**PHILOSOPHY ASSIGNMENT**

**IS IT OKAY TO BE OFFENDED BY A JOKE?**

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**2018A7PS0230U**

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**CHAPTER 1**

**INTRODUCTION: WHY DO WE MAKE JOKES?**

*“What's the difference between a rusty old bus stop and a crab with big breasts?*

*One’s a crusty bus station, the other’s a busty crustacean”*

I was probably 15 years old when I first found out what a *roast* is. My introduction to this type of comedy was through a group of comedians called AIB (All India Bakchod) when they hosted the roast of actors Arjun Kapoor and Ranveer Singh. In a word, it was delightful- watching all these celebrities breaking out of character and behaving like real people, ripping into each other with jokes and comments which were rather inappropriate for television was a cathartic experience. It was what I discovered later- an FIR was lodged against AIB and all the celebrities involved in the roast on grounds of obscenity and hurting religious sentiments [[1]](#footnote-0). The fact that these people were subject to such scrutiny and hatred only for making some jokes didn’t feel okay.

This incident planted questions in my mind. Some questions about the fundamental idea of humor, some about the structure of a joke, some about intolerance and the freedom of speech. All these questions tiptoe around one major idea, the one I have contemplated while writing this paper: *Is it okay to be offended by a joke?*

We live in a world that witnesses an ongoing war between an entitled audience and, for the purposes of this paper, comedians who are too afraid to be vocal in their acts. There is no better time to try and understand the journey of humor- how it has fared in history and how people have reacted to it over time. This paper focuses on the philosophical implications of a joke by trying to break down the concept of humor to its fundamentals.

This paper tries to reduce humor and offence to their most basic forms and understand what philosophers have said about it over different time periods. A **metaphysical** understanding of humor then makes it easier to set the premise for the ultimate question this paper asks. The answer to whether or not it is okay to feel offended at a joke is multifold, with answers lying in all sorts of philosophical and psychological schools. The paper is restricted to only consider the **ethical** and **stoic** grounds so that it doesn’t spin in circles around the same question, and instead provides an answer that makes sense.

**CHAPTER 2**

**WHAT IS HUMOR?**

*“What would Plato say to impress his wife?*

*You may be from high heaven, because you have perfect form.”*

Over centuries, philosophers have sought to answer questions regarding everything in life. One common observation between all philosophers, though, is that the vast majority of them never looked kindly upon humor. As simple and unassuming as it may be, the nuances of humor have eluded most philosophers thus making it a scarce topic. However, the underlying narrative has been that of disdain- humor was generally looked down upon by great philosophers such a Plato and Socrates, at times believed to be something irrational and even unethical [[2]](#footnote-1).

**2.1 HOBBES’ SUPERIORITY THEORY**

This way of assessing humor is probably the oldest; the roots of the ideas embodied in this theory can be observed as long as 2,000 years ago. Plato argued that citizens should not engage in humor at all since it is an unethical practice. Rene Descartes had a very similar view of humor and thus despised the practice in general. In the 1800’s, Thomas Hobbes came along and famously theorised that the only reason one makes a joke on another is because one feels superior to them. This gave rise to his theory of superiority. It brought about the idea that if I make a joke on something, it makes me superior to that, and hence degrades the thing being referenced. [[3]](#footnote-2)

*“Descartes walks into a bar and finishes a drink. The bartender asks him whether he’d like another, to which Descartes replies, ‘I think not’, and then disappears.” [[4]](#footnote-3)*

Someone who defends this theory would assume that I feel superior to Rene Descartes for making a joke about his famous statement, “I think, therefore I am”, whereas that isn’t the case at all. A joke along such lines is only playful and clever play on words. Unfortunately for roughly two millennia, this way of thinking was prevalent and hence is the reason why humour earned a bad name in history.

It is still believed that certain types of jokes, such as, jokes made at the expense of marginalized communities like black people, (or Dalits in India) are a classic example of the superiority theory- we laugh at them because we feel superior to them. 2, 4

**2.2 FREUD’S RELIEF THEORY**

At the turn of the century, Sigmund Freud offered a theory called the relief theory of humor. Freud and Herbert Spencer made observations about the biological aspect of humor. They believed that laughter was something that the human body did to cope with stress and tension. Freud believed that a joke should be structured such that the setup creates a tense environment and the punchline being drastically different than the expected narrative should quail the tension, hence making the audience laugh.

There’s a commercial where an overweight man checks his weight, and disappointed by the results, climbs on a chair by his balcony and jerks the chair away. The way that the shot is framed, it appears as if the man killed himself because of his body. Just a second later, the camera pans upwards, revealing that he was hanging by two gymnastic rings, trying to exercise. The screen then cuts to black with the message, “do some sports!” [[5]](#footnote-4)

The following commercial builds up tension and portrays the depiction of a suicide because of a serious issue like body dysphoria, but in the “punchline” the narrative entirely shatters because the reality was so vastly different than what we were lead to believe. People who support this theory of humor believe that this is the sole reason why people laugh. 2, 4

**2.3 KANT’S INCONGRUITY THEORY**

Philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer laid the seeds for what is now one of the most common theories in understanding philosophy, known as the incongruity theory. This states that the joke works in three steps, where the first step sets an example of how the joke is supposed to go, the second example sets expectations for how the third step will go, and the final step subverts the expectations such that that gap in what we expected and what was delivered is so vast that it gives birth to humor.

*“Tommy said that his favourite vegetable is a carrot, and Danny said that hers is ladyfinger. ‘Mine is Stephen Hawking’ I said, Tommy and Danny fell quiet.”*

The following joke plays on the given incongruity theory. It sets up a conversation between three friends and till the second example, it is an innocent enough conversation. It is the last statement which plays on the word “vegetable” challenging its conventional meaning by opting for the second definition, a slang to refer to people in a vegetative state. The incongruity theory is similar to the relief theory since the underlying process of generating humor by dashing expectation remains constant. 2, 4

**2.4 THE PLAY THEORY IN AESTHETICS**

Lastly, another relevant way to understand humor is the play theory. This idea primarily lies in the philosophy of aesthetics. It works by combining multiple ideas from various different theories and is more of a sociological way of looking at things. The play theory basically dictates that laughter is a way of disarming a situation, a sign of ease in conversation, or to signify that something that was initially thought about as serious or stigma isn’t considered so anymore. 2, 4

Examples of play theory can be seen in satire, books, movies, or TV shows mocking tyrant figures like Adolf Hitler. The 1940 comedy movie, the great dictator starring the British comedian Charlie Chaplin exemplifies humor as portrayed in the play theory. The movie mocks Hitler and his extremist Nazi ideologies to demonstrate how Hitler and the hatred he espouses should not be taken seriously. The point of such works is not to normalize trauma or wrongdoing, but to state that it is not okay and the aggressors who indulge in such activities aren’t to be taken seriously.

Over time, we can see how humor has evolved- the contrast between the ideas presented in the superiority theory and the play theory shows how philosophy has evolved in understanding the implications and scope of what humor is and how jokes should be made.

**CHAPTER 3**

**DARK HUMOR**

*“Why can the king only move one step at a time on the chessboard while the queen can move unrestricted?*

*Because the chessboard looks exactly like a kitchen floor.”*

There are jokes which have their genesis in topics that are generally considered taboo, mainly because such topics are too serious, uncomfortable, or painful to talk about. Artists use this style of humor to shine a light on social issues or traumatic incidents to destigmatize them or to simply amuse their audience. This style of humor is called **dark humor**, and is also known by many other names such as black comedy, edgy humor, or morbid humor.

**3.1 WHAT MAKES A JOKE DARK**

Dark humor is an umbrella term which includes multiple subsections such as blue comedy, which is the sphere of jokes about sexual activities or basically any topic that has a sexual connotation, and gallows humor which comprises humor pertaining to death in all of its contexts.

We can see the first mentions of the subject of black humor in the works of surrealist Andre Breton.[[6]](#footnote-5) Before this, the term black comedy had no meaning, other than the literary interpretation- jokes about black people. Despite the publication of his anthology in 1941, the term only started gaining popularity in the 1960’s.

The concept of dark humor challenges the limits one can push while making a joke, which is why it is amusing to people who enjoy it and offensive to people who despise it. Let’s consider the joke mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. It is an ironic comment on sexism and the oppressive stereotypes for women we observe in the world right now. The reason it may make people anxious is that it approaches the topic with a hint of humor.

The widely misunderstood nature of humor makes it harder for a lot of people to see beyond the laughter. Hobbes’ superiority theory (chapter 2.1) had an archaic understanding of jokes, and many similar theories for over two millennia have instilled the idea that laughing at someone or something is an act of degradation and hence engaging in it is unethical. We can see the remnants of this idea even today in people who refuse to acknowledge dark humor as something normal.

The deeper we dive in the concept or the punchline of a dark joke, the clearer the message gets.

**3.2 DISSECTION OF A JOKE**

Dissecting a joke is exactly like dissecting a baby- you can tear it apart and put it back together, but it won’t work anymore.[[7]](#footnote-6) For the purpose of this paper we will break down and analyse the structure and message of the aforementioned joke and try to understand what makes it funny.

The joke sets up an intriguing question which if taken seriously, could be actually answered with facts speaking to the origin of the game of chess. In casual conversation or even on a stage, the setup does a good job of introducing a concept and setting up a false expectation for the audience, all while giving no hint as to where the joke is headed.

The punchline, *“because the chessboard looks exactly like a kitchen floor”* does the job of dashing the expectations of the audience, exactly like Kant’s incongruity theory (chapter 2.3) dictates. The joke may not follow the same structure of two setup examples and the third outlying punchline, but it plays on the same concept of humor. The joke draws a comparison between the alternating black and white squares on a chessboard and a common kitchen tile design. By doing so the joke casts light on the sexist stereotype which dictates that all women belong in the kitchen.

The joke is approaching the topic of female oppression in an offhand manner. It is taking a crack at the brazen idea behind the stereotype. As discussed in the play theory (chapter 2.4) humor and laughter are affective tools to destigmatize situations and make a statement saying something which was considered serious or was looked at as the truth once, is utterly stupid now.

Does laughing at this joke mean we’re laughing at the plight women have gone through over multiple centuries? No it does not. The joke simply mocks people who believe that there is a factual lesson in the punchline. Such people reflect the oppressors the joke is targeting, and in doing so laughing *at* them, because by believing that the joke is truthful they become more and more like caricatures espousing their archaic ideologies.

There is no factual or provable argument in the joke once you analyse the comparisons or the punchline. No, all kitchen floors do not have the same pattern. No, regardless of how much the king is permitted to move it is still the key piece in the game. No, there are better and less ambiguous ways to talk about female oppression.[[8]](#footnote-7)

All these points are, in fact, factually accurate. Here’s the kicker, though- a joke is inherently absolved from being analysed critically because it is meant to portray facts in an inaccurate manner. It is not a debate, or a research paper, or a news article. It is a comment on society and the way it works; a comment that was never designed to be taken seriously. It is a joke.

**CHAPTER 4**

**JOKES AND ETHICS**

*“If your phone gets wet and stops working, leave it overnight in a box filled with rice because the rice will attract Asians and they will fix the electronics overnight.”*

**4.1 A BAD NAME IN HISTORY**

If we look at all the jokes presented so far, we observe a common factor- it is very easy to misconstrue the context of the joke and take it in a way it was never meant to be spoken. The joke mentioning Descartes and the bartender was misconstrued because of the limited view of humor presented in the superiority theory. The ad with the relief joke about suicide and body dysphoria can easily be seen as an insensitive mocking of people who suffer from these diseases. The joke about vegetables can be viewed as a cheap way to create laughter by disrespecting a sick person. The joke mentioning the queen on the chessboard can be seen as normalizing prejudice against women and lastly, the great dictator can be construed as a movie mocking the struggles of Jewish people.

As discussed before, the real concept of humor has eluded us for centuries. The flawed interpretations of it have crafted a society that feels the need to justify everything that makes it laugh. The traces of humor being an uncomfortable topic can be seen in literary works as old as the bible 2 and as recently as one of many blog posts published every day calling someone out for making jokes which offended someone else.

These jokes were very clearly following the premises of the theories we discussed in the second chapter and yet, there is enough room for doubt. There are some jokes that are not held under an interrogation lamp for their intent: jokes which don’t demand laughter at the expense of a group of people or a taboo event. Does that mean we can only laugh about such jokes without feeling guilty? If not, where do we draw the line to which we can push the limits of a joke? We must explore the ethical scope of a joke to understand fully why justifying a joke is a task filled with ambiguity.

**4.2 THE ETHICS BEHIND A JOKE**

Ethics is the branch of philosophy which deals with moral principles which govern behaviour. Over the years many philosophers have specialized in the field of ethics, trying to answer the fundamental question, “how to lead a good life?”. People like Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham have tried to answer this question with different interpretations of what it means to live a “good life”.[[9]](#footnote-8) Immanuel Kant answered the question by stating that there is a set of *categorical imperatives* that one ought to follow under all circumstances, regardless of their desire. These categorical imperatives include simple statements like one must always tell the truth.

Jeremey Bentham believed in the *utilitarian* approach: any task that maximises the good and minimises the bad (also happiness and sorrow) is the most ethical thing to do. As opposed to Kantian ethics, utilitarian ethics do not follow rule set in stone to classify an action as ethical- the outcome, rather, the goodness of the outcome is what matters the most.

Utilitarianism and Kantianism are two schools of thought that reject each other often in terms of how to act morally and hence set up a good debate to analyse humor. The utilitarian argues that the net overall good must outweigh the net overall bad. Hence, if the outcome of a joke is positive overall, the act of making a joke is considered okay.[[10]](#footnote-9) The concept of “the outcome being good” is highly interpretive in the context of jokes. In the eyes of a stand-up comedian it could mean that the joke gets a good reaction from the audience. The recipients of the joke play a major part in deciding whether or not the joke is ethical. The joke could also be seen as a social comment: a crack at making fun of taboo practices and aggressors who reap benefits from a society skewed in their favour by marginalizing another group of people. Jokes against dictators and tyrants, *flat-earthers* and *anti-vaxxers* create an environment that disqualifies their farfetched and often unscientific views resulting in the promotion of more educated, kind, and safe ideologies. The utilitarian joke eventually becomes an unconventional tool for social change, in some cases, disregarding the underlying debate about the morality of the joke itself.

Even though the paper has already discussed Kant’s theory of incongruity in chapter 2, the theory itself isn’t subject to an ethical analysis of the joke. Kantianism dictates that all actions a person does ought to align with the categorical imperatives, that is, anything that a person does and says should be scalable in such a way that if other people started doing it universally, the action would still be ethical. Going by this maxim, the Kantian joke would have to be scalable universally, and be in line with the categorical imperatives. Anyone should be able to make the same joke without any scrutiny and the joke should cause no offence to anyone.

The contrast between Kantian and utilitarian humor conditions a joke on too many external factors for it to be considered ethical. On one hand this creates a roadmap to navigate humor such that one always arrives at a joke to be ethical enough to appease the audience and funny enough to still be called a joke, and on the other hand, the joke leaves enough room to question whether ethics are a good parameter to measure a joke.

Fredrick Nietzsche was a nihilist who saw no moral obligation when it came to humor. He believed that humor and laughter are tools that can be used to attack traditional morality. He also believed that humor can be used as *ad hominem*, that is, a personal attack against someone who’s views he disagreed with. Nietzscheoften advocated the use of humor to personally attack a philosopher to undermine their views and draw more importance to what he believed to be true.[[11]](#footnote-10)

**CHAPTER 5**

**OFFENCE AND STOICISM**

*“It is estimated that roughly 25% women in the United States take medication for mental illness, which is a scary thought because it means that the other 75% are roaming freely”*

Regardless of how differently humor is perceived, one thing that remains common in all jokes is that they have the power to offend anyone. As mentioned in the previous chapters, sometimes the off-handedness with which humor approaches serious topics leaves enough of an explanation gap for someone to get offended. Other times, the joke is plain and simple offensive. The feeling of being ridiculed or being made feel like an outcast because of what someone says or does is never pleasant and often is a valid response. When we consider offence in the context of humor, though, things get vastly more complicated.

Many stand-up comedians and psychologists are at the frontline of the debate about humor and offence. To understand the depth of how humor works it is necessary to understand how people react to humor, and the only reaction that competes with the conventional laughter is offence.

**5.1 OFFENCE AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF PEOPLE**

Here is a little thought experiment- let us think of a simple statement which is devoid of any inherent social connotations and is not politically charged. For the purpose of this paper, we say something like *“I enjoy eating pizza”*. Pizzas are delicious, and more importantly for us, the concept of eating a pizza is completely neutral in terms of political and social implications.

Now imagine that we exist in a society that stigmatizes pizza. The social and political structures of this society are such that the citizens are vastly conservative when it comes to dietary habits and pizza is an ostracized delicacy. Eating a pizza, or even talking about pizza without using the correct vocabulary is seen as a demeaning act.

Say, you were a stand-up comedian in this *pizza-phobic pizza-averse* society. You go on stage, and start your set with the sentence, “I enjoy eating pizza”. The audience gasps at your audacity and starts hurling abuses at you, calling you insensitive and outcasts you. The audience feels offended that you disregarded the communal sentiment against pizza and dared to talk about a topic that makes people uncomfortable without even using the correct vocabulary.

If we stick with this bizarre thought long enough, we can see a very familiar storyline forming: *person makes jokes about uncomfortable topics, person gets cancelled*. Once we look beyond the pizza metaphor we realize that we live in a society of multiple such pizzas- rape jokes, holocaust jokes, jokes on black people, and many such topics which are considered taboo and frowned upon are the *pizzas* of our society. Naturally, when someone makes these jokes they do it at the risk of offending someone with reserved views on the topic.

If we go back to our thought experiment, we can conclude that pizza inherently is not offensive at all. There is no attribute of the pizza which can classify it as offensive in a vacuum. Offence enters the picture when we include people who are sensitive to the concept of eating a pizza.

Of course, this thought experiment is just that- a thought experiment. It is way too simple a metaphor to capture all the nuances of a society that has been socially evolving for over two millennia. Real life is more complicated than that- everyone has their own trigger points and how people perceive offence is very personal to them . In spite of these high level differences, the thought experiment captures the essence of the philosophy behind taking offence, and asks the question:

*Is* ***being offensive*** *an attribute of the joke, or is* ***being offended*** *an attribute of the people?*

**5.2 EPICTETUS’ IDEA OF STOICISM**

Thinking about offence and what ticks us is not a newfound activity. It is a question that has perplexed philosophers for ages. Considering that offence is an internal trait possessed by people and not something external which can be caused by another person’s actions (in our case, the action being a joke) is an idea that has been thought about for a long time.

Stoicism is the school of philosophy that preaches the idea of living a good life by focusing inward rather than outward. It states that one should detach their desires and aversions from the external world and link them only to how the external world makes them feel inward. This is done through *askesis*, which means the practice of severe self-discipline. Philosophers like Epictetus and Seneca were prominent figures in stoicism. They believed that this ascetic way of life was important to lead a good life.[[12]](#footnote-11)

Stoicism talks about offence and how to deal with it. Seneca and Epictetus believed that a person can feel offended only when they relate too personally with the opinion of another. The friction caused by two opposing opinions is what generates anger, and in this case, offence. Epictetus believes that the expectation that the world should behave decently is unfounded and childish. The world is filled with people who are immature, mean, and cruel. Their opinions will always differ from ours and expecting them to be sensitive about these differences is bizarre.

He advocated that there is nothing offensive in the world. If someone states something allegedly “offensive” they are either telling a truth, or something entirely nonsensical. If they are in fact telling the truth, then there is nothing to be offended about- they are stating a fact which, hence making any offence baseless. If the statement is nonsensical, then there is no need to feel offended at all- the projection of their lack of knowledge or insecurity is their problem, not ours. Instead, we must practice askesis and pay no heed to the external.[[13]](#footnote-12)

There is some critique on stoicism; if we only focus on the inward and keep disregarding misinformation on the outside, it gives freedom and power to people to feel entitled to incite conflict without taking any blame for it. Stoicism is one of the toughest philosophies to apply to our lives practically. We live in an age that is largely influenced by the opinions of people and we must, as responsible citizens, voice our opinions to contribute to the greater good of the community.

In the context of humor, though, it is something that can help if studied and interpreted properly. As presented in Seneca’s argument of truth and nonsense, most jokes would probably fall in the latter; they are, ultimately, light-hearted and not meant to be taken seriously. They may be derived from facts and real life incidents but are still opinions.

The argument gets a little easier when we think of comedy as a form of art. If we were talking about a painting about something dark like female oppression, or death by suicide, would we want to censor it? Or call it offensive? Most people wouldn’t, because they understand that art is meant to be enjoyed in its beauty even if it makes us uncomfortable. We do not tailor art according to our level of comfort with social issues because censoring art takes away from it. Why not extend the same courtesy towards humor? There is no such difference between humor and a painting that makes it acceptable to censor humor. Hence, a responsible audience, going by the philosophy of stoicism, should be one that can enjoy the humor presented in a joke, and disregard anything they may construe as offensive.

**CHAPTER 6**

**THE SOCIOLOGY OF A JOKE**

*“A blind man walks into a bar. And a table. And a chair.”*

**6.1 THE SNOWFLAKE GENERATION**

We live in a world where getting access to all kinds of information is easier than ever before. Be it educational tutorials, election statistics, or stand-up comedy videos from years ago, we never forget anything. When we consider a world that is shrinking this rapidly, the idea of putting out a thought out in the world knowing that anyone across the globe can access it and that it will never be forgotten becomes scarier by the minute. Making jokes in a world like this comes at an expense.

It appears as though we have arrived at a cultural stalemate- there always seem to be people fighting for their right to exercise their free speech, and opposing them there seem to be people who disregard their rights in the name of social justice. The increasing divide between these two halves has made it a mundane affair to see the same *pizza-phobic* (chapter 5.1) thought experiment repeat itself every day in real life. We have given rise to the snowflake generation.

This generation unabashedly yells offence whenever there’s some opinion they disagree with. Of course, by doing that, they are exercising their right to free speech- the same right of speech they seek to deny the people offending them. The snowflake generation is as far away from Seneca’s idea of stoicism as a generation can be. We expect everyone to cater to our specific trigger points, be respectful of the things that we find offensive personally, and only consider someone’s speech to be “free” as long as they abstain from talking about whichever social cause we care about that week.[[14]](#footnote-13)

This is a dystopian world where humor is indeed a dying art. The constant bloodbath comedians have to face for just trying to make jokes for their audience only discourages them from pushing the boundaries in humor. There are always people out to get comedians like Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle because someone in the audience doesn’t like the fact that a joke was made the expense of women, or transgendered people. It is almost as if people have started believing that their right to take offence supersedes someone’s right to speak freely.

**6.2 OFFENCE AND ENTITLEMENT**

We can observe a pattern here. The need to be socially and politically appropriate has driven us crazy to the point that we feel like being offended entitles us to some sort of justice. This is not an accurate way of looking at things. It is, time and again, important to keep reminding ourselves of the fact that being offended is just a difference of opinion. It does not reflect the truth, and it certainly does not give us the right to overpower someone else into changing their opinions to align more with our social compasses.

In an interview, Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson was asked a question along the lines of the same issue we have been discussing- whether or not it is okay to offend someone. Peterson very eloquently stated that to have a conversation with someone about something important, we have to risk offending them. He talked about how to seek the truth about his ideas the interviewer was willing to offend him. This argument floored the interviewer and made for a funny moment on live TV.[[15]](#footnote-14)

Even though Peterson has some extremist views which aren’t always agreeable, his idea about free speech and offence is something that the world should go by. Being offended does not entitle us to anything. It is a personal reaction we have to something external.

**6.3 THE POINT OF A JOKE**

We have covered how humor has evolved over centuries and how people have perceived it. We have spoken about the ethics of humor and whether or not classic morality is even an appropriate scale to judge humor by. The paper has also reflected on offence and how humor often tends to incite offence as a response to it and how our society has evolved to be so coddled that just one statement that doesn’t meet the qualifications of being “totally PC” throws us into a fit of anger over some false entitlement.

After knowing all this, what is the point of making a joke? It obviously feels like were we to not indulge in the practice of making jokes at all, things would be a lot easier- no one to offend anyone, no offhand comments on serious topics, no philosophical questions to answer about an innocent practice.

We make jokes because we need to. Humor and laughter make us feel at home. People who have issues about their bodies make jokes about their body to feel more at home, more normal. We make jokes to deal with our trauma (it may not be a healthy practice but it is a common one). During the holocaust, the captives used to make jokes about their sorrows to still feel like they were human.9 In spite of having a pessimistic and anti-moral stance of humor, even pessimist Fredrick Nietzsche indulged in self humor and advocated it.10

The point of a joke is not to state fact, or be appropriate, or appease all sects of people who have varying levels of tolerance for various topics. It is a reaction to the churn life puts us through, it is the little *noir* we need in our lives to keep reminding ourselves that we are not machines which need to follow every single social norm to validate our existence. The point of a joke is to laugh at the system, and make us feel at home.

**CHAPTER 7**

**CONCLUSION: IS IT OKAY TO BE OFFENDED BY A JOKE?**

*“If a Jewish man were to run into a wall with a full erection, he would break his nose first”*

We have seen the entire journey of a joke. Started in the Mind of Plato and Hobbes, crafted and understood further by Freud and Kant, it is something that has visually evolved over ages. When we talk about jokes, we refer to the years of misconceptions and elusiveness, study and analysis, and the need to understand why the concept of laughter has perplexed all of humanity for so long.

Comedy and humor have evolved a lot, and we stand a paradigm shift in how comedy is perceived as an art. In spite of there being people offended by jokes, there are enough enthusiasts to make sure that humor keeps on evolving. We stand at an age that is witnessing a war on freedom of speech, and every passing day it takes comedians and humoristsaway from their calling. It is more important for us now than ever to understand humor and its scope and separate it from what is considered as hate speech.

Going by Freud’s Relief theory (chapter 2.2), we make jokes to deal with the outside world. We are wired to see the silver lining in any situation. We laugh to make things feel okay. Considering how important the need for humor is in everyday human life almost trivializes the question of taking offence- humor is a tendency woven deeply in the human psyche, hard to understand yet still there, and offence is just one reaction to disagreement; it almost seems unfair to compare them.

That is, however, not the case. Despite what Epictetus and Seneca argue, being offended is a real thing in a society built on the idea that everyone should feel safe. The words we say and things we do stick with people for a long time. Living in a community entails some responsibility towards others: the responsibility of being mindful of our words and actions.

All said and done, is it okay to be offended at a joke? Hobbes would undoubtedly answer yes because of the limited understanding of humor back then, and Epictetus would say no because of his pessimistic view of the society and his belief in being ascetic. We live in a time and age right now that neither Thomas Hobbes not Epictetus had any understanding of. One can argue that both of their views are incomplete.

I believe that it is not okay to be offended at a joke. At the end of that day, it is a joke- a frivolous statement spoken to extract laughter from the audience. It has no standing in the real world as a fact, it is merely an opinion. Pick up any one of the jokes the paper mentions, and ask “why should this joke not be misconstrued as offensive?”. Provided we all operate at the same level of philosophical understanding (in this case, the level being that of a student), we can’t answer that question. The language of the joke, or the cruel punchline, or the twisted message in the joke- all contribute to the argument that the joke is, in fact, offensive. But we don’t quite see it that way because we understand the fact that regardless of how it is framed, it is a joke. It isn’t a statement of hatred, or even fact. It is a joke. The only full explanation one can provide to explain why humor should exist without any boundaries is, *because it is a joke*.

A joke is not an excuse to be hateful- in my mind, by definition a joke can be called a joke only if it exists without any *malintent*. As offensive as it may sound, the genesis of the joke happens only when the intentions of a joke-writer are devoid of any feelings of prejudice or hatred against the target of the joke. The moment this condition is beached, the joke stops being a joke. It becomes something ugly disguised in the skeleton of a joke.

I think this is where a lot of problems lie too- people disguise their hatred in the form of humor and spew it onto unsuspecting listeners. This practice is incorrect and has helped humor earn the bad name associated with it for centuries.

Of course, it is not possible to verify the intentions of a comedian- you can never tell whether someone hates something with absolute certainty. Regardless, the fact that a jaw-dropping joke that challenges the way society works and makes one laugh hard can exist without there being any malicious feeling behind it, there is enough reason to keep fighting to keep humor alive.

1. Hindustan Times’ coverage of the AIB roast case timeline: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/a-complete-timeline-of-aib-knockout-who-said-what/story-qgTgpKcpp4JWK4lBQfqLeM.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. This paper from the Stanford Encyclopaedia of philosophy follows a similar structure as mine pertaining to the definition of humor and is hence referenced multiple times in the paper:

Morreall, John, "Philosophy of Humor", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/humor/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Heyd, David. “The Place of Laughter in Hobbes’s Theory of Emotions.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 43, no. 2, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, pp. 285–95, https://doi.org/10.2307/2709204. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. The video talks about perception of humor and pertains to all 4 subchapters in the second chapter: <https://youtu.be/XO9O6Oww820> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. the commercial that plays on the relief theory: <https://youtu.be/wUgflhd1aWE> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Andre Breton’s account on dark humor: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/black-humor> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. A clip from Lex Fridman’s podcast where he talks with Michael Malice about the philosophy of dark humor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1DdrnY-Qus> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. A YouTube video dissecting a dark joke: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkboYmqzvOI> . The video talks about dissecting another dark joke talking about police brutality and racism. The prime idea of my dissection is derived from how the video dissects its own joke. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Mensah, Ronald & Agyemang, Edward. (2020). A Comparative Philosophical Analysis of the Kantian Principle of Moral Theory and the Utilitarian Theory: Applications and Critiques. 3. 127-131. 10.33140/JHSS.03.03.02. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Ethics in humor: <https://youtu.be/vfqOqHyV_CM> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Boddicker, C. Humour in Nietzsche's style. *Eur J Philos*. 2021; 29: 447– 458. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12585> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Epictetus on askesis: <https://youtu.be/luzlrp5hL9I> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Stoicism and being offended: <https://youtu.be/AghCljoO5kE> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Why everyone feels offended these days: <https://youtu.be/0kGBQSXX_GU> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Jordan Peterson’s interview about free speech and offence: <https://youtu.be/VEOHQoh82bs> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)