

7. Humour and Ethics

If humour has beneficial social and psychological functions, then we might assume that it is a necessary part of our lives. However, given its association with superiority and taboo, humour can be socially oppressive and offensive, and this raises difficult ethical questions. How do we square our apparent need for humour with our social responsibilities? The issue of the morality of humour has been addressed by philosophers throughout the ages, and this section will examine the key areas of debate.

Pause and Reflect

In social terms, is humour always a positive thing? List some of the good and bad things that might be associated with humour and laughter.

7.1 John Morreall: On the Positive and Negative Ethics of Humour

In his book *Comic Relief* (2009), John Morreall discusses what he terms the positive and a negative ethics of humour, offering a–for–and–against debate about the morality of humour. Beginning with the negative aspects of humour, he lists various reasons why we might object to humour on moral grounds. Firstly humour is associated with lies: when we joke we take liberties with the truth, and duplicity and dissimulation often feature in humour. We value authenticity in our communications, and because we are wary when this is undermined, we may object to humour on these grounds. Also, we saw in our discussion of Freud and Bakhtin that humour is associated with play, but this too can have a negative dimension. When we are at play we are not working: we are engaged in something that is other than produc-

tive. So in this sense humour is linked to idleness, which is generally thought to be bad. Play can also be self-indulgent and hedonistic, of course, and humour is potentially problematic in this respect too. Also, as laughter is associated with physical pleasure, it has often been frowned upon in societies where pleasure and the desires of the body are deemed sinful or distracting. For instance, Morreall notes laughter's long association with a lack of sexual restraint in woman; indeed it is still a sign of promiscuity if a woman laughs with her mouth open in certain Asian countries. Humour also has connotations of irresponsibility, and some have objected to it on these grounds. The objections here are most evident perhaps when someone is being laughed at. There is a famous quote by Mel Brooks in which he distinguishes between tragedy and comedy: 'Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.' Most people will recognise a degree of validity in this statement, and it doesn't reflect well on comedy. In other words there is an extent to which humour might encourage us to disengage from other people and have detrimental social consequences as a result: we saw earlier how it can be used to block emotions. In Morreall's terms, humour 'can cause harm by blocking compassion for those who need help,' (John Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 103). Humour and laughter can be nasty, then, and a host of philosophers from Plato onwards have been suspicious of it for this reason. While we know that we shouldn't laugh when someone falls into an open sewer and dies, some fear that cultivating a fondness for laughter might encourage callousness of this kind.

Obviously it is easy to defend humour from some of these accusations. Firstly, while acknowledging that humour and laughter can have all these negative features, it is simple to think of humorous situations where none of them apply. Also, some of the criticism levelled against humour seems equally applicable to other perfectly acceptable activities. For instance, while fabrication and insincerity may well be a feature of humour, it is also a feature of fiction and drama. It is worth noting here perhaps that, from a psychological perspective, those who find it hard to tolerate lapses from literal facts tend not to have a sense of humour. Victor Raskin has suggested

that: ‘truthfulness—a commitment to the literal truth of what is said under any circumstances and in any mode of communication—should be seen as counterindicative of the sense of humor.’⁴⁰ Humour depends on an understanding that comic lapses from the truth have a different status from lying. Also, while humour might be associated with pointless and potentially self-indulgent entertainment, couldn’t the same be said of the arts in general? With respect to the issue of the possible irresponsibility of humour, it is worth noting that most people *wouldn’t* laugh if they *literally* saw someone fall into an open sewer and die. Brooks’ quip makes a valid point about the occasional relationship between humour and *schadenfreude*, but he is exaggerating for comic effect. When we laugh at that quip we laugh at the hyperbole; in other words, we laugh partly because it distorts reality. It’s the perfect example of a comic incongruity in that it’s both false and a little bit true. Of course the extent to which it is false is critical: humour might be able to block compassion to a degree, but it is hard to imagine it doing so completely. Thus we might be able to find humour in a fictional (comic) representation of someone falling into an open sewer and dying, but in reality this would more likely cause horror. So for most people there is a point at which another’s misfortune would destroy rather than increase the potential for laughter.

So what are the ethically sound aspects of humour? According to Morreall humour has the potential to promote both intellectual and moral virtues. From an intellectual perspective, for instance, the psychological research of people like Alice Isen and Avner Ziv shows that humour can stimulate original and creative thinking:

Humour promotes divergent thinking in two ways. First, it blocks negative emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness, which suppress creativity by steering thought into familiar channels. Secondly, humour is a way of appreciating cognitive shifts: when we are in a humorous frame of mind, we are automatically on the lookout for unusual ideas and new ways

40 Victor Raskin, ‘The Sense of Humor and the Truth. In W. Ruch, ed., *The Sense of Humor: Explorations of a Personality Characteristic* (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter) 95–108 (108).

of putting things together (John Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 113).

Humour can help us shake ourselves free of conventional thought processes: we become more receptive to alternative ways of thinking when we are in a humorous mode, and this has potentially positive social and psychological consequences. When we are in a humorous mode we are also more adept at thinking critically. When thinking humorously we are more aware of incongruities, and this may extend to disparities between appearance and reality. In the social sphere, Morreall argues, this may boost our capacity to discern hypocrisy and deceit, making us more likely to challenge rather than acquiesce to the powers-that-be: ‘we are not likely to blindly follow leaders, or do something merely because “we’ve always done it this way”’ (John Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 113).

Humour is linked to moral virtues too, and for Morreall this has to do with its ability to affect ‘self-transcendence.’ In other words humour can enable us to step outside ourselves and gain a less egocentric perspective than might otherwise be available. Society tends to see the ability to laugh at oneself, and not to take oneself too seriously as a positive trait. People who cannot do this are often seen as self-important or self-obsessed. Self-deprecating humour is good because it suggests humility. Morreall argues too that a sense of humour is conducive to tolerance and patience: framing bad news or information in a humorous way can offset its negative impact. The tradition of the court jester is worth noting here: in the past humour gave a jester licence to communicate unpalatable truths to the king. Imagine a skilful jester encouraging a stubborn king to laugh at himself, and you can see how acceptance, lenience and broadmindedness are all virtues that might be fostered by humour. Humour can offer a means of solidarity for people too, and this is often the case during times of oppression. The most often cited example is that of Jewish humour. The Jews have a history of oppression, and humour is felt to have functioned as a coping mechanism for them at times of extreme crisis; it has worked to offset adversity, most notably during the Holocaust. For instance Morreall cites examples of joking about the dearth of food in the Lodz ghetto: ‘Before the war we ate ducks and walked like horses; now we eat horses and walk

like ducks' (Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 123). This 'coping humour' has a positive function both for the individual and for the oppressed community as a whole.

For Morreall, the positive outweighs the negative when it comes to the ethics of humour. He associates the cultivation of humour with wisdom, and the ability to live well. Indeed he argues that humour can help us acquire essential knowledge for living well: we can, for instance, learn how to avoid behaviour that would turn us into the butts of jokes; we can learn to critically assess institutions which claim authority over our lives; we can learn to privilege humour over violence; we can learn to enjoy life, and take pleasure in its absurdities rather than let them traumatise or annoy us; we can learn to disengage from life, when appropriate, and achieve a more objective perspective; not least, we can learn how to use humour to bond with like-minded individuals.

Creative Writing Exercise

This exercise concerns adopting the kind of 'humorous frame of mind' that might be conducive to creativity. Those people with a natural feel for humour will find it easier than others, but there are techniques that can help. As with some of the other creative exercises, this is best done with a friend. Try to find an example of a comedy that you both agree is funny (a comic film, sit com, etc.). Using the existing characters, try to write a new story for them. So, for instance, if you're both fans of a particular sit com, plan an original script for the show. If you have any kind of rapport with your friend then you'll find yourselves in a humorous mode quickly enough. As your confidence develops, start trying to be more inventive. Introduce new characters into this comic world. If these new characters have the potential to carry a story of their own, then start writing it. This is a way of using someone else's work both as a means of creating an appropriate mind-set for humour, and as the springboard for original comic ideas.

7.2 Ethnic Humour

While humour can offer a route to social solidarity and bonding, it can also be divisive. When communities bond through humour, it

is often at the expense of another community; for this reason much discussion of the ethics of humour has focussed on ethnic and sexist humour—in other words humour that seems to privilege one group over another.

7.3 Christie Davis

Before going on to discuss the ethical issues raised by racist and sexist jokes, it is worth saying something about what they are and how they function. One of the leading authorities on ethnic jokes is Christie Davis, who discusses them from a sociological perspective in books such as *Ethnic Humor Around the World* (1990) and *Jokes and Targets* (2011). The most common form of ethnic jokes is stupid–ethnic jokes, where a member of an ethnic minority is cast in the role of an idiot. Alongside these, and almost as prevalent, are what are often referred to as canny–ethnic jokes. Canny means shrewd, but it also means calculating, stingy, and crafty. So it's the opposite of stupid, in a sense, but it's not a compliment. In canny ethnic jokes, canny people are presented as astute, but they're also devious, sly, underhand and mean. In a given society a particular social group will be labelled dim, while another social group will be labelled canny. For instance, in Britain, Irish people are the butt of stupid jokes, Scottish are the butt of canny jokes; in America, Polish people are the butt of stupid jokes, Jews are the butt of canny jokes; in Italy, Southern Italians are stupid, Milanese and Florentines are canny, and so on. There are various historical social reasons why certain groups get labelled stupid or canny, but it is generally just an accident of history with no basis in reality. So what function do such jokes serve? According to Davis:

Ethnic jokes about stupidity inevitably flourish in modern societies based on competition, rational calculation, and technical innovation, for stupidity means failure and the downfall of self and others alike.⁴¹

We live in a competitive world and the only way we can flourish is if

41 Christie Davis, *Ethnic Humor Around the World* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990) 28.

we have the intellectual ability to compete, so we fear being seen as stupid. The message of stupid ethnic jokes is that *our* community is clever, compared to the others. So they convey a heartening message. Our world is deeply flawed and human stupidity is often perceived as contributing to that. If there weren't so many stupid people around, then the world would be a better place! Again, the message that jokes convey is that it's the other group, and not us who are the problem. As Davis says, the 'reassuring humorous message for joke tellers is [the butt of the joke]—and they alone—are comically stupid. We are not them. Therefore we are not stupid.' Likewise, people tell canny jokes because canniness is also something we fear in ourselves. While modern society encourages us to be successful—particularly financially successful—on the one hand, it also encourages us to be sociable and generous, on the other. Canny people aren't sociable and generous because they put too much emphasis on financial success at the expense of others. Not only is the world being ruined by dumb people, then, it's also being ruined by canny people: by greedy, self-ish, devious people. In other words, Davis argues that canny-ethnic jokes address a similar unease about failure: something else that we fear in ourselves that we project onto others.

Ethnic jokes are pervasive, then, and they would seem to have a social and psychological function. The degree to which they are deemed socially acceptable depends on the social context, but they always have the potential to offend, and to be labelled racist. Many people still find them funny, of course, even though they might feel guilty about laughing at them. How might we assess them on a moral level?

Pause and Reflect

Could there ever be a case for censoring humour? If so, how would this work and how would such censorship be enforced?

7.4 Walsall People Are Stupid

The town of Walsall in the English West Midlands is often mocked, particularly in regional culture for being an ugly town; also its towns-

folk are occasionally labelled as stupid in the manner of a disparaged minority. For example:

Did you hear the one about the dead Walsall bloke in the cupboard? He was last year's hide and seek winner.

Why shouldn't Walsall workers be given coffee breaks?
It takes too long to retrain them.

I was born in Walsall and I think this gives me some licence to make jokes of this kind, but would anyone have legitimate grounds to be offended by them? Perhaps if I wrote a social-history of Walsall asserting that Walsall people can't be given coffee breaks because it takes too long to retrain them, and I couldn't prove that this was true, people would have cause to be offended. In this case I would be misrepresenting facts in a context where we expect truth. Similarly if I were to make such claims in a piece of journalism, or in a political manifesto, then again people might legitimately complain: in these contexts we'd want the claims to be based on facts established by research. However, as we have seen, jokes aren't a context in which we expect the truth; rather they're a context in which we expect people to be joking. Jokes, by definition, don't make truth claims. They create a world in which everything is potentially false, where everything potentially undermines itself. So we're not supposed to take them literally. To take jokes literally is not to have a sense of humour. Also most people understand that to cast a group as stupid in a joke does not mean that they really are stupid. The Walsall jokes cited above are variations of blonde jokes, and it's clearly not the case that all blondes are stupid. In one sense the truth status of these claims is irrelevant anyway because a joke does not need to be true in order to be funny. For instance, an Incongruity Theorist might argue that what we laugh at in such jokes is the structure of the joke. The narrative sets up certain expectations, and then undermines them, and it is the sudden shift in logic, the sudden incongruity, that makes us laugh. If we laugh at Walsall stupidity in a joke, we are not laughing because we think that it is true—we have no way of knowing if it is or not. We're not laughing at reality, we're laughing an incongruity.

However there are people who argue that we relate to such jokes at a

deep psychological level, and that laughing at them is never innocent. One contemporary philosopher, Ronald De Sousa, for instance, claims that to find such jokes funny is morally objectionable because it means that one shares their views; he argues that such jokes depend on one adopting an ‘attitude’ toward the disparaged group, and such an ‘attitude’ is effectively the same as a belief: ‘attitudes are beliefs that one cannot hypothetically adopt,’ and as a result it is impossible to be morally disengaged from the attitude expressed: to laugh at it is to share it, at least on one level.⁴² De Sousa cites a sexist joke about rape and claims that anyone who finds it funny shares its sexist attitudes; he doesn’t believe that it’s possible to engage with it on a purely imaginative level. This view has been effectively countered by many commentators, however, including Berys Gaut, who makes the point that:

I can imagine what it is like to adopt the attitudes characteristic of a desperate person, a Republican, or a maniac, and I can do that because imagination in these cases minimally involves the non-doxastic representation of the attitudes concerned, and such representation is clearly possible. Moreover, merely imagining an attitude may in some cases be all that is necessary to find a joke funny [...] I can hold to be funny jokes told by Jews about themselves, even though as a non-Jew I cannot share the self-directed attitudes on which they depend for their self-deprecatory humour.⁴³

So Gaut argues that imagination is all that is required to find such jokes funny; it is not necessary to share the attitudes to which the joke appeals. From this we could conclude that if you laugh at an offensive joke you need not necessarily feel guilty about it. So don’t worry about being Walsallist.

Some argue that if offensive jokes make no claims to truth, and don’t depend on reality for their humour, they need not be considered

42 Ronald De Sousa, ‘When is it Wrong to Laugh?’ in John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987) 241.

43 Berys Gaut, ‘Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor,’ *Philosophy and Literature*, 22, 1998 (51–68) 57.

morally objectionable. It could be said, for instance, that true racist discourse is markedly different from joking because true racist discourse *does* make claims to reality; genuine racist discourse does construct itself as the truth. The speeches of Adolf Hitler were racist because they claimed to be underpinned by truth. If we concede that jokes only exist in order to be funny, then how can they be racist? Consider these words from the British comic novelist Howard Jacobson:

Once we accept that a joke is a structured dialogue with itself, that it cannot, by its nature, be an expression of opinion, you have conceded its unaliqueness to racist discourse, which by its nature is impermeable and cannot abide contradiction.⁴⁴

Pause and Reflect

Howard Jacobson's view is that jokes do not have opinions, and they undermine themselves as narratives: does this make you feel more comfortable about racist jokes? If not, why?

You can quote views like Jacobson's in perpetuity but they don't make people any more comfortable with racist jokes. The problem with them becomes more evident if we substitute Walsall for Irish in the example above. This makes us feel more uncomfortable about the joke because, while such jokes might not be interested in truth, or in expressing an opinion, they *do* utilize and perpetuate stereotypes. We know that stereotypes are potentially undesirable because they are reductive: whether a stereotype is positive or negative it reduces a group of people to a single characteristic and to do so is to diminish, and possibly dehumanise them. This may not be too much of a problem for Walsall people because they aren't a vulnerable minority; they aren't discriminated against socially. If we substitute Walsall for Irish it might be more of a problem because the history of British colonialism is such that the Irish have been presented as subordinate in English culture. There has been a perceived hierarchy in the historical relationship between England and Ireland that stupid Irishmen

44 Howard Jacobson, *Seriously Funny* (London: Channel Four Books, 1997) 36.

jokes might be said to reinforce. Irish people aren't a particularly vulnerable group and you still hear Irish jokes in popular culture, but the more discriminated against the ethnic minority, the less comfortable most people will be at making jokes at their expense. Imagine substituting Walsall for Black. Black people both in the UK and America have a long history of discrimination, of course, and negative stereotyping has played a huge part in this. Joseph Boskin, for instance, has written about the negative stereotyping of African Americans in humour. He draws on the ideas of Henri Bergson to make a point about the 'duplicating nature' of humour: according to Bergson, when something is reproduced often enough in a comic context, 'it reaches the state of being a classical type or model. It becomes amusing in itself, quite apart from the causes that render it amusing.'⁴⁵ Boskin argues that the derogatory stereotype of the Sambo is an example of this transformation from flesh and blood individuals into a 'comic machine-person':

The Sambo stereotype, whose longevity reflected its deeply rooted functions, was an essential form of hostile humour. Sambo was Bergson's comic 'machine-person,' the palpable absurdity, subscribed to by whites in their attempt to preserve social distance between themselves and blacks, to maintain a sense of racial superiority and to prolong the class structure. The stereotyping of the black as one of the major comics in the popular culture of the United States is an example of psychological and cultural reduction. Sambo, then, illustrates the unique historical relationship between stereotyping and humouring (Joseph Boskin, 'The Complicity of Humor,' 261–262).

We might disapprove of disparaging ethnic jokes because they deal in negative stereotypes, then, and because they can be reactionary; they can reinforce social structures which are unjust and discriminatory, buttressing social prejudices. While it may well be possible to partake of ethnic humour *without* being racist, there is no doubt that some advocates of racist humour are racist; and while it might be pos-

45 Joseph Boskin, 'The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo,' in John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987) 257.

sible to engage with such jokes on a detached, imaginative level, it is certainly the case that some people genuinely accept negative representations of ethnic groups as reality. Also Freud's theories would suggest that the fact that some people find such jokes upsetting is exactly the reason other people enjoy telling them: for Freud humour can have an aggressive function precisely because it is associated with the fulfilment of suppressed desires; it can be a socially acceptable form of hostility. One of the implications of Freud's theory is that people find some jokes pleasurable *because* they are cruel.

As we have seen, Superiority Theorists argue that we laugh when our sense of superiority is confirmed. We laugh at perceived flaws in others, and in much ethnic humour, particularly in stupid-ethnic jokes, people who have power are laughing at people who, because they're outside the dominant social group, *don't* have power. The same is true of sexist jokes which belittle women and thus reinforce patriarchy, an unequal social structure where men have power at the expense of women's freedoms and right to parity. As some see it, then, humour can be a powerful factor in reinforcing social hierarchies, diminishing social groups, and as such has a negative effect on the community. This is why we might want to disapprove of racist and sexist jokes.

So what should we do about it? Should jokes of this kind be outlawed? There are comedians who make a living out of telling them on both sides of the Atlantic: should society censor overtly racist/sexist comedians like Chubby Brown in the UK or Andrew Dice Clay in America? That would be hard for a variety of reasons. If Freud is correct, for instance, wouldn't social censorship only augment their taboo status, potentially making them funnier? Also, more importantly, to censor joke narratives is to censor something that, as we've seen, isn't *inherently* racist. If you allow that a narrative is articulating a joke, rather than a fact, then in a manner of speaking it can't be. This is essentially the view of the American philosopher Ted Cohen, whose reflections on jokes will be discussed below.

Creative Writing Exercise

Imagine that a stand-up comedian delivers an offensive routine

on national television about your gender, ethnic group or sexual orientation. Think about what you might find offensive in such a routine then write an imaginary letter to that comedian explaining why they should change the nature of their material. Begin your letter, Dear 'Comedian.'

7.5 Ted Cohen: Just Joking

Ted Cohen's book, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (1999) is exclusively about jokes, but his conclusions are relevant to many general situations in which humour and laughter occur. He concedes that there are things we should be wary of joking about, and feels that joking can become a form of avoidance. Some things in life need to be addressed without humour, and if we're not careful humour can work to deflect us from issues and experiences that should be confronted. He quotes Mark Twain's famous line, 'Against the assault of humour nothing can stand,' but makes the point that 'there are some things that should remain standing.'⁴⁶ A subject such as death is often the focus of humour, for instance, but while comedy may offer a valid and helpful response to this in certain contexts, it 'cannot be the entire human response' to such issues. A reaction to death that is exclusively humorous is lacking in something important, and may indeed be a way of avoiding the reality of the event. At the same time a response to death—or indeed to anything—that does not 'include the possibility of jokes is less than a totally human response' (Cohen, *Jokes*, 70). Joking is fundamental to the human condition for Cohen, then, and its significance—while it shouldn't necessarily be privileged—should never be ignored or suppressed. It is this belief that informs his thinking on the morality of joking.

Cohen allows that some jokes can be tasteless and offensive, and as such they should be deemed objectionable; however, the problem with establishing grounds for making moral judgements about them has to do with their status as fictions. In the case of an offensive ethnic joke, there may well be some people who interpret it as true—those who are prejudiced against Walsall folks, for instance, might

46 Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999) 70.

genuinely believe in their inferiority; but the joke itself cannot be condemned a result: as suggested earlier, it makes no sense to condemn something that does not have opinions. Cohen admits to being simultaneously amused and disturbed by disparaging ethnic jokes that deal in reductive stereotypes, but does not believe it is possible to establish a moral theory that would allow us to judge them as immoral. To make his point he invokes a tool occasionally employed in conceptual moral theory: the notion of an ideal observer. Cohen invites us to imagine an observer who is completely objective and infinitely wise, and then ask how such an observer would respond to a disparaging ethnic joke. With laughter? With guilty laughter? With outrage? With condemnation? Most people would agree that it is impossible to say. However, this does not mean that people's outrage at such jokes is invalid—just as jokes cannot be condemned with reference to any single moral theory, they cannot be defended either. People who are offended by a particular joke have a right to say so, but they should be wary of claiming that such objectionable jokes are never funny. Cohen states that:

the offended person who takes issue with a joke finds himself doubly assaulted, first by the offensive portrayal in the joke, and then again by the implicit accusation that he is humourless. But the offended person may make the reflexive mistake of denying that the joke is funny. More than once someone has demanded of me that I explain exactly why anti-Semitic jokes are not funny. I have come to realise that if there is a problem with such jokes, the problem is compounded exactly by the fact that they *are* funny. Face that fact. And then let us talk about it (Cohen, *Jokes*, 83–4).

For Cohen, to claim that an ethnic joke is not funny just because it is upsetting is an indication of cowardice and denial that cannot change the principal problem, which is: people have negative feelings about other social groups. His advice is not to deny that such jokes are funny, but to focus instead on determining why they are.

As suggested, Cohen sees joking and the appreciation of humour as a fundamentally human trait, and like Morreall he views humour's

capacity to affect solidarity between people as a positive aspect of joking. That this solidarity is often expressed in opposition to or at the expense of another group doesn't diminish the significance and potential of this phenomenon. When we share jokes we are reaching out to others, partly, Cohen says because:

I need reassurance that this something inside me, the something that is tickled by a joke, is indeed something that constitutes an element of my humanity. I discover something of what it is to be a human being by finding this thing in me, and then having it echoed in you, another human being (Cohen, *Jokes*, 31).

Cohen asks the reader to imagine a world where no one finds the same things funny; it is indeed a useful exercise to do this, and I think most people would be chilled by the prospect of a world in which it was impossible to share humour. It underscores the extent that humour and laughter are social activities, and adds weight to Cohen's view that they are fundamentally linked to our sense of humanity.

Creative Writing Exercise

Write a short story in which a character with a humorous disposition wakes up one morning to discover that he is living in a world in which everyone else is lacking a sense of humour.