

In Defense of Comic Pluralism

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Accepted: 26 January 2017 / Published online: 1 March 2017
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Abstract Jokes are sometimes morally objectionable, and sometimes they are not. What's the relationship between a joke's being morally objectionable and its being funny? Philosophers' answers to this question run the gamut. In this paper I present a new argument for the view that the negative moral value of a joke can affect its comedic value both positively and negatively.

Keywords Humor · Comic moralism · Comic immoralism · Incongruity theory · Aesthetic judgment

1 Introduction

Some jokes are funny, and some are not. Louis Székely's (C.K's) jokes are often funny, whereas Carlos Mencia's jokes rarely are. Some jokes are morally objectionable, and some are not. Jokes from *New Yorker* cartoons are rarely morally objectionable, whereas southern chef Paula Deen's jokes (apparently) sometimes are.¹ Here's a question: What's the relationship between a joke's being funny and that same joke's being morally objectionable? According to the view I favor, which I'll call *comic pluralism*, the negative moral value of a joke can affect its comedic value both positively and negatively. The aim of this paper is to present a new argument for this view.

¹See Deen (2013, esp. pp. 78-80).

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The detailed plan is this: In Section 2 I set the stage: I briefly survey the various positions taken in the literature and identify the position I'm interested in defending here: comic pluralism. My defense of comic pluralism comes in two steps. First (Section 3), drawing on recent work by Aaron Smuts, I identify the mechanism by which the negative moral value of a joke can affect its comedic value negatively. Here I'll also outline Smuts's attempt to shift the burden of proof to those who – like me – think that negative moral value can affect comedic value positively. Next (Sections 4 and 5), I show how, *pace* Smuts's view, the very materials that underwrite the mechanism by which moral flaws can attenuate amusement can also operate to make the negative moral value of a joke affect its comedic value *positively*. The crucial idea, as I'll explain (Section 5), is that an agent's experience of comic amusement can sometimes precede her moral condemnation, resulting in incongruous attitudes toward the same joke. This idea, together with insights gained from work on the nature of comedy (Section 4), is, I'll argue, sufficient to shoulder the burden of proof: it shows how the negative moral value of a joke can sometimes contribute to its humor. In the final section (Section 6) I'll answer five objections.

2 Setting the Stage

Recall our question: What's the relationship between a joke's being morally objectionable and that joke's being funny? There are roughly three simple answers. According to comic *moralism*, the negative moral value of a joke negatively affects its comic value. According to comic *immoralism*, the negative moral value of a joke positively affects its comic value. According to comic *amoralism*, the negative moral value of a joke is irrelevant to its (positive or negative) comic value.

These three simple answers can get complicated quickly once we notice that (i) the very same question arises about the relationship between a joke's *positive* moral value and the joke's comic value and (ii) there's room for modal variation within the views. Let me comment on each of these issues in turn.

For the purposes of this paper, I'm going to set aside the issues surrounding (i): that is, I won't be interested in how a joke's *positive* moral value is related to its comic value.² Regarding (ii), the possibility of modal variation in the views: That's an issue I do want to be sensitive to in my discussion. Comic moralism and immoralism each come in strong and weak modal flavors: *strong* comic moralism is the view that the fact that a joke is morally objectionable *always* makes the joke un- or at least less funny; *weak* comic moralism is the view that this sometimes happens. Similarly, *strong* comic immoralism is the view that the fact that a joke is morally objectionable *always* makes the joke more funny; *weak* comic immoralism is the view that this sometimes happens.

This way of dividing the field leaves open the possibility that weak moralism and weak immoralism are compatible. The position that I'll call *comic pluralism* is the combination of these two views. It's the view I'll be defending in this paper. According to comic pluralism, then, sometimes negative moral value negatively affects comic value and sometimes

²Cases of political satire as practiced by, for instance, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver, seem like especially good examples of these kind of jokes. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting these examples.

Table 1 The expression “ $-M \rightarrow -C$ ” means “negative moral value ($-M$) affects (\rightarrow) comic value negatively ($-C$),” and variations of this expression mean what you would expect

	Strong moralism	Strong immoralism	Weak moralism	Weak immoralism	Amoralism	Pluralism
$-M \rightarrow -C$	A	N	S	–	N	S
$-M \rightarrow +C$	N	A	–	S	N	S

‘A’ means “always,” ‘N’ “never” and ‘S’ “sometimes”; each modal term should be understood to modify “affects”. So, for example, the way to read the first column, first row is: “negative moral value always affects comic value negatively”

negative moral value positively affects comic value. So, we have the taxonomy of views depicted in Table 1.³

Here, I’m going to present a new argument in favor of comic pluralism.⁴ As I’ve already said, pluralism is best understood as the combination of weak moralism and weak immoralism. Hence a natural way to defend pluralism is by defending each of weak moralism and weak immoralism. And that’s what I’m going to do. In fact, as I’ll argue, the very same considerations that tell in favor of weak moralism, together with insights from work on the nature of comedy, can be marshaled in support of weak immoralism.

3 Weak Moralism Defended

According to weak moralism, moral flaws in a joke can sometimes make that joke less amusing. And at the limit, moral flaws can make an otherwise amusing joke not at all funny. Why think this? Focus for the moment on what is involved in thinking that something –

³Each of these views, with the exception of amoralism, has its recent defenders. Berys Gaut (2007) is a strong comic moralist. Noel Carroll and Aaron Smuts (in at least one time-slice) both defend weak comic moralism. For Carroll’s classic defense, see Carroll (1996). For Smuts, see Smuts (2015a), Smuts (2011), Smuts (2010), and Smuts (2009). In more recent work, Smuts has switched to defending a view he calls ‘symmetric comic moralism,’ the view that not only can negative moral value negatively affect comic value, but also that positive moral value can positively affect comic value. See Smuts (2013). As I mentioned above, I’ll be setting to one side the issue of how positive moral value affects comic value for the purposes of this paper. Martin Shuster, Scott Woodcock, and Ted Nannicelli each defend versions of comic immoralism. See Shuster (2013), Woodcock (2015), and Nannicelli (2014). Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson are comic pluralists. (Indeed, they appear, besides myself, to be the only proponents of the view.) See D’Arms and Jacobson (2000) and D’Arms and Jacobson (2014). D’Arms and Jacobson’s view is somewhat complicated by the fact that, although they clearly think negative moral value *can* affect comic value both positively and negatively, they also think it is a kind of mistake (their word is “fallacy”) when it does so. Hence it can be tempting to describe their view as an amoralist one, but this conflates the question of whether moral judgment *can* affect comic amusement with whether it’s ever appropriate for it to do so. Here, I won’t be interested in the question of whether the interaction between moral judgment and comic amusement is ever *appropriate* (but see fn. 14). (It’s worth pointing out that, Gaut possibly aside, it’s difficult to find examples of real, live adherents to any of the other two modally strong views. Presumably this is because the difficulty of showing either that it’s *necessary* or that it’s *impossible* that morality affects comedy in one way or another is quite high.) Thanks to an anonymous referee for urging clarity on this point.

⁴In what follows, for the sake of brevity, I sometimes drop the modifier ‘comic.’

anything whatever, not necessarily a joke – is somehow morally objectionable. Plausibly, such thoughts regularly involve, or are accompanied by, negative attitudes of one sort or another. For instance, if I think that starving one's pets is morally objectionable, and I discover that Hemme starves his dog, then I'm not just likely to think, all cold and calm, that Hemme has done something morally objectionable: I'll also probably have an accompanying negative attitude, or emotion, toward Hemme's action or Hemme himself. I'll *feel* a particular way about what he has done, and the way I feel will have a negative valence. Really, that understates things wildly: I'll probably be disgusted, or outraged, or, if I know him well, perhaps even ashamed on his behalf. Two qualifications are in order.

First: What precisely the negative attitude regularly involved in negative moral judgment might be is up for debate. Perhaps negative moral judgment regularly involves moral disgust, or moral disapprobation, or a willingness to blame people for engaging in the relevant activity. Perhaps the negative attitude depends on the severity, kind, or content of the particular moral judgment at issue.⁵ These issues won't concern me here. All that matters for present purposes is the idea that negative moral judgments are regularly accompanied by these negative sentiments. For simplicity, and to remain neutral on their nature, I'll refer to whatever negative attitudes or emotions are regularly involved in negative moral judgment as the *moral con-attitudes*.

Second: Notice I've said that negative moral judgment *regularly* involves, or is accompanied by, moral con-attitudes. Hence I leave open, at least here, the possibility that some negative moral judgments might be made, as I put it above, all cold and calm, i.e., without the accompanying moral con-attitudes. It's even possible, for all I've said here, for there to be particular agents who lack the capacity to have the moral con-attitudes altogether but who are nevertheless capable of negative moral judgment; for such agents *all* their negative moral judgments will lack the accompanying attitudes. But having remarked on these two possibilities, it's worth highlighting two things. First, we – you and I and other ordinary adult humans – are not agents of this latter sort. That is, we have the capacity to experience the relevant attitudes, and regularly do so. Second, although perhaps both the degree of regularity and the degree of intensity with which we experience moral con-attitudes together with our negative moral judgments might vary from agent to agent, again there is a striking amount of overlap among ordinary adult human agents. We expect, at least when everything else is equal, that others will, when they think the same moral thoughts as we do, feel much the same as we do. Imagine your surprise if I told you that, despite thinking that Hemme had acted cruelly toward his dog, I didn't feel any way whatever about his having done so.

With these two qualifications in mind, focus now on what is involved in thinking that a joke is amusing. Plausibly, again, such thoughts regularly involve, or are accompanied by, *positive* attitudes of one sort or another. For instance, if Mitch tells me:

I haven't slept for ten days...because that would be too long.

then I'm not just likely to think, all cold and calm, that Mitch has just told me a funny joke: I'll also probably have an accompanying positive attitude, or emotion, toward Mitch's joke.⁶

⁵The problem of articulating the precise nature of the attitude involved in moral judgment is sometimes called the "specification problem." For a nice overview of the problem (and an attempt to solve it) see Björnsson and McPherson (2014).

⁶Hedberg (2003).

I'll *feel* a particular way about the joke, and the way I feel will have a positive valence. Really, again, that understates things wildly: I'll probably be moved to laughter.

The two qualifications from the moral case apply here too. It's an interesting question what, precisely, the attitudes or emotions are that are implicated in thinking a joke is amusing, and it's an interesting question how and to what extent these attitudes depend on the kind or content of the joke in question. However, answering these questions isn't my aim here. Instead, I'll simply refer to whatever positive attitudes or emotions are involved in positive comic judgment as the *comic pro-attitudes*. Equally, as before, I leave open the possibility of agents who completely lack the capacity to experience such comic attitudes but who are capable of the thought that something is funny, or amusing. (Although: It's worth pointing out that, however plausible you find the possible existence of such agents in the moral case, they do look *truly* bizarre in the comic.) And I won't take a stand, here, on whether or how much the regularity and intensity of comic pro-attitudes might vary from agent to agent, except to note that, again as in the moral case, there is a large degree of overlap among ordinary adult human agents on this score. In other words, when people find funny the same things we do, we expect them to be attitudinally moved in much the same way we ourselves are, at least when all else is equal.

These two points, about the attitudes that regularly accompany both moral and comic judgment, serve to lay the groundwork for an argument in favor of weak moralism. We need to add only the claim that, sometimes at least, the moral con-attitudes can *interfere with* or at least *attenuate* the comic pro-attitudes. Aaron Smuts puts the point like this:

The recognition of genuine moral flaws in an attempt at humor is decidedly not conducive to amusement. [...] [N]ot only does pity (and the entire group of other-suffering emotions) interfere with the production of humor, so too do other-condemning emotions when they are directed at the source of the humor and not the target of the joke.⁷

The idea, then, is that on an agent's thinking that some joke or other instance of comic performance is morally objectionable, at least when all is equal, and when we're dealing with an ordinary adult human agent, the agent will have some moral con-attitudes toward the joke. These moral con-attitudes, as a matter of psychological fact, tend to interfere with, or at least attenuate, the production of the comic pro-attitudes. This claim, that the moral con-attitudes attenuate or interfere with the comic pro-attitudes is borne out by common-sense and by observation. Here is Smuts again:

[I]magine a Jewish joke told by Hitler at the Nuremberg rallies. Our moral condemnation of such joke tokens would most plausibly preclude the slightest hint of amusement. [...] When one is morally repulsed by the telling of a joke or another attempt at humor, it is next to impossible to find it amusing.⁸

Again, the point is not that it is *strictly* impossible to find a joke one thinks immoral amusing. The point is that "moral condemnation is antithetical to amusement in *normal human beings*."⁹

⁷Smuts (2009, p. 156).

⁸Smuts (2009, p. 154).

⁹Smuts (2009, p. 155), emphasis added.

Smuts isn't the only moralist to endorse this argument. James Beattie, writing more than two hundred years earlier, also notices the possibility of a conflict between morality and comedy:

But can pity, abhorrence, and risibility, be excited by the same object, and at the same time? Can the painful passions of hatred and horror, and the pleasurable feeling that accompanies laughter, exist at one and the same instant in a well-informed mind? Can that amuse and delight us by its absurdity, which our moral principle, armed with the authority of Heaven, declares to be shameful, and worthy of punishment?¹⁰

Heavenly authority aside, Beattie is interested in exactly our issue. And Beattie anticipates Smuts, framing things in just the same way, i.e., in terms of the interaction between attitudes on the part of the agent involved. Beattie answers his own question:

It is impossible: emotions, so different in their nature, and so unequal in power, cannot dwell together; the weaker must give place to the stronger. And which is the weaker? – moral disapprobation, or the ludicrous sentiment? [...] The glow-worm and the sun are not less susceptible of comparison.¹¹

Colorful metaphors aside, Beattie answers just as Smuts does: the moral con-attitude (“moral disapprobation”) interferes with the comic pro-attitude (“ludicrous sentiment”).

While Smuts and Beattie both rest their argument in favor of weak moralism on this point – that the interaction between moral con-attitudes and comic pro-attitudes has a common-sense observable effect – we can, perhaps, say a bit more. For notice that moral and comic attitudes are not, in ordinary human beings, the only attitudes that interact in this way, to attenuate or interfere with one another. Instead, the interaction effect exhibited by the moral and comic attitudes is an instance of a more general phenomenon. Further examples of this general phenomenon, familiar from socio-psychological research, are the various interaction effects between agents' mental attitudes. Sometimes, these sorts of interactions are between conative states, such as desires, and cognitive states, such as belief. The most obvious example of this sort of interaction between desires and belief, and certainly a philosopher's favorite, is the phenomenon of wishful thinking, whereby a (strong) desire that p can attenuate or interfere with belief that not- p .¹² Other times, the interaction is between just conative states – as when an agent both desires p and desires not to desire p – or just between cognitive states – as when an agent's belief about the low objective chance that p doesn't match her high credence that p . In each of these cases, we regularly observe an effect of one mental attitude on another: the presence of the second-order desire tends to attenuate the first-order desire, and the presence of the belief about low objective chance tends to attenuate the high credence.¹³ My aim isn't to get into details about these examples. The point is just that

¹⁰Beattie (1778, p. 424).

¹¹Beattie (1778, p. 424).

¹²See, for example, the discussion of wishful thinking in Shah and Velleman (2005). For a more recent example of interest in this phenomenon, see Siegel (2016).

¹³Of course, some philosophers think these interactions are required by norms of rationality. On the first, see Frankfurt (2004) and Frankfurt (2006). On the second, see Lewis (1986). This isn't relevant at present, since the argument for moralism isn't grounded on how agents' attitudes are normatively required to interact, but instead on how those attitudes normally *do* interact.

we can strengthen the Smuts-Beattie argument for weak moralism by pointing out that the mechanism they appeal to in making that argument – one whereby mental attitudes attenuate and interfere with one another – is common-place and completely uncontroversial.¹⁴

So, that is the argument for weak moralism: we're familiar with, and have evidence for, the mechanism by which moral con-attitudes can interfere with, or at least attenuate, comic pro-attitudes. Since weak moralism is just the view that this can sometimes happen, we should therefore accept weak moralism. Before turning to the argument for weak *immoralism*, it's worth spending a few moments on where a comic moralist such as Smuts thinks this leaves the dialectic. According to Smuts, the weak immoralist now faces a serious challenge. For although we have good evidence for the existence of – indeed, as we've just seen, are intimately familiar with – the mechanism by which moral flaws in a joke can interfere with or attenuate comic amusement, according to Smuts we aren't at all familiar with a corresponding mechanism by which moral flaws can *enhance* or *strengthen* comic amusement. And it's this latter mechanism that comic immoralism needs in order to make its argument. Here is Smuts making this point:

Moral flaws can be causally responsible, or a reason, for the failure to amuse. As noted above, the moralist can make recourse to a fairly familiar reaction to explain how moral flaws detract from amusement. However, it is extremely difficult to describe a comparable process whereby moral flaws could contribute positively to a joke's humorousness.¹⁵

Comic moralism and immoralism are therefore asymmetrically situated, at least according to a moralist such as Smuts: "the burden of proof falls on the immoralist to show how genuine moral flaws could possibly contribute to amusement."¹⁶ In the next section (§4), as a first step toward shouldering this burden, I'm going to take a quick detour through work on the nature of comic amusement. Then (§5), I'll show how insights from this work, together with the observation that an agent's comic amusement can sometimes precede her moral outrage, yield an argument in favor of weak immoralism. Hence we're left with good arguments for both weak moralism and weak immoralism; in other words, we're left with comic pluralism.

¹⁴Importantly, the fact that one attitude attenuates (or indeed strengthens) another does not affect which attitudes are *fitting* and to what degree those attitudes are fitting. Plausibly, what attitudes are fitting is a matter of the normative relationships that hold, or fail to hold, between facts or states-of-affairs in the world and our attitudes, whereas what attitudes attenuate or strengthen one another is a matter of how our psychologies actually work. So, for instance, the fact that desiring that *P* tends to make one more confident that *P* doesn't show anything about whether or not it's *correct* or *fitting* either to desire or to believe that *P*. Now, it might turn out, and seems plausible to suppose, that evidence about the interaction effects between attitudes is sometimes evidence regarding the conditions under which those attitudes are fitting. But for present purposes, we do not need this claim. The important idea, here, is merely that there *are* these interaction effects, not whether they are appropriate, or fitting. This is because the moralist's argument, as we've just seen, depends only on thinking that the moral attitude can *in fact* attenuate the comic and, as we're about to see, the pluralist's argument depends only on thinking that the moral attitude can *in fact* strengthen the comic. Thanks to Daniel Jacobson for suggesting clarity on this point.

¹⁵Smuts 2009, pp. 156-7).

¹⁶Smuts (2009, p. 156).

4 Incongruity and Humor

Before presenting the argument in favor of weak immoralism, we need to take a quick detour through some work on the philosophy of humor. A theory of humor is an attempt to say what, if anything, makes something funny. Traditionally, theories of humor have been divided into three sorts of view: incongruity theories, superiority theories, and relief theories.¹⁷ Also traditionally, each of these theories has been understood as aiming to identify necessary, sufficient, or both necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being funny. But, as several authors – including Smuts – have pointed out in recent years, understanding the theories in this way is not very helpful.¹⁸ This is because humor appears to be a family-resemblance concept, and each of these theories plausibly identifies features of jokes, or other instances of humor, that contribute to their comedic value in some contexts, but not in others. Moreover, attempts to shoehorn all instances of humor into one or other of these theoretical approaches look hopeless: they simply fail to deliver the correct results. In any case, this idea, that each of the theories of humor identifies relevant but not unfailingly determinative humorous features of things, is now fairly widely accepted, and I will proceed on the assumption that this is correct.¹⁹ Understood in this way, each theory goes some way to identifying key contributing features to what makes something (more or less) funny. Some things are amusing because they involve incongruity (puns are a good example), others because they contribute to a sense of superiority (insult jokes), and still others for different reasons.

Here my focus is on the incongruity theory of humor. In the next section, I'm going to argue that insights gained from this account concerning what contributes to things being funny apply directly to the issue motivating the paper, viz. the relationship between the moral and comedic value of a joke. Before that, we need a few more details concerning what the incongruity theory of humor says makes things funny.

The key idea behind the incongruity theory of humor is that, sometimes at least, what makes something funny is the existence of incongruity between attitudes on the part of those for whom it is funny. This idea, that incongruity contributes to humor, isn't a new one. Beattie, our eighteenth-century moralist from the last section, says that humor is “an opposition of suitableness and unsuitableness, or of relation and the want of relation, united, or supposed to be united, in the same assemblage.”²⁰ In other words, humor involves incongruity. Now, “incongruity” can have a wide range of meanings. Here I follow John Morreall in taking the core meaning of “incongruity” in incongruity theories of humor to be a violation of normal connections between attitudes. As Morreall puts it, incongruity is present

¹⁷These theories each have a long history, dating back to Hobbes (1982), Kant (2001), and Aristotle (2013). For just a few recent defenses of each of these views, see Scruton (1986), Clark (1987), Morreall (2009), and Martin (1983).

¹⁸Smuts (2015b) has given this point its clearest expression.

¹⁹For a clear defense of the inadequacy of one theory, see Carroll (1991). In recent years, a fourth account of humor has come on the scene, motivated in large part by reflection on the cognitive-social evolution of the mechanisms underlying humor. This evolutionary account has been given the clearest articulation by Hurley et al. (2013). Moreover, these four accounts do not even begin to exhaust the theories of humor that have been offered. For instance, the semantic approach in Raskin (1979), the gestalt theory developed in Maier (1932) and the computer modeling account in Suslov (1992) are three more examples. Each of these views seems to capture some important aspect of humor. Although I think it's plausible to think that no single unified (i.e., non-disjunctive) theory will capture the necessary and sufficient for humor, here I'll simply assume that the correct view will incorporate the insights of competing views.

²⁰Beattie 1778, p. 348).

when “some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations”.²¹ To illustrate the view, focusing on the case of violating normal expectations, consider the joke:

What would Kant do if he were alive today?
Scream and claw at the lid of his coffin.

Let’s ruin the joke. In the setup of the joke a range of expectations are encouraged on the part of the listener. For one, the possible world that is conjured in the mind of the listener (where Kant is alive today) is likely to be one where, somehow, Kant has survived into almost his third century of life (and so hasn’t ever been buried), or instead one where he has somehow been brought back to life by miraculous or scientific intervention (and is presumably no longer buried). The punchline is incongruous with these expectations: the possible world implicit in the punchline is one where Kant is alive and well, but remains buried (trapped!) beneath Königsberg. More: the listener reasonably expects the answer to have something to do with Kant specifically. So she might expect, for instance, that the answer will involve something to do with acting in accord with the categorical imperative, or with Kant’s relationship to contemporary academic philosophy, or whatever. Instead, the answer applies equally well to anyone who is dead and buried, on the assumption that they are now alive but still buried. And notice that this joke works *even when one knows a joke is coming*. This is because the punchline is so radically out of line, i.e., incongruous, with the expectational attitudes formed on the part of the listener (unless, of course, one has previously heard the joke or one of its close cousins).

Importantly, incongruity that contributes to humor needn’t always involve this sort of expectational incongruity. Other incongruent combinations of attitudes – combinations that violate our “normal patterns of thought” – can be triggered by a joke or other humorous event. As Beattie points out, some comedy involves mixing the serious and high-minded with the “mean,” so that, for instance, “mean circumstances in solemn description seem ridiculous to those who are sensible of the incongruity.”²² Because that which we ordinarily take seriously normally evokes one sort or set of attitudes and that which is we ordinarily take to be vulgar normally evokes in us another, the incongruity between the two sets of attitudes (sometimes) contributes to humor. Cases of non-expectational attitudinal incongruity are also not limited to cases of opposition between solemnity and vulgarity. Subversive or transgressive humor, humor that invites the participants to find amusement in something ordinarily deemed shameful, uncouth, pitiable, or somehow objectionable, sometimes works via the same mechanism: one set of attitudes regarding the object of the humor is triggered, and the punchline triggers a competing, incongruous set of attitudes.²³ The result, when all goes well, is humorous.

²¹Morreall (2009, p. 11)

²²Beattie (1778).

²³Again, the incongruity theory should not be understood to claim that incongruity between attitudes is *sufficient* for humor, for not all cases of incongruity are humorous. For instance, consider the “joke”:

If Mary buys a sweater, Jon will too.
Mary buys a sweater.
Jon doesn’t buy a sweater.

Here, the “punchline” (Jon doesn’t buy a sweater) violates our normal mental patterns: the joke elicits incongruous attitudes. But I hope you’ll agree that the joke isn’t thereby funny.

That's a whirlwind tour through the incongruity account of humor. There's much more that could be said, but this overview will do for present purposes. In the next section I'll explain how the incongruity theory, together with the mechanism already identified in the defense of weak moralism and an observation about how agents experience jokes, can be used to generate an argument for weak *immoralism*.

5 Weak Immoralism Defended

How does the incongruity theory of humor bear on our question concerning the relationship between a joke's moral and its comic value? Let me make two remarks before answering this question.

First: as we saw above, negative moral judgment and comic amusement regularly involve, and are accompanied by, certain con- and pro-attitudes, respectively. Recall that it was this fact, that negative moral judgment carried a certain attitudinal valence directly opposed to the attitudinal valence carried by comic amusement, that made the argument for comic moralism so compelling. The moral con-attitude, it seemed, was capable of canceling out, or at least attenuating, the comic pro-attitude. Now, with the incongruity theory of humor in mind, we can add the following: the moral con-attitude and the comic pro-attitude are *incongruous*. There is a clear kind of attitudinal (though not necessarily expectational) incongruity between simultaneously having both the moral con-attitude toward a joke, whatever that attitude's specific nature, and having the comic pro-attitude, whatever its specific nature, toward that same joke. Ordinarily at least, we do not have pro-attitudes toward that which we also have strong con-attitudes toward. But in the case of jokes that are morally objectionable, this ordinary pattern of thought is disrupted. In particular, it is disrupted when the joke elicits both comic amusement and moral condemnation. In other words, immoral jokes make for incongruous attitudes. This shouldn't be controversial, at least not to a defender of weak comic moralism, such as Smuts (or indeed Beattie), who wants to embrace the argument in favor of weak moralism given above. For, again, it's this very fact, that the moral con-attitude makes an uncomfortable bedfellow with the comic pro-attitude on which the moralist rests her argument.

Second: Agents' moral judgments regarding and their comic amusement at particular jokes occur at specific times and not necessarily simultaneously. Moreover, we have no reason to suppose that one of these always comes before the other, so that, for instance, an agent is always morally outraged by a morally objectionable joke *prior* to being amused by it. This too shouldn't be controversial. The moralist's point was not that the moral con-attitude always everywhere *preempted* comic amusement. It was, instead, that the moral con-attitude ordinarily attenuated, or interfered with, the comic pro-attitude in a way that made the morally objectionable joke less amusing. It's compatible with this point to think that an agent is *first* amused by a joke and *then* morally condemns it. Indeed, experience reflects the fact that this sometimes happens. One can find oneself starting to smile at a particularly clever remark before one even *realizes* that the remark relies on or otherwise involves some morally objectionable content. The moralist's point is simply that, when it occurs, the moral realization tamps down the comic amusement. And that's a point I've been urging we should accept.

If you're not convinced that things can happen in this way, let me emphasize again that it's no part of weak moralism to claim that comic amusement is *always* attenuated by morally objectionable content in a joke. After all, the mechanism by which moral flaws in a joke detract from the comedic value of the same joke is one that operates *via* an agent's

attitudes. And if we suppose, as it certainly seems plausible to suppose can sometimes happen, that an agent's moral con-attitude might not be present in the face of a joke with morally objectionable content, then the mechanism simply won't have any materials with which to work. There are any number of ways this might happen: as above, an agent could fail to recognize the moral flaws in a joke, or she could fail to have the relevant moral attitude for some other reason. The point here is just that agents *can* be and sometimes *are* amused by immoral jokes, and that the moralist isn't in the business of denying this common-sense datum.²⁴

But now we are in a position to see why the moralist should also accept the possibility that things can happen, as we might put it, in reverse, i.e., that, sometimes at least, the morally objectionable nature of a joke can make the joke more (and not less) amusing. This is because an agent who is *first* amused by a joke and only *subsequently* judges that it is morally condemnable will experience a distinctive kind of incongruity in her attitudes. In particular, she will experience an incongruity between her comic pro-attitude toward the joke and her moral con-attitude toward the joke. Above, we saw the moralist claim that, when this happens, the moral con-attitude will attenuate the comic pro-attitude. And that seemed plausible enough. But with the incongruity theory now in front of us, I submit that the following claim is equally plausible: the incongruity between the comic pro- and the moral con-attitude can *itself* be a cause of amusement. In other words, the joke can be made more funny as a result of its moral flaws: its moral flaws can lead the agent to experience the moral con-attitude, which in turn is experienced as incongruous with the antecedent comic pro-attitude, and hence can itself be a cause of amusement. Below, I'll reply to some objections to this line of thought. Before doing that, let me say something briefly about the scope of this result.

The immoralist claim I've just defended, like the moralist claim defended above by Smuts and Beattie which I've suggested we should accept, is relatively *weak*. For it is not the claim that always everywhere moral flaws contribute to amusement. Instead, it's the claim that this can sometimes happen. Recall Smuts's complaint – his attempt to shift the burden of proof – that we saw at the end of section 3. His worry there was that the immoralist had no good account of the mechanism by which moral flaws could possibly contribute to amusement. What I've just done is argue that, if we accept the idea that moral judgment and comic amusement involve attendant attitudes of the kind the moralist is committed to thinking they do, and if we accept that incongruity in attitudes can sometimes contribute to humor, then the immoralist *does* have an account of the relevant mechanism. In effect, the mechanism is the *same* mechanism by which moral flaws can attenuate amusement *plus* the insights garnered from the incongruity theory of humor.

If this argument works, it doesn't show that weak immoralism rather than weak moralism is true. Instead, what it shows is that the combination of these two views, the view I've been calling *comic pluralism* is true. So, rather than being weak moralists or weak immoralists, we should be comic pluralists.

6 Objections and Replies

In this section I'll consider and reply to five objections to the argument in favor of comic pluralism.

²⁴C.f. (Smuts 2009, p. 156): "The fact that jokes judged to be immoral can still be found amusing is perfectly compatible with moderate comic moralism."

6.1 Meta-Humor

I've said that there's sometimes an incongruity between an agent's moral con-attitude toward a joke and her comic pro-attitude toward that same joke. Suppose that's true. I've also said that this incongruity can sometimes cause the joke to be more amusing. But one might object: the incongruity between attitudes I've identified in fact generates a kind of *meta-humor* or *meta-joke* but does not increase the comic value of the original token joke. The idea, then, would be that the argument has failed to show that moral flaws contribute to the comedic value of jokes because, although moral flaws in a joke can sometimes generate (more) amusement (via the mechanism I've identified) those moral flaws can't make the *joke itself* more funny: they can only contribute to the humor of something else – the situation, or the circumstances, or whatever. Rather than serving to increase the comedic value of a token joke, then, the relevant incongruity generates meta-humor, or a meta-joke. And that meta-joke, which involves only the experienced incongruity between attitudes, doesn't *itself* have any moral flaws. So, I've failed to show that moral flaws can enhance the value of a joke. So, I've failed to show that weak immoralism is true. So, I've failed to show that comic pluralism is true.

Whether this objection works turns on what the object of humor is when the incongruity between one's moral attitude and one's comic attitude generates amusement. If it's some new object, such as the situation one finds oneself in, then the objection goes through and the argument fails. If it's the same object, i.e., the original joke, then the objection doesn't go through and the argument in favor of comic pluralism stands.

On the one hand, I do not want to insist that things could not possibly turn out so that one's amusement was directed at the situation one finds oneself in. That is, it could be that what is amusing in the circumstances where one's moral attitudes are incongruous with one's comedic attitudes is simply the very fact of one's being in those circumstances. This would be an instance of, as I've been putting it, meta-humor, i.e., humorous amusement whose object is one's own attitudes.

On the other hand, the comic moralist equally does not have grounds for insisting that things *must* turn out like this. For notice that a token joke might be specifically *designed* to elicit the incongruous combination of sentiments at issue here. If that is how the joke is meant to *work*, it seems presumptuous for the moralist to claim that, when to all appearances the joke works perfectly – that is, when it simultaneously elicits the moral con- and comic-pro attitudes and thereby generates more amusement – the joke in fact fails because what is funny isn't the joke itself but instead some meta-joke. In other words, I'm not convinced that we can draw a line around jokes in the way the objection would require us to do: some jokes might, in virtue of the way they are crafted, be such as to be the jokes they are, and have the comic value they do, because they generate the incongruous attitudes at issue here. It seems arbitrary, and question-begging, to always everywhere insist that we assign the humor generated by such a joke to some new joke, the meta-joke. I conclude, therefore, that this objection fails.

6.2 No Incongruity

A different objection to comic pluralism holds that the moral con- and comic pro-attitude aren't incongruous. Recall the mechanism by which the pluralist thinks moral flaws can enhance comic amusement works by way of the incongruity between the moral con- and comic pro-attitude. So, if these two attitudes turn out not to be incongruous, then there's no

reason to think the mechanism will operate in any case of a joke with morally objectionable content. In reply, two related points.

First, as we noted above, “incongruity” can have a wide range of meanings. But for the purposes of the incongruity theory of humor, I suggested we follow Morreal in taking the core meaning to be one where incongruity is a matter of violation of our normal mental patterns and normal expectations. In reply to the suggestion that the moral con- and comic pro-attitude are not incongruous, then, it should suffice to point out that, ordinarily at least, we do not simultaneously have strong con- and pro-attitudes toward the same thing at the same time. If we did, our ordinary experience of life wouldn’t just occasionally involve attitudinal dissonance, which it obviously does, it would be an unrelenting experience of internal conflict. Granted, we sometimes have oppositional attitudes toward the same thing at the same time. But these events are not (statistically) normal: they are not what our normal patterns of thought are like. And so when conflict such as this does occur, we experience it as uncomfortable, as a violation of the ordinary patterns of our mental lives. This is why, for instance, it’s so phenomenologically strange to simultaneously admire and condemn the same person. It seems a stretch, then, to say that the moral con- and comic pro-attitudes toward the same object are not incongruous; more worryingly, it seems to be using the notion of incongruity in a different way than we’ve stipulated its meaning to be here, for use in the incongruity theory of humor.²⁵

Second, and more importantly, it seems the moralist who takes this line of attack is in conflict with her own view. For, as we saw in making the argument for weak moralism, according to moralism the moral con- and comic pro-attitude are at the very least dissonant: they do not make for an easy combination. That is why, after all, the moralist thinks the moral con-attitude is suited to tamp down the comic pro-attitude. Consider what would be the case if the moralist really thought the moral con-attitude was systematically not incongruous with the comic pro-attitude. If this were so, then it would be a mystery why the moral con-attitude sometimes puts pressure on the comic pro-attitude in the way the moralist is committed to thinking it can sometimes do. After all, if the two attitudes aren’t in any kind of conflict or incongruity with one another, then why, on simultaneously experiencing both toward the same object, would the moral pro-attitude serve to attenuate the comic? In attempting to block the immoralist from her argument in this way, the moralist thus cuts her own argument off at the knees. Assuming they do not want to do this, the moralist will need to look elsewhere.

6.3 Incongruity, But No Humor

This objection grants that the moral con- and comic pro-attitude are incongruous but denies such incongruity, though suited to generate humor (see 6.2), ever *in fact* generates humor. Recall that the incongruity theory of humor doesn’t say that all instances of incongruity contribute to humor; that is, it’s not a sufficient condition for something’s being humorous that it violates our normal mental patterns or normal expectations. Instead, the incongruity theory

²⁵The moralist might choose to reject the stipulated meaning of “incongruity” wholesale. But if she does, she will need to do so without robbing the incongruity theory of humor of its interest and explanatory power: she will, in effect, have saddled herself with the task of articulating a replacement notion of incongruity that can do the work of the original notion in the incongruity theory of humor without delivering the result that the moral con- and comic pro-attitudes are incongruous. I’m not optimistic about the prospects for accomplishing this, and in any case exploring this line would take me too far afield here.

of humor only says that this sometimes happens, that incongruity in attitudes is *sometimes* a contributing cause of humor. So, says this objection, incongruity between the moral and the comic pro-attitude is incongruity in attitude that systematically fails to contribute to humor. So, while it might be true that I've carved out some logical space for the comic pluralist to occupy, I haven't shown that this space includes any actual, real-life examples of morally objectionable content contributing to the humor of a joke.

In reply, two points. First, if what the moralist would like for me to do in reply to this objection is to tell her an actual morally objectionable joke that, on hearing it, in fact generates amusement in the way I've explained such jokes can in principle do, I demur. I do so for two reasons. First, whether or not a particular telling of a particular joke will operate, via the mechanism I've identified, to increase amusement because of its morally objectionable nature, depends on too much for me to be sure of its effect. This is because, as we've already seen, whether the joke is made more funny because of its morally problematic nature depends on the sensibility of the audience of the joke in two respects: on their sense of humor, and on their sense of morality. Since I don't have any firm view of what the objector's sensibility might be in either of these two respects, I am at a loss as to what joke to tell: one might fail to be funny, another morally problematic, a third both. And in any case mere words are insufficient: a joke can be morally problematic not because of its semantic content but instead because of features of the context in which it is uttered, including, but not limited to, features of the audience to whom it is addressed. Those aren't features I can replicate here, in this paper, in a way that would do what it might be that the objector wants me to do, which is presumably to tell a simultaneously funny and morally condemnable joke that is made more funny because of its moral nature. Even if this weren't so, and I had an example I knew would land, ready-to-hand, I would still demur because I think that the moral cost to telling such a joke outweighs the rhetorical benefit doing so might have.²⁶

Second, and more importantly, notice that the moralist who pursues this line of objection takes on a serious debt. Not only must she show that there are *some* cases where the incongruity between the attitudes involved in moral judgment and comic amusement does not contribute to humor – that is something the pluralist is happy to admit – she must show that this is so in *all* cases. This is no easy task, since the moralist must not only explain why it is that incongruity fails to contribute to humor in this or that instance, but why it systematically fails to do so. And she must do so, again, without begging the question against the pluralist. To emphasize how difficult this task is, recall, again, that the moralist we're imagining objecting in this way concedes both that the moral and comic attitudes are incongruous and that they can interact. The surprising thing is that, according to this objection on behalf of moralism, these incongruous attitudes can only interact in one way: the negatively valenced moral attitude can only attenuate (but not strengthen) the positively valenced comic attitude. And this is so despite the fact that incongruity in attitudes is a hallmark of humor. So, the moralist must explain this surprising fact, and she must do so without simply relying on a view of the moral and comic attitudes that precludes the possibility of the effect the pluralist thinks these attitudes can have on each other, on pain of begging the question. In other words, the moralist must explain what's so special about the moral (or the comic) attitude that belies the incongruity between the two leading to amusement, and she must do so without simply stipulating – as Beattie does – that, for instance, the one attitude is, as a glow-worm, always blotted out by the sun of the other. I don't see any prospect for her doing

²⁶Thanks to an anonymous referee for urging clarity on this point.

so; at the very least, we are now owed a story from the moralist about why this surprising fact is so.

Worse, it's unclear why we would be interested in pursuing this line of thought. (Which is not to say it's unclear why a *moralist* would be interested in pursuing it.) For, granting that moral and comic attitudes exhibit incongruity, that the latter can sometimes precede the former, and granting that incongruity is apt to generate humor, why would we think there is some theoretical restriction on the incongruity exhibited by *these* attitudes that precludes them from generating humor? Again, I see no pre-theoretical (i.e., non-moralistic) reason to think this is so. At the very least, then, again, we are owed some account by the moralist about why we should accept such a restriction. In other words, the burden of proof now belongs to the moralist.

6.4 Moral Flaws Don't Directly Cause Humor

Suppose, as I've argued, that it's possible to be amused by a joke that has some morally objectionable features, and that it's possible for the amusement one feels in response to this joke to be enhanced rather than attenuated in virtue of the fact that the joke is morally objectionable in the way it is. As I've argued, this can happen because it's possible for the moral con-attitude we have in response to the joke's problematic moral features to be incongruous with the comic pro-attitude we have in response to the joke's comic features, and for this incongruity to itself be a source of amusement. The current objection claims that this fact, supposing it is a fact, is insufficient to serve as a reply to the moralist. According to this line of thought, to vindicate comic pluralism it is necessary to show that whatever specific features of the joke are morally objectionable *themselves* contribute to its humor. It's not enough for the joke *as a whole* to generate amusement and also deserve condemnation (and thereby be made more funny): instead, it must be that *the very same feature of the joke that is morally problematic* is also itself *funny*. Hence although I've shown how moral flaws can *indirectly* contribute to humor (via the mechanism of incongruity between attitudes), I haven't shown how such flaws can themselves contribute *directly* to humor.

In reply, I accept that I haven't shown that moral flaws contribute "directly" to humor: the mechanism I've identified goes by way of the attitude one has in response to those flaws, and that attitude's interaction with one's comic attitudes. But I reject the idea that, in order to show that morally objectionable jokes can be more amusing as a result of being morally objectionable, it is necessary to show that they are more amusing "directly" as a result of the very features that make them morally objectionable. Instead, it is sufficient to show that the joke's having the one feature – being morally objectionable – can sometimes contribute, either "directly" or via some intervening mechanism, to its having the other feature – being amusing.

Consider the following analogy between an action's being morally obligatory and its being prudentially rational. Suppose I convince you that something's being morally obligatory sometimes contributes to its being prudentially rational because, as a matter of fact, moral obligations are widely policed in the sense that those who violate their moral obligations are ostracized, publicly shamed, and otherwise treated in a way that negatively contributes to their prudential well-being. It would then be true that what *makes* some action morally obligatory is not the same as what makes it prudentially rational; what makes an action morally obligatory might be, for instance, that one promised to do it, while what makes that same action prudentially rational might be, for instance, that if one fails to do it one will be ostracized from one's social group. It's nevertheless true that the action is (i) simultaneously morally obligatory and prudentially rational and (ii) that its being

prudentially rational is a result – though not a “direct” result – of its being moral obligatory. Here, the mechanism by which moral obligatoriness sometimes contributes to prudential rationality is the mechanism of social enforcement of moral obligations: it is not the *promise itself* that makes keeping one’s promise the prudentially rational thing to do, but instead some facts about how promise-keeping can be related to one’s well-being, as matter of fact.

Similar remarks apply to the case at hand: it’s not the moral flaws *themselves* that make the joke more funny, but instead some facts about how attitudinally responding to those flaws can be related to one’s comic amusement, as a matter of fact. Moral flaws contribute to humor *by way of* the mechanism of incongruity in attitude.

6.5 Not Really Nasty

The final objection I’ll consider grants that it’s possible to be amused by what appear at first blush to be morally objectionable jokes, but denies that those jokes are *in fact* morally objectionable. The idea, here, is to explain away the morally problematic nature of those jokes that generate amusement in favor of thinking, instead, that the jokes are (merely) outrageous, or transgressive, or have some other non-morally objectionable, but, as we might put it, moral-adjacent, property. Here is Smuts:

Comic [pluralism] is a position about morally flawed attempts at humor, not attempts at humor that merely feature immoral acts and salacious content. It is hard to imagine any controversy over what we might call comic naughty-ism – the position that outrageous, irreverent, or inappropriate content can often enhance amusement. Most everyone agrees with that view. The problem is that defenders of comic [pluralism] have offered merely naughty examples when something far less nice is needed.²⁷

The situation might be thought to be worse for a defender of comic pluralism, such as myself, who has refused to offer *any* examples, let alone any particularly nasty ones. In reply, two points already mentioned in response to preceding objections will suffice.

First, I point the reader to the discussion above (6.3) where I explained my reasons for demurring to offer such examples: they are, as Smuts says, *nasty*, and, more importantly, there are barriers to generating effective examples in the context of a paper.

Second, apart from reasons why it is not advisable, easy, or perhaps even possible to generate examples of the relevant jokes, I do not accept that the argumentative burden to produce such examples is on the pluralist. We now have in front of us a mechanism by which the relevant phenomenon can occur: the moral con-attitude is incongruous with the comic pro-attitude, and incongruity in attitude can lead to humor. Above, I explained why the moralist who rejects the possibility of *this kind* of incongruity leading to humor takes on a serious debt, and hence why the pluralist position is the more natural one. Here, I’ll simply put this same point another way. The moralist claim, that truly “nasty” jokes can’t ever operate via the mechanism I’ve identified to be more amusing because they are nasty is, to borrow a phrase, a somewhat daring empirical claim about human psychology.²⁸ And importantly, it’s not a claim, at least without further evidence, the pluralist has any reason to accept.

²⁷Smuts (2009, p. 154)

²⁸David (2001, p. 155).

7 Summary

Some jokes are morally objectionable and some are not. According to weak moralism, the comic value of jokes can sometimes be negatively affected by their moral flaws. One defense of weak moralism appeals to common-sense facts and observations about the interaction effect between the attitudes normally involved in moral judgment and comic amusement: the former tends to attenuate the latter. According to weak moralists such as Smuts, the weak *immoralist*, who thinks that moral flaws can enhance amusement, is then faced with the task of explaining the mechanism by which this contrary effect can happen. Here, I've argued that insights from the incongruity theory of humor, paired with the same materials underwriting the mechanism by which the moralist thinks moral flaws sometimes detract from humor, can explain how it is that moral flaws can contribute to humor. If successful, this argument supports a view that combines weak moralism and weak immoralism; that's the view I've called comic pluralism. I sketched five objections to comic pluralism. In each case, I explained why the proponent of pluralism should find these objections unconvincing. I conclude that, barring new arguments from moralists, we should be comic pluralists.

Acknowledgments Thanks to two anonymous referees for their thorough, helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks also to Daniel Jacobson, Justin D'Arms, Matthew Kotzen, and Megan Mitchell for feedback and discussions of the issues.

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