

# WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT (AND WHY)? EXPLORING THE HUMOR OF FAMILY GUY

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Ken Tucker's review of the first volume of the *American Dad!* DVD in *Entertainment Weekly* was largely about *Family Guy*. Tucker doesn't think *Family Guy* is playing around – he thinks it's downright mean. “Both *Family Guy* and *American Dad!* are larded with cheap, mean humor that panders to audiences, letting them off the hook by implying that this is a parody of cheap, mean humor.”<sup>1</sup>

I don't want to be mean, or support those who are, so we better get thinking about whether or not *Family Guy* is guilty of these accusations. We need to look at the *ethics* of humor. For example, is it morally wrong to laugh when Peter (mis)understanding Lois's objection to his plan to find a Native American high roller to pay one million dollars to sleep with her) says, “These people took 24 dollars for the isle of Manhattan. They have no idea what things are worth” (“The Son Also Draws”)? Of course people *do* laugh at such remarks, but *should* they? Just like people do things they shouldn't, people laugh at things they shouldn't laugh at. To determine what we ought to laugh at, it will be helpful to consider in general what makes us laugh. Once we understand why things in general are funny, we can determine why particular jokes are funny. And once we determine why particular jokes are funny, we can figure out what it is we are laughing at and whether it's wrong for us to do so.

## What Makes Things Funny?

Philosophers have proposed three main answers to the question: “Why is something funny?” The oldest answer – stretching back to

Plato (428–348 BCE), but most clearly expressed by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1689) – is the Superiority Theory. Hobbes describes humor in the following manner: “Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.”<sup>2</sup> So, according to Hobbes, we find something funny because it makes us feel better about ourselves – either because of something we did really well or because we see how others are inferior to us. When we see Peter struggling to answer the question “What color is a fire truck?” (“Petarded”), Hobbes would say that we laugh because we feel so much smarter than (and therefore superior to) Peter.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) gave a different answer to the question “Why is something funny?” According to Freud, we laugh because it helps us relieve our stress about uncomfortable topics.<sup>3</sup> Let's call this the Relief Theory. When we see the film used by Happy-Go-Lucky Toys for sensitivity training (“Women in the Workplace” produced in 1956), we laugh at the narrator's comments like: “Tell them how good they look every day – even if they're homely or unkempt” and “Nothing says good job like a firm open palm slap on the behind” (“I Am Peter – Hear Me Roar”). Freud would say that we find this funny because we have a lot of stress regarding how to conduct ourselves in the workplace (and in some cases because our workplace makes us uncomfortable because it has not recognized that times have changed since the 1950s).

But these theories don't explain why we find it funny when a National Geographic special on fire trucks features a fire truck hunting gazelles on the Serengeti (“Petarded”). For that we need the Incongruity Theory. Presumably we don't need to feel superior to a fire truck, and we shouldn't have any Oedipal hang-ups about them either. What's funny about the fire truck National Geographic special is that it doesn't fit with our expectations; instead it combines two things that don't go together. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) summarizes Incongruity Theory well: “Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. *Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.*”<sup>4</sup> It may sound like Kant's description could fit



all humor. It certainly seems to explain the bulk of what goes on in *Family Guy* from Stewie's rendition of "Rocket Man" *à la Shatner* ("... And the Wiener Is") to subtitles that aren't in English (beginning of "Let's Go to the Hop"). However, not everyone laughs because of incongruity. After all, racists find a racist joke funny *because* it meets their expectations, and pratfalls can be funny even when they are telegraphed far in advance.

Our brief survey shows that there is no single, all-encompassing reason why we find things funny. This should not be surprising. Ask yourself – are buildings, people, and mountain vistas all beautiful in the same way? Obviously not. As we have seen, the three theories of humor are each well-suited for some examples but not others. Still, just because jokes don't all work the same way doesn't mean they have nothing in common. Humor has an important social function – things make us laugh for different reasons, but all that laughter has the same purpose.<sup>5</sup> As anthropologists have documented, humor is very useful in conveying social norms. But more on this later.

### So – Why Are Parodies of Mean-Spirited Humor Funny?

For now, we'll assume that the writers of *Family Guy* aren't just pretending to do a parody of mean-spirited humor. (Later we'll actually show that it truly is a parody.) Given what we now know about why things are funny, what makes such parodies funny? It's unlikely that one particular theory of humor would apply to every example of a parody of mean-spirited humor. Fortunately, every theory of humor can be applied to such parodies.

Take, for instance, the following exchange about a beer commercial.

**Announcer:** Pawtucket Patriot Beer. If you buy it, hot women will have sex in your backyard.

**Lois:** Typical male fantasy – women drinking beer. I guarantee you a man made that commercial.

**Peter:** Of course a man made it – it's a commercial, Lois, not a delicious Thanksgiving dinner.

("I Am Peter – Hear Me Roar")

According to the Superiority Theory, this is funny because it makes us feel better about ourselves. If this were actually mean-spirited humor, that would mean feeling superior to women. But this is a parody, so the person we're laughing at is anybody who would take it seriously. In other words, we feel superior to anyone who would hold such an extremely sexist view.

Consider another example. Lois decides to play video poker at the casino owned by Native Americans but only (in her words) "as long as you're not using it for fire water" ("The Son Also Draws"). We might laugh because we feel superior to Lois, but we might also laugh as a way of dealing with stress over race relations. Since it's a parody, our stress derives from the uncomfortable feeling we get knowing that there are still people who make such racist assumptions.

In many cases, the joke in a parody of mean-spirited humor will be at the expense of someone who is mean-spirited. In those situations, the Superiority Theory or Relief Theory would seem to apply. But there are some parodies that do not seem to fit this mold. Consider what Peter says to Cleveland after Peter learns of his African-American heritage: "I got no idea how to be black – except for not smiling when I get my picture taken" ("Peter Griffin: Husband, Father... Brother?"). The incongruity Theory comes into play here. We expected Peter to say something really awful, but instead he invokes a far less obvious stereotype (or common one, it's not one I've heard before). In this case we laugh because Peter's racism defies our expectations.

One common thread through all of these examples is that the object of humor is the person who might make such comments, not the person the comments are about. With a parody of mean-spirited humor, we laugh at mean-spirited people, instead of laughing mean-spiritedly.

### Why Is It Not Okay to Laugh at Mean-Spirited Humor, But Okay to Laugh at Parodies of It?

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) tells us virtue is determined by a thing's proper function.<sup>6</sup> So, virtuous (or ethical) laughter would be determined by the proper function of laughter. Although there are different theories as to why something is funny, all laughter seems to have the same function: it serves to indicate what should be avoided. After all, nobody likes to be laughed at. In many cultures, ostracism



and ridicule have been used as social punishments. This continues in the modern world, definitely in high school and almost certainly beyond. People's ethnicity, religion, and sex are irrelevant in determining their value as human beings. Presumably we all disagree when Peter says "Women are not people – they are devices built by the Lord Jesus Christ for our entertainment" ("I Am Peter – Hear Me Roar"). Instead, we would condemn such a statement and anyone who thinks such a thing. Since we judge such a belief to be one that we shouldn't hold, we should ridicule anyone who does hold that belief in the hopes of getting them to give it up.

Since parodies of mean-spirited humor target mean-spirited people we *ought* to laugh at the parodies. By laughing at them we are reinforcing the idea that no one should be like them. This is the proper function of laughter – establishing social norms – and so it is part of the domain of ethics. Which is not to say that all humor is ethical – after all, a society can adopt and enforce social norms (like slavery) that are clearly wrong. However, because humor works to shape our ideas of right and wrong, when it endorses ideas that are morally justified, we are doing the right thing when we laugh at it. On the other hand, mean-spirited humor is mean precisely because it ridicules someone for something that should not or cannot be avoided. We *shouldn't* laugh at people for being good people, because no one should be discouraged from being a good person. The most mean-spirited humor involves making fun of someone because of something they can't change (like a physical handicap). In those cases especially, it seems wrong to ridicule someone for being who they are. After all, they can't choose not to be handicapped – and if there is no choice, it is not the domain of ethics. Mean-spirited humor violates the proper function of laughter and therefore is unethical. Laughing at parodies of mean-spirited humor reminds us of these violations.

### But, Can I Laugh At Family Guy?

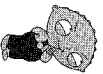
We've established why it's okay to laugh at parodies of mean-spirited humor, but what we need to show now is that *Family Guy* is a parody of mean-spirited humor and not just pretending to be (as Ken Tucker alleges). This requires getting inside the heads of the *Family Guy* writers, which is no easy task (especially if you're not a font of 70s

and 80s trivia). Philosophers call this the Problem of Other Minds – how do I know that you are a conscious creature as opposed to a zombie? The most common solution, as explained by Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), is that I see the similarities between your outward behavior and the behaviors I exhibit when I know that I'm thinking. From these similarities, I conclude that you must be thinking what I would be thinking in the same situation. For example, when I'm in pain, I scream and cry. You're screaming and crying, so I infer that you're in pain. But what are the outward behaviors of *intending* to do a parody – as opposed to *pretending* to do a parody? Or to put it more bluntly, how do I act when I am sincerely making fun of people who are mean-spirited and how do I act when I am using it as an excuse to be mean-spirited?

Let's consider a controversial episode of *Family Guy*, "When You Wish Upon a Weinstein." This episode (as the commentary on the DVD notes) was not aired by Fox during the initial run of *Family Guy* because Fox executives considered it anti-semitic. (It has since been shown on Cartoon Network, TBS, and Fox – although with changes.) "When You Wish Upon a Weinstein" centers around Peter's attempts to get Chris bar mitzvahed in an attempt to make him smart. In the episode, Peter sings:

Lois makes me take the wrap  
Cause our checkbook looks like crap  
Since I can't give her a slap  
I need a Jew  
Where to find a Baum, Steen or Stein  
To teach me how to whine and do my taxes  
Though by many they're abhorred  
Hebrew people I've adored  
Even though they killed my Lord  
I need a Jew

In broadcast airings the line that was deemed most anti-semitic has been changed to "I don't think they killed my Lord." In defending this episode, the writer (Ricky Blitt) takes two different approaches. The first, which is probably the most common defense for humor that could be deemed offensive, is that he himself is Jewish and a number of Jews were asked for their opinions on the episode. The problem with this approach is that it ignores the fact



that someone can be treated wrongly and not know it. Think of how someone can be poorly treated by people who they think are their friends. Does the fact that they don't object to being a doormat make it morally permissible?

The writer also says that those executives at Fox who thought it was offensive were not paying attention to the context of the song (and other comments that were seen as anti-semitic). In effect, they were not looking for the clues the writer left that he was *sincerely* making fun of anti-semites (as opposed to using the episode as an excuse to be anti-semitic). That the executives missed these clues is somewhat understandable, since the best parodies try to look as much like the thing they are parodying as possible and subtly exaggerate the things that they want to make fun of. It would not be a very funny parody if the words "CAUTION: THIS IS NOT AN ENDORSEMENT OF ANTI-SEMITISM" kept flashing on the bottom of the screen.

Instead, Blirt had to rely on less obvious clues (although honestly they are not that hard to miss) in the form of who is saying what. Most of the things that can be deemed anti-semitic come out of Peter's mouth (and the rest out of Lois's mouth). Seth McFarlane points out in the commentary on this episode that they had spent a season and a half establishing how stupid Peter was (only in a later episode ("Perarded") would this be officially documented). That a stupid person would say such anti-semitic things seems a strong recommendation against repeating them. By definition, an idiot is not someone to model your behavior after.

Even a casual viewer could easily realize that the anti-semitic comments were being made by a total idiot. Within the episode there are clear indicators that Peter lacks the basic reasoning skills we associate with good judgment. The whole reason Peter thinks he needs a Jew is because he used all of Lois's rainy day money buying volcano insurance. This insurance was sold to him in the following exchange:

- Salesman:* According to my uncle, who's a real whiz with volcanoes, a volcano is coming this way.
- Peter:* [thinks] I too have an uncle. [says] Come in.
- [Some discussion of the cost ensues]
- Peter:* ... I'm pretty sure we've never had a volcano either.
- Salesman:* Well, don't you think we're overdue for one?
- Peter:* Touché, salesman.

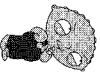
Here Peter commits an error in reasoning known as the Gambler's Fallacy – thinking that just because something hasn't happened yet, it is more likely to happen in the future. (Do you think the chances keep increasing that pigs will fly out your butt?) Moreover, when Max Weinstein gets Peter's money back, we find out that Peter signed a piece of paper that gave him no insurance coverage – it just said "volcano insurance" over and over and then at the bottom "He's signing it. He's signing it. I can't believe it."

Furthermore, when Lois accuses him of acting like a child for buying the insurance, Peter responds: "If I'm a child, then know what that makes you: a pedophile. And I'll be damned if I'm going to stand here and be lectured by a pervert." And the most obvious example of Peter's poor reasoning skills is the very premise of the episode – he thinks that converting Chris to Judaism will automatically make Chris smarter. This is another fallacy, thinking that just because two things are correlated that they must be causally related. (Most players on NBA basketball teams are over 6 feet tall – do you think joining an NBA team would make Regis Philbin 6 feet tall?) Peter's ignorance about Judaism is also evident – as he thinks that going to temple means going to something out of an *Indiana Jones* movie.

In determining who is the butt of the jokes in this episode, paying close attention to context is key. Lois also says some things that could be construed as anti-semitic. And while she is not portrayed as a complete idiot, she did marry Peter, which says something about her poor judgment. In addition, some attempts are made to correct Peter's anti-semitism. Take, for example, the following exchange:

- Peter:* ... So you're saying I need a Jewish guy to handle my money.
- Cleveland:* Peter, not every Jewish person is good with money.
- Peter:* Well, yeah, I guess not the retarded ones but, but why would you even say that... for shock value? Geez Cleveland, there's edgy and there's offensive.

Cleveland seems a reasonable fellow and not very mean-spirited, and so it is out of his mouth we have a reasonable response to Peter's anti-semitism. It's worth noting that Peter's response also draws the line we did earlier – jokes that make fun of things people can't change are inappropriate. Even Peter accepts this principle. The difference is that he has a skewed perspective on what is intended as a joke and what is intended as a statement of fact.



## Where Do We Draw the Line?

If Peter can understand the ethics of humor, but still misapply it, how can we be sure that we're not doing the same thing? After all, Peter thinks that Cleveland is joking because Peter thinks it's an undeniable fact that all Jews are good with money. One of the clues we look for in determining whether something is a parody is that it denies the obvious. It seems pretty clear that the show is not endorsing anti-Irish sentiment when it shows the exhibits at the Museum of Irish Heritage ("Peter Griffin: Husband, Father . . . Brother?"). And it doesn't seem to be endorsing anti-Christian sentiment when Mel Gibson falls off of Mt. Rushmore because (in Peter's words) "Christians don't believe in gravity" ("North by North Quahog").

But this subtle approach can only work if you're sure that everybody knows that what you're showing is not true. You don't have to look very far to find people who believe crazy (and false) things, for example, that a Jewish conspiracy controls the world and the Holocaust never happened. Knowing that such nutjobs exist, it would be wrong to provide them something to laugh at. That would be aiding and abetting their reinforcement of harmful social norms. For example, in the commentary on "When You Wish Upon a Weinstein," Blitt mentions a joke that was deemed too offensive. It was a parody of *E.T.* in which Peter discovers Max Weinstein in his shed after he rolled a ball in and it rolled back, followed by Peter rolling in a quarter that didn't return. In this case, we don't have the statement of an idiot; we have an action. And while one would like to think that the action is unbelievable, it did not have the proper context to indicate that it was a parody.

In using parodies of mean-spirited humor, one has an added responsibility to distance oneself from the ways in which people might use the parody as a way to get their anti-Semitic views past the Standards Board. "The Son Also Draws" provides a classic example of how this can be handled (and in a funny way using the "The More You Know" PSA style of 80s Saturday morning shows).

*Stewie:* Stupid, Greedy Savages.

*Lois:* Stewie, that's a terrible thing to say. This one particular tribe has lost its way, but most Native Americans are proud,

hardworking people who are true to their spiritual heritage. They are certainly not savages.

*Stewie:* Oh that's funny mother. Just this morning you said they were lazy like the dirty Mexicans. Just kidding. The Mexicans are a clean and industrious people with a rich cultural heritage.

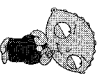
*Meg:* Yeah, not like those dumb, gargantuan Swedes. Actually, the Swedes run the gamut from very short to very tall. And did you know that Sweden gave us the brilliant inventor Alfred Nobel.

*Peter:* Yeah, which is more than we ever got from those reloading Canadians. Canada sucks.

On the commentary to this episode, Seth McFarlane mentions getting angry emails from Canadians about that episode (where there is no disclaimer). Of course, we have to wonder if these Canadian viewers were engaging in mock indignation, presenting a parody of those people who don't understand that jokes require context. (One can hear Peter saying, "Those silly Canadians – they're the funniest people in our country!") But not me, I'm smart enough to know the geography of Canada and wise enough not to further antagonize people who share an unguarded border with us. Unlike those can't-take-a-joke Norwegians.)

Now, one night watching an *In Search of . . . or Is It True?* marathon makes you realize that for every crackpot theory you can think of, there is someone out there who believes it is an undeniable fact. Does this mean that any attempt at a parody of mean-spirited humor is unethical – because someone will laugh at it for the wrong reasons? The trick here is not to focus on the fact that someone in an old bomb shelter believes it's true. Instead we need to ask ourselves how many people probably believe it's true. The more people believe it, the more we need to be careful how we frame our parody. It would probably be hard to come up with more than a handful of people who think that the Irish are an inferior race or that Christians are completely irrational. On the other hand, there are clearly large numbers of people who espouse anti-semitic ideas or assume that a young South Asian-American needs to be welcomed to this country. In those cases, one must tread more carefully, because the probability of someone missing the hint (because not all Jews are good with money) is greater.

For some people, it seems wrong to play the odds – any possible misunderstanding of what the joke is about is unacceptable. This was



a concern Dave Chappelle had about his show – that people *might* be laughing too hard and for the wrong reasons at his skits – and it is one of the reasons he gave for canceling it in his *Actor's Studio* interview. Which raises the question – given the potential for abuse, why is it okay for people to produce this kind of comedy for public consumption? The short answer is that (1) this kind of humor does not cause racism to exist (so without it there would still be racist thoughts) and (2) without this kind of humor we lose a very effective way of not only making fun of racists (and therefore publicly disapproving of them), but also getting them to realize their own folly (as they laugh at Peter's stupidity and begin to realize what they are really laughing at). While it might go over some people's heads, it's not like our society is devoid of more straightforward condemnations of racism, sexism, or anti-semitism. If it were, then the context of this comedy would be very different – and even though the people who produced it might view it as a parody, there would be very little reason for the general audience to do so. Admittedly, this kind of humor requires a bit more thought than a simple pun or knock-knock joke, but that's what makes it more rewarding (and therefore a valuable addition to the repertoire of comedy).

Take that, Ken Tucker.

NOTES

- 1 Ken Tucker, "DVD Review: *American Dad* Vol. 1," *Entertainment Weekly* April 21, 2006.
- 2 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Part I, Chapter 6, p. 43.
- 3 Freud explores this in his 1905 work *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Penguin, 2002).
- 4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Section 54.
- 5 For another comprehensive view of humor that makes use of its function, see Simon Critchley's *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), although he sees the function of humor as being more about self-understanding than social control.
- 6 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1985), Book I, Chapter 7, p. 15.



TINKIN' IS FREAKIN'  
SWEET! FAMILY GUY  
AND FALLACIES

ROBERT ARP

If Liza Is Wrong, Then I Don't Want  
To Know What Richard Is

In the episode "Peter Griffin: He's Not a Father... Brother?" Peter shows Chris a family album. Believing that the clothes, goatee, and hand rested under chin, Peter's relative is in contemplation when his wife asks, "Aren't you going to get a job?" The philosopher lifts his hand up in the air and responds, "Why?" The scene is claim, stares into the heavens, and then says, "Why?" The scene is hilarious – even to philosophers – because it is an attempt on a stereotypical view of a philosopher. Philosophy is a useful endeavor for lazy people who just want to sound doing nothing, but contemplate why-questions.

However hilarious the scene might be, stereotypes can be harmful both morally and logically. The moral harm comes from assuming that "if one or a few are like that, then they must all be like that." Quagmire evidently had a problem of one-night stands, and now the other members of the Kringles want sex (worse yet, sex with him). The episode "Death Live" where Peter thinks they're ghosts incorrectly thinks that all non-white people are wicked or subhuman. Think of all the racism, sexism, ageism, and every other negative "ism" that comes from people inappropriately jumping to the conclusion that "if one is like that, or that." Recall Diane Simmons' claim, "Well, Tom, I just plain don't like black people" ("I Never Met the Dead Man").

