

HOBBS ON LAUGHTER, *TREATISE ON HUMAN NATURE*, 11.13

13. There is a passion which hath no name, but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance we call LAUGHTER, which is always joy, but what joy, what we think, and wherein we triumph when we laugh, hath not hitherto been declared by any. That it consisteth in wit, or, as they call it, in the jest, this experience confuteth: for men laugh at mischances and indecencies, therein there lieth no wit or jest at all. And forasmuch as the same thing is no more ridiculous when it groweth stale or usual, whatsoever it be that moveth laughter, it must be new and unexpected. Men laugh often (especially such as are greedy of applause from every thing they do well) at their own actions performed never so little beyond their own expectation; as also at their own jests: and in this case it is manifest, that the passion of laughter proceedeth from a sudden conception of some ability in himself that laugheth. Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison of which their own abilities are set off and illustrated. Also men laugh at jests, the wit whereof always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity or another. And in this case also the passion of laughter proceedeth from the sudden imagination of our own odds and eminence; for what is else the recommending ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmities or absurdity? For when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonour we participate, we never laugh thereat. I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour. It is no wonder therefore that men take it heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over. Laughter without offence, must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and where all the company may laugh together. For laughing to one's self putteth all the rest to a jealousy and examination of themselves; besides, it is vain glory, and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmities of another sufficient matter for his triumph.