

# Aristocrats and Inferno Bullets: Two Controversial Claims about Humor and Morality

Aaron Smuts

## Abstract

A common view holds that humor and morality are antithetical: Moral flaws enhance amusement, and moral virtues detract. I reject both of these claims. If we distinguish between merely outrageous jokes and immoral jokes, the problems with the common view become apparent. What we find is that genuine moral flaws tend to inhibit amusement. Further, by looking at a few satirical news stories, we can see that moral virtues sometimes enhance amusement. The position I defend is called *symmetric comic moralism*. It is widely regarded as patently absurd. I hope to correct this mistake.

## 1 Introduction

When asked, most people would likely agree that the morally serious have no sense of humor. Consider this familiar joke:

Q: How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb?  
A: That's not funny!

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus (c 50-130 CE) proves the point. Casting an ancient frown on our amusement, he recommends that we:

Stay away from raising a laugh, since this manner easily slips into vulgarity. [. . .]  
It is also risky to fall into foul language. So when anything like that occurs, if a good opportunity arises, go so far as to criticize the person who has done it, and otherwise by staying silent and blushing or frowning you will show that you are displeased by what has been said.<sup>1</sup>

Not only are moralists thought to be humorless bores, morally praiseworthy humor is generally considered to be awkward and unfunny. There seems to be nothing worse than a joke with a moral purpose. We may slap our knees in agreement, but politically correct humor does not evoke the belly-aching guffaws and tears that stream forth from a really good dirty joke.

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<sup>1</sup> Epictetus, *The Handbook*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Hackett, 1983), p. 24.

## Section 1. Introduction

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Consider the Aristocrats joke: A family theater group walks into a promoter's office. The father tells the promoter that the family has a great act and asks if he would like to see it. The promoter says sure. They begin. For half an hour the family engages in all manner of extreme sexual activity—incest, bestiality, sadomasochism, and other acts of errant perversion. By the end, pets, children, and parents are coated in an assortment of bodily fluids. When done, the promoter says, "That's great! What do you call it?" The father replies, "The Aristocrats." Now, on the surface the joke is not the slightest bit funny. The punch line is stupid, at best. But this is perhaps the funniest joke ever told. Of course, it depends on who is doing the telling. Gilbert Gottfried's foul mouthed rendition is one of the funniest things I have ever heard. It is funny because it is incredibly outrageous, so outrageous that I cannot bring myself to transcribe any of the details.<sup>2</sup> It certainly seems that the joke is funny in virtue of its moral flaws.

These brief observations suggest that morality and humor are antithetical. A familiar limerick attests to the relationship:

The limerick packs laughs anatomical  
Into space that is quite economical.  
But the good ones I've seen  
So seldom are clean -  
And the clean ones so seldom are comical.

Moral virtues appear to make attempts at humor less amusing, and moral flaws appear to make jokes even funnier. This is just obvious, just commonsense, perhaps. But commonsense or not, I think that both of these claims are false. In fact, I think that the relationship runs in precisely the opposite direction: Moral virtues enhance amusement, and moral flaws detract. By considering satirical examples we can see that the common view, the view that moral value and humor are inversely related, is mistaken.

In this paper, I defend a bold, new theory called *symmetric comic moralism*; it makes symmetric claims about the role of moral flaws and the role of moral virtues in attempts at humor.<sup>3</sup> My argument proceeds in a few steps. I begin by exposing two fundamental problems with the claim that moral flaws enhance amusement, a position that we can call *comic immoralism*. I argue that

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<sup>2</sup> You can see a recording of Gottfried's version in the documentary "The Aristocrats" (Provenza 2005). I also discuss this example in: Aaron Smuts, "Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46.2 (2009): 151-163.

<sup>3</sup> My choice of labels is controversial. It comes from the art and morality debate. Although the names are not perfect, I adopted Noël Carroll's choice of terms: moralism (=moral flaws sometimes detract) and immoralism (=moral flaws sometimes enhance). For an alternative suggestion and further discussion of the naming controversy, see: Matthew Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge: the challenge of immoralism" in *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.

## Section 1. Introduction

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defenders of immoralism mistakenly confuse outrageousness with immorality.<sup>4</sup> And secondly, immoralists mistakenly assume that some jokes<sup>5</sup> that happen to be funny in spite of their immorality are funny *because* they are immoral. In opposition to the other common view, the view that moral virtues inhibit amusement, I present several examples that are funny precisely because of their moral virtues.<sup>6</sup> My principal goal is to show that symmetric comic moralism can satisfy the requirement that immoralism fails to meet; namely, it can show that genuine moral flaws and virtues can have an impact on amusement.

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<sup>4</sup> I make this distinction in "Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?" [This article resolves problems with my earlier efforts in defense of negative moralism, expands the array of examples, and clarifies the core distinctions needed to develop my new position in support of positive comic moralism—a position that I previously thought was dead wrong.]

<sup>5</sup> For ease of expression, I use the term "joke" to refer to a wide variety of attempts at humor that are not exactly jokes. For an attempt at a definition of "joke" see: Noël Carroll, "Jokes" in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge UP, 2001): 317-334. Carroll's articles on humor include "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research" *Ethics* 110 (2000): 350-387; "Horror and Humor" in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*: 235-253; "Moderate Moralism" in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*: 293-306; and "Notes on the Sight Gag" in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York, Cambridge UP, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> I do not know of another defense of this view. This is the principal contribution of this article to the humor literature. The symmetric moralism defended here is an unprecedented position; one that I previously thought was indefensible.

## 2 Immoralism

I want to dispute two common views. The first is the notion that moral flaws enhance amusement. Examples such as the Aristocrats joke certainly seem to lend support for this view. So do a variety of scandalous limericks and dirty jokes. Consider *The Onion*<sup>7</sup> article "Newlyweds Regret Saving Sex for Marriage":

WETUMKA, OK—Two weeks after their Feb. 1 wedding, Matt and Liz Kuchen, both 32, regret remaining virgins until marriage. "Why the hell did I wait?" Liz said Tuesday. "I could've been having mind-blowing sex with dozens of guys these last 15 years, and instead I spent them making little uptight speeches about how it'll be more special if I hold out." Matt agreed, saying, "Stacy Pratt totally would've done me. Oh, man."<sup>8</sup>

Jokes that can be told in "polite company" generally are not very funny. But when one can get away from the puritans, have a few drinks, and loosen up, the jokes get a lot dirtier and a lot funnier. In fact, puritans make great butts. The more outrageous the telling of the Aristocrats joke, the funnier it seems to be. Gottfried's version tops all the others, both in scandal and amusement. The immoralist makes the obvious conclusion: moral flaws enhance amusement.

Sigmund Freud presents a theory of humor that appears to account for this phenomenon. Ultimately, his theory of humor is not very plausible, but its general contours are worth considering. Freud's theory is what is known as a "relief theory." The nineteenth century Social-Darwinist, Herbert Spencer developed an early version of the view. In "The Physiology of Laughter," Spencer presents a "hydraulic" theory of nervous energy. He argues that excitement and mental agitation produce energy that "must expend itself in some way or another."<sup>9</sup> Spencer claims 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. Jokes provide a convenient means by which this energy can be channeled out via laughter.

Freud expands on Spencer's general outline. In "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious," Freud develops a nuanced version of the relief theory of laughter that amounts to a restatement of Spencer's theory with the addition of a new process.<sup>10</sup> He describes three different sources of laughter: joking, the

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<sup>7</sup> *The Onion* is a satirical news weekly distributed in the US and available online at <http://www.theonion.com>

<sup>8</sup> February 19, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> See Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter" *Macmillan's Magazine* 1 (1860): 395-402.

<sup>10</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Humor" *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (1928): 1-6; and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. J. Strachey (Norton, 1960).

## Section 2. Immoralism

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comic, and humor. He argues that all three 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 that we would otherwise use to solve an intellectual challenge is left over and can be released. The humorous, on the other hand, involves a saving of emotional energy. In humorous situations, what might have been an emotion-provoking situation turns out to be something that we should treat non-seriously. The energy built up for the serious emotional reaction is released through laughter.

Building on something close to Freud's relief theory, a defender of immoralism may attempt to provide an explanation for how moral flaws could contribute to the humorousness of a joke. It certainly seems that morality, at least in part, requires the suppression of various desires. The pent up energy associated with these desires needs to go somewhere. Immoral jokes can serve to release the steam, so to speak. Freud's theory is somewhat more nuanced: On his view, it is not the energy behind the suppressed drives that is released, but the energy that would have been used to suppress the drives. Crudely put, jokes about sex, for instance, allow people to release the energy used to repress sexual desire. The theory concludes that this is why dirty jokes are so funny.

At this point, immoralism is supported by both commonsense and the relief theory of humor. Not only do we have examples (such as the Aristocrats joke and the "Newlyweds Regret Saving Sex for Marriage" story) that appear to support the claim that moral flaws enhance amusement, thanks to Freud, we also have a psychological account, albeit a bit fuzzy, of why this might be the case. Hence, immoralism appears to be a well supported position. But, again, I think that it is wrong.

### *Two Problems with Immoralism*

To assess comic immoralism, we need to clarify its basic claim. Immoralism holds that moral flaws can enhance amusement. That is, the theory holds that moral flaws are in some sense responsible for the intensity of our amusement. In support of immoralism, it will not do to merely show that a funny joke is morally flawed; it must be shown that it is amusing *because of* the moral flaw. So we must 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?<sup>11</sup>

Consider an analogy: You could shoot me in the heart with a silver bullet,

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<sup>11</sup> I am not talking about reasons to think that the joke is funny. Rather, I am looking at factors that make it amusing. I take it that the only reason to think that a joke is funny is because people find it amusing. That seems clear. But I want to know if moral flaws and virtues have a typical effect on whether normal people find jokes amusing. Hence, I am concerned with causes for amusement, not reasons to think a joke is funny. The reasons are clear, the *causes* are not. Much of the literature in the art and morality debate suffers from this confusion. For example see: James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean "Moderate Autonomism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38.2 (1998).

## Section 2. Immoralism

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but since I am not a werewolf, the fact that the bullet is silver would be irrelevant to my 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. The moral flaw has to function like the silver in the bullet that kills a lycanthrope. Most plausibly, this would require that we recognize that a 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 how funny we find a joke, we need to show that it plays something akin to a causal role in increasing or decreasing amusement. The defender of immoralism needs to show that moral flaws can play a prominent role in any adequate account of why an attempt at humor is funny. Unless we can show that an attempt at humor benefits *because* it is ethically flawed, we have no reason to think that its ethical flaws contribute to our amusement. The problem is that defenders of immoralism have not acknowledged this distinction. The theory gains much of its intuitive support by a failure of to adequately recognize the simple distinction between moral flaws that play a role in the production of amusement and those that do not. Too often, defenders of immoralism confuse the two. This is the first mistake that immoralists make.

However, simply drawing the distinction (between moral flaws that affect amusement and those that play no role) does not show that immoralism is wrong. But it does establish a clear challenge: The challenge for the immoralist is to show that some jokes are funny because of and not simply in spite of their moral flaws. In the next section, I will argue that the immoralist cannot meet this challenge. But first, we first need to get clear about what constitutes a moral flaw. This brings us to the second problem with immoralism.

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. This time, it is a failure to distinguish between attempts at humor that merely feature immorality and those that are genuinely immoral. This familiar limerick fails to make the distinction:

The limerick's callous and crude,  
Its morals distressingly lewd;  
It's not worth the reading  
By persons of breeding -

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

## Section 2. Immoralism

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It's designed for us vulgar and rude.

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 lewd 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.

The excessive strictures of puritanical morality are just that, excessive. They do not track what we think of as genuinely immoral. Swearing may violate a conventional rule of etiquette; but torture violates the norms of morality. One feels appropriately guilty for murdering innocent strangers, not for merely telling dirty jokes. 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. We do not need to be reminded that sexually abusing children is awful. The joke does not confuse us into thinking such things are permissible. And neither does this one:

A man comes home to find his girlfriend crying and throwing her clothes into her suitcase. "What's the matter, honey?" he asks. "I was talking to the neighbors and I've learned you're a convicted pedophile!" she says. "Pedophile?" he replies. "Now that's an awfully big word for an eight-year-old."<sup>13</sup>

It is hard to imagine a plausible basis for moral condemnation of either the Aristocrats joke or the "awfully big word" 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."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I owe this example to Jeff Dean who presented it as a putative counter-example to my argument.

<sup>14</sup> This example too was presented as a putative counter-example by an anonymous referee.

## Section 2. Immoralism

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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 for a street-walker. In most other conceivable contexts telling the Belgrave limerick or the Aristocrats joke would simply be outrageous, not immoral.

To push the envelope, consider *The Onion* article "Three Fingered on Class Trip to Washington, DC": Reading further, one expects to find that three students were "fingered for" a crime, but it turns out that three of the girls were willingly "fingered" (as in vaginally penetrated with a finger) by boys in the group. One girl was "fingered" on the bus before they even got to DC!<sup>15</sup> The joke is funny because it sets up an expectation and subverts it with something scandalous. We do not go around talking about the private sexual activities of adolescents, especially not in newspapers. This is outrageous and extremely crude, but not immoral. Why would it be? These are fictional characters, not actual teenagers whose privacy was violated. And certainly it cannot be immoral for merely suggesting that teenagers are sexually active. How could merely stating such an obvious truth be 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 frequently enhances 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.

Of course, a puritan might object, "That's not funny!" The butt of the light bulb joke thinks that no serious topics such as pedophilia, incest, and murder should be treated with levity. Dark comedy, I suppose, is also off limits. The morally squeamish puritan will stay silent and frown, letting her displeasure show. No doubt, she will not find the aristocrats joke or the awfully big work joke funny. Those of us who do, the "vulgar and the rude," I suppose, do not find any moral problems with these jokes. As we shall see, rather than an objection, the puritan proves the point I develop in the next section. She just does not like the same jokes.

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<sup>15</sup> April 25, 2009. Issue 45.17

### 3 Moralism: The Negative Thesis

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 putatively 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."<sup>16</sup> Our moral condemnation of such jokes 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.<sup>17</sup> 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. If so, then the negative thesis of *comic moralism* is true: moral flaws sometimes decrease amusement.

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. Any plausible standard of correctness for our evaluations would not be devoid of moral sentiments or have those of a diabolical being. Simply put, we would not consider Satan or your garden variety sociopath the best judge of what is funny. Even if we assume radical subjectivism about judgments of humor, we can still ask: Who cares what Martians find funny? I am interested in normal earthlings, not extraterrestrial moral monsters. 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. Here, again, the immoralist may appeal to a rough version of Freud's relief theory of humor. The jokes allow us to release repressed desires, or energy that would have otherwise

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<sup>16</sup> Ted Cohen discusses this joke in *Jokes*, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Henri Bergson, "Laughter" in *Comedy* ed. Wylie Sypher (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 61-192.

### Section 3. Moralism: The Negative Thesis

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been used to repress thematically related desires.

In response, two comments are in order. First, I only intend to defend a moderate form of comic moralism. The moderate version of 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 I not only want to defend moderate comic moralism, I 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.

Yes, mere profanity and crude subject matter can often have an almost immediate positive effect. As I noted above, *comic naughty-ism* is clearly well-supported. But what does this prove? It seems, very little. Sure, one might recognize that a joke is outrageous, but not consider it genuinely morally flawed until after one is laughing. However, unless one believes in reverse causation, the fact that the judgment came after the amusement shows that it had nothing to do with the 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: had one detected the moral flaw sooner, one likely 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 is ethically objectionable, and because of this fact, we would have to find it 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.<sup>18</sup> I disagree, but 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 thought to be present: humor is blocked.

The problem for immoralism is that the perception of genuine moral flaws in an attempt at humor is decidedly not conducive to amusement. As mentioned above, not only does pity 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,

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<sup>18</sup> 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: Aaron Smuts, "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor be Wrong?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2009, forthcoming).

### Section 3. Moralism: The Negative Thesis

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but the immoralist lacks one altogether. Since immoralism lacks a plausible psychological account, the burden of proof falls on the immoralist to show how it is that genuine moral flaws could possibly contribute to amusement.

Let me re-iterate: 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,<sup>19</sup> but also that a moral flaw with an attempt at humor can have a negative impact on amusement. (In the following section, I will show that moralism can meet the inverse burden—it can show that moral virtues can have a positive 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 my skin, but the fact that the glass is red had nothing to do with why it sliced my 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 for the failure to amuse.

The moralist can make recourse to a fairly familiar reaction to explain how moral flaws detract from amusement: moral disgust often trumps 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 I understand how the fact that an attempt at humor promotes a morally repugnant racist agenda could work against its humorousness, I simply do not see how it could contribute to amusement. This is the central problem with immoralism, and the principal virtue of moralism. Moral flaws do not make jokes more amusing. No, genuine moral flaws, when detected, frequently make jokes less amusing. And when moral flaws are not detected, or are only detected after the fact, they most plausibly do not play any role at all.

Berys Gaut thinks that a much stronger case can be made for comic moralism. He argues that if "a comedy presents certain events as funny (prescribing a humorous response to them), but, if this involves being amused at heartless cruelty, then the work is not funny."<sup>20</sup> We must ask: Isn't this mere wishful thinking? Perhaps angels do not find cruelty funny, but mere mortals often do. I see no reason to think that what is really truly funny is what the angels find funny. Who cares what angels find amusing? Again, I am not

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<sup>19</sup> 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). I try to meet this burden elsewhere in "The Ethics of Humor."

<sup>20</sup> Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford UP, 2007), p. 233.

### Section 3. Moralism: The Negative Thesis

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concerned with extraterrestrials, be they moral monsters or humorless angels.<sup>21</sup>

Gaut recognizes that his claim is too strong, so he qualifies the consequent: "or at least its humor is flawed." But this qualification deflates the conclusion. Of course, we might think that the humor is flawed, perhaps morally flawed, but why would this necessarily make it any less funny? Gaut needs to give us some reason to think that this is how we use the term "humor" and not just stipulate a new use, since whether or not the ethical dimensions of a joke do affect its humorousness is exactly what is at issue. It might just be, and it certainly could have been the case, that moral flaws never have any impact on amusement. There is no apparent conceptual connection between moral merit and amusement.

Although there is no conceptual connection, there is an empirical connection. Moral disgust prompted by the recognition of a moral flaw can sometimes inhibit amusement in psychologically normal humans. But normality gives us neither normativity nor a conceptual connection.

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<sup>21</sup> Further, surely, such an objective angelic standard is less plausible than subjectivism. I develop this line of argument in my article on moral flaws and aesthetic properties. See: Aaron Smuts, "Grounding Moralism: Moral Flaws and Aesthetic Properties" *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (2010, forthcoming).

### *What about Freud?*

I argue that the immoralist lacks a plausible psychological account of how the recognition of moral flaws could enhance amusement. But what about Freud? Doesn't Freud's relief theory provide just such an account? At this point the critic of immoralism owes us a reply to the Freud's relief theory.

The first thing to be said in reply is that the specifics of Freud's theory are very odd. I did not go into much detail in my earlier gloss of the view, but that is because his notion of energy saving is unclear. It is not at all clear how it makes sense to say that energy which is never called upon is saved. 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, allowing for the repressing energy to be released.<sup>22</sup> Isn't it simply that no energy was expended? 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. This is a fairly mysterious process.

More importantly, beyond merely sounding odd, Freud's 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, but the opposite is clearly the case. In my experience, severely repressed, generally uptight people do not tell many dirty jokes. Nor do they laugh the most on such occasions. Hence, the theory contradicts the evidence, albeit anecdotal.

But this is beside the point: even if the relief theorist has a convincing defense of the theory, we still have no reason to think that it provides support for immoralism. I did some hand waving during my initial presentation of the view. We did not get into any details. Now we must ask, how exactly does the relief theory explain how the fact that an attempt at humor is morally flawed could be a reason why it was found more amusing? I do not think that it can.

Consider the case of pedophile jokes. Suppose that Phaedrus harbors a desire to molest children, boys in the flower of their beardless youth, and let's also assume that pedophilic desires do not invalidate Phaedrus's judgments of humor; he is a pedophile, not a Martian. On the relief theory, the occasion of hearing a pedophile joke might allow for the release energy used to repress sexual desire, 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 what I said about the Aristocrats joke, the mere representation of pedophilia is not immoral. If one considers genuinely immoral

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<sup>22</sup> John Morreall and Noël Carroll make a similar criticism of this theory of energy management. 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 encyclopedia article: Aaron Smuts, "Humor" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2006).

### Section 3. Moralism: The Negative Thesis

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jokes, 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 a racist who likes racist humor: One has no reason to think that the immorality of a racist joke has anything to do with why it was found amusing by a racist. 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 think racist beliefs accurately assess the worth of certain groups of people. Hence, even if we could demonstrate that racist attitudes contribute to the amusement racists feel in response to racists joke, this 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. The racist does not detect the moral flaw.

Although revolting, racists are not like Kant's radically evil<sup>23</sup> 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. Racist do not laugh maniacally and then exclaim: "Evil, be thou my good."<sup>24</sup> The fact that a racist joke token is morally flawed plays no role whatsoever.<sup>25</sup> 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 just 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.<sup>26</sup> And this class likely contains a higher percentage of the human population than, say, the class of the color sighted.

So, even if we accept the Freudian relief theory of humor, this does not give us any reason to think that immoralism is true. The immoralist still lacks an account of how the recognition of the immorality of a joke could possibly enhance amusement.

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<sup>23</sup> In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* Kant argues that the radically evil—those who do evil for evil's sake—are inconceivable.

<sup>24</sup> *Paradise Lost* (book 4, line 110).

<sup>25</sup> An interesting consequence of my argument is that moralism does not require moral realism if moral condemnation functions the same way in normal people.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

## 4 Moralism: The Positive Thesis

Do moral virtues make attempts at humor less amusing? It is widely assumed that a moral joke is an unfunny joke. An article from *The Onion* titled "Dedicated Student Cartoonist Takes on Campus Issues" supports this assessment. The cartoonist of the school paper thinks that he has created a set of insightful political cartoons, but he has merely produced a series of droll, obvious images motivated by simplistic moral crusading:

Mayhew's most controversial artistic statement to date came in May, when, during a debate over minority student incentive programs, Mayhew ran a single, devastating image on The Bard's opinion page: a drawing of hooded Klansmen bearing the caption: "C.S.C. Regents."

"By depicting the Cayuga State Board of Regents as Klansmen, I made a powerful statement about the reality of racism in our society today," Mayhew says. "I was pretty sure the fur was really going to fly over that one. For some reason, though, the entrenched power elite chose to not to respond. I guess they'd rather ignore me and just hope I magically go away. Well, I won't, Chancellor Davis."<sup>27</sup>

God save us from such boorish nincompoops! Sure, we may clap our hands in approval of a joke condemning a morally pernicious political regime, but the moral thrust does not make such jokes funny. If Bush jokes, for instance, are funny it is because they are good jokes, not because they are morally virtuous.<sup>28</sup>

Consider the Onion headline: "Bush Sends Troops to West Nile."<sup>29</sup>

WASHINGTON, DC—Vowing to "exact justice for the taking of innocent American lives," a determined and defiant President Bush deployed more than 14,000 ground troops to the West Nile Monday.

The article attempts to undermine the credibility of a president that many consider to be a morally pernicious war criminal. Put aside your political views and try to adopt the perspective of someone, perhaps a Bush detractor, who finds the joke funny. Many people that I know found the headline hilarious. But why? Was it because we thought that the headline was doing its small part in promoting justice? Of course not. As repellent as we may find the Bush regime, the article would not be funny if it were not so clever. It came out around the time of a flare up of the West Nile Virus in New York City. Combine this with the widely held view that W was a bit thick and bit too quick

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<sup>27</sup> July 19, 2000 (Issue 36.24)

<sup>28</sup> Ted Cohen raised a similar point at the pacific division meeting of the *American Society for Aesthetics* (2006).

<sup>29</sup> September 18, 2002. (Issue 38.34)

to send forces overseas, and you have a hilarious mix-up. It is as if Bush confused the virus with a terrorist attack from the region of the West Nile and then deployed troops with no further investigation. So, yes, the joke is clever. It presents an odd incongruity, forces the reader to puzzle over the meaning, and then, suddenly, the pieces fit. The formal properties of the joke are doing the work. This is why people on both sides of the political spectrum can find the headline amusing. The putative moral virtues of the joke do not seem to help.

In this case, the moral virtues appear to be innocuous, but they often seem to detract from amusement. Or, this is at least what many think. However, I think that this, too, is wrong. I will argue that sometimes, indeed frequently, attempts at humor are more amusing because they are morally virtuous. This claim runs against the common view, but a careful consideration of a few additional articles from *The Onion* will lend support for my position.

*The Onion* is a remarkable source of attempts at humor that are more, not less, amusing because they are morally virtuous. Good examples can be found on the "Onion News Network"—a video spoof of CNN complete with crawling headlines. For instance, the story "Manufacturer Recalls Hollow Point Bullets that Fail to Explode in Targets" provides clear support for the view that moral virtues can indeed enhance amusement.<sup>30</sup> Without the moral outrage appropriately directed at the butt of the joke, the satire could not work. A brief description of the sequence is required.

The sketch begins with the newscaster announcing that the world's largest manufacturer of munitions, Steel Hawk has issued a massive recall of hollow point bullets because "they might not properly shred the internal organs of victims." She informs us that "When functioning normally, the tip of a hollow-point bullet breaks into fragments and then cuts a wide and jagged path through the tissue and bone of its target." The video cuts to the CEO of Steel Hawk delivering a statement at a press conference: At Steel Hawk we aim for the "complete satisfaction of our customers when they maim or kill. Some of these defective bullets can leave an exit wound as small as a plum. That is unacceptable."

The story moves to customer testimonials. One disgruntled customer says, "If I wanted to kill someone without destroying the body, I'd use a hammer." In compensation, we learn that Steel Hawk is planning to distribute discount coupons for its newest product, "Inferno Bullets." As if hollow points were not enough, inferno bullets "start a small fire inside of someone when you shoot them." The video returns to the press conference, where the CEO says, "We understand that when our customers shoot a man, they want to see his liquefied organs pour out of every hole in his body. Give us another chance. We'll give you the lung-shreddingest bullets on the market."

The joke requires that the audience find the enterprise morally unsettling. Without this moral reaction, the joke would fail. The joke works by first arousing moral outrage at a fictional character, then the humor comes when we

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<sup>30</sup> [http://www.theonion.com/content/video/manufacturer\\_recalls\\_hollow\\_point](http://www.theonion.com/content/video/manufacturer_recalls_hollow_point)

#### Section 4. Moralism: The Positive Thesis

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realize that the joke intends for us to think of the characters as an analog to a type of real-world gun enthusiasts. The characters featured in the satire are ridiculous precisely because they do not seem to realize that they are engaged in a morally hideous enterprise. We are forced to ask: How could anyone not realize that they are creating a product that causes gratuitous suffering? As the episode continues, the absurdity increases. If we did not recognize that the story intended for us to find the CEO morally condemnable, the humor would be utterly lost. There would be no incongruity. The story would simply be about a packaging mistake at a fictional ammunitions plant and new type of bullet that starts fires. There is nothing funny about that. We have to recognize the moral purpose of the story in order to understand the joke. The moral purpose cannot fly under the radar. The story is funny only if we recognize that although a job worth doing is a job worth doing well, a job that should not be done is a job that should not be done at all. The CEO's commitment to customer satisfaction misses the point. Sure, with a second chance Steel Hawk might give us the "most lung-shreddingest bullets on the market," but they should not try.

The "inferno bullets" story is funny precisely because of the fact that it is morally virtuous. Its moral virtues enhance amusement. It does not merely arouse moral disgust directed at the CEO and the clientele of Steel Hawk. That would not be funny. Imagine watching an actual newscast with the same content: It would be terrifying. The "inferno bullets" story is amusing because it asks us to recognize how ridiculous it is to be dedicated to making better ways to hurt people. This is not to say that all weapon construction is immoral. Clearly the world is not such a nice place that we all safely disarm. No, the immorality of the enterprise comes in the production of weapons for everyday use that produce gratuitous suffering. The morality of ammunitions manufacturing is complicated, but making "hollow point bullets" for personal use is as *prima facie* immoral as producing "inferno bullets." At least, this is what the story suggests. Hence, this makes it a satire. And if we did not recognize that the story is a satire, we would not find it funny. Accordingly, the moral virtues of the work make it amusing.

The story ends with a customer testimonial: "Those people over at Steel Hawk ought to be shot in the face in front of their families." Rather than sit in horror, we can laugh because we recognize that *The Onion* asks us to condemn immoral viciousness. This is not a virtue of the same caliber as torture is a vice, but it is still a virtue. And it is a virtue that makes a difference: the detection of this moral virtue plays a clear role in the production of amusement. It is like the silver in a bullet used to slay a lycanthrope.

A brief consideration of another story will help further support my claim that moral virtues can indeed make attempts at humor more amusing. Consider a second video satire: "DNA Evidence Frees Black Man Convicted of Bear Attack."<sup>31</sup> We learn that Mr. Marshall will be released from jail after serving twelve years in federal prison. In archival footage, we see the victim's father at

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<sup>31</sup> [http://www.theonion.com/content/video/dna\\_evidence\\_frees\\_black\\_man](http://www.theonion.com/content/video/dna_evidence_frees_black_man)

#### Section 4. Moralism: The Positive Thesis

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the time of the original trial say, "I took one look at him and knew that he was the man who mauled and ate my daughter." The newscaster tells us that throughout his time in jail, Mr. Marshall maintained his innocence: "Claiming his jaws were not powerful enough to inflict the six-inch deep bites covering Ms. Kelly's body. And that he did not eat Ms. Kelly's entire left leg and lower torso." At this point, we realize that Mr. Marshall spent twelve years in jail for a crime that no human could have committed. Obviously, a bear killed the victim, not Mr. Marshall. How could the Jury have been so stupid?

In recounting the story, we learn that the acquitted man "was definitively placed within a mile of the crime scene" in the state park where he worked. As if this is sufficient evidence! The father tells us that "They said that after he killed Janet, that he spent five minutes rubbing his hairy back up against a tree to scratch it. This man is sick." The story ratchets up the absurdity a notch further: "Buried with her is the last photograph that she took before she died. A self-portrait of her and two bear cubs." In the photo, we see Janet on the right in the foreground. In the background on the left, there are two bear cubs. She smiles, perhaps thinking that they are cute. Again, it is obvious that the mother bear found Ms. Kelly playing with the cubs. This is ridiculous! Adding insult to injury, we learn that "the DNA evidence has not exonerated Mr. Marshall of a larceny charge for tearing off the trunk of Ms. Kelly's car to get to the food insides." Ha! The police plan to reopen the case and "find the black man who did this."

The "DNA evidence" satire is hilarious, but why? What does it have to do with its moral virtues? Sure, it asks us to consider how African Americans are often presumed guilty, and how racism can blind one to the obvious. But why should we think that this is what makes the story funny? Why isn't this precisely like the Bush jokes? One might object that the reason why these stories are amusing is because they are clever in the right kind of way, not because they are morally virtuous.

In reply it is important to note that I do not think that the "Bear Attack" story is amusing merely because it is morally virtuous. Moral virtues are not sufficient for amusement. This is clear. And they are not typically necessary. This too is clear. But they can sometimes help. Here they do. Let me further explain how.

It is more difficult to show how moral virtues can contribute to amusement than it is to show how moral flaws can detract. Moral flaws arouse moral disgust, which plays a clear role in blocking amusement. But moral virtues arouse no such comparable reactions. Sure, noble sacrifice can elicit feelings of elevation, but this is not a common role for jokes to play. We do not feel elevation in response to the "Bear Attack" story. Moral virtues play a somewhat different role in promoting amusement. Principally, they help us recognize the butt. When the butt of a joke is a well-known figure or a stereotype, we need no such help. For instance, we know enough about Bush to understand the "West Nile" story. However, when the butt is a little more opaque, the moral emotions can play a role.

Roughly, it works this way: Something in the joke arouses moral disgust.

Rather than blocking amusement, when we recognize that the joke is asking us to direct our condemnation at a risible subject, we can share in the condemnation. Here, the subject is amusing because it fails to recognize its glaring moral flaws, flaws that we detect. If the "Inferno Bullets" story did not condemn gun nuts and ammunition manufactures of a certain stripe, we would not be able to find it amusing. It would be terrifying. A proper understanding of the moral purpose behind the satire is a precondition for finding it funny. And it helps make it amusing: our initial moral disgust is channeled into outrageous hilarity at the moment we realize the point of the satire. We do not get angry. We do not feel sickened. Instead, we laugh.

Similarly, although, we need comparatively little help identifying the butt in the "Bear Attack" story, moral disgust directed at outrageous stupidity and wrongful incarceration helps us identify racists as the butt of the joke. We are not merely asked to consider a strange group of people that happen to ignore the obvious. That would be more frightening than amusing. But the "Bear Attack" story is funny. It is funny from the moment that we recognize that we are dealing with racists. It is not simply that we dislike racists; we morally disapprove of the racism featured in the joke. The story asks us to consider how unbelievably stupid and morally hideous racism can make people. It purposefully arouses moral condemnation. And the moral condemnation helps identify the butt of the joke. More importantly, we can only laugh once we recognize the moral purpose to which the joke is directed. It is not as if the satire is merely accidentally morally virtuous. No, it is funny, in part, precisely because of its genuine moral virtues. Although the virtues are not grand, they are nonetheless genuine virtues.

## 5 Conclusion

In this article, I argue for two controversial theses about humor and morality. The common view is that morality and amusement are antithetical: Moral flaws seem to enhance amusement, and moral virtues seem to detract. I argue against both claims.

In opposition to the view that moral flaws enhance amusement, the position called immoralism, I charge that this theory lacks support. It has apparent support only if we make two mistakes: (1) confuse jokes that are funny in spite of their moral flaws with those that are funny because of their moral flaws, and (2) mistakenly assume that jokes that merely feature outrageous content are genuinely immoral. If we do not confuse naughty jokes with immoral jokes, then we will be hard pressed to find support for immoralism. When we consider genuinely immoral jokes, such as racist jokes told at KKK meeting, we find that moral disgust often trumps amusement.

Rather than enhance amusement, our typical response to the detection of genuine moral flaws in attempts at humor is that of moral disgust. And moral

## Section 5. Conclusion

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condemnation blocks amusement. This observation supports the negative half of comic moralism: moral flaws inhibit amusement.

We find support for the positive half of comic moralism in *The Onion*. I argue that the "Inferno Bullets" satirical piece supports the claim that moral virtues can enhance amusement. Its moral virtues cannot go undetected. It is only by recognizing that the story intends for us to direct our moral condemnation at zealous gun enthusiast and arms manufactures that we can find the story amusing. The fact that the story is morally virtuous is the reason why we can find the absurd content amusing. Here, moral virtues enhance can amusement.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> I thank Heidi Bollich for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay. Noël Carroll provided helpful feedback. Ted Cohen earlier convinced me that the positive thesis that I now defend was wrong. Jeff Dean raised several putative counter-examples to the negative thesis. Sharon Kaye reminded me of the "Onion News Network," and provided comments on a pervious draft.