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The Negative Ethics of Humor

John Morreall

Can it ever be wrong to tell a joke? If so, when? Are there *kinds* of jokes that you just shouldn't tell? If so, which ones? Morreall argues that, if we want to answer these questions, we shouldn't focus on whether the joke happens to trade on a stereotype. Instead, he takes the primary problem with some humor to be that it involves *disengaging* from things with which we ought to be engaged. Sometimes, this takes the form of *irresponsible* humor; we use it to deflect attention from serious issues. In other cases, humor *blocks compassion*, leading us not to empathize when we really should. Finally, humor can *promote prejudice*, discouraging us from respecting the differences between individuals.

I will be discussing racist and sexist jokes. . . . as part of a general ethics of humor. And in these moral reflections, I want to pay attention to the special psychological and linguistic features of humor. . . . The central feature here is the playful disengagement of non-bona-fide language and actions.

This non-practical, non-cognitive orientation is something humor shares with play in general and with aesthetic experience. In all three,

Morreall, John. 2009. "The Negative Ethics of Humor." In *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons.

we are for the moment not concerned with gaining knowledge or achieving practical gain.¹ We are disengaged, idle, "distanced." While joking with friends, for example, nothing is urgent, no action is called for. We are not attending to anyone's needs, but are like art lovers strolling through a gallery or music lovers listening to a concert. That is why Ludovici spoke of the "indolence of humor"² and Hobbes said, "They that are intent on great designs have not time to laugh."³

The practical disengagement of humor . . . helps explain the opposition between amusement and negative emotions. To have practical concern about a situation is to be emotionally involved with it. A situation that does not meet with our approval naturally elicits fear, anger, or hatred, if we are focused on ourselves; and compassion, if someone else is suffering the setback. As Henri Bergson said, "Laughter is incompatible with emotion. Depict some fault, however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity; the mischief is done, it is impossible for us to laugh."⁴

When we want to evoke anger or outrage about some problem, we don't present it in a humorous way, precisely because of the practical disengagement of humor. Satire is not a weapon of revolutionaries.

Humor involves cognitive as well as practical disengagement. While something is making us laugh, we are for the moment not concerned with whether it is real or fictional. As we have said, the creator of humor puts ideas into our heads not to communicate information, but for the delight those ideas will bring. And so we grant comic license to people telling funny anecdotes, letting them exaggerate the absurdity of real situations, and create extra details. Indeed, someone listening to a funny story who tried to correct the teller—"No, she didn't spill her drink on the mayor and the governor, just on the mayor"—will probably be hushed up by the other listeners.

As in play and in aesthetic experience, the practical and cognitive disengagement in humor can have harmful effects. I will focus on three. First, the disengagement can be irresponsible, as we neglect actions that are called for, and do things that should not be done. Secondly, it can block compassion. And thirdly, it can promote prejudice.

First Harmful Effect: Irresponsibility

Humor can disengage us from what we are doing or failing to do. To follow the parallel with play and aesthetic experience, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with playing music, but when Nero played as Rome

burned, that was objectionable. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with creating *bons mots*. But when Marie Antoinette responded to reports of famine by saying "Let them eat cake," that was objectionable because, as queen, she was supposed to care about her people.

In our daily lives, we sometimes "laugh off" a problem or criticism instead of taking appropriate action. If my doctor puts me on a special diabetic diet, warning me of blindness or early death if I don't follow it, then I may discount her advice with a quip like "She's fatter than I am" and ignore the diet. Or if my friend needs my help in controlling his alcoholism, and the next time he gets drunk I laugh at his antics instead of helping him restore self-discipline, then my humor is also irresponsible. In Stanley Milgram's famous experiments with obedience to authority figures, where subjects were ordered to give potentially fatal electric shocks to people simply for not remembering word associations, 14 of 40 subjects burst out laughing and then administered the shock.⁵ Here laughter seems like whistling in the dark, a way to suppress legitimate concern. In laughing off some problem, we treat it as trivial. It is unimportant, "no big deal," and thus doesn't call for our attention. An extreme case of humor supporting irresponsibility is the "total cynic" who laughs at everything and assumes no responsibility for anything. The MTV program *Beavis and Butt-Head* is based on such characters.

This disengagement fostered by humor is often deliberately used by politicians to deflect criticism. During their famous debates, as Abraham Lincoln began waffling on an important issue, Stephen Douglas accused him of being "two-faced." Lincoln responded, "Ladies and gentlemen, I leave it to you. If I had two faces, would I be wearing this one?" When John Kennedy was criticized for using his father's massive wealth to finance his bid for the presidency, he staged an event at a fund-raising dinner. Pretending to open a telegram, Kennedy said, "I have just received a telegram from my generous daddy: 'Dear Jack, Don't spend a dollar more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'll pay for a landslide.'" In his first televised debate with Walter Mondale before the 1984 election, incumbent Ronald Reagan sounded uninformed and confused. Critics said that as the oldest presidential candidate in history, he was simply not up to the job. For the next TV debate, therefore, Reagan's handlers prepared a funny line for him to memorize. As soon as a reporter asked about the "age issue," Reagan said, "I am not going to make age an issue in this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political gain my opponent's youth and inexperience." The audience laughed, the age issue evaporated, and Reagan went on to win by one of the greatest margins in history.

He was probably in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, as we now know, but this joke made it impossible for anyone to bring up such a possibility.

Second Harmful Effect: Blocking Compassion

Another way the disengagement in humor can cause harm is by blocking compassion for those who need help. In such cases, humor can harm in two ways—by displacing action, and by insulting those who are suffering, thus increasing their suffering. Suppose that I am walking along an icy sidewalk and see someone awkwardly slip and fall into a puddle, breaking his wrist. If I stand back and laugh, then not only have I not helped him, but my treating his accident as mere material for my amusement has demeaned him, belittled him, made him feel that he doesn't matter. From the way I am laughing, it seems that his suffering is no more important than the pain of Wile E. Coyote in Roadrunner cartoons. As Peter Jones put it, "The victim of laughter is confronted by the reaction of a mere spectator."⁶

In cases of mild suffering, we call such humor insensitive or callous; in more serious cases we call it cruel. Consider the cover of the July 1974 "Dessert Issue" of *National Lampoon* magazine. In 1971 George Harrison and others had done a charity concert to benefit victims of a famine in Bangladesh. That was made into the record album *Concert for Bangladesh*, whose cover was a photograph of a starving child. The cover of *National Lampoon's* "Dessert Issue" looked almost identical to that photograph, only it was of a *chocolate sculpture* of a starving child, with part of the head bitten off.

A good deal of humor in past centuries was similarly cruel. Laughing at dwarves and people with deformities, and at the mentally retarded and the insane, was common. In ancient Roman slave markets, deformed and idiotic children often brought high prices because buyers found them amusing. Cruelty also grew into sadism, as people caused the suffering that they enjoyed. The Roman emperor Trajan celebrated a military victory in 106 CE by having five thousand pairs of gladiators fight to the death. In fifteenth-century Paris, burning cats was a form of home entertainment. Before the French Revolution, members of the nobility would visit insane asylums to taunt the inmates, by clanking their canes across the bars, for example. In Britain, bear-baiting was popular until the nineteenth century. For a special royal festival attended by Elizabeth I in 1575, thirteen

chained bears were torn to death by dogs. Idi Amin is said to have cut off the limbs of one of his wives and sewn them onto the opposite sides of her body, for his own amusement. A more recent example of sadistic humor is the humiliation of prisoners by Americans in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. When asked why they made the men pile on top of one another naked, soldiers said that it was a joke, "just for fun."

Even when such fun does not involve the suffering of someone present, so that it does not directly humiliate people and increase their suffering, humor can promote insensitivity, callousness, or cruelty toward those being laughed about. The *National Lampoon* cover was probably not seen by starving children in Bangladesh or their parents, but still, it tended to inure readers of the magazine to their suffering, the suffering of other famine victims, and, generally, human beings needing help. . . .

Perhaps the most widely accepted moral rule is to not cause unnecessary suffering. From that it follows that we should not laugh at someone's problem when compassion is called for.

Third Harmful Effect: Promoting Prejudice

The two harmful effects of humor we have seen so far—blocking action and blocking compassion—are based on the way humor disengages us *practically* from what we are laughing about. A third harmful effect is based on the way it disengages us *cognitively* from the object of amusement. Here we will finally get to what is wrong with racist and sexist jokes. . . .

. . . [S]exist and racist jokes, like jokes in general, are known to be fictional by tellers and audience alike. We often introduce jokes with play signals such as, "Have you heard the one about . . .?" and we use the present instead of the past tense to indicate that what we are saying is not a report of a real event.

Adding to this unreality, what characters in jokes say and do is unlike what real people say and do. When these characters are stupid, lazy, or sexually promiscuous, the degree of those shortcomings is usually exaggerated far beyond what they are in any real human being. In the Polish astronaut joke, the man's belief that flying to the sun at night would keep him cool isn't just stupid, but more stupid than any real person's beliefs. This fantastic exaggeration found in so much humor is ignored by virtually all ethicists writing about ethnic jokes, who treat those jokes as if they were assertions that Poles are stupid, black people are lazy, etc.

Such bald assertions, however, are not funny and are easy to falsify. When people are communicating information, listeners often think that what a speaker is saying or implying is false, and so they question or contradict that person. But we don't question or contradict joke tellers. No one hearing the joke above would say, "There *are* no Polish astronauts," or "Most Poles *are not* stupid." Neither those telling this joke nor their listeners are committed to a belief in the existence of Polish astronauts, or to a belief that Poles in general are stupid.

Indeed, we could enjoy this joke even though we had no beliefs at all about Poles. The first time I heard a version of this joke, at a humor conference in the Netherlands, it was told about a *Frisian* astronaut. I had no idea who Frisians were, but I still enjoyed the picture of the astronaut saying that traveling at night would solve the problem of the sun's heat. The next day when I learned that the Frisians are an ethnic group living in the northern part of the Netherlands, I still did not *believe* that Frisians are stupid, any more than I *believe* that Poles are stupid when I laugh at Polish jokes.

The stupidity of the character in this joke, I suggest, is not a piece of information being communicated, but a fantastic idea being presented for playful enjoyment. What most people enjoy in hearing this joke is not a belief that they are superior to Poles or Frisians, but the mental gymnastics they go through in making sense of the line "I'll go at night"—all the while knowing that no real person would say such a thing in earnest. Whatever might be objectionable about telling standard sexist and racist jokes, then, it is not that they *assert* or *imply* that certain groups of people have preposterous degrees of stupidity, sexual promiscuity, etc. But that does not let the tellers of such jokes off the moral hook, for there are other ways to promote prejudice. Those who circulate racist and sexist jokes do it, I suggest, not by making truth-claims but by being *indifferent* to the truth. They are disengaged cognitively and practically from the stereotypes in what they are saying, and they don't care about the harm that circulating those stereotypes may cause.

What usually makes these jokes harmful is that they present characters with exaggerated degrees of undesirable traits who represent groups that some people believe actually have those traits. Indeed, we sort such jokes into genres largely by naming the ethnic or gender group and the shortcoming, that is, the stereotype being exaggerated. There is the Dumb Blonde joke, the Flighty Fag joke, the Dishonest Greek joke, etc. To write a new joke of one of these types, you create a story about members of the target group that attributes an exaggerated degree of the shortcoming to those characters.

The fun in these jokes is based on stretching negative stereotypes. Whether the tellers of sexist and racist jokes accept those stereotypes or not, their playing with them through exaggeration converts morally objectionable ideas into palatable ones. Putting a "play frame" around stereotypes in a joke aestheticizes them, removing them, at least temporarily, from moral scrutiny. As listeners enjoy sexist and racist jokes, they let harmful stereotypes in under their moral radar. A straightforward assertion might quickly draw criticism, but an exaggerated version of a stereotype presented in a clever way will probably be simply enjoyed.

Humor's play frame allows prejudicial ideas to be slipped into people's heads without being evaluated. It even allows for the creation of stereotypes that any reasonable person would reject out of hand were they asserted. In the 2006 comedy *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, Sacha Baron Cohen plays a Kazakh journalist who is a crude, boorish, incestuous, anti-Semitic, racist, Gypsy-hating, sexist boor, as are the other Kazakhs in this fake documentary. Borat introduces the "town rapist" and boasts that his sister is the "Number Four prostitute in our country."

In reality, no Kazakhs appear in the film: Cohen based his new stereotype on people he met in southern Russia. The village shown and its inhabitants are Rumanian. Real Kazakhs are not Slavic but a mix of Turkic and Mongolian, and they don't look like Cohen or the people in the film. In the nineteenth century the Kazakhs were invaded by Russia; thousands died resisting colonization and conscription into the Russian army. Under Stalin and Khrushchev, huge tracts of their grazing land were converted to agriculture to feed Russians. For resisting, a million and a half Kazakhs died, along with 80 percent of their livestock. Russian settlers were brought in to displace Kazakhs, until by the 1970s Kazakhstan was the only Soviet republic in which the native people were in the minority. In creating his new fictitious stereotype of Kazakhs, with negative features often attributed to Russians, Cohen insulted Kazakhs twice. He portrayed them as having vices they don't have: Anti-Semitism was never widespread in Kazakhstan, nor was the persecution of Gypsies; women have rights equal to men's. And secondly, the vices he attributes to Kazakhs he took from stereotypes of their Russian oppressors. The deep offense here was obvious in a four-page advertisement taken out by the government of Kazakhstan in the *New York Times* before the release of the film, to counteract the stereotype Cohen had created. A simple question asked by critics was why Cohen had not thought up a fictitious country to go with his fictitious stereotype. . . .

What is objectionable about sexist and racist stereotypes, of course, is that they categorize all members of a group as being interchangeable and as having certain shortcomings. Instead of respecting group members as individual persons, those who think in stereotypes tend to write them all off as inferior. They belittle, demean, dismiss them. To use the archaic verb from which we get “contempt,” they condemn the whole group—they treat its members as low, worthless, beneath notice. As Richard Mohr has said of anti-gay jokes, “The individual as distinctive is erased, dissolved into a prejudged type which determines in society’s eyes all of his or her significant characteristics. The jokes . . . presume that a gay person is nothing but his sexual orientation and its efflorescences.”⁷⁷

[. . . So] nothing as cognitively sophisticated as belief is required for such jokes to do harm. Mere repeated thinking of groups in negative stereotypes is enough to prompt us to treat real individuals not according to their actual merits and shortcomings, and so justly, but as automatically inferior because they belong to those groups. In milder cases, this mistreatment may involve only condescension, but in other cases, as under Jim Crow, South African apartheid, and homophobia, it involves malicious distrust, hatred, oppression, and even murder. That’s why groups who have suffered from such mistreatment often show resentment for the humor that stereotyped them—American blacks for Jim Crow humor, women for sexist jokes, and gays for “fag jokes.”⁷⁸

The objectionableness of jokes based on stereotypes, I suggest, is not all-or-nothing, but is proportional to the harm those stereotypes are likely to cause. . . .

[Consider a joke about] lawyers:

Two lawyers on a fishing trip in Alaska awake one morning to see a grizzly bear running toward their tent. One hurriedly starts putting on his running shoes.

“Don’t be a fool,” the other lawyer says. “You can’t outrun a grizzly bear.”

“I don’t have to outrun *him*,” the first lawyer says, “I only have to outrun *you*.”

This joke is based on the image of lawyers as tough-minded and uncaring, and retelling it helps keep that stereotype alive. But does the joke or the stereotype lead to the mistreatment of lawyers? Do people act condescendingly toward lawyers, insult them, or deny them jobs because of that stereotype? Hardly. Lawyers are a powerful and respected group

in our society, and the stereotype of the tough-minded, unsentimental lawyer enhances rather than threatens their power and position. In fact, lawyers even put that stereotype to work in TV commercials and Yellow Pages advertising for law firms. . . .

All this contrasts sharply with the harm black people, women, and homosexuals have endured because of the stereotypes circulated about them. Not only have they been insulted, but they have suffered discrimination in voting, in buying real estate, and in the courts. Racist and sexist stereotypes cost them money, respect, status, and power. That is precisely why so many people object to sexist and racist jokes, while not objecting to lawyer and doctor jokes. . . .

The stereotypes perpetuated by jokes are more objectionable, then, when they are about people who lack social status and power, and when those stereotypes are part of the social system that marginalizes them and “keeps them in their place.”

Comprehension Questions

1. What does Morreall mean by the “practical disengagement of humor”?
2. In what sense did Lincoln, Kennedy, and Reagan each use humor irresponsibly?
3. When we laugh, we usually aren’t feeling compassion at the same time. However, Morreall doesn’t think that *all* humor is problematic. So when is “blocking compassion” supposed to be a concern?
4. Morreall clearly thinks that it can be OK to make jokes that play on ethnic, gender, and racial stereotypes. So when are those jokes problematic? When do they “promote prejudice”?
5. On Morreall’s view, what’s the difference between jokes about African Americans or the LGBTQ community, on the one hand, and lawyers on the other?

Discussion Questions

1. We sometimes laugh at jokes and then say, “That was wrong.” What’s going on in those cases?
2. How have you seen humor used irresponsibly, or in ways that block compassion, or in ways that promote prejudice?
3. Morreall says that “[when] we want to evoke anger or outrage about some problem, we don’t present it in a humorous way.” You might

think that the work of people like Stephen Colbert, John Stewart, Larry Wilmore, and John Oliver are counterexamples to this claim. Are they? Why or why not?

4. It sounds like Morreall is saying that no joke is *inherently* wrong. Jokes *become* wrong when they're used irresponsibly, or block compassion, or promote prejudice. Is he right about that? Are there jokes that are morally problematic whether or not they have these consequences?
5. Is there any humor that's *always* irresponsible, or *always* blocks compassion, or *always* promotes prejudice? Consider, for example, rape jokes. Might they always be guilty of one of these charges? Why or why not?

Case

In 2015, *The Guardian* posted an article that included this passage about Amy Schumer, a popular comic:

Schumer's stand-up repeatedly delves into racial territory tactlessly and with no apparent larger point. Her standup special features jokes like "Nothing works 100% of the time, except Mexicans" and much of her character's dumb slut persona is predicated on the fact that the men she sleeps with are people of colour. "I used to date Latino guys," she says in an older stand-up routine. "Now I prefer consensual."

Schumer responded on Twitter:

I am a comic. I am so glad more people are laughing at me and with me all of a sudden. I will joke about things you like and I will joke about things you aren't comfortable with. And that's OK. Stick with me and trust I am joking. I go in and out of playing an irreverent idiot. That includes making dumb jokes involving race. I enjoy playing the girl who from time to time says the dumbest thing possible and playing with race is a thing we are not supposed to do, which is what makes it so fun for comics.

You can call it a "blind spot for racism" or "lazy" but you are wrong. It is a joke and it is funny. I know that because people laugh at it. Even if you personally did not. I am not going to start joking about safe material. And don't ask that of me. I love what I do and won't let anyone take that away. I ask you to resist the urge to pick me apart. Trust me. I am not a racist. I am a devout feminist and lover of all people. My fight is for all people to be treated equally. So move on to the next person who is more deserving of your scrutiny and not the girl in your corner.

Sincerely Amy (a dirty half Jew)⁹

What might Morreall say about Schumer's jokes? And what do you make of Schumer's defense of herself?

Notes

1. See Roger Scruton, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 170–1.
2. Anthony Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter* (New York: Viking, 1933), 11–13.
3. Thomas Hobbes, *English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 11 vols. (London: Bohn, 1845), vol. 4, 455.
4. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 139.
5. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974).
6. Peter Jones, "Laughter," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 56 (1982), 225.
7. Richard Mohr, "Fag-ends and Jokes' Butts," from "Gays and Equal Protection," unpublished manuscript.
8. For an historical examination of the use of humor to keep American blacks "in their place," see Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
9. https://twitter.com/amyschumer/status/615182173570633728/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw