

A Comedy of Errors or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Sensibility-Invariantism about ‘Funny’

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that sensibility-invariantism about ‘funny’ is defensible, not just as a descriptive hypothesis, but, as a normative position as well. What I aim to do over the course of this essay is to make the realist commitments of the sensibility-invariantist out to be much more tenable than one might initially think them to be. I do so by addressing the two major sources of discontent with sensibility-invariantism: the observation that discourse about comedy exhibits significant divergence in judgment, and the fact that disagreements about comedy, unlike disagreements about, say, geography, often strike us as fundamentally intractable.

Consider the following scenario:

Jane (27 years old) and Sarah (nine) are together on the couch watching an episode of *Arrested Development*. While Jane thinks that the show is utterly hilarious and is, as a result, having a wonderful time, Sarah finds the show slightly confusing and is, as a result, rather bored. During a commercial break, Jane turns to Sarah and says, ‘*Arrested Development* is incredibly *funny!*’

In the above scenario, Sarah will likely respond by saying something like, ‘I don’t think it’s very funny,’ a response that Jane will regard as an attempt to call into question her preceding assertion. Given the circumstances, it is likely that will make certain concessions (e.g., ‘Oh... well yes I can see how the show’s humor is probably a bit lost on someone your age.’). At the same time, assuming that Sarah’s response has not led Jane to wonder whether her being amused was owed less to the comic merits of the show than to some sort of distorting factor (e.g. her being more intoxicated than she realized as a result of her after-work cocktail), Jane will most likely dig in her heels as to the truth of her claim (e.g., ‘But trust me, it’s really quite funny.’)¹

What I want to suggest in this essay is that the best way to make sense of exchanges such as the above is by understanding the truth-values of the claims expressed by ascriptions of funniness (e.g., ‘X is funny.’) as being in no way contingent upon the idiosyncratic sensibilities of some salient set of individuals.² Roughly speaking, the position I will defend in this essay is that an impersonal ascription of ‘funny’ expresses a true claim iff the object of that ascription is funny *simpliciter*, i.e. iff it is funny according to a sensibility-invariant standard of comic excellence.³ Along these lines, the sentence ‘*Arrested Development* is incredibly funny!’ will express the same claim -- and, in turn, possess the same truth-value -- no matter who it is that happens to be speaking (or listening⁴).⁵ In other words, what I want to suggest is that we do best to be *sensibility-invariantists* about ‘funny.’

I. Two Challenges for Sensibility-Invariantism

Taken just as a descriptive claim about the way we actually talk, sensibility-invariantism about ‘funny’⁶ seems to me to be on fairly solid ground. But, even if it’s true that, in everyday practice, we go around making (or at least trying to make) claims about what is and is not funny *simpliciter*, one might still have serious doubts as to whether this is a reasonable thing to do. After all, to engage in such a practice would be to incur the sorts of *realist* commitments that come with engaging in any non-relativistic discourse, commitments which might seem, in the face of empirical observation, indefensible in the case under consideration. For instance, if we interpret Jane’s earlier assertion, ‘*Arrested Development* is incredibly funny,’ as an attempt to express the claim that *Arrested Development* is incredibly funny *simpliciter*, Jane seems thereby committed 1) to the existence of some absolute or non-relativistic fact as to whether *Arrested Development* is incredibly funny, and 2) to it being the case that anyone who judges (or asserts) that *Arrested Development* is *not* incredibly funny judges (or speaks) falsely and is, hence, mistaken.^{7,8}

In Jane’s case in particular and in the case of discourse about comedy in general, the realist commitments just mentioned can seem highly problematic when one considers them in conjunction with certain familiar empirical facts. For instance, discourse about comedy is, as we all know, a discourse riddled with disagreement. This can seem problematic for the practicing sensibility-invariantist, insofar as recognizing this fact of *divergence in judgment* will, given her commitment to non-relativistic facts about comedy, commit her to the view that a large number of people are failing to perceive those comic facts correctly, i.e. that they have faulty senses of humor. As John MacFarlane expresses the worry, ‘If there [is a] wholly objective propert[y] of funniness... then most of us must be *defective* in our capacity to detect [it]. We are humor-blind... in much the same way that some of us are color blind.’⁹ And, this, as MacFarlane understands things, is simply implausible. Or consider a second worry: many if not most arguments about comedy that people engage in in ordinary discourse are highly unproductive, suggesting that there is nothing that either disputant could do or say to (rationally) convince her interlocutor that she has made a mistake in judgment. As such, the practicing sensibility-invariantist is, given her realist commitments, placed in the somewhat uncomfortable position of having to regard those with whom she disagrees in comedic judgment as being in error despite the fact that quite often it seems to be the case that there is nothing that she could do to (rationally) convince her interlocutor of that alleged error.¹⁰ This can leave the sensibility-invariantist looking like something of a dogmatist.

To give a more general diagnostic, the worries about the reasonability of sensibility-invariantism seem rooted in the thought that, for all that it has in common with other non-relativistic discourses, discourse about comedy just doesn’t seem

sufficiently *well-disciplined* to support the sorts of factualist commitments that the practicing sensibility-invariantist incurs.¹¹ While discourse about comedy is by no means totally *undisciplined*, it doesn't seem, given the observed widespread divergence in judgment and *prima facie* impossibility of fostering convergence in a great number of cases, that the standards governing the discourse are so well-defined as to legitimize the realist commitments that the practicing sensibility-invariantist takes on board. As such, even if it is true that we tend towards sensibility-invariantism about comedy in ordinary conversation, worries about lack of discipline might still lead us to think that this is a silly practice to engage in, and is one that we ought to abandon in favor of some more defensible, relativistic alternative.

In an effort to undermine this sort of concern about the reasonability of sensibility-invariantism, what I aim to do over the course of this essay is to make the realist commitments of the sensibility-invariantist out to be much more tenable than one might initially think them to be. I will do so by addressing what seem to me the two major sources of discontent with sensibility-invariantism, both mentioned above: 1) the observation that, unlike discourse about more prosaically factual subject matters (e.g. furniture, geography, mathematics), discourse about comedy exhibits a significant amount of divergence in judgment, and 2) the fact that disagreements about comedy, unlike disagreements about, say, geography, often strike us as fundamentally intractable. My strategy will be to address these worries in reverse order: first, I will argue that the perceived intractability of disagreements about comedy can be explained to a very significant extent by appeal, on the one hand, to a peculiar feature of the standard of warrant governing discourse about comedy that makes it especially difficult to rationally convince one's interlocutors of conclusions about comedy via argument (section II), and, on the other, to a pervasive practical limitation that many otherwise perfectly competent participants in the discourse face when engaging in argument which further limits their capacity to rationally persuade their interlocutors (section III). Second, I will try to explain why, non-relativistic facts or no, it should come as no surprise that we observe significant divergence in judgment about comedy. I will do so by appealing to a variety of common *distorting factors* that can prevent even the most competent comedic judge from being amused by things that are genuinely funny (or, conversely, that can cause even the most competent judge to be amused by things that are not funny) (section IV). In addressing worry (2), I hope also to further assuage worry (1) by providing additional explanation as to why it is so difficult to reach convergence in judgment about comedy via argument. In terms of methodology, then, my aim will be offer an explanation of the two empirical phenomena that skeptics/(revisionary) relativists about comedy most often cite as justification for their dismissiveness of sensibility-invariantism, an explanation that is entirely consistent with there being absolute or non-relativistic facts about what is and is not funny. Thus, while I offer nothing like a deductive argument for the correctness of sensibility-invariantism about comedy,

qua *normative* thesis, I hope to at least shift the burden of proof back to the skeptic/(revisionary) relativist.

II. Explaining Seeming Intractability: The Limits of Testimony

One peculiar feature of discourse about comedy, and about aesthetic subject matters in general, is that the standard of warrant governing the discourse seems to preclude the possibility of warrant transmission via testimony. Whereas discourse about prosaically factual subject matter appears to allow for an individual to become warranted in believing that *p* on the basis of testimony that *p* alone (e.g. typically we accept that an individual can come to know that the keys are on the shelf or that the coffee shop opens at 7 AM if she hears that this is so from a reliable source), when the conversation turns to comedy, or aesthetics generally, testimony that *p* appears never to suffice by itself for an individual to be warranted in believing that *p*. Call this the *No Warrant Transmission via Testimony* restriction, or NWT^T.

Evidence for NWT^T

Whatever the underlying rationale for such a restriction might be, a quick look at speakers' intuitions suggests quite strongly that NWT^T is firmly in place when we engage in discussions of matters comedic (and, more generally, aesthetic). For instance, suppose that Bob goes to see some new comedic film and reports back to his friend David that it 'isn't funny at all.' Given that David has yet to see the film for himself, even if he takes Bob to be a reliable comedic judge, it would seem to us both bizarre and inappropriate for David to come away from their exchange having formed an unqualified belief that the film in question isn't funny. Even if Bob were to supplement this testimony by citing his various *reasons* for regarding the film as unfunny (e.g. 'The jokes are incredibly formulaic and uninspired,' 'The actors have no sense of comedic timing whatsoever,' etc.), it still seems that, by our lights, David would be in no position to judge, without qualification, that the film is of poor comic merits.¹² This is why, for example, if David were to encounter another friend moments later who was considering whether to see the film, it would strike us as inappropriate for David to discourage his friend by saying, 'Don't waste your time. That movie isn't funny at all.'¹³ While some sort of weaker discouraging remark might be perfectly in order (e.g. 'I hear it's not very funny,' 'The jokes are supposed to be incredibly formulaic'), because his only evidence concerning the film's comic merits is testimonial in nature, David is, intuitively, in no position to make an unqualified claim about whether the film is funny. Cases of this sort are easily reproduced, and moreover, producing cases where it *would* seem appropriate for a speaker to make an unqualified assertion of the form 'X is funny' without her ever

having directly observed *X* or a sufficiently similar reproduction seems next to impossible.¹⁴

Now, to say that we never treat testimony by itself as an adequate basis for a warranted belief as to whether something is or is not funny is not to say that we treat testimonial reports about comedy as devoid of epistemic value altogether. To the contrary, so long as he takes Bob to be a competent comedic judge, David will (reasonably, by our lights¹⁵) be inclined to attribute to Bob's testimony at least *some* evidentiary significance. Depending on how strongly he trusts Bob's opinion on such matters and on what else he has heard or read about the film from other sources, David might (reasonably, by our lights) take Bob's testimony to license him to form some sort of probabilistic judgment concerning the film's comic merits (e.g. he might judge that the film 'probably isn't very funny'). Further still, if, as time passes, David encounters other seemingly competent comedic judges who corroborate Bob's negative appraisal (e.g. the *New York Times* film critic judges the film to be 'utterly unfunny,' describing its humor as 'terribly hackneyed'), David will (again, reasonably, by our lights) feel warranted in forming stronger and stronger probabilistic judgments concerning the film's comic merits (e.g. 'the film is almost certainly terrible'). All the same, until he has taken the time to see the film for himself, David will (insofar as he behaves in a fashion that we deem reasonable) abstain from judging without qualification whether the film is funny.

Now consider a slightly different scenario: this time Bob and David have just returned together from a screening of a different film and are sitting down over coffee to share their thoughts. Finding it a great deal better than the previous film, Bob confidently asserts, 'That film was absolutely hilarious.'¹⁶ This time, however, David responds not with a trusting nod, but, rather, with slight disbelief. 'Really?' he asks, 'I didn't think that was all that funny.' Suppose again that David regards Bob as having an excellent sense of humor and takes his opinions about comedy to have epistemic value. All the same, given that the film failed to strike him as especially funny, David is both a bit surprised by and somewhat skeptical towards Bob's confident positive appraisal. 'Why do you think it was so funny?' David asks. 'Well,' Bob responds, 'I just really appreciated how it managed to weave subtle cultural subversiveness into such a silly, outlandish plotline.' After considering the comment, David replies, 'I guess I didn't really pick up on anything interestingly subversive in the film. To me, it just seemed silly and outlandish.' 'Yes,' Bob responds, 'I can see how it would come across as fairly trite if you failed to see the subversive aspect. But, if you *had* picked up on it, then you would have realized just how brilliant the whole thing actually was!' To this, David replies, 'Hmm, I don't know... maybe you are right and I just failed to see it. Perhaps I just wasn't paying close enough attention.'

Interestingly, although in this case David *has* seen the film under consideration, it still seems that it would be unreasonable for him to walk away from the conversation holding an unqualified belief as to whether the film is funny. On

the one hand, even if when entering the conversation David took himself to be warranted in believing that the film was not funny, Bob seems to have now presented him with good reason to call that initial assessment into question.¹⁷ If Bob is right, and the film really does have an underlying subversive aspect that David failed to notice, then David's basis for regarding the film as not funny (e.g. it's (allegedly) being merely silly and outlandish) would be undermined. As such, although the film struck him as not especially funny, David is now in no position to claim without qualification that the film was not funny.¹⁸ On the other hand, even if David accepts that Bob is almost certainly correct, and that he probably did just fail to pick up on the film's (quite real) underlying subversive aspect (e.g. perhaps David now realizes that he was very tired and incapable of devoting the requisite attention for picking up on features of the sort that Bob cites, or maybe Bob is just very stingy with praise and almost never lauds things which do not warrant it), it still seems equally true that David is in no position to claim without qualification that the film is funny. Parallel with the previous case, if David was approached by a friend trying to determine whether to see the film, while it might seem perfectly reasonable to us for him to encourage the friend to go (e.g. 'You should see it. I think that much of the film's humor was lost on me, but it's supposed to be quite good'), insofar as the film failed to make him laugh, it would seem to us both strange and inappropriate for David to endorse the film with an unqualified positive assessment (e.g. 'You should go. It's absolutely hilarious').

As this second exchange suggests, then, even in cases where a person *has* seen a film (or television program, comedic performance, etc.), insofar as that film failed to strike her *as* funny as she viewed it, according to the rules governing the discourse, that individual cannot then come to hold a warranted belief that that it is funny just on the basis of further testimony. Just as in cases where one has yet to see the film under consideration, it seems to us that a person can reasonably regard testimonial evidence as a basis for probabilistic judgments concerning that film's comic merits (e.g. 'I bet it's hilarious'). Additionally, it seems to us that testimony can also serve the person who was not amused by the film initially as a basis for probabilistic judgments concerning why she failed to laugh as she watched it (e.g. 'I was probably distracted'). But again, in order to actually come to be warranted in believing that the film is funny, and, in turn, that her failure to laugh was owed to something other than the film's poor comic merits, it seems to us that testimony alone will not suffice.

Perceiving *as* Funny

Insofar as a person cannot come to be warranted in believing that a film (or television program, comedic performance, etc.) is funny just on the basis of testimony, a natural question to ask is, What further sort of evidence is required in

order to be so warranted? At least in David's case, the answer seems obvious enough: what David must do in order to be warranted in believing that the film in question is funny (let's assume that it is) is to go back and give it another try.¹⁹ This is not to say that David must watch the film again just for the sake of repetition, but rather that he must watch it again in order to perceive the film *in the right way*, so to speak. What is essential is that David sees it again and, because he now picks up on the underlying subversive aspect that escaped him before (thus 'getting' the film's humor), comes to perceive the film *as* funny.²⁰

While for David it is probably safe to say that watching the film again and perceiving *as* funny in this way will suffice for him to come to be warranted in believing that the film is funny (given his previous experience with the film, if David finds the film funny this time, it will, presumably, be because he now 'gets' its humor, i.e. he will be laughing *for the right reasons*, so to speak), this is not to suggest that perceiving a film *as* funny is a *sufficient* condition for being warranted in believing that that film is funny. One can, after all, perceive film (or television program, comedic performance, etc.) *as* funny when it isn't actually so (e.g. owed to intoxication, over-excitement, etc.). And, insofar as an individual has reason to question whether a particular perception of something *as* funny is veridical, it seems that that particular perception would not issue the sort of warrant necessary for unqualified belief. What I am suggesting here instead is just that it is plausibly taken as a *necessary* condition on being warranted in believing that a film (or television program, comedic performance, etc.) is funny that one, at some point, perceive that film (or television program, comedic performance, etc.) *as* funny, i.e. that one is genuinely amused by it.²¹

Is NWTT Rationally Defensible?

At this point, one might wish to raise the concern that NWTT (and its companion, the striking *as* requirement) appears to lack any sort of rational basis. In fact, amongst aestheticians that remain skeptical of these requirements, the principle source of their skepticism is the thought that there is simply no good reason for warrant transmission not to be possible with respect to comedy or, for that matter, to aesthetic subject matters generally. 'What,' these NWTT skeptics ask rhetorically, 'could possibly justify a ban on warrant transmission via testimony in the domain of comedy (and aesthetics generally) when such transmission is seemingly unproblematic in other domains (e.g. furniture, geography, mathematics)?'²²

For my part, I would argue that NWTT is best understood as stemming 1) from the fact that in order to actively *appreciate* of a piece of art, be it a painting, symphony, or a sitcom, one must have a sort of first-hand familiarity with either that thing or a sufficiently similar reproduction of it²³ (e.g. I cannot be awed by a painting that I have never seen, nor can I be made to laugh by a joke that I have never heard),

and 2) from the requirement that in order to be warranted in believing a thing to be funny, beautiful, etc., one must have, at some point, actively *appreciated* its humor, beauty, etc. As for the aforementioned appreciation requirement (just another gloss on the perceiving *as* requirement), while I cannot properly defend it here, it is my suspicion that the rationale for this restriction has, at least in part, to do with the compatibility of non-evaluative descriptions of pieces of art with wildly varying evaluative properties.²⁴

Whatever one thinks of this or any other explanation/vindication of NWTT, however, I take it that the empirical data concerning speaker's intuitions considered thus far amount to a compelling case that NWTT is a restriction that we observe in every day practice. After all, even if one remains skeptical that there is any good reason for us to observe NWTT, such an individual will be hard-pressed to reject any of the examples presented above, examples which firmly support NWTT qua empirical hypothesis. As such, even if were true (as I doubt that it is) that, as the skeptic would have it, NWTT is something that we would abandon upon reflection, given the data it nevertheless seems true that NWTT is a principle that we observe when discussing matters comedic. And this, by itself, has serious consequences.

***De Facto* Intractability**

If we accept that, as a rule, one cannot come to be warranted in holding a belief as to whether something is funny just on the basis of testimony, but must instead come to perceiving that thing *as* funny (or not funny, depending), then this is going to place significant restrictions on what one can reasonably hope to accomplish by way of argument with those with whom she disagrees in comedic judgment. If I claim that something is funny and you maintain that it is not, and if the only way for either of us to (reasonably) become fully convinced of the other's position is by observing that thing again, this time perceiving the thing *as* the other did initially, then, barring the conversation's taking place in the presence of the thing being assessed (e.g. mid-film or mid-comedic performance) or one of us being capable of recollecting the thing vividly enough to allow for a screening in the 'theatre of the mind,'²⁵ the possibility of (reasonably) reaching total convergence will be ruled out from the start. In other words, our disagreement will be a *de facto* intractable one, and the most that either of us could reasonably hope to accomplish would be to bring the other to admit that we are 'probably' right or, more plausibly, to get them to back down from their initial unqualified contrary assessment (e.g. 'You are wrong, that film is funny!') in favor of something tending towards agnosticism (e.g. 'Well, it struck me as funny, but perhaps I was mistaken').

As mentioned at the outset, these limitations put disputes about comedy in sharp contrast to a great many of the disputes that we have about more prosaically

factual subject matters, where complete convergence is a perfectly reasonable goal. If you and I are having an argument over whether tomorrow's colloquium talk is at 4 PM (the standard time, as I point out) or at 4:30 PM (as you contend), and you report to me that you received an email just this morning announcing a schedule change from 4 PM to 4:30 PM due to difficulties with the speaker's travel schedule, you will (at least in ordinary circumstances²⁶) have given me sufficient reason to accept that the meeting is at 4:30 PM after all. There is no need for me to attain some sort of first-hand familiarity with your email. Rather, on the basis of your testimony alone, I would be perfectly warranted in admitting without qualification that you were right and that I was wrong, reporting to others that they should not arrive for the talk at 4 PM since it 'is' taking place at 4:30 PM, etc.

Still, that actual convergence is a reasonable goal in the one type of argument but not in the other does not force upon us the conclusion that disputes about prosaically factual subject matters and disputes about comedy are totally different beasts. After all, while it is true that disputes about comedy will, often by necessity, have a lower ceiling on what their participants can reasonably hope to accomplish than disputes about things like what time a colloquium talk starts, it is not as if disputes of the former sort are bound to be totally *unproductive*. As exemplified by the earlier exchange between Bob and David, at least some disputes about comedy are very fruitful indeed, with the involved disputants (reasonably) working their way much *closer* to convergence than they were at the outset. Such productivity is nothing to scoff at, and is sometimes even a first step towards actual convergence (e.g. a conversational exchange might give the acquiescent disputant sufficient motivation to watch the particular film or television program in question again, at which point she may perceive it is as her interlocutor did).

III. Explaining Seeming Intractability: Inarticulateness

All of this optimism aside, one possibly lingering worry is that the imagined conversation between Bob and David, meant to exemplify the potential for productivity in disputes about comedy, exhibits a *peculiarly high* level of productivity for an exchange of its sort. It is, after all, an unfortunate fact that many if not most of the arguments about comedy that occur in ordinary conversation do *not* end with the involved parties approaching convergence, with moderate concessions having been made by one or both of the involved disputants. Instead, a great number of these exchanges end in full-blown standoffs, with neither disputant backing down from her position in the least. What are we to make of this disparity between cases of the familiar and frustrating sort and the less familiar but infinitely more satisfying exchange between Bob and David?

While disputes about comedy tend towards the unproductive for a variety of reasons, some of which we will address in due course, one very basic explanation for

why it is that so many people find themselves incapable of making the sort headway when arguing about comedy that Bob does in his exchange is that these people are simply much less adept than Bob (or David, for that matter) at *sharing* their reasons for regarding things as either funny or not funny. It is a striking feature of their exchange as I have described it that Bob and David are both quite skilled at *articulating* their reasons for regarding the film as being funny and not funny, respectively. This shared ability to articulate their reasons is essential to the fruitfulness of their exchange, since it is what allows them to pool and collectively consider the available *prima facie* evidence concerning the question of whether the film is actually funny (e.g. it is only because David is able to explain to Bob that he judged the film not especially funny *because* he found it to be merely silly and outlandish that Bob is able to explicitly call David's *prima facie* justification into question). By contrast, if, like many of us, neither Bob nor David were capable of saying much of anything on their behalf beyond reformulations of their original assertions (e.g. 'You didn't like it? But it was so good!'; 'I can't believe you thought it was funny. It was absolutely terrible!') or self-reports of their respective affective responses (e.g. 'I laughed so hard!'; 'I didn't laugh at all!'), then it seems safe to say that any conversation between the two wouldn't be very productive at all. And rightly so, given that in such a scenario neither disputant would be capable of giving his interlocutor much if any reason to call his initial assessment into question (e.g. neither could have successfully introduced any new *prima facie* evidence speaking against his interlocutor's initial judgment beyond the mere fact that a seemingly competent judge disagrees, nor could they have managed to call into question the *prima facie* evidence speaking on their interlocutor's behalf). Because David takes Bob to have excellent taste in comedy, it is possible that David might take the mere fact that Bob disagrees with him as suggesting that there are worthwhile elements of the film that he failed to perceive after all. However, if David is at all confident in his conflicting assessment (e.g. he perceives himself as having excellent evidence that the film is not funny, and doubts that he simply missed evidence speaking to the contrary), such a consideration shouldn't cause David to waver in his judgment very much.

To generalize: owed to the unfortunate fact that many otherwise perfectly competent comedic judges²⁷ are relatively unskilled at articulating their reasons for regarding things as either funny or not funny,²⁸ it is easy to see why so many arguments about comedy tend to be much less productive²⁹ than the one between Bob and David. Unable to offer up their reasons for public consideration, it could only be on the basis of something like felt peer-pressure or extremely high regard for the opinions of her interlocutor that one could be led by an inarticulate conversational partner to back down from one's opposing view. Barring irrationality or extreme deference, then, the conversation is bound to go (almost) nowhere, i.e. the dispute will be *de facto* intractable.

IV. Explaining Lack of Convergence: Distorting Factors

While appeal to the two sources of difficulty discussed thus far, *the ban on warrant transmission via testimony* and *the problem of inarticulateness*, does help to address the second skeptical worry mentioned at the outset, that disagreements about comedy tend towards the unproductive and, hence, tend to strike us as intractable, nothing said thus far touches on the first skeptical worry, the fact of widespread divergence in judgment about comedy. Even if appeal to these difficulties can help to explain the resistance that we face in *working towards* convergence in comedic judgment, this still leaves us with the question of why there is so much divergence in the first place.

What the proponent sensibility-invariantism owes us is an explanation of the observed divergence in comedic judgment that is compatible with there being non-relativistic facts about what is and is not funny. If the sensibility-invariantist wishes to maintain that it is actually *reasonable* for us to go around ascribing false beliefs to those with whom we disagree in comedic judgment (which, again, most of us do), what she must develop is a plausible account of why it is that so many seemingly competent comedic judges (as many of the people with whom we disagree are) can fail to assess things correctly on such a regular basis. Towards that end, the hypothesis that I will be pursuing is this: observed divergence in comedic judgment is best explained by appeal to the variety of factors that can distort an individual's ability to be amused (henceforth *distorting factors*) but whose operation often go unnoticed. This unnoticed operation of distorting factors results in individuals frequently making faulty inferences from facts about whether or not they laugh at something to conclusions about whether or not something is funny.

Environmental Distractions and Psychological Disturbances

Standup is seldom performed in ideal circumstances. Comedy's enemy is distraction, and rarely do comedians get a pristine performing environment. I worried about the sound system, ambient noise, hecklers, drunks, lighting, sudden clangs, latecomers, and loud talkers, not to mention the nagging concern 'Is this funny?' – Steve Martin³⁰

As the quote above reminds us, one difficulty that we face as comedic judges is the variety of all too familiar distractions and disturbances that can easily get in the way of our being amused by something that we might have otherwise quite enjoyed. For instance, if the person sitting in front of Susan at the movie theater is unusually tall and especially noisy, it will be very difficult for her to follow, let alone to appreciate, the comedic film being screened. Even if it is quite funny, insofar as these *environmental distractions* are preventing Susan from devoting to it the proper attention,

the film in question is not going to make her laugh. As such, Susan will be in no position to assess the film in terms of its comic merits. Similarly, if Geoffrey is watching a sitcom on the heels of a heated argument with his spouse and after having just received some piece of terribly disappointing news, clever and witty as that program might be, it would be something of a minor miracle if it were to get rise out of him. In the presence of these *psychological disturbances*, Geoffrey is simply far too preoccupied to be amused by much of anything right now, and is, as a result, in no position to judge whether the show is funny.³¹

While environmental distractions and psychological disturbances are similar in their tendencies to prevent individuals from being amused by things which they might otherwise find quite funny, one potential difference between the two is that whereas we, qua comedic judges, tend to be aware when things like excessive noise or occluded vision are undermining our capacity to be amused, the effects of the things like frustration or anxiety more frequently go unnoticed.³² Just consider the plausible extensions of the two cases above: in the first, it seems highly unlikely that Susan is going to form much of an opinion either way concerning the comic merits of the film that she is trying to watch. Aware of her misfortune at being seated behind such a tall and noisy person, it's difficult to imagine Susan doing anything other than (reasonably) suspending judgment on the question of whether the film is funny. In the second case, by contrast, it isn't at all difficult to imagine Geoffrey failing to recognize that his psychological distress is hampering his ability to assess the sitcom, and, as a result, forming the ill-founded judgment, 'This show isn't funny at all.'

Now, I assume that it will come as a surprise to no one to hear that things like anxiety or frustration can lead a person to be unduly harsh. When we are in a bad way psychologically it is, unfortunately, all too easy for us to form highly critical opinions about those things and persons around us. Although Geoffrey's feelings of discontent almost certainly reflect nothing concerning the comic merits of the sitcom that he is trying to distract himself with, it is not difficult to imagine Geoffrey unfairly blaming the show for his lack of amusement and dismissing it accordingly. Again, this should all be familiar. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that, in the presence of disturbances of this sort, any wholesale negative appraisals that we might deliver are going to be *decidedly ill-founded* (and in a great number of cases, unwarranted). This is especially relevant to the case at hand since when it comes to aesthetic judgment in general and comedic judgment in particular, it is often tempting to move immediately from the way a particular film, art installation, musical performance, etc. strikes us to the belief that the film, installation, performance, etc. is or is not praiseworthy. And while no one should want to reject the thought that when it comes to aesthetic subject matters in general and to comedy in particular, initial impressions are excellent *prima facie* evidence concerning a thing's aesthetic merits, cases such as Geoffrey's should remind us that our initial impressions are, indeed, fallible.^{33, 34}

Unfamiliarity of Content

While the two types of hindrances discussed thus far, *environmental distractions* and *emotional disturbances*, serve well to introduce the notion of a *distorting factor*, i.e. a factor that can inhibit (or amplify) a person's capacity to be amused and, insofar as its functioning goes unnoticed, lead a person to form ill-founded judgments about comedy, it seems doubtful that appeal to these two types of distorting factors alone will get sensibility-invariantist very far in explaining the full array of divergence in judgment that she is grappling with. In order to give a more comprehensive explanation, then, the sensibility-invariantist must appeal to distorting factors that are far more pervasive and pernicious in their functioning than noise or stress.

A good place to start is with the sort of distortion that results from failures to comprehend the *content* of comedy. A great deal of comedy consists in putting a humorous twist on events, experiences, or phenomena that both the performer and the audience are (presumed to be) familiar with.³⁵ Yet, because the set of experiences to which a particular instance of comedy might refer is almost infinite, ranging from the nearly universal (e.g. romantic relationships, difficulties with family) to the maximally idiosyncratic (e.g. the personality quirks of one's friend or lover), it is, unfortunately, a common occurrence that an otherwise cleverly constructed joke or comedic performance is lost on audience members who happen to lack the requisite background knowledge. If Erin tells Sarah a witty anecdote having to do with the experience of bearing children and Adam happens to overhear, given that Adam has never beared children himself, it is unlikely that he (unlike Sarah, a mother) will find the anecdote amusing. Even if we suppose that the joke or film in question is, in fact, quite funny, because Adam lacks the relevant life-experience, the joke likely to fall on deaf ears.

Parallel with Susan and Geoffrey before, it seems that, given his circumstances, it would be unreasonable for Adam to form a determinate judgment concerning the merits of the joke that either has just heard. Because the jokes likely gave rise in him to feelings of curiosity or puzzlement rather than amusement, it would be both strange and inappropriate for Adam to come away thinking them to be funny. At the same time, given he has simply failed to 'get' the joke, it would (given his apparent awareness of his ignorance) be almost equally strange and inappropriate for him to deem the joke not funny. Instead, like Geoffrey and Susan, it seems that Adam ought simply to remain agnostic with respect to the question of whether the joke was funny or, perhaps, to form some sort of probabilistic judgment on the matter on the basis of indirect or testimonial evidence (e.g. Sarah's laughter at the joke, Erin's reputation as an excellent joke-teller, etc.).

As anyone who has ever tried to explain a joke to a person lacking the requisite background knowledge can tell you, attempts at closing such informational

gaps generally yield middling results at best. Erin, for example, is free to try to describe to Adam the particular pregnancy-related experience that her joke made reference to, but it seems doubtful that Adam will come away with a very thorough understanding of what it is actually like to be pregnant. And, unfortunately, this makes it equally doubtful that Erin can help Adam to become capable of fully appreciating her anecdote. In this case, probably the best that Erin could hope for is that Adam will come to think something like, ‘Okay, I think I can see why that would be funny.’ To hope for more would be somewhat fanciful. Of course, there are informational gaps that are not nearly so difficult to close as those which require explaining to the uninitiated what it is like to bear children. To the contrary, in cases where the missing information is fairly specific or otherwise easily communicated, one can reasonably hope to close the gap entirely, often without much difficulty (e.g. cases where all that needs to be shared is a very specific biographical fact about the subject of a joke). Easy cases aside, however, owed to the frequency of cases where closing the informational gap is difficult if not impossible (e.g. trying to explain to a Chinese peasant what it is like to live in NYC, or to a member of the ‘Greatest Generation’ what it was like to grow up in the 90’s), it seems that one can explain a great deal of the observed divergence in comedic judgment, as well as much of the trouble that we have in working productively towards anything like convergence, just by appeal to the difficulties in understanding subject matter that we all face. Because the set of experiences that a particular instance of comedy might rely on is, again, almost infinite, it would be absurd to expect even the most seasoned comedic judge to be equipped to understand each and every joke, anecdote, comedic film, etc. that she might come across, i.e. it would be unreasonable to expect any of us to have 20/20 ‘humor-vision,’ as MacFarlane might put it. Add to this the extreme difficulties that we face in catching someone up to speed when they lack an understanding of the subject matter, and it should come as no surprise that there are all sorts of jokes, anecdotes, comedic films, etc. that each of us, as individuals,³⁶ cannot and probably will never fully ‘get.’

Further still, appeal to these difficulties can also help to explain to a significant extent why it is that we observe systematic differences in opinions about comedy across groups (e.g. genders, cultures, generations, etc.³⁷): because each group has a common stock experiences that are familiar to each of its members and potentially unfamiliar to non-members, it should only be expected that there will be intra-group commonalities and inter-group differences in what sorts of comedy individuals are able to appreciate. That there are such systematic differences across groups needn’t force us into accepting relativism about comedy (e.g. this joke is funny *for women*, but it is not funny *for men*) insofar as these variations can be explained in terms of the differences in groups’ respective capacities for appreciation (e.g. women tend to *get* this joke, whereas men tend not to).

Admittedly, this still leaves us with the question of why content unfamiliarity might give rise to genuine *divergence* of comedic opinion as opposed to mere *lack of*

convergence, i.e. why those at a content-familiarity deficit might, as a result of their deficit, issue faulty judgments rather than merely suspending judgment in the relevant cases. Three points on this: first, the ratio of divergence to mere lack of convergence across the population in general and across demographic groups in particular ought not to be exaggerated. Jokes having to do with, say, the experience of women far more often elicit shrugs of indifference from unknowing men than they do outright dismissals. As such, explaining mere lack of convergence gets us a long way towards making sense of the empirical facts that are supposed to make trouble for the sensibility-invariantist. Second, it should be observed that there are at least some cases where it would be perfectly reasonable for a person to fail to be aware of their being at a content-familiarity deficit and to issue ill-founded comedic judgments accordingly; typically such cases involve humor that is reasonably misinterpreted by the misguided comedic judge as having to do with content other than what the humorist intends (e.g. a joke about ‘California’ that elicits a lukewarm response because it is reasonably misinterpreted by a longtime San Francisco resident as having to do with San Francisco rather than Los Angeles). Third and finally, I would argue that most of cases of divergence grounded in content-unfamiliarity (of which there are a fair number) are owed to the unfortunately widespread tendency for individuals to dismiss humor that they do not ‘get.’ Going back to the example of female-centric humor, one can (unfortunately) easily imagine a less-than-reflective male (illegitimately) dismissing such humor purely on the basis that it does not make him laugh. Such an unreflective individual would likely either reject out of hand or, more plausibly, fail to even consider the possibility that his failure to appreciate this humor was owed to his lack of familiarity with its subject matter and, in doing so, would demonstrate his arrogance and/or lack of imagination (which are the traits the I would postulate as the principle psychological source of the problematic tendency under consideration).

Unfamiliarity of Form

Just as a person must be capable of understanding the subject matter of a given instance of comedy in order to appreciate it, so too, I want to argue, must she be capable of understanding the *comic form* or *style* that it happens to take.³⁸ Subject matter aside, if a particular comedic film or standup performance makes heavy use of comic devices that seem strange or unfamiliar to a particular audience member, it’s doubtful that this person will find said film or performance very amusing. ‘I know that this is *supposed* to be funny,’ the puzzled audience member might think to herself, ‘but I just don’t get it.’

Take an example: suppose that Tom, circa 1974, has, on the advice of a friend, decided to attend a performance of the *avant garde* comedian Andy Kaufman. Although he enjoys a good laugh (who doesn’t?), Tom is no aficionado of the

standup comedy scene and has no real sense of the evolution that the medium has undergone over the past few years. To him, the term 'standup comedy' connotes a very traditional type of performance consisting of a series of jokes in the standard setup-punch line style. Given this limited background, Tom has little idea what is in store for him at Kaufman's show. Kaufman, after all, is attempting to turn conventional standup comedy on its head, and his brilliance as a comedian is rooted precisely in his ability to toy with and to flout the traditional comedic expectations of his audience. Whereas his audience expects a comedy routine to be interspersed with punch lines, and, thus, with opportunities to release the building comic tension, Kaufman constructs his various bits to build tension to an almost unbearable level, denying his audience the relief that they expect, before bringing the bit to a close on something of a flat note (e.g. in one paradigmatic bit, Kaufman stands on stage with a record player playing the theme from *Mighty Mouse*, standing by idly except in order to lip-sync with great enthusiasm to one distinct line in the chorus, 'Here I come to save the day!' The bit comes to a close with Kaufman standing by as the record plays itself out³⁹). Uninitiated audience members such as Tom are thus left slightly puzzled once the bit has come to a close, thinking to themselves, 'Wait, that was the joke?'

Given his puzzled and unamused response, clearly it would entirely inappropriate (and, again, rather inexplicable) for someone such as Tom to come away from Kaufman's performance thinking that it was funny. At the same time, I want to argue, because Tom failed to make sense of the comedic logic underlying Kaufman's performance, it would be almost equally inappropriate (though, as we will see, entirely explicable) for Tom to come away feeling confident in the judgment that the show was *not* funny. Because Tom simply failed to understand Kaufman's act, rather than dismissing it out of hand, it seems that Tom does best to remain agnostic with respect to the question of whether the performance was funny or, again, to form some sort of probabilistic judgment on the basis of available indirect/testimonial evidence.

Just to summarize: to claim that understanding form is a prerequisite for appreciating some instance of comedy is, in effect, to say that in order to be in a position to judge whether something is funny, one must successfully identify and understand that thing's underlying comedic logic. Going back to the Andy Kaufman example, in order to fully comprehend Kaufman's act and to understand why it is even *supposed* to be funny, something that is required in order to find it as amusing as one ought to, one must first have a sense of the standards governing more conventional forms of standup comedy, and, in turn, to see how it is that Kaufman's act intentionally flouts those standards. Absent that understanding, one will, like Tom, find Kaufman's act only puzzling and/or bizarre.⁴⁰

Important to note here is that, as with subject matter, understanding form is not a bivalent property but, rather, one that comes in degrees. For example, if we consider Kaufman's so-called 'anti-humor,' we can see that it is relatively easy to

describe and, thus, to come to comprehend the basic mechanics of the approach (e.g. ‘Anti-humor is designed to toy with and to flout the norms of traditional standup comedy’). By contrast, in order to develop an eye for the various intricacies of the form, and for the marks that separate truly excellent instances of anti-humor such as Kaufman’s from those which are merely mediocre (e.g. Kaufman’s use of the actively *unfunny*, as opposed to merely arbitrary or bizarre), a great deal more time and exposure will be necessary.⁴¹ As a result, whereas someone only minimally acquainted with the form will be able to appreciate Kaufman’s particular anti-humor act at a very basic level (e.g. ‘Oh, I get it!’), those with much greater familiarity with and comprehension of the form will be able to pick up on the subtleties and nuances that make several of Kaufman’s routines truly brilliant (e.g. ‘What a genius!’). And, as a result, while for the minimally acquainted, all instances of anti-humor tend to seem alike and, hence, prove equally amusing, for the connoisseur, some routines evoke uncontrollable laughter while others barely give rise to a chuckle.⁴²

Reminding ourselves that those with only a minimal grasp of a particular comic device find themselves incapable of distinguishing between excellent and mediocre instantiations of that device is helpful for the purposes at hand, since appeal to that phenomenon can, it seems, be used to explain a relatively significant portion of observed divergence in comedic judgment. For example, consider a slightly more familiar comedic device: sarcasm. As with anti-humor, the basic mechanics of sarcasm are easy enough to explain (e.g. ‘Sarcasm is the use of ironic statements to express disdain in the guise of approval’). However, as anyone who has ever interacted with a young child can tell you, the mere grasp of these basic mechanics does not suffice to enable an individual to distinguish between thoughtful, amusing sarcastic remarks and other less-thoughtful, highly obnoxious ones. Given her very minimal grasp of the device, for the young child nearly *any* use of sarcasm (e.g. Jack, to the young girl wearing an outmoded hand-me-down blouse: ‘*Nice shirt, Agnes!*’) will strike her as positively hilarious, warranting the utmost praise (e.g. ‘That was *so* funny!’). This willingness to praise nearly any and every sarcastic remark stands in stark contrast to the dispositions to praise of those of us with a more sophisticated understanding of the device and, hence, with more discriminating tastes. While someone well-versed in sarcasm can see what it is about the obnoxious comment that makes the child laugh (e.g. that it makes use of irony), she can also see that this particular comment lacks the subtleties and nuances required for a sarcastic remark to warrant the sort of extreme praise that young child is willing to dole out in this (and every other) case.

Again, understanding of form is something that comes in degrees, ranging from minimal, child-like understanding to absolute connoisseurship. The point here is just that the greater a person’s grasp of a particular form, the greater her ability to discriminate between better and worse instantiations of it, i.e. the better her ability to distinguish between the truly hilarious, the mildly amusing, the actively unfunny, etc. And, insofar as degrees of comprehension of comic devices such as sarcasm or anti-

humor range across the population from the minimal or non-existent to the comprehensive, it should come as no surprise that dispositions to be amused vary across the population accordingly. If we are trying to determine why it is that some find absurdist anti-humor hilarious while others don't find it amusing at all, one plausible explanation is simply that some people have come to grasp the form while others have not.⁴³ Alternatively, if querying why it is that adolescent males are disposed to laugh at nearly any joke having to do with bodily functions, whereas others are disposed to laugh only at a select few, one available explanation is just that those with a more thorough understanding of that particular comic device realize that not all bodily function jokes are created equally (something that most adolescent males have yet to realize). As far as I can tell, these two models of explanation generalize quite readily.⁴⁴

(Un)awareness of One's Ignorance

As with the distorting factors discussed before it, a failure to (fully) grasp a thing's comic form will only lead an individual to mistakenly judge that thing to be not funny (or funny, depending) insofar as she is *unaware* of that failure. As we saw earlier, although Tom did not find Andy Kaufman's performance to be very amusing, because he had a sense that he did not really understand the act, Tom (reasonably) was not inclined to infer from his lack of amusement to the conclusion that Kaufman's act was not funny. To have made that error, Tom would have had to fail to be aware of his ignorance, (mistakenly) taking himself to be in a good position to assess the act.

Admittedly it is difficult to imagine conditions in which it would be excusable for someone in a position like Tom's to fail to be aware of his or her being in no position to assess the merits of the humor that he is confronted with. Be that as it may, what I want to point out here is that there are at least some situations in which even a reasonable, generally competent comedic judge can fall prey to this type of error. For example, suppose that Rita, on the advice of a friend, sits down to watch an episode of the satirical news talk show *The Colbert Report*. As the show begins, Rita listens to the host, Stephen Colbert, open with what is ostensibly a racist joke portraying Mexican immigrants as a 'scourge on America.' Seeing as this is Rita's first encounter with *The Colbert Report*, and as the friend who advised Rita to watch did not alert her to the show's satirical character, Rita (not unreasonably) interprets Colbert as delivering this racist joke in earnest and, accordingly, deems it to be decidedly unfunny.⁴⁵ What Rita fails to realize is that Colbert is delivering the joke not as an expression an irrational hatred of Mexican immigrants, but, rather, as a way of parodying various right-wing political pundits who genuinely hold and earnestly espouse such racist views. As such, by (understandably) failing to detect the satire,

Rita not only *fails* to understand the form of the joke, but actually *misunderstands* it and, as a result, makes a (reasonable) error in comedic judgment.

Closed-mindedness

What Rita's case highlights, then, is that there are at least some situations where the problem of misunderstanding comic form can befall even the most reasonable comedic judge. When a comedian employs incredibly subtle sarcasm or irony, for example, it is possible for an individual to fail to pick up on that aspect of the performance through no serious fault of her own. And if, in addition, that comedian's performance is readily intelligible as an attempt at comedy even when (mis)understood as containing no irony or sarcasm whatsoever (e.g. a standup comedian parodying an incredibly hacky standup comedian), then even a perfectly reasonable and competent comedic judge might misunderstand the performance entirely, evaluating it incorrectly in turn.

Unfortunately, in actual practice the problem of misidentification of form (and, hence, disagreement in comedic judgment) is far more pervasive than it would be if we were all perfectly reasonable comedic judges. Turning back to Tom's case, because the Kaufman performance that he watches (which Tom knows is supposed to be funny, mind you) bears no significant resemblance whatsoever to the more conventional form of standup comedy that Tom is familiar with, it would be inexcusable for Tom to misidentify Kaufman's performance as an attempt at conventional standup comedy, assessing it (harshly) accordingly. Kaufman's performance is transparently not a conventional standup performance, so to judge it negatively because it fails to exhibit the marks of a *good* conventional standup performance would be inappropriate. Thankfully, as I have described him, Tom is reasonable enough to avoid this sort of error. Instead of trying to assess the performance in the light of an obviously ill-fitting standard, Tom does the appropriate thing and suspends judgment on the question of whether Kaufman's performance is funny.

But not all comedic judges are nearly as reasonable as Tom. To the contrary, it is quite common to encounter individuals who, to varying degrees, go around assessing the comic merits of any and all instances of comedy that they come across according to the comic standards appropriate to the limited range of comic forms with which they are familiar. These *closed-minded* individuals feel confident in applying the standards that they are familiar with even in cases where a minimal amount of reflection would make it apparent that those standards fail to apply in the case at hand. For example, someone equally unacquainted with *avant-garde* comedy but a great deal less reasonable than Tom might decide to evaluate Kaufman's performance (harshly) according to the standards of excellence with which she is familiar. Such a person would then infer from the act's failure to make her laugh to

the conclusion that the performance isn't funny. Rather than taking the fact that Kaufman's performance makes no discernable effort at meeting the standards of comic excellence that she is familiar with as evidence that some *other* standard is, in all likelihood, more appropriate in this case, the closed-minded individual presses ahead, applying the familiar but ill-suited standards with full confidence, feeling warranted in dismissing the performance in turn.

Important to realize here is that the problem of unreasonable dismissals resulting from closed-mindedness is not one faced solely by the comic *avant-garde*. Consider Ellen, a closed-minded aristocrat, who only has a real appreciation for incredibly dry, reserved humor. If she is presented with a very clever but slightly low-brow comedic film (e.g. *Stripes*), one whose comedy is laden with sexual content and contains a fair amount of foul language, it is very likely that Ellen will find the film crass and vulgar, and will dismiss it accordingly. Now, while it is true that a film being *too* crass or *too* vulgar does count as a strike against its being funny in any context, one suspects that the standards of crassness and vulgarity that Ellen is employing in this particular case are simply far too restrictive given the sort of film that she is assessing. What Ellen fails to realize is that crassness and vulgarity, when employed judiciously (as they are in *good* low-brow comedies), can help bring about hilarious results. Because she is not familiar enough with the comic form of low-brow humor to appreciate its virtues, to perceive the nuances and subtleties that mark off truly excellent low-brow comedies from their mediocre counterparts, etc., Ellen simply lacks an eye for such films. And while Ellen's being unfamiliar with, and hence incapable of appreciating, low-brow comedies might not be all that objectionable in itself, Ellen is most certainly criticizable for her unreasonably harsh assessment in this case. Specifically, Ellen is open to criticism for having failed to consider the possibility that other forms of worthwhile comedy might exist beyond the range of forms that she is familiar with.⁴⁶

Whatever the psychological origin of an individual's closed-minded tendencies, be it a simple lack of reflection or the manifestation of a subconscious refusal to acknowledge that there might be forms of comedy that one fails to understand, i.e. an unwillingness to admit the possibility of ignorance, the problematic effects of closed-minded tendencies are obvious enough. Thus, insofar as we wish to be *reasonable* comedic judges, avoiding the sorts of unwarranted dismissal that closed-mindedness tends to produce, we do best to adhere to what we might call a *principle of open-mindedness*: when considering something that one knows is *supposed* to be funny, but which makes no discernable attempt to conform to the standards of comic excellence that one is familiar with, then one ought to suspend judgment concerning that thing's merits,⁴⁷ given that one has, in all likelihood, failed to grasp that thing's comic form.⁴⁸

What this principle of open-mindedness tells us is that because it is far too easy to fail to be amused by a particular instance of comedy because one lacks sufficient familiarity with the comic form that it instantiates, in situations where a

thing's comic form is not readily intelligible, the reasonable thing to do is to suspend judgment, not taking one's failure to be amused as (conclusive) evidence that the thing under consideration is not funny.⁴⁹ It is my hope that this principle of open-mindedness is one that most of us already accept, at least in principle, if not in practice. Still, insofar as a significant amount of the observed divergence in comedic judgment can be explained by the prevalence of closed-minded tendencies, it is worth reminding ourselves that closed-mindedness is *objectionable* and actively *distorts* our ability to assess things in terms of their comic merits. Hence, divergence resulting from closed-mindedness (of which there is a great deal) does nothing to count against the plausibility of there being non-relativistic facts about comedy.

Confidence in our own assessments

Having spent so much time discussing the various ways in which one's comedic judgment can be led astray, one might reasonably ask at this point how it is at all possible for a given individual to have confidence in her own comedic judgments. After all, when one is confronted by a person with whom one disagrees as to whether or not, say, *Arrested Development* is funny, how is one to know whether she or her interlocutor is correct? Ought she not to suspend judgment on the matter?

While the correct answers to such questions will vary case-by-case, it is possible to make a couple of general observations. First, the above discussion at least seems to indicate that distorting factors will far more often prevent one from appreciating something that is genuinely funny than lead one to laugh at something that is not (with the one possible exception of unfamiliarity with comedic form, which could very often lead one to laugh loudly at fairly pedestrian comedic efforts). For that reason, it seems that one ought to retain greater confidence in one's comedic assessments in the face of disagreement insofar as those judgments are positive ones. Second, and more fundamentally, when determining whether one ought to downgrade one's confidence in a particular comedic judgment when confronted with a disagreeing interlocutor, one must ask, as in any other situation of disagreement, whether the interlocutor's conflicting judgment is plausibly attributed to one of the distorting factors discussed above. For instance, if one is aware that the person attempting to cast doubt on the funniness of *Arrested Development* has had very little exposure to the sitcom form, paid very little attention when she viewed the show, or is simply in a grumpy mood, then one ought not to feel rationally compelled to downgrade to any significant extent her confidence in the funniness of the show in light of her interlocutor's position. On the other hand, if the disagreeing interlocutor is known to be an expert in sitcoms, has paid careful attention to the show, and appears to be thinking in a clear-headed fashion, then this ought to give one reason for pause.

More generally, then, what the above discussion suggests is that one ought to evaluate comedic judgments (be they one's own or another's) with an eye to the

factors that can lead such judgments astray. In attempting to determine whether a particular comedic assessment is correct, one must simply ask whether that judgment is plausibly attributable to something other than the un/funniness of the thing being assessed.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to defend the reasonability of our practice of making claims about what is and is not funny *simpliciter* rather than making claims about what is and is not funny *for us*. As I mentioned at the outset, this practice can seem problematic insofar as our engaging in it seems to involve a commitment to the existence of absolute or non-relativistic facts about what is and is not funny and, in turn, to our thinking that those with whom we disagree in comedic judgment are mistaken. Owing to the observed widespread divergence in judgments about comedy and the *prima facie* intractability of the corresponding disputes, these are commitments which have seemed to many to be indefensible. Throughout the discussion I have tried to work against this sentiment by providing a variety of explanations as to why these two seemingly troublesome empirical phenomena need not be taken as counting against the plausibility of the sensibility-invariantist's commitments. No doubt, in order to offer a fully comprehensive account of these two phenomena one would have to cite additional distorting factors beyond the ones that I have mentioned here (e.g. the effects that mistaken ethical judgments can have on comedic judgments⁵⁰). Still, over the course of this discussion I take myself to have covered the most empirically significant of these factors, and to have demonstrated the structural features that distorting factors possess generally, thus paving the way for a more extensive account, should one be deemed necessary. It is my sense that, in the end, most if not all divergence can be explained by appeal to such factors. But again, that is an empirical claim, one for which I have provided only imperfect (albeit significant) evidence here.

Whether or not one comes away from this essay completely convinced of the reasonableness of being a practicing sensibility-invariantist about comedy, my hope is that, at the very least, one will come away thinking the practice of making claims about what is and is not funny *simpliciter* to be a great deal more defensible than he or she might have previously thought. As frustrating of a time as we sometimes have in trying to convince one another that, say, a particular comedian or television program is or isn't funny, it simply isn't true that the only plausible way of making sense of these frustrations is by appealing to some sort of skepticism or (revisionary) relativism about comedy. Disagreements notwithstanding, it remains entirely plausible that some things really are *just plain* funny.⁵¹

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¹ Worth observing is the apparent contrast with a scenario in which Jane remarks, 'Watching *Arrested Development* is so much fun!' Here, in response to a similarly critical response by Sarah (e.g., 'Actually, it's no fun at all.'). Jane is much more likely to retract her initial claim, offering instead a much more qualified alternative (e.g., 'Oh... yes I guess I can see how it wouldn't be much fun for children. It would be fun for you if you were older.'). See Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009) (defending indexical relativism about 'fun').

² On the other hand, the discussion below does not rule out the possibility that something possessing the property of funniness ultimately amounts to no more than that thing's being such that a creature capable of amusement would, in optimal conditions, be amused by it. Cf. Johnston (1989) (articulating a response-dispositional account of value). All that this essay suggests is that, on such an account, ideally situated observers would, according to the conception of funniness that ordinary speakers operate with (reasonably, I argue), respond to any given instance of humor *uniformly*, i.e. that *anyone*, or, perhaps, anyone physiologically capable of amusement, given the requisite intelligence, information, etc., would be amused by something that is genuinely funny. In this respect, the account advanced here is compatible with the view that, e.g., the appreciation of humor is contingent upon the possession of certain physiological sensitivities, but incompatible with the view that those sensitivities vary across persons in a way that would undermine the existence of a uniform standard of humor, compare McGonigal (2006) (arguing that variations in physiology render implausible the idea that all human observers ideally situated would converge in judgment as to what is and is not 'delicious'), including variations across, say, different species capable of appreciating humor (though, for obvious reasons, I make only a limited attempt to defend the empirical plausibility of this last commitment), compare Hyman (2005) (suggesting that gross color concepts are species-centric); see also note 37. In other words, according to the account advanced here, 'funny' is not an anthropocentric concept.

³ Because 'funny' is a gradable adjective, it does exhibit a sort of threshold context-sensitivity, i.e. the features of the context of utterance determine *how* funny something has to be in order to count as 'funny' in that context. To avoid unnecessary complication, however, I will abstract from such threshold context-sensitivity throughout the course of this discussion.

⁴ See MacFarlane (2007) (arguing that the correctness of an ascription of funniness varies according to the comedic sensibilities of the person assessing the ascription).

⁵ Holding all other relevant contextual features fixed (e.g., the show's quality has not changed dramatically between utterances, thresholds are sufficiently similar, etc.).

⁶ And about most aesthetic predicates (e.g., the predicates that we employ when assessing paintings, films, music, etc.).

⁷ Sometimes these factulist commitments are construed as at least potentially admitting of exceptions in cases of vagueness (e.g., Wright 1992). While I do not think that they admit of any such exceptions (I doubt that 'disagreements' over the status of vague cases are real disagreements), this is not a point I wish to haggle about here.

⁸ Here I reject the thought expressed by Wright (2006) and Einheuser (2008) that disputes over matters of taste do not involve attributions of fault. To my mind, a disagreement that does not involve attributions of fault is no disagreement at all. Additionally, it just seems untrue to the phenomenon to maintain that such disagreements do not involve attributions of fault (e.g., if I think that something is funny, and you maintain that it is not, I think that you are *wrong*).

⁹ MacFarlane (2007), p. 1.

¹⁰ As Ted Cohen (1999, p. 29) expresses the skeptical concern: 'When you find a joke funny, you expect me to join you in your amusement once you have told me the joke. If I fail, then once you have determined that I understand the joke, exactly what *failure* will you attribute to me? You find the joke funny, I don't. It is not as if some argument or proof had been presented, with your following to the conclusion and my not. In that case, the conclusion is something *to be believed*. This is an objective matter. My failure to join you is an error, or a mistake, or a misapprehension. But with the unsuccessful joke, there is nothing to point to besides the joke itself. You cannot show that the joke is an instance of something that must be acknowledged as funny, as you might show that an argument is an instance of valid reasoning.'

¹¹ This worry is expressed most clearly by Wright (1992). See esp. chapter 3, including the appendix.

¹² One possible exception would be a case where the testimonial account is so vivid that it could function as a reproduction of the film (e.g., the description would allow David to imagine the film so vividly that it would be as if he had seen it for himself).

¹³ Here and throughout I assume that a speaker's being in a position to reasonably assert that *p* is an indicator of her being in the position of reasonably believing that *p*.

¹⁴ One might worry that what we're tracking here is some sort of conversational implicature, such that in *saying*, without qualification, that such and such film is funny one merely *implies* that she has seen it for herself (e.g., Mothersill (1984)). This seems wrong to me, if only because the alleged implicature does not admit of cancellation (e.g., 'Arrested Development is hilarious, though I haven't seen it myself yet,' sounds quite bad).

¹⁵ In the sense that we would think it odd and inappropriate for him to do otherwise. This leaves open the question as to whether such judgments of reasonability are judgments that we could reflectively endorse, i.e. whether NWTT is rationally defensible.

¹⁶ One thing to note concerning ascriptions of 'funny' (and aesthetic predicates generally) is that we often slide back and forth between ascribing 'funny' to things and ascribing it to *specific viewings* of things (the latter being marked by the use of past tense). For instance, in the scenario above, Bob, having just seen the film in question, might have said just as easily that the film '*wasn't* funny at all.' While this is an interesting phenomenon, for our purposes I don't think it poses any sort of difficulty since, I assume, a viewing's possessing a particular aesthetic property (e.g., being funny) presumably entails its objects possessing that same property, and vice versa.

¹⁷ Here I will remain agnostic as to whether Bob's testimony gave David a new reason to reconsider or merely made him aware of a previously existing reason to do so.

¹⁸ Related to the previous note, I wish to remain agnostic at this point as to whether David was in such a privileged position *before* his exchange with Bob.

¹⁹ One exception would be where David is able to recall the film (or just the salient parts) vividly enough to re-watch it 'in his mind,' making an additional trip to the theater unnecessary.

²⁰ Note that this perceiving *as* requirement is, in effect, just a restatement of the appreciation requirement suggested at the outset of this section.

²¹ Walton (1993) argues for a similar perceiving *as* requirement with respect to our understanding of both humor and music.

²² See, e.g., Budd (2003), Livingston (2003), and Meskin (2004).

²³ Admittedly, the notion of a 'sufficiently similar' reproduction is somewhat vague. Livingston (2003) worries that this vagueness poses a serious problem for any form of first-hand familiarity requirement, though I fail to see how it gives rise to any problems other than potential borderline cases of sufficiently similar reproductions.

²⁴ Sibley (1959) famously argued that *any* non-evaluative description of a piece of art was compatible with that artwork possessing or failing to possess any given aesthetic property (e.g., being beautiful, funny, etc.). And, while Sibley's strong claim seems problematic insofar as the aesthetic supervenes on the natural, it does seem right to say that most non-evaluative descriptions of a piece of art that we would actually give (given the various practical constraints that we face) are, in fact, compatible with the possession or lack thereof of any given aesthetic property. As such, it does seem that in order to *know* that a particular piece of art does or does not possess a particular degree of aesthetic value, one must have a more detailed understanding of that object's non-normative properties than one usually receives via testimony. This does, of course, leave open the possibility that an *incredibly lengthy and detailed* description of a piece of art might suffice to give one knowledge of its aesthetic properties. Such a detailed description, however, would probably suffice as a 'sufficiently similar representation' of the corresponding piece of art. Whether detailed descriptions can or cannot function as sufficiently similar representations is, of course, a difficult question, but I doubt that it is one that can be settled *a priori*.

²⁵ E.g., if I describe to you what I take to be hilarious scenes from a film in such detail that you are able to replay them in your mind, then it seems plausible that you might be capable of coming to see them, and in turn the film, *as* funny, even if neither the scenes nor the film struck you *as* funny upon your initial viewing

²⁶ E.g., so long as I have no reason to believe that the email message is spurious or has been superseded by a later email moving the talk back to the normal 4 PM time slot, or that you are lying and that there never was any such email.

²⁷ I take it that even those with highly attuned senses of humor can have difficulties articulating the features that they respond to when finding a particular bit of comedy funny. Being able to respond to reasons is one thing, and being able to put those reasons into words is another.

²⁸ Perhaps as a result of the lack of widespread education in the comic arts, in combination with the fact that comedy, much like beauty, is something that can often be appreciated even in the absence of an explicit understanding of its good-making qualities.

²⁹ As Richard Moran has pointed out to me, it would be a mistake to say that all ‘productive’ conversational exchange concerning some matter of taste result in something approaching convergence. For instance, even if nothing like convergence is reached, we might deem a conversation between two firmly opposed interlocutors highly productive insofar as the two gain a deeper understanding of one another’s position over the course of their argument (e.g., a dispute over the merits of some low-brow comedic film between two individuals with strong respective preference for high- and low-brow humor is unlikely to result in convergence; all the same, such a dispute may well aid each interlocutor in better understanding the position of his or her opponent). It is for this reason that we sometimes (rightly) take there to be a point in engaging in disputes with those with whom we firmly disagree, even when we are fully aware that said dispute will almost certainly fail to result in anything like convergence. Be that as it may, I doubt that this observation in any way militates against the thought that ‘productivity’ or ‘success’ in a conversation concerning some matter of taste consists in the parties getting *closer* to convergence. After all, what is happening in the cases where two firmly opposed interlocutors have a ‘productive’ exchange is that the two are gaining a better understanding of the reasons their opponent has for holding the opposing position that they do. In other words, what is happening in such cases is that the two parties are getting better acquainted with one another’s evidence. And, while this pooling of evidence may not result in convergence (or anything close to it), the process certainly brings the two closer to seeing eye to eye on the matter in dispute (e.g., each interlocutor might acknowledge that there is a reasonable case to be made for the opposing side, and that, perhaps, the issue is less clear cut than he or she might have initially thought). And, it is in this approach of convergence, I would argue, that the ‘productivity’ or ‘success’ of their conversation consists.

³⁰ Martin (2007), p. 2.

³¹ Bergson (1914) famously argued that laughter requires the total absence of emotion. And, while this is most certainly an overstatement, there is a truth in the neighborhood, which is that *too much* emotion can prevent appreciation.

³² Though, as psychological research on moral judgment suggest, we might not even be so good at being aware of the operation of environmental disturbances. See, e.g., Schnall, Haidt, et al. (2008).

³³ The point here is similar to Hume’s (1757) observation that a ‘perfect serenity of mind’ is a prerequisite of a well-formed aesthetic judgment.

³⁴ Although the above cases remind us that various distorting factors can *prevent* a person from being amused by something that she otherwise might find quite funny, one mustn’t forget that there are similar distorting factors that can have precisely the opposite effect. If a person is intoxicated, in an especially giddy or excited mood, or is heavily anticipating that something or someone is *going to be* hilarious, it will be easy for her to burst out in laughter in response to a joke or anecdote which she would (hopefully) otherwise recognize as being not especially funny (e.g., bad jokes told on a first date with a very attractive person).

³⁵ This is the type of humor that Cohen (1999) refers to as ‘conditional,’ in that an audience’s ability to appreciate said humor is *conditional* on their possessing an understanding its subject matter.

³⁶ That is, *for each individual* there exists a great deal of humor that she cannot and will never be able to fully grasp.

³⁷ These considerations also help to explain, in the extreme, why one would expect rational creatures with radically different forms of life (e.g., dolphins, Martians) to be ‘blind’ to the humor that human beings are well-situated to appreciate, and likewise why one would expect humans to be ‘blind’ to the humor that such creatures are better equipped to understand. Indeed, insofar as such dramatic differences might preclude the mutual grasping of certain concepts, curing certain instances of such ‘blindness’ could turn out to be impossible.

³⁸ My claim in this section is very similar to Walton’s contention that, in order to appropriately experience a work of art, one must have an understanding of the *category* that that work falls in, thus perceiving it *as* a member of that category. See Walton (1970).

³⁹ Kaufman introduced this routine on the very first episode of *Saturday Night Live* in 1975.

⁴⁰ None of this is to say that a comedic judge must be able to *articulate* the underlying logic in order to appreciate it (e.g., I needn’t be able to tell you exactly how Kaufman’s routine flouts my comedic expectations in order to comprehend and appreciate it. In fact, I needn’t even be able to articulate what my expectations are in order to do so).

⁴¹ As Walton (1970) notes, ‘Perceiving a work in a certain category or set of categories is a skill that must be acquired by training, and exposure to a great many other works of the category or categories in question is ordinarily, I believe, an essential part of this training,’ p. 366. Or as Hume (1757) remarks: ‘When objects of any kind are first presented to the eye or imagination, the sentiment, which attends them, is obscure and confused; and the mind is, in a great measure, incapable of pronouncing concerning their merits or defects. The taste cannot perceive the several excellences of the performance; much less distinguish the particular character of each excellency, and ascertain its quality and degree. If it pronounce the whole in general to be beautiful or deformed, it is the utmost that can be expected; and even this judgment, a person, so unpracticed, will be apt to deliver with great hesitation and reserve. But allow him to acquire experience in those objects, his feeling becomes more exact and nice: He not only perceives the beauties and defects of each part, but marks the distinguishing species of each quality, and assigns it suitable praise or blame. A clear and distinct sentiment attends him through the whole survey of the objects; and he discerns that very degree and kind of approbation or displeasure, which each part is naturally fitted to produce.’

⁴² A similar phenomenon occurs when dealing with all kinds of aesthetic subject matter. For example, some wine novices deem nearly all Pinot Noirs equally sumptuous (or unpalatable); some film novices find all non-narrative films similarly fascinating (or frustrating).

⁴³ Note that this does not preclude the possibility of a well-informed individual holding absurdist anti-humor in ill-regard quite generally. Such a person might argue that all instances of the form by necessity exhibit characteristics that count against their being funny (e.g., all anti-humor is overly esoteric). Note, however, that this sort of criticism requires a thorough understanding of the form being critiqued (more plausible examples of a comedic forms warranting this sort of general critique would be offensively racist or sexist humor).

⁴⁴ The first type of explanation seems to fit quite well with things that are, as we say, ‘acquired tastes’ (e.g., satire, dark humor), whereas the second type seems to fit with forms which are more immediately accessible (e.g., slapstick comedy).

⁴⁵ Contra D’Arms and Jacobson (2000), I take it that a joke’s being conditional on a listener’s holding a mistaken ethical belief counts against that joke *on purely aesthetic grounds*. This is why, I assume, we judge truly offensive jokes not to be funny (this is in contrast to Walton (1994), who asserts that we ought not to take such ethically-based aesthetic denunciations ‘literally’).

⁴⁶ One can easily imagine a parallel case moving from low-brow to high-brow, where a person familiar only with low-brow humor dismisses high-brow humor on the basis of its being stuffy and dull.

⁴⁷ Or form some probabilistic judgment on the basis of indirect or testimonial evidence.

⁴⁸ This principle of open-mindedness is of a natural pair with Walton's suggested features counting in favor of a work of art W 's being appropriately assignable to some category C :

- (i) The presence in W of a relatively large number of features standard with respect to C ...
- (ii) The fact, if it is one, that W is better, or more interesting or pleasing aesthetically, or more worth experiencing when perceived in C than it is when perceived in alternate ways... (1970, p. 357)

⁴⁹ We may still wish to attribute *some* evidentiary significance to our failure to laugh, given our status as generally reliable humor-detectors, but not a substantial amount.

⁵⁰ As I mentioned before (see note 45), it is my position that an instance of comedy's being conditional on an audience member's having mistaken ethical views counts as evidence against a thing's being funny (for sympathetic arguments, see Gaut (1998) and Moran (1994)). As such, I maintain that anyone who goes in for sensibility-invariantism about comedy is going to have to go in for some non-relativistic conception of morality as well.

⁵¹ Thanks to Selim Berker, Nico Cornell, Kerstin Haase, Warren Goldfarb, Thomas Scanlon, James Shaw, Nick Zangwill, the members of the Harvard Moral & Political Workshop, and an anonymous reader for this journal for helpful comments and criticisms.