

Laughter and the Good Life in Plato and Aristotle

Emily Daly

2nd-15th April 2025

My time at Susimetsa was one of the best experiences of my DPhil (PhD) journey so far. For two weeks I got the opportunity to read and write surrounded by the stillness of nature: the lake, the woods, the birdsong, and the snow were nourishment for the soul.

During the residency, I worked on the third chapter of my doctoral thesis, 'Taking comedy seriously in the *Republic* and the *Laws*'. In a well-known passage from *Republic* 10, Socrates bans the comedy of his day, i.e. Old Comedy, from the ideal state on the grounds that it is morally harmful (606c). In the *Laws*, the Athenian prescribes comedy as a form of moral education in the state, on the grounds that one cannot learn anything without also learning its opposite, in this case the serious without the laughable (816d-e). And so, we are faced with a problem: given the association of comedy with moral harm in the *Republic*, how is it safe to reintroduce it in the *Laws*? In this chapter, I propose that Plato finds a political solution to this problem. I argue that Plato sees Old Comedy as perpetuating the elements of democracy which he condemns in *Republic* 8. I then argue that Plato's new strictly censored model of comedy in the *Laws* solves the challenges posed by comedy in the *Republic* by removing its most democratic elements. I also tentatively suggest that Plato's attitude towards comedy in the *Laws* finds a parallel in his attitude towards *symposia* (671b-c, 645e, 666b-c) in that both laughter and alcohol may be exploited by the state for the practice of self-control (673e).

Having written an outline of this chapter before the residency, my first goal in Susimetsa was to get a better grasp of Plato's views on ethics, aesthetics, and politics in the *Laws*. To that end, I read Christopher Bobonich's 'Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics', Glenn R. Morrow's 'Plato's Cretan City: A Historical Interpretation of the *Laws*', and many journal articles on theatre, performance, and education in the *Laws*. My second goal was to research the relationship between Aristophanes and Plato, particularly their views on Athenian democracy. I found Erich Segal's 'Oxford Readings in Aristophanes' particularly helpful in this regard. I also took the time to delve deeper into some of the other key concerns of this chapter, from Plato's attitude to *symposia* to the moral psychology of the *Republic* and the *Laws*. This period of research culminated in a draft of the chapter. Moreover, reading about the profound influence of the *Laws* on Aristotle's thought has provided me with a springboard for writing the chapter which I had originally planned to work on at Susimetsa, 'Aristotle on the ethics and aesthetics of comedy'.

Outside of reading and writing, I enjoyed getting to know the three other residents—Jonas, Maja, and Ozan—over dinners, bike rides, and sauna sessions. Thank you all for making this such a positive and memorable experience! I would

also like to thank Prof. Margit Sutrop for organising the residency and for her warm welcome to the University of Tartu.



*Residency Period: April 2nd – April 15th 2025
Ozan Altinok, Emily Daly, Jonas Pöld, Maja Mateas*