

# It's Not (Only) The Joke's Fault: A Speech Act Approach To Offensive Humor

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*Abstract.* Usually the ethics of humor revolves around the content of humor. After giving a synopsis and exposing some shortcomings of the recent controversies, this paper takes into account additional aspects and proposes a change of perspective from token to type level and deploys tools of the philosophy of language to tackle the question whether a joke as a *type* can be considered morally flawed irrespective of its tokens. After exploring possible ways one can think of to furnish evidence for the opposite position, two novel lines of argumentation based on counterfactual conditionals and speech act theory are provided to show that these ways aren't viable and that joke as types (even offensive jokes like sexist or racist ones) are ethically neutral. Moreover, the presented approach increases the resolution of the debate and provides a framework to capture other hitherto neglected questions of the philosophy of humor as well.

## 1. Introduction

In the course of time the philosophy of humor hasn't received much attention in particular. This generally applies even more to a subtopic of the philosophy of humor: the ethics of humor. As John Morreall writes in the introduction to his important anthology *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, this might be at least partly due to the treatment of humor as an ethically dubious matter by some of philosophy's most eminent thinkers like Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes. However, a couple of recent publications on the ethics of humor slightly changed the situation and more distinguished approaches have been developed as well as questions are reaching deeper now. In spite of some progress<sup>1</sup>, the main debate about the ethical status of humor, especially of its offensive variants, carries on.

To get a grip on the topic, this paper starts with an overview and evaluation of both the important questions to the ethics of humor and its recent controversies in order to settle their significance and to prepare for the following sections.

The central hypothesis I will argue for is that regardless of their content, jokes aren't per se morally objectionable. More specifically I will do this by addressing a question Smuts hitherto explicitly bracketed, namely whether a joke as a *type* can

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<sup>1</sup> See especially the thorough work of Aaron Smuts: Smuts (2009); (2010); for criticism of his approach see e.g. Shuster (2013).

be considered morally flawed irrespective of its tokens.<sup>2</sup> After exploring the possible ways one can think of to furnish evidence for the opposite position, I will provide two novel lines of argumentation by employing counterfactual conditionals and speech act theory in order to show that these ways aren't viable and that joke-types (even types of offensive jokes like sexist or racist ones) are ethically neutral.<sup>3</sup>

This new grasp presupposed, I will discuss some aspects which by many participants of the debate have been partly neglected as well as some proposals for future research in the last section. Intriguingly, the insights derived from the speech act approach to jokes will connect aspects like intentions and consequentialist features, hence leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the moral nature of both offensive and sound jokes.

## 2. *The Ethics of Humor*

### 2.1 *Overview*

In general the current debate about the ethics of humor revolves about three not entirely separated questions:

1. How are morally good or flawed properties and the funniness of humor interrelated?
2. On what terms is humor morally objectionable?
3. Under which conditions is humor morally appropriate or desirable?<sup>4</sup>

Although there's some literature on the therapeutic benefits, positive effects and social functions in the psychological and healthcare area, philosophy has focused rather on the first two questions than on the third. However, this doesn't implicate any ranking with respect to their significance – quite the contrary: for the ethically positive aspects of humor have received too little attention, I will shortly mention this topic at the end of this paper and suggest to devote more attention to it in the future.

Before I go into any detail, some remarks about my use of the terms '*humor*' and '*type*' might be due. '*Humor*' is an ambiguous term and can be used either to denote a dispositional trait of character, i. e. the tendency or ability to evoke amusement in fellow men, or as synonym for the comic or funny, i. e. that which causes amusement. It is the latter meaning of '*humor*' I employ throughout this article. '*Humor*' as '*the comic*' or '*the funny*' naturally captures a wide range of phenomena: jokes,

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Smuts (2010), 334 second footnote and Smuts (2009), 159 f.

<sup>3</sup> The referring to these genuine topics of the philosophy of language is also the reason I restricted this paper to jokes as purely verbal forms of humor.

<sup>4</sup> This trichotomy is of course a simplification. There are other topics of the philosophy of humor which are related to the ethics of humor, e. g. the discussion whether humor is an emotion in Morreal (1983). But since many of them can in their impact to the ethics of humor be regarded as facets of the second question, I won't treat them separately.

situations, pictures, even sounds and music<sup>5</sup>. Albeit jokes are only a subcategory of humor, this article deals primarily with jokes since there are many prima facie ethically dubious examples and they have several advantages (which will be discussed in 2.2.1) which make them easier to analyze. To what extent the results might be transferred to other forms of humor will be an interesting future question to address.

The term 'type' is similar ambiguous in our ordinary language. In this article I use 'type' strictly in the technical sense of the type-token-distinction, i. e. the type of X is a thing which tokens of X are instances of.

### 2.1.1 The comic moralism/anti-moralism debate

The first question of how moral properties and humor are connected might sure be an interesting question per se, but since it is also one of major importance to the answer to the second question (to which my main hypothesis is directed to), I will restrict my enquiry of this discussion primarily on the aspects relevant to exactly this relation. How things between moral properties and humor are is basically captured by the controversy between *comic moralism* and *comic anti-moralism*. Both positions comprise a strong and a weak variant.<sup>6</sup> According to this distinction, '*comic moralism*' denotes the strong version which can be characterized by the statement that the manifestation of flawed attitudes is sufficient to ensure that a joke isn't funny, whereas *moderate moralism* (as termed by Smuts<sup>7</sup>) is the weaker position that though a joke might maintain some residual funniness, the manifestation of morally flawed attitudes bears negatively on its humor. On the anti-moralist's site, the *amoralist* believes the strong thesis to be true that moral features and funniness don't interact at all. The *immoralist* on the other hand makes the weaker claim that moral flaws contribute to the funniness of humor.

For the sake of their plausibility all four of these are at least partly based on some intuitions many of us share; however the wheat gets separated from the chaff when it comes to their robustness towards counterexamples and objections. I dare to claim that everyone at least sometimes laughs at jokes whose content might prima facie be judged as immoral as well as everyone has made the experience that a joke might fail because of its moral flaws, e. g. if it is made at the expense of someone who doesn't deserve to be made fun of or if the joke is utterly insensitive in a given context. But taking into account only these common sense experiences, there isn't much to be inferred from this regarding the controversy yet. If anything, it shows that the strong version of both positions doesn't really fit our perception of the phenomenon. It's no wonder that due to their unattractiveness very few philosophers actually take up a stance on them; nor do I and therefore won't discuss moralism and amoralism as strong versions any further.<sup>8</sup> Thus, immoralism and mod-

<sup>5</sup> A fact the film-technique *Micky-Mousing* makes use of.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gaut (1998).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Smuts (2009). This position is also called *ethicism* in Gaut (1998).

<sup>8</sup> Those who want to concern themselves with moralism and amoralism to greater detail may refer to Gaut

erate moralism remain. The following table systemizes and summarizes the mentioned positions with respect to jokes and gives a formal sketch of their main thesis:

Position		Main thesis	Formal sketch
comic moralism	moralism (= strong version)	Moral flaws inhibit the funniness of a joke.	$\forall x \forall y: (J(x) \wedge F_m(y,x)) \rightarrow \neg F(x)$
	moderate moralism (= weak version)	Moral flaws reduce the funniness of a joke.	$\forall x \forall y: (J(x) \wedge F_m(y,x)) \rightarrow DF(y,x)$
comic anti-moralism	amoralism (= strong version)	Moral flaws and the funniness of a joke don't interact at all.	$\forall x \forall y: (J(x) \wedge F_m(y,x)) \rightarrow \neg(DF(y,x) \vee IF(y,x))$
	immoralism (= weak version)	Moral flaws increase the funniness of a joke.	$\forall x \forall y: (J(x) \wedge F_m(y,x)) \rightarrow IF(y,x)$

*Table 1:* Overview of the positions concerning the relation between moral flaws and humor in the case of jokes. The predicates abbreviate the following properties and relations:  $J(x) = x$  is a joke,  $F_m(x,y) = x$  is a moral flaw of  $y$ ,  $F(x) = x$  is funny,  $DF(x,y) = x$  decreases the funniness of  $y$ ,  $IF(x,y) = x$  increases the funniness of  $y$ . The formulas quantify over all situations in which a joke is uttered.

Now, there are several possibilities how this controversy can become relevant to the question under what circumstances humor might be judged as offensive or even morally wrong; let's first take a look on the role of anti-moralistic approaches. According to de Sousa some special sort of humor which he refers to as *phonic laughter*<sup>9</sup> relies on morally wrong attitudes to be appreciated by its audience: "In contrast to the element of wit, the phonic element in a joke requires endorsement. [...] The phonic makes us laugh only insofar as the assumptions on which it is based are attitudes actually shared."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore he argues that this engagement, by alienating the victim and wrong assessment of reality, constitutes a moral flaw in offensive humor: "phonic laughter [...] presupposes a very definite emotional engagement. If laughter is wrong, it is because this engagement is wrong."<sup>11</sup>

This implies that it has at least to be assumed that in some cases moral flaws *don't interfere* with, but rather *contribute* to funniness. In accordance with that, Bergmann lists five possible ways in which she thinks sexist beliefs can contribute or even constitute humor.<sup>12</sup> She furthermore characterizes sexist humor as jokes de-

(1998) or Smuts (2009). D'Arms and Jacobsen argue that moralists commit a fallacy in inferring that if it would be morally wrong to be amused by a joke, then the joke isn't funny. In claiming that moral considerations are irrelevant to considerations on amusement, they propagate a form of amoralism. Cf. D'Arms/Jacobson (2000).

<sup>9</sup> Philosophers of humor often distinguish between humor and laughter insofar as humor usually causes the latter, which is therefore simply treated as the effect of humor in the physical realm. De Sousa explicitly stated at the beginning of his essay that he uses the term 'laughter' as a synonym for humor and not to refer to the effect.

<sup>10</sup> de Sousa (1987), 240.

<sup>11</sup> de Sousa (1987), 244.

<sup>12</sup> Bergmann (1986), 70–74.

pended on these sources of humor to such an extent that without them, the humor wouldn't be funny anymore. She describes the ethical problem with these cases of humor as follows: "It is the insult of finding fun in an episode when part of the stage-setting that we have contributed to the episode, and that is necessary to the fun, hurts someone. [...] Whenever somebody tells or laughs at a sexist joke it is an insult to those people who have been hurt by sexist beliefs, whether the insult is intended or not."<sup>13</sup> Even worse, the social nature of humor might ultimately lead to reinforcement and consolidation of morally flawed attitudes when frequently referred to in a funny way<sup>14</sup> – a point which also Harvey insistently emphasizes.<sup>15</sup> Since all of the mentioned possibilities deploy rather immoralistic premises, the assessment of the relation between moral flaws and humor, i.e. the assessment of the four drafted positions is indeed important to the moral evaluation of humor. But since all four positions are eagerly disputed, so is immoralism.

Gaut argues that moderate moralism is the best theory to make sense of our experiences. It avoids the extreme consequences of moralism and amoralism and takes into account an aspect which he thinks leads immoralism to confuse the cause of amusement: the normativity of humor. "So it is not the *viciousness*, i.e., the fact that the jokes displays the vices that we relish in these cases: it is the fact that they hit their target, and the target *deserves* to be hit."<sup>16</sup> Hence, moderate moralism could both explain why it sometimes *seems* as if moral defects enhance amusement and sometimes, namely when the aggression towards the target isn't just, diminishes it.

Contrary to Gaut, Jacobson writes in his essay "In Praise of Immoral Art" in favor for comic immoralism: "Morally dubious jokes can be funny, I claim; and when they are, what is funny about them is often just what makes them offensive."<sup>17</sup> According to him, moral considerations don't determine whether or not the amusement perceived by hearing a morally flawed joke "fits its object"<sup>18</sup>, but that's not to say moral considerations and amusement are autonomous, since moral reservations still could render the comic value epistemically inaccessible which, without these reservations, might have been appreciated. Albeit his general notion that "the judgment that a joke is offensive does not settle the question of its comic value"<sup>19</sup> is plain sailing, Jacobson actually fails to supply what has been announced – namely an explicit account of how the viciousness of a joke can contribute to its fun that goes beyond claiming that it's the "panache"<sup>20</sup> with which the butt of the joke is exposed to an unjust slight.

This lack of explanation on the side of the immoralist is exactly what Smuts criticizes. For moral disgust is explanatory sufficient to inhibit amusement, he shifts the burden of proof to the immoralist to show *how exactly* the fact that a joke has a

<sup>13</sup> Bergmann (1986), 79.

<sup>14</sup> Bergmann (1986), 79 (footnote).

<sup>15</sup> Harvey (1995).

<sup>16</sup> Gaut (1998), 60.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobson (1997), 162.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobson (1997), 172.

<sup>19</sup> Jacobson (1997), 172.

<sup>20</sup> Jacobson (1997), 175.

moral defect can contribute to its humor, arguing that immoral but funny jokes are best understood as being funny in spite of their moral flaws.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed it seems as if in comparison to immoralism, moderate moralism is the more favorable position. Nevertheless, already suspending immoralism might be too hasty since other mechanisms might provide the lacking explanation. Smuts dismisses tension-relief theories as proper candidates but he doesn't even mention superiority related accounts of humor. Though superiority alone is unlikely a sufficient condition for amusement, it still could play the role the immoralist suggests as some empirical research within the psychology of humor suggests.<sup>22</sup>

But still, inhibitory effects may occur way more often than contributory effects do. Perhaps even both moderate accounts of moralism and anti-moralism are wrong and we need to look at humor with a much higher resolution in order to capture on what terms moral flaws facilitate distinct reactions with respect to amusement.

### 2.1.2 On what terms is humor morally objectionable?

So far we can't provide an answer to that question simply on the basis of what we know about the relationship between moral flaws and funniness since that isn't settle yet. That means we can't dismiss accounts of when jokes are objectionable like de Sousa's or Bergmann's for merely referring to immoralistic premises. However, other approaches are more successful. In another paper Smuts restates de Sousa's argument, in my opinion correctly, as follows:

1. Understanding a joke requires being aware of what propositions it relies on.
2. Understanding (or "getting") a joke does not mean that you find it funny.
3. If you have negative attitudes toward the propositions that are required by a joke, it will fail – you won't find it funny.
4. You cannot hypothetically endorse propositions in such a way that will revivify a joke that is dead for you.
5. Hence, what makes the difference between merely getting a joke and finding it funny must be some positive attitude that you genuinely hold towards the propositions required to understand it.
6. Therefore, if you find a sexist joke funny, and sexist propositions are required for getting the joke, then by virtue of your attitudinal endorsement of these propositions you are a sexist.<sup>23</sup>

As I hope have made clear, I'd be cautious to dismiss it by simply claiming attitudinal alignment towards (in this case) sexist propositions doesn't play any contributory role at all, hence undermining the sub-argument constituted by the 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> premise. But Smuts has more to criticize in this argument.

For a start, he correctly notes that it's not clear what propositions are exactly needed to be endorsed in order to find a certain joke amusing. Several distinct

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Smuts (2009).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ferguson/Ford (2008).

<sup>23</sup> Smuts (2010), 336.

attitudes, not all of them ethically dubious, could facilitate amusement.<sup>24</sup> To conclude that by finding fun in a putatively offensive joke, a person has a certain attitude, one has to exclude every other possibility.

Focusing on an example which disparages an individual, de Sousa bases his theory on an unfortunate and weak example.<sup>25</sup> Smuts suggests to stretch the case and look at humor which employs stereotypes against groups. By using a new example borrowed from Ted Cohen which features prejudices against black men, he argues that from de Sousa's perspective, change of the ethnic group would destroy the joke for those listeners who previously found it amusing since they endorsed a racist attitude towards blacks and hypothetically endorsement of that attitude towards another ethnic group is impossible.<sup>26</sup> Smuts argues that this is more likely due to the lack of certain stereotypes which now prevent joke comprehension. Changing also the stereotype mends the broken part and one ends up with a working derivate of the prior joke which has formally the same joke-scheme. "Hence we have good reason to think that de Sousa confused the failure of a joke to be readily comprehensible with it failing to be humorous."<sup>27</sup> Most importantly however, he accuses de Sousa of a serious omission: "His claim is not merely that sexist attitudes can increase amusement, but that they are necessary. Hence, de Sousa proposes a strict psychological law. Such laws require far more burdensome standards of evidence than do mere general correlations. It is not merely that de Sousa lacks adequate support for his conclusion; there is strong evidence to the contrary."<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, Smuts has shown, convincingly I think, the dispensability of ethically unsound attitudes. One doesn't need one of them in order to perceive fun in an allegedly offensive joke; de Sousa's account of when it is wrong to laugh is therefore misguided.

<sup>24</sup> Smuts (2010), 337.

<sup>25</sup> For those not familiar with that famous 'joke' about M. Trudeau: "M. visits the hockey team. When she emerges, she complains that she has been gang-raped ... Wishful thinking" (de Sousa [1987], 239)

<sup>26</sup> Smuts (2010), 339 f.

<sup>27</sup> Smuts (2010), 340. Interestingly, Bergmann commits two failures very much akin to de Sousa's. She claims that the 'hidden moral' of the following joke about a particular woman is that women are dumb:

"Gee, did I fool that fellow. Imagine trying to make me pay him \$ 5000.00 for a fur coat."

"But I saw you sign the check."

"I know, but he'll never be able to cash it."

"Why not?"

"I didn't fill in the amount!"

Furthermore she claims that if the joke were about men, it might work too, but only if men are portrayed in a particular role – say for example as a politician or mechanic – and not as representatives of their sex like the woman in the example. Bergmann (1986), 72. Taken as mere representative of his sex, I see no reason why this joke doesn't work if you replace the woman this joke is about for a man and the fur coat for a car. Likewise the hidden moral is just as fuzzy as the necessary attitudes in de Sousa's example are. The moral could as well be that the woman is so crazy about that coat, she even loses her ability to properly fill in a check. That might be considered a sexist belief also, but that'd be a bit daring; the modified joke would then too contain a sexist moral about men. I think that'd be a rather petty judgment for I believe merely being enthusiastic about something in a way one loses his/her mind for a moment can't make up a sexist moral.

<sup>28</sup> Smuts (2010), 338.

Other approaches, like Bergmann's, albeit somewhat similar, are not fully reducible to de Sousa's attitudinal endorsement theory and deserve to be treated separately to a greater extent. Yet, before doing so I will switch the focus of the debate in the following section by asking: On what terms is a certain joke as a *type* ethically objectionable?

## 2.2 *Why it isn't (only) the joke's fault*

We have gained an overview concerning the relation between moral flaws and humor and saw that this relation is relevant to the question of when humor is morally objectionable but since the relation isn't settled yet, we couldn't answer the question on merely this basis. De Sousa's answer to that question was refuted by Smuts, but other approaches that render jokes immoral which employ allegedly offensive content still remain and are addressed in the following by two novel lines of argumentation which presuppose the type-token distinction, counterfactual conditionals and speech act theory.

### 2.2.1 Jokes types, joke tokens and what makes them immoral

Jokes belong to verbal species of humor. Furthermore, most jokes are pretty simple and clearly structured and due to these properties of all kinds of the comic probably most suited for the scrutiny of philosophy. The analytical tools provided by the philosophy of language and partly by logics have been occasionally used in order to settle questions concerning theories of humor<sup>29</sup>, but only rarely, if at all, to deal with the moral aspects of offensive humor. It's about time to change that and see what happens.

My first claim is that jokes, by virtue of being verbal (spoken or written) entities, can be regarded as speech acts.<sup>30</sup> (I will come to this claim to a great detail later on when specific speech acts become relevant for my ethical argumentation, for now let's assume it's uncontroversial.) As such, they're also a sort of acts. For a particular act carried out in our spatio-temporal world there are various possibilities to be considered morally bad. Let's take the following example of an act:

On his daily way home from work, John takes the bus. As he leaves, he sees a man running and waving towards the bus stop in order to catch the bus. John places his foot between the automatic doors for only a few seconds until the man arrives.

While there are of course different competing philosophical opinions about what the relevant aspects for an ethical evaluation of an act are, I can't think of much a moral philosopher could complain about in a deed like the sketched one. (Perhaps the running man is a bit obese and for the sake of his health it'd be better for him to

<sup>29</sup> For example in Clark (1970) or Zwagerman (2010).

<sup>30</sup> For the general idea of making use of speech-act theory for the ethical evaluation of jokes I am indebted, though not being a proponent of it, to noncognitivism.

take a walk instead of riding the bus.) Imagine now that though John's intentions were nothing but to show some kindness towards a fellow human being, by delaying departure, John actually helped a terrorist to take hostages. Alternatively, imagine that John is an accomplice of the terrorist and knows what his plans are, but John didn't know that he's working together with a psychopath who, due to frustration, would have killed dozens of people if the hostage-taking would have failed. But since he caught the bus, no one was hurt.

Both more detailed scenarios I asked you to imagine feature factors relevant to accounts based on intentions and elements which a consequentialist might be interested in. Since in the first case John's intentions were good but he unfortunately couldn't know what would happen, the act might from an intention-based perspective be judged in a positive way, whereas strictly taking into account the consequences of the act might lead to an opposite judgment. In the second case it's the other way around. If we regard a good intention as a virtue, we still haven't mentioned a third major family of systems in the field of ethics, namely deontological approaches. I want to summarize deontological under the vague notion that there's some kind of obligation or duty that yields a criterion for the ethical assessment for an act. Let's stick to the story given above and imagine the following:

As John arrives at home, his neighbor James tells him that Jack, a brash, ten year old boy, has devastated James' flowerbed by playing soccer in the garden without permission.

So on the deontologists view, whether or not John is guilty of an educational omission towards Jack who devastated the flowerbed may depend on whether or not Jack is John's son. If so, the deontologists might argue, John is guilty of not attending his parental duties towards Jack.

I don't want to give any argument here in favor of one approach over the other. In fact, what's more important at this point is, that most plausibly neither of them would attribute the relevant factors for the ethical assessment to intrinsic properties of an act like 'holding open the doors of a bus for someone'. What does count in these examples are properties extrinsic to the act, namely intention, consequences and duties. This is of course a rough simplification and there might be a lot more to consider for an adequate analysis of the scenes, but it's hard to imagine that any of these could belong to something inherently associated with the act-type 'holding open the doors of a bus for someone'. So for obvious reasons, while it's rather easy to settle whether or not a particular token of a morally neutral type of act is morally bad, the claim that a certain act as a *type* is morally objectionable needs by far stronger support. Most likely what has to be shown is that necessarily, every instanced token of the act-type is morally flawed. How exactly this has to be done depends again on the general ethical route one choses to follow. For the sake of simplicity, let's stick to the approximate notions of consequentialist, intention based and deontological approaches. Then, three plausible principles arise:

(PC) A type of act is morally bad iff every token carried out bears negative consequences due to an intrinsic property of the act.

- (PI) A type of act is morally bad iff every token carried out requires bad intentions.
- (PD) A type of act is morally bad iff every token carried out necessarily<sup>31</sup> violates an obligation or duty.

While it's generally harder to find examples for types of acts which always bring about negative consequences for the causal chain of consequences is hardly predictable in the mid- to long-term and one can legitimately ask "negative for whom?", examples that fits (PI) or (PD) are easier to construct – e.g. it's hard to imagine that kidnapping and cruelly torturing a child could somehow be based on benevolent intentions. If we tend to believe in Kant's considerations (maybe misinterpreted as being too rigid), any deed which employs a lie is (PD)-condemnable for it violates our obligation towards truth.

Now let's look back at putatively immoral jokes. For such a joke to be judged as morally flawed by the mere virtue of its type and irrespective of its context of utterance, according to (PC), (PI) and (PD) one needs to show that *every token* of that joke bears negative consequences due to an intrinsic property of the joke or can *only* be told by someone with malevolent intentions or *necessarily* violates an obligation or duty. Since a definite list of potential explanatory mechanisms might be difficult to obtain and every attempt of mine would likely err, I'll refer to those attempts in the literature which already aimed at convincing that certain humor species like sexist or racist humor is genuinely ethically objectionable. So unless one doesn't employ a completely different ethical basis than consequences, intentions, obligations or duties in order to show that a joke as a type is morally flawed, if the hitherto existing attempts fail to provide what (PC), (PI) and (PD) require, the burden of proof lasts upon those who believe offensive humor to be morally flawed. I will argue that this is indeed the case.

### 2.2.2 Do sexist jokes necessarily bear negative consequences?

Firstly, I will take a closer look at Bergmann's approach. As already mentioned above, she argues that sexist humor is morally flawed. She does so by claiming that whenever "somebody tells or laughs at a sexist joke it is an insult to those people who have been hurt by sexist beliefs, whether the insult is intended or not."<sup>32</sup> Additionally she takes into account that sexist humor may lead to consolidation and affirmation of sexist beliefs and stereotypes.<sup>33</sup> Thus Bergmann explicitly dismisses (PI) as her option and focuses only on the consequences of sexist jokes, which according to her are always an insult to the victims of sexism. As we shall see, she herself gives us a hint to why she errs. In order to reveal this, I'll refer to the use of counterfactual conditionals which yield an argument in our favor.

Let's for a few moments assume that she's right and that sexist jokes would indeed always be condemnable since what they bring about is always an insult, a

<sup>31</sup> Note that a kind of conceptual necessity is meant here, not a metaphysical one.

<sup>32</sup> Bergmann (1986), 79.

<sup>33</sup> cf. Bergmann (1986), 79.

negative consequence. We should then believe that some kind of ethical judgment as the following should hold true as a conclusion:

(1) Sexist jokes are morally wrong.

If (1) holds true, the following corresponding counterfactual conditional should also hold true:

(2) If a joke were sexist, it would be morally wrong.

Given Bergmann's remarks and my notion of (PC), we can specify (1) and (2):

(1') Sexist jokes are morally wrong by mere virtue of its type.

(2') If a joke token were sexist, it would be morally wrong by mere virtue of its type.

But the truth of (2') is dubious. Preceded by a quotation of Naomi Weisstein who highlighted the disadvantaged position and continuous discrimination of women in society, Bergmann wrote: "[...] women have been the butt of jokes for so long that it is impossible for them to take these jokes as "friendly teasing." Too many jokes add up to the message that the jokes are quite serious in their ridicule, or disparagement, of women."<sup>34</sup> I actually believe she has a point and many morally objectionable tokens of sexist humor are indeed objectionable because with regard to the history of sexism, their proclaimed friendliness lacks credibility in some contexts. Nevertheless, even if all tokens of sexist humor were in fact objectionable (what I don't believe), that doesn't mean (2') is true, not even that (1') or (1) is true, since they're to be understood as ethical judgment and not simply as universally quantified sentence over a set of joke tokens.

Bergmann herself provides us the key to explain why (2') isn't true: the cultural and political history can set a context in which credibility of benevolence is not possible. That however allows for not objectionable tokens of jokes at the expense of women at certain contexts or periods in history (in which there's no discrimination of women) when credibility of benevolence can be granted and thus, people who have been hurt by sexist beliefs needn't be insulted. If society develops ideally, after a succession of several generations of parity no one bats an eye anymore in the sight of a joke at the expense of women by mere virtue of being at the expense of women.<sup>35</sup> Without additionally features, there's no need to suspect malevolence. Hence, what Bergmann's account lacks is the conceptual connection (PC) requires between the intrinsic properties of the token of an act and the strict occurrence of negative consequences. We can therefore reject (2') and infer that (1') must be also false. The strongest remaining claim we still can make in favor of Bergmann is that sexist joke tokens are morally wrong in contexts in which it's not credible that they're benevolent and they thus will likely have negative consequences (e.g. like

<sup>34</sup> Bergmann (1986), 76.

<sup>35</sup> Though I hope this scenario of equality between sexes isn't mere wishful or even utopian thinking, I believe even less is sufficient. A circle of friends for instance in which everyone knows well enough about each other to exclude malevolence or acceptance and perpetuating of sexist beliefs.

setting the stage for insults). Moreover, we thereby have good reasons to believe that what has been said about sexist jokes can be generalized to jokes featuring other offensive content. That means the aspects relevant for the ethical assessment are in this case extrinsic to the joke as a type.

### 2.2.3 Speech acts, intentions and duties

Before tackling the question whether a joke can be morally flawed by fulfilling the requirements of (PI) and (PD), we shall take a closer look at my claim that jokes can be regarded as speech acts. Star and Bowker for example regarded this claim to be controversial since proponents of speech act theory like Searle allegedly excluded humor from their investigations. "Searle", they write, "explicitly excluded humor from speech act theory because humorous statements could be couched as speech acts but read as and acted on as if they were jokes."<sup>36</sup> Though they might have been misreading Searle, since in their mentioned reference Searle is far from doing anything like excluding humor from speech act theory<sup>37</sup>, Austin's preliminaries of *How to do things with words* might be interpreted in such a way. As Austin writes: "a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. [...] Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used *not seriously* [my italics], but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use-ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration."<sup>38</sup>

This is again far from claiming that jokes aren't speech acts, but one might suspect that Austin wants to bracket out non-serious forms of speech and hence maybe also humor. To clarify the possible source of this confusion about the status of verbal forms of humor, it might be helpful to take a look at what Searle in fact does explicitly say:

The existence of the pretended form of the speech act is logically dependent on the possibility of the nonpretended speech act [...] and in that sense the pretended forms are *parasitical* on the nonpretended forms [...]. Austin correctly saw that it was necessary to hold in abeyance one set of questions, about parasitic discourse, until one has answered a logically prior set of questions about "serious" discourse. But the temporary exclusion of these questions within the development of the theory of speech acts, proved to be just that – temporary.<sup>39</sup>

Given Searle's explanations, the fog of confusion is lifted. Even if the speech of a joke is pretended speech (which is not always the case), jokes aren't excluded from speech act theory; but since they're more complicated as "serious" (unpretended) speech acts, they can only be analyzed in its terms if one has already at hand a solid theory based on standard speech acts. This is also more coherent to our intuition: It would be rather odd not to regard such ritualized and convention governed entities

<sup>36</sup> Star/Bowker (2007), 276.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Searle (1977).

<sup>38</sup> Austin (1955), 22.

<sup>39</sup> Searle (1977), 205.

of spoken and written language like jokes as speech acts; their alignment to paradigmatic speech acts reveals, as I will argue soon, many similarities.

Now that I have hopefully reduced reservations towards the general possibility to apply speech act theory to jokes, it's necessary to give a brief overview of the concepts and distinctions of speech act theory before I will apply those to jokes. Everything we need for this endeavor is delivered by Austin's influential outline of his theory in *How to do things with words*:

Instead of analyzing language simply in terms of what was said (i. e. the propositional content) and how it was said (i. e. the way the content was uttered), Austin was interested in what kind of action was constituted by uttering something. In every kind of uttering he took into account he identified three essential components of the uttering which together constituted more or less simultaneously a speech act. The first aspect of any speech act, by no means a new insight, is the utterance itself, that means the act of saying something or the *locutionary act* as Austin labeled it. The second component, and that was innovative, is his so-called *illocutionary act*. The illocutionary act denotes the kind of action performed in uttering the locutionary act. So in saying for example "I do" one can perform under certain circumstances the illocutionary act of marrying, in others maybe the illocutionary act of documenting a credo. The number of illocutionary acts one can perform is potentially unlimited: ordering, persuading, claiming, threatening – just to name a few. In contrast to that, the immediate effects one brings about by performing an illocutionary act are regarded as *perlocutionary act*. One way to distinguish between illocution and perlocution is to ask whether the respective act was performed *in* or *by* saying something. So as Austin puts it, *in* saying "I do" one performs the illocutionary act of marrying, whereas *by* saying "I do" (i. e. by performing the illocutionary act of marrying) one has married someone, thus performed a perlocutionary act.

Another, perhaps easier way to understand the difference between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts is to take a look at where speech acts can misfire, since the respective components usually have a special set of felicity conditions. For a locutionary act to succeed there isn't so much to go wrong as long as the utterer isn't gagged, voiceless or otherwise muted and the audience isn't deaf or otherwise acoustically deprived. But consider for example an order like "open the door!" which can misfire both on a illocutionary and perlocutionary level even though the locutionary act succeeded. If the words are directed to a servant who understands them but instead of doing as he was told to replies "That's it! I'm done with serving despotic snobs, I'm quitting my job!" the illocutionary act succeeded, but the perlocution is blocked. If the words are in another case uttered by a servant towards his employer and the employer takes them as a joke, the perlocutionary act may be blocked as well, but most likely the speech act already misfires on the illocutionary level. In saying "open the door!" the servant didn't succeed to give an order, therefore by saying "open the door!" he also didn't perform the perlocutionary act he intended to.<sup>40</sup> What sets both scenarios apart are the felicity conditions

<sup>40</sup> I borrowed this way of arguing from Rae Langton who used similar examples. She too employed speech act theory to tackle ethical questions, though not such concerning humor but pornography. Since her

which weren't met. In the first one the illocutionary act succeeded, but as the perlocutionary act requires that the servant is willing to take orders as part of his job, the perlocutionary act misfires. In the second case however the intended illocutionary act isn't performed, since part of the felicity conditions of that illocutionary act seems to be that one has the necessary authority to give an order.

Albeit a bit easier to distinguish, mere reference to felicity conditions isn't uncomplicated. In some cases, especially those where the respective speech act is guided by clear rules which were set by convention (like marrying) many felicity conditions may be apparent, but in many other common speech situations things are less obvious. We might be able to get grip on a few important conditions, but not to identify the whole set of requirements. There's a lot more to say about speech act theory, but now that we have a basic framework that can capture the relevant aspects, let's be content with that. We can now try to apply our distinctions to jokes.

Jokes aren't all the same, not only regarding their content or topic, but also with respect to their kind, the conventions that apply to it and the function a particular joke might have in a context. All that in return also affects the way how they are told. Given the remarks above, I believe we can capture these phenomena in terms of speech acts and their properties. What's most important, I think we can distinguish different kinds<sup>41</sup> of jokes with respect to their illocutionary role, each with its typical, if not unique, felicity conditions. As well as we don't need a definite list of possible illocutionary acts that can be performed by ordinary speech acts, we don't need such a list when it comes to jokes. What we can do, however, is to list some of the most common kinds of jokes, some of them rather harmless, some morally suspicious.

Jokes can be used simply to amuse each other but also to criticize in a constructive way (e.g. by directing attention to a delicate topic). They can, on the other hand, also be used to disparage or to ridicule someone. If what I have said is right, we have identified with these four kinds of jokes four corresponding illocutionary roles that jokes can take:

- (i1) evoking amusement
- (i2) criticizing
- (i3) disparaging
- (i4) ridiculing

If we remember the locution "I do", we saw that it's possible for one entity of language to take different illocutionary roles in different contexts. Moreover, it's even possible for one speech act to play different illocutionary roles at once. If a father asks his child: "Why haven't done your homework?" it can both be a critic of the child's laziness and an order to change that or at least a request for an explanation. The same applies to jokes. Consider the following examples:

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analysis yields some very interesting insights when compared to the ethics of humor, I will later come to that point again. Cf. Langton (1993).

<sup>41</sup> Note that by "kind", I do not mean to refer to what I have called content or topic. If one talks about sexist jokes, one talks about jokes with a certain *content* or topic, not about certain kinds of jokes.

- (j1) Two pedestrians are feeding birds in a park.  
 “Politicians are like pigeons.” says the first one.  
 “How is that?” asks the second.  
 “As long as they’re on the ground they’re hand-tame, but as soon as they reach the top, they shit on us.”
- (j2) How many babies does it take to paint a house?  
 Depends on hard you throw them.
- (j3) 78% of black men like sex in the shower.  
 The other 22% haven’t been to jail yet.

It’s not hard to imagine that (j1) is simply told to amuse with no intended offense. Nevertheless it can be used to disparage politicians in a different context, too. That means telling this joke can in different contexts be regarded as different speech acts. It can even be told to amuse and to criticize at the same time if a politician tells it at the parliament to get both the attention of his colleagues and to raise awareness of overly self-involved tendencies of his profession. Furthermore, though the illocutionary role isn’t entirely independent from the content (the content for example sets some restrictions as a joke about politicians can hardly be used to make a joke at the expense of physicians), the example shows that the content or topic alone does not determine which illocutionary roles the joke can play. Likewise can we tell (j2) and (j3) – a fitting context presupposed – simply to amuse someone, although it might be that the speech act sometimes fails because such delicate topics might be considered an insipidity. The illocutionary horizon of (j2) seems rather limited since the felicity conditions of (i2)–(i3) require among other things that the object is to some degree a conscious being and/or responsible for its deeds. Criticizing, disparaging or ridiculing a baby is as pointless as criticizing, disparaging or ridiculing a piece of furniture. As shown later to a greater extend, (j3) is again well suited to also disparage or ridicule.

What does all this imply with respect to the quest of declaring a joke as immoral by mere virtue of its type with reference to (PI) or (PD)? Opting for (PI) loses plausibility to a considerable extend. What kind of intentions are needed depends on what kind of act telling the joke is. What kind of act telling the joke is, depends on the illocutionary force at work. So if a joke can play a harmless illocutionary role, it’s not necessarily immoral. Maybe the speech act approach to jokes doesn’t exclude the possibility that a joke can necessarily require bad intentions to be told, but it shows that the task is even more complicated. One not only needs to show that a particular joke necessarily requires bad intentions, but as a prerequisite that telling this joke is an odd speech act in a sense that it is unusually highly restricted in the illocutionary roles it can play, i. e. only can take roles that allow or require malevolent intentions. Taken together with Smuts notion that there are typically multiple reasons a joke can be funny to someone and that there’s no need of morally flawed attitudes to perceive fun in jokes featuring sexism or racism, it’s not convincing to claim a certain joke necessarily requires bad intentions, dubious attitudes or is illocutionary restricted unless one successfully proved otherwise. Hence, we have no reason to believe any joke is morally wrong by mere virtue of its type with reference to (PI).

Now that we have also suspended (PI) as a viable option to condemn an offensive jokes by mere virtue its type, only (PD) is left to be analyzed as explanans. Some deontological approaches, for example Kant's, count intentions within their domain. For we already dealt with intentions, we don't do that twice and draw our attention to other deontological aspects. Several common-sense rules like "Don't make jokes at the expense of the disabled!" or "Don't laugh at the harm of others!" which are taught from early on seem to fit in here at a first glance. Yet, I think these are best regarded as rules of etiquette or rules of thumb. A child for example could legitimately ask why it shouldn't make such a joke, but arguing that such a joke necessarily violates the obligation not to do tell jokes at the expense of the disabled, maybe even going one step further and claiming that jokes at the expense of the disabled are intrinsically wrong, seems to be anything but a satisfactory answer. Rather, it tastes like begging the question. Perhaps some of these are eligible in certain situations, but usually they have too many exceptions to count as general duties. Thus, if we appeal to a deontological way of arguing, what we need seems to be a more convincing, more basic obligation. We require a violation of an obligation such that this violation apparently constitutes an intrinsic flaw.

Obviously this is quite a difficult task and to my knowledge there are actually no approaches in the literature that *explicitly* refer to obligations or duties to evaluate humor. However, one could reason that by modification, de Sousa's approach could be interpreted in such a way. Albeit one doesn't need dubious attitudes, a racist joke for example could depend in its incongruity on a false assessment of reality.<sup>42</sup> If we stick to a rigid obligation towards telling the truth, this might yield a proper candidate for an obligation whose violation could obviously enough constitute an intrinsic flaw – given, to emphasize that again, we accept such a rigid and categorical obligation. For the sake of the argument, I will do so at least hypothetically.<sup>43</sup> Such a strict notion is of course rather counterintuitive. Notwithstanding this objection, a very early indication that it's not entirely absurd to assume a connection between truth and the ethics of humor is delivered by Bradley Gilman. In his interesting, though by experience obviously false account of humor, he evaluates humor ethically virtuous by merging incongruity and superiority theory, claiming that all origin of amusement is "the joyful use of reality, by a person, to overpower falsity."<sup>44</sup> Not every punchline is an epistemic victory, nevertheless the relation between truth and humor is worth to be investigated further.

Some might be tempted to encounter these efforts by denying that truth-values are the right category to apply to jokes. One might believe that to talk about the truth or falsity of a joke is a meaningless endeavor just like asking whether the request "Would you do me the favor to open that window?" is true or false is. But this is oversimplified and not convincing. Consider again the joke about politicians from above. In order for this joke to successfully develop the illocutionary force of

<sup>42</sup> Cf. de Sousa (1987), 244.

<sup>43</sup> It's worth mentioning that this implies that not only sexist or racist jokes are immoral, but also any other prima facie harmless joke that depends on a false proposition.

<sup>44</sup> Gilman (1909), 490.

criticism (i2), the punchline, though somewhat exaggerated, must be based on a by and large true proposition. If politicians were predominantly as we wish them to be, professionally only concerned about the well-being of the people, the joke would clearly lack its basis for that illocutionary role. Thus, the truth of the content sometimes is a felicity condition of the respective illocutionary act. We can now ask, whether the same holds true for the remaining illocutionary roles (i1), (i3), (i4) or their corresponding perlocutionary acts.

In order to successfully amuse, thereby to successfully fulfill (i1) and bring about the corresponding perlocutionary act, things are fuzzy. In many cases whether or not the depicted content is factual or not, bears no impact to the joke. However, in other cases the question touches the discussion about comic moralism and immorality. The French comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala for example, though for sure not only intending to amuse, often fails to do so because the factual basis of his jokes – often topics like the holocaust, deportation and annihilation of jews in gas chambers – usually inhibits amusement.<sup>45</sup> It might be not clear whether or not such insipidity interferes already at the illocutionary level, but for sure it often does at the perlocutionary level. So at least in some cases the factual basis of the involved topics is relevant to (i1) or the corresponding perlocutionary act.

Disparaging (i3) and ridiculing (i4) are likewise difficult to settle in their relation to truth. In order to successfully disparage someone with a joke, asking whether or not the employed propositions have a factual basis is hardly relevant. At best there might be a tendency towards falsity so that one can easier distinguish (i3) from criticism. What's more essential for disparaging speech acts are other factors: for perlocutionary success, the audience needs to embrace or share the attitudes towards the victim and the victim itself needs to take it as an offense or humiliation in order for disparagement to be illocutionary successful. Ridiculing, in contrast to criticism and disparagement not understood as a (more or less) justified corrective or straight degradation but more specifically as a kind of social debilitation in such a way that the victim is intended not to be taken serious anymore seems to be comparable to disparagement in its felicity conditions. Amongst other conditions, the utterer requires a certain kind of authority to perform this illocutionary act. Factual grounding may sometimes be of advance, but is often rather negligible and false propositions serve just as well.

In conclusion, the illocutionary acts (i1)–(i4) or their corresponding perlocutionary acts relate quite mixed towards truth, but none of them exclusively requires a false assessment of reality. This means the proposed way of making use of (PD) also isn't viable and at least at the moment no alternative is in sight.

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<sup>45</sup> Still, that doesn't make his jokes immoral by mere virtue of their type, even if all tokens uttered by him might be immoral. The same joke could e. g. still be used in order to criticize Dieudonné and his lack of humor if uttered in a certain way – so to say as a meta-joke. In this case the factual basis of the joke's content isn't relevant anymore, it's only relevant that it has been uttered by Dieudonné.

### 3. Summary, Further Aspects and Neglected Questions

Exploring the relation between moral flaws and humor revealed that this relation is of significant interest for the question of when humor is ethically objectionable. Albeit the moderate form of moralism has some benefits in comparison to other theories, the relation isn't entirely settled yet. Hence, theories dependent on immoralistic premises couldn't be rejected simply on the basis of this discussion. As Smuts showed, some of them could be dismissed on the basis of other shortcomings.

I then switched the perspective from token to type level and asked what one needs to show in order to judge a joke by mere virtue of its type. Three possible ways emerged: showing that every token of the joke bears negative consequences due to intrinsic properties, requires malevolent intentions, or necessarily violates some kind of obligation or duty. I argued that neither of them is attractive. What consequences the telling of a joke brings about is rather contingent upon aspects extrinsic to the joke. By arguing that jokes can be regarded as speech acts, I reasoned that since they typically play different illocutionary roles which can require different intentions, also the reference to malevolent intentions isn't very convincing. Since deontological approaches are a rare species in this area, I didn't refer to an example from literature but investigated the relation between truth and offensive humor in order to see whether certain kinds of jokes require a false assessment of reality and concluded that this isn't the case.

Therefore I rendered – hopefully convincingly – offensive jokes ethically neutral on the level of their type. In keeping with Austin I'd say with respect to ethics, the philosophy of humor was for too long concerned with the content of jokes instead of asking what different kind of actions are constituted by telling them. If we understand jokes as linguistic entities like every other speech act, then, if telling a joke in a given context is morally objectionable, it's not only the joke's fault anymore and the responsibility is shifted significantly towards the narrator.

Moreover, being a proponent of the idea that sexist or racist jokes are ethically neutral on the type level by deploying speech act theory doesn't make one an *advocatus diaboli*. Speech act theory to the contrary also yields a powerful framework to capture different ethically relevant notions of joke tokens like intentions and consequences in terms of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts and their felicity conditions. In accordance with Philip Percival's remark that the relevant context is a good deal more complex than many have assumed<sup>46</sup>, this enables us to reach a more profound understanding of when exactly a joke token is morally objectionable and raises new, interesting questions that could be addressed. An especially important one among these is the question of how exactly jokes, morally neutral as types, become morally objectionable tokens by virtue of the intertwining of context and content. Although it doesn't add up to a general answer, the following sketch of a token of (j3) tries to give an impression of how that might work:

After a match, a football-team heads for the showers. Two players, let's call them Peter and Bruce, are competing to become next season's team captain by election.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Percival (2005), 111.

Peter, not a bad but a rather average player, is very popular within the team and one of the veterans of the team. Bruce however is a very talented player, a good strategist and well on the way to become the next star of the team. From an athletic point of view he sure would be the best choice for the team's captain. Furthermore he is a pretty new member of the team, the only black player and a homosexual who did not come out yet officially. Moreover, Peter recently saw Bruce holding hands with and kissing another man in a park. While the team is showering, Peter takes the opportunity to tell the joke (j3) from above and the whole team starts laughing. Feeling bullied, Bruce complains about the joke but Peter responds "Come on dude, can't you take a joke? I wasn't serious!"

Is it credible that this token is a joke just for the fun of it, i. e. a speech act taking the morally benign illocutionary role (i1) "evoking amusement"? Most likely this is not the case. One crucial felicity condition to fulfill this illocutionary role is that the one telling the joke doesn't expect to hurt, disparage or ridicule someone since that'd contradict the goal of that illocutionary role: to evoke amusement in the entire audience to which the joke is directed at. In the given context however, several aspects make this illocutionary role implausible and militate in favor of others. Firstly, both players have a significant conflict of interest with respect to their professional goals and since Bruce is clearly superior when it comes to sports, Peter's envy and malevolence would be a mean but comprehensible reaction to this situation. In addition, Peter might expect benefits for the upcoming election by such moves. At this point one might legitimately object that this is mere speculation, but taking into account the remaining features of the context, (i1) loses any plausibility: as a newcomer Bruce is presumably less socially integrated within the team and as the only black player among whites, he's also a representative of an ethnic minority. Moreover Bruce seems to be afraid of the social reactions to his true sexuality. Since Peter knows about Bruce's real sexuality, he can expect to induce insecurity. Taking all these aspects together seems sufficient to show that this token is highly questionable. This joke token certainly fulfills (i3) "disparaging" by highlighting his role as an ethnic and social outsider through his content in the given context. In sports like football where homosexuality is still a taboo and lots of homophobic stereotypes are prevalent<sup>47</sup>, it may also fulfill the felicity conditions of (i4) "ridiculing" if the rest of the team would know about Bruce's sexuality.

A more general answer to this question will require to find out which aspects of context and content determine whether a token invites us to adopt a certain attitude or only *features* it (e. g. when a stereotype is a constituent of the incongruity in the pun). To explain the impression that some topics often lack credibility for morally benign jokes nonetheless, it could be a promising attempt to interpret e. g. the allegedly sexist content of a joke not as an intrinsically flawed content which necessarily invites us to adopt sexist attitudes but as a content with a rather high *tendency* to produce morally flawed. To explain this tendency it could well be that'd be necessary to not only refer to philosophical but to psychological aspects as well.

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<sup>47</sup> E. g. that gay men are stalking for any man they can get or that gay men don't do well in sports.

Apart from such general considerations it would be for example a promising task to compare ridiculing (i4) in its felicity conditions and perlocutionary force to Rae Langton's approach of criticizing pornography. She argued that pornography, not objectionable by mere virtue of its type, can bear the illocutionary force of subordinating women and silences them by restricting the illocutionary roles their speech acts can play. To do that, similar to ridiculing, one of the felicity conditions that must have been met is some kind of authority in the respective field.<sup>48</sup> Another interesting question to ask with respect to jokes as speech acts would not only be whether the utterer is responsible for the speech act, but whether the butt of joke is responsible too insofar she or he has to identify which illocutionary force is at work.

The outlined approach also encourages to view not only ethically suspect, but also ethically sound humor from a new perspective. Eva Dadlez for example, similar to Gilman, highlighted humor in its role of moral criticism based on the epistemic virtue humor sometimes has.<sup>49</sup> Some of her claims, namely that humor sometimes provides a unique way to reveal moral shortcomings advantageous to other ways, seem to be very promising targets to be reframed in terms of speech act theory. Whatever lies ahead in the philosophy of humor, we'll be well advised not to forget that telling a joke is an action not fully determined merely by the content of the joke.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Langton (1993).

<sup>49</sup> Dadlez (2011).

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