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Ethical Taboo in Humorous Play

Lukas Myers[1]

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1 Introduction

When I teach humor ethics my students are frequently puzzled as to how exactly we are meant to *morally judge* acts of humor in a meaningful way when, in their terms, "Isn't that, like, the whole point of humor? To be edgy, to be outrageous." My students are certainly not alone in having a skeptical reaction to the subject of humor ethics. Indeed, there is, I have noticed, a broad tendency among some of those not *writing* in humor ethics to have a general knee-jerk aversion to the topic.

Colleagues have frequently admonished me for trying to restrict and analyze the ethical boundaries of humor. Theirs' is a general fear of overreach by the philosopher as Platonic censor, a skepticism of moralizing behavior, of grandstanding, of squashing something sacred. I am told that humor ethicists tend to underplay the *importance* of humor, that they are too ready to condemn and never ready to consider the costs of those condemnations. Even in my conversations with other philosophers of humor there is a tendency to dismay at the negativity of the emerging subdiscipline.

It is no wonder that this would be the case. There is much more written about the harms, ills, and potential biases in humor than there is about its contribution to the good life. Classic papers in humor ethics focus on how our laughter at morally questionable humor implicates audiences and speakers alike. My students are told that they only find certain things funny because they hold some immoral attitudes, that their laughter is a sign of *agreement* with what has been said.[1] This could not be further from their initial intuitions. Indeed, their intuition that humor is, in some respect, *resistant* to ethics, is often met with explicit denial. Jennifer Marra, for example, has recently said that, "…moral standards can be universally applied to humor, and that those standards do not rely on detailed specific facts of the humorous event."[2]

[1] Bergman 1986; de Sousa 1987; Tapley 2012; Kramer 2022.

[2] Marra 2020 p. 17.

✉ Lukas Myers
ljmyers2@wisc.edu

[1] University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, USA

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The non-ethicist's skeptical attitudes are sometimes multiplied by the increased public scrutiny on comedy in recent years. The liberal polity has become increasingly critical of comedy and comedians. As comedians like Dave Chappelle, Roseanne Barr, and Louis C.K. come under fire for their comedy, and behavior off the stage, a new line in the culture war has formed. On one side are those immersed in a language and culture of instinctual deference to principles of social justice and allyship. On the other there are those who have cultivated an ethos of opposition to this so-called 'cancel culture'. Various social trends might be cited as the source of this more militant approach to comedy: #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, the rise of Donald Trump politics, cancel culture, 'wokeness', increased targeting of transgender Americans in state legislatures, etc.

It is not uncommon to hear the refrain that it is the 'end of comedy' on the anti-woke side of the aisle. According to this familiar talking-point, the woke moralizing of the American youth is so far reaching it risks running all comedy aground. With both conservative commentators and working comedians bemoaning the youth's inability to 'take a joke'. Jerry Seinfeld, for example, has argued that the youth of today fundamentally do not understand what a joke is: "Jokes are not real. People assume that when you say something that you believe it. It's purely comedic invention."[3] If Seinfeld is correct, then today's youth fail to recognize the norms of non-literal speech in humorous contexts, which is a fairly glaring mistake since the suspension of linguistic norms is one of humor's central features.[4]

This paper is not meant to serve as an academic 'hashing out' of the culture wars. To do so would be a fool's errand of wading through cynical outrage politics, trying to produce sense where there is none.

I do not take it that my, mostly quite liberal, colleagues and students who voice the kind of concern with which we began are doing so cynically. Rather, I think that they are engaging from a place of genuine skepticism founded upon their understanding of the *nature* of humor. Having spent many hours trying to negotiate my way through conversations with them on behalf of my colleagues in humor ethics, I have reached the conclusion that the skeptics are, indeed, *onto something*. Thus, in this paper I aim to articulate why, and in what sense, humor is resistant to ethics. My argument in this paper will entail that we are always *pro tanto* justified in resisting the introduction of certain practical restrictions, which I call ethical taboos, into humorous play.

In section 2 of this paper, I will begin by discussing what exactly is meant by a 'taboo' and why I choose to focus on it. We will then consider the connection between humor and the good life. I argue that humor involves a particularly important kind of *play*, such that engaging in *humorous play* is important for living a good life. This is because humorous play is *liberatory* and provides us a space where we are no longer constrained by the norms of action and thought which govern our everyday lives. It is because humorous play is meant to *liberate* us from these restrictions that it is difficult to justify imposing taboos into this play, and indeed why it is contrary to the nature of humor to impose restrictions upon it.

[3] Leeman 2018.

[4] Rappaport & Quilty-Dunn 2020.

I will finish in section 3 by considering what this account of humor's value means for existing accounts of humor ethics. I will argue that one of my account's promising features is that it helps to bridge a "theoretical gap" in humor ethics which has been pointed out by Paul Butterfield (2022). I conclude the paper by sketching an approach to humor ethics which seeks to preserve its contribution to the good life while taking issues in humor ethics seriously.

2 Humorous Play and the Good Life

2.1 Taboos

The goal of this paper is to navigate and explain a kind of skepticism about humor ethics. Skepticism about humor ethics can take many different forms. We can be skeptical of the *coherence* of humor ethics. Perhaps we think that it is a *category mistake* to ascribe moral properties to comic objects like jokes, sketches, or stand-up sets. We can be skeptical of the *theoretical fruitfulness* of humor ethics. Perhaps we think that there is nothing theoretically interesting or unique about humor such that it poses any interesting ethical questions. Or perhaps, we think that 'humor' is not a unified category about which we can properly theorize *at all*, let alone produce ethical theories.

I do not take it that the skepticism with which we began is so theoretical. Rather, I think that the skepticism of my colleagues and students is a *practical* one. When we, in response to the subject of humor ethics, say, "Isn't the whole point of humor to be edgy?" We are most straightforwardly asking whether there is any point in *doing humor* if it is going to be boxed-in or restricted in the ways we are considering. When we, for example, voice concerns over whether philosophers should be in the business of restricting stand-up comedy, we are asking whether ethical reasons can or should play any role in shaping how we *do* stand-up comedy. The implication is that there is something about the nature of humor that makes such an enterprise seem misguided.

Thus, I will not attempt to argue that humor cannot *be* immoral, I take it for granted that it can. Rather, I am arguing that we should resist introducing general practical rules which restrict the scope of humor. I call these general practical rules 'taboos'. This is an idiosyncratic usage of the term 'taboo' which, while I do think it reflects the basic structure of what we often refer to as a taboo, has no claim to being definitive of taboo per our normal usage. My goal in using the term is to isolate a specific normative phenomenon.

It is one thing for a philosopher to give an argument that something is immoral, it is another thing for the philosopher to provide advice on what we ought to do about that. When we move from the theoretical role of moral diagnosis to the practical role of moral advisor we enter into the realm of taboos. I use the term 'taboo', then, to refer to a practical normative restriction, which may or may not be founded upon good normative reasoning, and which is in some way enforced or reinforced through social pressures that fall short of violence or state intervention.

Taboos restrict certain actions or kinds of action. Taboos are socially enforced and reinforced, they are often heuristical, admitting of various exceptions, and they are generally enforced via collective social pressures.

Taboos may be simple or quite complex. An example of a simple, though no longer always adhered to taboo in the English-speaking world is the taboo on speaking ill of the dead, we are simply not supposed to bad-mouth those who have passed. On the contrary, the incest taboo, observed in nearly every society, is often extremely contextualized and nuanced. It can vary on cultural, genetic, legal, class, and gendered grounds even within a particular society.

Taboos are socially enforced practical restrictions. But, of course, many restrictions so described are hardly taboos. For example, the fact that I cannot move my rook diagonally in a game of chess is both a practical restriction (a restriction on what I can do) and is socially enforced (insofar as the rules of a game are socially enforced), yet it would be strange to call this rule a 'taboo'.

This strangeness is, in part, because the word 'taboo' has a connotation of irrationality or foreignness. We often reserve the word 'taboo' for application to restrictions viewed from an objective anthropological lens—we apply the word to the behaviors of people in different social settings than our own. We rarely, except in academic conversation, describe taboos in our own society using the word 'taboo'. Often, we use 'taboo' to refer to restrictions which seem strange or arbitrary in another culture, from *our* cultural vantage point.

I wish to use 'taboo' in a way which is free from these connotations, taboos can be irrational or arbitrary, but they need not be—they can arise for perfectly intelligible reasons. Taboos are socially enforced practical restrictions, and we can and should acknowledge them as such even when they bind *us*.

There is another reason, though, why moving a rook diagonally in a game of chess does not really count as a taboo. It is because we reserve the name 'taboo' for those socially enforced practical restrictions which we violate at the risk of moderate to harsh social censure. Moving my chess pieces incorrectly is, so to speak, 'low-stakes' whereas, violating the incest taboo is likely to gain more than light admonishment when discovered by social peers. The violation of taboos carries with it risk of shocked gasps, heckling, accusatory glances, social shunning, banishment, even perhaps violence in some cases or places.

It is easy to conceive of what general taboos might look like in humor. Some might suggest a taboo to restrict the subject matter of jokes. It is a familiar sight to see people claim that we ought not joke about, for example, race, gender, suicide, and a variety of other sensitive topics, at least in some contexts. Sometimes these calls might be for the unilateral restrictions of jokes, as in the cases of suicide, rape, and political violence. More often, these rules might be more nuanced, as when it is claimed that only members of certain groups should be allowed to joke about subjects pertaining to members of that group.

Taboos are not by their nature restricted to specific activities. Many taboos, such as taboos on mentioning or referring to certain things, are meant to govern our behavior in all or nearly all contexts. Nevertheless, when taboos take as their target specific activities, like joking for example, they aim to establish rules of conduct for those activities specifically. In section 2.3 I adopt a view on which humor is, in

general, a rule governed activity, more specifically, humor is a kind of play. It will be important here to, briefly, make a distinction between two sorts of rules which govern activities and practices: what we might call *internal* and *external* rules or restrictions.

Internal rules are those rules which are adopted from *within* a practice in order to *facilitate* or *enhance* the practice. When we introduce internal rules, we refer to the internal goals and functions of the activity in which we are engaged in order to justify those rules. External rules are those rules which regulate an activity on the basis of reasons which do not make reference to the internal goals and functions of the activity in question. When someone evaluates our practice and creates an all things considered judgement that we ought to restrict it along some dimension due to factors separate from the practice itself, this counts as an external restriction. To say we ought not joke about x or y due to some distinct and prevailing moral or social norm which we really ought to follow and take more seriously, is to impose an *external restriction* onto the practice.

The status of 'internal' or 'external' regarding the rules of a practice has to do with the source of *justification* for that rule. Internal rules are justified by reference to facts about the practice alone. External rules more closely approximate all things considered judgements, justified by facts which emerge when a practice is put into a specific context. One and the same rule can be justified externally or internally. Suppose, for example, that we introduce an internal taboo in chess tournaments—for the purpose of facilitating play and the flow of the tournament—that players are disallowed to concede by smacking the pieces to the floor in a rage. If we allow such outbursts we threaten the social features of the game, plus such scenes create a distraction for other players, impeding the functioning of our practice. We might also justify this restrictive rule on the external grounds that it makes more work for the building's cleaning staff later, or that it is generally rude. In justifying the rule in this way, we do not necessarily refer to the constitutive goals or health of the practice we are engaging in, but the larger context in which the practice is enmeshed.

The subject of this essay is not taboo *per se* but *ethical taboo*, that is, a taboo which is adopted or justified by appeal to explicitly ethical reasons. As such, these particular rules tend to be *externally* justified, and thus regarded as external taboos. This is because if we wish to justify some ethical restriction to an activity, the priority of our appeal is not to the facilitation of the activity itself, but to claims about what is right or good more generally. As such, when I refer to 'ethical taboos' in this paper, I will refer specifically to restrictions on behavior which are socially enforced through means of significant social censure, and which are justified externally for ethical reasons.[5]

My argument in this paper will entail that we are always *pro tanto* justified in resisting the introduction of new ethical taboos into humorous play. Insofar as a rule is *internally justified* it is legitimate. In the final section of this paper, I argue that ethical restrictions might sometimes be justifiable internally to humorous play. This

[5] As we will see in section 2.4 below, internal taboos do not pose the same risks to humorous play as external taboos—this is because internal taboos are either necessary to facilitate the activity itself or *enhance the quality* of the activity.

is because, as a social activity, some ethical norms may be required to maintain the stability of humorous play. When ethical restrictions are justifiable in this way, they will not pose a risk to the value of humor.

The fact that humorous play is resistant to external restrictions but amenable to internal ones is a feature of the nature of the sort of practice humorous play *is*. It is natural, then, to ask, what exactly it is about humorous play that makes it such that we ought not introduce taboos? I now turn to answer this question, but before I do so, I first will make clear a couple of assumptions in my approach.

2.2 Assumptions

Before I begin to discuss the connections between humor and the good life I will be making two assumptions. The first is simply this: that there *is* some connection between humor and the good life. I will not provide an argument that there is such a connection, in part, because the notion that there is such a connection is central to the thesis which I want to explore in this paper. In part, however, this is motivated by genuine conviction. I am among that group of people for whom, if I may be so dramatic, the humorless life is not worth living. For those who subscribe to such a view, it is obvious, and for those to whom such a view seems foreign there is little that I can do to persuade you that it is true. For the comically deficient all that I can do is insist that there is something to life that they are missing out on, while this essay may be an effort in showing what that *is,* it can only persuade by virtue of how appealing the description of the relationship between humor and flourishing looks therein.

One should not get the impression from my refusal to defend humor's role in the good life that philosophers have not *said* anything useful about the role of humor in the good life. Aristotle famously considered *wittiness* as the virtuous mean between boorishness and buffoonery with regard to laughing at and telling jokes.[6] Modern philosophers such as Shaftesbury and Kierkegaard similarly held that humor had a role to play in the good life.[7] Figures such as Cicero and Descartes discuss the role of humor in shaping our ethical lives.[8] And contemporary philosophers like Lydia Amir, Drew Chastain, and David Shoemaker (to name only a few) have been approaching the question of humor and the good life from a variety of different perspectives.[9] I will not give time to the considerable views developed by these philosophers historically and today. I only mean to indicate that my assumption, that humor has some role to play in the good life, is not exactly novel.

Second, I will be aiming to explore the intuition that there are particularly lofty barriers to the introduction of ethical taboos into humorous play. While I think that this view is true, and I will be explaining why that would be so, I will not be giving a definitive argument for its truth. As this assumption serves as my beginning

[6] Aristotle (2019), *Nicomachean Ethics IV.8*

[7] Amir 2014.

[8] Cicero (2001) *De Oratore* 2.236*;* Descartes (1985) *The Passions* p. 393

[9] Amir 2019; Chastain 2024; Shoemaker 2024.

intuition, the resulting theory will be an attempt to make good on that intuition and explain its pull. My hope is that the explanatory appeal of the theory I sketch herein will be enough to persuade. Given this second assumption, my argument will be oriented only towards explaining what about humor in our lives makes it so resistant to the introduction of ethical taboo. As such, there is, I suspect, plenty more to say about humor and the good life, my picture is intended to be only partial.

2.3 Humor and Play

I am going to argue that humor is particularly valuable in our lives in virtue of being a distinctive sort of *play.*[10] The first philosophical work on the notion of humor as play seems to have come from Max Eastman's *The Enjoyment of Laughter* (1936) in which humor is compared to the behavior of other great apes who exhibit what are often called 'play behaviors'. The notion has also been explored in various social scientific or evolutionary psychology venues. Social scientists often consider play a theoretical puzzle, because the behavior is not straightforwardly beneficial to survival, and indeed appears to involve doing things that are somewhat aimless. It is hard to see why nature would select for 'fun for fun's sake' and thus there ought to be some explanation of this apparently wasteful activity.[11]

Many philosophers, by contrast, have *embraced* the 'fun for fun's sake' appearance of play. Schopenhauer defined play as, "The discharge of superfluous energy." Building on Schopenhauer's notion of superfluousness, Bernard Suits recognizes play as *autotelic,* or done for its own sake rather than instrumentally, and proposes a definition which adapts and expands upon Schopenhauer's gloss. According to Suits, "x is playing if and only if x has made a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes."[12] The archetypical example for Suits is playing with your food, where someone does things to their food other than eating, cooking, preparing, or transporting it. We play with our food for the sake of what fun it is to do so, and it is play in virtue of the fact that we are having fun *rather than* using the food as it is intended to be used.[13]

It is Suits' definition that Steven Gimbel has in mind when he argues that humor is necessarily 'playful'. According to Gimbel, "The notion of playfulness that is essential to humor is the sense of the word in the phrase "playing with your food." … I act humorously only when I take something—a word, a concept, a prop—and I use it in some way other than that for which it was intended."[14]

Gimbel's conception of humor as essentially involving play is taken up by and expanded by David Poplar, who argues that humor as a form of communication

[10] I do not, thereby, endorse a general 'play theory' of humor to the exclusion of competing theories like the incongruity or relief theories of humor. I merely take on board the play theory as capturing something interesting about the nature of humor.

[11] Woolston 2021.

[12] Suits 1977, 124.

[13] Which is not to say that the eating of the food cannot be fun, only that it would not be playing to have fun while eating a meal.

[14] Gimbel 2017, 41.

involves what he calls *play frames*. To adopt a 'frame' is to adopt a *perspective* regarding some activity or content one is interacting with. In Poplar's words, "[The frame] functions like a scaffolding of logical understanding—a perspective that brings with it a set of already formed logical relations, assumptions and expectations that can be applied like a heuristic to a current situation."[15] Adopting a frame involves maintaining a perspective or, when we play together, joint perspectives which are necessary for the functioning of a general practice or activity.

For example, in an educational frame students adopt one perspective with a set of norms and expectations while instructors adopt a somewhat different perspective. Together, the perspectives they inhabit for the sake of the activity constitute the frame. In the frame social and linguistic expectations are shifted from those outside the frame to facilitate the activity. Instructors are the objects of deference in an educational setting, either for the sake of their expertise or for their organizational authority. As such, we might think, the educational frame involves a norm of deference on behalf of students and taking up authority on behalf of instructors, both of which are justified internally for the purposes of facilitating the educational activity.

There are many kinds of frames, but most importantly, for Poplar, is the *play frame*. This is the frame in which game playing, make-believe, and humor take place. The play frame, then, is the general kind of frame in which humor occurs, the *humor frame* is a subcategory nested inside the play frame. The humor frame involves adopting the further expectations which govern the activity of humor more generally. While we are in the humorous play frame we form the expectation, "…. that the content that is being communicated is actually not intended at face value, and therefore is not meant to be interpreted seriously."[16] In the humor frame, in humorous play[17], entering the frame initiated through familiar social cues for joking, special cadences, or special contexts. When we hear someone say, "Have you heard the one about the x?" or when we hear someone adopt a special storytelling style of talking, or when we find ourselves in a comedy club, our perspective changes we adopt a new set of heuristics we use for navigating humorous conversation.

Understanding the various ways in which the humor frame shapes and changes our expectations will help us to understand exactly how humor contributes to the good life, and thus, in what way humor might be insulated from ethical taboo. It is to this that I now turn.

2.4 The Value of Humorous Play

According to Poplar, when we enter the play frame, we adopt a perspective wherein our general expectations diverge from the Gricean conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner.[18] That is to say, for the sake of being funny we can engage in saying and doing things which are irrelevant, unhelpful, ambiguous,

[15] Poplar 2022, 154.

[16] Poplar 2022, 155.

[17] I use these phrases synonymously.

[18] Poplar 2022, 157.

awkward, and just plain bizarre or out of place. Puns, for example, seem to rely upon and exploit, rather than shy away from, ambiguities. Consider: "A bike can't stand on its own because it is two-tired.", "My wife told me to start doing lunges to get in shape, that'd be a big step forward." etc.[19]

Which of our ordinary linguistic norms are being violated is often more subtle and hard to pin down. Take, for example, the following quote from the *I Think You Should Leave* sketch 'Dylan's Burger', "The truth is, I may look like I have it all, but inside, I'm just a scared little boy who never learned how to ask for people's food or their burger." This sketch is a masterclass in the violation of strange and implicit norms some linguistic and some not, go watch it, I implore you—though be warned it is extremely inappropriate. I always find myself losing it at, "…people's food or their burger."

But it is not merely the Gricean pragmatic maxims and linguistic norms that we depart from when we engage in humorous play. To make this point, when I teach classes on the violation of norms in humor, I will lie down on the ground, put my feet on the chalkboard, and deliver about 3-4 minutes of a lecture from this position. This is the violation of a norm for humorous effect, though it is certainly no linguistic norm that I am flouting.

We are allowed to depart from the conventions of common decency and etiquette: we might use profanity and lewdness in discussing certain men from Nantucket. We eschew certain epistemic norms regarding how we ought to treat information and content in a certain context (i.e. "Who's on First?"). We even flout moral norms by making light of things we would normally not make light of for moral reasons, or even by farcically adopting personas or endorsing propositions which would otherwise be immoral to endorse. For example, I might come to extoll the virtues of Adolf Hitler, after all, *he did kill Hitler!* All of this is fair game and par for the course when we engage in humorous play, and in healthy well-functioning instances of humor these features of humor are not ethically questionable.

It is this feature of humorous play, the suspension of rule-following and adherence to norms, which I want to claim accounts for the unique contribution of humorous play to our conception of the good life. Because humorous play involves adopting a perspective in which we are allowed to flout these norms, it provides an opportunity for us to be *liberated* from the burdens of our obligations. When we engage in humorous play, we are free to think, act, and speak in ways that would never be permissible outside of this play. As such, we are literally liberated, the range of actions which we are allowed to pursue is greater than it is outside of the frame. We are no longer bound by social obligation to remain decent, we are no longer beholden to the principles we endorse, we are free, for those fleeting moments, to be completely wild and selfish and foolish and strange.

The play frame's liberatory role is found in it providing us with a safe and contained space for such activities. The play frame mediates and exculpates us from the personas and propositions we endorse in the act of humorous play by virtue of the frame's implication of unseriousness. The frame allows us to live both the life of a

[19] For a comprehensive and sometimes philosophically interesting treatment of the pun see *The Pun Also Rises* by John Pollack (2012).

socially, morally, and politically respectable person with generally pro-social attitudes and commitments while *expressing* the values and *engaging in the behavior* of people who are anti-social, awkward, and downright immoral. In this way, humorous play has a special role in alleviating the burdens of our obligations. If man finds himself everywhere in chains, then humorous play might simply help to lighten the load.

We are not liberated from all obligations in humorous play, only some. I will clarify the scope of humor's liberatory force in section 2.6 below. But before I do, let me first make explicit why *this* feature of humorous play is especially important for our stated goal. I have assumed that we are hesitant to introduce taboos into humorous play, that is, to engage in any practical restrictions over the content of humorous play. If this is true, as I think it is, then the liberatory nature of humor can help to explain *why* this is true. We place a high bar on the introduction of taboos into humorous play because what makes humorous play so valuable to us is that it is an activity we engage in precisely to escape the *burdens* which the recognition and maintenance of taboos typically place in our life.

This is, I think, the most charitable interpretation of the intuitions we began with: that ethical restriction of humor is somehow antithetical to the *purpose* or *nature* of humor. The best interpretation of this claim is not that humor is just edgy by nature and so complaining that it has crossed a boundary is always wrong or misguided. Instead, it is that we threaten losing or destroying what makes humor so valuable to our lives: its liberatory nature. By restricting that with which we engage to avoid being restricted, we undermine our very reasons for engaging in humorous play to begin with!

We are now in place to understand why external rules pose a threat to the value of humorous play while internal rules do not. External rules impose restrictions on our activity from outside of that activity of the very sort that we are trying to escape when we engage in play. Play itself is, however, a rule-governed activity. Some rules, internal to the practice, are *constitutive* of the practice.[20] These rules are definitive of humorous play, they make it the unique activity that it is. We adopt those rules *autonomously* from within the practice either tacitly, in order to facilitate the practice, or explicitly in order to maintain or enhance the practice.

Restrictions and constraints justified from within the practice, therefore, are not generally regarded as *impeding* the practice. They are *for the sake of the practice,* either *by definition* or by *function*. This distinction is particularly salient in the case of games. Bernard Suits has argued that all games involve these constitutive restrictions, that game activities could not exist without them.[21] C Thi Nguyen develops Suit's theory and gives an account of how internal restrictions to an activity can provide people greater freedom and autonomy rather than less.[22] I do not take this to be a feature unique to games, any practice which defines new roles through sets of constitutive rules will define new ranges of human action.[23] My distinction between

[20] In the sense popularized by John Searle (1969).

[21] Suits 1978.

[22] Nguyen 2020.

[23] Following Rawls 1955 and Searle 1969.

internal and external rules tracks the distinction between those sorts of restrictions adopted for the sake of the activity, which do not impugn its function, and those imposed upon the activity which sometimes might.

This is not to say that internal rules *never* unduly impede or burden our practices. The distinction between internal and external rules is a distinction in justificatory source. An internal rule is made for the sake of play. But we can imagine that we autonomously adopt rules that we *think* will make the game go better but in fact do not. Nor am I claiming that externally imposed restrictions will *always* impede the value of a practice. What is unique to humorous play, and perhaps some other forms of play, is that we engage in it to *avoid* certain kinds of restrictions. Rather, humorous play is valuable, in part, for its capacity to expand the horizons of our autonomy. Internal restrictions are an expression of that autonomy and while such restrictions may not always be justified, they do not pose the same sort of threat that an external restriction does.

Some internal restrictions are adopted to enhance a practice. A 'clean comic' who eschews vulgarity and profanity, may produce unique and interesting comedy. A clean comic might, for example, have to work harder to shock us without the use of profanity, and thus create more rewarding punchlines. We also might organically come to adopt restrictions on the frequency or kinds of jokes we play with, in order to keep play fresh. Such autonomous restrictions, since they are adopted to facilitate such play, do not diminish the play's quality. This is precisely because they are autonomous restrictions, we choose them voluntarily, either in order to play in the first place or as a means to make play better.

Some internal restrictions to play are even enforced through forces of social pressure, just as taboos are. We introduce what we might call the *buzzkill* norm, to enforce *unseriousness*. When people are insisting too strongly on a serious attitude, we apply to them the status of 'buzzkill'. Bearers of this status are often teased or avoided in the scope of the practice. Buzzkills are part way in and part way out of the play frame, they engage with us as peers, but they do not follow the rules of unseriousness. The buzzkill norm is justified internally, as buzzkills threaten the stability of play through disruptive interaction with the play.[24] We will discuss another norm, the trust norm, in section 3.2 below.

2.5 Humorous Play, Satire, and Truth

I have argued that humorous play 'creates a space' in which we are liberated and thereby insulated from our ordinary reality and, thus, from the burdens of our obligations. I have claimed that this fact helps to explain humor's contribution to the good life and that it explains why we would be resistant to ethical restrictions in humor—since we engage in the practice, in part, to escape those restrictions. In arguing thusly, I have followed the Suitsian tradition of play as facilitating the creation of a 'play world': a context in which we are guarded from certain features of

[24] There are important ethical concerns regarding the buzzkill norm. Members of the in-group may use it to shut out criticism of the play when their play is genuinely harmful. Still, I take it the buzzkill norm often *is* effective and worthwhile.

the 'real world'. It might, however, be objected that much humor is *not* insulated from the 'real world' but is actually noteworthy precisely for its attempts to *truly represent* that world. If this is true, then we might question whether humor really is so insulated from reality—and thus, whether my argument that it is resistant from ethical restrictions can be successful.[25]

Consider, for example, satire. Satirical works aim to accurately represent the target of their critique—as well as the features which make the target worthy of critique—in the artwork. In *Dr. Strangelove* Captain Mandrake attempts to persuade the nearby Colonel to break into a Coke machine to steal change for the payphone to prevent a nuclear holocaust, and the Colonel resists because the machine is private property and only relents when he makes clear that Mandrake is the one who will have to answer to the CocaCola Company. This exchange works, it is funny, because it reflects an actual truth about the attitudes of Americans. Americans are so deeply invested in their capitalistic values of consumerism, corporate loyalty, and private property, that their first inclination is to do *nothing* even when the fate of the world is on the line.

Were *Dr. Strangelove*'s critiques less appropriate, if we thought they misrepresented the object of their critique, or if we thought that the critique was itself hollow and undeserving, this would count as an aesthetic blemish on the work—a count against the funniness of the satire. Indeed, what is commendable about satire, what is often considered so valuable about the medium, is its capacity for poking fun at genuine issues, for delivering serious commentaries through the medium of comedy. In this way, satire does not seek to be 'insulated from reality'. Satire seems to eschew the idea of a 'play world' and places itself squarely in the purview of the *real world.*

If this is a correct understanding of satire, as I think it is,[26] then it may seem as though a significant portion of humor does not count as play, or that it counts as play of a different sort than I have described, such that it is not 'insulated from reality' in a way which would make it appropriately resistant to ethical taboos.

I should begin my reply by noting that the ideas of a 'created space', a 'play world', and 'insulation from reality' are all themselves helpful metaphors but that they should not be taken too literally. As I have alluded to previously, humorous play is a kind of rule governed practice, and like any such practice it defines a set of roles and actions within the practice which are governed by values and norms internal to the practice.

Consider, an umpire for a baseball game. The umpire is given a special role, with special powers that others do not have: to make calls which determine the course of the game. The umpire is also, by virtue of that role, governed by a different set of values than others within the setting—players want to win, audiences want to be entertained, etc. But the umpire, by virtue of *being the umpire,* cannot consider any one team's desire to win, or what outcome would be most entertaining, or narratively compelling, when making their calls. We would be appalled if the umpire decided to do so, it would ruin the integrity of the game we are playing, and thus the

[25] Thank you to a reviewer for this noteworthy objection!

[26] And as I have argued elsewhere that it is (Redacted for Anonymous Review).

practice itself. This is true even if one team deserves to win more than another, or if part of what makes sport worthwhile in general is an entertaining narrative.

Likewise, when we engage in humorous play, we are assuming roles within such a practice—we are like the umpire, playing with a different set of values and norms, which are constitutive of and definitive of the practice itself. It is our position within this practice that enables a new range of actions, it defines for us a kind of role or range of roles (i.e. jokester, audience, actor, director, etc.), to embody which allow us to do things which are definitive of the practice itself (i.e. telling a joke, doing an impression, writing a sketch, etc.). The distinction between the 'play world' and the 'real world', then, is just the distinction between the shared participation in a practice, and the lives we lead when we are not engaging in this practice.

As a result, humorous play is still a worldly practice, which takes place against and is shaped by the backdrop of the whole range of *other* human practices we engage in every day. The assumptions of non-literality and non-seriousness, which apply both to our speech and to our actions in humorous play, are constitutive of the activity—but this does not mean that we cannot *use* play to say things about the world.[27] In humorous play, where we are free from Grice's pesky norms, we utilize the norms, conventions, and vehicles of that play—and the artforms which have arisen out of it—to communicate important truths or to say something about the world around us. When we state such truths, however, we are bound by the conventions of humorous play, so those conventions become the vehicles for making statements about reality.

This is how satire, an artform which has developed out of humorous play, can make statements about the world. Satires do not typically take the form of recitations of valid arguments—they use the familiar moves of humorous play to deliver their message: mimesis, mockery, caricature, absurdity, wit, and ridicule.

Consider the satirical tradition of dressing as Nazis to make fun of Nazis or to make commentary on contemporary issues. See films like *Jojo Rabbit* or comedy sketches like the Whitest Kids U'Know's "Hitler Rap" which even present Adolph Hitler in a satirically sympathetic or redeemed light. It is the fact that this satire is a form of play, that we are prompted to regard it non-literally and non-seriously, that allows us to appreciate it aesthetically. Our attitudes towards those who try to paint Hitler in these lights are starkly different inside humorous play than they are outside of humorous play. This is because the practice of humorous play permits us a wider range of actions—through the machinery of the play frame—where outside of that play such actions are not permitted.

Thus, I contend, there is no tension between the claim that we use humorous play to make truthful commentary on the world and the claim that humorous play is governed by norms of non-literality and non-seriousness in addition to the suspension of several typical norms. It is this second claim which grounds my argument that humorous play is resistant to the introduction of ethical taboos.

[27] Just as an assumption of literality and seriousness may be assumed elsewhere, but metaphors may have a role to play even there.

2.6 Obligations as Burdens

I have argued above that one of the most important contributions of humor to the good life is that it liberates us, for short durations, from our normal obligations: moral, political, and social. In doing so, I have painted a picture of these obligations as burdensome, as difficult for us to maintain, as something which we might *need* to be liberated from on occasion.

One may object that we do not *really* lose our obligations when we engage in humorous play. After all, humorous play takes place within a broader social context, and that context is what grounds the obligations we do have. We are not permitted, for example, to literally murder people when we engage in humorous play. Ergo, it seems like I must be mistaken in thinking that humorous play liberates us from our moral obligations.

It will be helpful, here, to clarify the scope of liberation which we receive in humorous play. It is, of course, true that we are never *permitted* to act immorally, elsewise it would be unclear what we mean by 'moral' and 'immoral'. However, within scope of humorous play, we are *exempt* from many of the typical moral restrictions which bind us in everyday life. To see what this means consider how norms tend to proliferate: In normal circumstances, we may not murder, because murder is wrong, but the fact that murder is wrong does not *merely* oblige us to *not murder* in the normal course of our lives. The fact that murder is wrong *also* obliges us to hold various attitudes towards murder, to disavow it in conversation, to treat actual events of murder in the world with a certain sort of reverence. In the scope of humorous play, none of these derivative obligations are required of us. We often act as though we are murderers, treat murder in a blasé matter, or joke about actual murders while engaging in humorous play. Indeed, many stand-ups have, or have had, bits dedicated to Charles Manson, OJ Simpson, and Casey Anthony.

I may be obliged wherever possible to disavow injustice, take suffering seriously, and otherwise signal my virtue to the public. Obligations to speak certain ways, to align myself with certain causes, to publicly support and express respect for all people, are things which are clearly not required in humorous play. Over time these obligations weigh us down, they are burdensome. While any one of them may seem, on its own, perfectly innocuous, they are taxing when taken together as a whole. Humorous play is a context where many of these derivative moral obligations are suspended. In the street, if I see a man in Nazi regalia going about his business, not as part of poignant performance art, I am inclined to think that he is doing something morally wrong. In a *Monty Python* or *Whitest Kids U'Know* sketch I take Nazi dress to be much more acceptable.[28]

Another objection to regarding obligations as burdensome might come from someone who is more generally skeptical about the claim that real obligations are

[28] I use deontic language of 'obligation' and 'duty' throughout, but I take it that the same can be said in terms favorable to consequentialists who are skeptical of some of these norms. After all, many consequentialists demand we pay attention—even at all times—to the causes which make claims on us, and they are many: animal rights, the environment, and poverty for example. Even if they eschew deontic language, these causes demand our attention and sympathy—humorous play allows us a moment to relax our sympathies to play at indifference.

burdensome *at all*. We might think that, properly conceived, doing the right thing, or making good on our promises should flow naturally from our character, that we should be happy to do the right thing and that it should be pleasing to us to do it. Such an argument, Aristotelean in nature, would have it that it is wrongheaded, and possibly even immoral, to regard our general obligations as burdensome to us. If we are properly virtuous and good, acting morally would be no burden at all.

I will concede that it is perhaps possible that a perfectly virtuous person might find doing the right thing always effortless. But as the vast majority of us are far from fully virtuous, it seems to me that as a practical point we *are* burdened by our general moral obligations. Furthermore, experience seems to suggest that when the stakes are high and the consequences difficult, it can be extremely stressful to do the right thing. Since my desires are not perfectly sculpted to accord with an ideally virtuous character, I also find that my obligations come into conflict with my own self-interest, and insofar as I view these things to be in opposition it is almost impossible not to view these obligations as burdensome.

It is worth noting, however, that even if I *do* find my obligations easy and enjoyable to perform, humorous play still provides something valuable to me by temporarily and partially liberating me from my obligations. Humorous play provides me not just freedom-as-relief from my burdens, but in doing so also offers me positive liberty, a new kind of behavior or range of actions which are at my disposal for the duration of play. Humorous play offers us a range of actions which are unavailable outside of the activity. In this way, even if we do not ever say or do something which we would receive social censure for outside of humorous play, we still receive a form of positive liberty from the activity in general. In the same way that having the right to ride my bike to work even if I never do might be good for me, so too might be having the option to break norms, even if I don't pursue that option.

These positive forms of freedom are valuable for their ability to expand the range of reasonable and desirable options for action in our lives. As such, it is not *merely* that we are free from the stresses of our burdens in the context of humorous play, we also come to find ourselves free to act in ways that previously we were not.

3 Implications for Humor Ethics

I have claimed that humor's contribution to the good life is, at least partially, grounded in its propensity to liberate us from many of the norms and obligations which burden us in our everyday life. Importantly, this includes ethical norms, which explains why we are generally reluctant to introduce ethical taboos into humorous play. Doing so is antithetical to the very purpose of engaging in ethical play in the first place. I now want to consider how my proposal might be brought to bear on the extant work in humor ethics. I will also reply to the objection that my theory has immoral consequences.

3.1 Helping to Bridge the Theoretical Gap

Paul Butterfield exposes something of a theoretical gap in the literature on humor ethics.[29] This gap is between accounts of immoral humor, on the one hand, and the philosophical interest in humor *qua* humor on the other hand. As Butterfield points out, while many philosophers have done good work regarding the ethical status of individual tokens of humor, these accounts tend to focus on salient features of those tokens which are not interestingly connected to their status as *humor per se*. This is all well and good for general work in ethics, but such accounts fail to truly engage with the ethical dimensions of *humor* as an activity.

Many accounts of the immorality of a joke, for example, would just as well work for helping us to condemn speech acts more generally. As Butterfield says, "Intentionally or inadvertently, then, these philosophers have given arguments not about humor, but about morality in the abstract; humor is present in their examples, but the real philosophy is happening elsewhere."[30] A good and substantive humor ethics should try to show what it is about *humor* that makes it interesting and unique in terms of its ethical significance. To this end, I think my account goes some distance to bridging this gap. My goal is to determine the value and importance of humor more generally, surely this counts as *about* humor in Butterfield's sense.

It may be objected, though, that I still fall short of bridging the gap. The features which I isolate as ethically interesting in humor might, in principle, be applicable to other areas of life such as make-believe. While my account *does* explain what makes humor valuable, the things which make it valuable are not necessarily *unique* to humor. We play all the time, in all sorts of ways, after all, it is not just humorous play which makes use of playframes and the suspension or adopting of temporary norms.

I think that such an objection is misguided. In providing an account of what humor contributes to the good life, I am not doing 'morality in the abstract', rather I am engaging with those features which allow humor to play a role in the good life. We should not, *a priori,* expect that all and only humor would be the activity which has those features. What Butterfield's work shows is not that humor is some perfectly unique category which has no deep overlap with other ethically interesting phenomena. Rather, what matters is that we turn our theorizing to humor itself, and its qualities, rather than engage with ethical approaches which, as if by accident, *just so happen* to have implications for humor as well.

3.2 Implications for Humor Ethics

Thus far my aim has merely been to supply an account which makes sense of the intuition that humor is in some way resistant to ethics. Now I would like to get clearer on the boundaries of humor's resistance to ethics. I have claimed that this resistance is to the introduction of externally imposed ethical restrictions (taboos) on

[29] Butterfield 2022.

[30] Butterfield 2022, 290.

humorous play. Humor's contribution to the good life is a liberatory one, by engaging in humorous play we are liberated from a variety of our obligations—obligations which amount to a rather large burden. Thus, to externally impose obligations onto that practice diminishes its value. We therefore always have *some* reasons against the introduction of taboo into humorous play.

The humor frame changes the norms by which we are bound for the sake of that play. This fact explains how some of our obligations, including some of our moral obligations, no longer apply to us for the duration of play. As noted in section 2.6 there are many deeply held and powerful norms for whom the force of the reasons in their favor is bound to override our reasons to resist introducing restrictions into play. It is simply not plausible that the fact that we are *playing* suspends our obligations to not kill, or commit acts of sexual violence, or torture others. Nor is it plausible that during play we are allowed to suddenly buy-in to racist or fascist ideologies.

In making this previous argument, I said above that we are only liberated by humor from norms which are derivative of our most deeply held duties. This was only part of the story. We are indeed liberated from our derivative obligations. Many deeply held, or 'core', duties ground further duties. We are obliged, not only to *not kill* but also to *disavow killing* to *take killings seriously* and to *bear certain attitudes towards acts of killing*. In humorous play, some or all of these are often suspended. We might joke about the prospect of killing someone, or laugh at tragic current events, and so on. In this sense, these derivative obligations are suspended for the purposes of humorous play.

However, it is not *merely* derivative obligations which are suspended for the purposes of humorous play. Humorous play comes with a set of risky behaviors which require that we suspend various moral norms as well. In our everyday lives we have moral obligations to avoid harming others. In humorous play we may still be bound by this obligation when it comes to *particularly severe harms* (like physical or extreme psychological harm), but we are not bound by this obligation to the same extent as outside of play.

In this way, humorous play is a *risk-latent activity*. A risk-latent activity is one which we engage in because we find it valuable, either for flourishing, personal gain, or as a general social institution, but which we know carries with it some inherent risks. Risk-latent activities include caving, mountain climbing, sports, stock-market investments, gambling, dating, fireworks displays, trampoline jumping, etc. Humor is, I like to think, akin to boxing. The risk of harm in boxing is clear and obvious, and it is also clear and obvious that these harms are not ones which we take ourselves to be risking *outside* of the activity. That is to say, we are willing to allow boxers to get punched in the face and kidneys as hard as possible, where that harm would be unacceptable outside of the activity of boxing.

Likewise, in humorous play we take on certain risks which are inherent to the nature of humor. We take on the risk of being offended without recourse, of being alienated or othered, of being insulted and having those things about which we feel most vulnerable exposed and ridiculed to those around us for the sake of laughter. That is not to say that all humor has these features. Indeed, we might make various distinctions regarding the level or role of playmates in humorous play. Some of us are full-throttle players who take on all risks, including deeply personal risks, others

may be more sidelined and less susceptible for the purposes of play. Nevertheless, to some extent these risks are inherent to the practice of humor as we know it, they have a *general tendency* to occur. Nor is it clear that we can, or should, try and rid ourselves of these risks.

Consider, for example, the prevalence of ridicule in our humorous lives. Ridicule is that form of humorizing and comedy which includes satire, caricature, insult-comedy, self-deprecation, gentle ribbing, hazing, and so on. Being the subject of ridicule can be quite unpleasant psychologically. It can result in loss of self-esteem or social standing among one's peers. But these are often *features* not *bugs* of ridicule. We often ridicule our friends for the purpose of gently guiding their behavior, or even for the sake of pointing out the flaws we find endearing about them. We aggressively ridicule public figures for the purpose of lessening their reputations and convincing people not to associate with or support them. Ridicule is not some passing defect on humor's face, it is a deeply embedded part of our humor practices, its risks are known and to some extent unavoidable.

Humorous play also incurs other risks, like those of feeling alienated or othered on the basis of in-group-out-group dichotomies which humor can help to reinforce.[31] A complete list of potential risks inherent in humorous play cannot be given here, I am not creative enough to foresee all such risks. My claim is just that many of these risks are things that we do *not* expect ourselves to be vulnerable to outside of contexts like humorous play. We do not expect ourselves to be, for example, subject to verbal attacks like those employed in ridicule. Nor do we expect that when others offend us, we are disallowed from seeking restitution for that offense. Often, however, we *are* disallowed restitution in humorous play.

When we engage in humorous play, then, we suspend both those norms which are derivative of our most deeply held duties and some of the more general lightweight duties by which we are bound in normal contexts. We do not suspend those norms and obligations which are most deeply held or core to our system of morality. The reason for this inability to suspend some moral norms is twofold. In many cases it is just that our reasons for *resisting* the introduction of ethical taboos are massively outweighed by our reasons for not engaging in the harmful activity. Thus, we may not kill or torture each other because no amount of benefit to the quality of humorous play could possibly justify taking such risks.

However, humorous play is also a kind of activity which involves the autonomous and mutually recognized adoption of the play frame. There are many norms which we cannot, as individual groups, autonomously *choose* to suspend. For example, myself and my white friends may simply not be in a position to suspend norms about the use racial slurs. It is simply not the case that anything about *our activity* permits us to suspend those norms. Contrast this with the decision of my friends to take on more risks of other sorts: like those of being offended or even of being physically harmed in a raucous prank. Our friend group may autonomously choose to suspend even more norms than humor usually requires for the purpose of enhancing our humor experience—where we are in a position to autonomously consent to the suspension of those norms.

[31] See: Kivy 2003.

I take it that some norms, like those which govern the deployment of slurs, are such that they are grounded not only in their serious tendency to produce harm but also in a notion of respect for a people group. Such norms are not the sort of thing which can be suspended by those outside of that group without exceptional justification. So, my white friend group cannot choose to suspend the norms restricting the deployment of racial slurs, but they can choose to suspend the norms which protect us against bodily harm, if we think it is sufficiently funny, and no one is being coerced.

The account I have given here is admittedly vague. This is partly due to the nature of the subject as I am conceiving of it. I do not take it as a fixed matter of fact which norms are to be suspended and which are not. I have suggested some rough classifications of which norms can be suspended and which likely cannot, but even these may be up for negotiation. At least one individual for whom I have presented this argument claims some non-standard norms might be suspended in the case of his own friend group. He suggested that his group of friends could conceivably suspend norms to allow for minor but significant stabbings (with knives). In this way, I take it that the line between which norms are or are not suspended is blurred by relativism to specific groups. This makes giving a systematic account of which norms can and which cannot be suspended relatively difficult.

Nevertheless, I think there is at least one useful heuristic which we can introduce which might help us to navigate the problem of preserving the value of humor while taking seriously our ethical hangups about certain forms of humor.

I have argued that external ethical restrictions are inimical to the value of humorous play. They introduce the kinds of restrictions which we seek to escape by engaging in such play. However, *internal* or *autonomous* restrictions do *not* diminish the value of humorous play in this way. They exist to facilitate or enhance that play, and so can be justified from within the practice. I want to suggest that for any potential practical restriction to humorous play, it is always preferable if that restriction can be justified *internally* to play.

I would propose that we engage first and foremost in what we might conceive of as *internal ethics of humor*. Where an 'internal ethics' is an ethics of some practice, which makes reference to the constitutive aims, goals, and conventions of a practice as well as the nature of the practice, to suggest ways which we might facilitate or enhance that practice going forward. If restrictions can be justified in this way, then they can be justified without damaging the value of the practice.

It may seem unlikely that an internal ethics of a practice would be capable of doing justice to the nature of the ethical reasons which justify a restriction externally. This is because as mentioned previously, ethical restrictions are justified by means of ethical reasons *not* reasons which hold fixed the aims of humor, or any similar practice. I think this is mistaken; ethical reasons can be subsumed internally to a social practice by virtue of its social nature. We would expect that any practice which deals first and foremost in social relationships, to require various norms which facilitate mutual interaction. Principles by which we are meant to live, which help us to maintain our relationships with others and govern what is allowable inside those relationships, seem likely to be ethical principles. Thus, we might expect there to be *some* ethical principles internal to a practice which govern that practice.

3.3 An Internal Ethics of Humor

It will be useful to see how we might engage in an internal ethics of humor and how it might contrast from an approach which seeks to introduce external ethical taboos. My claim is simply that wherever it is available, the internal approach to humor ethics is preferable for its propensity to preserve the value of our humor practices.

Many prominent accounts in humor ethics aim primarily to address a concern regarding bigoted forms of humor.[32] One approach, developed by Robin Tapley holds that racist jokes, jokes which target a particular racial group for ridicule, are immoral because they involve harms like a loss of social standing, understood in terms of social equality. According to Tapley, jokes are immoral when they involve social harms, where a 'social harm' is understood as a, "…significant impairment to some group or group member's attainment or sustainment of social equality."[33] Let us grant Tapley's general account of the immorality of at least some racist humor. Let us focus instead on the question: What ought we to do about racist humor?

According to Tapley, we should meet this immoral humor by introducing norms of social censure. By 'social censure' Tapley means, "… the strongest most effective kind of disapprobation that can radiate from society at large…"[34] by this Tapley explicitly means all forms of disapprobation short of coercive state action through legal mandate. According to Tapley, "In social censure we bring to bear all social (non-legal) measures we have to silence a person, to have them refrain from an action, to regulate their behavior."[35]

What should my account say about Tapley's suggestion? To start, as I have noted repeatedly, engaging in humorous play does not excuse us from our obligations to not *be* bigoted or racist. Humorous play does not permit us to suddenly *buy-in* to a racist ideology. So insofar as someone is being genuinely and overtly racist in humorous play, they are still open for all the normal sanctions of our moral practices. Insofar as Tapley's suggestion is one for which it is appropriate to normally react to bigotry, it seems to me a completely fine solution.

Unfortunately, much racist humor is not overtly racist. A great deal of racist humor is *covert*. That is, it is done under the *guise* of genuine engagement with humorous play, it pretends to be merely *edgy* or *socially subversive* and maintains a sense of plausible deniability. Such racist humor, humor in name only, *exploits* the playframe's implications of unseriousness and its suspension of norms to maintain the convenient excuse of, "Whoa! I am only joking." Further, covert racism often trades in speech patterns already ubiquitous with humor such as innuendo and insinuation as vehicles for pernicious speech acts like *dogwhistling*. The aims of those who utilize covertly racist humor, is to convey their beliefs to others who agree with them, or to endear themselves to those who are naïve to the contents of the dogwhistling.

Should we, then, adopt Tapley's same approach when it comes to cases like these? There is reason to be skeptical that we should. As Aaron Smuts points out, it

[32] Benatar 1999; Tapley 2005; Anderson 2015; Butterfield 2022.

[33] Tapley 2005, pp.179.

[34] Ibid. 180.

[35] Ibid. 180.

is often, at least initially, unclear whether people who engage in this kind of humor are genuinely and intentionally racist, or if they are engaging in humor in good faith. The more opaque the context of the joke, the less certain we can be about the actual attitudes of the speakers in question.[36] Covertly racist humor depends on a well-functioning background of humorous practice, one which is presumably often morally unobjectionable. Furthermore, there is, as Luvell Anderson points out, a morally significant difference between how we evaluate humor which is *racist,* from humor which is *racially insensitive,* and from humor which is *merely racial*.

Racial humor is humor which aims to subvert rather than uphold racial stereotypes, racially insensitive humor is either intentionally anti-racist but fails to successfully communicate this or is unreflective regarding the contents of the humor, racist humor intentionally and knowing targets a particular racial group.[37] We evaluate cases very differently between these categories. People whose humor is racially insensitive seem to merit very different forms of social pressure than those we know to be genuinely racist. Yet, it is not always clear from the mere content of an utterance which of these categories a speaker falls into. Indeed, in the right context with the right speaker, the very same spoken phrase might have any of the three statuses.

Racist humor may warrant the sort of social censure that Tapley advocates, but it seems clear to me that merely racial and racially insensitive humor do not. Yet, if these are often hard to tell apart—as I have claimed they are—what *should* we do? One popular suggestion is that we disallow certain people to engage in humor with certain subject matters. White people simply are not allowed to make jokes about black people, even in such cases as when jokes are intended to subvert racial stereotypes and be anti-racist.

Ought we to engage in such a taboo? There are reasons for thinking we should not. Legitimate signals of allyship have often come in the way of racial humor. Humor can help us to form bonds, indeed, we can use humor to reinforce boundaries between in-group and out-group which may be useful when the in-group are avowed anti-racists dedicated to the cause of racial equality. There are also the costs which the humor practice bears by virtue of imposing these external taboos. The practice loses some of its liberatory force. Still, the concern of covertly racist humor seems very large, it is a particularly pernicious force, and it grows larger with the ubiquity and anonymity of social media and online life.

My suggestion is that we first consider whether there may indeed be a *practice-internal approach* which helps us to deal with the issues of covert racist humor. We should, I think, engage in an internal ethics of humor.

There are obvious reasons why we might, from the internal perspective of a practice, worry about bad actors who wish to exploit the various features of our practice. The playframe is held together by an assumption of a mutual understanding that we are engaging in the same activity with the same sorts of rules. If I cannot make that assumption because there may be people in my midst who have a *different* and *exploitative* set of assumptions, then the stability of play is threatened. In such cases, I am unable to *trust* those with whom I am playing.

[36] Smuts 2007.

[37] Anderson 2015, 506.

We already have norms which are meant to moderate our ability to trust one another in comedic settings. Philosopher Daniel Abrahams has introduced the *trust framework* into humor ethics. This framework, I think, constitutes a framework which is *internal* to humor. The trust norm is a norm how we ought to treat one another and what attitudes we ought to take towards each other's behaviors. In this sense, the trust norm is an ethical norm. Some version of a trust norm may be relevant to any practice which is sustained through mutual coordination and agreement.

Abrahams' focus is on the case of stand-up comedians. In stand-up, audiences need to trust that a comedian is unserious and does not regard the groups that they joke about in disaffiliative ways. If the audience does not have this trust, then the comedy is deemed unsuccessful, or it is at least diminished. Abrahams considers the case of Indo-Canadian comic Russell Peters who, while not Mexican, has become popular with Mexican audiences. These audiences trust Peters to tell jokes about Mexican people. Peters has the trust of his audience, trust that he does not 'buy in' to the stereotypes which serve as the basis of comedy about Mexican people. Likely, audiences are able to make this inference, in part, due to Peters' own experience as a racial minority growing up in Canada.[38] As a result, Peters is able to create in-roads across groups which previously regarded themselves as out-groups, thereby forming new in-group ties. In these cases, ethically valuable relationships might be forged as a result of cross-group comedy, this can allow for collation building between marginalized group.[39]

The trust norm helps to make sense of the norm, discussed by Paul Butterfield (2022) that audiences give greater leeway to speakers who joke about their own groups. While it is not *impossible* for a member of a group to harbor disaffiliative attitudes towards the group, there is a much higher chance that they will not. In humorous play, then, we regulate for our playmates by adopting a trust norm. This norm requires a sort of probationary period mediating our relationship with our playmates early on, until it has been demonstrated that all players can be trusted. This is not uncommon, in more banal ways, we test the waters with more 'lightweight' comedy to see if the people with whom we are engaging are the type who we can trust to understand us how we wish to be understood.

People can lose trust, by betraying their audience, even if they are members of those groups whose trust they tend to have by default. Indeed, when we have some positive reason to think someone harbors disaffiliative attitudes we have a tendency to set a high bar for them to earn or re-earn our trust. When we are just beginning to play with someone, or when someone is suspected of ill-mannered or exploitative play, we may require that they explicitly disavow the contents of their jokes where normally in the playframe it is assumed that we are not being serious. The trust norm, therefore, will acknowledge some measure of factors external to the practice—facts about racial or gendered oppression for example. This does not mean that the norm *itself* is external, it simply means that the practice responds to its environment. Any practice which is to survive for long will be require to do so. The justification for the norm is still *internal* to the practice.

[38] Abrahams 2020, 495.

[39] Some philosophers have called this "brOtherizing" (Gimbel, Chandra, & Zhan 2020).

I think that the prevalence of a trust norm in comedy tells us that humorous play has mechanisms internal to it to handle those who would exploit the practice. Perhaps we worry that these mechanisms are insufficient. I think it would be preferable in such cases to try and figure out how they could be improved rather than introduce any blanket taboos into our practice. That said, if there truly is nothing that can be done from the inside, and exploitation of the play frame is so prevalent, then perhaps we would be left with no choice but external taboos. For my part, I am optimistic that norms such as the trust norm can be developed to handle these challenges.

3.4 Conclusion

When people react with puzzlement to humor ethics as a subject matter, our response is often one which tries to explain away people's intuitions. They've just misunderstood the subject. If they just *start doing it* they'll see that humor ethics is nothing puzzling about it! This does disservice to the skepticism which motivates this puzzlement. I think that if we take this skepticism seriously, we arrive at a view in which humor *is* resistant to ethics along practical lines. Is the result that we cannot fruitfully engage in ethical inquiry about humor? I think not, it is just that humor's value is particularly vulnerable to certain forms of ethical engagement. To moralize about humor *is* in some ways antithetical to the goals of humor. So, we should prioritize practical strategies which preserve the integrity of humor as a practice, a form of play. Otherwise, we risk losing humor's liberatory force, which is one of the reasons to engage in humorous play to begin with. It can sometime seem that the weight of social obligation is massive. On their own, each obligation, social, epistemic, moral, and political may seem easy. Taken together they create a great burden. Humorous play suspends these obligations, it helps to lighten the load.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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