

Brian Robinson*

Seismology of Gimbel's *Isn't That Clever: Finding Its Faults*

There's a lot I liked in this book. Don't get me wrong; like any good philosopher, there was plenty I disagreed with and debates I now want to have with Steven Gimbel after reading this book. I will get to those shortly. But I want to start with and stress how much I liked about this book.

First of all, it was funny. Not slightly amusing, but properly funny. I laughed out loud several times. It is hard to emphasize enough how unfortunately rare that is in philosophy of humor (this piece included, unfortunately). His wit made the book a joy to read.¹

It is also clear and concise in an estimable way, worthy of envy and imitation.

It is also original. For a topic that has been discussed for so long, finding something new to say is a genuine accomplishment. Gimbel's cleverness definition of humor is new and adds something worth considering carefully. And that is a mark of good philosophy. Whether one agrees with Gimbel's thesis or not, his originality, clarity, and insight make the book well worth engaging with.

Laudable as well was Gimbel's virtue-based approach. He incorporates both virtue epistemology of humor and virtue aesthetics of humor, both of which immensely enrich the work as a whole and the theory Gimbel thereby produces. I hope to see a continued trend in this direction in philosophy of humor.

* Texas A&M University-Kingsville; brian.robinson@tamuk.edu

¹ My personal favorite original joke is probably the following: "What is solitary, nasty, brutish, and enlarged? Hobbes's prostate of nature" (2018, 42).

I would also be remiss not to applaud Gimbel's response to Morreall (2009) regarding Gricean pragmatics. As a brief reminder, Grice (1989, 26) argued for his Cooperative Principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." Speakers are required to observe this principle on pain of irrationality. To do so, Grice claims they should adhere to his four conversational maxims of quality, quantity, manner, and relation (though they may flagrantly flout a maxim to conversationally implicate something). Morreall (2009, 36) objects to this Gricean picture, claiming that when joking, "We suspend ordinary rules of communication."

Gimbel rightly rejects this ridiculous notion. Telling jokes requires cooperation. Joke tellers are still observing Grice's Cooperative Principle. Given the purpose of the talk exchange (i.e., to tell jokes) the jokester does make their contribution as is required. Gimbel is quite correct to recognize that joke tellers do observe conversational rules in order to be cooperative joke tellers. Following Victor Raskin (1985), Gimbel contends for modified version of the maxims, which a speaker should observe to be cooperative. (If correct, then this would allow for the unexplored possibility that a speaker could flout one of these maxims, thereby conversationally implicating something in addition to the joke.) Gimbel's laudable addition is the corresponding rules incumbent upon audiences to observe when interpreting jokes in order to be cooperative conversational partners. This speaker/audience cooperative symmetry is an often-overlooked component to Gricean pragmatics, which Gimbel not only understands but makes use of to advance our understanding of the pragmatics of humor.

But enough praise. I was asked here to serve as a critic, and so I shall. Gimbel's central claim of the book is a definition of humorous actions: "An act is humorous if and only if it is an intentional, conspicuous act of playful cleverness" (2018, 37). While I have a few points of

contention, I will mostly set criticism of this definition aside for now, resting assured that my fellow critics on this panel have more clever and playful criticism to conspicuously raise against it.

Instead, I first and foremost want to focus on a conspicuous, near total absence of engagement with contemporary psychological literature on humor. Early in the book—in the “obligatory chapter”—Gimbel undertakes the required task of reviewing prior theories of humor, going back to Plato. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to do, and Gimbel covers the commonly discussed *philosophical* views on humor well. Yet, philosophy is hardly alone in investigating humor. Psychology, in particular, has made considerable contributions to the academic study of this universal human phenomenon. Gimbel includes the obligatory reference to Freud. Besides that, Gimbel references only one psychology publication since 2000 (in a footnote). There are a few references to psychology papers from the ‘70s and ‘80s. But that’s it.

This lack of engagement with contemporary psychology of humor is, in my view, the most significant shortcoming of the book. Gimbel is careful to distinguish between the questions of what counts as humor and what counts as funny. The latter question alone is not a purely theoretical question amenable to armchair answers. Psychology has studied this question extensively. Engaging with this literature would only have served to enrich this book. I have no doubt that Gimbel, with his keen insight into humor, would have developed many insightful connections with, criticisms of, and new proposals for the psychology of humor.

To give a small sample of the possibilities, consider Gimbel’s presentation of various theories of humor in “The Obligatory Chapter.” He presents the standard philosophical theories usually discussed. Of late, however, psychologists have developed several accounts of humor, e.g., Reversal Theory (Apter 1982; 1992) and Comprehension-Elaboration Theory (Wyer and Collins

1992; Wyer 2004). Of particular note is the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012; Warren and McGraw 2015) that is becoming increasingly popular and holding up well to empirical testing (Martin and Ford 2018). According to this theory, humor is based on violations recognized as harmless. Caleb Warren and A. Peter McGraw (2015, 7106) explain that a violation occurs when “something seems threatening, negative, or wrong,” but if at the same time “things seem safe, acceptable, and okay,” then humor has occurred.

Gimbel’s definition of humor in terms of playful cleverness leaves me wondering how much similarity (or difference) there is between his theory and McGraw and Warren’s benign violation account. Can playfulness be explicated in terms of being benign? Could both theories enrich one another? Does Gimbel’s account raise some new challenge for the benign violation theory? These are but a few of the questions left unanswered—that I for one would be eager to hear Gimbel’s thoughts now regarding—by not considering much work on humor outside of philosophy.

There are two other points where not engaging with the psychology of humor cause limitations to the book. The first pertains to the meaning of the term “sense of humor.” Gimbel points out, “The term is triply ambiguous” (2018, 54). He rightly notes that “sense of humor” can refer to one’s ability to *get* most jokes or gags. It can also refer to one’s ability *tell* jokes. A third possibility is that it means the ability to *create* new humor (even if you’re bad at telling or enacting it).

Gimbel is correct in pointing out this ambiguity and these three options. The ambiguity, however, is even worse than he seems to realize. In their recent handbook presenting a wide-ranging overview of the psychology of humor, Rod Martin and Thomas Ford (2018) identify eleven different interpretations of “sense of humor” that have explored in various attempts to

quantitatively measure people's sense of humor. Psychologists have developed various questionnaires over the last few decades. Using factor analysis, they have been able to tease apart additional notions of claiming someone has a sense of humor that are not immediately apparent from the armchair. One such example is the notion of having a sense of humor amounting to not taking oneself too seriously. So here again, my point is not that Gimbel was wrong, but rather that his philosophical analysis could have been considerably enriched by engaging with related empirical research.

By contrast, at another point Gimbel's lack of engagement with relative empirical literature causes significant problems. He asserts, "Laughter at jokes is physiological and non-voluntary" (92). This is an important, central claim to his account of the aesthetics of humor and comedy. His source for this bold empirical claim is the legendary stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce. While it certainly is sometimes true that laughter is non-voluntary—and quite likely nearly always true for Lenny Bruce's audiences, given his comedic genius—this is not a purely theoretical claim; it makes a testable claim about the world that warrants evidence.

An ethnographic study of laughter conducted by Robert Provine (1993) provides evidence to doubt this claim. The study focused on the relationship between laughter and speech in college students. Admittedly, Provine focuses on laughter following any speech, not just jokes, while Gimbel's claim was about laughter in response to jokes specifically. Nevertheless, Provine's findings give reason to doubt the notion that all laughter to jokes is non-voluntary. Provine reports that only 10–20% of the observed laughter followed something at all humorous (as rated by observers). As Provine puts it, "There is only a partial correlation between the behavioral fact of laughter and the abstract and subjective category of humor. The focus on humor deflects

consideration of broader and deeper roots of laughter in human vocal communication and social interaction” (1993, 296).

In social settings, people laugh a lot without anything funny. It’s forced laughter. (There are, of course, plenty of justifiable, sensible reasons for this; laughter is a sort of social lubricant that builds trust and helps maintain relationships.) On the basis of this finding, it appears quite implausible to claim that all laughter to jokes is non-voluntary. One may hear a joke (from a comedian doing stand-up or from a social acquaintance) and voluntarily laugh regardless of whether they found the joke funny, since that is the socially expected behavior and not doing so could be rude or at least socially awkward. The downfall of his claim that laughter to jokes is non-voluntary creates serious problems for the rest of Gimbel’s aesthetics of humor, which in turn is an integral part of his definition of humor as an inherently aesthetic act.

On a different note, I want now to turn to Gimbel’s discussion of whether humor is subjective or objective. Gimbel objects to subjective accounts of humor, according to which whether an action (be it utterance or something else) counts as a humorous act depends on one’s personal beliefs and interpretation of the action. I actually have no complaint with Gimbel’s rejection of this view. The one point of criticism I would like to raise—and perhaps it is only a minor issue, not truly important—is with Gimbel’s interpretation of the utterance “Humor is subjective.”

The crux of Gimbel’s argument against subjectivism for humor is a distinction between whether an act is an act of humor and whether an act of humor is funny. The former is an objective issue. Gimbel is clearly correct to distinguish these questions. In a similar vein, whether something counts as music is a separate question from whether a given piece of music is good.

In the course of making this distinction, Gimbel says, “What ‘humor is subjective’ really means, however, is that determining the truth of ‘X was an act of humor’ is simply a matter of personal belief, that is, there is no fact of the matter about whether a given act is a gag” (2018, 35). This is an uncharitable interpretation of the utterance “Humor is subjective.” If this were the right analysis of the meaning, then by the same reasoning someone saying, “Music is subjective” would be claiming that whether a series of sounds produced counts as music is subjective. That is preposterous. A considerably more charitable interpretation would be that the speaker was making a claim about what music counts as *good* music is a subjective question, not about whether it counts as music at all. Likewise, given Gimbel’s distinction between the question of what counts as humor and what counts as good humor, a more charitable interpretation of “Humor is subjective” is that a claim is being made on the latter question, i.e., what counts as good/funny humor. This is more charitable since there is a long-standing debate about whether something is funny is purely subjective, a debate Gimbel addresses later in the book. Since that is a reasonable question to debate, the more plausible, charitable interpretation of someone stating, “Humor is subjective” is that the speaker is staking out a position in this debate.

I next wish to consider Gimbel’s definition of humor in more detail. As a reminder, Gimbel defines humor as “An act is humorous if and only if it is an intentional, conspicuous act of playful cleverness” (2018, 37). He later adds that a humorous act is an aesthetic act.

Let’s begin with playfulness. The playfulness in humor is like the playfulness in playing with your food, i.e., it’s “when you use it for a purpose other than that for the sake of which it was created” (2018, 41). Gimbel also is explicit in rejecting an emotion-based account of playfulness. “There is no preferred emotional state for humor” (2018, 41). First of all, presumably Gimbel is talking about a preferred emotional state *in the audience*, not the speaker. This is a significant

claim, since (as Gimbel is well aware) other definitions define humor in terms of an emotion, namely amusement (or comic amusement, e.g., Carroll 2014).

I confess the argument for this claim confounds me. His primary concern seems to be with arguing against theories of humor that require an audience to get the joke for it to count as a joke (e.g., Brommage 2015). As Gimbel sees it, a joke is still a joke even if no one gets it and so no one is amused. While I agree with Gimbel in rejecting audience understanding as a prerequisite for humor, whether or not the audience was actually amused is irrelevant to whether the speaker intended for the audience to be amused. To see a parallel, consider bragging. As I have argued previously (Alfano and Robinson 2014), part of what is required for a speaker to brag is that the speaker *intends* for the audience to feel impressed. It does not matter if the audience actually is impressed; the speaker still bragged. Likewise, one could argue that humor's preferred emotional state is amusement in that the producer of a gag intends to amuse the audience. Even if the audience was not amused (perhaps if they did not get it), it still counts as humor.² This is not to say that Gimbel is wrong in asserting humor has no preferred emotional state. His argument does not appear, however, to have considered the intention to produce an emotional state as necessary condition for amusement. It may also be that *most* humor intends to amuse, but an atypical subset of humor exists where that is not the case. As before, I'm curious what Gimbel would have to say here as a follow-up.

There is an additional potential worry for Gimbel's play-based account of humor. A lot of humor is enacted through language. Gags—as Gimbel rightly notes—are incredibly diverse, and we should not limit our analysis of humor to just jokes told through language. But we cannot

² One might counter with cases in which the speaker of a joke (or producer of a gag) *knows* the audience will not get it or will not be amused, but it is still humor. First, I am not committing myself to defending an intention-based account. Second, one could respond though that in such cases the speaker was the audience (or part of it) so that the speaker intended to amuse herself with the joke, even knowing no one else would be amused.

overlook jokes told with words. To re-iterate, Gimbel conceives of play as using something with a purpose other than that which it was originally created. This can create a problem depending on what one takes the original purpose of language to be. One might claim that the purpose for which language was created was the efficient transfer of information. Noam Chomsky (2002), however, argues against this view. He notes ambiguity—a clear hinderance to efficient communication—is ubiquitous. So, he concludes that language “does not seem at all well designed for use” in communicating information (2002, 106). “The use of language for communication might turn out to be a kind of epiphenomenon” (2002, 107). In other words, language may have no original purpose at all. If so, then one necessarily cannot use language for a purpose besides what it was created for, which would mean one cannot playfully use language. That would be an absurd conclusion. Yet, it would be where combining Gimbel and Chomsky would lead.

Next, let’s take up the cleverness condition. Gimbel—for good reason—does not offer a singular account of cleverness; there are many different ways to be clever. Cleverness is understood as a cognitive virtue that is advantageous apart from its use in play. This is not an objection to Gimbel’s account of cleverness per se, but rather defining humor in terms of it. The worry is that people often find humor or amusement (or comic amusement if you prefer) in things very unclever. Some comedy—especially some sitcoms—are not clever; they are rehashing of the same tired comedic tropes that audiences have seen over and over and over and over. But that is precisely the point sometimes. Some audiences enjoy comedy because its familiar, because it does not challenge them, because it is not clever.

Along similar lines, we must ask for whom must an act count as clever for it to be a humorous? To be clear, I am not attempting to make an argument for a subjective notion of humor, which we have already covered. Rather, the issue is novelty. There seems to be a fundamental

connection between cleverness and being new. If I create something that has been created a thousand times before, it was not especially clever. If I tell the same knock-knock joke repeated ad nauseum in elementary schools, it was not clever. Gimbel is not wrong to see some connection between humor and cleverness. Part of what makes a great comic great is their cleverness at creating new humorous observations or connections. Many of my own favorite comedy movies are loved because they *were* very clever, creating new gags instead of just recycling the same bits from a hundred other movies. The thing is, however, they were funny the first time I saw these movies, and they still are funny. I know the gags that are coming; they're not novel. But they're still humorous acts and funny. So, does a clever act remain forever clever because it *was* novel when it was first done (e.g., when the movie was first made or joke first told)? Or does it cease to be clever (and so cease to be humor) over time as its novelty fades?

Gimbel's definition does not consider playfulness and cleverness separately, however, and neither should we. Gimbel enumerates many different cognitive virtues (such as creativity, open-mindedness, and pattern recognition) that are different forms of cleverness. But just because an act is clever does not make it humorous. It must also be playful. As we saw, playfulness is understood in terms of using something for a purpose other than that for which it was created. So, humor consists in using these cognitive virtues for purposes other than that for which they were created (i.e., evolutionary advantages).

The worry is that, given the cultural ubiquity of humor, perhaps humor is not some sort of misuse of these cognitive virtues. Perhaps employing these cognitive virtues for humor is to our evolutionary advantage. Not only might humor be individually advantageous (by improving one's mood, for instance), it appears socially advantageous. A recent, cross-cultural study by Bryant et al. (2016) found that listeners could tell whether two people were friends or strangers just from

short recordings of their laughter. Laughter and humor help encourage and maintain social cohesion and cooperation to our mutual advantage. Such advantageous use of laughter (and presumably by extension humor) does not appear limited to humans. It apparently can be found in nonhuman primates as well. Ross, Orwen and Zimmerman (2009) examined the sounds of infant and juvenile orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos and humans when tickled; they reported many similarities. This finding is further significant given the benign violation theory of humor mentioned above. Tickling is a common example of a benign violation.

The main point then is that using the cognitive virtues of cleverness does not appear to be a misuse of these virtues but rather using them for one of the evolved purposes. If so, that would mean that they are not playful, at least on Gimbel's notion of playfulness. But that appears absurd. The many ways we (and perhaps nonhuman primates) use humor is playful, even if it is using the cognitive virtues for their created purpose (or at least one of them).

I am further troubled by Gimbel's account of humor as a playfully clever act for a different reason. Suppose there is some everyday, mundane object, a widget. It was created to be used for a particular purpose and is widely used that way. What if I creatively come up with a new use for the widget? I then intentionally, conspicuously use the widget for this new purpose. Unfortunately, this new use I have developed is quite nefarious; I use it to take over the world! By Gimbel's account, I cannot see why this does not count as a playfully clever act, and therefore as a humorous act. But that seems absurd. My world domination is no joke (even if it does produce evil, maniacal, mad-scientists type laughter in me). Here, benign violation theory would appear to have an advantage over Gimbel's playful cleverness theory of humor. My nefarious misuse of the widget was far from benign, and so it was not humor.

Lastly, my final worry about Gimbel's overall account of humor presented throughout the book is that it is elitist. Following Steve Martin, Gimbel speaks disparagingly of comics who get "cheap" laughs not by being clever, but by conditioning audiences to laugh at repeated movements or one-liners. As he puts it, "The size of the laugh a gag receives is not an aesthetic criterion, but a measure of psychological reaction" (2018, 94). The hoi polloi may laugh a lot a dumb fart joke, but that does not make it an aesthetically good gag. The masses may be asses and not get an amazingly clever joke from a cerebral comic, but that does not mean it was not an aesthetically fantastic joke.

To be fair, my own aesthetic preferences for humor run along very similar lines as Gimbel. I, too, am something of an elitist about humor. The concern, however, is that such elitism can turn comedy into an art house activity, where comedy snobs sit around nodding appreciatively at the cleverest of gags, but no one is laughing. And that would then be the highest aesthetic ideal of comedy.³ Gimbel may well be right. But the elitism of Gimbel's aesthetic of humor is, I think, worth making explicit and directly considering. Elitism in a theory is not always wrong, but also should not be endorsed offhandedly.

In closing, I wish to register again my appreciation of Gimbel and this book. It was insightful and thought provoking. Here I have conjectured, criticized, and nitpicked. To be clear, however, it was not out of malice or disdain. Many of the criticisms here I have made as strong as possible because I am eager to hear Gimbel's forceful refutation of them.

References

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³ I do have hope, however, in such a comedy art house, puns would be recognized for their comedic brilliance and not just dismissed as some antics playing with meaning.

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