

The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor be Wrong?

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Abstract

I distill three somewhat interrelated approaches to the ethical criticism of humor: (1) attitude-based theories, (2) merited-response theories, and (3) emotional responsibility theories. I direct the brunt of my effort at showing the limitations of the attitudinal endorsement theory by presenting new criticisms of Ronald de Sousa's position. Then, I turn to assess the strengths of the other two approaches, showing that their major formulations implicitly require the problematic attitudinal endorsement theory. I argue for an *effects-mediated responsibility theory*, holding that the strongest ethical criticism that can be made of our sense of humor is that it might indicate some omission on our part. This omission could only be culpable in so far as a particular joke could do harm to oneself or others. In response to Ted Cohen's doubts that such a mechanism of harm is forthcoming, I argue that the primary vehicle of the harmful effects of humor is laughter.

1 Introduction

In the introduction to the collection *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, John Morreall notes that the ethics of humor is "an area which is of the greatest practical concern, but which, of all the topics considered in this book, has received the least careful attention" (Morreall 1989, ix). The publication of Morreall's *Taking Laughter Seriously* in 1983 revived the philosophical study of humor, but only a handful of recent articles have dealt with ethical issues (Bergman 1986; de Sousa 1987; Roberts 1987; Goldstein 1995; Gaut 1998; Carroll 2000; Philips 2002; Benatar 2002; Smuts 2007). The majority of the ethical debate revolves around the question of when humor is ethically objectionable, or, as Ronald de Sousa puts it, "When is it wrong to laugh?" My goal in this article is to assess some of the answers that philosophers have offered to this question. This paper explores the ethical dimensions of the sense of humor. More specifically, it focuses on the moral significance of finding

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putatively sexist and racist jokes funny.¹ As we shall see, it is much more difficult to show that merely finding something funny could be wrong than one might suppose.

I am primarily concerned with the first two stages of the three-part joke response: joke comprehension, finding a joke funny, and laughing at jokes.² As much as possible, I try to bracket questions about the effects of telling jokes or even the responsibility an audience may have in laughing.³ Though few people focus exclusively on humorous amusement, we can identify three somewhat interrelated approaches to its ethical criticism: (1) attitude-based theories, (2) merited-response theories, and (3) emotional responsibility theories. I direct the brunt of my effort at showing the limitations of the attitudinal endorsement theory by presenting several new objections to Ronald de Sousa's argument. I then turn to assess the strengths of the other two approaches, showing that their major formulations implicitly require the problematic attitudinal endorsement theory.

I argue for an *effects-mediated responsibility theory*, holding that the strongest ethical criticism that can be made of our sense of humor is that it might indicate some omission on our part. This omission could only be culpable in so far as a particular joke could do harm to one's self or others.⁴ In contrast to Ted Cohen's doubts that such a mechanism of harm is forthcoming, I argue that the primary vehicle of the harmful effects of humor is laughter. One humor theorist warns that the ethics of humor may be "a desert from which you will never come back" (Nilsen and Nilsen 2000). I hope to start a map of the various areas of this complex phenomenon, and in the process show that the most prominent theory of when it is wrong to laugh is only a mirage.

¹ I do not attempt to offer a definition of a sexist and racist jokes. Two competing views about what constitutes a sexist or racist joke are that it expresses a sexist or racist view of the teller, or that it causes a harm particular to sexism or racism (Philips 2002).

² I will use the phrase "attempt at humor" and "joke" 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. I make no attempt to address the question of whether or not a joke type could be morally flawed. For further discussion of this issue, see Smuts 2009.

³ Robert Provine argues that laughter is often the result of non-humorous social interactions (Provine 2000).

⁴ I do not mean to assume *welfarism*—the view that normative ethics need only be concerned with well-being. I assume that other sources of value are morally significant.

2 Historical Perspectives on the Ethics of Humor

Nearly every significant philosopher has had something to say about humor, but the ethics of humor has not received careful attention until recently. Nevertheless, some ancient and early modern commentators offer a few notes relevant to the ethical investigation of amusement. I will survey a notable few.

In the "Philebus" Plato argues that laughter at comedies is a form of malice, which he defines along the lines of sadism. In comedy, we take pleasure from the misfortune of others through either their ignorance or infirmity. Although his brief comments do not amount to a theory of humor, Plato is one of the first philosophers to turn a critical eye towards the pleasures of amusement. It is important to note that, like most superiority theorists, Plato's cynicism blinds him to the pleasure to be had from the formal aspects of comedy, and he fails to see the self-reflective sources of finding humor in the antics of others (Solomon 2002).

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses humor as an example of a characteristic that is best in moderation. He argues that "with regard to the pleasantness in the giving of amusement the intermediate person is ready witted and the disposition is ready wit, the excess is buffoonery and the person characterized by it a buffoon, while the man who falls short is a sort of boor and his state is boorishness" (Aristotle 1990, II 7). Humor carries little ethical significance for Aristotle, who does not consider the idea that the sense of humor could make one much worse than a boor or a buffoon.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus offers some advice for those living in a painful world where even laughing and telling jokes can produce suffering. He argues that it is advisable to refrain from telling jokes since joking can often lead to vulgarity, which can lessen your esteem in the eyes of others. If you find yourself confronted with another's vulgar jokes, you should "go so far as to criticize the person who has done it, and otherwise by staying silent and blushing and frowning you will show that you are displeased by what has been said"—advice that will win you lots of friends, no doubt (Epictetus 1983, 24).

Considered a surprise theorist of humor, Descartes has a more temperate view of laughter, and, like Aristotle, finds that amusement can be appropriate in some situations. Descartes develops something of an etiquette of joke telling, noting that derisive laughter can be an appropriate social corrective, but the teller of such jokes should refrain from laughing, since this would be an immodest recognition of one's own cleverness (Descartes 1985).

Thomas Hobbes makes the radical pronouncement that laughter is "nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (Hobbes 1999, 54-5). The suggestion that humor is frequently, if not necessarily, the product of feelings of superiority, has raised the ethical eyebrows of those suspicious of pride. Baudelaire takes Hobbes's superiority theory a step farther, arguing that laughter is a Satanic expression of our superiority over beasts and our frustration at our mere mortality (Baudelaire

1956).

As this brief and selective overview indicates, most historical considerations of the ethics of humor focus on possible problems with a person's character, such as having a propensity to feel malicious pleasure, becoming vulgar, acting immodestly, and behaving like a buffoon. Recently there have been a few attempts to analyze the possible ways that finding jokes funny could be wrong, but as we shall see, like the ancient and modern philosophers, the principal lines of current thought focus on a person's character without stating criteria for assessing the potential wrongness of one's sense of humor. The problem is that no one has satisfactorily stated what would make one's sense of humor un-virtuous much less a culpable vehicle for wrongdoing.

As with most contemporary accounts, the historical analyses of humor engage in either character examination or etiquette guidance. This method of analysis is inadequate for understanding jokes. Without all but the most general criteria of when it might indicate a character flaw to find a joke funny, virtue-focused ethical discussions of humor have only been able to offer platitudes: "Laughing can be obnoxious. It is immodest to find your own jokes too funny. Sometimes it is cruel to take pleasure in the suffering of others." In the absence of virtuous role models, we should try to move the ethics of humor beyond etiquette and common sense by offering an effects-focused analysis of when it might be wrong to find something funny.

3 The Attitudinal Endorsement Theory

In "When Is It Wrong to Laugh" Ronald de Sousa examines the ethical dimensions of what he calls "phthonic laughter"—laughter from malice or envy (de Sousa 1986). De Sousa argues that finding a joke with reprehensible content humorous indicates deeply held immoral assumptions on the part of the listener. If he is right, then jokes are the one of the most powerful tools for character assessment that we could ever hope to have.

In "How many Feminists Does it Take to Make a Joke," Merrie Bergmann offers an argument similar to de Sousa's; they even use the same joke as an example (Bergmann 1986; de Sousa 1987). I will concentrate on de Sousa's formulation. Briefly, de Sousa's argument, which we can call the *Attitudinal Endorsement Argument*, goes something like this:

1. Understanding a joke requires being aware of what propositions it relies on.
2. Understanding (or "getting") a joke does not mean that you find it funny.
3. If you have negative attitudes toward the propositions that are required by a joke, it will fail—you won't find it funny.
4. You cannot hypothetically endorse propositions in such a way that will revivify a joke that is dead for you.

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5. Hence, what makes the difference between merely getting a joke and finding it funny must be some positive attitude that you genuinely hold towards the propositions required to understand it.

6. Therefore, if you find a sexist joke funny, and sexist propositions are required for getting the joke, then by virtue of your attitudinal endorsement of these propositions you are a sexist.

If premise 5 is correct then the conclusion of the argument follows. If one must indeed endorse the statements that are required to understand a joke in order to find it funny, then what one finds funny is highly revealing of one's moral character. Jokes would be capable of revealing our attitudes on a wide variety of issues. However, I will argue that even if we accept premises 1 through 4, we need not accept premise 5—the claim that attitudinal endorsement is necessary for amusement. For now, it will pay to develop de Sousa's case in a bit more detail.

De Sousa begins his argument with an example that he calls "a joke of undiluted nastiness." Here it is: "M. visits the hockey team. When she emerges, she complains that she has been gang-raped...Wishful thinking" (de Sousa 1987, 290).⁵ It does not help de Sousa's argument that his central example is not a joke, much less a funny one by any account. It is simply an insult that could not be a joke without significant revision.⁶ For the sake of argument, we can assume that the example is actually a joke and that it might be possible for someone to find it funny.

De Sousa catalogs a host of beliefs that he thinks are necessary for getting the joke, many of which are exaggerations of the underlying propositions necessary for understanding it. For instance, he says that we must (be able to hypothetically) believe that "rape is just a variant of sexual intercourse," and that "there is something intrinsically objectionable about a woman who wants or gets a lot of sex" (de Sousa 1987, 292). After specifying what he considers to be the beliefs that one must necessarily hold to understand the joke, de Sousa argues that in order to find it funny one must *endorse* these propositions. Since he thinks that endorsement cannot be hypothetically adopted, genuine endorsement of these propositions must be necessary for amusement. Hence, if one finds the M. joke funny, one must really be a sexist.⁷

De Sousa concludes that "*merely to know* [the propositions] *doesn't make*

⁵ A variant on this joke can be found in the films "Private Eyes" (Michael Hui, 1976) and in "All for the Winner" (Corey Yuen, 1990). In "Private Eyes," a group of gangsters robs a movie theater. During the robbery a woman turns to Michael's character and asks if he thinks the robbers will also rape the women. Michael replies "You wish!" I saw both films in theaters where most of the audience laughed.

⁶ Noël Carroll pointed out to me that this example could also be formed into a riddle riff. Merrie Bergmann includes a somewhat more expanded version this joke in her analysis of sexist humor (Bergmann 1986).

⁷ For the sake of argument, I will assume that it is culpable to hold sexist and racist beliefs. But this, too, is dubious.

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*the joke funny.*⁸ What's more, to laugh at the joke marks you as a sexist. It is not a convincing defense to say, 'I was merely going along with the assumptions required to get the point of the joke'" (de Sousa 1987, 290). He continues, claiming that "the difference is that to find the joke funny, the listener must *actually share* those sexist attitudes. In contrast to the element of wit, the phthonic element in a joke requires endorsement" (De Sousa 1987, 290).⁹ "When I laugh, I endorse certain attitudes, and anyone else endorsing them would probably be laughing too" (De Sousa 1987, 290).

Attitudes and Amusement

Robert C. Roberts largely agrees that endorsing the propositions de Sousa outlines is required for finding the M. joke funny. However, Roberts argues that de Sousa fails to understand that one merely needs to *assume* a particular perspective, that of a sexist, to understand the humor, and that one can even like it from this angle. Roberts may be right that attitudinal endorsement of propositions, even perspectival endorsement, may help make a joke funny, but he provides no reason to think that attitudinal endorsement is necessary for the appreciation of a joke, much less that it can be reliably inferred from one's sense of humor. De Sousa assumes that these attitudinal endorsements must be about the propositions necessary for understanding the joke. In response, I will argue that he fails to take into account the possibility that other attitudes may be sufficient or that attitudinal endorsement of such propositions may be unnecessary altogether. I doubt that even hypothetical endorsement is required.

It is not clear exactly what is required to get de Sousa's "joke" except something along the lines of thinking that the teller does not like M. and thinks that she is indiscriminate in her sexual activity or just a hypocrite. The joke could be told by a man out of spite or disregard for M on similar grounds. Alternatively, if you heard something like this from a woman, you would most plausibly assume that M. is thought to be tasteless or that the teller is jealous or angry about some perceived wrong that M. committed against her. One cannot be not sure to what degree the attitudes about rape or promiscuity need to be endorsed to find this funny, depending on your attitudes toward M. However, I doubt that in most situations many people would find this funny, since the subject of rape is too painful to serve as a reliable comic foil and the "joke" itself is so spiteful that it smacks of pettiness. If one *disliked* M., however, one might

⁸ De Sousa argues that "thinking something is intrinsically funny (or unfunny) is itself an attitude and not a mere belief" (de Sousa 1987, 291). In my presentation, I have not strictly followed the distinction de Sousa makes between attitudes and beliefs. It's contentious and threatens to weaken the argument. Instead, I assume that beliefs are roughly attitudinal endorsements of propositions. If de Sousa has in mind higher-order attitudes towards first-order beliefs, the argument runs into the same problems.

⁹ This distinction between wit and the phthonic element does no real work in de Sousa's argument. I take it that he thinks that humorous amusement nearly always involves a phthonic element. This is precisely where I disagree.

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find the "joke" amusing, not because the auditor is a sexist, but because anything that "cuts" M. will elicit the experience of "sudden glory."

De Sousa builds his case on the claim that attitudinal endorsement is both necessary and impossible to counterfeit, but he offers very little argument for this view. In support, de Sousa tries to explain what it is that makes a joke funny to someone and not to someone else. Since these kinds of sexist jokes are not funny to him, he assumes that in order to be funny sexist jokes must require attitudinal endorsements that he cannot make. But this is too fast. The mere fact that de Sousa, a non-sexist, does not find putatively sexist jokes amusing does not show that it is necessary to share all the possible attitudes expressed by sexist jokes. To see why, it will help to emphasize that attitudinal endorsement of the propositions underlying a joke is not sufficient for amusement.

Jokes with which one has a content attitudinal alignment are not always funny. If you have ever told a joke, you know that any given joke can fail for a host of reasons. Shared attitudes are clearly not sufficient for funniness. Further, it is not clear that they play any role whatsoever. If so, we have no reason to think that they are necessary.

We have no good reason to think that attitudinal endorsement plays a positive role. Consider racist jokes: Why should we think that putatively 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 at the condemnation of Bush and his bestiary of madmen, but the sentiment does not make jokes at his expense any funnier. Bush jokes are funny for independent reasons having to do, most likely, with their cleverness. Unless we find a joke morally suspect and the humor is blocked, attitudinal alignment has seemingly little or nothing to do with how amusing we find attempts at humor.¹⁰

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

¹⁰ I thank Ted Cohen for suggesting this line of argument.

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At this point one might object that I have saddled de Sousa with an unreasonable burden. Of course it is difficult to isolate attitudes, perhaps even methodologically impossible to do so conclusively, but surely we can make warranted inferences about people's attitudes. No doubt, we can. I deny no such general claim. But de Sousa needs something far stronger for his conclusion. He makes the incredibly bold claim that necessarily one must have a pro-attitude towards certain sexist propositions in order to find a putatively sexist joke funny. His claim is not merely that sexist attitudes can increase amusement, but that they are necessary. Hence, de Sousa proposes a strict psychological law. Such laws require far more burdensome standards of evidence than do mere general correlations. It is not merely that de Sousa lacks adequate support for his conclusion; there is strong evidence to the contrary. As the mediocre Bush jokes indicate, we have good reason to think that such attitudes play no discernible role whatsoever.

We need to ask, "What would it take to empirically support de Sousa's claim that attitudinal endorsement is necessary for joke appreciation?" A study supporting de Sousa's claims would have to show an increase in amusement as the level of such attitudes increased.¹¹ It would have to show that amusement is not possible on the bottom end of the attitudinal test, since he claims that the endorsement is necessary. It would have to rule out people with traumatic associations, and it would need to somehow calibrate the individual's self-reporting scale with some base line jokes. The study would also have to pick exactly which attitudes the jokes rely on and then find some way to measure these particular attitudes and test to see if the jokes work. A general test of a wide range of attitudes will not do, since we are trying to confirm that the beliefs are necessary. There is no empirical or anecdotal evidence to suggest that de Sousa is right, nor should we believe that any is methodologically possible to obtain. The strongest claim that can be made (given the complexity of the subject and some of the current research) is that pro-attitudes may increase comic amusement, but the mediocre Bush jokes give us reason to doubt even this modest claim. The strong claim that attitudinal endorsement is necessary for joke appreciation is completely unsupported by the evidence. However, the opposite is more important: strong contra-attitudes can block humor in some circumstances. If it is possible to find a joke funny without correlated attitudes, or reliably furnish such evidence of them, then we should not assume the worst.

Rather than make hasty judgments of character, when ethically evaluating

¹¹ Studies designed to show a correlation between rape attitudes and the perceived funniness of putatively sexist jokes are methodologically flawed for the same reasons that de Sousa's argument is flawed. No studies have showed a significant correlation exists. Even if they did, this would not tell us in any given case about a particular individual's dispositional beliefs or attitudes. If in general we had reason to believe that there was some causal connection, this still would give us little ethical insight. This would require showing that rape attitudes influence behavior in morally noteworthy ways. I'm not sure how this could be done satisfactorily. For an example of such a study, see Ryan and Kanjorski 1998.

humor we should follow this razor: "Never attribute to an -ism what can be adequately explained by formal properties of a joke."

Insults and Stereotypes

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

Ted Cohen's basketball joke is more interesting and would serve de Sousa better. It goes like this: "How did a passerby stop a group of black men from committing a gang bang? He threw them a basketball" (Cohen 1999, 77). To make de Sousa's content switch question more telling, we might ask: Why doesn't this joke work if we change the subject to a group of white men? De Sousa could argue that even though we could imagine that it were the case that white men are stereotypically fond of playing basketball, the joke does not work since you cannot attitudinally endorse this proposition. You likely do not believe that most white men are avid basketball enthusiasts. So, you cannot endorse the proposition. Hence, he concludes that these kinds of examples show that endorsement of particular propositions is necessary for the jokes to work.

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

During a particularly self-reflective *Seinfeld* episode, Jerry took some grief from his friends for telling this joke: "What's the difference between a sadist and a dentist? Better magazines." Kramer and his dentist acquaintances accused

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

Summary

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

Simple examples might be enough to make a strong case that de Sousa's initial generalization from this particular joke to all jokes is unwarranted. Noël Carroll gives the example of Newfie jokes: Though knowing nothing about Newfies, except that they are supposed to be stupid, and never possibly having the chance to develop attitudes about actual Newfies, he can still find Newfie jokes funny (Carroll 1999). Perhaps de Sousa's initial premise should be that if your assumptions run strongly counter to those supposed in the joke then it is more likely that the joke would fail. He should start by arguing from this more modest claim.

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

4 Merited Response Theories

Berys Gaut develops a merited-response position for evaluating attempts at humor. He argues that moral shortcomings can count against the humorousness of a joke and, as a result, some jokes are not funny even if some people think so—that is, he thinks that judgments of humor are normative. Some immoral jokes, Gaut argues, ask us to entertain morally suspect attitudes. In so far as a joke encourages the morally dubious entertainment of morally suspect attitudes, it does not merit amusement. In order to assess Gaut's position, we need to ask two questions: (1) Is humor best thought of as a normative concept? And (2) Does the normative status of humor matter to the ethics of humor?

Gaut argues that humor is a normative concept: In other words, what people find funny is not what they necessarily should find funny, and what they should not find funny is what they sometimes do find funny. In support of Gaut's claim, one might note that there does seem to be a normative sense to "humor," given that we have all said, if not heard, "That's not funny." However, we can raise doubts about this conclusion, by unpacking the sentence. It plausibly means something like this: "You should have had another reaction," or that humor might be inappropriate for some reason. If saying that something is not funny amounts to a normative claim, then it is a strange unilateral kind of normativity that is only operative as a censure. There does not seem to be a corresponding claim along the line of "That is funny" carrying similar normative force.

However, some ethicists, like Robert C. Roberts, attempt to describe humor as a virtue—one should find humor to the correct degree in the appropriate object. The intuitive pull of this position lends some credibility to idea that there is a should and a shouldn't side to humor. Nevertheless, there is a pronounced normative imbalance in our everyday conception, making it awkward to think of humor as better described as normative rather than non-normative. But perhaps most of us simply err on the side of the buffoon rather than the boor. The imbalance may be in our dispositions, not the concept.

The principal problem for Gaut's claim that humor is normative is that one can consistently think that if you think that a starving child on the side of the street looks like an old man, and you find the incongruity funny, then it is funny. We can say that you should have had another reaction, but this does not mean that it is not funny. You should have had a sympathetic reaction, and your finding it funny certainly indicates some human failings on your part. This might indicate a moral omission for which one may be responsible; however, it does not mean that "humorous" is a normative concept just because amusement is inappropriate in some situations. I can consistently say that you should not find something funny, while holding that it was in fact funny for you. Humor may be incompatible with the morally required reactions, and in this way be indirectly normative. But Gaut's claim is far stronger.

Gaut assumes that not only does it make sense to talk as if the amount of humor produced by a joke is dependent on its merit, but that this is how we do

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talk about it; neither of which seem to be the case. Gaut 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" (Gaut 2007, 233). 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? Surely, such an objective standard is less plausible than subjectivism (Smuts 2010).

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.¹²

The definition of humor proposed by Gaut's ethicist is a concept in tension with itself and common usage. He argues that "the notion of the funny is distinct not just from the object of laughter, as noted earlier, but also from that which people as a matter of fact find funny" (Gaut 1998, 61). Gaut argues that "the notion of the funny (or amusing, or humorous) is a normative one, it is not simply what *causes* humorous reactions that makes it funny, it is what *merits* or *makes appropriate* such reactions" (Gaur 1998, 61). But one cannot easily define humor as both identified by a response and identified by a merit evaluation, since the two may give non-converging and even conflicting answers. Gaut seems to have a two-stage quality assurance process—the humorous is identified by finding something funny, and then whether these things are truly funny is determined by whether they merit the response. The problem is that there are two radically different notions of humor at work here. We need a description of how the merit check could be performed without ruling out most cases of humor. In addition, we need a reason to think that talking of something as not really funny, even if people are laughing at it, makes sense. Overall, the simpler explanation—that "humor" takes on one meaning and that our finding something funny is just how we identify the humorous—is a better explanation.

Perhaps there is no need to settle the issue of the normativity of judgments of humor; whether humor is normative or descriptive may be ethically irrelevant in most respects. Either way, we want to be able to say that one should not find a particular thing funny for some reason or another. Specifying the reason can

¹² Although I don't think that there is a conceptual connection, I do think that 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 (Smuts 2009).

be difficult. It would be an inappropriate response in most conceivable situations to be amused at the sight of an angry Rottweiler ripping a child apart. Perhaps if you found it distressing you could intervene, or seek help. Depending on the situation, finding it funny may not actually be doing something wrong, but, not doing something else would indeed be culpable.

However, the ethical status of humor concerning jokes is much more complicated than in the cases of the starving child or the angry Rottweiler. There has been no satisfactory answer to the question of what might make it wrong to find a particular kind of joke funny. Gaut argues that a joke may be ethically flawed if it asks us to entertain ethically suspect attitudes, but he supplies no reason to think that finding a joke funny requires that we entertain any attitudes in particular. More importantly, it is not clear that merely entertaining attitudes can cause any harm. I will return to this issue in the next section, but, for now, it pays to note that implicitly he falls back on the problematic hidden attitude argument offered by de Sousa. Given the problems with the attitudinal endorsement theory, Gaut's ethicism does not get us any closer to an answer to our initial question. An ethics of humor must tell us in what way and for what reason it might be immoral to find something funny.

If Gaut's ethicism is correct, if humor is indeed a normative concept, what exactly does this entail for the ethics of humor? If we find something funny that we should not find amusing, then what kind of trouble are we in? Well, we have done something we should not have and have committed some type of mistake, but can we be said to be culpably wrong for finding something funny? It is not evident that we are in moral trouble. Perhaps we should be arrested by the joke police, but is it clear that we should be arrested by the morality police? After all, the crime was merely finding something funny that was not funny. To make a stronger claim we would need to explain how the person might be responsible for their inappropriate sense of humor. Attributing robust responsibility would require showing that people have some kind of meaningful control over what they find funny. In the next section, I ask whether or not such a position is plausible.

5 Emotional Responsibility and Omissions

The third ethical position is significantly different from the previous two approaches. Rather than focusing on what might be bad about a person who finds certain kinds of jokes funny, the emotional responsibility approach attempts to provide grounds for attributing culpability to one's sense of humor. Aristotle, Morreall, Gaut, and Roberts suggest that even though we do not have full control over our sense of humor it might be a cultivatable aspect of our character. Hence, we might be responsible for its development and training.

In an Aristotelian vein, Sankowski argues for emotional responsibility by suggesting a plausible sounding basic rule: Someone can be held responsible for

their emotions only in so far as they can control them (Sankowski 1997). Yet to be fully developed by any humor theorist, a related argument might be that in so far as humor can be blocked, if a particular type of joke could be harmful in some way, then not taking steps, not undergoing training, to block this type of humor could be a culpable omission. In as much as we are responsible for our sense of humor, we could be held responsible for the harm caused by finding something funny. It is not clear what kind of wrong this might indicate, or if calling humor normative would add anything to the discussion. On a purely dispositional account of humor, one could still be held minimally responsible for feeling humorous amusement. Either way, we must answer the question of when it might be wrong to be amused by a joke. Without even a minimally uncontroversial sketch of what jokes it would be wrong to be amused by, the best available answer is that the wrongness of humor depends on its effects.

David Benatar argues that racist humor can harm in a subtle way akin to damaging someone's reputation by spreading rumors. Further, Benatar argues that mere beliefs can cause harm, even if they never result in any harmful actions. He argues that "If I believe negative rumors about somebody, that person is harmed by my having the belief even if I fail to act on it [. . .] His reputation is damaged" (Benatar 2002, 42). Even if we accept the controversial claim that events which do not make any experiential difference to a person can genuinely harm that person, a claim that I seriously doubt, Benatar's analysis is not relevant to the humor response.¹³ Benatar's theory of harm might indicate one reason why *telling* racist jokes might be wrong—they might spread racist beliefs; however, merely *hearing* racist jokes and thereby entertaining racist thoughts can not be considered a harmful act. If it were, then historians of the American south would be some of the greatest offenders imaginable, since understanding someone's motives most plausibly involves some degree of entertaining their attitudes. Merely entertaining racist attitudes does not appear to be morally suspect.

To say that finding racist humor funny causes belief-harms, we would need something like de Sousa's argument that amusement requires the actual endorsement of a proposition, not its mere entertainment. Since nothing of this kind is forthcoming, we have no reason to think that belief-harms reliably result from merely finding something funny. If we do not think that merely entertaining thought can cause harm, we must conclude that experiencing humorous amusement cannot cause any direct harm to others. However, amusement often leads to laughter, which, as Hobbes notes, can serve as one of the greatest forms of insult and can most plausibly be thought to sometimes cause harm.

A brief consideration of insult jokes will help make it clear that humor can

¹³ Ivan Soll makes a case for that thinking mere beliefs can harm conflates the fear of probable effects with the causes (Soll 1999). However, my argument does *not* rest on the controversial experience requirement—the claim that in order for something to be harmful it must result in some experiential consequences. For further defense of a more modest version of mental statism, see Kagan 1994.

indeed have harmful effects. As mentioned above, Descartes acknowledges that insult jokes can serve a socially corrective purpose. Echoing Bergson, in "Just Joking," Gaut briefly discusses how insults can often show a person the error of their ways, and can be used to keep people in line. Depending on the norms enforced, we can obviously see the value in certain types of humor. In some cases, as Hobbes recognizes, a joke can be worse than a direct insult and may inspire hatred in the butt. In other cases, certain kinds of humor can be used as an effective way to criticize and offer suggestions that might fall flat in another mode of expression. Sometimes it might be good to make others laugh in derision at an insult joke.¹⁴ But these cases are not interesting for our current purposes, since there seems to be little or no harm done or even intended.

The opposite extreme in the insult joke continuum is the merciless ridicule of the weak or different. This is a paradigmatically schoolyard phenomenon that can leave the victim with genuine emotional scars. I suspect that it is rare for someone to completely get over vicious jabbing, especially in the sensitive years of adolescence. As we all know, not only can children be brutally honest, they can be cruel to those who are different. Plato's cynical identification of the sadistic pleasures of amusement is most persuasive in the humor of children. They quickly learn the power of humor to harm others, and must be taught to use it with discretion.

Suppose we agree that laughing at certain kinds of insult jokes and, in certain contexts, stereotype jokes can cause harm, we can still ask: What does this say about our sense of humor? Humor does not directly cause harm, but since it can snowball into laughter, we might have some responsibility to control our sense of humor if laughing can result in harm. The sense of humor is under weak control, but we can steel ourselves against other's attempts to make us laugh. In general, laughter is more controllable than the sense of humor, since with great effort it can usually be quelled, even after it starts. Given these features of humor and laughter, I will make an extremely qualified ethical claim on one's sense of humor: *In so far as laughter can cause harm, and in so far as laughter is caused by humor, and in so far as our sense of humor can be trained and blocked, we can be culpable for finding something funny.*

The potential harm done from laughing may incriminate one's sense of humor; but since humor is not under direct control and it is unreasonable to suppose that one could block all cases of humor that might lead to harmful laughter, the sense of humor can serve to diminish the responsibility one has for harmful laughter. Laughter, as we know from experience, is not always under our control. There is a gradation of cognitive penetrability, moving from the least to the most controllable, from the comprehension of a joke, to feeling humorous amusement, to laughing aloud. It is an over simplification to say that someone is responsible for all forms of non drug-induced laughter, especially since one cannot be responsible for all instances of feeling amusement, and

¹⁴ F. H. Buckley develops the position that humor tracks virtue. He argues that extremes are risible, and humor serves as a corrective, pushing the butt towards a mean (Buckley 2003).

amusement can uncontrollably grow into laughter.

In attributing limited culpability to one's sense of humor for its role in producing laughter, we must acknowledge the mitigating factor of the indeterminacy of its effects. In some contexts, it must be clear that the harm done by a particular joke is reasonably foreseeable. If this were the case, then since finding something funny is semi-automatic, a certain amount of preconditioning would be necessary to prevent becoming amused and accidentally laughing where it might do harm. However, the possible drawbacks of such conditioning, namely humorlessness, are significant. If one were to mediate all attempts at humor in order to head off plausible injurious laughter, one risks becoming a humorless bore.¹⁵ Much that adds joy to life would be lost. But, to acknowledge this dynamic is not to endorse a traditional virtue ethical position, since I argue that we can ultimately base our evaluation on the consequences of amusement. One can do far worse than merely act as a buffoon. One can do harm.

To restate the responsibility diminishing dynamic that I am arguing for: On the *effects-mitigated emotional responsibility view*, one is responsible for their sense of humor, and the experience of humorous amusement is a culpable omission, in so far as it reasonably could have been blocked but, instead, snowballs into harmful laughter; conversely, one is not responsible for the effects of laughter in so far as the laughter is involuntary. This is a complex and heavily qualified statement about a phenomenon that admits of few generalizations. To understand the full ethical dimensions of humor and laughter, we would need to look more closely at the various types of situations in which jokes are told in order to assess the degree to which laughter can be harmful.

¹⁵ Laurence Goldstein explores the harms of humor and humorlessness. He also provides an analysis of the ways in which stereotypes could cause harm (Goldstein 1995).

6 Conclusion

Knowing what is necessary to get a joke cannot mark us as immoral, unless of course we are trading in the inside jokes of a set of, say, child pornographers. The proposed necessary conditions for getting and subsequently finding a joke funny—incongruity, cognitive shifts, error perception, attitudinal endorsement of beliefs—all fail to tell us enough about any given case to say that it is wrong to find it funny (Smuts 2006; Carroll 1996; Carroll 1999). We cannot specify all the beliefs necessary for getting a joke, much less the set of beliefs that someone must endorse for a joke to be funny, nor can we reliably determine which set of endorsements a person might be making. Since we have no clue what is sufficient for a joke to be humorous, and none of the necessary conditions can tell us if we are immoral, we have no way in any given case to say that it indicates a moral failing to merely find a joke funny. Even if someone laughing comes out and tells us why she thinks a joke is funny (“It’s true. They are all lazy.”), we have reason to doubt that it was sexism, racism, or any other –ism at work.

Telling jokes, encouraging jokes, and laughing at jokes are actions with clear ethical significance—they are all capable of producing harms. However, at this point we are standing on shaky ground if we say that merely finding any given joke funny is itself reprehensible. We may have other reasons for finding the person’s moral character suspect, but little support for saying that any particular set of beliefs accounts for their sense of humor. In so far as humor can be controlled, we might be responsible for finding something funny. Most plausibly, this responsibility can only lead to culpable wrongdoing if some harm, to self or others, results or is likely to result. The capacity for jokes to do harm is a topic of another study, where one would need to distinguish between the capacities of telling, comprehending, finding a joke funny, and laughing to do harm. Even if laughing at jokes is a clear source of harm, amusement could at most be an error of omission—a failure to adequately train oneself to face suspect cognitive pleasures.

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