

# **Philosophy of Humor Yearbook**

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Edited by Lydia Amir

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# Philosophy of Humor Yearbook

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Edited by  
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Chris A. Kramer\*

# Is Laughing at Morally Oppressive Jokes Like Being Disgusted by Phony Dog Feces? An Analysis of Belief and Alief in the Context of Questionable Humor

**Abstract:** In two very influential papers from 2008, Tamar Gendler introduced the concept of “alief” to describe the mental state one is in when acting in ways contrary to their consciously professed beliefs. For example, if asked to eat what they know is fudge, but shaped into the form of dog feces, they will hesitate, and behave in a manner that would be consistent with the belief that the fudge is really poop. They *alieve* that it is disgusting, while they *believe* it is not. This paper investigates laughter from self-proclaimed egalitarian, tolerant folk, in response to oppressive jokes that might fit the alief-model. If I merely alieve the content of a joke at which I laugh, will that constitute morally exculpating reasons for such laughter? And what else might it imply? This paper will provide insights at the intersections of humor studies, ethics, epistemology, phenomenology, and the philosophy of mind, all while being moderately and appropriately amusing.

**Keywords:** alief, belief, ethics of laughter, implicit bias, racist humor, stereotypes

## 1 What’s All This About?

Years ago, I was with my family at the Willis Tower in Chicago, looking out over the glass enclosure that protrudes from the side of the building near the top floors. One can, if one dares, walk, usually crawl, out into this glass box, seemingly just dangling out the side of the building, and look straight down 100 or so floors to the sidewalk, where the people look like tiny, self-important ants. I hesitated to step out, but my two kids, 3 and 5 at the time, apprehensively crawled out before me. A stranger behind me asked whether I thought the glass floor was safe. I said something witty and surely hilarious, like, “Well, I don’t know, let’s see how my kids fare out there!” Then I *laaaughed*, like some kind of total ass.

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