

Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?

Abstract

This paper argues that genuine moral flaws never enhance amusement, but they sometimes detract. This claim is opposed to *comic immoralism*—the position that moral flaws can make attempts at humor more amusing. Two common errors have made immoralism look attractive. First, immoralists have confused outrageous content with genuine moral flaws. Second, immoralists have failed to see that it is not sufficient to show that a morally flawed joke is amusing; they need to show that a joke can be more amusing because of the *fact that* it is morally flawed. This paper argues that the immoralist lacks a plausible account of how this could be the case.

I. Introduction

Can moral flaws make attempts at humor more amusing? Defenders of *comic immoralism* think so.¹ They argue that the putatively immoral violations of the norms of propriety and good taste add to the outrageousness of some jokes. Since the added outrageousness seems to make jokes funnier, they conclude that some moral flaws with jokes can make them more amusing. This all seems fairly intuitive. Consider the aristocrats joke: In the abstract the joke is about a family theater group that pitches a new routine to a promoter. The routine usually involves graphic acts of incest, violence, and general perversion. After they perform the routine, the promoter asks “What do you call it?” The father replies “The Aristocrats.” Since the punch line is not the slightest bit amusing, the humor of the joke is entirely dependent on the degree of salaciousness that the teller can achieve in describing the act.²

Despite its *prima facie* plausibility, there is good reason to think that *comic immoralism* is false, and not only false, but backwards.³ In fact, this paper argues in support of a moderate form of *comic moralism*—the position that moral flaws can make attempts at humor less amusing. This paper offers a burden of proof argument, arguing that immoralism, unlike,

moralism, lacks a plausible mechanism whereby genuine ethical flaws could become relevant to amusement value. Although it is not necessary to argue against *comic immoralism* in order to defend *comic moralism*, showing why immoralism is false will help us see why moralism is true.⁴

This paper begins with an attempt to establish a basis for evaluating the positions. Most importantly, this paper argues that it is not sufficient to show that a morally flawed joke is amusing; the immoralist needs to show that the joke is more amusing because of the *fact that* it is morally flawed. Although outrageous content can make jokes more amusing, merely being outrageous does not make an attempt at humor morally flawed. The immoralist lacks a plausible account of how a genuine moral flaw, and not just everyday outrageousness, could enhance amusement. In contrast, the *comic moralist* has a perfectly clear explanation for how moral flaws can decrease amusement: Moral disgust, prompted by the recognition of a genuine moral flaw, can trump amusement. For this reason, *comic moralism* is more *prima facie* more plausible than both *comic immoralism* and *comic autonomism*—the view that moral flaws neither detract nor enhance amusement.⁵ After presenting an argument for *comic moralism*, this paper considers, in detail, five objections.

Before beginning, a brief comment about the source of the controversy and the scope of this paper is in order. The relationship between humor and morality has garnered little attention outside the art and morality debate. *Comic immoralism* is closely related to what is called *immoralism about art*—the view that ethical flaws in a work of art can be aesthetic virtues.⁶ Some immoralists, such as Daniel Jacobson, argue for *immoralism about art* by way of an analogy to jokes.⁷ He argues that many of the supposed ethical flaws in art are like the putative ethical flaws with, say, racist or sexist jokes⁸—flaws that do not seem to interfere

with uptake. Further, many of the flaws are not just hindrances; they likely make positive contributions to the achievement of aesthetic goals. Indeed, a direct argument can be made for *immoralism about art* by way of *comic immoralism*. One only needs to add a fairly non-controversial premise—the premise that humor can contribute to aesthetic value.⁹ Perhaps it would help to make the argument more explicit:

1. Humor can positively contribute to the aesthetic value of an artwork.
(*humor aestheticism*)
2. Moral flaws in attempts at humor can make them more amusing.
(*comic immoralism*)
3. Hence, moral flaws can increase the aesthetic value of an artwork.
(*immoralism about art*)

From the above argument, it should be apparent that the truth of *comic immoralism* is significant to the art and morality debate.

Although pre-reflective opinion might support Jacobson's immoralism, others deny that there is any relationship between moral flaws and amusement. In a rare discussion of ethically objectionable humor in his book *Jokes*, Ted Cohen pleads "I wish you good luck in thus maintaining your feeling of disgust—moral disgust, if that is how it feels to you—at the joke, but I insist that you not let your conviction that a joke is in bad taste, or downright immoral, blind you to whether you find it funny".¹⁰ Cohen's criticism of this kind of dishonesty suggests a reason to think that comic autonomism is likely true—that moral flaws do not have any impact on amusement. Hence, the opposition to comic moralism is two-fold. This paper offers an argument against both immoralism and autonomism about humor.

Although the truth of comic immoralism has a direct bearing on the art and morality debate, we will not attempt to settle the larger issue here. Although this paper concludes with an example that suggests the relevance of the current argument to the broader issue in

aesthetics, the focus is on humor, not art.

II. The Immoralist's Two Mistakes

There are two forms of *comic immoralism*, strong and moderate. *Strong comic immoralism* is the position that ethical flaws in attempts at humor *always* make them more amusing. This position is wrong for some fairly obvious reasons, and it has no defenders that one is aware of. In contrast, *moderate comic immoralism* is the view that ethical flaws with joke tokens can *sometimes* make them funnier. This position may seem plausible, since the outrageousness and naughtiness of jokes does seem to be part of the reason why some of them are so funny.¹¹ However, the intuitive plausibility of *comic immoralism* is based on two easily made mistakes. First, immoralism appears attractive only if we fail to make clear what must be the case for a moral flaw to be relevant to the amusement value of an attempt at humor. It is not enough to merely show that a funny joke is morally flawed. The immoralist needs to show that the joke is funnier *because* it is morally flawed. Second, immoralism rests on an excessively loose notion of what it means for a joke token to be ethically flawed—so loose that it asks us to mistakenly conflate outrageousness and immorality. Too often, defenders of immoralism seem to think that the mere representation of immorality makes an attempt at humor morally flawed. But this is clearly mistaken. In what follows, this paper examines these two problems in turn.

To assess *comic immoralism*, we need to ask, what must be the case in order for us to say that a joke token is funnier *because of* (and not simply *in spite of*) its ethical flaws? Consider an analogy: You could shoot the president in the heart with a silver bullet, but since he is not a werewolf, the fact that the bullet is silver would be irrelevant to his death.

Similarly, 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 (consciously or unconsciously) that the joke is morally flawed and then find it funnier because of that fact. There is no other convincing way to argue that *the fact that* the attempt at humor was ethically flawed played any role whatsoever.¹² Since moral flaws must have an impact to be relevant, those that fly under the radar, so to speak—undetected by the audience—cannot be said to enhance amusement.

In order for a moral flaw to be relevant to amusement value, we need to show that it plays something akin to a causal or explanatory role in increasing or decreasing amusement—that is, the moral flaw should play a prominent role in any adequate account of why an attempt at humor fails to solicit amusement. To avoid assuming a controversial position on the causal efficacy of moral properties, we might say that the audience's judgment that the attempt at humor is morally flawed, rather than the moral flaw itself, would need to play a causal or explanatory role. For instance, one may note that a particular scene in a movie is clearly intended to be amusing, but it is not the least bit funny because vicious racist motives sapped the humor. One might explain that rather than feeling amusement, audiences feel moral disgust at the scene in question. Such an explanation of the defects of the attempt at humor would make recourse to the *fact that* the work is morally flawed. Unless we can show that an attempt at humor benefits or suffers *because* it is ethically flawed, we have no reason to think that its ethical flaws are relevant to its amusement value. Much of the controversy around the relationship between moral value and amusement is a result of the failure of those defending immoralism to adequately recognize the simple distinction between moral flaws that play a role in the production (or inhibition) of amusement and those that do

not.¹³ This is the first mistake that immoralists make.

Immoralism gets its prima facie plausibility from a combination of two mistakes. As we have seen, the first mistake is a failure to differentiate between two types of moral flaws; likewise, the second mistake is a failure to differentiate between attempts at humor that merely feature immorality and those that are genuinely immoral. Although it might not be immediately obvious, it should be clear that a joke featuring immorality, however extreme, is not necessarily itself an immoral joke. Yes, outrageous content such as taboo subjects and wildly inappropriate behavior can clearly contribute to the humorousness of a joke, but it is not at all clear that moral flaws contribute positively in any way. It is important that one not confuse inappropriateness, lewdness, irreverence, and the like with immorality. Nor should one confuse the mere representation of an immoral character, attitude, or sentiment with a moral flaw.

Although the aristocrats joke represents incest, torture, rape, bestiality, and all manner of nastiness, this does not make the joke morally flawed. Newspaper stories reporting on child molestation, murder, rape, and incest are not morally flawed for merely representing immoral acts, and neither are jokes. Of course, in some sense the aristocrats joke makes light of outrageous immorality, but it does not endorse child molestation or encourage positive attitudes towards rape and torture. As such, it is hard to imagine a plausible basis for moral condemnation of the aristocrats joke. Similarly, many limericks are funny precisely because they feature over the top representations of outrageous immorality. Here's one:

There was a young man from Belgrave
 Who kept a dead whore in a cave.
 He said, "I admit
 I'm a bit of a shit,

But think of the money I save.”

There is no reason to think that the aristocrats joke or this limerick is immoral for merely representing immoral actions. And it is difficult to think of any situation where the telling of such a limerick would be morally flawed, except by virtue of being wildly inappropriate and possibly callously insensitive—at, say, a funeral service. In most other conceivable contexts telling the Belgrave limerick or the aristocrats joke would simply be outrageous, not immoral.

Comic immoralism is a position about morally flawed attempts at humor, not attempts at humor that merely feature immoral acts and salacious content. It is hard to imagine any controversy over what we might call *comic naughty-ism*—the position that outrageous, irreverent, or inappropriate content can often enhance amusement. Most everyone agrees with that view. The problem is that defenders of comic immoralism have offered merely naughty examples when something far less nice is needed.

III. Comic Moralism

Rather than contributing positively to a joke's humorousness, genuine moral flaws, recognized as such, are most plausibly antithetical to humor. To see why, one merely has to consider hearing a joke told for an indisputably immoral purpose. Imagine hearing this racist joke at a KKK gathering: “How did a passerby stop a group of black men from committing a gang rape? He threw them a basketball.”¹⁴ Or, imagine a Jewish joke told by Hitler at the Nuremberg rallies. Our moral condemnation of such joke tokens would most plausibly preclude the slightest hint of amusement. In *Laughter*, Henri Bergson makes the comment that humor “requires a momentary anesthesia of the heart,” meaning that pity directed at the

butt of a joke relieves it of all amusement value.¹⁵ Our everyday experience confirms Bergson's observation that pity is indeed antithetical to humor and so it seems is moral disgust when directed at the teller. When one is morally repulsed by the telling of a joke or another attempt at humor, it is next to impossible to find it amusing.

But, we may ask, is moral condemnation of the telling of a joke necessarily antithetical to finding it amusing? Any such claim would most plausibly be too strong, but some might argue that the nature of moral judgments gives us good reason to think that *comic immorality* is necessarily false. It seems that part of what it means to sincerely judge that an action is morally prohibited is to be at least defeasibly motivated to abstain from such behavior. If someone says that they understand perfectly well that torturing and taunting the weak for sport is immoral, but that they could care less and will continue to do so, one might be a bit confused. Most likely, one would think that the unrepentant bully does not really think that his actions are wrong. The theory called *motivational judgment internalism* (MJ) captures just this intuition, holding that if a moral judgment is sincere then necessarily one is, at least somewhat, motivated to act in accordance with that judgment.¹⁶ Indeed, it seems highly counterintuitive that someone could sincerely think that an action is morally obligatory and fail to be moved the slightest bit to fulfill the obligation. To think otherwise, according to MJ, is to misunderstand the nature of moral judgment—to misunderstand the very concept.

Along these lines, one might argue that the motivational state necessarily accompanying a sincere judgment that the telling of a joke is morally condemnable is incompatible with finding the joke funny. Finding an attempt at humor (that one judges to be immoral) amusing would be akin to approving of, or even encouraging, the telling. If something similar to MJ is correct, then one cannot unreservedly want to encourage a

behavior that one genuinely thinks is morally prohibited. Hence, the moralist might argue, necessarily one cannot find a joke wholeheartedly amusing if one sincerely judges that it is immoral. The joke would necessarily be somewhat less amusing by dint of the motivational state accompanying the judgment that it is immoral.

As mentioned previously, we do not want to defend this line of argument against *comic immoralism*. There is no point in trying to make the argument any stronger in anticipation of minor objections, since there is a fatal flaw—namely, MJI is likely false. To see why, one only needs to coherently imagine someone who sincerely judges that an action is immoral, but who is not motivated in the least bit to abstain from such behavior. For such an example, Simon Blackburn directs our attention to the character of Satan from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who states that "Evil be thou my Good."¹⁷ Satan recognizes that his designs are morally prohibited; but is not only not motivated to abstain, he is motivated to pursue the immoral course of action precisely because he thinks that it is immoral. Certainly, neither Milton nor generations of readers who thought that they understood Satan's motivations are confused about the nature of moral judgment. The more likely explanation is that MJI is wrong to attribute a conceptual connection between moral judgment and motivation.

Hence, the critic of *comic immoralism* cannot make an argument of this kind from conceptual necessity. Nevertheless, 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 or have those of a diabolical being. Although it may be conceptually possible for someone to sincerely judge that an attempt at humor is immoral and still find it funny, anyone with such a psychological makeup would be highly problematic as a standard of correctness for judgments of humor. What they found funny would be as irrelevant to what

normal humans find funny as what Martians might find amusing. Simply put, we would not consider Satan or your garden variety sociopath the best judge of what is funny. Since moral condemnation is antithetical to amusement in normal human beings, 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. People clearly find many jokes amusing, despite the fact that they consider them to be immoral. Typically, such jokes are also outrageous. The immoralist may argue that the reason such jokes are found funny is because they are immoral. The immorality is what makes them naughty and in virtue of this naughtiness, they are more amusing.

In response, two comments are in order. First, if one merely wanted to defend *comic moralism*, one could point out the moderateness of the position. Moderate *comic moralism* does not claim that moral flaws always interfere with the humorousness of a joke, only that they *sometimes* do. The fact that jokes judged to be immoral can still be found amusing is perfectly compatible with moderate comic moralism. But we not only want to defend moderate comic moralism, we also want to reject immoralism. So, as a second response, it is important to note that the fact that someone judges an attempt at humor immoral after finding it funny does not indicate that moral flaws contributed to its amusement value. Yes, mere profanity and crude subject matter can often have an almost immediate positive effect. But what does this prove? It seems, very little. One might recognize that a joke is outrageous, but not consider it genuinely morally flawed until after one is laughing. Unless one believes in

reverse causation, the fact that the judgment came after the amusement shows that it had nothing to do with the degree of amusement. In such cases, it is far more plausible to say that the attempt at humor was found amusing *in spite of*, not because of, the fact that it is morally flawed. It is funny *in spite of* its moral flaws, because had one detected the moral flaw sooner, one would not have found it funny.

Most plausibly, for immoralism to be true, we would have to recognize that the purpose someone is putting a joke to use for is ethically objectionable, and because of this fact, we would have to think it is funnier. For instance, one might think that an attempt at humor is morally objectionable because it is used to foment hate. Alternatively, one might think that seemingly innocuous stereotype jokes harm those that fall under the type. Perhaps, as David Benatar argues, one might think that such jokes damage the reputation of the members of stereotyped groups. Accordingly, to tell a stereotype joke, regardless of the teller's intentions, is to culpably inflict undeserved harm on the group that is the butt of the joke.¹⁸ For present purposes it is not necessary to specify the precise ways in which a joke token could be ethically flawed, one need only note what happens when such flaws are detected. The recognition of genuine moral flaws in an attempt at humor is decidedly not conducive to amusement. As mentioned above, 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 target of the joke. Given the ability of moral disgust to inhibit 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. Hence, the moralist has a plausible account of how moral flaws can be detrimental to amusement value, but the immoralist lacks one altogether. Since one lacks a plausible account, the burden of proof falls on the immoralist to show how it is that genuine moral flaws could possibly contribute to

amusement.

The comic moralist must show not only that attempts at humor can be ethically flawed, which is far different from noting that they might be outrageous,¹⁹ but also that a moral flaw with an attempt at humor can have a negative impact on amusement. This is different from merely showing that a morally flawed attempt at humor fails to amuse. A red piece of glass may cut one's skin, but the fact that the glass is red had nothing to do with why it sliced one's flesh. Indeed, the moralist can show that a detrimental effect on the amusement value of a joke token is a result of *the fact that* it is morally flawed, not merely that the joke is *coincidentally* morally flawed. Moral flaws can be causally responsible, or a reason, for the failure to amuse. As noted above, the moralist can make recourse to a fairly familiar reaction to explain how moral flaws detract from amusement. However, it is extremely difficult to describe a comparable process whereby moral flaws could contribute positively to a joke's humorousness. For example, the comic immoralist would have to show that the fact that an attempt at humor asks us to endorse a racist perspective or the fact that an attempt at humor is aimed at increasing hate would have to be the reason why it was found more amusing. Although one understands how the fact that an attempt at humor promotes a morally repugnant racist agenda could work against its humorousness, one does not see how it could contribute to its amusement value. This is the central problem with immoralism.

IV. Objections

I. The first objection that this paper will consider concerns the nature of its argument against immoralism. One may argue that in response to any example offered in support of moralism the immoralist could simply agree and move on. Moderate immoralism does not

claim that moral flaws always make an attempt at humor more amusing, only that they sometimes do. It proves nothing against immoralism to merely provide examples where ethical flaws do not contribute positively to the amusement value of an attempt at humor. In response, one must note that this objection shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the structure of this paper's argument. This paper is not arguing that because *some* jokes suffer rather than benefit from their moral flaws *comic immoralism* is therefore false. No, this paper is simply not offering counterexamples; rather, it is offering an argument intended to shift the burden of proof. This paper argues that the burden of proof is on the immoralist to explain how ethical flaws could possibly make an attempt at humor more amusing. In contrast, the moralist has a plausible story to tell: Moral disgust at an attempt at humor precludes amusement, just as does pity directed at the butt of a joke.

II. As a second objection, one may claim that this paper's argument for moralism actually provides support for immoralism via racists. One might ask, don't racists sometimes find racist jokes funnier precisely because the jokes are racist? If so, then a racist attempt at humor could be found more amusing by a racist precisely because it is racist. This would show how an attempt at humor could be more amusing because it is ethically flawed—because it is racist. Rather than deciding the issue in favor of the moralist, it appears that this paper's argument inadvertently provides support for my opponents.²⁰

In reply, two comments are in order. First, one has no reason to think that racist content contributes positively to the humorousness of racist jokes to racist listeners. Even if a racist exclaims "It's true, they are all shiftless thieves!" one has no reason to think that racism contributed to the racist's amusement. It is more plausible to think that whatever it is that makes jokes funny—resolvable cognitive incongruities or something else yet to be discovered—is what explains the humor. If the racism were responsible, we would expect the

same kind of mechanism to operate in the opposite kind of situation—the morally commendable joke. However, jokes at the expense of President Bush, for example, are not more amusing simply because they challenge a morally pernicious head of state. In response to a mediocre joke, we may slap our knees and smile in approval of the condemnation of Bush and his bestiary of madmen, but the sentiment does not make jokes at his expense any funnier.²¹ Bush jokes are funny for independent reasons having to do with their cleverness. Unless we find a joke token morally suspect, attitudinal alignment has seemingly little or nothing to do with how humorous we find attempts at humor.

A second reply to the racist inversion objection is that even if racists could be said to find a stereotype joke funny because they think that the negative aspects of the stereotype featured in the joke are largely representative, or because they agree with an attitude of condemnation expressed by the teller of a joke, one has no reason to think that the joke was found more amusing because it is ethically flawed. Most plausibly, racists do not think that racist attitudes are morally suspect. They simply accept that racist attitudes are true expressions of the value of a certain group of people. Hence, if racist attitudinal alignment could contribute to humor, it would not show that the fact that an attempt at humor was ethically flawed contributes to its amusement value; rather, it would simply show that the fact that the joke expresses attitudes a racist agrees with contributes to how funny the racist finds the joke. That is, any explanation of the role of the racist content in the production of humor would not need to make reference to the morally flawed nature of the performance of the joke. The fact that the attempt at humor is morally flawed would be irrelevant, as it is unacknowledged by the racist.

Although revolting, racists are not like Kant's radically evil²² or Milton's Satan—doing evil for evil's sake. Racists do not recognize that a racist joke is morally flawed and then find

it funny because of this fact. The fact that a racist joke token is morally flawed plays no role whatsoever.²³ Even if we were to accept something close to relativism about judgments of humor, moralism still holds in a non-trivial sense. The theory is not simply true for those for whom it happens to be the case that moral condemnation is antithetical to amusement; rather, *comic moralism* is true for those that are not radically evil.²⁴ And this class likely contains a higher percentage of the human population than, say, the class of the color sighted.

III. One may raise a third, and more general, objection against my argument, concerning its basic approach. The general argument for comic moralism concerns uptake: This paper claims that pernicious moral properties arouse moral emotions that can sometimes make audiences highly unreceptive to attempts at humor. One may ask, isn't this akin to making the bizarre claim that food sometimes lacks taste because its texture is disgusting? In reply, it pays to note that this objection makes a false analogy between sensory domains. Humor is most plausibly an emotional response, or at least it has several characteristics of standard emotional responses.²⁵ This paper argues that certain emotional responses are largely incompatible. For instance, as with pity and humor, moral disgust and humor are difficult to experience simultaneously. This is radically different from the situation of taste and texture, where we are dealing with different sensory modalities. However, an analogy to taste might serve just as well: We all agree that some tastes can override others. For instance, the moldy flavor of corked wine can cancel out all other flavors for sensitive tasters. This paper's claim is that moral disgust plays a similar role: It can trump amusement.

IV. As a fourth objection, one may take issue with the claim that the immoralist lacks a plausible account of how ethical flaws could contribute to the amusement value of attempts at humor. Doesn't something along the lines of Herbert Spencer's and Sigmund Freud's tension-relief mechanism provide an adequate explanation? To understand the full force of

this objection, it is necessary to explain the relief theory in a bit more detail. In "The Physiology of Laughter," Spencer develops a theory of laughter that is intimately related to his "hydraulic" theory of nervous energy, whereby excitement and mental agitation produce energy that "must expend itself in some way or another."²⁶ He argues that "nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular motion." As a form of physical movement, laughter can serve as the expressive route of various forms of nervous energy.

In "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious," Freud develops a more nuanced version of the relief theory of laughter that amounts to a restatement of Spencer's theory with the addition of a new process.²⁷ He describes three different sources of laughter—joking, the comic, and humor—which all involve the saving of some psychic energy that is then discharged through laughter. In joking, the energy that would have been used to repress sexual and hostile feelings is saved and can be released in laughter. In the comic, cognitive energy to be used to solve an intellectual challenge is left over and can be released. The humorous involves a saving of emotional energy, since what might have been an emotion-provoking situation turns out to be something we should treat non-seriously. The energy building up for the serious emotional reaction can then be released.

Building on something close to Freud's relief theory, one may attempt to mount an objection to the claim that the immoralist lacks a plausible explanation for how moral flaws could contribute to the humorousness of a joke. In so far as morality involves the repression of desires, immoral jokes can serve to release the steam, so to speak. In response one can make two criticisms.

First, the details of Freud's discussion of the process of energy saving are widely regarded as problematic. His notion of energy saving is unclear, since it is not clear what sense it makes to say that energy which is never called upon is saved, rather than saying that

no energy was expended. Take his theory of jokes: It is unclear what it means to say that the energy that otherwise would have been used to repress a desire is saved by joking which allows for aggression to be released. John Morreall and Noël Carroll make a similar criticism of this theory of energy management.²⁸ One may have an idea of what it is like to express pent up energy, but we have no notion of what it would be like to release energy that is used to repress a desire. More importantly, beyond merely sounding odd, this theory of joking does not result in the expected empirical observations. On Freud's explanation, the most inhibited and repressed people would seem to enjoy joking the most, though the opposite is clearly the case.

Even if the relief theorist has a convincing defense of this theory of humor, one still has no reason to think that it provides support for immoralism. How exactly does the relief theory explain how the fact that an attempt at humor is morally flawed could be the reason why it was found more amusing? Consider the case of pedophile jokes. Suppose that P harbors a desire to molest children and let's also assume that pedophilic desires do not invalidate P's judgments of humor. On the relief theory, the occasion of hearing a pedophile joke might allow for the release of sexual energy, but not because the joke is immoral. The mere fact that a joke raises pedophilia to conscious awareness would be the driving force behind the humor. And, to reiterate our comments on the aristocrats joke, the mere representation of pedophilia is not immoral. If one considers genuinely immoral joke tokens, such as racist jokes told at a Klan meeting, the immoralist is in no better shape with the relief theory than without it. The situation is analogous to the racist who likes racist humor: One has no reason to think that the immorality of the joke has anything to do with why it was found amusing.

V. Although one may agree that comic moralism is likely correct, this paper's focus on

joke tokens, rather than types limits the applicability of the conclusion to the art and morality debate. This paper has avoided making any claims that joke types can be ethically flawed. However, it seems that our moral evaluation of art is about types and not tokens—that is, one claims that a movie or novel is ethically flawed, not the token instance. This disparity begs for an explanation, if one is to think that the relationship between moral flaws and amusement has any bearing on the relationship between moral flaws and aesthetic value.

In reply, this paper will avoid a controversial and digressive discussion of the metaphysics of various works of art. But it is worth noting that although some works are likely best described as types (works of film, literature, and video games), others have token instances that are works in themselves (works of classical music, theater, and dance), and others still are single instance works (paintings) that are not best described in the language of types and tokens. In any case, it is true that our moral evaluations are typically *prima facie* directed at the works themselves—which, in a type-token artform is the type. In fact, everyday moral condemnation of jokes is also directed at the joke type and not the token. One does not often hear someone object to a racist joke by saying that it should not have been told in the presence of a member of the offended group, but that it should not have been told, because the joke itself (the type) is morally objectionable. Perhaps joke types can be morally flawed independent of the effects of their tokens, but this is not a claim that this paper will defend.

This paper merely claims that outrageous, even offensive, scandalous humor, is not necessarily morally flawed. To be genuinely morally flawed one will need to do more than mere be naughty. Most likely, one will have to cause harm. And the same standard would apply to artworks as well. If one assumes a general ethical consequentialism, the evaluation

of type-token artworks (films and novels) must ultimately be based on the effects of the tokens. Just as an un-tokened joke type cannot cause harm, neither can an un-tokened artwork. Our moral condemnation is, or at least should be, based on the effects of the particular joke and art instances, not the mere existence of an abstract type.

V. Conclusion

To conclude, let us consider an actual immoral example that will reveal the broader significance of *comic moralism* to the art and morality debate. *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) is often cited as a pioneering work in the development of narrative cinema, yet it is a deeply flawed artwork. Most of its aesthetic flaws stem from the fact that the work is morally flawed, since it is replete with despicable racist content that lent legitimacy to the then-prevalent practices of racial domination. Designed to perpetuate suffering by fomenting hate, *The Birth of a Nation* is clearly morally flawed, but one may ask, "Why should we think that these moral flaws lessen its aesthetic value?" The answer is simple: The insipid racism arouses feelings of terror, disgust, and anger that are antithetical to the goal of its narrative, which is to inspire feelings of heroism and pride in the acts of the KKK and pity for the suffering of its white characters. But how can one possibly feel sympathy for a white woman merely because a black man offers his hand in marriage?

The aesthetic failures of the film are not confined to the traditional emotions one experiences in response to drama; instead, the aesthetic defects are broad, since even the humor in the work is destroyed by its moral flaws. For instance, although the film intends the black congress composed of drunkards and cutthroats to be both amusing and horrifying, it is simply disturbing since its attitude towards these characters is revolting. As such, *The Birth of*

a Nation is aesthetically less valuable because the moral flaws with its attempts at humor make them less amusing. The film provides unambiguous support for *comic moralism about art*.²⁹

Notes

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- 1 See Daniel Jacobson "In Praise of Immoral Art" (*Philosophical Topics*, vol. 25, no. 1, spring 1997) and "Ethical Criticism and the Vices of Moderation" (*Current Debates in Aesthetics*, ed. Matthew Kieran).
- 2 The movie *The Aristocrats* (Paul Provenza, 2005) focuses on variations of the aristocrats joke.
- 3 There is some controversy around the labels one should adopt for these positions. As such, a brief note is required. Since I admire the clarity of his work, I have adopted labels analogous to those used by Noël Carroll in his work on the art and morality debate.
- Comic Moralism (CM) = moral flaws can sometimes make attempts at humor *less* amusing.
 - Comic Immoralism (CI) = moral flaws can sometimes make attempts at humor *more* amusing.
 - Autonomism (A) = Not CM and not CI.
- 4 It is not my goal in this article to offer a conclusive defense of *moralism about art*.
- 5 Ted Cohen is an autonomist. See his book *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago, 1999).
- 6 The two leading forms of moralism about art are Noël Carroll's moderate moralism and Berys Gaut's ethicism. Noël 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*. Cambridge UP, 2001). To be more precise, Gaut defends a position that he calls "ethicism," which is far stronger than Carroll's "moderate moralism." Berys Gaut "Art and Ethics" (*The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic Mclver Lopes. New York: Routledge, 2001).
For a useful synopsis of this debate, see chapter 11 of Robert Stecker's *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
- 7 See note 1.
- 8 I do not intend to specify what would make a joke racist or sexist. I'm merely using the labels as a short-hand way of referring to a certain kind of joke—primarily those involving racial or gender stereotypes, that people commonly refer to as "racist" and "sexist."
- 9 Of course, this premise needs support. One may argue that although we are accustomed to evaluating comedies based on their humorousness, we rarely think of comic amusement as a form of aesthetic experience. In addition, unlike the paradigmatic aesthetic properties, such as gracefulness, humor is only tenuously linked to assessments of beauty and ugliness. To make matters worse, humor is not directly related to sensation, the narrow domain of the aesthetic. As such, judgments of humor are not clear candidates

of aesthetic evaluation.

10 Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 83.

11 Since the strong version of *comic immorality* is highly implausible, I omit the “moderate” prefix when referring to the weak version.

12 I am using the phrase “attempt at humor” to refer to both joke tokens, site gags, comic plot structures, and the like. We only ever encounter particular performances of jokes. When I talk of a morally flawed joke, I’m referring to a morally flawed joke token. The same joke type may appear in multiple contexts where it plays a far different ethical role.

13 No one in the literature has made this distinction.

14 Ted Cohen discusses this joke in *Jokes*, p. 77.

15 Henri Bergson, “Laughter” in *Comedy* ed. Wylie Sypher (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 61-192.

16 For a remarkably clear discussion of Motivational Judgment Internalism, see Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense* (Oxford, 2005).

17 See Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, (Oxford; 2000), p. 61. I thank Noël Carroll for pointing out the relevance of Satan to the debate around Motivational Judgment Internalism.

18 David Benatar, “Prejudice in Jest: When Racial and Gender Humor Harms.” *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 1999) pp. 191-203. For a criticism of Benatar’s position see my “The Ethics of Humor and Laughter.”

19 Showing that a joke could cause harm is the most plausible way to argue that it is morally flawed. I am not arguing that this is the only way. Ted Cohen agrees but doesn’t think that the bar can be reached: “Among contemporary normative theories of morality, most would require that it be shown that traffic in these jokes produces genuine harm to someone, or at least that it reduces the moral character of those who traffic in them. It seems preposterous to suppose that anyone could show that either of these consequences obtains.” (*Jokes*, p. 81)

20 I owe this objection to Jeff Dean.

21 I would like to thank Ted Cohen for suggesting this line of argument.

22 In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* Kant argues that the radically evil—those who do evil for evil’s sake—are inconceivable.

23 An interesting consequence of my argument is that moralism does not require moral

realism if moral condemnation functions the same way in normal people.

- 24 I am not claiming that all non-radically evil beings will find jokes less amusing if they find them morally flawed. I am only claiming that they will find *some* less amusing.
- 25 For a discussion of whether humor should be considered an emotion, see: John Morreall, "Humor and Emotion" (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20, 1983, pp. 297-304).
- 26 See Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter" (*Macmillan's Magazine*, 1, 1860, pp. 395-402).
- 27 See Sigmund Freud, "Humor" (*International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 9, 1928, pp. 1-6) and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. J. Strachey (W. W. Norton, 1960).
- 28 See John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (SUNY, 1983) and Noël Carroll "On Jokes" in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge UP, 2001) pp. 317-334. For an additional overview of the relief theory of humor see my entry "Humor" in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- 29 I thank Heidi Bollich for reading and commenting on several drafts of this paper. I thank Lester Hunt, Ivan Soll, and Noël Carroll for providing useful feedback on parts of this paper in another form. My commentator at the American Society for Aesthetics meeting in Asilomar in 2005, Jeff Dean provided several trenchant objections. I thank the audience at Asilomar. In particular Ted Cohen, Alex Neill, Noël Carroll, and Andrew Kania provided useful feedback. I presented part of this paper at the ASA Eastern division meeting in 2006. The feedback from the audience and my commentator are much appreciated. I also thank an anonymous referee for this journal who noted two important omissions.