors to laugh at the humiliating treatment he received; to do so would recreate within the courtroom the hubristic treatment he suffered in the streets of Athens. Moreover, as the above analysis of hubris suggests, such laughter would constitute a further assault against Ariston’s status as an equal democratic citizen. It would publicly mark Ariston as an inferior who could be abused at will, severely compromising his ability to exercise equal agency within the public sphere of democratic Athens. Thus, while Ariston formally charges Konon with a private suit for assault (*dikē aikeias*), his repeated reminders to the jurors that he could have prosecuted him on a public charge of *hubris* (*graphē hubreōs*) highlights the danger such hubristic laughter and mockery might pose to the democratic order.

Demosthenes’s *Against Konon* thus provides a lens through which we might interpret Aristotle’s discussion of wittiness in a democratic light. It also offers an illustrative portrait of what virtuous forms of laughter and mockery would *not* look like. Given that, for Aristotle, the laughable is connected to a perceived fault or shortcoming, the laughter and joking engaged in by the *eutrapelos* would seem to remain derisive, at least in some sense. At the same time, *eutrapelia*, as educated hubris, would be hubris “only in a severely attenuated sense.” The potential hubris involved in laughing and joking would be “educated” in such a way that they would not constitute pure expressions of superiority, or at least not be perceived in that way. How can the hubristic element of laughter be educated in this way? How would such laughter and joking not fall prey to the same problems of perceived superiority associated with irony in the previous section? The following section provides an answer to this question by returning to the practice of laughter within the context of friendship.

**Cultivating Wittiness**

Despite the danger that hubristic actions and hubristic laughter pose to political order, Aristotle does not conceptualize wittiness as devoid of this
agonistic element, but as tempering it. What, then, is the positive contribution of wittiness to one’s ethical development and to life within a political community? Why, in other words, not champion the agelast as virtuous with respect to laughter and joking? In this section, I argue that the positive value of laughter lies in its ability to serve as a medium for critical engagement with friends, enemies, and strangers with whom we disagree. In attending to how laughter functions in this way, I hope to illustrate how wittiness can be cultivated through such engagements, and how such cultivation creates the social space for laughing with, rather than at, others.

The necessity of friendship to the flourishing human life provides us with a useful starting point. John Cooper argues that the self-knowledge we gain from virtue friends (those friends whom we care for because of their characters and for their own sakes) is a necessary constituent of the good life since human flourishing requires both leading the best life (that of activity in accordance with the virtues) and choosing it for its own sake. Given the “double tendency to deny the presence in oneself of what one recognizes in others as faults, and to claim for oneself virtues that one does not really have at all,” gaining knowledge of the character of our “second self” through sharing in a community of conversation and thought (EN, 1170b10–12) with our friends is a potential means to nonbiased information about our own self. Although Cooper acknowledges that our assessment of our friends is also liable to bias, he insists that we must balance this fact against the very difficulty of attaining such self-knowledge. Unlike the gods, whose self-knowledge is perfect, human self-knowledge is inherently imperfect, and is dependent on our relationships with others for its illumination.

Virtue friends are necessary to the flourishing life, then, insofar as self-knowledge is necessary, and self-knowledge is best acquired by using our friends as mirrors of our selves (MM 1213a10–26). Yet, this is not the only way in which friends help us to acquire such self-knowledge. In his discussions of both friendliness and eutrapelia, Aristotle notes that the virtuous individual will cause pain to those with whom he associates when it is appropriate. In what does such paining consist? The friendly person, it seems, will share in the pleasure of others only insofar as it is fine and beneficial to do so; if it is not, he will not only cease sharing in such pleasure, but cause pain instead. Although Aristotle does not specify what such paining will look like, it is likely to take the form of rebuking others for their faults; as he notes in the Rhetoric, “everyone is pained when they see their own faults exposed” (1379b22–23). The friendly person, then, will cause pain by exposing and critiquing the faults of friends, enemies, and strangers; the eutrapelos, likewise, will do the same via laughter and joking. When practiced within the
context of virtue friendship, then, laughing at the faults of our friends may be a further method by which friendship can help cultivate self-knowledge. In conversing and thinking with our friends, we come to recognize their faults and can expose them to our friends via laughter.

This critical laughter and its link to self-knowledge offers one possible conception of the positive contribution of virtuous laughter to ethical life, yet it does not itself fully explain how such laughter would be practiced and cultivated within the context of virtue friendships. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle argues that we seek out witty individuals as friends for their ability to both make and take jokes: “and those are liked who are adept at both mocking others and enduring mockery (hoi epidexioi kai tōthasai kai hupomeinai), for both strive for the same goal as the other, the ability to be mocked and to mock others appropriately (1381a33–35). Likewise, individuals seek out “those who do not dissemble (plattomenous) with them; such individuals are those who speak about their own faults (ta phaula ta heautōn)” (1381b29–30). These passages indicate that for such critical laughter to be sustained within a relationship of friendship it must be reciprocal; in this regard, one must both be able to joke and laugh in virtuous ways and be disposed to laugh at oneself.

Here, Aristotle’s accounts of eutrapelia in the EE and MM offer a crucial supplement to the account offered in EN. In both EE and MM, Aristotle distinguishes between two types of eutrapelia. The first type, which corresponds to the definition offered in EN, consists in the ability to produce jokes and laughter; the second type, however, consists in the disposition to endure being laughed at and even to take pleasure in jokes told against oneself (MM 1193a17–18; EE 1234a15–17). If the first type of eutrapelia distinguishes the witty individual from the buffoon (who produces too much laughter and/or too much pain with his mockery), the second type of eutrapelia distinguishes the witty person from the boor (who cannot endure the laughter of others). Both types of eutrapelia are necessary, however, for such laughter to be reciprocal; and such laughter must be reciprocal in order to prevent the friendship from devolving into a relationship of domination and obsequiousness where one party to the relationship is consistently mocking the other and the other is consistently being mocked.56

If the disposition to laugh at oneself captured by this second form of eutrapelia is necessary to explain how laughter functions within the context of friendship to enrich the ethical development of individuals, it is also true that the relationship of friendship itself is integral to cultivating such a disposition. The Aristotelian Problems offers a clue to how this latter dynamic operates: “Why are men less able to restrain their laughter in the presence of friends? Is
it because, when anything is especially elated, it is easily set in motion? Now goodwill (eunoia) causes elation, so that laughter more readily moves us” (Prob. 950a17–19, Forster translation). This passage suggests that given the presence of goodwill among friends, we are less concerned, in laughing at them, that our laughter will cause offense; conversely, it suggests that we are more likely to laugh at jokes directed at us by our friends since we recognize that such jokes are animated by a spirit of goodwill. The presence of goodwill signals that the joke or laughter is not motivated by a desire to cause pain, or at least not to cause pain with the goal of demonstrating superiority. Given that Aristotle defines friendship as mutually recognized, reciprocated goodwill (eunoia, EN 1155b27–1156a5), friendship would seem to offer an ideal social space for developing the disposition to laugh at ourselves.

Drawing together these various threads on laughter in Aristotle’s works allows us to reconstruct what I take to be a plausible account of how laughter functions in his ethical thought. So far, however, this argument has focused solely on the operation of laughter within the context of virtue friendship. Is this the only context in which laughter can function in the above-mentioned way? Is this account transferable to the other forms of friendship that Aristotle names? Is it applicable to what he calls civic friendship? To our daily interactions with enemies and strangers?

If the mutual recognition of goodwill in friendship facilitates laughter, then the practice of laughter becomes more complicated as we move from virtue friendship to other, more conflict-prone, relationships. Utility and pleasure friendships, like virtue friendships, also require reciprocated goodwill, yet such reciprocated goodwill, and the trust it generates, is more fragile in utility and pleasure friendships. Insofar as Aristotle thinks, along such lines, that these less complete forms of friendships are more vulnerable to dissolution through slander, it would seem to follow that they would also be more prone to conflicts arising from one or both of the parties taking offense at the laughter and jokes of another (EN 1157a20–25). This problem is compounded by the fact that “what is hateful to one is pleasant to another, and vice-versa” (EN 1128a27–28); insofar as laughing well requires knowing the character of the one we are laughing at (i.e., what he or she finds pleasant and hateful), the practice of eutrapelasia is more difficult in utility and pleasure friendships where we know the characters of our friends less well. With strangers, where there is no preexisting feeling of affection, all of these difficulties are compounded even further.

In spite of these difficulties, it is specifically within the context of our daily interactions with friends, enemies, and strangers that Aristotle situates the virtue of eutrapelasia. What such virtuous laughter and joking will consist
in will change according to the relationship in question; jokes and laughter directed at others might need to be more tempered in these contexts; and more emphasis might be placed on laughing at oneself as a mode of facilitating social interaction. Yet, laughter will still be an important part of both the personal and civic friendships of citizens. It will be both a medium through which they relax and bond with each other, and also one through which they criticize each others’ faults and those of their city.60

Toward a Contemporary Ethos of Democratic Laughter

In the preceding analysis, I hope to have demonstrated how Aristotle’s account of *eutrapelia* points us toward an ethic of laughter that could animate everyday citizenship. His inclusion of *eutrapelia* among the eleven virtues of character in the *EN* stems from his understanding of political relationships as, by definition, entailing difference and conflict, and his recognition of the role virtuous forms of laughter and joking might serve in mediating such conflicts. This entails a rejection of irony as an assertion of superiority in favor of an account of wittiness that is linked to the recognition and preservation of the equal political agency of citizens. As a form of “educated hubris,” *eutrapelia* allows for critical forms of laughter and joking that might help cultivate self-knowledge within the context of friendship. At the same time, it is by learning to laugh and joke well with our friends, and crucially, how to endure being the object of such ridicule, that prepares us as citizens to laugh and joke at and with our fellow citizens in appropriate ways.

While Aristotle’s account of *eutrapelia* is not necessarily democratic, it does harbor democratic potential. Indeed, Demosthenes’s *Against Konon* provides us with one possible avenue for drawing such a connection from within the democratic context in which Aristotle lived for most of his adult life. In the remainder of this article, I would like to indicate how Aristotle’s conception of *eutrapelia* might also inform a contemporary ethos of democratic laughter. Earlier, I suggested that Connolly’s gestures toward an ethos of democratic laughter remain caught between an antagonistic mode of ironic mockery and a fugitive laughter that accompanies the sudden recognition of positive connections across lines of difference. From this perspective, Aristotle’s account of *eutrapelia* is useful insofar as it offers a mode of laughter and joking that is critical yet remains agonistic, rather than antagonistic, while offering an insightful psychological account of how such a virtuous disposition is fundamentally dependent upon cultivating the ability to both make and take a joke within the context of friendship.
As noted previously, Aristotle’s teleological ethics and Connolly’s post-Nietzschean theory share an emphasis on an ethic of cultivation, yet they provide different accounts of how the virtues they identify might be cultivated. For Aristotle, our ethical formation is deeply dependent on the early habituation we receive from our families, friends, and the laws of the particular polis in which we live. Such habituation is necessary to create the stable characters from which our actions must emanate if they are to be virtuous; such habituation, moreover, must be supplemented by a theoretical account that guides us in assessing what course of action would be virtuous within a given context. Together, these practices of cultivation enable us to knowingly choose virtuous action over its alternatives, and to do so for its own sake. Connolly’s focus, in contrast, is on our engagement with others across lines of difference. Micropolitical practices, such as “films, family memories, social movements, dietary regimes, marches, dream work, medical techniques, gossip, medications, curriculum organization, talk shows, identity performances, material disciplines and rewards, sermons, leadership techniques, and rituals,” carry the potential to cultivate the virtues of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness that would animate Connolly’s vision of agonistic democracy. For Connolly, there is no guarantee that these micropolitical practices will cultivate above-named virtues; the risk will always remain that such encounters with difference will provoke reactive responses that feed the drive to convert otherness to evil. Nevertheless, these practices have the potential to forge connections and resonances across lines of difference that can generate and fuel new macropolitical movements.

This distinction between habituation and engagement in micropolitical practices underlines what might be understood to be a broader disagreement concerning the relationship between the virtues each wishes to promote and the dominant culture. Aristotle’s ethical writings make explicit those virtues already implicit within the social practices of classical Greek culture, while holding them up to critical scrutiny. The virtues Connolly wishes to cultivate, however, lie in tension with predominant ethos he identifies. Consider the virtue of agonistic respect. Liberal democracy promotes the liberal virtue of tolerance, which is distinct, yet related to agonistic respect. While liberal tolerance entails an orientation of forbearance toward those who adhere to different fundamental faiths and/or engage in different cultural/political practices, agonistic respect demands engagement and contestation with others across such lines of difference. Agonistic respect would be cultivated within the current framework of liberal political institutions and practices, yet it would not simply sustain those
institutions and practices; rather, it would provide a foundation for animating those institutions and practices differently.

Or consider Connolly’s recent reflections on what he terms the “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” in the contemporary United States. While he emphasizes that both capitalism and Christianity are “many-splendored thing[s],” the particular capitalist axiomatic of late-modern America promotes an ethos of existential revenge that impedes movement toward a more just eco-egalitarian orientation. Hence, the problem is not one of creating an ethos of engagement *ex nihilo*, but the more difficult task of working within the existing “resonance machine of the right” to create a “counter resonance machine.”64 From this perspective, the micropolitical practices Connolly identifies harbor within them the potential to alter, disrupt, and displace the dominant ethos of existential revenge while creating spaces for the emergence of an alternative ethos that could set a new trajectory for contemporary capitalistic institutions and practices.

Connolly’s focus on engagement across lines of difference and on micropolitical practices as modes of ethical cultivation is thus driven by the need to foment moments of rupture that might generate an alternative ethos. To return to Connolly’s continued engagement with Augustine, engagement across lines of difference carries with it the possibility that one or both parties might “convert” the other: “Who knows, one of us may blink, as Augustine did when he converted from a flirtation with Epicureanism to Manicheanism, and later from Manicheanism to the Trinity. Had he engaged the Greek tragic tradition, he might have blinked again.”65 Such “blinking” does not arise from acting as a mirror to one’s agonistic opponent, or at least as a fully reflective one.66 It requires a type of contestation that places at risk something within the existential faith of each of the engaged parties, hence exposing each to the potential pain of agonistic contestation.67 This mode of agonism always flirts with antagonism, yet it is precisely such contestation that has the potential to move us to inhabit our identities, and the institutions of late-modern capitalist society, differently.

The friends Aristotle discusses as aiding each other in the acquisition of self-knowledge and ethical cultivation, unlike the agonistic combatants Connolly describes, are, as noted in the previous section, mirrors to each other. As Aristotle writes, the virtue friend is “another self” (*allos autos, EN* 1166a33) or “another I” (*heteros egō, MM* 1213a24). Viewed in comparison with Connolly, then, Aristotle’s virtue friends may not adhere to different “existential faiths,” and it is likely that they would subscribe to similar visions of the good life. As such, the critical laughter and joking they engage in might challenge their identities and fundamental faiths less deeply, and might be
less likely to lead such friends to inhabit their identities in a more contingent way. Still, the underlying unity between virtue friends should not be pushed too far. As Jill Frank rightly emphasizes, the adjective *another* in “another self” does important work. One’s friends for Aristotle, even one’s virtue friends, are still separate selves, and their friendship is not based on an elimination of their differences, but their ability to negotiate them.68

Such friendship, moreover, provides a space for learning to endure the pain of such criticism and contestation, and might help cultivate the disposition to *not* react to such contestation in an antagonistic manner, or animated by an ethos of resentment and revenge. Friendship thus provides a space for working on the self in ways that might prepare one to engage with others across lines of difference in a mode of agonistic respect. What Aristotle’s account of *eutrapelia* offers, then, is both a way of unpacking Connolly’s gestures towards an ethos of democratic laughter appropriate for late-modern citizens, as well as a complement to Connolly’s account of how such laughter might be fomented.

**Conclusion**

By reconstructing Aristotle’s account of wittiness in dialogue with William Connolly’s gestures toward a late-modern ethos of democratic laughter, I hope to have begun to flesh out what such a contemporary ethos might look like and why it might be worth cultivating. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest how Aristotelian *eutrapelia* might inform the broader current within contemporary political theorizing that attempts to articulate an ethos of citizenship appropriate to conditions of late-modernity. For Stephen White, whose recent *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* exemplifies this “ethical turn,” such an ethos is best understood as operating within the contours of a “weak ontological” framework—one that affirms both the need to articulate conceptions of the self, other, and world as well as the recognition that all such conceptions are themselves contestable.69 Such a weak ontological framework can accommodate theorists who occupy many different points along the contemporary ideological spectrum—from liberals like George Kateb to postmodernists like Judith Butler, and from theists like Charles Taylor to nontheists like William Connolly. It can also generate an ethos that can orient citizens in confronting the challenges of late-modernity, from how we engage in practical reasoning with others to how we exercise our moral imaginations in attending to the domestic and global predicaments that late-modern democracies, and democratic citizens, face.70 The particular ethos that White identifies entails a conception of practical reason and rea-
sonableness that is emphatic, yet chastened, one that is linked to the cultivation of the virtues of moral attentiveness and self-restraint. 71

For White, cultivating an ethos of self-restraint demands tempering the capaciousness of the contemporary liberal subject. For theists like Locke, limits upon one’s agency flow from our equal subjection to God; White suggests that our equal subjection to the condition of mortality might provide a nontheistic ontological source for such limitation. By our equal subjection to mortality, White does not mean a Hobbesian sense of our equal subjection to violent death, nor does he figure this ontological source as a general vulnerability to pain and suffering; rather, it entails an “awareness of our shared subjection to a condition of absolute vulnerability.”72 Such an awareness might be cultivated through what White labels “experiences of dearth,” such as the appearance of death and suffering that make manifest the “brute insufficiency” of the capacious, sovereign subject.73 They might also take on a more everyday character, such as an experience of the sublime that lays bare one’s finitude.74

If cultivating experiences of finitude is central to a late-modern ethos of democratic citizenship—indeed, it seems to be a crucial theme animating the works of both White and Connolly – then Aristotle’s conception of eutrapelia offers a way of folding an ethos of laughter into this broad framework. Above all, it offers a model for how the experience of finitude might become part of one’s everyday experience through the critical laughter and joking engaged in by friends, enemies, and strangers. Yet, Aristotle’s account of eutrapelia does more than that. As I argued in the previous section, while the cultivation of wittiness might be concentrated within small communities of virtue friends, its practice spirals out to include non-virtue friends, strangers, and even enemies. As such, eutrapelia points beyond a picture of individual citizens caring for, and working upon, themselves towards various communities of citizens (potentially interlocking and overlapping) who might cultivate a shared sense of finitude through the practice of virtuous laughter. In doing so, a democratic ethos of laughter might help citizens navigate the experience of finitude that attends the process of sharing in rule in a democratic society.

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Notes


8. In Identity\Difference, Connolly uses the terms “agonal democracy” and “agonistic democracy” to describe a mode of political life animated by the virtue of agonistic respect. See pp. 192–93. More recently, Connolly has noted that he prefers the language of “agonistic respect folded into a positive ethos of political engagement” to agonistic democracy; as he explains, this helps avoid the potentially Schmittean, antipluralistic undertones of the latter. Given Connolly’s earlier willingness to use the term to describe his project, I am comfortable doing so here; however, the above qualifications/reservations should be kept in mind. See Morton Schoolman and David Campbell, “An Interview with William Connolly,” in The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition, ed. David Campbell and Morton Schoolman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 315. My thanks to Mary Dietz for this suggestion.


10. Ibid., p. 94.


15. Ibid., pp. 153–54.

16. Connolly, Identity\Difference, p. 120. Such ironic self-distancing is reminiscent of Rorty’s conception of the liberal ironist who is an ironist insofar as she recognizes that she possesses no noncircular recourse for grounding her liberalism. See Rorty, Contingency, p. 73.

17. Connolly, Identity\Difference, p. 183.


21. Ibid., pp. 144–45.

22. Ibid., p. 120.
24. Ibid.
28. The following abbreviations will be used for Aristotle’s works: *EE* = Eudemian *Ethics*; *MM* = Magna Moralia; *Met. = Meteorology*; *EN* = Nicomachean *Ethics*; *Poet. = Poetics*; *Pol. = Politics*; *Prob. = Problems*; *Rhet. = Rhetoric*. Translations from the Greek are my own, unless otherwise noted.
30. On the connection between irony and superiority, see Nehamas, *Art of Living*, pp. 62–63. Nehamas’s focus is on the figure of Socrates, who also occupies Aristotle’s attention in his discussion of irony in the *EN*. There, Aristotle identifies Socrates as one who practiced irony in a refined manner (1127b22–26). Still, whatever admiration of Socrates this might express, irony still remains a vice for Aristotle, and the Platonic dialogues afford important examples of Socrates’s practice of irony is perceived as an expression of superiority and/or a refusal to engage with his interlocutors on equal terms. See *Republic* 337a, *Gorgias* 489e, and *Symposium* 216e–218d.


46. There is one example that does appear to involve hubristic mockery: “and they plotted against Periander, the tyrant in Ambracia, because when he was drinking with his young male beloved he [Periander] asked him [the young male beloved] if he [the young male beloved] was pregnant by him [Periander] yet” (*Pol.* 1311a39-b1). Who “they” are is unclear, though earlier in the *Politics* Aristotle notes that the dēmos of Ambracia joined with Periander’s enemies in overthrowing him (1304a31–33). On the whole, however, Aristotle argues that monarchies, tyrannies, and aristocracies are the regimes most vulnerable to *stasis* arising from the revenge of hubristic acts, and lists a number of monarchs who were brought down through hubristic action: Hipparchus (the brother of Hippias) of Athens; Periander of Ambracia; Evagoras of Cyprus; and Philip II and Archelaus of Macedon, to name a few (*Pol.* 1311a32–1311b6). Tyrants, he claims, must be especially wary of
hubristic action (1315a14; 1315a27), and even the women of their households must avoid the appearance of treating other women hubristically since “many tyrannies have been destroyed on account of the hubristic actions of women” (1314b25–27). Finally, so-called aristocracies are more vulnerable to stasis arising from hubristic action than polities. In general, the majority of citizens, who constitute the most powerful element in the regime, are content with having an equal share; however, when the rich are granted more power, as they are in so-called aristocracies, they act hubristically and try to acquire even more power for themselves (1307a20). This last example illustrates why Aristotle’s analysis of hubris as a cause of stasis focuses on non-democratic regimes; echoing Herodotus, Aristotle claims that hubris is cultivated in those who are placed in positions of superior political power. While monarchies, tyrannies, and aristocracies are all predicated on inequality between rulers and ruled, acts of hubris can exacerbate this feeling of inequality, leading to the overthrow of inegalitarian regimes.


51. This is, of course, the position advocated for the guardians of Kallipolis in Plato’s Republic (388e4–6), and one that enjoyed long favor from the Renaissance through to the nineteenth century. For the latter tradition, see Skinner, “Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter,” pp. 142–76; John Morreall, Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Theory of Humor (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), ch. 1; and Anca Parvulescu, Laughter: Notes on a Passion (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), ch. 1.

52. This is not to say that this is the only positive value of laughter and mockery for Aristotle. In the Rhetoric, as mentioned above, he positively recommends Gorgias’s maxim that we “destroy the seriousness of our opponents with laughter and their laughter with seriousness” (1419b13–15). He also recommends the use of laughter as a technique for disengaging the audience’s attention when it is useful to do so (1415a36–38; Lysias’ speech For the Disabled Man is perhaps a fourth-century example of this precise technique. See Christopher Carey, “Structure and Strategy in Lysias XXIV,” Greece & Rome 37, no. 1 [1990]). In general, Aristotle does not ban the use of particular techniques in the Rhetoric, though this assessment should be qualified by the fact that he does disparage some forms of abuse and mockery as vulgar and to be avoided by those of refinement. On the former point, see Bernard Yack, “Rhetoric and Public Reasoning: An Aristotelian


60. Exactly how *eutrapelia* would manifest itself in contexts outside of virtue friendship (as well as within it) would be a matter of practical judgment. Parties to pleasure and utility friendships, for example, would need to gauge the level of trust that exists in the relationship in assessing just how critical their joking and laughter can be without provoking unwanted conflict. With strangers and enemies, one might emphasize forms of self-deprecating humor, those critical of shared characteristics, or eschew critical forms of joking altogether. Among strangers and enemies, the shared pleasure of lighthearted forms of joking might help dispel any initial distrust. One commonality would seem to be the crucial importance of the second form of *eutrapelia* (that of the ability to endure being the object of joking and laughter discussed in the *Eudemian Ethics*) in moving from virtue friendships to other relationships where trust may be absent. Cultivating this type of *eutrapelia* may help avoid unwarranted offense at the joking and laughter of others.


64. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, p. 58.
65. Ibid., p. 91.
68. Frank, *Democracy of Distinction*, p. 159.
72. Ibid., pp. 64–72.
73. Ibid., p. 74.

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