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## The ethics of humor

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by Massimo Pigliucci

Plato and a platypus walked into a bar. The bartender gave the philosopher a quizzical look, and Plato said, “What can I say? She looked better in the cave.” The relationship between humor and philosophy has been explored for a long time, with the authors of the popular [Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar...](#): Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes, Daniel Klein and Thomas Cathcart, arguing that good jokes are structurally similar to good philosophical arguments: they start with a familiar, apparently non-threatening, situation; lead the listener toward a path he thinks he can see; and then they suddenly take a sharp turn to deliver either the punchline or a surprising conclusion.

But I was reminded of a different connection between humor and philosophy this past semester, while listening to a fascinating (and funny!) talk by my colleague at CUNY’s Graduate Center, [Noël Carroll](#) (who, interestingly, holds not only a PhD in philosophy, but one in cinema studies). Carroll set out to explore the ethics of humor, and particularly to examine what he called the “skeptic’s” position that humor is a-moral, i.e. that jokes have no moral content of their own, and that applying ethical reasoning to humor is a category mistake (something akin to asking about the typical smell of triangles).

As Carroll immediately pointed out, historically humor and ethics have often come into contact — and conflict. Puritans of all stripes have always objected to humor on moral grounds, which famously prompted American journalist and satirist H.L. Mencken to quip that puritanism is “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

But setting aside puritanism, the skeptic has to deal with the fact that

some jokes do appear to cross an ethical line that ought to (and often does) make people uncomfortable. For instance, one thing is to make fun of a privileged group, and an altogether different one is to laugh at the expense of a disadvantaged one. Consider the increasingly less popular (at least in liberal urban centers) ethnic jokes along the lines of “an Irishman enters a bar...” If you are not Irish, you really ought (morally, not just as a politically correct precaution) to stay away from that stuff. But self-deprecation is okay, so that usually we don’t have a problem with Irish, Scots, Italians, Jews, etc. making jokes — even to non-members of their group — about themselves.

[And now, a joke about philosophy, which can only be told by philosophers: “The First Law of Philosophy is: For every philosopher, there exists an equal and opposite philosopher. The Second Law of Philosophy is: They’re both wrong.”]

Carroll brought up an interesting point in this respect: some malicious jokes are indeed funny, if ethically objectionable. Is one therefore morally complicit if he laughs at one of these jokes? It depends on which theory of humor you subscribe to. Understanding and laughing at a joke obviously requires a certain cultural background on the part of the listener, and according to the attitude-endorsement theory, if said listener is laughing at racist or misogynist jokes, he must be at least somewhat racist or misogynist himself.

But this conclusion may be a bit too quick, since it presupposes the existence of only one viable (i.e., funny) interpretation of a given joke. It is possible, for instance, that an apparently misogynist joke could instead be interpreted as being, say, about hypocrisy. This response, according to Carroll, can only go so far, because jokes — like any other type of text, and pace the postmodernists — are not open to an infinite number of interpretations. But it is also true that we can entertain possibilities in which we do not actually believe: I can laugh at a joke about Santa Claus without this somehow implying that I believe in Santa Claus. Similarly, one could laugh at a racist / misogynist joke without being racist / misogynist. As Aristotle famously put it, “it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

[Aristotle had other things to say about humor, for instance: “Humor is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humor; for a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious, and a jest which will not bear serious

examination is false wit.” Umberto Eco’s famous book [The Name of the Rose](#) is all about a fictional – and lethal – controversy generated by Aristotle’s views on humor among medieval puritans.]

Another possibility raised by Carroll is that the “funnyness” of a joke cannot be measured simply by how many people laugh at it, because there is a normative (as opposed to just a descriptive) component to humor. This would imply that that some jokes are not funny because they are immoral, regardless of how many people laugh at them. Carroll didn’t seem to buy this idea, and I think he is correct. For one, he pointed out that if true this would imply that adding moral content to a joke would make it funnier, something that is in flagrant contradiction with empirical (if anecdotal) evidence... Indeed, a position called “comic immoralism” maintains that spicing jokes with a bit of immorality helps them. Think of the latest funny joke about cannibalism, which made you laugh without necessarily implying that you find cannibalism an ethically acceptable habit.

Nonetheless, Carroll concluded his talk (at least, according to my notes), with the interesting observation that moral imagination can stop the humor in its tracks in ways similar to which, say, a highly disgusting situation may block the enjoyment of a joke. Both physical and moral disgust can cause alienation from the humor – something in agreement with recent research showing the [neural commonality](#) between moral and physical disgust.

So, may I go back now and enjoy this week’s Jon Stewart with a clear conscience?