

The Morality of Laughter

By F.H. Buckley

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2003

ISBN 0-472-09818-7

Why is humour so hard to understand? Rather like attempts to explain how music can move us, attempts to explain why things are funny seem doomed from the outset.

Discussions of humour typically distinguish three kinds of theory: the incongruity theory (we are amused by the incongruous), the relief theory (humour is an expression of relief in difficult situations) and the superiority theory (we laugh to express our sense of superiority over others). In the face of genuine humour, theories like these can seem pedestrian and unconvincing. F.H. Buckley's book is, unfortunately, no exception to this rule. Coming from the superiority camp, the book defends two theses about humour. (Professor Buckley's own word is 'laughter', but it is clear that he is really interested in why we laugh rather than laughter itself.) The first is what he calls the 'Positive' thesis: that all humour is the expression of a sense of superiority over someone else, whom he names 'the butt'. The second he calls the 'Normative' thesis: that those who laugh really are superior to the butt.

Neither thesis stands up to scrutiny. The Positive thesis has some initial plausibility, but it isn't generally true. As Buckley's examples show, a lot of humour does involve laughing at others; and often when we laugh at others, this can sometimes involve thinking of them as inferior. But this need not always be so. Mimicry and mockery among friends and families need not involve any belief in the inferiority of those who are its objects. When parents laugh at the things their young children say, it is absurd to suppose that this must be because they think the children are inferior in some way. Other examples abound. Buckley himself mentions puns and the absurd as potential counterexamples to his theory, and while perhaps they are not

humour's most refined manifestations, appreciation of these things can nonetheless be part of what it takes to have a good sense of humour. Buckley's attempts to dismiss these counterexamples – in effect, by inventing a 'butt' for them or by saying that they are not really amusing – are not in the least convincing.

The Positive thesis, then, suffers the deficiencies of the other theories of humour: it is not true, since it only concentrates on one aspect of the comic. But at least it has some plausibility, unlike Buckley's Normative thesis ('the butt is truly an inferior person'). This idea only needs to be considered for a moment in order to see how silly it is. And Buckley himself drops it almost as quickly as he puts it forward, noting that 'decidedly inferior people laugh', so 'the Normative thesis cannot be accepted without reservation'. But if the reservation is that the thesis isn't true, then we shouldn't accept it at all. Not only can inferior people laugh, but we can be wrong about who is inferior. The matter is barely worth discussing.

Buckley's real interest, however, is not his Normative thesis, but the connection between the importance humour has in our lives and the question of how to live. This is what he calls the 'morality of laughter'. The idea seems to be that humour is a good indicator of the presence of certain important virtues – the 'social' virtues of integrity, moderation, fortitude and temperance, and the character virtues of grace, taste and learning. To link his real interest here with his ostensible theme, Buckley calls these (rather confusingly) the 'comic virtues'. He believes that we detect and refine our sense of these virtues, each occupying an Aristotelian mean between two vices, by noting what we find it natural to laugh at. Most of the book involves articulating this picture of the relationship between humour and the good life, illustrated on the way with a rather exhausting collection of examples from what sometimes seems like the entire canon of Western culture.

Buckley is surely right about the centrality of humour in our lives, and its role in detecting and regulating what we value. But in tying his account of humour so closely to *moral* issues he is in danger of mimicking the attitude of the priggish and puritanical defenders of the politically correct who are his main target. Buckley complains about the tendency in for scholars in the humanities today to politicize every issue, even issues which do not lend themselves to it. This is worth saying, but Buckley himself comes close to committing a comparable academic sin: the tendency to moralise every issue. At one point he quotes approvingly a commentator on Aristotle who says that these days the question ‘how should one live?’ has been replaced by the question ‘how should one morally live?’ and that this is a regrettable narrowing of the concerns of earlier times. But Buckley does nothing to broaden the concerns: by focusing only on how our laughter targets the inferior, he reduces the role of humorous person to that of the supercilious arbiter of good morals and good taste.

Buckley says that books about humour should be judged by one standard: whether they are funny. Despite the ebullient, well-read personality which emerges from these pages, it has to be concluded that if this is the standard, the book does not succeed. The bad signs are there in the opening pages, where the second example of a joke is one of Freud’s: ‘This girl reminds me of Dreyfus. The army does not believe in her innocence.’ Perhaps this was funny when Freud said it; but I challenge anyone to honestly say that they find it at all funny now. And this isn’t because it is immoral or in bad taste; it just isn’t funny.

The fact that jokes can change from being funny to not being so is something which this study of humour, like many others, tends to ignore. But the key to understanding humour must somehow lie in the fact that whether something is funny

depends not just on what is said, but essentially on who is saying it, how they say it, to whom they are saying it, and when and where they are saying it. It is unlikely that any decent theory of humour will get anywhere without taking into account this simple truth. It may be for this reason that drawing examples from the timeless classics of world literature is not going to be the best way of illustrating a thesis which really tries to get to the heart of what is funny.

Tim Crane
University College London