

The Normative Significance of Flatulence: Aesthetics, Etiquette, and Ethics

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Abstract

Proceeding on the basis of reports of a proposal in 2011 to criminalize public flatulence in Malawi, the normative significance of flatulence is considered from the respective standpoints of aesthetics, etiquette, and ethics, and it is indicated how aesthetics and etiquette may themselves also have ethical significance. It is concluded that etiquette and ethics may both require that certain violations of etiquette and ethics should sometimes be ignored.

Keywords: flatulence, ethics, aesthetics, etiquette, normativity, manners, Malawi

An Odd Legislative Proposal

Many jurisdictions have laws governing activities that produce unwanted noise. Laws may specify maximum decibel levels for outdoor music venues or restrict them to certain times of day; they may require mufflers on motor vehicles but ban Hollywood or glasspack mufflers; they may mandate lower sound levels for hospital zones; they may bar some people from producing certain kinds of sounds (e.g. ordinary folks aren't allowed to use sirens on their vehicles). Many jurisdictions also have laws (often in the form of zoning laws) directly or indirectly regulating the production of noxious odors: chemical plants, pig farms, feedlots, and tanneries may not be located in certain areas; people may not keep livestock in their suburban backyards. All of this is unexceptional and, within reason, unexceptionable.

So what, then, are we to make of the bill proposed in 2011 by Malawi's President Bingu wa Mutharika, which purported to criminalize the passing of gas in public? The relevant clause in the bill stated:

Any person who vitiates the atmosphere in any place so as to make it noxious to the public [or] to the health of persons in general dwelling or carrying on business in the neighbourhood or passing along a public way shall be guilty of a misdemeanour. (*BBC News*, 2011, February 4).

This was interpreted by Malawi's Justice Minister George Chabonda to include farting. When asked about enforcement, Chabonda replied that it would be similar to laws banning public urination. However, Solicitor General Anthony Kamanga contradicted Chabonda, saying that "fouling the air" just means pollution, and "How any reasonable or sensible person can construe the provision to criminalising farting in public is beyond me" (*BBC News*, 2011, February 4). Quite. Nor have I found any evidence that anyone was ever charged or prosecuted for publicly farting in Malawi; reason has apparently prevailed.

The case is nevertheless interesting insofar as it concerns both unwanted noises and unwanted odors. Yet it is not the noise that is being subsumed in the wording of the legislation, but it is the odor that, if noxious, is being taken as an indication of "vitiating" atmospheric quality. The noise would just constitute audible evidence that an air-befouling event had occurred. To be sure, such noise is not always accompanied by a noxious odor, though admittedly vitiating air quality is not always detectable by olfactory means. Nor is the expelled gas always accompanied by the noise, whether offensively odoriferous (as per the vernacular idiom, "silent but deadly") or not. In any case, the brevity and volume of the noise would not seem to rise to the level of what is nowadays regarded as noise pollution, and any associated malodor would not seem to be sufficient to constitute a health hazard.¹

Chabonda's motivation for seeking to criminalize farting is not predicated on levels of noise or air-quality anyway; instead, he expresses a moralizing rationale for such criminalization: it would promote "public decency" (*BBC News*, 2011, February 4). In short, "The government of

¹ Or at least not the health of the *general* public. The link between airway reflux and asthma is discussed in Morice (2013). Morice mentions the early work of J. J. Floyer, who refers to "True Flatulent *Asthma*" (Floyer, 1698, preface) allegedly caused by "Windy Spirits". Floyer, himself an asthmatic, describes as "extraordinary [*sic*] offensive ... any ... ill Smell during the Fit" (Floyer, 1698, chap. 1). Whether the wind from an "Inflation of the Stomach", which breaks downwards as flatulence instead of upwards as reflux, can actually *cause* (as opposed to merely being correlated with) an asthma attack is not established, but if we take an asthmatic like Floyer at his word, the smell could conceivably still cause or increase physical discomfort.

Malawi plan to punish persistent offenders “who foul the air” in a bid to “mould responsible and disciplined citizens” (Fernandes, 2011, January 28).

However, we must remember that, at least for most of us, farting is a middle range behavior, falling between the extremes of reflexive behavior on the one hand and deliberate action on the other. Some people can sometimes fart at will, some people can sometimes control or suppress an incipient unintended fart, whereas some people sometimes have no control at all. For the last group, with the absence of any intent, Chaponda’s proposed application of the bill would be tantamount to a strict liability law, and given that “ought implies can” the purported rationale of improving moral character would be otiose.

Any phenomenon that is unwanted and offensive is *pro tanto* undesirable in a normative sense, so we might raise the general question of what the normative significance might be. In addition to the moral significance intimated by Chaponda, but downplayed if not actually denied by his detractors, flatulence also has normative significance pertaining to other distinguishable albeit interrelated normative categories, namely aesthetics and etiquette. In what follows I will first briefly discuss the aesthetics and etiquette of flatulence and then in the final section return to the question of the ethical significance of flatulence. It will be seen that we can agree with Chaponda that flatulence has moral significance without agreeing that such significance is worthy of our attention, let alone enshrining in law.

The Aesthetics of Flatulence

In his science fiction novel *Galápagos*, Kurt Vonnegut takes finding flatulence funny to be one of the enduring traits of the human species, which, unlike brain capacity, could survive even a million years of evolution:

And people still laugh about as much as they ever did, despite their shrunken brains. If a bunch of them are lying around on a beach, and one of them farts, everybody else laughs and laughs, just as people would have done a million years ago. (Vonnegut, 2009, p. 223)

We may agree that flatulence has been commonly and perennially regarded in a humorous vein; indeed, the world’s oldest known joke is apparently a Sumerian fart gag from 1900 BC (Spiegel, 2015, August 17). Moreover, the production of fart humor in the form of jokes and cartoons, as well as slapstick videos recording both real and simulated farts, seems to be an ongoing cultural industry, as some modest googling will readily confirm. Numerous famous folks have also made more literary contributions to fart humor (Spiegel, 2015, August 17) and one also finds classical artworks devoted to the subject (*Daily Mail*, 2012, February 21).

So far we have been talking about representations of flatulence in words or images. Cultural creations that are verbal or pictorial have aesthetically relevant properties and hence are subject to aesthetic judgements, so presumably there is no issue in judging on aesthetic grounds jokes, cartoons, videos, paintings, texts, literature, and so forth that deal with flatulence. This is bolstered by the fact that farting is associated with humor, and humor is nowadays also considered to fall within the remit of aesthetics. And since aesthetic judgements can be normative, there should be no problems as regards judging representations of flatulence or the roles played by such representations in normative terms. Whether cultural creations qua being of a certain genre are regarded as lowbrow or highbrow is of course itself an aesthetic

normative judgement, but that is a separate issue from whether a representation within the genre is judged to be well or badly executed or deployed.

But what about live flatulence in public, a presentation, so to speak, instead of a mere representation? Again there are precedents, such as Joseph Pujol, the famous *Le Pétomane*, who elevated his flatulence to the level of a comedic performing art, short melodies included (cf. Moore, 2013). It is no accident that Pujol was referred to as a *fartiste*, with its implicit allusion to the normative cachet of *artiste*.

The Etiquette of Flatulence

Notwithstanding this broadly aesthetic phenomenon, many would still regard deliberate² public farting as rude, crude, bad-mannered, uncouth, offensive, shameful, or disrespectful, as well as an embarrassment for the perpetrator. Thus, there appears to be a double standard, with farting regarded as a tolerable occurrence giving rise to mirth and merriment on the one hand, or provoking disgust and censure on the other.

Certain behaviors, that is, belching or slurping one's tea or noodles, which are regarded as crude or indelicate in some cultures, are considered normal and pass without notice in other cultures. Indeed, in some cultures belching after a meal is virtually obligatory as a polite sign of appreciation and satiety. Allegedly, farting after a meal is likewise a sign of appreciation in Inuit culture.³ Whether or not such farting might actually be thus authorized by rules of etiquette, it is surely not controversial that in some circumstances, intentionally farting is not a breach of etiquette that evinces disrespect but rather a mock breach that is not intended to be taken seriously; that is, in some circumstances the normal rules of etiquette are suspended. For example, boys in a boarding-school dorm or a group of young men gathered in front of a TV to watch a football game and drink beer, may engage in deliberate farting without restraint and with much hilarity and conviviality. There is a time and a place for such behavior, and what is "bad form" in one situation may be indifferent or even applauded in another.

The Ethics of Flatulence

We might ask what makes behaviour that is unobjectionable in private as well as in a few public situations, become objectionable in other public situations. Although Chavonda sought to criminalize farting under the legislative category of a harm potentially injurious to public health, that was rightly regarded as laughably unreasonable. One can of course imagine logically possible cases of potential harm, for example, someone entering a highly sensitive biosecure area without proper suiting and compromising biosecurity by, *inter alia*, maliciously passing gas; however, to regard such an unlikely possibility as warranting the specific mention of farting in legislation (or in the interpretive judgements pertaining thereto) would still be bizarre.⁴

² Even if involuntary, Islam regards flatulence as engendering a state of impurity that, out of respect for Allah, requires ritual ablution (*wudu*) before prayer; cf. Huda (2019, June 25).

³ Numerous websites make this claim, but I have not found an authoritative source for it. So it might just be an urban myth.

⁴ I'll leave it to readers to decide how or whether to accommodate the possibility of an antagonist who triggers an asthma attack by maliciously farting in an asthmatic's vicinity; cf. n. 1 above.

“Would you be happy to see [*sic*] people farting anyhow?” Chaponda asked on the popular “Straight Talk” programme on Malawi's Capital Radio, and when asked about enforcement, replied “it would be similar to laws banning urinating in public” (*BBC News*, 2011, February 4). Chaponda’s rhetorical question suggests that he regards farting as an affront that would make his radio audience (and himself) *unhappy* and his remark about enforcement invites the supposition that in his mind public farting and public urination are cut from the same cloth. If so, public farting would not be simply a petty violation of etiquette but more closely associated with the kind of disgust that might be evoked by excreted bodily wastes. Accordingly, public farting could be regarded as evincing a lack of concern for and violation of the sensibilities of others, and in that sense, unacceptably disrespectful.

However, I don’t think we need to look to the extreme of excretal associations to make the case that flatulence can have moral significance. If we regard a moral code as (*inter alia*) promoting or regulating actions that promote a set of values, where values are the things that are intrinsically good (e.g. happiness) then it should be clear that both aesthetic properties and etiquette can also have moral significance. Etiquette may be a means to achieving certain values that are intrinsically good, and certain aspects of etiquette may even manifest aesthetic features that are either intrinsically good or conducive to an intrinsic good (e.g. happiness, again).

First, let’s consider ethics and aesthetics. It is commonly claimed nowadays that certain forms of humor are unethical because hurtful or gratuitously denigrating in certain ways, and inasmuch as humor lies within the domain of the aesthetic, its aesthetic properties (e.g. its role in an aesthetic object or the nature of the funniness involved) will also have moral significance (which is not to say that the aesthetic properties are themselves moral properties). Can fart humor be unethical? Let me give one example that could potentially fit the bill. In Grace Metalious’s novel *Peyton Place*, the character Mary Kelley recounts:

The Doc leaned down and whispered in my ear. ‘Mary,’ he said, ‘don’t you know that niggers fart black?’ [...] I can tell you, I watched that black man. He couldn’t even burp, much less anything else, without me right there by his side to see what I could see. I watched him for days, and finally one morning The Doc came out of the ward and walked up to me in the corridor. ‘There,’ he said, ‘what did I tell you?’ ‘What’re you talking about?’ I asked him, and he looked at me, surprised. ‘Why, Mary, didn't you see it?’ ‘See what?’ I asked him. ‘Come on, quick,’ he said, and led me over to the ward by the hand. Of course, there was nothing there, and The Doc looked around, all innocent and puzzled, and he said, ‘Hm, that’s funny, it must have all gone out the window.’ ‘What?’ I asked him, all excited by this time. ‘The soot,’ he said, and right away I got mad, thinking he was making remarks about the way we kids in training kept the room. ‘What soot?’ I asked him. ‘From that black feller,’ he said. ‘So help me, I was in here a minute ago and that black feller farted and this whole room was black with soot!’ (Metalious, 1999, bk. 1, chap. 19)

Note that I am not advocating kneejerk political correctness here. Whether this example *actually* does fit the bill, is inconclusive, since the answer will depend on nuances of context and how the passage relates to other elements of the novel and to the nature of its readership.⁵

⁵ For example, it might be claimed that *omnibus perpensis* the butt of Metalious’s humor is not blacks but laughably ignorant and racist small-town Americans.

All I want to suggest here is that a passage of this sort, occurring in *some* contexts rather than others, could constitute unethical fart humor.⁶

Secondly, as regards ethics and etiquette, I contend that etiquette and morality are purposefully entwined, and that etiquette may be a means to some of the goals for which morality exists to promote.

Consider for a moment utilitarianism, the view that morally right actions are those that produce the greatest good of the greatest number. A distinction has often been made between act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism.⁷ Without going into fine theoretical details, the distinction can be illustrated with a simple example. It is the middle of the night and you are driving home; there are no other cars or pedestrians out and about. The traffic light at an intersection is red. What do you do? If you are an act-utilitarian, you might for the nonce just treat the red light as if it were merely a stop sign, that is, you stop, look both ways, and proceed even though the light is still red. No one is harmed, there are no witnesses that you might corrupt by your example, and you have gained a small benefit, namely, you will get home a few minutes sooner and you will not have suffered the unpleasantness of impatience. You have broken the law for the greater good. On the other hand, if you are a rule-utilitarian, you will stop, wait for the light to change, and then proceed, all in accordance with the law. A rule-utilitarian might reason that acting in accordance with the rule of law, although not of immediate benefit to anyone, will reinforce habits that in the long run benefit everyone. Rule-following can indirectly be means to the most beneficial end.

One doesn't actually have to be a utilitarian to appreciate the distinction; all that's needed is to accept that sometimes utilitarian-style consequentialist reasoning plays a legitimate role in moral judgement and decision-making. Traffic conventions have no intrinsic ethical significance, nor any kind of intrinsic value. The traffic-light rule is arbitrary; "stop on green, proceed on red" would serve the same purpose⁸; likewise the convention for which side of the road to drive on could be the reverse (as indeed it is in some countries).

Similarly, certain aspects of military etiquette (a.k.a. military courtesy), to take another example, have no intrinsic value. The conventional forms of address according to rank or occasion, as well as for simply identifying an individual's role, exist to reinforce discipline and the chain of command, and hence have instrumental value, including morally instrumental value – there are after all exigent circumstances in which ingrained habits of discipline and obedience in a chain of command are morally called for. Arbitrary conventions or rules of etiquette can serve a moral purpose.

Etiquette per se is not ethics, but conventions of etiquette and ethics or morality are nevertheless entwined and overlap to an appreciable extent.⁹ Judith Martin (1993, p. 350) tells us, "When modern philosophers mention etiquette at all, they do so blithely presuming that

⁶ We might also remind ourselves that similar things have been said about jokes that blacks tell amongst and about themselves, where the jokes are such as would be unacceptable in a different context.

⁷ I don't deny that this distinction could ultimately be shallow inasmuch as rule-utilitarianism may just turn out to be a special case of act-utilitarianism.

⁸ Apparently Chairman Mao's Red Guards sought to adopt such a reversal because of the symbolic value the color red had for communism (proceed on red \approx "Great Leap Forward").

⁹ This is forcefully argued against a number of naysayers in Judith Martin & Gunther S. Stent (1990).

everyone now agrees that etiquette is at best frivolous and at worst, repressive.” The various reactions to Chaponda also cast his stance in a frivolous and absurdly repressive light and we can readily agree with that assessment, insofar as it’s limited to his extreme proposal to criminalise public flatulence. But would it be equally frivolous or repressive considered as a proscription of etiquette? In that regard Chaponda’s rhetorical question – “Would you be happy to see people farting anyhow?” – is pertinent. Special circumstances apart, surely no one welcomes willful and disrespectful farting.

Without going into fine details, I will borrow and repurpose Martin’s example of the history of the social regulation of smoking, which she herself offers as an “exemplar of the historical dialectic between etiquette and law” (Martin, 1993, pp. 352–3). She contends that separating smokers from nonsmokers was once accomplished to a satisfactory extent by prevailing rules of etiquette, although the rules changed over time, first becoming lax in favor of the smoking majority, then:

Sometime later, non-smokers managed to change the rules back: It has again become rude to smoke near non-smokers without first seeking their whole-hearted agreement. However, a declining recognition of the need to obey etiquette when it goes against one's personal wishes has made enforcement of these rules difficult. So we have rude smokers who refuse to comply with the new rules, and rude non-smokers who refuse to comply with other etiquette rules against insulting people....

At this impasse, the law began to take over from etiquette, on the grounds that medical findings that indirectly inhaled smoke might injure the health of non-smokers made the conflict a sufficiently serious matter for the law’s attention. (Martin, 1993, p. 352)

So once serious harm was recognized and became an issue, the rules of etiquette also assumed a moral importance of sufficient degree to call for legal intervention.

Now let us reimagine this history slightly. Suppose the history is as represented, *except* that secondhand smoke was in fact *not* harmful, but many people just found it to be a very unpleasant sensory stimulus. In such a possible world, subjecting others to secondhand smoke that could not be easily or reasonably avoided by those who detest it would be a moral transgression, not a major one perhaps, but certainly sufficient for moral disapprobation. Smoking per se may not be a moral vice, but willfully subjecting to secondhand smoke those who find such smoke unpleasant would exemplify the moral vice of being inconsiderate and disrespectful.

Not all moral transgression can come within the purview of the law, but when there is significant harm it will be a deciding factor. In a possible world where the only effects of secondhand smoke are unpleasantness and distaste, factors such as likelihood and frequency of being subjected to violations of smoking etiquette, as well as allocation of resources to legal enforcement, would be among the deciding factors. Supposing there to be few smokers, and the number of willfully offensive ones even fewer, there would not be much point in enacting legal prohibitions. To all intents and purposes, public farters in Malawi would be comparable to inconsiderate smokers in our reimagined world. Legally proscribing public flatulence is frivolous precisely because it is unwarranted “overkill” for an infrequent and (absent implausible logical possibilities) physically harmless occurrence.

Conclusion

A familiar saying is that “virtue is its own reward” and one might go on to suggest that part of the reward of virtuously following rules of etiquette is the mutual respect and harmony evinced in and reinforced by social relations governed by the rules of etiquette. Such respect and social harmony also give etiquette a moral imperative. Therefore Chaponda was not entirely off the mark in invoking such moral notions as “public decency” in regards to public flatulence, since public flatulence would in most circumstances violate an implicit rule of etiquette. However, to openly censure a violation of etiquette may engender even more disharmony than the violation and indeed may itself constitute a violation of etiquette; a self-righteous moralistic reaction to small matters may itself be regarded as “bad form”, as well as counterproductive and morally inappropriate. Chaponda would have done better to heed the wise counsel of Judith Martin (a.k.a. etiquette columnist Miss Manners) to whom it is fitting that, by way of conclusion, we give the last word regarding public flatulence:

Polite fiction is a sort of useful falsification — one that is aimed inward. It requires that one school oneself not to see, hear or notice certain things.

By not acknowledging that material for possible etiquette disasters actually exists, one renders awkward reactions to them unnecessary. No reaction at all is required when something didn't happen, not even an apology or statement of forgiveness.

The classic example of a fact of life that cannot be commented upon in any edifying way is the unfortunate and involuntary minor physical gesture. Does Miss Manners make herself clear? One reason she doesn't mention it by name is that she is offering this as an example of the unmentionable....

Besides registering disgust, the complainers want to know what they should say or do (other than running for cover) or what the offender should have done (after what, in the best of worlds, that person should not have done).

The answer is: Nothing. There exists a polite fiction that such a thing never happened. (*Miss Manners*, 1993, September 12)

So even though Chaponda may be correct in some cases in attaching moral significance to rules of etiquette that apply to farting, the appropriate moral response may nevertheless just be to “turn the other cheek”.

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