

Taking Humour (Ethics) Seriously, But Not Too Seriously

DAVID BENATAR

University of Cape Town

ABSTRACT

Humour is worthy of serious ethical consideration. However, it is often taken far too seriously. In this paper, it is argued that while humour is sometimes unethical, it is wrong much less often than many people think. Non-contextual criticisms, which claim that certain kinds of humour are always wrong, are rejected. Contextual criticisms, which take issue with particular instances of humour rather than types of humour, are more promising. However, it is common to overstate the number of contexts in which humour is wrong. Various mistakes of this kind are highlighted and cautioned against.



INTRODUCTION

Although humour¹ is the very opposite of seriousness, perceived breaches of humour ethics are often taken very seriously. Some people go so far as to think that purportedly errant humourists should be killed. This was the reaction, for example, of some people to the Danish cartoonists whose cartoons depicted the prophet Mohammed (For a discussion on the ethics of the Mohammed cartoons, see Benatar 2006). Various regimes, including Nazis and the Soviets, have severely punished humour directed towards them (Peukert 1993, 198; Lewis 2006; Nesbitt 2000).

The humourless reaction to humour is not restricted, however, to fundamentalist Muslims and tyrannical regimes. Even in liberal democracies many citizens are outraged at what they take to be breaches of humour ethics, even if their reactions are not as severe. For example, a philosopher at the University of Wales, Swansea, resigned from that university in response to a barrage of criticism after he told jokes “with sexual overtones” at a Department Christmas party (Goldstein 2002). A United States National Security Advisor, James L. Jones, was taken to task for telling a joke, at an anniversary gala of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, about a Taliban militant and two Jewish businessmen (Guttman 2010). There were calls for the resignation of David Letterman after he joked about Sarah Palin’s daughter, who advocates pre-marital abstinence but is herself an unwed mother (Cohen 2009). A professor at the United States Merchant Marine Academy faced the prospect of being fired for a humorous quip that referenced the Colorado movie theatre shooting². In

1. Humour includes not only jokes but also comedy, cartoons, satire, quips, puns, comic impersonations and so forth. I shall sometimes refer to “jokes” or one of the other forms of humour without always meaning to restrict my comments to that particular form of humour. I do not propose to provide a definition of humour. Defending one definition over rivals would be a massive undertaking, well beyond the scope of this essay. Even stipulating a definition would be ill advised and make little or no difference to what I have to say. The word “humour” can be used in different senses. A definition covering all reasonable senses would either have to be so general as to cover all senses or it would have to be a disjunction of all (reasonable) meanings. That said, it should be clear from the context of what I shall say that when I use words like “humour” or “joke” I am excluding bizarre cases where people find humour in something that fails to meet the (minimal) aesthetic conditions to count as humour. One such bizarre case would be somebody opening up a mathematics textbook, seeing an equation and laughing, where there are no contextual considerations that would explain why the equation met the relevant aesthetic conditions. While we can say that this person “found the equation humorous”, when I use the word “humour” (and “joke”) in this paper, I am not using the term so broadly as to include the equation that this strange person finds humorous. I am not denying that the word *can* be used in this way. It is just that I am not using it that way here. I shall not stipulate what the aesthetic conditions are for something to count as humour. That too would take me beyond the scope of the current paper and would unnecessarily tie my analysis to a particular view. My analysis of humour ethics is compatible with a wide range of views about what the relevant conditions are.

2. While showing a film during a class, eleven days after the shooting, he said “If someone with orange hair appears in the corner of the room, run for the exit”. (Berrett 2012)

the end he was instead given a 45-day suspension and was required to undergo five hours of “sensitivity training” (Kaminer 2012). And a comedian in New Zealand had to resign from his radio and television jobs after he made a joke about homosexuals and Jews being expendable (Haaretz Service and DPA 2010).

Not all humour is thought to be morally problematic. Much humour is taken to be innocent and beyond reproach. Ethical questions are typically thought to arise in certain predictable categories of humour. One such category consists of racial, ethnic and gender humour – including jokes about “blacks”, Jews, Poles and women. Another is humour about God, religious figures (such as Mohammed) and other sacred matters. We might refer to this as blasphemous humour. Scatological humour is a third category, which includes jokes about genitalia, sex, urination, defecation, menstruation and other bodily effluvia. Humour about death and suffering – what we might call morbid or tragic humour – includes dead baby jokes, and making light of the Holocaust, famine and disease. Another category of humour that raises ethical concerns is humour about people’s personal attributes – such as their big ears or noses, their short or tall stature, or their mental or physical disabilities. Finally, there are so-called practical jokes (such as the “candid camera” variety) in which the victims are “set-up” without their knowledge in order to provide entertainment for others, and the related phenomenon of comic pleasure from people’s (un-engineered) misfortunes.

Although I think that humour can be and sometimes is morally wrong, it is not wrong as often as popular wisdom suggests³. And when it is wrong, it often is not as serious a wrong as many people would have us believe. In arguing for this conclusion, I shall evaluate various views people seem to hold about the ethics of humour.

My argument will make mention of various jokes that some people may take to be offensive. This is unavoidable without compromising the quality of the argument. A proper discussion of the ethics of humour cannot avoid all reference to the very jokes that some people take to be unethical. In other words, I am not telling the jokes

3. When I say “popular wisdom” I am referring, as the above examples should make clear, not to the views of philosophers or other theorists about the ethics of humour but to the views of the broader population. Some philosophers also have (what I take to be) overly restrictive views on the ethics of humour, and I shall make reference to them too, but my interest is not limited to what philosophers say about humour ethics. I seek to address views that are held much more widely. Of course, what constitutes “popular wisdom” varies, both geographically and temporally. I am referring to views that are held widely in some or other part of the world in our own times.

but mentioning them in order to discuss them⁴. Readers who are prone to offense at the mere mention of a joke are advised not to read any further. *Caveat lector!*

Humour is subject to ethical criticism on at least two grounds. First, it is often thought to arise from a moral defect either in the person purveying the humour or in the person who enjoys it. The focus here is on an agent, whether it be the person telling or appreciating a joke. The other main way of criticizing humour is by focusing on the joke rather than on those telling or laughing at it. Those who fault humour in this way usually do so because of the (wrongfully inflicted) deleterious effects of the humour in question. However, in some select cases, a piece of humour is faulted not because of its effects but rather because of some inherent feature of it⁵.

It is worth noting that the stated flaws are not mutually exclusive. For example, a joke could reflect some moral failing in its teller while also having negative effects. In fact, one flaw might often lead to or explain the other. Thus, if a particular telling of a joke expresses a vice of the joke teller, the joke might, on that basis, have deleterious effects it would not otherwise have. For instance, a joke prompted by malice might cause harm that the same joke offered without any malice would not. Alternatively, the fact that a joke can be expected to have harmful effects on those who do not deserve those harms might sometimes lead us to think that the telling of the joke is an expression of either indifference or malevolence on the part of the joke's teller.

Another way to classify the moral criticisms of humour is to distinguish between contextual and non-contextual criticisms. Non-contextual criticisms take issue with a joke irrespective of its context. The criticism is of a type of joke, which is thought to be wrong irrespective of its context. Contextual criticisms, by contrast, are those that criticize not the joke itself but rather a contextualized instance (or token⁶) of it. In what follows, I shall discuss both non-contextual and contextual evaluations of humour and will show how the earlier distinction between different grounds for criticizing humour maps onto this distinction.

4. Philosophers distinguish between the “use” of a term and the “mention” of it. If you call me a moron, you are using the word “moron”. If, by contrast, you say “Bob called you a moron” you are mentioning the word “moron”. I am mentioning rather than using (or telling) jokes.

5. This last distinction is not the distinction between consequentialist and deontological assessments of humour. This is because a deontological assessment can cut across these two kinds of faults. Criticizing a joke because of some inherent feature of it does appear to be a deontological assessment. However, because a determination of whether deleterious effects are wrongfully inflicted can be made in a deontological way, faulting humour on account of its effects isn't always a consequentialist matter.

6. The type-token distinction is a technical philosophical one. Those unfamiliar with it may, without cost, ignore the reference to a token.

The various relationships are graphically represented here:

<i>Two grounds for assessing the ethics of humour</i>			
Agent (Humourist or appreciator)		Humour	
Some categories of humour always express a defect in the agent.	Some instances of humour express a defect in the agent, but others do not.	Humour itself	Effects
Non-contextual	Contextual	Non-contextual	Contextual

NON-CONTEXTUAL CRITICISMS

Criticizing humour because of a moral defect in the people purveying or appreciating it can be either contextual or non-contextual. It should be obvious that humour is at least *sometimes* the product of a character defect. Sometimes jokes about racial or ethnic groups or about one or other sex are told or enjoyed because the teller or the audience is prejudiced towards the group that is the butt of the joke. Blasphemous, scatological, tragic and personal humour, as well as practical jokes are sometimes delivered or enjoyed because of insensitivity, maliciousness or cruelty.

The key question is how often these kinds of jokes are the product of character defects. Some of those writing on the ethics of humour have held the extreme view that in the case of some kinds of humour, the answer is “always”. With respect to these kinds of humour, their critique is non-contextual. It is not that one of these kinds of jokes is acceptable in some circumstances but morally wrong in others. Instead, it is, on this view, always a product of some or other vice.

For example, some people have argued that jokes that turn on negative racial, ethnic or gender stereotypes *always* reflect badly on those who enjoy them. The suggestion is that one cannot enjoy a joke that turns on a stereotype without actually

endorsing the stereotype (de Sousa 1987)⁷. It is not possible, on this view, to adopt the prejudicial attitude hypothetically. To laugh at a joke about women, Jews or “blacks”, is to show you up as, respectively a sexist, anti-Semite or racist.

Arguments for this conclusion ask us to introspect. They suggest that if we do, we will find that “we intuitively know that sharing [the joke’s assumptions] is what would enable us to find the joke funny”⁸ (de Sousa 1987, 240). This claim is problematic. If we assume, for the moment, that introspection is a reasonable methodology, we find that many honest introspectors simply do not find that they share the prejudicial assumptions of the jokes they enjoy. They find instead that they can enjoy a joke that employs a stereotype of a particular group of people without actually endorsing that stereotype. Consider, for example, the following joke:

A Jew, a Scot and an Englishman have dinner together at a restaurant. After the meal, the waiter approaches them and asks to whom he should present the bill. The Scot says: “I’ll pay”. The headline in the newspaper the next morning reads: “Jewish ventriloquist found dead in alley”.

Stereotypes about Englishmen are inert in this joke, but the joke does turn on stereotypes about Jews and Scotsmen. According to the stereotypes both groups are tightfisted. But this purported attribute is combined with canniness in the Jew and a propensity to violence in the Scot. The wily Jew, intent on avoiding payment for the dinner, cleverly tries to get the Scot to pay. The Scot, equally unwilling to pay, (over-)reacts by killing the Jew.

At least some people find that they can enjoy a joke of this kind even though they are as confident as possible that they do not endorse the underlying stereotypes. To this it might be objected that the joke would be less funny if it had been an Englishman who said he would pay and an American ventriloquist who had been found dead in an alley. In that version one might see the point of the joke but one would not find it as funny, even if the relevant stereotypes were stipulated in advance of telling the joke. The suggestion is that this shows that we do indeed need to endorse the underlying stereotypes to find the joke funny.

7. Ronald de Sousa’s view is endorsed by Merrie Bergman (1986). Claudia Mills also seems to endorse this view (1987).

8. The particular joke that he uses as an illustrative example is a very weak rape joke. I have elsewhere (Benatar 1999) provided a detailed response to his musings about that joke and I shall not repeat them here.

However, this objection overlooks the fact that actually *endorsing* the stereotypes is not the only alternative to merely *stipulating* them. Intermediate between these is *recognizing* stereotypes and this may well be sufficient to enjoy the joke (Benatar 1999). This is not to deny the possibility that there are those who find the joke funny because they do endorse the underlying stereotypes. Instead, it is to say that endorsing the stereotypes is not necessary in order to enjoy the humour. Introspection suggests that one can, and some people do, enjoy such jokes without endorsing the stereotypes, in which case jokes turning on a racial, ethnic or gender stereotype are not always tainted by flaws in the person recounting or enjoying the joke.

So far I have been assuming that introspection is a reasonable methodology for determining whether endorsing a stereotype is necessary for appreciating humour that turns on that stereotype. Against this assumption it might well be suggested that introspections are unreliable because even honest introspectors may be unaware of their implicit biases. However, if the introspective method is unreliable then those claiming that one cannot enjoy a joke that turns on a stereotype without actually endorsing the stereotype cannot appeal to introspections to make their case. Nor is it sufficient for them to point to the numerous studies that have shown that implicit biases are widespread. They need to show that it is the presence of an implicit bias that causes the relevant humour to be appreciated. For if it were the case that somebody had an unconscious prejudice but this played no role in appreciating a particular piece of humour, it would not be the case that the humour appreciation were an *expression* of the prejudice. In short, those who claim that appreciating humour that turns on a stereotype is always an expression of prejudice cannot simply make that claim. They need to provide evidence.

Just as jokes that turn on stereotypes do not seem always to be an expression of a defect in those who appreciate the jokes, so jokes about the ugly or the disabled, or about violence, rape or death, do not seem *always* to arise from insensitivity or cruelty in the person telling or enjoying such jokes. Such vices may explain why some people like jokes of these kinds, but for others the appreciation of such jokes is explained in other ways. For some people it arises from the opposite character traits. It is precisely because of their sensitivities or anxieties about the sufferings and misfortunes that they seek relief in lightheartedness about these serious matters. Think, for example, of the old man who says, "When I awake in the morning, the first thing I do is spread my arms. If I don't hit wood, I get up." Such a quip does not indicate that the old man regards his death as a trivial matter. Instead, it is his anxiety about death (and inter-

ment) that gives rise to his humour. While this is a case of self-directed humour, there is no reason to think that something similar is not sometimes occurring when people joke about the tragedies that befall others. Such tragedies can cause us anxiety, and humour is one way in which we can deal with them.

Thus we see that to joke about something is, contrary to what some people think, not necessarily to trivialize it. When jokes are told about serious matters, we are not necessarily treating these matters as though they were not serious. We can laugh at the serious, and sometimes we do so precisely because we recognize it to be serious.

However, saying something in jest is not the same thing as saying it seriously. Indeed sometimes a joke or a skit or some other piece of humour is found to be funny precisely because it could never be said in seriousness (without exceeding the bounds of civility).

It is not merely the contemplation of the transgressive that explains why some people find some jokes about nasty subjects funny. Rape jokes, for example, might include amusing incongruities that are enjoyed even by those who do not have morally defective views about rape.

Another non-contextual moral critique alleges that some kinds of humour are always tainted, not because of a defect in those spreading or enjoying it, but instead because of a defect in the humour itself. It is arguably the case that this claim is made about very few types of humour. Perhaps the clearest example is (purportedly) blasphemous humour. Although those concerned about such humour might take blasphemers to be morally defective, their basis for objecting to the humour lies not in the blasphemer but in the blasphemy. Humour that “takes the Lord’s name in vain” or that irreverently depicts the sacred, or, in some cases, depicts God or a prophet in any way, is thought to be wrong⁹.

Arguments that a particular type of humour is always wrong because it is blasphemous are deeply controversial. This is because they rest on highly contested premises. They assume not only that God exists but also that blasphemy is morally wrong (as distinct from being prohibited on non-moral grounds) and that a particular piece

9. There are many examples of people taking humour to be wrong on the grounds of it being (purportedly) blasphemous. The *Jyllands-Posten* publication of the Mohammed cartoons is one infamous case. Millions of people around the world took the cartoons to be wrong for this reason. Nor were all these people themselves Muslims. Journalist Charlene Smith claimed that “never, ever, should we blaspheme a person’s God or goddess” (Smith 2006) In another, less well-known case some Christians in South Africa objected to what they took to be blasphemous humour in a University of Cape Town student humour magazine. (Naidoo 2009). These complaints led to the magazine being withdrawn from the shelves of a major chain of shops, and to an apology from the University of Cape Town.

of humour constitutes blasphemy. Atheists, of course, will deny the basic assumption of God's existence, and the other assumptions fall like dominos in consequence. However, even theists, who agree about God's existence, can disagree about the other assumptions and especially the final one. There is wide variation in the views of religious people about what constitutes blasphemy and blasphemous humour. Some are much more permissive than others. For these reasons, the non-contextual moral critique of blasphemous humour is hard to defend and I shall not discuss it further.

CONTEXTUAL CRITICISMS

It should not be surprising that non-contextual criticisms of humour are harder to defend. They make more expansive claims than contextual criticisms do. More specifically, they say that *all* humour of a particular kind is morally wrong. Such claims are hard to believe. Much more plausible is the view that various kinds of humour can be morally acceptable in some contexts but wrong in others. On this view, we should not be evaluating types of jokes but rather particular instances of a joke to determine whether they are morally permissible.

The thought that humour can be wrong when it stems from a defect in the person telling or appreciating a joke, is a contextual critique when a particular instance of a joke is faulted not because all jokes of that type are thought to stem from a personal defect but rather because that particular instance of it is thought to do so. In other words, telling joke J could be wrong for person P (because J would reflect a defect in P) even though it would not be wrong for person Q (because J would not reflect a defect in Q).

A defect in the joke-teller is not the only basis for a contextual criticism of humour. The other basis arises when an instance of humour is thought to inflict a wrongful harm. Because a given joke can be harmful in some situations but not in others, and because where it is harmful the harm is permissibly inflicted in some circumstances but not in others, a contextual critique makes reference to the particular circumstances in which a joke is told.

Humour only rarely causes physical harm, at least directly. Some kinds of practical jokes would be the most likely of the various types of humour to cause such harm (and are also the kind of joke most easy to fault). Imagine for example, the practical joker who contrives to cause somebody to slip or fall for the amusement of others. Such actions could be physically injurious. It is arguably somewhat more common

for humour to cause physical harm *indirectly*. Consider, for example, a case of somebody who responds violently to a piece of humour that he finds offensive. The violent reaction to the Mohammed cartoons in the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper is a possible example (Benatar 2008). Of course, it is not uncontroversial in such cases to say that the humour *caused* the violence. This is because the intolerant, violent reactor has a choice about how to react to the humour. He is not caused or forced to react violently. Nevertheless physical harm can be an indirect effect of humour.

The most common harmful effects of humour are not physical. When humour harms, the harms are typically psychological, including offence, embarrassment, shock, disgust and the feeling of being demeaned or insulted. Humour is sometimes also thought to inculcate, spread or reinforce negative attitudes about those individuals or groups that are the butt of the humour¹⁰. Such attitudes might themselves be thought to be harmful. At the very least, they might be thought to pose the risk of causing harm to those toward whom the attitudes are held.

COMMON MISTAKES IN HUMOUR ETHICS

In assessing the effects of humour, common thinking about the ethics of humour is prone to a number of mistakes.

The Benefits are Ignored

First, the focus tends to be (almost) exclusively on the *negative* effects. Of the positive effects that are overlooked, the most obvious is the pleasure that humour brings. Where critics of humour do consider the pleasure, this often forms part of the critique. The suggestion is that there is something wicked about taking pleasure in humour that also has the negative effects. Obviously such a critique is sometimes apt. Sometimes it is wicked to laugh at the expense of another. However, it is not always wrong. One can better see why this is the case if one considers some of the other benefits of humour.

For example, humour is a powerful tool that can be wielded against those who abuse power (There are many people, of course, who do not overlook *this* benefit.

10. For example, South African President Jacob Zuma believes that he has been demeaned by cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro (aka Zapiro), and jokes about racial or ethnic groups have been said to exacerbate stereotypes about those groups.

However, there are many others who do. This includes not only those who abuse power but also their many supporters). Tyrants have no moral complaint when others, and especially those they oppress, laugh at them. It is because of humour's subversive power that many a despot has sought to prohibit humour that mocks him or his associates. For example, in Zimbabwe it is a criminal offence to ridicule the President, Robert Mugabe.

Here is an example of one anti-Mugabe joke:

A man is caught in a traffic jam when someone taps on the car window. The driver lowers the window and asks what he wants. The other man says, 'President Mugabe has been kidnapped and the ransom is \$50-million. If the ransom is not paid, the kidnappers are threatening to douse the president with petrol and set him on fire. We are making a collection. Do you wish to contribute?' The man in the car asks, 'On average, what are people donating?' The other replies, 'About two or three gallons'

(The Herald 2006, 6)

Sometimes the oppressed begin to joke about the risks of joking. Here is one example from the Third Reich:

What is fratricide?

If Hermann Goering slaughters a pig.

What is suicide?

If someone tells this joke in public.

(Lipman 1991, 52)

Other repressive regimes have been a little less sensitive about satire. In such cases humour can serve the function of conveying (sometimes scathing) criticism in a form that is more palatable to those being satirized. It is often the case that a true and critical word spoken in jest is tolerated more readily than a true and critical word spoken in seriousness would be. South African comedian, Pieter Dirk Uys,

lampooned Apartheid and Apartheid-era politicians (as he does post-Apartheid politicians) with relative impunity¹¹.

This phenomenon does not occur only at the political level. Even in inter-personal relationships, criticisms offered in jest are often more agreeable than criticisms offered in earnestness. And it is because we all have our foibles that others may sometimes joke about us. Thus it is not only tyrants who have no justified complaint about being the butt of a joke.

Humour has other benefits too. It can puncture pretentiousness, and lighten mood. It can help people cope with their anxieties – about disease, disability and death, for example. It is often the case that when people joke about these things it is not because they are failing to take them seriously, but instead precisely because they do take them so seriously. Tragedies often breed dark humour. Think, for example, of the flurry of jokes that were generated in response to the Ethiopian famine, the space shuttle disasters, the death of Diana Spencer, and the O.J. Simpson murder trial following the killing of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman. Humour also flourishes in circumstances of adversity, enabling people to battle the ill-effects of being victimized, oppressed or persecuted. Soviet citizens joked about the USSR, mocking the repression, the inefficiencies, the drabness, and the shortages. Jews joke about anti-semitism, and “blacks” joke about racism. The dynamics vary. Sometimes a group that is stereotyped employs jokes embodying the stereotype in an attempt to neutralize the potency of the stereotype. More rarely, the stereotype becomes the butt of the joke. Consider the following joke, which has two variants. The Jewish variant reads:

Two Jews are walking down a street and see a sign on a church saying: “Become a Christian and earn \$100”. They don’t know what to make of this, but decide that one will convert and will share the money with the other. The prospective convert enters the church. After a while he emerges. His friend says to him:

“Where’s my \$50”.

The new Christian replies: “Is that all you people think about?”

11. If my memory serves me correctly, one cabinet member, Piet Koornhof, even (knowingly and freely) participated in one of Mr Uys’ films.

The “black” variant reads:

Two “blacks” are walking down a street and see a sign on a building saying: “Become white and earn \$100”. They don’t know what to make of this, but decide that one will become “white” and will share the money with the other. The prospective “white” enters the building. After a while he emerges. His friend says to him:

“Where’s my \$50”.

The new “white” replies: “Get yourself a job!”

These versions of the joke rest on a recognition of stereotypes about Jews and “blacks”, but the butt of the joke is not the Jew or the “black”. Instead it is those who hold the stereotypes about them.

The joke (in its two forms) is instructive in a variety of ways. First, it provides further support for the point I made earlier that one does not have to endorse a stereotype in order to find funny a joke that turns on that stereotype. Second, the fact that a joke incorporates a stereotype does not mean that it reinforces or spreads that stereotype. It could instead subvert the stereotype. Third, although the butt of the joke is, respectively, those who hold stereotypes about Jews and “blacks”, this does not mean that Christians and “whites” are being stereotyped as stereotypers. One does not have to think all (or even almost all) Christians or “whites” have these attitudes in order to find the joke funny. One need only be aware that there are (or have been) many Christians and “whites” who have held these views.

Contextual Considerations are Oversimplified

Many people recognize that context is crucial for determining when a joke expresses a defect in the joke-teller, but a common view about humour ethics tends to oversimplify the contextual considerations. For example, it is often thought that jokes about “blacks”, Jews, women, Poles, or the disabled, for example, are morally tainted unless they are told by members of the group that is the butt of the joke. Some go so far as to say that unless one is a member of the group about which one is joking, telling the joke is wrong. This view is correct in asserting that the identity of the joke teller is relevant to a moral assessment of a given telling of a joke. Depending on who

is telling a joke, the joke either is or is not an expression of a defect in the joke teller. However, where the view is wrong is in claiming that only group-insiders may tell jokes about the group. What it seems to assume is that all and only group-insiders can tell the joke without either (a) the joke being an expression of a defective attitude or (b) its being viewed as the expression of such an attitude.

However, neither of these assumptions can be supported. First, it is possible for group-insiders to share defective attitudes about the group. It is not uncommon for people to internalize prejudices or other negative attitudes towards a group of which they are members. When such group-insiders tell jokes about their group they may well be exhibiting the same attitudes as prejudiced people outside the group. If a joke is morally problematic because it expresses some defect in the joke teller, then the telling of a joke about “blacks”, for example, is wrong if the person telling it is a “black” who shares that defect.

Second, because of this phenomenon we cannot assume that group-insiders will not be viewed (at least by those with a more nuanced view of human psychology) as expressing the problematic attitudes.

Third, there are situations in which we can be confident that the joke-teller does *not* share the negative attitudes even though he or she is *not* a member of the group about which the joke is being told. Sometimes we know somebody sufficiently well – or we know that those to whom we tell a joke know us sufficiently well – that the telling of the joke will not be viewed as an expression of a bad attitude.

Thus, while the identity of the person purveying some piece of humour is clearly a relevant contextual consideration, it should not be reduced to the crude principle that all and only group-insiders may joke about the group.

Another contextual consideration is the identity of those to whom the humour is directed, namely its audience. This consideration too is oversimplified – and in a way that connects with the identity of the humourist. Thus it is often thought that if a group-insider tells a joke to fellow group-insiders, the humour is innocent. However, if the same joke is told to those outside the group being joked about, then the joke telling is morally suspect, whether or not the teller is a member of the group. The thought seems to be that telling a joke about “blacks”, for example, is not likely to inculcate or reinforce anti-“black” attitudes in “blacks”, or that there is something less troubling about a disabled person laughing at disability than there is about an able-bodied person laughing at the same joke.

While this view contains some truth, it too is insufficiently refined. It probably is

true that group-insiders, although not immune, are often less prone to adopting negative attitudes towards the group. Moreover, it does seem true that self-deprecatory humour is less worrying than humour that deprecates others. Nevertheless, because people can enjoy jokes about others without having or coming to have negative attitudes towards those people, we cannot assume that it is always impermissible to tell a joke about a group to those not in the group.

A third contextual consideration is the identity of the group *about which* (rather than *to which*) the joke is told. The conventional wisdom here is that there is no problem telling jokes that are critical of men but that there is a presumption against telling jokes that are critical of women. Similarly, while it is acceptable for “whites” to be the butt of a joke, telling jokes about “blacks” is presumptively wrong. The rationale seems to be that subordinate groups are more vulnerable than dominant ones and that laughing at the “underdog” is morally problematic in a way that laughing at dominant groups is not.

Again, there is an element of truth to this view. Telling jokes about some groups is more likely to cause harm than telling jokes about others. But this does not mean that telling jokes about historically disadvantaged groups always (wrongfully) harms, or that telling jokes about historically advantaged groups never (wrongfully) harms. For example, jokes about “whites” might be more dangerous in Zimbabwe than they are in Sweden, and jokes about male nurses may be more damaging than jokes about female doctors.

Offence is Given Too Much Weight

Possibly the most common mistake made in thinking about the ethics of humour is to treat offence either as a decisive moral consideration or, at the very least, as a very strong moral consideration. It is often thought that because a piece of humour offends somebody it is therefore wrong or is at least presumptively so. Variants on this view claim that offence must either reach a certain level of intensity, or be sufficiently widespread, or must result from a violation of particular sensibilities – usually religious ones – in order to be judged wrong.

When this view is stated bluntly, as I have just stated it, it sounds untenable. It might be wondered, therefore, whether anybody really makes the mistake of thinking it true. Because the argument is rarely stated explicitly it is hard to *prove*, at least without probing people, whether they are in fact espousing such a view. However, it

does seem reasonable to attribute the view to those who, in criticizing an instance of humour, refer to its offensiveness and say nothing more¹². There are many examples of this¹³.

What tends to happen is that people express their outrage at a piece of humour (or people note that others are outraged about it) and they infer that the humour must be wrong. Alternatively, it is noted how many people are outraged or how intensely outraged people are, and it is assumed that there must be a good reason why so many people are upset or why people are so upset. However, in the absence of a justification for the outrage, it is the outrage itself that is doing the work of (purportedly) justifying the claim that humour is wrong. In other words, it is one thing to say that humour is wrong for such and such reasons, and people are outraged because it is the sort of wrong that elicits justified offence. It is another thing to say that the humour is wrong because people are outraged by it.

All versions of the view that humour is wrong because it causes offence are problematic. If the view were correct then it would grant a moral veto to the hypersensitive (Benatar 2009). Those easily offended or outraged would be able to render instances of humour immoral. That, in turn, would imply that there is no difference between warranted and unwarranted outrage – or at least that the distinction is irrelevant to our assessment of the ethics of humour. It would also ignore the fact that humour that offends some people can bring more important benefits to others. Finally, offence arguments can be two-edged swords that produce judgments that if not contradictory are certainly in tension with one another. Thus A might be offended by B's joke,

12. Where they do add something but all they add is about the intensity of the offense or about religious sensibilities having been offended, they seem to be advocating one of the variants of the offence argument to which I referred in the previous paragraph.

13. Here are just a few: Afzal Ahmad, Chairman of the American Islamic Association, in a letter to *The New York Times* said he found the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons “both hurtful and offensive”. The only other thing he said in criticism of the cartoons was: “In my view, freedom of speech in a public arena carries with it a huge responsibility not to malign people’s deeply held religious belief systems.” (*The New York Times* 2006) This suggests that he is advancing the version of the offence argument that objects to offending people’s religious beliefs. Criticizing the same cartoons, Kofi Anan, then Secretary General of the United Nations, said “I share the distress of the Muslim friends who feel that the cartoon offends their religion” (Brinkley and Fisher 2006). If Mr Anan said more, it was not quoted by *The New York Times*, suggesting that either he or the newspaper took the point about offence to be the heart of the criticism. At a performance in Johannesburg, comedian John Cleese told a joke about a tour group to the Dachau concentration camp that arrived too late in the day to be admitted. The joke’s punch line was that somebody in the group, hearing that they had been refused entry, said: ‘Tell them we are Jewish’. Some Jewish members of Mr Cleese’s audience took exception. One said that it “is truly offensive and (Cleese) should know how we feel” (*South African Jewish Report* 2013). That was the only criticism attributed to that complainant. Again, either the complainant said no more or the reporter was of the view that this captured the essence of the complaint.

but B might be offended by A's offence – that is, by his humourlessness. If offence is a sufficient condition for rendering immoral the conduct that generates the offence then although B's joke is immoral, so is the very reaction of A that makes the joke immoral.

Although offence is not a very weighty moral consideration against telling a joke, this does not mean that it is irrelevant. The fact that one's humour would cause others offence is often something we must take into account. That consideration will regularly be overridden but there are times when it will not be outweighed by other considerations. The clearest scenario is where the offence is gratuitous – where the offending humour produces no benefit to redeem it. It would be wrong, for example, to tell crude jokes to prudes if *all* that this achieved was the mortification of the prudes.

JUDGING JOKES

How can we judge (prospectively) when we may tell a joke and when we may not? How can we judge (retrospectively) whether some humour that has been disseminated should instead have been withheld?

It should be obvious that no formula can be provided. If, as I have suggested, the non-contextual criticisms of humour are defective, we cannot even say that some kinds of jokes should never be told. Instead any judgment will need to take into account the specifics of a given joke in a given context. Drawing on the earlier discussion, a few general guidelines can be provided.

We obviously need to ask, in a specific context, whether the humour expresses some defect in those purveying or appreciating the humour. We also need to consider the effects of telling a joke. That involves considering the expected harms of telling the joke, but it also requires us to consider the joke's expected benefits. The harms and benefits will be influenced by facts about the humourist, the audience and the butt of the joke, but not in the crude ways that are often assumed. However, these are not the only determinants of the quality and quantity of the harms and benefits. The location and the timing, for example, can also be relevant. Sometimes a joke is “too soon” after a tragedy. And some jokes may be acceptably told in one place but not in another. Consider here the difference between telling a profanity-laden, deeply disgusting joke in a bar and telling it in a church or a cemetery.

We need to weigh up the harms against the benefits. This does not mean that our determination must be a utilitarian one or, if it is a utilitarian one, that it must be

a simplistic utilitarian calculation. For example, if a joke will offend, we should ask whether the offence is deserved or not, and whether it is warranted or unwarranted. If it is deserved or unwarranted, it should be discounted in our weighing up of the harms and benefits. If it is undeserved or warranted it should weigh more heavily.

Considering and weighing all these factors will enable us to make more nuanced judgments about humour than are typically made. It is possible to think intelligently and carefully about the ethics of humour. This does not mean that in some cases there will not be scope for reasonable disagreement. For example, it will sometimes be unclear what the consequences of a joke will be, how important it is to tell it, or how warranted the resultant offence will be. In such uncertainties humour ethics is no different from the ethics of other practices.

CONCLUSION

Humour is often about serious subjects and the ethics of humour is, of course, no laughing matter. It deserves our serious consideration. It is possible, however, to take humour too seriously. In conclusion, consider one deeply ironic example.

Nando's, the South African chicken restaurant chain is well known for its witty, irreverent advertisements. In one of its advertisements, a blind old lady is led into a pole by her guide dog, who then snatches her take-out Nando's chicken after she lies concussed on the pavement. The advertisement was greeted with outrage by protesters who claimed that it made light of the blind. Some protesters thought that the advertisement "was more offensive to the reputation of guide dogs" (Feris 2000). The Advertising Standards Association of South Africa ruled that the advertisement was offensive to the blind (but not to the guide dogs) and that it had to be withdrawn (Sapa 2000).

The irony here is that the chickens consumed in Nando's outlets are, during their lifetimes, made to suffer in all the appalling ways in which chickens are reared and killed. Yet those objecting to the advertisement completely ignored this very serious moral problem and took the most important moral issues to be the reputation of guide dogs and the sensibilities of the blind¹⁴. That distortion is indicative of how unreliable popular views about the ethics of humour can be.

In a famous example of "anti-humour" we are asked: "Why did the chicken cross

¹⁴. Because they cannot see the advertisement those blind people who objected to it are offended by the bare knowledge of its existence.

the road?” This looks like the set-up for a joke, but when the “punchline” is delivered – “Because it wanted to get to the other side” – we realize that it is in fact not a joke at all¹⁵. Asking questions about Nando’s advertisements may look like a case of humour ethics, but when the answers badly distort the relative weight of different moral considerations, it may in fact be a case of “humour anti-ethics”. Taking humour ethics seriously involves not taking it more seriously than it should be taken.

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15. This “anti-joke” has spurred many real jokes that are humorous variants on the original.

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