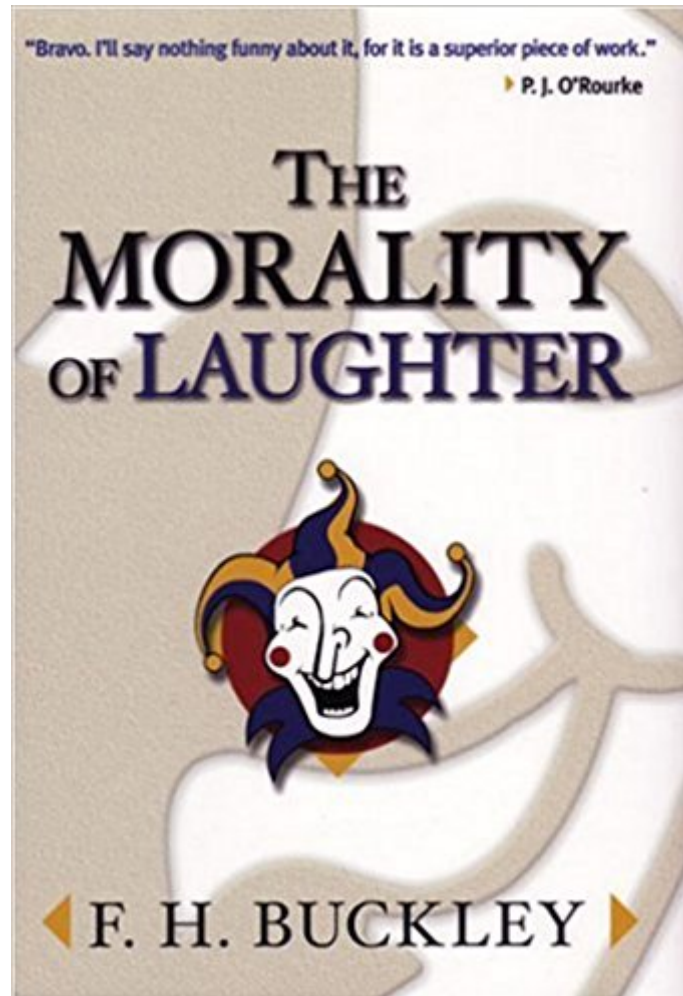




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The Morality Of Laughter



Synopsis

"Bravo! I say nothing funny about it, for it is a superior piece of work." P. J. O'Rourke "F. H. Buckley's The Morality of Laughter is at once a humorous look at serious matters and a serious book about humor." Crisis Magazine "Buckley has written a . ne and funny book that will be read with pleasure and instruction." First Things ". . . written elegantly and often wittily. . . " National Post ". . . a fascinating philosophical exposition of laughter. . . " National Review ". . . at once a wise and highly amusing book." Wall Street Journal Online ". . . a useful reminder that a cheery society is a healthy one." Weekly Standard

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Customer Reviews

". . .at once a wise and highly amusing book. . . . I laughed aloud, reading The Morality of Laughter." -- Roger Kimball, The Wall Street Journal "as Buckley. . . humorously points out, mechanical rules have invaded nearly all fields of modern life." -- Crisis Magazine A fascinating philosophical exposition of laughter. -- National Review A useful reminder that a cheery society is a healthy one. -- Weekly Standard The Morality of Laughter "abounds with amusing anecdotes and observations." -- National Review Online

Francis H. Buckley is Professor of Law at George Mason University School of Law and Director of the George Mason Law and Economics Center

Everyone likes a good laugh. It used to be thought that laughing was one of the things that separated us from other primates, but it has been shown that chimps and other cousins have laughter; this only means that laughter is even more intimately associated with our inner life than we had previously supposed. But human laughter is not simply a physiological response to an amusing situation or to delight. According to F. H. Buckley, in *The Morality of Laughter* (University of Michigan Press), laughter is a civilizing force, and if you laugh, you are a moralizing agent shaping your social environment. Buckley is a lawyer, and while he may be an academic, he is not a professional philosopher. He admits that laughter has been frowned upon as a subject for academic and philosophical investigation; laughter is just too lightweight. However, his entertaining volume, which includes its share of jokes and is wittily, if densely, written, demonstrates that there may be more to laughing than is usually thought, and that the subject has been worth his serious attention. We often laugh at something surprising, at a story that turns out in a way we were not expecting; we find the incongruous funny. Buckley demonstrates, however, that though such incongruities may spark laughter, there is a tripartite social arrangement going on between a jester, his audience, and the butt of the joke. The wit proposes a joke. The listener laughs or not. Laughter indicates a social tie consented to by the listener, a solidarity with the jester in laughing at the butt. The laughter is judgmental. The jester has proclaimed his superiority over the butt, and the listener who laughs agrees. "There is no laughter without a butt, and no butt without a message about a risible inferiority." The laughter shared between the joker and the listener promotes trust between them. We are far more likely to laugh aloud when seeing a play in a theater to spread this communal trust than we are when reading the script at home. Buckley gives counterexamples of such jokes as puns, which may seem not to have a butt (but sometimes do); but there are so many examples of pointed jokes given here that the overall pattern is clear. For instance, when George IV was told by a courtier, "It is my duty to inform Your Majesty that your greatest enemy is dead," the courtier intended to give the news of the death of Napoleon; but the king replied, "Is she, by God," indicating his disdain for Queen Caroline. Buckley shows that laughter may correct behavior, directing it toward moderate norms. A delight in reading this volume is that Buckley is extremely widely read, and can, with seeming effortlessness, draw upon Graham Greene, Aristotle, Moliere, Hobbes, Bergson, and many others. His erudition does not keep the book from being lively. Laughter goes with joy, and as Buckley says, "... of all things, the ability to find joy in life is our chief earthly good." In a volume filled with widespread intellectual thrusts and asides, he has provided much to think about, as well as directly delivering plenty of his very subject matter.

My book club of 12 bright, well-read people -- who have on occasion forged their way through some pretty obscure ideas and dense prose -- found this book so off-putting to read that the point of the book got lost in the effort. We agreed that there were some interesting ideas in the book, but it just wasn't worth the effort to uncover them. Where, oh where, was the editor?

I heard about this book during a radio news "extra" program. The interview with the author was intriguing as was the title of the book. I was quite disappointed. The book does not read easily and evoked memories of college text books.

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