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What Could It Mean to Say That Today's Stand-Up Audiences Are Too Sensitive?

ABSTRACT

Contemporary comedy audiences are accused by some comedians of being too morally sensitive to appreciate humor. To get closer to an answer, I will first briefly present the argument over audience sensitivity as found in the nonphilosophical literature. Second, I then turn to the philosophical literature and begin from the idea that “funny” is a response-dependent property. I present a criticism of this response-dependence account of “funny” based in the claim that funniness is not determined by what normal audiences actually laugh at, but by what merits laughter. Third, I argue that excessive or deficient moral sensitivity distorts audience receptivity to humor. Fourth, I turn to candidates for ideally sensitive audiences. I conclude by returning to the particular cases of supposed oversensitivity or undersensitivity to jokes to see how we might judge them.

In 2018, comedian Nimesh Patel had his mic cut and was asked to leave the stage while performing stand-up as part of an event hosted by the Asian-American Alliance at Columbia University. Representatives of the organization dedicated to the “political, social, and personal empowerment of Asian Americans as well as other marginalized groups” decided that his jokes about racial identities and sexual orientation were morally offensive and not suited to the event’s ideals and he was made to stop performing. The joke in question was about how Patel lives in New York City’s Hell Kitchen and his community included gay black men who would criticize his clothing. He joked:

This is how you know being gay can’t be a choice—no one would choose to be gay if they’re already Black. No one is doubling down on hardship. No Black dude wakes up and thinks that being a Black man in America is too easy. No Black dude says, ‘I’m going to put on a Madonna halter top and some Jordans and make an Indian dude real uncomfortable.’ That’s not a choice. (Patel 2018)

This stirred a discussion in the student paper. Some thought his comedy about ethnicity was offensive and inappropriate. Others said that he should have been informed of the event’s boundaries or perhaps they should not have invited a comedian at all. And still others were non-plussed by Patel’s set. In the end, the Asian-American Alliance apologized “for the hurt that his words caused members of the community” and, despite cutting Patel’s mic, “invite[d] and welcome[d] dialogue” (Wright 2018).

For many comedians, this event was but another example of the oversensitivity of today’s stand-up comedy audiences. They claim that there has been a recent wave of “outrage culture,” particularly on college campuses, that has threatened free speech and the right of comedians to speak truth to power. In this article, I attempt to make sense of this charge that stand-up audiences today are “too sensitive.” What would it mean for audiences to be morally sensitive in such a way that makes them poor judges of what is funny and what should be said on stage?

To get closer to an answer, I will first briefly present the argument over audience sensitivity as found in the nonphilosophical literature. Second, I then turn to the philosophical literature and begin from the idea that “funny” is a response-dependent property. I present a criticism of this response-dependence account of “funny” based in the claim that funniness is not determined by what normal audiences actually laugh at, but by what *merits* laughter. Third, I argue that excessive or deficient moral sensitivity distorts audience receptivity to humor. Fourth, I turn to candidates for ideally sensitive audiences. I conclude by returning to the particular cases of supposed oversensitivity or undersensitivity to jokes to see how we might judge them.

This approach reflects my metaethical commitment based in pragmatist moral philosophy, though its contextualism has historical roots in virtue ethics’ idea of practical wisdom. According to the pragmatist model, the purpose of moral philosophy is to refine the conceptual tools that allow us to resolve concrete, problematic situations found in lived experience. There are no a priori answers to moral problems, and moral abstractions must be “cashed out” by how they allow us to more intelligently resolve situations. That is why the question in the title is not “Are contemporary stand-up audiences too sensitive?” The correct answer is always, broadly speaking, “it depends.” However, philosophical reflection allows us to understand what it depends on. That explains the structure of this article: we begin with everyday examples and nonacademic arguments regarding audience offense at jokes, use philosophical tools to articulate the underlying issues, and then return to the problematic situation with refined tools to help us better judge and resolve them.

I. THE CONTROVERSY

Examples of supposedly oversensitive audiences have been exploited to further the narrative that free speech is under assault by the progressive Left, but critics’ concerns are not entirely unfounded. There have been a number of instances in which comedians have received angry criticism and have been shouted down by college audiences. In addition to Columbia University, there have been documented cases over the

last few years at Purdue University, Rutgers University, Reed College, Washington State University, and others (Can We Take a Joke? 2016, Donnelly and Zerbib 2015, Bodenner 2017, Mack 2018). As a result of their morally offending audiences, comedians have lost their jobs, suffered death threats, and even been attacked on stage.

This has led some comedians to claim that college campuses are no longer fit places for comedy. Notoriously, Jerry Seinfeld stated in an interview with ESPN that “I don’t play colleges, but I hear a lot of people tell me, ‘Don’t go near colleges. They’re so PC.’ ... They just want to use these words: ‘that’s racist,’ ‘that’s sexist,’ ‘that’s prejudiced.’ They don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.” (Seinfeld later recanted.) Another well-established comedian, Chris Rock, has accused college audiences of being too conservative. “Not in their political views—not like they’re voting Republican—but in their social views and their willingness not to offend anybody.” Similar charges against college (and other) audiences have been brought by John Cleese, Patton Oswalt, Dan “Larry the Cable Guy” Whitney, Bill Maher, Jim Norton, Judy Gold, Gilbert Gottfried, Lisa Lampanelli, Dennis Miller, and Dave Chappelle (Silman 2015). Conservative journalist Caitlin Flanagan investigated the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA), the main booker of comedians and other performers on college campuses. She found that the student bookers were sincere and well-meaning, but ultimately rewarded bland, unchallenging comedians who satisfy racial and sexual diversity requirements for fear of offending anyone on their campus (Flanagan 2015).

Whether comedians are criticizing college audiences or contemporary stand-up audiences generally, they express a series of shared complaints: today’s audiences are motivated by a self-congratulatory righteousness that makes them feel empowered and publicly signals their virtue. They claim a right not to be offended and an accompanying right to “cancel” those who offend them, but no one has such rights. Audience censorship poses a threat to free speech and to the specific power of comedy to speak truth to power, to push boundaries, and to speak where others do not have institutional permission to do so. If we ban all potentially offensive speech, then there will be no comedy left, as all subjects

are potentially offensive.¹ Rather than censor comedy, the easily offended should not come to stand-up shows in the first place. Ultimately, these comedians argue that audiences are “soft,” with thin skin and an unwillingness to confront darker or more challenging topics. Jim Norton, a comedian and prominent defender of offensive comedy, believes that “if you think you have a right not to be offended, either change the parameters of what offends you or just realize you are wrong. Those are your two choices” (Can We Take a Joke? 2016).

Needless to say, these accusations have been met with great resistance. First, because it is easy to find countless historical examples of people complaining that hypersensitivity is ruining comedy, and yet great comedy is still with us. (That said, there is an equally long history of people offended by the most harmless of jokes.) It is then odd to say that today’s “woke” culture renders comedy too difficult, given that we are currently living during a comedy boom. It is no coincidence that the accusers above are predominantly heterosexual, older, and/or Caucasian men in an increasingly pluralistic society. They have greater social power and have not been the historical butt of jokes. Perhaps they feel threatened, but even “canceled” comedians remain successful and free to express themselves.

Lindy West, a former comedian who now writes on cultural and political issues, concedes that some people truly are humorless but believes that contemporary audiences’ criticism of comedy arises not from oversensitivity but from the inclusion of previously marginalized voices and an expansion of basic moral decency. “What *Seinfeld* and some other comedians see as a threat, I see as doors being thrown open to more and more voices. ... It’s so-called political correctness that gave me the courage and the vocabulary to demand better from the community I love” (West 2015; see also *Women in the World Summit* 2019). As Andy Kindler said in his “State of the Industry” speech at the 2019 Just for Laughs festival, “I hear a lot of old white male comedians, they’re complaining all the time. They complain about how easy it is to offend people these days. It was always easy to offend people! It just wasn’t easy for them to tell you about it!” (Kindler 2019). Social media in particular has lowered the barriers to speaking

back. Audience resistance to comedians is then not a threat to free speech, but its expansion, as people who have previously been unable to speak or be listened to can now express their justified offense.

This reflects an expansion of empathy. Contemporary audiences no longer find jokes targeting racial or sexual/gender identity or sexual orientation funny because they are more morally sensitive to the marginalization of certain groups and, like all audiences, they are less receptive to humor they consider morally offensive (for more on the potentially marginalizing effects of humor, see Billig 2005, Lockyer and Pickering, eds. 2006). Comedians should not fear being called unfunny or being censored as long as they “punch up,” that is, choose their targets correctly rather than punching down at the socially marginal (Zoller Seitz 2016, Berteaux 2015). According to Hannah Gadsby, whose recent comedy has focused on the marginalization of women, LGBT people, and the neuro-atypical, “If something as benign as political correctness can kill comedy, then comedy’s already dead” (Cornish and Hodges 2019).

Audiences have reversed the sensitivity charge by claiming that it is the comedians, too used to having their monologues unchallenged, who need to thicken their skin. For example, the immensely successful comedian Ricky Gervais came under criticism for jokes he told while hosting the 2016 Golden Globes ceremony about transwoman Caitlyn Jenner in which he “dead-named” her by referring to Caitlyn as Bruce. Perhaps ironically, Gervais has claimed that while comedians have the right to free speech, audiences have the similar right to criticize them, and it is up to the comedian whether or not to care about those criticisms. Gervais has tended not to ignore criticism. In his 2018 special, *Humanity*, the largest chunks were dedicated to defending himself from the charges and doubling down on the trans humor by joking that “I’m not one of these bigots, who think having all that done is science gone too far... In fact, I’ve always identified as a chimp. Well, I am a chimp. If I say I’m a chimp, I am a chimp. And don’t ever dead-name me, from now on you call me Bobo. I’m going to have species realignment” (Gervais 2018). Comedy critic Garret Martin contends that “Like so many middle-aged comedians

today, he needs you to respect his decision to say whatever kind of lazy, dismissive junk enters his brain, even if it effectively denies the humanity of others, while he seemingly takes great offense at any amount of criticism lobbed his way. He acts tough but might be the weakest man in show business today” (Martin 2018). If the comedian’s solutions are for the audience not to listen or to thicken its skin, contemporary audiences’ is to tell comedians to write better jokes or to toughen up themselves.

We now have a brief sketch of the popular controversy over the claim that contemporary stand-up audiences are too morally sensitive. Put simply, boundary-pushing comedians believe audiences are too sensitive to appreciate comedy, while critical audiences counter that they are appropriately sensitive while comedians are both under-sensitive toward the butt of their jokes and oversensitive to criticism. The controversy pivots on what, exactly, is the appropriate level of moral sensitivity. To get closer to an answer, let us take an abstract turn through the idea that “funny” is a response-dependent property before coming back down to Earth.

II. THE RESPONSE DEPENDENCE OF “FUNNY”

It is widely held that funniness is a response-dependent property. To make sense of this notion, consider the difference between mass/extension and color. We might say that whether an object has mass and takes up space does not depend on whether we perceive it. We are able to imagine an asteroid racing through space having mass and extension without also imagining someone perceiving it as having those properties. It is more difficult to imagine that asteroid being red without also imagining some possible person perceiving it as red. We might imagine that the asteroid reflects light at certain wavelengths, but for it to be red, it must tend to be perceived as red by some being with a certain kind of receptivity to certain wavelengths of light. Red entails some mind that responds in certain ways. So too for sounds, tastes, smells, being pleasurable, being cold, and so on. In addition, the response must be that of a normal person under standard conditions. If a person were blind or had red–green color blindness, we would not take their response as the standard

for whether something is red. At least in part, what we mean by “red” is the response it tends to evoke in a normal person under standard conditions.

This claim about the response dependence of secondary qualities is relatively uncontroversial. The greater controversy is when we turn to evaluative properties, as when we make aesthetic or moral judgments. On the one hand, the history of philosophical aesthetics is full of object centered accounts of aesthetic value, such as its representative power, its form, or its expressive power. On the other hand, there is the belief that beauty is in the eye of the (normal) beholder (under standard conditions). While some argue for the response dependence of value (for example, Strawson 2003, Johnston 1989), others resist, particularly regarding moral judgments (Zangwill 2003). The latter is consistent with the common intuition that an act such as murder is wrong in itself and not because we disapprove of it. As this debate is far too expansive to cover here, let us focus on the matter at hand—the response dependence of funniness.

II.A. *Getting Laughs*

Certain evaluative properties seem to be clearly response dependent: scary, disgusting, shameful, and funny. It is not possible to make sense of these properties without imagining the emotional response they are disposed to evoke. A horror movie is scary if it evokes fear, a corpse is disgusting if it evokes revulsion, and an act is shameful if it evokes disapproval. Likewise, a joke is funny if it tends to get laughs. This echoes the common saying among comedians that “the audience tells you what’s funny about you.” To claim that a joke is funny but that it does not, nor would not, ever amuse any audience makes no sense at all. Put more precisely, the opening version of the response-dependence claim is: “something is funny if and only if we are disposed to be amused by it under appropriate attentive conditions” (López de Sa 2017, 46) or “the funny is that what typically elicits amusement; that is, something is funny to the extent that people are typically disposed to respond to it with amusement under standard viewing conditions” (Shoemaker 2017, 485; see also Levinson 2006, 396; D’Arms and Jacobson 2006, 196).

The response dependence of funniness fits with the intuition that, if we lived in a radically different world and we had radically different sensibilities, then what is funny would also be different. What is funny in one time, place, or culture may not be so in another.

At this early point in the argument that funniness is a response-dependent property, it follows that it is not possible for audiences to be too sensitive because the response the audience is disposed to have, no matter what it is, sets the standard. If audiences are disposed to feel amusement and laugh at the joke, then it is funny, by definition. If they tend to become morally outraged and cut the comedian's mic, then it is not funny. If a comedian complains that contemporary audiences are too easily outraged and need to thicken their skin, they have little ground to stand on. Funny is as the audience tends to respond.

However, even the simple dispositional model of response dependence does not state that the presence of amusement or laughter alone is sufficient to establish that a joke is funny. While funniness is what evokes amusement, it must be among normal people under standard conditions. Consider a few abnormalities. First, there are subjective conditions for amusement. People with gelastic epilepsy, under the influence of nitrous oxide, or who have pseudobulbar affect because of a brain injury do not determine whether a blank wall is funny, no matter how amused they happen to be. Likewise, if a person is suffering from some physical or psychological impairment that causes anhedonia such as clinical depression, then their inability to laugh does not mean that the joke was not funny. Second, there are environmental factors. For example, there might be a loud, distracting group talking in the back of the comedy club or a rancid smell from the kitchen ruining the crowd's mood. Third, some jokes rely on having particular knowledge, like late-night satire that requires that the audience know how corrupt the President's moral character is. Whatever the particular reason, there are many ways that an audience may be abnormal for the purposes of a response-dependent definition of funniness.

Of particular importance for the issue of oversensitivity, an audience may not laugh because of another overriding emotional response. A person or audience may be overtaken by sadness

that prevents them from being amused. Stand-up sets do not typically happen at funerals, though those with a dark sense of humor may be disposed to laugh at the same jokes once they have some emotional distance. A person being chased by a bear would be overwhelmed by fear and not likely to feel amusement, though they might laugh hysterically or others at a distance may laugh at what is happening. A person smelling rotting meat will also find it difficult to feel amusement rather than disgust. For the response to be that of a normal person under standard conditions, they would need a sufficient degree of emotional equanimity in order to feel amusement. In a moment, we will discuss how moral outrage may disturb this equanimity.

II.B. *Deserving Laughs*

But first, there is a serious problem with the descriptive-dispositional model of response dependence I have presented so far. As currently defined, a joke is funny if it disposes normal people to feel amusement under standard conditions. This reduces the normative judgment "that joke is funny" to the descriptive observation that "certain audiences are disposed to laugh at it." But this runs counter to the seeming fact that audiences' responses to jokes could be wrong. It seems perfectly reasonable to say that what a person or even an entire audience is laughing at simply is not funny, no matter what they might think. As Patrick Todd notes, "The uncomfortable implication would seem to be that, if we did (or were inclined to) laugh at genocide, then genocide would be funny. ... If we were all inclined to laugh at genocide, it would say more about us (and our moral cravenness) than it would be about the amusing and humorous qualities of mass murder" (Todd 2016, 236).

Rather, the judgment "that joke is funny" states not what audiences actually do, but what they ought to do. "To call something funny is in some way to *endorse* amusement at it, not to report or predict it" (Jacobson 2011). The person making this judgment is claiming that others should be amused by a joke and, if they are not, then they are mistaken or unreceptive to humor for some reason. Whether the joke tends to evoke feelings of amusement or laughter does not define funniness; rather, audiences tend to

laugh because it is funny in itself. In sum, the claim is that funniness is response independent.

However, that claim is unpersuasive. First, recall the reasons already given in the previous section regarding the seeming response dependence of funniness. Specifically, for funniness to be response independent, we would have to accept the possibility that *every* audience's sense of humor could be systemically, radically out of touch with what is actually funny, which is very difficult to accept (López de Sa 2013, 386–388). While it is conceivable that any particular audience may have judged poorly, it is odd to imagine a funny joke that has been misjudged by every actual or possible audience. Second, consider the most widely supported account of humor's funniness: incongruity. Even this account of funniness does not support response independence. Incongruity must be the sort that evokes amusement rather than the sort that evokes fear or mere curiosity, to note only two possible nonfunny cases of incongruity (D'Arms and Jacobson 2006, 194–196; Shoemaker 2017, 486–487). Wherever one stands on the necessary and sufficient conditions required for something to be funny—assuming such conditions could ever be found for such a complex phenomenon as humor—it would seem that at least one element must be that it evokes amusement in some audience.

Because neither descriptive response dependence nor response independence works, some have sought a middle position that acknowledges the response dependence of funniness while not reducing it to just any audience response. This position has been given many names, such as sentimentalism, fitting-attitude theory, and merited-response theory. What they have in common is the contention that “the funny just is whatever merits amusement (the amusing). That is to say, something is funny if and only if, and in virtue of that fact, it merits amusement” (Shoemaker 2017, 488). Something is merited if it is fitting that we respond in a certain way. Funny jokes are amusement-worthy because it is fitting that we judge something amusing and respond with a pleasant feeling and a tendency to laugh. Audiences are mistaken when they fail to judge, feel, and act in this way when it is merited by the joke, or do when it is unmerited. It is a matter of having sufficient good reasons, of being justified in one's amusement.

The most well-known advocate of the merited-response approach to art and to jokes in particular—even coining the term—is Berys Gaut. He holds that a morally flawed joke is necessarily less funny because it aims to evoke an unmerited response: “a comedy presents certain events as funny (prescribes a humorous response to them), but if this involves being amused at heartless cruelty, we have reason not to be amused. Hence, the work's humor is flawed, and that is an aesthetic defect in it” (Gaut 1998a, 196; see also Gaut 1998b, 55). Because unethical perspectives are never warranted, a joke fails in its aim to make us take up that position and laugh. Audiences may in fact laugh, but they should not have. Despite its strengths, his merited-response argument has come under criticism, as we will see in the next section. But for the moment, it is enough to note that Gaut does not define an audience's optimal level of moral sensitivity except to say that one should never entertain an immoral perspective because such a position is, by definition, unjustified.

A normative approach to response dependence is worthwhile. In the merited-response approach, the definition of “funny” is still essentially linked to how audiences respond, but jokes merit that response (or do not) because of properties that do not reduce to how any particular audience responds. Of course, different audiences can and do disagree over what properties of a joke merit laughter. One may focus on its cleverness or how it pushes boundaries while another may require that it not morally offend. Nevertheless, the essential issue has shifted from a descriptive account of what audiences tend to laugh at to a normative debate over what properties merit laughter. Despite their clashing senses of humor, different audiences may agree that amusement is not the fitting response in just any case, even if people have in fact laughed.

III. BEING TOO SENSITIVE TO JUDGE JOKES

These two versions of response dependence, both normative and descriptive, allow us to get a better sense of what it could mean when people say that audiences are “too sensitive.” In the normative response-dependence model, saying “this is funny” or “this is not funny” is a matter of what response one should or should not

have to the joke, and audiences may be having responses they should not. The strongest version of this claim is that moral offense is not a fitting response to jokes, at least when we are trying to determine whether they are funny. This is behind comedians' objections that their material is "just jokes" and that today's audiences are humorless prigs who insist on bringing their morality into comedy clubs. Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson accuse critics like Gaut of committing the "moralistic fallacy": "to commit the moralistic fallacy is to infer, from the claim that it would be wrong or vicious to feel an emotion, that it is therefore unfitting. ... To infer that offensive jokes are never funny, or even that their humor is always diminished by their morally dubious qualities, would be to commit the moralistic fallacy" (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000, 69 and 80). It may be fitting to feel amusement at a joke because of how well-crafted, insightful, or surprising it is, but the fact that it morally offends does not entail the conclusion that it was not funny. It is an example of what Jacobson terms elsewhere as the "wrong kind of reason" problem (Jacobson 2011). Amusement is fitting when we have good reason to feel it in response to a joke, but the fact that it is morally offensive is the wrong kind of reason for concluding that it is not amusing. Ironically, as audiences have grown more morally sensitive, they may also be "growing progressively less sensitive to an aspect of the funny" (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000, 81). These sensitivities may be at cross purposes.

This strong version of the argument opens up the debate about the relationship, if any, between aesthetic judgments and moral ones. Rivers of ink have poured into that debate and it is too much to discuss here. However, because the separation of aesthetic and moral judgment is controversial, we need not fully commit to Jacobson's position here. We may take the weaker and less controversial position that someone might mistakenly take *their* moral offense to be good reason to find a joke unfunny.

The moral offense of an ideally sensitive person might provide good reason, but the response of an undersensitive or oversensitive person would not. As we have seen, some audiences' responses are irrelevant to whether or not something is funny. Just as a color-blind audience would not define what is red, a depressed or humorless audience would not define what is

funny. Strong emotions can distort an audience's capacity to judge humor. Among the potentially distorting emotions is moral offense. An audience's moral oversensitivity may lead them to find a joke unfunny, or to claim that it should not be found funny, even when the joke warrants laughter. Likewise, an undersensitive audience may laugh, or claim that a joke should have been laughed at, when it did not warrant it.

This point has already been made about morally undersensitive audiences without controversy. Like Gaut, Noël Carroll and Aaron Smuts have argued that jokes that invite the audience to entertain an immoral perspective, like if the joke invites us to mock socially marginal groups, are never funnier for it. In reply to the objection that people with dark senses of humor actually do find comedy that entertains immoral perspectives funnier, Carroll asserts that such jokes are not found funny by "morally sensitive" people but only by those who are at a lower level of "moral development" or "ethical maturity" (Carroll 1996, 233 and 1998, 421; Carroll 2014, 251–252). Only a wicked person would laugh at wicked jokes and "we would not consider Satan or your garden variety sociopath the best judge of what is funny" (Smuts 2009, 155). Unfortunately, also like Gaut, Carroll and Smuts do not expand on what makes an audience morally insensitive—other than to say in a circular fashion that they laughed at what a morally sensitive person would not laugh at.

Likewise, heightened moral sensitivity can also suppress receptivity to humor. Consider moral disgust. Moral judgment has been shown to have ties to feelings of disgust. Just as the disgusted person is ill-suited to respond to jokes with amusement, a person's moral disgust may impair their ability to make well-founded judgments about funniness or the rightness of telling jokes (Prinz 2006). Or consider morally threatening humor. While not the same sort of fear felt when being chased by a bear, a racial, sexual, political, or religious joke may threaten one's identity or identity-constitutive beliefs. And when people feel threatened, they find it difficult to feel amused. Lastly, consider how a joke may ask the audience to take up a morally offensive viewpoint for the sake of the joke. We imaginatively resist engaging with jokes when they ask us to take up a viewpoint we consider morally repellent (Carroll 2000 and 2014). To

be found funny, the comedian must find a way to joke about potentially rough material that does not puncture the “playframe” that weakens the audience’s concerns about what is true or good and allows them to laugh (Gimbel 2017, ch. 7).

If a person is unwilling to play along and take up the perspective of a joke, for moral reasons or any other, then they are going to be unreceptive to its funniness. As argued by Daniel Jacobson, “if we are unwilling even to attempt to imagine what a work prescribes us to, then surely we are in no position to judge its aesthetic value. ...Such morally grounded resistance to engaging a work, however praiseworthy it may be, undermines one’s epistemic position for aesthetic judgment” (Jacobson 1997, 189). Put more simply, if an audience morally refuses to get into a position to enjoy a joke, they cannot say if it is funny.

Before turning to the next section, please allow a short aside. I have argued only that an audience may be so oversensitive or undersensitive that they are not good judges of what is funny, but this is not the only issue. The Asian-American Alliance at Columbia not only judged that Patel’s jokes were unfunny; they also judged that they were immoral and should not have been told. However, it is possible that the same moral oversensitivity that makes someone a poor judge of whether a joke was funny may also make them a poor judge of whether it was immoral to tell. Jacobson is also suspicious of moral claims about humor by those who are offended. “I am inclined to grant normative authority on matters of offense to those at whose expense a joke comes. ... Even on questions of offense, the authority of the slighted is by no means absolute. For one thing, unless you get the joke, you are in no position to judge either its humor or its offensiveness” (Jacobson 1997, 173). Aesthetic sensitivity is a necessary condition for reliable moral judgement of jokes. Ironically, if aesthetic judgment is impaired by excessive moral sensitivity, then moral judgment is arguably compromised as well. The moral rightness of a joke may or may not be response dependent, but we do have less reason to take certain people’s testimony as *evidence* of that wrongness. If an audience member objects that a joke was immoral to tell, then we must know something about that person’s fitness to endorse certain responses to the joke.

IV. THE IDEAL AUDIENCE

“Who gets to say when the line has been crossed?” Often, this question is used as a way of throwing up one’s hands and ending the conversation. It is another way of saying “no one gets to say, so we should refrain from making such judgments.” This would be a mistake. Sometimes, the line truly is crossed. And sometimes, a particular audience may be very well suited to judge jokes because of their ideal levels of moral and aesthetic sensitivity to humor.

One danger of the merited-response theory of humor is that it risks sharing problems with response independence. If it claims that audiences ought to laugh at something or that it merits amusement, the obvious question is to ask what, precisely, merits amusement? If it is exclusively the objective properties of the joke like wit, insight, incongruity, transgression, absurdity, or exposure of intellectual or moral vice, then the merited-response theory is very similar to the response-independent one. Both state that there are objective properties that warrant amusement and they are merely acknowledged by good audiences (though the latter adds the idea that we cannot make sense of “funny” without including reference to this acknowledgment). However, it is necessary to look to which audiences find these properties provide good reason to laugh. If an audience with refined aesthetic and moral judgment finds the joke unfunny and/or morally wrong to tell, then that is evidence that it merits such a response. To merit a response is then to merit that response *from certain people*. This side of the dialectic has been largely unexamined in the debate over the response dependence of funniness. Perhaps that is because everyone tends to believe that their level of aesthetic and moral sensitivity is the ideal from which everyone else deviates, as when George Carlin joked, “Have you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac?”

If we are trying to determine whether a comedian has crossed the line and told a joke that would offend the sensibilities of a reasonable person, then the obvious starting point is the offended audience. Since the beginning, some jokes have targeted socially marginal people or made individuals their “butt.” If we hope to determine which audience is best suited to judge

the funniness of a joke or whether it was right to tell, we would of course want to hear from those who have been targeted. Jokes can be used to denigrate, to ridicule, and to police social boundaries. Offended audiences would then have experience with such jokes and a *prima facie* expertise in identifying when a joke should not be told. They have unique perspective as to why something is genuinely offensive, a perspective that the comedian may lack. Telling them to keep quiet or exit the comedy club is then a doubling of the moral offense.

While they have a claim to set the ideal level of moral sensitivity, it is not an absolute one. First, as argued in the last section, an audience is ill-suited to make aesthetic and moral judgments about jokes when their moral offense prevents them from appreciating the joke as a joke. They must be receptive to what warrants amusement, and strong moral emotions may impair that. We have likely all been swept up in our moral reaction to a joke only to realize that we were too reactive.

Second, an audience may have an idiosyncratic response. Let me speak from personal experience. I have loved people who were suicidally depressed. As a result, I sometimes find it difficult to laugh at Maria Bamford's comedy about her mental illness and suicidal ideation. This is not because Bamford is not funny nor because she is telling morally offensive jokes. Bamford is indisputably a brilliant comic and, if those who know her are to be believed, a truly decent human being. Many find her jokes about her mental illness to be relatable and all the funnier because of it. Personally, I find it possible to laugh when her comedy is sharp or absurd enough but, at best, it is darkened with sadness. On some days, I might be morally offended that she made mental illness and suicide grist for comedy at all. But it would be unreasonable to use my response as proof that her suicide jokes are immoral, inherently unfunny, or out of bounds. It is just that I am particularly sensitive about this subject.

Third, even defenders of contemporary, morally sensitive audiences do not believe that sheer offense is sufficient to establish that a joke is not funny or should not have been told. Jokes that target people who are white/cisgender/heterosexual/men frequently come under fire from the political Right who

charge that it is bigotry under another name. Conservatives are offended by the political and religious satire that is standard on virtually every late-night comedy program, or by the frank discussions of sex or use of curse words that are common in comedy, yet their concerns are dismissed and they are told that they are unjustifiably sensitive. Others counter that skilled humor that "punches up" is funny and morally right to tell even if it offends the moral sensibilities of socially dominant groups. Satire is designed to offend, yet it is not wrong if the target is deserving of ridicule. For example, if *The Daily Show* were to accurately expose a politician's corruption, stupidity, or hypocrisy, then the fact that the politician or the broader society was offended would not render the satire unfunny or immoral.

This is not to claim that offended rightwing audiences are correct. It is only to note that not just any audience's offense sets the standard for the correct level of moral sensitivity. We must ask if the offense was appropriate or felt under the right conditions. While the fact of their offense should be respected, it must also be open to the demand that their moral offense be rationally justifiable. Of course, virtually everyone thinks their sensitivities are well calibrated and their offense is appropriate, but that is not necessarily the case. Without scrutiny, funniness and the moral rightness of telling jokes is defined by the most sensitive person in the room, and it is rarely a good idea to allow the extreme to set the standard for everyone. Therefore, simply asking targeted audiences to report their offense is not sufficient.

The other obvious candidate for the ideal audience is the comedian or the comedy community generally. In most matters, we value the judgment of experts. The offended audience has a strong claim to moral wisdom because of their experience with being targeted by jokes. Likewise, a professional comedian with experience at crafting jokes has a strong claim to aesthetic wisdom. It is reasonable to trust their judgment about what is funny and when a joke should not have been told. Of course, determining who counts as an expert on comedy, and how their social position functions in how they come to be called experts, is complicated (see Friedman 2014). It is certainly relevant in cases like those discussed here where there are gaps in class, race, and gender between those who joke and

those who are offended. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to respect the judgment of those with experience doing comedy over those who do not, all other things being equal.

However, there is a substantial distance between crafting and telling a joke and being joked about or laughed at. Experience with writing and telling jokes does not necessarily lead to expertise at judging the moral rightness of their jokes. First, comedians are often jaded and desensitized as they play to their peers, constantly trying to push boundaries to get laughs from “the back of the room” where the other comedians sit. Their moral sensitivity may be numbed due to years of telling jokes and seeking the next laugh. As they learn to “see the math” underlying the joke, they may focus too narrowly on the craft of the joke and lose a sense of how their jokes are denigrating others. While comedians are the experts on humor, members of marginalized groups have expertise in subtle denigration.

Second, as seen already, comedians often react defensively to criticism of their comedy. This is more than the fact that people generally do not like to be criticized. For some comedians, there is a financial incentive to maintain their position as an “edgy” comedian. More fundamentally, I suspect, such comedians see themselves as speaking truth to power and moral criticism is felt as an attack on their identity. Like anyone else, comedians can be, and often are, oversensitive to their own feelings of moral offense and undersensitive to the perspective of others.

V. LESSONS LEARNED

Given that whether a joke is funny and whether it is morally right to tell it are at least response dependent, and given that it is not possible to measure the appropriate response by uncritically following either offended audiences or comedians, what conclusions may we draw? It is not possible to say that audiences are too sensitive in the abstract. Rather, the appropriate level of moral sensitivity to comedy is a matter of the particular situation. In that spirit, let us return to the cases of Nimesh Patel and Ricky Gervais.

First, let us focus on the jokes themselves. If the jokes themselves were anodyne or even morally progressive, then a strong negative reaction reveals oversensitivity. Were their jokes the

sort that would strike a reasonable person as too much? Gervais compares being transgender with being a chimpanzee, which is literally inhuman. He also makes light of people’s gender identification, lazily following jokes used against the transgender community about identifying as an attack helicopter. In contrast, Patel’s point was that one’s sexual orientation was not a choice, which is typically a pro-gay rights point. People should not be discriminated against on the basis of their unchosen identity, as in the cases of race, class, or gender. It also shows sympathy for the hardships gay people must suffer. There are no attacks on this marginalized group.

A second issue regards how comedians respond to criticism. If they display defensiveness rather than understanding, or if it is part of a pattern of behavior revealing a vicious character, then there is reason to believe that the audience was appropriately sensitive. As noted, Gervais received criticism for his earlier jokes about Caitlyn Jenner. In a following interview, he said, “You mustn’t make [identity factors] the target to be ridiculed. ... You shouldn’t laugh at something they can’t help. ... Deep down, I want people to know I’m not a racist or a homophobe or a sexist” (Romano 2020). However, actions belying his words, he spent a large chunk of his next special displaying dismissiveness and disgust. Patel’s response was more nuanced. He admitted that his initial reaction was to call college students “soft” and “coddled,” he then reflected and recognized that they had the right to be offended. Though he ultimately argued that his joke was acceptable, and it was a shame that they cut off the conversation rather than extending it, he displayed understanding. He also admired the strength of this college generation as they have fought for gun control and environmental protection (Patel 2018). While all comedians should be given the room to tell boundary-pushing jokes, some display moral awareness and reflection while others do not.

Third, was the audience “normal” for the purposes of defining what is funny and right to tell? Gervais was telling his jokes to fans of his comedy in a theater context. However, as it was recorded for broad distribution, the actual audience is much larger. While transgender people and their allies have moral expertise on this issue, it is not clear if they are familiar with comedy and the expected suspension of our

serious, real-world commitments when listening to it. Further, when his jokes were removed from a comedic context and only read in the news media or shared on social media, they appear far more serious than intended. What offends in real life is usually given a pass in a comedy club. Therefore, it is not clear how familiar Gervais's audience was with the norms of comedy. However, in Patel's case, the audience was restricted to college students invested in racial justice. This gives us reason to believe that their level of moral sensitivity, particularly on issues of race, was higher than that of the typical person.

For these reasons, I believe that Gervais's audience was appropriately sensitive while Gervais himself was insufficiently sensitive to the trans community and oversensitive to criticism. At the same time, I believe that Patel's audience's reaction was not warranted and displays an oversensitivity to his jokes. Analyzing these two cases is philosophically useful only insofar as it results in developed tools for analyzing future cases in a more intelligent way. Cases like these allow us to better articulate the situational factors to be considered and the questions we should ask.

An audience that has an ideal level of comic receptivity, and thereby avoids the charge that it is too sensitive, attends to a host of situational factors: who told the joke? Do they have permission, issued in part by their audience, to joke about certain topics? What was the context of the joke? Who, if anyone, was targeted by the joke? These are all critical questions when determining the moral rightness of telling certain jokes in certain situations. However, the issue at hand is that of moral sensitivity. What questions should we ask when trying to determine if a response was merited? As we have seen, they include: does the joke itself warrant offense? How do criticized comedians and offended audiences respond to others' reactions? Do they have the moral and aesthetic expertise to make good judgments?

An ideal audience, the reaction of which provides good reason to believe that the joke was both funny and morally acceptable, has a number of qualities. First and foremost, they must be able to submit their reactions to rational scrutiny. This, in turn, requires that they must be able to pause for a moment to determine if their moral offense is appropriate given the

context and what they know about the moral character of the comedian. They must be able to reflect on whether they are acting defensively or idiosyncratically. They must have sufficient exposure to comedy to appreciate how it works, but not be so invested in it that they are blinded to the consequences of humor beyond merely getting a laugh. Comedians must be empathetic to those they joke about, while audiences must be generous in their judgment of the comedian's character (unless either has good reason to believe that the object of their criticism deserves it). They must acknowledge both that the changing moral beliefs of the audience will shape what is aesthetically and morally permissible to joke about, and that the comedian has every right to push the audience's beliefs and to encourage them to treat usually sacrosanct beliefs as comical within certain contexts. What rightly offends the moral sensibilities of audiences is always changing as social mores change, but it is also always contested.

The broad question of "are contemporary stand-up audiences too sensitive?" then resolves down into a host of particular contextual questions and to the general demand that we scrutinize the aesthetic and moral responses of both comedians and audiences. While it is not possible to answer in the abstract, this discussion has hopefully refined the tools to resolve particular situations more intelligently as they arise.²

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1. To cite an extreme example, insult comic Lisa Lampanelli once needed security to remove a man who rushed the stage because he was offended by her jokes about the 1980s rock band Journey.

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