# Aristotle on Wittiness: Verbally Abusing One's Friends in the Right Way

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Abstract: Aristotle claims, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, that in addition to being, for example, just and courageous and temperate, the virtuous person will also be witty. Very little sustained attention, however, has been devoted to explicating what Aristotle means when he claims that virtuous persons are witty or to justifying the plausibility of the claim that wittiness is a virtue. It becomes especially difficult to see why Aristotle thinks that being witty is a virtue once it becomes clear that Aristotle's witty person engages in what he calls 'educated insolence.' Insolence, for Aristotle, is a form of slighting which, as he explains in the *Rhetoric*, generally causes the person slighted to experience shame and anger. In this paper, I attempt to bring some clarity to Aristotle's claim that being witty is a virtue by examining why Aristotle thinks that the object of a witty person's raillery will find this joking pleasant.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*, Aristotle includes wittiness among the virtues and thereby implies that a certain sort of humour is not only an acceptable part of life but is required for a fully good and flourishing life. In addition to being, for example, just and courageous and temperate, the virtuous person will also be witty. Moreover, as is his practice with the other virtues, he warns against two associated vices: the vice of buffoonery and the vice of boorishness. Very little sustained attention has been devoted to making sense of exactly what Aristotle is claiming or to why Aristotle might plausibly think that wittiness is a virtue.[1] In this article, I aim to bring clarity both to the content and to the plausibility of Aristotle's claim. Aristotle's position is further complicated by the fact that the witty person is not simply a funny person generally speaking; the witty person engages in a particular type of humour, what we might call barbs or put downs, while relaxing with friends. My strategy is to clarify and make plausible Aristotle's claim that wittiness is a virtue by focusing on the question: what does the witty

 *Epoché,* Volume 24, Issue 2 (Spring 2020). ISSN 1085-1968. 323–336
DOI: 10.5840/epoche2020226157

person do such that the object of her joke is pleased rather than shamed and angered by the joke? I argue that once we gain a clear understanding of what sorts of jokes the witty person makes and in particular why the object of the witty person's raillery, and not just a more general audience, can take pleasure in the joke, the plausibility of treating wittiness as a virtue within Aristotle's general schema of the virtues, will become apparent. I also defend the claim that Aristotle's witty people, boors, and buffoons do make choices and thereby confirm the plausibility of Aristotle's treatment of wit as a virtue in the *NE*.[2]

## 1. An Initial Overview: Wittiness, Boorishness, and Buffoonery

In *NE* IV.8, Aristotle provides an explication of the virtue wittiness (*eutrapelia*) and of the vices boorishness (*agroikia*) and buffoonery (*bōmolochia*). He begins by identifying the need for such a virtue and indicates the context in which one will need to govern one's behaviour in a way that hits the mean, wittiness, and avoids both the deficiency of boorishness and the excess of buffoonery. He says: "[s]ince life includes rest as well, and in this is included leisure and amusement, there seems here also to be a kind of intercourse which is tasteful; there is such a thing as saying—and again listening to—what one should and as one should" (1127b33–1128a3).[3] The discussion that follows in the rest of the chapter makes clear that the amusement under consideration concerns humour and more specifically telling and listening to jokes. Moreover, as with the other virtues, excellence concerns not just what one does, but also one's affections. Wittiness governs the pleasure we take in making and listening to jokes (1128b7).[4]

The virtue relevant to telling and listening to jokes, while enjoying leisure time, is wittiness and witty people are those who joke in a tasteful (1128a10) or tactful (1128a18) manner. More specifically, Aristotle distinguishes between what a good, well-bred, and educated man and a vulgar, uneducated man will say and hear in jesting (1128a19–22). He points to the distinction between old and new comedies in order to illustrate the kind of difference in jesting he has in mind. He says: "[o]ne may see this even from the old and the new comedies; to the authors of the former indecency of language was amusing, to those of the latter innuendo is more so" (1128a22–24). Second, he does not make or listen to jokes that are unbecoming or that give pain and he is able to give delight to the hearer (1128a25–26). Finally, he recognizes that "the jest is a sort of abuse" and that just as lawgivers forbid certain kinds of abuse, the witty person is his own law concerning the kinds of jokes he won't tell or tolerate (1128a29–34).

In addition to wittiness, Aristotle identifies and describes two vices: buffoonery and boorishness. Buffoonery is characterized as missing the mean by carrying humour to excess (1128a5). By 'going to excess' Aristotle does not appear to mean simply that the buffoon tells too many jokes but rather that he aims

to raise a laugh by any means; he aims to cause laughter but doesn't govern his joke-telling according to what is becoming and he doesn't take sufficient care not to cause distress to those at whose expense his jokes are constructed (1128a4–7). Moreover, he doesn't spare himself in trying to raise a laugh (1128a34–b2). The boor, on the other hand, misses the mean through deficiency; this person won't make jokes or put up with other people's jokes (1128a7–10). Aristotle says: "[t]he boor, again, is useless for such social intercourse; for he contributes nothing and finds fault with everything. But relaxation and amusement are thought to be a necessary element in life" (1128b2–4).

Given the sparse details of Aristotle's account, it is unclear why Aristotle treats wittiness as a virtue and boorishness as a vice. It is, however, easier to understand why at least one way in which the buffoon goes wrong may be vicious; causing pain or distress to other people through one's jokes seems to reveal something about one's character in a way that refusing to tell or enjoy jokes or telling and listening to appropriate jokes does not. I think, though, that some insight into Aristotle's position can be gained by considering in greater detail what is involved in a witty person's jesting.

## 2. Wittiness as Educated Insolence

At *NE* 1128a27–28, Aristotle claims that one should not cause distress and should perhaps even bring pleasure to the object of one's teasing. He gives a fuller account of this point in *EE* III.7. The witty person, he claims, is the one: "who can produce what a good judge will be pleased at, even if the joke is against himself; . . . this definition is better than that which merely requires the thing said to be not painful to the person mocked, no matter what sort of man he is; one ought rather to please the man who is in the mean" (1234a19–23). A good joke, according to this passage, is one that will please the person who is in the mean, i.e., the person who is also witty, even if the joke is about this person. My guiding intuition is this: if we can understand why the object of the joke takes pleasure in the witty jokes of the joker (since this is the person least likely, it seems, to enjoy the joke), then we will see some of the subtleties of Aristotle's position in a way that clarifies the plausibility of taking wittiness to be a virtue.

In order to explore this issue, some further knowledge of the kinds of jokes the witty person tells is required. In the *NE* passages, as we have already seen, Aristotle tells us that jokes are a kind of abuse (1128a29–34). But, he doesn't claim that the witty person will refrain from engaging in 'abusive' talk; after all, the witty person is supposed to tell such jokes. He only suggests that there are some sorts of abusive jokes that the witty person will not produce and tell. In the *Rhetoric*, however, he provides more detail about what wittiness involves. And

at first glance his account makes it less rather than more clear why engaging in such a practice is a virtue.

In *Rhetoric* II.12, Aristotle claims that wit (*eutrapelia*) is educated insolence (*hubris*) (1389b11). In *Rhetoric* II.2, in his treatment of the emotions, specifically in his treatment of anger, he identifies insolence (*hubris*) as one of three forms of slighting. For Aristotle, being slighted is what typically causes a person to become angry. He says: "[a]nger may be defined as a desire accompanied by pain, for a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight at the hands of men who have no call to slight oneself or one's friends" (1378a31–32). Slighting, which Aristotle defines as "the actively entertained opinion of something as obviously of no importance" (1378b10), comes in three types: contempt, spite, and insolence (*hubris*) (1378b13–14).

Contempt is very vaguely defined as straightforward treatment of someone or something as unimportant (1378b14–16). Spite and insolence, however, are given a more detailed treatment. "Spite . . . is a thwarting another man's wishes, not to get something yourself but to prevent his getting it" (1378b16–22). It is his account of insolence, however, that is important for bringing clarity to what the witty person does in making jokes. Aristotle explains that insolence "consists in doing and saying things that cause shame to the victim, not in order that anything may happen to yourself, or because anything has happened to yourself, but simply for the pleasure involved" (1378b22–26).

So, the witty person is someone who engages in educated insolence. Insolence, as a kind of slighting, involves doing and saying things that reveal the opinion that something or someone is obviously of no importance. The insolent person says these kinds of things, things that would usually cause shame to the victim, just for the pleasure involved in doing so. But, in the case of the witty person, the one who practices educated insolence, she brings pleasure rather than shame and anger to the object of her wit.

With this more detailed account of what wittiness involves, I want to investigate a two-fold question: what sort of insolent treatment in the form of jokes or raillery might cause the object of such treatment to be pleased and delighted rather than angry and ashamed and what can this tell us about the character of the witty person?

While there has been very little sustained attention to this issue in the literature, there are two general lines of interpretation about what motivates the witty person when making jokes and what the source of pleasure is for the object of the joke. Fortenbaugh, in his article "Aristotle and the Questionable Mean-Dispositions," argues, first of all, that joke enjoyment or joke appreciation is the passion that motivates the witty person. According to Fortenbaugh, "we can . . . relate wittiness to enjoying a joke in much the same way that we relate courage to fear and good temper to anger" (1968: 217). Second, he advances what I call

'the identification with superiority' view of why the object of a witty joke takes pleasure in the joke rather than responding with shame and anger. According to Fortenbaugh, "[w]ittiness is having a proper disposition toward the laughable (*geloion*) and in particular toward jeering abuse" (1968: 217). The witty person who crafts the joke, on Fortenbaugh's view, takes delight in himself because he deems his position to be one of superiority (1968: 219). In his explication of the pleasure the insolent person gets from being insolent, Aristotle explains that: "[t]he cause of the pleasure thus enjoyed by the insolent man is that he thinks himself greatly superior to others when ill-treating them" (1378b26–27). The person at whose expense the joke is made, if he is also witty, will laugh "at the thrusts and jabs of another person because he is educated; he has learned to appreciate the one-upmanship of other gentlemen. Instead of feeling ashamed or angry, when he is the victim of a clever barb, he laughs out of sympathy and identification with the triumphant party" (Fortenbaugh 1968: 219). On Fortenbaugh's view, therefore, the object of the witty joke enjoys the joke rather than feeling ashamed and getting angry because he is in sympathy with the triumphant joker; or, in other words, his *identification with* the display of superiority manifested by the joker makes him amused rather than angry or ashamed. On Fortenbaugh's view, it seems, joking with friends during times of leisure is an exercise in confirming or displaying the superiority of the members of the group.

I think there are two main problems with Fortenbaugh's interpretation of why the object of a witty person's joke can take pleasure in the joke. First, it is difficult, on the 'identification with superiority' view to make sense of the aspect of buffoonery that has to do, not with the telling of indecorous or uncivilized jokes, i.e., those based in foul language, but with the hurtful aspect of buffoonery. Aristotle claims that one way in which the buffoon goes wrong is in telling jokes that are distressing to the object of the joke (1128a4–7). But, provided this joke is funny, the object of the joke should identify with the joker's superiority and be amused rather than hurt.

So, on Fortenbaugh's view, it is difficult to account for the aspect of buffoonery that is not merely indecorous but instead is hurtful. One might attempt to defend Fortenbaugh's view by claiming that the hurtful jokes the buffoon makes are distinguished from the indecorous jokes precisely because the abusive aspect hurts the object of the joke and blocks his ability to identify with the superiority of the joker. If the abusive joke makes the object of the joke feel inferior, then he will not truly be able to identify with the superiority of the joker.[5] The problem with this line of defense, however, is that on Fortenbaugh's view the object of the joke enjoys the joke because "he has learned to appreciate the one-upmanship of other gentlemen" (1968: 219). Since one-upmanship may be hurtful or not and appreciating one-upmanship is what makes the joke enjoyable, it is difficult to see how this allows for the buffoon to go wrong by telling a clever, but hurtful joke.

In other words, on Fortenbaugh's 'identification with superiority' view, it seems that the identification of the object of the joke with the superiority of the joker is based in the recognition of the skills of one-upmanship and this recognition cancels out or overrides the hurtful and angering potential of the joke. But, if this is true, then the buffoon should not be able to go wrong by being hurtful; yet Aristotle thinks that he can (1128a4–7).

Second, on Fortenbaugh's view, the joker successfully displays his superiority and the object of the joke, being a similar kind of person, identifies with and thus enjoys this display. Fortenbaugh, therefore, is making wittiness a virtue concerned with accurate self-display. Aristotle does think that accurate self-display or self-representation is a virtue; but he treats this virtue separately from wittiness. In *NE* IV.7, he identifies a nameless virtue which governs the sphere of truth-telling about one's own status. One ought accurately to represent oneself in conversation, claiming neither to be better or better off than you are nor to be worse or worse off than you are. In this way you avoid the vices of boastfulness and mock-modesty. On Fortenbaugh's interpretation of what the witty person does, therefore, the distinction between wittiness and the nameless virtue having to do with self-representation is collapsed. While both virtues govern our social interactions, wittiness is concerned with pleasure and is expressed in jests, while the other is concerned with truth (*NE* IV.8, 1128b4–8).

Another line of interpretation, one that departs significantly from Fortenbaugh's view, is advanced by Howard Curzer in his book *Aristotle and the Virtues*. Curzer argues that the affection relevant to wittiness is not 'joke-appreciation'; Curzer's witty person may not be a good joke teller or a good joke appreciator (2015: 167). What drives the witty person to tell and listen to jokes in the right way and what drives the buffoon to go to excess and the bore to be deficient is the feeling of friendliness. Curzer claims that "the characteristic passion motivating people to tell jokes is the passion of friendly feeling (*philia*)" (2015: 173). For Curzer, "we tell jokes not primarily because we like jokes but because we like others" (2015: 173). On Curzer's interpretation, "Aristotle's witty people tell jokes rightly because they have the right friendly feeling for others. They want to amuse the right sort of people, in the right way, at the right time, etc. Buffoons and boors tell the wrong jokes or no jokes at all because they have deficient and excessive friendly feelings, respectively" (2015: 173).

I think the general outline of Curzer's position has some advantages, but that his interpretation is mistaken in one respect and incomplete in another. First, with respect to the disagreement between Fortenbaugh and Curzer concerning the characteristic passion that motivates wittiness, I think that Curzer is mistaken to reject the idea that Aristotle's witty person is motivated by humour. On my view, the witty person understands that leisure and amusement are, as Aristotle tells us, necessary parts of life (1128b3–4). The witty person seeks to make a contri-

bution to amusing her friends while enjoying leisure time and she is motivated by the 'laughable' as the form the amusement takes. While I think that Curzer is right to reject Fortenbaugh's claim that the passion characteristic of wit is 'joke appreciation,' I nevertheless think that a desire to enjoy the laughable with others is the passion that motivates the witty person to tell and to listen to jokes.[6]

Curzer replaces being motivated by the 'laughable' with the passion of friendliness (2015: 173). While I do think Curzer is right to emphasize friendliness, I do not think friendliness plays the role of the motivating passion for wit. If friendliness, rather than the desire to enjoy the 'laughable' with others, is the characteristic passion motivating witty actions, it makes mysterious Aristotle's treatment of the laughable as the form the leisure and more specifically the amusement takes. If the witty person is simply motivated by friendliness and not by the laughable, then it is unclear why the witty person makes jokes at all. One could enact or satisfy feelings of friendliness in the sphere of leisure by cooking a delicious meal or by providing other forms of amusement such as telling an engaging story.

While I don't think that Curzer is right to reject the desire to enjoy the 'laughable' as the passion that motivates wit, I do think he is right to take friendliness into consideration. I suggest that while friendliness doesn't motivate the enjoyment of jokes, it does serve as an important and necessary constraint on how exactly one will enjoy (tell and listen to) jokes. Curzer claims that once we keep in mind that Aristotle is primarily concerned with jokes that are put-downs, it becomes clear that the important challenge is 'which jokes should we tolerate,' not 'which one's are funny' and Curzer claims that it is the passion of friendly feeling that drives the decision to tolerate or not tolerate jokes (2015: 173). I think he is right about this claim, but want to suggest that friendliness isn't the passion motivating wit but it is a constraint on the telling and tolerating of jokes. Specifically, as enjoyment of certain sensual pleasures is the passion governed by temperance (*NE* III.10, 1118a2–26), so the enjoyment of jokes with others is the passion governed by wit. But just as considerations of health, for example, put a constraint on the enjoyment of bodily pleasure, so friendliness puts a constraint on the jokes we tell and to which we listen.

Second, Curzer argues that the witty person has the right sorts of friendly feelings and that he will not tell hateful jokes. The standard of which jokes are hateful is set by the witty person. Curzer explains that for Aristotle "there is an objective standard of joke hatefulness, and that the witty person is a barometer of that standard" (2015: 176). Moreover, he explains that, while

> [t]here is always an objectively right thing to do, the right thing to do depends upon one's situation. So a certain joke may be hurtful or offensive in some situations, and tasteful and tactful in others (relative-to-us), but it is the witty person rather than the teller, listener, or butt who is qualified to make that determination. (2015: 176)

I agree with Curzer's interpretation, but suggest that his account should be supplemented by consideration of how the witty person constructs jokes that please rather than cause shame and anger to the object of the joke. Curzer rightly points out that the standard for which jokes are hateful is the witty person, but it remains unclear on Curzer's view what the object of the joke enjoys about the non-hateful put-down; it is, even if non-hateful, nevertheless a put down or, in Aristotle's terms, a form of abuse. That is, if X makes Y the object of her educated insolence and successfully avoids being hateful by not telling a sexist heteronormative joke, for example, it remains unclear on Curzer's view what exactly X did in constructing the joke and why Y might be pleased by being the object of X's verbal abuse.[7] Specifically, Curzer's account is incomplete because it does not provide sufficient information about what barbs and put downs it is acceptable for the witty person to tell and thus does not fully capture the way the witty person navigates her social world. I suggest below that Curzer's account needs to be supplemented with a consideration of the particularity of the object of the joke.

## 3. Wittiness, Anger, and Particularity

If a person is successfully to be witty by constructing a joke about some other person or something that person cares about, then, as Aristotle has explained, the joke must not distress and instead must please that person if that person is also witty. Since the witty person engages in educated insolence, it will be useful to determine the parameters the witty person can use in order to avoid shaming and angering the object of the joke since insolence, as a form of slighting, is typically what causes a person to become angry and ashamed. On the basis of a clue Aristotle gives us in *NE* IV.8, in combination with some details he provides in the *Rhetoric* about what is likely to cause shame and anger, I argue that the pleasure one feels in being the object of a witty person's raillery can be accounted for in terms of a) the witty person's display of her relatively detailed knowledge of the object of the joke and b) her implicit care and affection for the object of the joke.

At *NE* 1128a25–28, as part of his discussion of joking in the right way, Aristotle makes a claim that focuses on the particularity of the object of the joke. He says: "[n]ow should we define the man who jokes well by his saying what is not unbecoming to a well-bred man, or by his not giving pain, or even giving delight, to the hearer? Or is the latter, at any rate, itself indefinite, since different things are hateful or pleasant to different people?" Aristotle's attention, here, to the fact that what will delight a hearer is indefinite because different people find different things pleasant or hateful, helpfully points to the particularity or individuality of the object of the joke. So, while one must not tell indecorous jokes, one also must be mindful of the particularity of the hearer, including the particularity of the object of the joke.

In the *Rhetoric* II.2 discussion of anger, Aristotle articulates a similarly individualized account of what is likely to make a person angry. He tells us that "[e]ach man is predisposed, by the emotion now controlling him, to his own particular anger" (1379a21–22). He explains that "a sick man is angered by disregard of his illness, a poor man by disregard of his poverty, a man waging war by disregard of the war he is waging, a lover by disregard of his love" (1379a19–21). The witty person, therefore, in treating his friend insolently, should not direct his insolence, which involves treating something or someone as obviously of no importance, toward those things about which that person is predisposed to be sensitive.

Aristotle furthermore specifies, in *Rhetoric* II.2, that we are likely to get angry when we are: a) slighted in connexion with things we most care about and b) worried either that we are lacking or are perceived to be lacking, either completely or to some significant extent the qualities in question. He says that we are likely to get angry when slighted

> in connexion with the things we ourselves most care about: thus those who are eager to win fame as philosophers get angry with those who show contempt for their philosophy; those who pride themselves on their appearance get angry with those who show contempt for their appearance; and so on in other cases. We feel particularly angry on this account if we suspect that we are in fact, or that people think we are, lacking completely or to any effective extent in the qualities in question. For when we are convinced that we excel in the qualities for which we are jeered at, we can ignore the jeering. (1379a32–b2)

These two passages from the *Rhetoric*, in combination with Aristotle's claim that what will delight the hearer is indefinite, suggest that if the witty person is going to make a good joke at another's expense, a joke that is both funny and will not make this person ashamed and angry, then there are a number of things the joker needs to know about the object of the joke. In particular, the joker needs to know what's going on in the other person's life, what this person's particular worries and cares are, as well as what this person is likely to be sensitive and confident about concerning her character, actions, and values, both in terms of her own assessments of herself and in terms of how she thinks others regard her. If, for example, the object of the joke has recently gone through a break-up and lacks confidence in her ability to conduct intimate and meaningful relationships, or thinks that others in her social sphere think she is unable to conduct intimate and meaningful relationships, then making a joke that makes her seem frivolous and shallow will not bring her pleasure but instead will shame her and cause her to become angry.

So, if, as a joker, one knows both what the object of the joke cares about and which of those things she's sensitive or confident about, then one can tease her in a way that won't make her angry or ashamed. To make this a little more concrete, I want to look at a particular manifestation of insolence. One way to treat someone insolently is to rob her of the honour due to her. In *Rhetoric* II.2, Aristotle

explains that "[o]ne sort of insolence is to rob people of the honour due to them; you certainly slight them thus; for it is the unimportant, for good or evil, that has no honour paid to it" (1378b29–31). The witty person, then, may construct a joke meant to rob her friend of the honour due to him by making light of something the friend cares about. For example, suppose one is considering making a joke that makes light of a friend's philosophical accomplishments. If the object of the joke is confident in her philosophical skills and confident that others recognize her skill (say she has just published a book to great acclaim), then a joke constructed around withholding honour for her philosophical skill will not anger her. If, however, the object of the joke really cares about her philosophical skill and has just published a book that she suspects no one is reading, then a joke about how her new book makes an excellent door stop will not be appropriate.

So, on my view, provided one's joke is actually funny, the object of the joke can enjoy the funniness of the joke because one has navigated with sufficient delicacy to avoid teasing about things he is predisposed, given his life circumstances and particular sensitivities, to become angry over. I don't think, though, that the mere funniness of the joke at one's expense, when that joke also avoids the things likely to anger and shame one, fully captures the pleasure involved in being the object of a good witty joke. Two further things are enjoyable; first, the joker's ability to construct a joke that is not only funny but also doesn't anger the object of the joke requires the joker to have paid one a sufficient amount of attention that is very particular. The joker doesn't think only about what would shame or anger most people. She thinks about what is going on in the life of the object of the joke, about what he cares about, about what he is sensitive about, and about what the sources of confidence are in his life. So, the object of the joke can take pleasure in another's attention to his particularity.

Second, being the object of a good witty joke reveals the care and affection the joker has for the object of the joke. If the witty person has paid this much attention to the object, then she knows what sort of joke would hurt. One could make such a joke but one instead expresses affection and care for the object by not doing that. That is, if someone knows another in the kind of detail required to avoid telling a shaming joke, then they also know that person well enough to tell a joke that would hurt. But, the witty person expresses affection or care for the object by refraining from building jokes using that material.

## 4. Wittiness and Choice

In his description of wittiness, Aristotle makes an analogy between the subtle movements of the body and the subtle movements of the witty person's mind. He says: "[b]ut those who joke in a tasteful way are called ready-witted, which implies a sort of readiness to turn this way and that; for such sallies are thought to be movements

of the character, and as bodies are discriminated by their movements, so too are characters (1128a10–13). Although Aristotle appears straightforwardly, in the *NE*, to take wittiness as a virtue and to hold that we can judge a person's character by the movements she makes in the sphere of wit he does not consistently espouse this position. In the *EE*, Aristotle holds that wit is praiseworthy but is not an excellence because it does not involve choice (*prohairesis*) (1234a24–25). McAleer draws on the *EE* account and argues that Aristotle is right to deny that wittiness is a virtue because he is right that it does not involve choice. McAleer notes that wit cannot be a character virtue because it involves kinds of reasoning that are incompatible with choice (*prohairesis*). According to McAleer, wittiness involves quick thinking (*anchinoia*) (2015: 301) as well as doing things 'on a sudden' (*exaiphnês*) (302). McAleer draws on several passages in which Aristotle distinguishes these sorts of thinking from good deliberation and choice. First, he cites a passage common to the *NE* and the *EE* where Aristotle argues that good deliberation cannot be quick thinking (2015: 302). According to this passage, quick thinking is a species of good guessing (*eustochia*), but good deliberation isn't good guessing at all (1142b1–6). Second, he turns to *EE* 1226b3–4 where Aristotle denies that one can make a choice (*proaireitai*) 'on a sudden' (*exaiphnês*) (2015: 302). Finally, he looks to Aristotle's distinction between choice and voluntary action at *NE* 1111b8–10; here Aristotle allows that voluntary actions but not choices can be made 'on a sudden' (302).

Aristotle defines character virtue or excellence of character as follows: "[e]xcellence, then, is a state concerned with choice (proairetikē), lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (*NE* II.6, 1106b36–1107a2). On McAleer's view, wittiness cannot be a virtue because the kinds of reasoning (quick thinking) and doing ('on a sudden') involved in being witty are incompatible with the witty person making choices. On my view, however, even if we allow that the witty person, in making a joke, employs quick thinking and does it on a sudden, this is insufficient to show that the witty person does not make choices.

First, while the witty person may employ quick thinking in constructing a good and timely joke, it is a mistake to equate wit and quick thinking. McAleer mistakenly moves from the recognition that being witty will involve quick thinking to the supposition that wittiness is quick thinking. Thus, he is mistaken to conclude that the witty person does not make choices. For the sake of argument, grant that the witty person must employ quick thinking when constructing jokes. Rather than equating wit and quick thinking, I think there is a good model for understanding the relationship between wit and quick thinking in Aristotle's discussion of the relation between wisdom and cleverness. In *NE* VI.12, Aristotle claims that cleverness, which is the ability successfully to pick out and do the things that will bring about a given end, is praiseworthy or not depending on whether the end is good or bad (1144a24–28). A person who has practical wisdom must also be clever, but

this does not entail that practical wisdom is identical to cleverness (1144a28–9). Likewise, a person who is witty may also need to be quick thinking, but this does not entail that wittiness is identical to quick thinking. While success at being witty may require that one is capable of quick thinking such that one is able to hone in on the potentially humorous, such thinking is not all there is to wittiness.

Second, given the details I have proposed about how the witty person constructs her jokes, it becomes plausible that the witty person does make choices. For Aristotle, what distinguishes our choices from the other voluntary things we do is that our choices are preceded by deliberation (*NE* III.2, 1112a15). In *NE* III.3, Aristotle explains that "[w]e deliberate about things that are in our power and can be done" (1112a31) and "[w]e deliberate not about ends but about what contributes to ends" (1112b12). In the case of wittiness, the end or goal is to bring pleasure, by way of a certain type of joking, to one's companions in leisure. The witty person, in my view, deliberates about which jokes to contribute by considering not just whether or not she can raise a laugh with the joke, but also how to please the object of the joke. Her deliberations, as I've suggested, will include thinking about the particularities of the object of the joke and being guided by affection for this person. While of course one may be funny voluntarily but without choice, this is not what the witty person does.

Despite Aristotle's claim to the contrary in the *EE*, Aristotle's treatment of wittiness in the *NE* is compatible with the requirement that virtues involve choice. Moreover, I think that Aristotle is right to suggest, as he does at 1128a10–13, that the character of the witty person is revealed in the jokes she tells. What is revealed about a witty person's character through the moves she makes, on my view, is the kind and degree of attention she pays to others in her social sphere coupled with her affection for them while aiming to make a contribution to the good of leisure. The witty person is motivated by humour, but in making jokes at another's expense brings them pleasure not just on account of the funniness of the joke, but on account of a) the display of the level of attention she has given to the life-circumstances, sensitivities and sources of confidence of the object of the joke and b) the implicit care and affection that is manifest in choosing not to wound or hurt in order to raise a laugh. The buffoon, on the other hand, is motivated by humour, but in making jokes at another's expense either a) has failed sufficiently to attend to the object of the joke in her particularity or b) has engaged in a sufficient level of attention but lacks appropriate affection for the object of the joke. The boor, by contrast, either is not motivated by humour at all or is but won't tell jokes because he wants to avoid being hurtful but has not paid close enough attention to those in his social circle such that he could confidently make a non-hurtful joke. Being witty, therefore, is not simply a matter of being funny; interacting with those in your social circle, those with whom you will be relaxing, in an attentive and caring way reveals something about the kind of person you are.[8]

## Notes

1. Curzer 2015, McAleer 2015, and Fortenbaugh 1968 are notable exceptions; I discuss their work in later sections of the article. Others have engaged Aristotle's discussion of wittiness in interesting instrumental ways. Kraut 2006, for example, uses Aristotle's discussion of wittiness to support the claim, contra Irwin 1985 and Annas 1992, that Aristotle does not, in his ethical works, employ anything like a modern conception of morality. Others, such as Burnet 1900, include considerations about wittiness as part of an attempt to establish the chronological order of Aristotle's ethical treatises.
2. In the *Eudemian Ethics (EE)*, Aristotle denies that wittiness is a virtue on the grounds that it does not involve choice (1234a10–13). In the *Magna Moralia*, Aristotle leaves open the question of whether wittiness is a virtue (1193a36–38). I return to the question of whether Aristotle's witty people make choices in the final section of the article.
3. References to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), *Magna Moralia*, and *Rhetoric* are from Barnes (1984).
4. How exactly to interpret this claim is controversial; Bostock (2000: 47–8) denies that wittiness governs a particular passion. Fortenbaugh (1968: 216–21) and Curzer (2015: 171–4) disagree about whether the relevant passion is joke appreciation or friendliness. I return to the interpretive debate about this claim in section 2.
5. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for Epoche for raising this point.
6. Curzer argues, against Fortenbaugh, that while joke appreciation may plausibly govern listening to jokes (2015: 173), "it cannot possibly be the primary passion motivating the *telling* of jokes" (172). Curzer argues that since we already know the jokes we tell, the passion motivating joke telling cannot be joke appreciation (172). "That is why," Curzer claims, "we typically do not tell jokes to ourselves" (172). My suggestion that the passion motivating wit is the desire to enjoy the laughable with others can accommodate both telling and listening to jokes.
7. To clarify, I am not suggesting that Curzer is wrong to claim that there is an objective standard of joke hatefulness and instead that the subjective feelings of the butt of the joke in all cases determine whether the joke is hateful. Instead, I am exploring a case where the butt of the joke is also a witty person and thus is someone qualified to determine whether a joke is hateful or not.
8. I am grateful to Kathryn Taylor for extended discussion of this paper and to Madilyn Johnston for editing assistance. I presented earlier versions of this article at McMaster University and Wilfrid Laurier University and would like to thank the participants for insightful discussion and suggestions. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer of the paper for substantive and very helpful comments.

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