

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW.

PROLEGOMENA TO A THEORY OF LAUGHTER.

A WRITER who professes to discourse on laughter has to encounter more than one variety of irritating objection. He finds to his dismay that a considerable part of his species, which has been flatteringly described as the 'laughing animal,' has never exercised its high and distinguishing capacity.* Nay, more, he soon learns that a good many oppose themselves to the practice and are laughter-haters. This kind of person (*ὁ μισόγελως*) is so possessed with the spirit of seriousness that the opposite temper of jocosity appears to him to be something shockingly wrong. All audible laughter is for him an ill-bred display, at once unsightly as a bodily contortion, and as a lapse from the gravity of reason, a kind of mental degradation. This estimate of the laugh as low and unseemly, is well represented in Lord Chesterfield's well-known *Letters*, in which the writer congratulates himself that since he has had the full use of his reason, nobody has ever heard him laugh. In some cases this feeling of repugnance towards mirth and fun takes on more of an ethical aspect. The laugher is identified with the scoffer at all things worthy, and condemned as morally bad. This is illustrated in the saying of Pascal, *discur de bons mots mauvais caractère*.

Now it seems evident that one who discourses on laughter is bound to notice this attitude of the laughter-hater. If he believes that the moods of hilarity, and the enjoyment of the ludicrous, have their rightful place in human experience, he must be ready to challenge the monopoly claimed by the out-and-out sticklers