

The Joke is the Thing: *In The Company of Men* and the Ethics of Humor

Introduction

Neil LaBute's film *In the Company of Men* (1997) is a pessimistic study of human cruelty as the predictable outcome of the contaminated moral climate of our modern world. The story features two professional men who, in a misogynistic conspiracy, decide to perform an extended sadistic experiment in male/female relations on a deaf woman. The film uses humor as a rhetorical device to draw unsuspecting audience members into sympathy with the protagonists, thereby making the viewer guilty by association. The early scenes are studded with putatively sexist jokes and (much like LaBute's play *The Shape of Things*) the majority of the film is structured around an elaborate prank, a cruel practical joke.

According to one prominent view, the attitudinal endorsement theory of joke appreciation, the content of jokes can reveal hidden beliefs in those who find them funny. In order to dispel an unproductive interpretation of the film, this paper argues that the attitudinal endorsement theory is too simplistic and that the immorality of a joke is dependent on context. Although *In the Company of Men* may get at the conscience of the audience through humor, the mechanism is not the content but the purpose to which the jokes are put. By examining the way in which humor is used in the film, we can reveal what the film has to tell us about the ethics of humor. There are two significant insights about humor to be gained: one about the source of humor, the other about the role of ethical flaws in comic affect. This paper argues that the film exposes a source of humor, namely, insecurity, which has been largely unaccounted for and is at radical variance with the superiority theory of humor. The film is an effective tool for making some of us aware of how susceptible we are to manipulation due to our insecurities and subservient admiration for power.

LaBute's film is especially relevant to comic moralism, the position that ethical flaws in attempts at humor can be detrimental to their humorousness.¹ At first glance, it may seem that moral flaws in the humor of a film increase its aesthetic value. However, under a more considered interpretation we can see that the attempts at humor in the film we are examining are not morally flawed, but are instead put to a strongly moralistic purpose. The film shows that comic immoralism lacks clear support, since it demonstrates how certain kinds of jokes fail to work in truly immoral contexts. More important than why some of the audience laughs at the jokes in *Men* is why most of us do not.

The Rhetoric of Jokes

In the Company of Men focuses on two mid-level office workers Chad (Aaron Eckhart) and Howard (Matt Molloy) who perform generic management tasks at an equally nondescript corporation. The extremely ordinary Howard is put in a position of authority over Chad for the duration of their next project. They are assigned to establish a new office in a distant city. In the opening scene, Howard's frustration at his ineffectual romantic abilities is channeled into anger by Chad's manipulation. Roiled and insecure about his newfound authority, Howard is convinced to play along with Chad's plan to take revenge on women by playing a joke on a female co-worker. They decide to court a deaf typist and then leave abruptly without saying a word when their assignment is up in six weeks. Christine (Stacy Edwards), the typist, ends up falling for Chad, but Howard, unable to suppress his emotions, develops genuine feelings for Christine and tries to back out of the plan.

Men is an indictment of people like Howard, who are so blinded by their own myriad weaknesses that they cannot see through Chad's various facades. Throughout the film, *Men* provides a series of strong indicators that Chad is a latent sociopath. Though not a complete cutthroat, he is presented as vicious and untrustworthy. In one scene, Chad and some of his co-workers sit around talking about other people in the company. One after another, Chad proclaims his hatred for nearly everyone on the payroll. Someone comes into the conference room, has a brief chat with Chad, and the moment he leaves, Chad turns to the rest of the room and says, "I hate that guy." A few scenes earlier, Chad humiliated a young African American intern during an interview, making him pull down his pants so Chad could see if he had "brass balls." Overall, the film presents Chad as an unsympathetic character; and his only redeeming trait seems to be that he is not as ineffectual, weak and indecisive as Howard.

Despite his flaws, many members of the audience seem to find Chad amusing, repeatedly laughing at his jokes. What makes its rhetorical structure noteworthy is the fact that *In the Company of Men* is designed to work for two different audiences: those who laugh at Chad's jokes, and those who find them repellent. Overall, the film has several different goals. It attempts to establish audience complicity with Chad, only to expose such a response as characteristic of sniffing sycophants like Howard. Although this may provoke feelings of shame, the film can also be interpreted as trying to provoke feelings of guilt in the audience for their complicity in sexism. It is important to confront the most obvious assessment of the significance of the jokes—that anyone who finds them funny is a sexist himself.

In "When Is It Wrong to Laugh" Ronald de Sousa examines the ethical dimensions of what he calls

"phthonic laughter" – laughter from malice or envy.² De Sousa argues that finding a joke with reprehensible content humorous indicates deeply held immoral assumptions on the part of the listener. If he is right, then jokes are the most powerful tool for character assessment that we could ever hope to have.

In "How many Feminists Does it Take to Make a Joke," Merrie Bergmann offers an argument that is similar to de Sousa's, even using the same example joke.³ Briefly, Bergmann and de Sousa's argument, which we will call the *Attitudinal Endorsement Argument*, goes something like this:

1. Understanding a joke requires being aware of what beliefs (or propositions) it might rely on.
2. Getting a joke does not mean that you find it funny.
3. If you have attitudes contrary to those that are required by a joke for it to be humorous, then the joke will fail
4. You cannot simply hypothetically endorse beliefs that will revivify a joke that is dead for you.
5. Hence, what makes the difference between merely getting a joke and finding it funny must be some deep seated attitude that you genuinely hold towards the beliefs required to understand it.
6. Hence, if you find a sexist joke funny, and sexist beliefs are required for getting the joke, then by virtue of your attitudinal endorsement of these beliefs you are a sexist.

Clearly, if premise 5 is correct then the conclusion of the argument follows from the other premises. If one really must endorse the statements that are required to understand a joke in order to find it funny, then what one finds funny is highly revealing of one's moral character. However, this paper will argue that even if we accept premises 1-4, we need not accept premise 5. For now, it will pay to develop de Sousa's case in a bit more detail.

De Sousa begins his argument with an example of what he calls "a joke of undiluted nastiness." Here it is: "M. visits the hockey team. When she emerges, she complains that she has been gang-raped...Wishful thinking."⁴ It does not help de Sousa's argument that his central example is not even a joke, much less a funny one by any account. It is simply an insult that could not be a joke without significant revision.⁵ For the sake of argument, we can assume that the example is actually a joke and that it might be possible for someone to find it funny.

De Sousa goes on to catalog a host of beliefs that he thinks are necessary for getting the joke, many of which are exaggerations of the underlying beliefs necessary for understanding it. For instance, he says that we must (be able to hypothetically) believe that "rape is just a variant of sexual intercourse;

[. . . and that] there is something intrinsically objectionable about a woman who wants or gets a lot of sex."⁶ After specifying what he considers the necessary beliefs one must hold to understand the joke, de Sousa argues that in order to find it funny one must endorse these beliefs. He thinks that endorsement cannot be hypothetically adopted and that personal endorsement of these beliefs is necessary for there to be humor. Hence, if one finds the joke funny then one must really be a sexist.

De Sousa concludes that "*merely to know* [the beliefs] *doesn't make the joke funny*. What's more, to laugh at the joke marks you as a sexist. It is not a convincing defense to say, 'I was merely going along with the assumptions required to get the point of the joke'."⁷ He continues to explain that "[t]he difference is that to find the joke funny, the listener must *actually share* those sexist attitudes. In contrast to the element of wit, the phthonic element in a joke requires endorsement."⁸ Crucially, he argues that "thinking something is intrinsically funny (or unfunny) is itself an attitude and not a mere belief."⁹ "When I laugh, I endorse certain attitudes, and anyone else endorsing them would probably be laughing too."¹⁰

Robert C. Roberts largely agrees that endorsing the beliefs de Sousa outlines is required for finding the joke funny. However, Roberts argues that de Sousa fails to understand how one can assume a particular perspective, that of a sexist, and understand the humor, and even like it from this angle. Roberts may be right that attitudinal endorsement of beliefs, even perspectival endorsement, may help make a joke funny, but he provides no reason to think that attitudinal endorsement is necessary for the appreciation of a joke or that it can be reliably inferred from one's sense of humor.

De Sousa assumes that these attitudinal endorsements must be about the beliefs necessary for understanding the joke, hence he fails to take into account the possibility that other attitudes may be sufficient or that attitudinal endorsement of beliefs may be unnecessary altogether. This paper argues that rather than making such hasty judgments of character, when ethically evaluating humor we should follow this razor: "Never attribute to an -ism what can be adequately explained by formal properties of a joke."

It is not clear exactly what is required to get de Sousa's "joke" except something along the lines of thinking that the teller does not like M. and thinks she is indiscriminate in her sexual activity or just a hypocrite. The joke could be told by a man out of spite or disregard for M on similar grounds, or if you heard something like this from a woman, you would most plausibly assume that M. is likely seen as tasteless and/or the teller is jealous or angry about some perceived wrong that M. committed against her. One cannot be not sure to what degree the attitudes on rape or promiscuity need to be endorsed to

find this funny, depending on your attitudes toward M. One doubts that in most situations many people would find this funny, since the subject of rape is too painful to serve as a reliable comic foil and the "joke" itself is so spiteful that it smacks of pettiness. If one *disliked* M., however, the "joke" could be taken as funny and not because the auditor is a sexist, since anything that "cuts" M. will elicit the experience of "sudden glory."

De Sousa tries to explain what it is that makes a joke funny to some people and not to others. Since these kinds of sexist jokes are not funny to him, he assumes that in order to be funny these jokes must require attitudinal endorsements that he lacks. However, this does not show that sharing all the possible attitudes expressed in the joke is either necessary or sufficient. A certain subset of pro-attitudes of a certain subset of the beliefs required to get the joke may be a sufficient endorsement. Further, even jokes with which one has a content attitudinal alignment are not necessarily funny. These shared attitudes are not sufficient for funniness, nor do they seem to be necessary. If you have ever told a joke, you know that any given joke can fail for a host of reasons.

To make good on his claim, de Sousa would have to clearly isolate a required attitude and show that a joke hinges on this particular attitude about a particular belief. He would, for example, have to find two people exactly alike in all relevant aspects except for this one attitude and then toss them the joke. This would be impossible, for we have no reliable way of exhaustively picking out people's attitudes. If we say that the joke is the thing that will help pick out the attitude, then we are begging the question. The kind of dispositional beliefs that de Sousa is addressing are not reliably identifiable.

We need to ask, "What would it take to empirically support de Sousa's claim that attitudinal endorsement is necessary for joke appreciation?" A study supporting de Sousa's claims would have to show an increase in funniness as the level of such attitudes increased.¹¹ It would have to show that funniness was not possible on the bottom end of the attitudinal test, since he claims that the endorsement is necessary. It would have to rule out people with traumatic associations, and it would need to somehow calibrate the individual's self-reporting scale with some base line jokes. The study would also have to pick exactly which attitudes the jokes rely on and then find some way to measure these particular attitudes and test to see if the jokes work. A general test of a wide range of attitudes will not do, since we are trying to confirm that the beliefs are necessary. There is no empirical or anecdotal evidence to suggest that de Sousa is right, nor should we believe that any is methodologically possible. The strongest claim that can be made (given the complexity of the subject and some of the current research) is that pro-attitudes may increase comic amusement. The claim that attitudinal

endorsement is necessary for joke appreciation is totally unsupported by the evidence. However, the opposite claim is more important: strong contra-attitudes can block humor in some circumstances. If it is possible to find a joke funny without correlated attitudes, or reliably furnish such evidence of them, then we should not assume the worst.

De Sousa tries to pick out attitudes en masse by asking us to imagine that the gang-rape joke had a male subject rather than a female one. This argument ignores other relevant differences and stacks the deck against the joke's potential success, by basing it on stereotypes that do not exist. Here it might be helpful to make a distinction between two types of possibly reprehensible jokes: those which serve as insults to particular individuals (along the lines of a caricature), and those that present a derogatory type to stand in for a group. Individual insult jokes have a very small audience and more particular usage, whereas stereotype-based jokes are much broader in their subject matter, appeal, and use. By picking the insult as the paradigm, de Sousa presents a particularly weak version of his position, which can be charitably beefed up with some more telling examples of the other kind.

Ted Cohen's basketball joke is more interesting and would serve de Sousa better. It goes like this: "How did a passerby stop a group of black men from committing a gang bang? He threw them a basketball."¹² To make de Sousa's content switch question more telling, we might ask, Why doesn't this joke work if we change the subject to a group of white men? De Sousa could argue that even though we could imagine that it were the case that white men are stereotypically fond of playing basketball, the joke does not work since you cannot endorse this belief with a pro-attitude. He thinks that this kind of example shows that endorsement of these particular beliefs is necessary for the joke to work.

However, this kind of switch most certainly does not show us what de Sousa thinks it does, namely that the pro-attitudes are necessary. There are other, extremely important differences between the two cases that are relevant to why the basketball joke fails when the subject is white. It does not work if we make the characters white since the cultural interest in basketball does not apply. Simply put, this is not a readily available idea. If we did not take it as merely absurd, getting this joke would require some amount of conceptual straining akin to a self-explanation, hence destroying the surprise element. We could change it to a group of frat boys and a keg of beer: "How do you get a frat boy to stop a date-rape? Tell him the keg arrived." In this form, one can quickly comprehend the joke. Hence, we have good reason to think that De Sousa has confused the failure of a joke to be readily comprehensible with it failing to be humorous.

During a particularly self-reflective *Seinfeld* episode, Jerry took some grief from his friends for telling this joke: “What's the difference between a sadist and a dentist? Better magazines.” Kramer and his dentist acquaintances accused Jerry of being “an anti-Dentite”. The absurdity of this accusation is analogous to de Sousa's crying “Sexist!”. What we are concerned with here is the perception of humor and not the telling of the joke. Maybe you found the joke funny, as many do, but that doesn't mean that you must be a closet anti-Dentite. All you need to know is that dentists often get accused with enjoying pain, since they cause so much of it, but you need not endorse the proposition to find it funny. One might find the joke funny for other, more complicated reasons. It might be enough just to know that the stereotypes exist and the formal make-up of the joke can do the rest. The stereotype joke must rely on the knowledge of a stereotype; otherwise, it would be a meta-joke, self-consciously defying comprehension. *Contra* de Sousa, knowing that stereotypes exist is not to be immoral, just awake.

The problem of humor-response blocking troubles de Sousa's analysis from the outset. He claims that if you do not share the supposed assumptions that a joke requires, then the joke will not be funny, and concludes that it must therefore be the case that sharing the assumptions is what makes jokes funny. The kinds of jokes de Sousa is concerned about can be consciously blocked if we have thought about the stereotypes and seek to combat them, or automatically blocked if hate-laden words like “nigger” are present. Without this cognitive pre-conditioning, if we accept the joke invitation, enough work might have been done to allow the joke to result in laughter. However, even if we are offended by a joke and clearly cannot be said to share in any assumptions the jokes asks us to make, this does not imply that if we find the joke funny we must share in any assumptions. Sometimes offense can trail behind amusement. For instance, in some cases, we may find a joke funny but wish we had not. Further, the fact that offense can inhibit amusement does nothing to show that certain assumptions are necessary to find certain jokes funny.

Simple examples might be enough to make a strong case that de Sousa's initial generalization from this particular joke to all jokes is unwarranted. Noel Carroll gives the example of Newfie jokes: Though knowing nothing about Newfies, except that they are supposed to be stupid, and never possibly having the chance to develop attitudes about actual Newfies, he can still find Newfie jokes funny. Perhaps de Sousa's initial premise should be that if your assumptions run strongly counter to those supposed in the joke then it is more likely that the joke would fail. He should start by arguing from this more modest claim.

De Sousa has failed to deduce any significant ethical conclusions from these two crucial features of humor: (1) we are blocked from appreciating certain types of humor, especially if the subject is painfully felt, and (2) stereotype humor fails if the stereotypes do not exist, since the jokes would have to be explained.

Although it may be a plausible argument that everyone who laughs at Chad's jokes in *Men* are sympathetic to sexism, it is not the content alone that supports such a conclusion. There are plenty of clues to tip us off that we probably shouldn't be laughing at Chad, since his jokes are used to express (and arouse) male chauvinism. Merely laughing at the jokes is not enough to reveal that you are a sexist, but in context, laughing at some of these jokes is extremely questionable and would be culpable in real life. The mere fact that these jokes are found funny tells us nothing *per se*. For our present purposes, we need to determine the significance of the fact that many members of the audience *do not* laugh at Chad's jokes and what this means for immoralism.

Nasty, Brutish, and Rough

LaBute has a deeply pessimistic view of human nature, and a puritanical view of human sexuality. In part *Men* is about how (deep down) there is a little bit of Chad—and his selfish and sadistic tendencies—in each of us. LaBute's static camera and medium-shot framing lends an uncomfortable detachment to our view of the cruelty, thereby administering a sort of anesthesia to the heart of the audience via the art of cinematography. As such, *Men* is something of a study of how humorous detachment may cause harm, which is also a theme in the tale of that classic womanizer, *Alfie* (Lewis Gilbert, 1966).

Although one may be tempted to argue that the film endorses a strong version of the superiority theory of humor—the theory made famous by Hobbes who said that "that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly"—a more considered look at the film reveals something altogether different.¹³ Although *Men* appears at first glance to support a superiority theory of humor, if we look closer, the film exposes a source of humor incompatible with the superiority theory. Before specifying exactly what I have in mind, it will help to explain the superiority theory in a bit more detail. We can give two forms to the claims of the superiority theory of humor: (1) the strong claim holds that all humor involves a feeling of superiority, and (2) the weak claim suggests that feelings of superiority are frequently found in many cases of humor. It is not clear that many

superiority theorists would hold to the strong claim if pressed, but we will evaluate as a necessary condition nonetheless.

Neither Plato nor Aristotle makes clear pronouncements about the essence of humor, though their comments are preoccupied with the role that feelings of superiority play in our finding something funny. In the *Philebus*, Plato tries to expose the "mixture of pleasure and pain that lies in the malice of amusement."¹⁴ He argues that ignorance is a misfortune that (when found in the weak) is considered ridiculous. In comedy, we take malicious pleasure from the ridiculous, mixing pleasure with a pain of the soul. Some of Aristotle's brief comments in the *Poetics* corroborate Plato's view of the pleasure had from comedy. Tragedy deals with subjects who are average or better than average; however, in comedy we look down upon the characters, since it presents subjects of lesser virtue than, or "who are inferior to," the audience. The "ludicrous," according to Aristotle, "is a failing or a piece of ugliness which causes no pain or destruction."¹⁵ Going beyond the subject of comedy, in the *Rhetoric*¹⁶ Aristotle defines wit as "educated insolence," and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*¹⁷ he describes jokes as "a kind of abuse" which should ideally be told without producing pain. Rather than offering a superiority theory of humor, Plato and Aristotle focus on this common comic feature in order to bring it to our attention for ethical consideration.

Thomas Hobbes developed the most well known version of the Superiority theory, claiming "that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."¹⁸ Motivated by the literary conceit of the laugh of triumph, Hobbes's expression of the superiority theory is more of a theory of laughter than a theory of humor. Baudelaire offers an interesting variation on Hobbes' superiority theory, mixing it with mortal inferiority. He argues that that "laughter is satanic" -- an expression of dominance over animals and a frustrated complaint against our being merely mortal.

Critically reversing the superiority theory, Robert Solomon offers an "inferiority theory" of humor. He thinks that self-recognition in the silly antics and self-deprecating behavior of the Three Stooges is characteristic of a source of humor based in inferiority or modesty. Rather than comparing our current with our former inferior selves, Solomon sees the ability to not take ourselves seriously (or to see ourselves as less than ideal) as a source of virtuous modesty and compassion. Solomon's analysis of the Three Stooges is not a full-blown theory of humor, in that it makes no pronouncements about the necessary or sufficient conditions of humor; however, it is a theory of humor in the sense that it suggests a possible source of humor or what humor can be and how it might function.¹⁹

The inferiority theory of humor raises a central objection against the Superiority theory, namely, that a feeling of superiority is not a necessary condition of humor. Morreall offers several examples, such as finding a bowling ball in his refrigerator, that could be found funny, but do not clearly involve superiority.²⁰ If feelings of superiority are not necessary for humor, are they sufficient? Undoubtedly, this is not the case. As Francis Hutcheson, points out, we can feel superior to lots of things, dogs, cats, trees, etc, without being amused: "some ingenuity in dogs and monkeys, which comes near to some of our own arts, very often makes us merry; whereas their duller actions, in which they are much below us, are no matter of jest at all."²¹ However, if we evaluate the weaker version of the superiority theory – that humor is often fueled by feelings of superiority – then we have a fairly well supported empirical claim, easily confirmable by first hand observation.

Most of the jokes coming from Chad are clearly motivated by feelings of superiority, but the way Howard responds shows that any humor found in his jokes was not based on superiority (or even modesty) but on insecurity. What the film highlights is that much of the humor, or at least the laughter (which may or may not be genuine), results from feelings of insecurity, not superiority. To better understand what I have in mind, consider the situation where someone tells you a joke and it seems that they have some pernicious ideological agenda fueling the content; to not at least feign amusement can invite a confrontation. Following Epictetus' advice and standing stone-faced when someone tells a joke is often taken a rude gesture, as a refusal to come and play.²²

Faking finding something funny may not always be based on feelings of insecurity; instead one may be positively disposed towards a person, and laugh just as one might lie about how much we like their new haircut if asked. At other times, insecurity certainly plays a role. Robert Provine's research on humor indicates that in situations of uneven power, the person with the advantage will laugh much less frequently than others.²³ This phenomenon is not confined to laughing; people in authority can often seem genuinely funnier than they would seem otherwise. One suspects that a tremendous amount of laughter is due to such insecurities, which make people prone to suck up to those in power.

Someone might object that this is raw psychological speculation, which fails to provide a clear explanation for why we should think that insecurity breeds anything but fake laughter. However, a plausible mechanism can easily be provided. Although it would be ludicrous to argue (*pace* the James-Lange theory of the emotions) that awareness of laughing is humor, the notion that laughter can affect humor is not entirely off base. It is a fairly commonplace observation that laughter is contagious. To appreciate the role of contagious laughter in how funny we find a joke or gag, compare the experience

of sitting alone watching a comedy with that of watching a comedy with friends or in a crowded theater of people laughing. The power of laughter to build a laughing circle is what gave rise to the TV laugh track.

In the early days of television, they found it puzzling that comedy that would work on the stage (or in a film) fell flat when watched on TV. The difference was that people were watching TV alone or in small groups, without the company of laughing crowds. Quickly, TV producers figured out a way to get the laughter of the crowd back into the experience by using live audiences. But live audiences put constraints on production; the timing between jokes and gags could be estimated or determined in rehearsal, but their laughter was needed to get it just right. The laugh track provided a way out of this impasse. If all you want is laughter from the audience, why not tape it and reuse it? The laugh track seemed to have magical abilities: not only could it help good material, it could sometimes make weak material seem strong. Of course, nowadays it is a sign of respect for one's material to forgo the use of laugh tracks, but this attitude has not made them much less prominent.

The contagious properties of laughter are widely acknowledged. In addition, when we are primed to accept humor, everything subsequent can seem even funnier. The contagious effect of laughter, the faked laughter of others, and our own half-hearted expressions of amusement can all play a role in how funny someone or something seems. Even if laughter is sometimes faked due to insecurity, that laughter can serve to 'prime the pump', so to speak. Through a feedback effect, those who are insecure can find something funnier than they would have if they were not trying to appease or flatter.

In the Company of Men brings this source of humor to fore, establishing a strong and compelling objection to the superiority theory. The film highlights the role of insecurity in securing faked laughter, which in the context of others can serve to increase the humor.

Immoralism

As stated previously, *In the Company of Men* seems to have been designed for two audiences: those who would fall for the trap, and those who, terrified, would merely watch it unfold. The reason why Chad's attempts at humor fail on this second group of audience members reveals something of great importance about the role of ethical flaws in humor. Specifically, it shows that comic immoralism (the view that finding ethical flaws in a joke can contribute positively to how humorous we find it) is probably false. Daniel Jacobson argues for precisely this position. As we shall see, the way we respond to Chad's attempts at humor poses a serious problem for the plausibility of immoralism.

There are two forms of comic immoralism, strong and moderate. Strong immoralism is the position that finding ethical flaws in a joke always contributes to its humor. This position is wrong for some fairly obvious reasons (that I will examine shortly), and it has no defenders that I am aware of. In contrast, moderate immoralism is the view that ethical flaws with a joke can sometimes make it funnier. This position seems more plausible, since the outrageousness and naughtiness of a joke does seem to be part of the reason why some of them are so funny. However, the intuitive plausibility of comic immoralism is based on a very loose notion of what it means for a joke to be ethically flawed.

What must be necessary in order for us to say that a joke is funnier *because of* (and not simply *in spite of*) its ethical flaws? If we find the content to be flawed, and it was precisely the flawed content that made it so funny, only then would we have shown that an ethical flaw could contribute positively to the humor. You could shoot me in the heart with a silver bullet, but since I am not a werewolf, the fact that the bullet is silver would be irrelevant to my death. In order to say that a joke is funnier because it is ethically flawed, it would have to be the case that what makes it funnier is *the fact that* it is ethically flawed. Most plausibly, this would require that audiences recognize that the joke is flawed and then find it funnier because of that fact.

In order for a moral flaw to be aesthetically relevant, we need to show that it plays a causal role in increasing or decreasing aesthetic value. For moralism about art, this is a much easier burden to meet, since we can argue that moral flaws prompt moral judgments and their concomitant moral emotions which may then interfere with the production of other reactions that the artist intends to provoke. However, it is extremely difficult to describe a comparable causal process whereby moral flaws could contribute positively to a joke's humorousness. This is the central problem with immoralism.

Although outrageous content such as taboo subjects and wildly inappropriate behavior can clearly contribute to the humor of a joke, it is not clear that moral flaws contribute positively at all. We should not confuse inappropriateness, lewdness, irreverence, and the like with immorality. Rather than contributing positively to a joke's humorousness, serious moral flaws, recognized as such, are most plausibly antithetical to humor. As Bergson noted, pity is antithetical to humor and so, it seems, is moral disgust, which most of the audience feels towards Chad. If we do not accept radical subjectivism about judgments of humor, then any plausible standard of correctness for our evaluations would not be devoid of moral sentiments. Hence, we would be hard pressed to justify any claim that the fact that an attempt at humor was morally flawed made it more amusing.

The defender of comic immoralism may object by pointing out that we often find immoral jokes

funny; we are surprised by the humor, and it is only after laughing at them, and finding ourselves uncomfortable for having done so, that we judge them to be immoral. The immoralist may argue that the reason such jokes are found funny is because of their immoral content. Even though they are found amusing, they are still judged to be immoral. In response, we would need to make two comments. First, I never claimed that moral flaws always interfere with the humorousness of a joke. The fact that jokes judged to be immoral can still be found amusing is perfectly compatible with moderate comic moralism. Second, and more importantly, the fact that someone judges that an attempt at humor is immoral after finding it funny does not indicate that moral flaws contributed to its amusement value; unless we believe in reverse causation, the fact that the judgment came after the amusement simply shows that it had nothing to do with its humorousness.

At several points during *In the Company of Men*, Chad tells putatively sexist jokes or makes some other attempt at humor, such as comparing the sound of the deaf typist's voice to that of a dolphin screeching. Sometimes the film only gives us the punch line of one of Chad's jokes. A typical example is "Never trust something that bleeds for a week and doesn't die." Although the film is not studded with jokes and other attempts at humor, they are frequent enough and stand out like sore thumbs. The reason that the jokes in *Men* are particularly salient is because for the audience members who recognize that the purpose of Chad's joking is to arouse hatred, his jokes are simply not funny. In contrast, audience members who laugh at his jokes appear subject to manipulation or (equally dangerously) obliviousness. The fact that Chad's attempts at humor are morally flawed effectively saps them of their humorousness for most moral, alert audiences.

Not only do Chad's jokes fail due to their moral flaws, the plot is structured around the execution of an elaborate prank, a malicious practical joke of sorts, which neither the audience nor the characters ultimately find amusing. Chad and Howard devise a plan to court a deaf woman, who hasn't dated in quite a while. The goal is to get her to fall for them, or to at least build her confidence, and then drop her cold without any explanation. Chad explains that not only will this allow him and Howard to get back at women, but also it will be something they can look back on and laugh about. Insecure and easily persuadable, Howard consents to the plan, but things do not work so smoothly. The problem is that Howard falls for the victim and cannot stand to see her being set up by Chad's manipulative scheming. With deep sympathy for the woman, Howard cannot bear the thought of hurting her so savagely. Neither the audience nor Howard can find the practical joke funny for very long.

Although a single example cannot defeat a general claim, the stifling effect of the moral flaws on

Chad's attempts at humor can most plausibly be generalized safely. *In the Company of Men* provides an elaborate confirmation of Bergson's observations on the antithetical nature of pity to humor. Not only does pity (and the entire group of other-suffering emotions) interfere with the production of humor; so too do other-condemning emotions when they are directed at the source of the humor and not the butt. Given the ability of moral disgust to inhibit humorous amusement, it is difficult to imagine how we could judge an attempt at humor to be genuinely immoral and have this make it more amusing. The moralist has a plausible account of how moral flaws can interfere with aesthetic value, but the immoralist lacks one altogether. Since we lack a plausible account, the burden of proof falls on the immoralist to show how it is that genuine moral flaws could possibly contribute to comic value. Most plausibly, for immoralism to be true, we would have to recognize that the purpose to which someone is putting a joke to use is ethically objectionable, and because of this fact, we would have to think it is funnier. This is not going to work, for reasons *In the Company of Men* reveals.

Conclusion

Any analysis of *In the Company of Men* is forced to answer three questions of central importance to the ethics of humor: (1) What does it mean to find sexist humor funny? (2) What are the various sources of humor? And, (3) can moral flaws with attempts at humor increase their humorousness? I argued that although merely finding a joke funny in a neutral context cannot tell you anything reliable about a person's beliefs, in context, a joke may reveal a great deal about one's social attitudes, or feelings of insecurity. Especially in its portrayal of Howard, the film exposes the role of insecurity as a source of humor. Not only can insecurity make one more prone to laugh, but it can also make someone seem funnier in some contexts. I contended that this shows that a strong version of the superiority theory of humor is clearly wrong. Furthermore, the disparate audience reactions to Chad's jokes showed that the morally sensitive who were aware of the purpose of his jokes would see them as ethically flawed. Rather than making the jokes more amusing, the fact that the jokes were considered to be ethically flawed made them less funny. Hence, immoralism is most likely false.

In the Company of Men is a more trenchant indictment of human weakness than most of LaBute's other works, in part because of its exploration of an extremely complex and pervasive source of our manipulability. The use of humor in the film to reveal key aspects of the character's retaliations to each other provides an excellent source for understanding humor in our everyday lives.

Aaron Smuts

Notes

- ¹ The two leading forms of moralism are Berys Gaut's ethicism and Noël Carroll's moderate moralism. Berys Gaut "Art and Ethics" (*The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. Eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes. New York: Routledge, 2001). Noel Carroll "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research" (*Ethics*, 110 January 2000, pp. 350-387), and "Moderate Moralism" (*Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001).
- The terrain of positions around the art/morality question is often divided into specific regions. For instance, Noël Carroll defends a position called "moderate moralism," which is the claim that moral flaws can, but do not always, constitute aesthetic flaws. On the opposite side of the debate, Daniel Jacobson defends a position called "immoralism," which asserts that moral flaws can sometimes *increase* the aesthetic value of a work of art. See his essay "In Praise of Immoral Art" (*Philosophical Topics*, Volume 25, no.1, Spring 1997, 155-199). Both positions depend on what we might call the Moral Relevance Thesis—the position that moral flaws can have an aesthetic impact. Both positions set themselves in opposition to "autonomism," the view that aesthetic value and ethical value are distinct and non-interacting.
- There is some relatively uninteresting controversy around these labels. For instance, taking issue with the standard of correctness ("the morally sensitive") offered by Carroll in his particular argument for moderate moralism, Matthew Kieran suggests that the position in support of the moral relevance thesis should be called "immoralism." This move seems unnecessary since we can distinguish between positions and the arguments in support of their claims. See Kieran's "Forbidden Knowledge: the challenge of immoralism" (*Art and Morality*, eds. Bermudez and Gardner, 2003) and "Art, Morality, and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value" (*Philosophy Compass*, 1/2, 2006: 129-143). In addition, Jacobson in "Ethical Criticism and the Vices of Moderation" (*Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Kieran, 2006), states that moderate immoralism is incompatible with moderate moralism, but he gives us no reason to think that this is the case. It is far less confusing if we understand moderate moralism and moderate immoralism as logically compatible. One could accept one and not the other, and one could except both. When one needs precise labels, it is far clearer to distinguish between moderate moralism and moderate immoralism, rather than lump them together under the vague category of "immoralism."
- ² Ronald de Sousa, "When is it Wrong to Laugh?" (chapter 11 of *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge, MIT, 1987).
- ³ De Sousa, Wrong.
- ⁴ De Sousa, Wrong, p 290. A variant on this joke can be found in the films "Private Eyes" (Michael Hui, 1976) and in "All For the Winner" (Corey Yuen, 1990). In "Private Eyes," a group of gangsters robs a movie theater. During the robbery a woman turns to Michael's character and asks if he thinks the robbers will also rape the women. Michael replies "You wish!" I saw both films in theaters where most of the audience laughed.
- ⁵ Noël Carroll pointed out to me that this example could also be formed into a riddle riff. Merrie Berman includes a somewhat revised version this joke in her analysis of sexist humor. See Merrie Bergmann, "How Many Feminists Does It Take To Make A Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong With It" (*Hypatia* vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 1986, pp. 63-82).
- ⁶ De Sousa, Wrong, p. 292.

- ⁷ De Sousa, *Wrong*, p. 290.
- ⁸ De Sousa, *Wrong*, p. 290.
- ⁹ De Sousa, *Wrong*, p. 291.
- ¹⁰ De Sousa, *Wrong*, p. 292.
- ¹¹ Studies designed to show a correlation between rape attitudes and the perceived funniness of putatively sexist jokes are methodologically flawed for the same reasons that de Sousa's arguments are. No studies have showed a radically significant correlation exists. Even if they did, this would not tell us in any given case about a particular individual's dispositional beliefs or attitudes. If in general we had reason to believe that there was some causal connection, this still would give us little ethical insight. This would require showing that rape attitudes influence behavior in morally noteworthy ways. I'm not sure how this could be done satisfactorily. For an example of such a study, see Kathryn M. Ryan, and Jeanne Kanjorski, "The Enjoyment of Sexist Humor, Rape Attitudes, and Relationship Aggression in College Students." (*Sex Roles*, vol. 38, no. 9/10, May 1998, 743-756).
- ¹² Ted Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 77.
- ¹³ Hobbes, *Human Nature*, ch. 8 section 13.
- ¹⁴ Plato, *Philebus*.
- ¹⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, sections 3 and 7.
- ¹⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, chapter II, 12.
- ¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, chapter IV, 8.
- ¹⁸ Hobbes, *Human Nature*, ch. 8.
- ¹⁹ I find Solomon's analysis of the Three Stooges extremely implausible. Another problem with the Superiority theory of humor, getting at the same thing can be found in knock-knock jokes. See Robert Solomon, "Are the Three Stooges Funny? Soitainly! (or When is it OK to Laugh?)" (*Ethics and Values in the Information Age*, eds. Joel Rudinow and Anthony Graybosch. Wadsworth, 2002).
- ²⁰ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (New York: SUNY, 1983).
- ²¹ Hutcheson.
- ²² Epictetus, *The Handbook* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983) p. 24.
- ²³ Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Viking, 2000).