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It's Okay to Laugh at Fat Bastard: Ridicule, Satire, and Immoralism

Abstract: Comic immoralism is the view that sometimes funny things are funny due to their having immoral properties of some sort. Immoralism has many proponents and detractors. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I clarify the scope and content of comic immoralism as a general thesis in the philosophy of humor. I will argue that the debate about immoralism has unduly excluded certain categories of humor from inclusion, and that the language which immoralists sometimes use can be misleading. Second, I argue for my own version of immoralism, which I call *ridicule immoralism.* Ridicule immoralism holds that sometimes things are funny due to their being ridiculous, and that things are often ridiculous due to being morally flawed. It follows from this that a version of comic immoralism is true.

Keywords: comic immoralism, satire, ridicule, philosophy of humor

Introduction: Fat Bastard

In *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999) a character was introduced to the world. He weighs close to a ton, is greasy, incontinent, sexually over-confident, repulsive, smelly, and has breasts roughly the size of Nerf Basketballs, all under a coating of wispy red hair and splotchy skin. His name is Fat Bastard. As his name betrays, Fat Bastard is an amalgamation of nearly every negative stereotype about fat people. Stereotypical depictions of fat people are now often called "fatphobic" and in recent years fatphobia has been taken more seriously both by philosophers and by people outside of the academy. People now recognize the racist and classist origins of stereotypes about fat people (NPR 2020), the pseudo-scientific justification for such stereotypes (Sole-Smith 2021), and the philosophically and ethically bankrupt underpinnings for such stereotypes (Nath 2019). The scholarly consensus seems to be that such stereotypes are morally and epistemically problematic. Endorsement of, or insensitivity, to such stereotypes is to be avoided. And yet, even I, (weighing in at 360 pounds) cannot help but laugh at Fat Bastard! Even though, I contend, I understand intimately the problematic nature of such stereotypes.

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Some philosophers have argued that, in order to find Fat Bastard funny, one must somehow *buy in* to the stereotypes which Fat Bastard represents. Robin Tapley, for example, has argued that finding morally problematic things funny requires that, at some level, we *believe* that the stereotypes are true (Tapley 2012). Hence, the popular saying that "it's funny because it's true."

Given a view like Tapley's, it may be the case that I think Fat Bastard is funny for all the wrong reasons. I may have subconsciously fatphobic beliefs. I may have internalized unquestioningly the patterns of fatphobia found in my society writ large. It may be the case that I am predisposed to deny fatphobic propositions such as "Fat people are incontinent, impulsive, slobs, etc." when facing such propositions directly, but still be predisposed to look to fat people in the room when something smells amiss.

Nonetheless, I do not think that Tapley is right to say that when we laugh at stereotypes we *buy in* to those stereotypes. Instead, I think sometimes we laugh at stereotypes precisely because we *refuse* to buy in to them. Fat Bastard is funny in this way. It is because he is the embodiment of familiar fatphobic stereotypes, stereotypes which are not only factually inaccurate, but which are morally problematic, that he amuses me. I find such stereotypes *funny*, not because I think there is some deep and unsavory truth to them but instead, because they are *flawed* and thus *ridiculous.*

The flawed and the ridiculous have an intimate relationship. Recognition of the connection between ridicule and moral flaw dates back to at least Plato, who says that only *the bad* is worthy of ridicule (Plato, *Republic,* Book V 452d–e). Aristotle associated ridiculousness with *the ugly* (Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ch. 5 1449a), and Hobbes claimed that humor centered around the apprehension of *deformity* (Hobbes 1994. 32). According to at least some of these thinkers, *moral* flaws count among the number of flaws that can make something ridiculous. Thus, moral flaws can sometimes play a role in making something funny.

To say that a moral flaw can make something funny is to endorse *comic immoralism.* In this paper, I will argue in favor of comic immoralism. In part, this will involve determining just what immoralism *is.* I call my immoralist thesis: *Explanatory Ridicule Immoralism.* I argue that one way in which immorality makes things funny is by making certain things *ridiculous.* Fat Bastard is funny *because he is ridiculous.*

Before I articulate fully my explanatory ridicule immoralism, it will be important to explain what immoralism *is* and how it came about as a thesis of interest originally in the philosophy of art and art criticism. This is what part 1 of this paper endeavors to do. In part 2, we discuss how immoralism came to be applied to *humor* in particular and consider some of the challenges that must be met by any successful immoralism. Once we have a good understanding of how immoral-

ism has come to *be* we will address the question of how immoralism *ought to be formulated* in more precise terms. I will argue in part 3 that discussions of immoralism have tended to ignore what I call *found humor.* I will also argue that the language of immoralism has placed a misleading emphasis on *enhancement* where it should instead focus on *explanation.* Then finally in part 4, I discuss ridicule, and give my positive account of ridicule immoralism. I end this section by showing how the account thus far applies to the case of Fat Bastard.

1 The Emergence of Immoralism in the Philosophy of Art

1.1 Autonomism, Moralism, and Ethicism

Immoralism emerges originally as a thesis in the philosophy of art and art criticism. Its first formulation comes from Daniel Jacobson’s 1997 paper “In Praise of Immoral Art” which was itself a response to novel work on the ethical criticism of art. Before the introduction of immoralism came the theses of *moralism* and *ethicism* which were voiced as responses to a thesis commonly associated with formalist schools of thought: *autonomism.*

Formalism is an important and historically complex collection of theses that I cannot hope to reconstruct here, but of its central theses were the claims that it was the “form” of an artwork rather than its *content* or *context* which is to be evaluated in terms of aesthetic virtue. Autonomism, then, can be understood as distinguishing the aesthetic value of the work’s form from the ethical or moral value of the work’s content. Dan Jacobson helpfully defines autonomism as, “The thesis that the “ulterior” values of art, such as its moral and cognitive value, are irrelevant to its aesthetic value” (Jacobson 1997 157). Autonomism is often motivated by comparison to overly moralizing philosophers like Plato who, in various places in his work, advocated for strict censorship of art and often seemed to see art as primarily relating to moral education. Autonomism respects the common intuition that art can be appreciated for its own sake, that it is not always in the business of dispensing moral education, and that censorship often can and should be resisted on philosophical grounds.

Autonomism was the foil against which Noël Carroll and Nigel Berys Gaut formulated the views of *moderate moralism* and *ethicism* respectively. Both Gaut and Carroll take inspiration from David Hume’s “Of the Standards of Taste” wherein Hume says,

> But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where the vicious manners are described, without being marked with proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I can never relish the composition. (Hume 1987, 246)

Inspired by Hume, Carroll and Gaut are less concerned with the Platonic question of what we ought to *do* with immoral art. Instead, they take interest in how the immorality in art relates to our *aesthetic relationship* with that art. Following Hume, they both hold that in some way immorality can play an *inhibitory* role in our appreciation of artworks.

While Carroll and Gaut agree with respect to immorality's propensity to *inhibit* aesthetic value, they disagree about the scope of such interactions. Ethicism is usually regarded by philosophers as a *stronger* thesis than moderate moralism. According to Carroll, ethicism holds that certain *kinds* of ethical flaws *always* work against an artwork's aesthetic success whereas moralism simply holds that some ethical flaws *sometimes* count against an artwork's success (Carroll 2000, 374). Though Gaut himself disagrees with this construal of the disagreement (Gaut 2007, 50) such a construal persists in Carroll's future works as well (Carroll 2014). I will not attempt to disentangle the myriad of ways these views might be distinguished, but I will assume as most do that ethicism is the stronger thesis of the two.

According to Anne Eaton (Eaton 2012, 282) while Carroll and Gaut may disagree about the scope of the ethical criticism of art, they both identify the same locus of aesthetical-ethical interaction in the aspect of an artwork: its *perspective.* According to Eaton,

> [Carroll and Gaut's approach] locates moral valence in a work's *perspective.* By "perspective" one means the work's evaluative attitude toward diegetic elements (elements of the world represented), such as persons, actions, and situations… An artwork manifests a perspective towards one or more diegetic elements by prescribing to its audience attitudes towards these elements. "Attitude" is meant to be vague in order to capture propositional attitudes, emotions, and other affective responses. (Eaton 2012 282)

Artworks attempt to stimulate us in various ways by presenting various elements of the artwork in ways intended to elicit certain beliefs or emotional responses to the work.

Take for example, two paintings of the same battlefield, in one the victorious King Tim, stands upon a hill overlooking his kingdom after a hard-fought battle, he holds his sword to the sky, exalted, with a supernatural glow emanating from his head. In the second painting, King Tim stands nine feet tall, covered in blood with

a malicious grin, surrounded by corpses, and villages and a castle burn behind him, darkening his face. These paintings prompt us to form distinctly different beliefs and attitudes about King Tim. These intended beliefs and attitudes constitute the work's *perspective.*

When the perspective of the artwork is immoral, Gaut and Carroll argue, this ethical flaw can come to be an aesthetic flaw. Suppose that King Tim was, as a matter of historical fact, a horrible despot who did in fact relish the sight of death on the battlefield and murdered all dissenters to his rule. We might then evaluate the first painting as flawed in that it asks us to think of King Tim as a heroic leader ordained by God whose rule was the result of divine mandate. We may even complain that the painting is a revisionary act of propaganda for those who seek to drum up nationalist fervor or sanitize the image of the monarchy. Either way, the painting asks that we adopt a set of attitudes towards King Tim which we know we ethically ought not adopt. As a result we will have difficulty accepting the perspective the painting prescribes, which counts against the painting's aesthetic success.

1.2 Immoralism

It is at this point, with the uptake of the moralist and ethicist projects in response to autonomism, that Daniel Jacobson is usually regarded to have articulated what has come to be known as *immoralism.* Jacobson argues that there exists a false dichotomy between autonomism on the one hand and ethicism or moralism on the other (Jacobson 1997 157). Jacobson agrees with Gaut and Carroll that the formalists are wrong to deny *any* relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical. He disagrees, however, that any *general theory* of the interaction between the ethical and the aesthetic, like moralism or ethicism, gives us a full story. Things are much messier than any neat theory would provide. In order to show this, he aims to show that *immoral* features of a work can play a role in making something aesthetically successful.

Jacobson considers the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will.* A film which is often at once derided for its fascist themes and considered a work of tremendous aesthetic importance. Many moralists are content to say that the film has ethical blemishes that damage its aesthetic value, but all aesthetic value that remains comes from some aspect of the film which is not ethically salient. Jacobson denies this, claiming, "The moral defects of the film are not aesthetic blemishes,. because they are inseparable from the work's aesthetic value… Like all the best immoral art, this film is incorrigible: it cannot be sanitized, as the moralists' appropriation of the notion of formal beauty promises, it can only be expurgated (Ja-

cobson 1997, 192–93).” It is on the basis of this *inseparability* between the aesthetic successes of *Triumph of the Will* and the abominations of fascist ideology that Jacobson makes his point.

Thus, Jacobson takes himself to have shown that, as generic theses, autonomism, moralism, and ethicism are all false. The relationship between moral and aesthetic value cannot be completely encapsulated by any of these views. Though Jacobson may not have intended to bring another contender onto the scene, his argument is generally considered the first argument for *immoralism,* the view that an artwork’s immoral qualities can play a role in making it aesthetically valuable. It is worth noting, though, that Jacobson does not apply this label to himself (Jacobson 2005).

1.3 Developments in the Debate

While Jacobson is typically considered the founder of immoralism, we might take Anne Eaton’s *robust immoralism* to be its most prominent recent development and defense.[1] In developing immoralism, Eaton adopts the technical machinery of Gaut and Carroll’s *perspectival evaluation* of art and applies it to her immoralist account.

Eaton argues that a work is sometimes aesthetically successful because its perspective prescribes to us, views or attitudes which we are already predisposed to reject. When the works do so successfully, this counts as a sort of aesthetic achievement. As she puts it, “… I argue that the capacity to make an audience feel and desire things inimical to their considered views and deeply held principles is for this very reason and to this extent an aesthetic achievement (Eaton 2012, 281).” Eaton uses the example of Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* a ruthless mob boss who does plenty of abhorrent things and consistently flouts commonly held moral norms. The aesthetic success of this show in part comes from the fact that we, the viewers, cannot help but *root* for this character who we acknowledge is patently unsympathetic. As such, Eaton seems to give a more complete picture of immoralism.

Another important development comes from Ted Nannicelli. Who has argued for what he sometimes calls *the genetic approach* to the evaluation of artworks, on which the *process which brought the work about* may be aesthetically relevant to our evaluation of the work. Take Nannicelli’s own example, “…the narrative struc-

1 Eaton is also important for having given a defense of a moralist evaluation of Titian’s painting *Rape of Europa* (Eaton 2003).

ture of *Citizen Kane* (1941) is properly understood as original just because what Orson Welles and Herman Mankiewicz *did* in terms of shaping Kane's story in a way that stood out from the standard Hollywood film of the 1930s and 1940s (Nannicelli 2014, 177)." The generative context of a work is, importantly, not a feature of its perspective. Thus, Nannicelli's shows that the ethical evaluation of art has more evaluative approaches than those which engage with an artwork's *perspective.* Nannicelli, as we will see in the next section, thinks this can be used to formulate a kind of comic immoralism.

2 Applications to Humor

2.1 A Preliminary Note

Before we begin to discuss how the above debates have played out in the philosophy of humor, a preliminary note is in order. Comic immoralism, comic moralism, and comic ethicism are theses about what makes something *funny.* Comic immoralism is the view that funny things are made funny by their having immoral features. The view is usually contrasted with *comic moralism*, the view that funny things are *made less funny* or *not funny at all* by their having immoral features, and *comic autonomism* the view that morality bears no important relation to funniness whatsoever. Both comic immoralism and comic moralism, are generally understood to come in two forms: moderate and strong. A *strong* comic immoralist would say that immoral features of jokes *always* make a positive contribution to funniness, whereas a *moderate* comic moralist would say that they merely *sometimes* do. As is common, when I discuss "comic immoralism" I will mean to refer to moderate comic immoralism, unless explicitly stated otherwise. Strong comic moralism, the view that jokes are always made less funny in virtue of having moral flaws, is not to be mistaken with comic ethicism, the view that ethical flaws of a certain *kind* always count against something's funniness.

Funniness is taken in the general philosophy of humor to be a *normative* concept. An object is funny if and only if it *merits* a humorous experience, humorous appreciation, or a humorous response (like laughter or grinning). Some have registered skepticism about the idea that funniness should be taken to be a normative notion. Most prominently Carroll (Carroll 2014, 247) and Aaron Smuts (Smuts 2009, 341). I am sympathetic to these considerations but will assume a normative view for the sake of this paper.

2.2 Comic Moralism and the Moral Disgust Argument

Now that we have a sense of the lay of the land regarding moralism and immoralism in the philosophy of art we are prepared to consider their application in the philosophy of humor. The fixation with immoralism in the philosophy of humor has both an historical and a theoretical basis. In Jacobson's seminal 1997 paper he uses jokes as one of his test cases for discussing the implications of moralism. Though to Jacobson, discussions of comic moralism were mostly helpful as what he considered non-art cases, Jacobson provides the first case for comic immoralism explicitly saying, "Morally dubious jokes can be funny, I claim; and when they are, what is funny about them is often just what makes them offensive…" (Jacobson 1997, 162).

For Jacobson, the fact that morally problematic jokes are funny because of their immorality served the purpose of an uncontroversial intuition pump. I doubt he suspected, then, that this would spawn a smaller scale debate within the philosophy of humor. This has led some in the literature to note that comic immoralism and comic moralism tends to be treated as a bit of a proving ground for the general theses in the philosophy of art (see Smuts 2009, 152; Nannicelli 2014, 170).

For example, both Gaut (Gaut 1998a) and Carroll (Carroll 2014) produced *comic* versions of their original theses. Carroll defined moderate *comic* moralism as the thesis that, "… sometimes the immorality of a joke or humour-token can render its utterance unfunny or, at least, less funny" (Carroll 2014, 250). While Gaut has argued for *comic* ethicism saying, "Ethicism about jokes holds that if an utterer manifests ethically bad attitudes in the production of a joke-token by deploying (aspects of) its content, then that counts against the humor of the joke" (Gaut 1998b, 64). Here again, ethicism seems a stronger thesis.

Yet, we would be mistaken to regard this focus on humor and joke-telling as a mere artifact of Jacobson's paper. Jacobson was picking up on something deeply intuitive about humor when he chose it to be his test-case. Humor is known for being boundary-pushing, frequently uncomfortable, and powerfully offensive. One is bound to recall the arrest of comedian Lenny Bruce for violating profanity laws in a stand-up set, or George Carlin's famous monologue "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." Comedians frequently draw the ire and outrage of audiences and commentators alike, creating the archetype of "the comedian" as someone who will go anywhere, or say anything in order to get a laugh, even if that means crossing the sacred boundaries of common morality.

Appeals to the *nature* of comedy and humor as a source of motivation for comic immoralism is common. Carroll says, for example, "Comic immoralism has a great deal of intuitive appeal, especially for those drawn to an incongruity

theory of comic amusement. For, on that view, comic amusement is brought about by perceived incongruities of a certain sort, and, obviously, transgressions of moral norms can fall into that category" (Carroll 2014 248). Humorists often try to subvert our expectations as a way of creating these perceived incongruities. Since we generally expect people to act in accordance with basic rules of moral decency it is perhaps to be expected that subversion of moral norms would be a source of humorizing. So, the philosophy of humor is *prima facie* ripe ground for immoralists.

It is the work of Smuts, a moderate moralist whose work is a reaction to these *prima facie* cases for comic immoralism, which has largely defined the sparring ground between moralists and immoralists in the philosophy of humor.

Smuts provides an argument that is meant to simultaneously provide evidence *for* moderate comic moralism and *against* moderate comic immoralism all in one go (Smuts 2009 156). I call this argument *the moral disgust argument.* Simply put the argument is just that, all things being equal, we are likely to be *morally disgusted* by something we judge to be immoral. As Smuts says, "Given the ability of moral disgust to inhibit amusement, it is difficult to imagine, how we could judge an attempt at humor to be genuinely immoral and have this make it *more* amusing" (Smuts 2009, 156. Emphasis my own).

Dong An and Kaiyuan Chen have recently expanded on the argument, adding moral anger and indignation to the list of humor-inhibiting emotions. They have argued that the problem with moral disgust is that it *prevents us* from feeling amusement towards something. If we are, however, inhibited from feeling comic amusement, then we *cannot* appreciate the humor in something. Since something is funny just in case it *warrants* comic appreciation, immoral jokes are unfunny because *ought implies can* and we *can't* appreciate them (An and Chen 2021). We can formulate the argument thusly:

Moral Disgust Argument

1. Moral disgust, anger, and indignation are inhibitory to feelings of comic amusement.
2. If we judge that a comic object has some immoral feature, then we are likely to feel moral disgust, anger, or indignation towards it.
3. Something is funny *iff* it warrants comic appreciation.
4. To appreciate the humor in a comic object, one must be *able* to feel amused by it.
5. Therefore, if we judge that a comic object has some immoral feature, then it is less likely to be funny.

Crucially (5) makes comic immoralism *less plausible* while at the same time providing direct support for Smuts's own moderate comic moralism which would predict that (5) was the case. This argument, I think, has a good deal of initial plausibility.

Premise (1) seems intuitive, we can see quite easily how feeling moral disgust towards something might make us *less* likely to think that it is funny. If our racist Uncle Mike comes to thanksgiving dinner ready to go on tirades full of racist jokes and stereotypes, our feelings of moral disgust are certainly going to inhibit our feelings of amusement towards those jokes. We do not find Uncle Mike funny, nor do we wish to tolerate his jokes, because we are *disgusted* or *enraged* by the behavior which he exhibits. We may even become confrontational towards Uncle Mike and disturb the peaceful holiday atmosphere, or we may simply bemoan his bigotry to our more trusted family members. In such cases as Uncle Mike's racist jokes, it seems as though moral disgust *does* inhibit comic amusement.

An and Chen provide further theoretical arguments in favor of (1), which might be taken to explain our judgements about Uncle Mike. They argue that moral disgust, anger, and indignation are "high arousal" emotions. Moral disgust, for example, is characterized by, "… a painful, distressing feeling that generally motivates people to *avoid and withdraw*." Meanwhile comic amusement, "…involves pleasure, and, in general, it motivates one to *approach rather than withdraw* (An and Chen 2021, 384)." Given the conflicting *character* of such emotions, it can be hard to see how they can both be had at the same time. Indeed, An and Chen argue that a desire to withdraw *would* diminish a desire to approach. A similar argument is given for moral anger. Moral anger is characterized by a desire to see justice wrought, to blame, or to see moral rectification come to fruition. As An and Chen note, "… it is hard to see how one could enjoy something while feeling pained, distressed, and desiring to blame the joke-writer and restore the justice that was damaged in creating the joke" (2021, 385).

Of course, as An and Chen explain, there could be empirical investigation into whether or not the emotions of moral anger and moral disgust are compatible with comic amusement. They cite research into several "mixed" emotion which has been fruitful. Such research studies things like guilty-pleasure, fear-pleasure, and disgust-amusement. They insist, though, that no such research has been done into *moral* anger and disgust with comic amusement.

It is, thus, in light of this argument that two prominent comic immoralists have attempted to articulate their views. Ted Nannicelli (Nannicelli 2014) and Scott Woodcock (Woodcock 2015) both define their versions of comic immoralism in response to Smuts's arguments. In particular, they both reject premise (2) of this argument. It is to their views that we now turn. Ultimately, while Woodcock and Nannicelli may have plausible objections to premise (2) I will also field an objection to premise (1).

2.3 Immoralist Objections to the Moral Disgust Argument

In response to premise (2) of the moral disgust argument Nannicelli, has argued that, "… the comic immoralist need not show that a work… is itself immoral but merely that the work suffers from moral blemishes (in virtue of which it is funny)." He goes on to argue that, "…it seems possible that a variety of similar cases exist in which comic works possess relatively *minor* moral flaws, the recognition of which elicits not moral *disgust* but merely unease or some similar emotion that does not prevent the work from being funny (Nannicelli 2014, 171–72)." In other words, Nannicelli argues that some moral flaws may not be so severe as to raise our emotions to the level of *disgust* but instead might cause less high arousal emotions which do not disrupt our ability to feel uncomfortable.

Nannicelli advocates for *genetic* immoralism, in line with his general theory of the genetic approach which we mentioned in section 1.3. He argues that some comic works, like the works of Sacha Baron Cohen, are made via immoral methods, which though morally flawed, explain what we find funny about the works. Cohen's typical *modus operandi* involves donning a character and interacting with real people who are not aware that the documentary being filmed is intentionally comedic. These works often have Cohen playing a morally problematic character, such as the racially insensitive and antisemitic Borat Sagdiyev, who acts outrageously in front of real-life people in public. Cohen does all of this as a way to get real people to reveal their own vices and to expose hypocrisy, racism, or antisemitism in the subjects he films, these outrageous characters help to lower the guards of those who might have these sorts of beliefs. Nannicelli insists, *deception* of *real human subjects* is a genuine moral flaw of the way these films were made, but additionally, the fact that people are *really being deceived* is inseparable from what makes this work uniquely funny.

Woodcock's strategy for dealing with the moral disgust argument is different. He begins by arguing that standards of humor are plausibly group relative in ways that standards of morality are not. Humor relies upon various linguistic, cultural, and social archetypes which vary from place to place and group to group, thus standards for what counts as funny are relative to specific groups. This allows for certain morally flawed groups, such as racist hate groups, to have standards of humor whereby jokes which are ameliorative to racist ideologies are genuinely funny by the standards of that group. Yet, people in these groups do not view such racist attitudes as morally flawed, even though they are aware that they are in the doxastic minority with regard to racist beliefs. Indeed, the fact that very few people assent to their racist beliefs contributes to the humor for them, since racist jokes in racist groups plausibly play a unifying "inside joke" role in these settings. As a result, we have jokes which are funny because they are genuinely immoral,

though they are not recognized as racist by the groups in question (Woodcock 2013 209). As such, Woodcock deftly dodges premise (2) of the moral disgust argument, since the audience with which he is concerned is not the kind of audience who is likely to feel moral disgust at the presence of these immoral features of the jokes, since they are mistaken about the facts about morality.

Comparably less has been said with regard to rejecting premise (1) of the moral disgust argument, though I think there is reason to be skeptical about the theoretical arguments given in favor of premise (1). According to An and Chen, because moral disgust motivates withdrawal and comic amusement motivates engagement or approach, we should think that these two emotions are incompatible or that the presence of one diminishes the richness or ability to appreciate the other. However, there is already a prominent genre of comedy whose central methodology functions by mixing just these sorts of reaction.

The genre of *cringe comedy* explicitly aims to make us laugh while making us cringe and feel uncomfortable, often making us feel morally concerned. Shows like *I Think You Should Leave, Nathan For You, and The Office,* all explicitly *try* to mix our ethical discomfort at some state of affairs with comic amusement. One episode of *Nathan For You,* entitled "The Claw of Shame," involved an escape-artist-style stunt which would require comedian Nathan Fielder to escape handcuffs or else be disrobed by a mechanical claw, which would expose his genitals to a group of onlooking children. There were even police officers prepared to arrest Fielder for indecent exposure in the event that he failed to escape from the handcuffs. He says in the episode, "Many escape artists have risked their lives in pursuit of their stunts, but none have risked something even worse: becoming a registered sex offender."

This sort of comedy is *supposed to be hard to watch.* People who watch these works often feel unable to look away but also unable to look directly at the screen; indeed, this conflict of feelings is *central* to the comedic stylings of these shows. Far from being *incompatible,* this genre's sole focus is to mix feelings which motivate withdrawal *with* feelings which motivate approach. We would not describe *cringe comedy* as funny *in spite of* this mixing of feelings, rather it is a *genre* of comedy precisely because something about the *mixing* of these emotions can, under the right circumstances, produce very high-quality comic amusement. If this is a correct construal of cringe comedy, as I think it is, then this would give us at least some evidence that a simple version of premise (1) is false.

3 Immoralism Defined

Now that we have an understanding of the emergence of immoralism, its relation to debates in the philosophy of art, and the current state of the debate surrounding comic immoralism, we are finally in a position to get more precise about the nature and scope of immoralism. In this part of the paper I will make two arguments with regard to the scope and nature of immoralism: First, immoralists and their critics have tended to focus only on *jokes* and *comic films* to the exclusion of various other legitimate forms of humor. I will suggest that immoralism, in virtue of being a thesis about *funniness*, ought to be broadened to accommodate not just *comic works,* like comedy movies and jokes, but also *found humor,* which is comedy that is not the result of intentional agential control. Second, immoralists have tended to say that the relationship between immorality and funniness is one of *enhancement.* I will suggest that it is not *enhancement* which the immoralist should focus on, but *explanation.*

3.1 Found Humor

As discussed previously (in 2.1), comic moralism, ethicism, and immoralism are theses about the funniness of comic objects. A *comic object* is anything which is purported to *be* funny, or which is purported to be the object of comic amusement. The comic object is whatever object we might identify when asked the question, "What's so funny?" It is that thing we consider to have the property of *being funny.* I use the neutral "comic object" here because there are many different *kinds* of things which we are apt to identify as "funny". Within the category of "the funny" it is important to note, for our purposes, two distinct categories of comic objects. The first objects are what we might call *intentional comic objects* or *comic works:* Comic works include: intentionally humorous movies, essays, books, jokes, stand-up sets, etc. The second are what we might call *found comic objects* or as I will call it, for convenience in this paper, *found humor.* For example, clumsiness, being tongue-tied, or a dog being scared of its own reflection. These are funny things but there is not some *orchestrator* of such acts who *intends* to create a humorous experience in some audience.

This distinction between intentional and unintentional comic objects has been observed elsewhere. Freud, for example, reserves the word "comic" for what I call "found humor" and the word "joke" for things like comic works (Freud 1905). Additionally, I acknowledge that my use of the word "humor" here is somewhat idiosyncratic. Some philosophers, like Alan Roberts (Roberts 2019) use "humor" to refer to

an aesthetic category, emotional state, or emotion-like state. Other philosophers, like Steven Gimbel (Gimbel 2017) and Daniel Abrahams (Abrahams 2021) use "humor" to refer to a sort of *activity*, such an activity is inevitably *intentional.* On these uses of "humor" the idea of "found humor" might seem completely oxymoronic. Though, interestingly, I borrow the nomenclature "found humor" from Abrahams, who considers the category to be made up of things which we engage with *as though* they were a part of our social activity, even though, strictly speaking, they are not.

I am not intending to herein take the side of one of these uses of the word "humor". Rather, my intention is to find a phrase "found humor" for the ease of continued reference to this category of funny things which we *find* rather than *tell, craft, or receive from others.* I use this nomenclature because it seemed less misleading than "found comedy" and more grammatical than "found funny".

This distinction between found humor and comic works will be important for my later argument. For our present purposes it is important to note something else about the distinction between comic works and found humor. As it stands, the literature on comic immoralism seems to entirely exclude found humor. Immoralists and moralists alike set found humor to the side in favor of discussing comic works like jokes, comedies (understood as a funny movie or play), and various other comic performance arts.

In this section, I argue that we have every reason to think of immoralism as relating both to comic works and to found humor. I argue this in virtue of the fact that immoralism is a thesis about the relationship between moral and aesthetic *value.* But first we must ask: *why* do these philosophers tend to neglect found humor? I can think of two reasons, one historical and the other theoretical.

Jacobson, only discusses *intentionally crafted* works because *art* criticism is the context in which this debate arose. Discussions of artistic immoralism exclude not just found *humor,* but also other "found" categories, like natural beauty, from discussions of immoralism. We might thus, "diagnose" the relative lack of discussion of these categories in the literature as having been due to mere historical contingency. But does the origin of these debates give any *philosophical* justification to the *ongoing* exclusion of found humor from the relevant class of comic objects? I think that this is unlikely, but we might consider an argument to this end.

One might suggest that due to the context in which the debates surrounding artistic immoralism emerge it is simply *irrelevant* to discuss found humor or other non-intentional aesthetical categories when discussing immoralism more generally. Such philosophers might worry that we risk going too far afield from the original purpose of these debates.

I think this concern mistakes the scope of immoralist theses. Since the publication of Jacobson's own paper, comic immoralism has been a thesis about what

makes something funny but *the funny* is, plainly, not exhausted by the list of comic works. Much of what is funny is found in the moment, watching the news, laughing to ourselves about a memory, giggling at an unintentionally dirty phrase. That is to say, much of the funny is *found.*

One might object that the above move is circular. Immoralism is *not* a thesis about funniness *itself*, but a thesis about the funniness of comic *works* specifically. I have two things to say to this. First, it is unclear to me what would motivate this distinction. Perhaps the claim is that there is something special about *comic works* such that *their* funniness calls out for an explanation, but no such explanation is called for with found humor. This seems implausible. Secondly, while it is true that immoralists have focused solely on art, this does not mean that they are all motivated solely by *artistic* concerns.

Anne Eaton, probably the most prominent identifying immoralist, has characterized these debates as being about, "… the relationship between ethical and aesthetic *value*…" (Eaton 2012, 282, emphasis added). The realm of art is not exhaustive of the realm of aesthetic value. If our motivations for pursuing immoralism are in mapping the complicated relationship between moral and aesthetic *value* then, it seems to me, we ought to open the thesis up to all avenues by which morality and aesthetics might collide. It may turn out *at the end of inquiry* that there are important and relevant differences between found comic objects and comic works which justify the exclusion of one class or the other from such theorizing, but this is far from obvious at the outset of said inquiry.

Another objection that might be voiced against the inclusion of found comedy has to do with agency. Art, some may say, is a distinctly agential affair. *Artists* create art. Morality is also a distinctly *agential* affair. Only agents are the bearers of ethical flaws, only agents can be found blameworthy, only the actions of agents are up for ethical evaluation. Plainly, immoralism is a thesis about how *immorality* relates to aesthetic value. As such, it might be complained that found humor is not the proper object of immoralism, because it is not the proper object of moral evaluation at all. Consider some morning, during my walk around the neighborhood I happen upon an oddly phallic tree branch and laugh at the sight of it. I am right to laugh, the branch looks like a penis, and that is funny. The thing which is funny, the thing which I laugh at, the tree branch, is the comic object in this a case. Phallic tree branches are an example of found humor, no one *intended* for me to see the penis-shaped branch, I simply happened upon it, but it was funny all the same. But surely a phallic tree branch is not the proper subject of *ethical* evaluation. Phallic tree branches aren't right or wrong, they are not blameworthy or pitiable. As such, we might think that the comic objects of found humor, while they *are* comic objects, are not of the requisite *sort* for having moral flaws.

This argument might be successful if it were the case that all found humor is of the phallic tree branch sort. Thankfully for me, this is not the case. As we will see in part 4 of this paper, much of satire and ridicule is related in important ways to found humor. The objects of found humor include human foibles, quirks, and bloopers. All of which might be taken to be related in the appropriate way to agential matters so as to have moral flaws. Take a sample of a 2021 flurry of tweets (Treisman 2021) by conservative commentators and politicians outraged that Sesame Street character Big Bird would be encouraging children to get vaccinated:

> "Government propaganda…for your 5 year old!" (@tedcruz, Nov. 6, 2021)
> "Brainwashing children who are not at risk from COVID. Twisted." (@LisaMarieBoothe, Nov. 6, 2021)
> "Big Bird is a communist." (@WendyRogersAZ, Nov. 6, 2021)

Certainly, these tweets are morally flawed. They are based on and perpetuate a morally harmful anti-vaccine rhetoric. But also, certainly, these tweets are *funny*. Further, they are not (at least not all of them) *intended* to be funny. They are intended to spark outrage in conservative voters, using a rhetoric which makes such voters fearful of what their vulnerable children are being subjected to.

Thus, we have examples of found humor which bear the appropriate relationship to agency so as to be morally flawed. As such, there seems to be nothing about found humor which should preclude us from considering it legitimate subject matter for those who put forward an immoralist thesis. As it so happens, I think such tweets are funny because they are *ridiculous* due to these moral flaws. This will be the major focus of part 4 of this essay.

3.2 Enhancement Immoralism

Thus far, I have said only that, according to immoralists, the immoral features of comic objects sometimes serve to "make" those objects funny, or "positively impact" funniness. It is natural to ask, what *exactly* is this *making* relation between immorality and funniness? How ought we to think about how these things relate to each other in more precise terms?

According to one prominent way of answering this question the relationship between immorality and funniness is one of *enhancement*. That is to say, the immoral features of a comic object *enhance* the funniness of that comic object. Both immoralists and their moralist opponents have independently advocated for this claim:

> Scott Woodcock, an immoralist, says,
> Comic immoralism… is the view that immoral features sometimes make jokes even funnier. (Woodcock 2014, 247)
>
> Noël Carroll, a moralist,
> Foremost amongst those skeptics is the comic immoralist who believes that ethical flaws may not detract from the funniness of a humour-token, but rather, at least sometimes, can enhance its comic effect. (Carroll 2014, 247)
>
> Ted Nannicelli, another immoralist,
> In contrast, comic immoralism is the view that moral flaws make comic works funnier. (Nannicelli 2014, 169)
>
> Aaron Smuts, a moralist, and the foremost critic of immoralism, says the following,
> To assess comic immoralism, we need to ask, what must be the case in order for us to say that a joke token is funnier *because of* (and not simply *in spite of*) its ethical flaws? (Smuts 2009, 152–53)

Common to each of these statements of immoralism is the idea that ethical flaws or immoral features of comic objects make jokes *funnier* or *enhance* them. Call this formulation of immoralism,

> *<u>Enhancement Immoralism:</u> The funniness of a comic object is* ***enhanced*** *in virtue of the work's having immoral features.*

We might be motivated to accept that this is the correct formulation of immoralism in virtue of the popular idea that jokes are sometimes, "Funn*ier* because they are wrong." This is a common saying which can be associated with the phenomenon of *guilty laughter.* Often jokes which push the boundaries of controversy give us a feeling of guilt or discomfort for having had a humorous response to the joke in the first place. Take, for example, the following dead baby jokes:

> *How do you get 30 dead babies into a bucket?*
> With a blender.
>
> *How do you get them out again?*
> With Doritos.

This genre of joke is almost universally intended to be shocking and edgy. If it makes you laugh it is supposed to make you feel at least a little bad for laughing, and it is supposed to be such that you would not readily repeat these jokes aloud or to just anybody in any context. A cursory search of YouTube shows a niche, but seemingly popular, cottage industry of video compilations with titles like, "You're going to hell for laughing at this." Indeed, we have all likely seen blooper reels of athletes becoming grievously injured (sometimes to the tune of Yakety Sax) and felt

both the uncontrollable urge to laugh and a pang of guilt for laughing at what might be a career ending injury.

Of course, dead baby jokes and sports bloopers aren't necessarily *immoral,* which is to say, they might not have any genuine moral flaws. But such "guilty" and "edgy" humor is meant to motivate the claim that, *sometimes*, a joke is funnier because we feel guilty for laughing at it. Plausibly, this guilt is due to the fact that the joke is funnier because we judge that we *shouldn't* be laughing. Indeed, in 1982 New York Times best seller *Truly Tasteless Jokes* was published and was purported to be *full* of such jokes. They range from more or less innocuous jokes like:

> *Why do Polish people have such beautiful noses?*
> Because they're handpicked.

To the extremely offensive and morally outrageous:

> *What do you call a black boy with a bicycle?*
> Thief! (Knott 1982)

Of course, our moral outrage at this second joke may very well prevent us from finding it funny. Indeed, I think it does (though the first joke is not particularly funny either), and I think this is a good thing. The immoralist is not committed to the funniness of such a joke. They are only committed to there being *some jokes* which have funnymaking moral flaws being funny. Somewhere on the spectrum from mundane jokes about nose-picking to lazy recitations of racist stereotypes, there is bound to be *some joke* which vindicates our language that something is "funnier because it's wrong."

One reason to think that enhancement is the wrong formulation of immoralism comes from Carroll. Carroll has claimed that defining immoralism in terms of "enhancement" commits the immoralist to a potentially incoherent comparative enterprise, whereby immoralists compare and contrast jokes *with* immoral features to similar jokes *without* the immoral features. Carroll says that, "Claims about what makes a joke funn*ier* are so damnably hard to operationalize just because it is difficult to subtract elements from a humour-token without destroying its comic potential altogether" (Carroll 2014, 248).

We might also think that *enhancement* immoralism simply emerges from an imprecise way of speaking. It is a useful and convenient way of speaking to say that the immoral features of comic objects "enhance their funniness" but it is not, I think, a completely satisfactory way of characterizing immoralism.

Enhancement-style immoralism is unsatisfactory because it has the wrong *focus.* Immoralists do not simply want to explain when or why something is *made funnier,* they want to explain why something is *funny at all.* Sometimes,

part of our explanation for why something has a certain aesthetic value (beauty, funniness, etc.) might involve talk about how certain features *enhance* others. But this need not always be the case. The immoralist thesis is one which aims to explain how immoral features can make something funny. Full stop. Enhancement-talk may sometimes be useful to that end, but it is certainly not *necessary* to achieve it. I think that a more appropriate characterization of immoralism replaces "enhancement" talk with the more general category of "explanation" talk. I call the resulting view, *explanatory immoralism.*

3.3 Explanatory Immoralism

At least one immoralist we have already discussed has begun to formulate immoralism using explanation-talk over enhancement-talk. Ted Nannicelli switches between two ways of speaking intermittently. He has formulated his commitment to immoralism thusly, "I claim that, sometimes, comic works are funny partly *in virtue of* their moral flaws" (Nannicelli 2014, 160). According to this formulation, the immoralist is actually making a simpler, and broader, statement. The immoralist is saying that the immoral features of the comic object sometimes *ground,* at least partially, the funniness which that comic object has. Call such a formulation of immoralism,

> *Explanatory Immoralism: The funniness of a comic object is **explained** in virtue of the work's having immoral features.*

According to explanatory immoralism, then, the answer to the question of "How does immorality relate to funniness?" is that, sometimes, immorality explains, wholly or partially, the very *presence* or *existence* of the funniness in a comic object.

Of course, we may indeed come to use enhancement-talk when giving the full explanation of a painting's aesthetic significance or a film's funniness, but it is not obvious at the outset of such an enterprise that such language will be needed. This is not to say that we *never* use enhancement language in giving a full account of the aesthetic value of works of art or in the funniness of jokes. Immoralists are welcome to pursue an explanatory immoralism on which the specifics of the account rely quite heavily or even entirely on the language of "enhancement" in giving their account. My goal is not to argue that we rid ourselves of enhancement-talk or to claim that it is useless or incoherent.

As I have said already in section 3.1 above, the purpose of this paper is, at least in part to conceive of immoralism as a thesis about the variety of ways in which

immorality might be said to contribute to the aesthetic value of an object. As such, explanatory immoralism is merely a blueprint in which many different immoralist theses might be written. Several philosophers have already given us immoralist theses. Each of them can be understood in terms of claims about explanation. Anne Eaton (Eaton 2012), for example, can be understood as saying that the aesthetic features of a work of art can sometimes be explained in virtue of the *immoral perspective* the work requires us to adopt to understand or appreciate the work. Nannicelli's comic immoralism amounts to the claim that the funniness of comic works is sometimes explained by the immoral *processes* which it took to *create* such works.

Any thesis which calls itself immoralism ought to be able to specify a particular way in which the immoral features of some object explain that object's aesthetic value. There might be any number of theses which could call themselves "immoralist" by this light. This is, I think, a good thing as it seems intuitively plausible that aesthetic and moral value might interact in many disparate ways, so nuanced are the roles that both sorts of values play in our lives.

With the groundwork finally complete, we can get on to my own articulation of comic immoralism: *ridicule immoralism.* Ridicule immoralism takes its inspiration from themes in the historical philosophy of humor specifically, from a group of insights which have come to be called *the superiority theory of humor.* It is to this theory that we now turn.

4 Ridicule Immoralism

I have argued in the previous section of this paper that comic immoralism is best understood as a general thesis about the funniness of comic objects, which include both comic works and found humor. A view is an immoralist view if, it describes a way in which the immoral features of a comic object explain the funniness of that object. In this section, I will argue for a particular version of comic immoralism, a view which I call *explanatory ridicule immoralism.* To do this I will first, briefly, consider the historical precedent for the view which gets its inspiration from the so-called superiority theory of humor. I will then give the view a contemporary motivation by showing how it relates to our current standards and practices of humor. Along the way and in the final part of this section, we will consider an objection and hope to get clearer on how to understand the implications of this view.

4.1 The Superiority Theory of Humor

It is popular today to say that there are three historically entrenched "theories of humor": the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory. According to Joshua Shaw (Shaw 2010) this way of dividing up theories of humor dates back to 1951 with the publication of *The Argument of Laughter* by D.H. Monroe. This trifold division enjoys widespread acceptance by prominent philosophers of humor and aestheticians such as John Morreall (Morreall 1987), Carroll (Carroll 2014), and Roberts (Roberts 2019). Briefly, the superiority theory of humor says humorous aesthetic experience, or comic amusement, is characterized by feelings of superiority over the comic object or by the apprehension of some flaw in the comic object. The relief theory of humor, said to originate with Sigmund Freud, says that humor is about the "release of nervous energy" and is a psychological mechanism primarily focused on coping with complicated or unclear stimuli. Finally, the incongruity theory, the most popular of the three, which originates with Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, states that comic amusement is characterized by incongruities between our expectations and reality.

Prominent philosophers who are usually taken to be a part of the superiority tradition include Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Descartes, and Hobbes. The name, "superiority theory" likely comes from the oft quoted passage from Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*,

> Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, *by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.* (Hobbes 1994, 32; emphasis my own.)

Morreall, and others, have interpreted this passage as Hobbes's statement on the nature of humor. According to these interpretations Hobbes argues that, "Laughter is nothing but an expression of our sudden glory when we realize that in some way we are superior to someone else" (Morreall 1987, 19). The focus of this passage is on the apprehension of "some deformed thing." By means of such apprehension, according to Hobbes, we are meant to judge that we are *superior* to that which is deformed, and this is meant to please us.

Still, the title "Superiority Theory" may be somewhat misleading. Many superiority theorists of antiquity tended to focus on the relationship between humor and "deformity" without reference to feelings of superiority at all. This is most clearly present in Aristotle who says in *Poetics* that,

> Comedy, as we have said, is an imitation of people who are worse than average. Their badness, however, is not of every kind. *The ridiculous,* rather, is a species of the ugly; it may be defined as a mistake or unseemliness that is not painful or destructive. (Aristotle *Poetics,* 2006, 26. Ch. 5 1449a)

Here Aristotle says that the art of comedy is in imitating *the ridiculous.* The ridiculous, is a species of *ugliness* and *badness.* As such, what Aristotle says about humor has to do with our recognition of what we judge to be some sort of flaw.

Likely the association with ugliness comes from Plato who said in *Republic*, "…he is empty who believes anything is ridiculous other than *the bad*, who tries to produce laughter looking to any sight as ridiculous other than the sight of the foolish and the bad…" (Plato, *Republic* 2016, Book V 452 d–e). Plato puts this forward as a defense of his argument that women ought to be eligible to be rulers in the ideal city. Against the claim that the view would be "laughable" to the Athenian men of their time, Socrates explains that it is only when something is antecedently shown to be bad that it is ridiculous.

Plato in particular focuses on two things as ridiculous: the foolish and the bad. For Plato, foolishness is a vice of lacking self-knowledge. It is a moral failing to take yourself to know what you do not, or to be ignorant of your ignorance. In *Philebus* Socrates says the following:

> **Socrates:** Foolishness is an evil, isn't it, and we call it a fatuous condition?
> **Protarchus:** Of course.
> **Soc:** Now on this basis we can see the nature of the ridiculous.
> **Prot:** Just tell me.
> **Soc:** In general it is a certain wickedness whose name comes from a certain condition. Moreover, of wickedness in its entirety, it is the experience opposed to the one expressed by the Delphic inscription.
> **Prot:** You mean the inscription "know thyself." Socrates?
> **Soc:** I do. So clearly the opposite of that would be expressed by the inscription "in no way know oneself. (Plato, *Philebus* 48c-48d)

Herein we see Socrates call the foolishness a sort of *wickedness* or vice, the vice of lacking self-knowledge. Later in *Philebus* 49c Plato makes the distinction between those who are strong and have the vice of foolishness and those who are weak and have such a vice. Plato warns that only the weak foolish are ridiculous, though I interpret this as being for *prudential* reasons, as the powerful foolish are likely to cause greater harm.

In the above cited passage of *Republic*, when Plato mentions "the bad" this is a translation of the word *kakos* which is also sometimes translated as "the ugly." This likely influenced Aristotle in considering the ridiculous a species of the ugly. However, *kakos* had a definitive connotation of "evil" or "wickedness" tied

in with its aesthetic judgement, as in the word "*kakopoiós*" which is often translated as criminal or thug. As such, both the foolish and the bad have *moral* connotations for the ancient Greeks, at least some of the time.

What I aim to adopt from the tradition of the superiority theory of humor, is this connection between *flaw* and ridicule. I make no commitment to claims about feelings of superiority. I will follow Aristotle in classifying some class of objects as "ridiculous" when they are flawed in some way. I will follow Plato in saying that sometimes these flaws are moral ones, and that we direct laughter at them as a means of critiquing them, perhaps in order to show that they are not to be taken seriously. My view is that these things are funny in virtue of being ridiculous, and that they are ridiculous in virtue of their moral flaws, and thus that immoralism is true.

4.2 What Makes Flaws Funny?

Given that I have just made the claim that flaws are connected to humor it may seem appropriate to ask: What *about* flaws makes flawed things funny? It is not obvious to me that there is just one answer to this question. Ridiculing flaws might, for example, be an *evolved* behavior. One that helps us to cope psychologically with things which trouble us. Cicero might be taken to be suggesting this in saying that, "…the sayings that are laughed at the most are those which refer to something offensive in an inoffensive manner…" (Cicero, 2001, *The Ideal Orator,* 222). Or, perhaps, as Peter Kivy (2003) suggests, perhaps we ridicule things as a means of group regulation, or as a means of publicly disaffiliating with certain ideas which we find somehow problematic, and aim to show that they ought to be treated non-seriously and laughed at.

Further, an incongruity theorist of humor, someone who argues that humor essentially relates to some subverting of our expectations, might say that we find these flaws funny due to their incongruity. When an individual acts we might expect them to comport with various linguistic or moral norms when interacting with others. When Michael Scott from *The Office* does a racially insensitive Chris Rock impression, or when he says "You cheated on me? When I specifically asked you not to." We might take him to be subverting norms of these sorts, and that may be incongruous with our expectations for another person's behavior.

Whatever evolutionary story (or stories) or theoretical reason (or reasons) there might be for finding flawed things to be funny, it seems as though it is a given that perceiving something as flawed, and thus ridiculous, very frequently explains why we might find it funny. As such, I will not take a stand on this matter here in any detail. There is sufficient *prima facie* support for the idea that a thing's

being ridiculous is often a satisfactory explanation for the thing being funny. This support comes from the plausibility of these speculative explanations, as well as the content of our actual comic practices as in the case of satire to which we now turn.

4.3 Satire and Political Humor

In *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) General Ripper, the jingoistic stand-in for the trigger-happy American war machine, says that he, "…can no longer sit back and allow the Communist infiltration, Communist subversion, and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids." In representing the General in this way, director and screenwriter Stanley Kubrick exposes and critiques very real flaws in the American military industrial complex. The military, or at least certain parts of it, has swallowed its own Kool-Aid, and is now convinced of the truth of its own absurd propaganda. The film is poignant for 1964 (and today) and is *bitingly* funny because its critique is so well-formulated and seems to hit its target with absolute precision. It is considered one of the best comedy films of all time as well as one of the best satirical films of all time.

This method of critique is central to the genre of satirical comedy. According to Dieter Declercq, two necessary conditions of satire are that satirical works be *critical*, in that they deliver a critique, and that they be intended to entertain. On Declercq's view, satirical critique has a specifically *moral* dimension. According to Declercq satirical criticism "…[Targets] issues about which we cannot agree to disagree; instead, we are morally compelled to oppose them (Declerq 2018, 323)." Further, a satire's moral complaints are specifically *social.* On his view, critique's scope, "…exceeds merely expressing disapproval but involves a committed effort toward resolving or alleviating the target's perceived social wrongness, if only by raising awareness about it."

Satirical comedy, understood in Declercq's terms, is ridicule humor whose focus is specifically *moral.* It points us in the direction of issues in the world. This seems to match our natural understanding of satirical comedy in our actual lives. Frequently the best satire functions by attempting to reveal, or call our attention to, injustices. Consider *The Daily Show,* a satire of a "talking-head" news media show. From 1999 to 2015, comedian Jon Stewart hosted the show. When reporting on the news of the 2000 U.S. Presidential election in which George W. Bush lost the popular vote, the show played a much-circulated soundbite of Bush saying the following, "I was not elected to serve one political party." Stewart's reply was simply, "You weren't elected."

In saying this, Stewart gave vocal and public representation to a sentiment which was in the minds of much of the American electorate, but which could never be said with the same conviction on a serious news channel. In saying this he mocked Bush's political posturing, he mocked the American electoral system, and he mocked the large news media conglomerates which were playing the soundbite endlessly as a means of pasting over the troubles of the extremely contentious and controversial election results in the name of turning over a new leaf. The media had depicted this quote as a unifying call for bipartisanship, and Stewart voiced much of America's cynicism. Stewart and *The Daily Show* were doing something which was *morally called for,* they were delivering needed criticism towards large parts of the American establishment, parts which were *apt for ridicule.* They took a stand and showed that our electoral system, and our news media, are *ridiculous.*

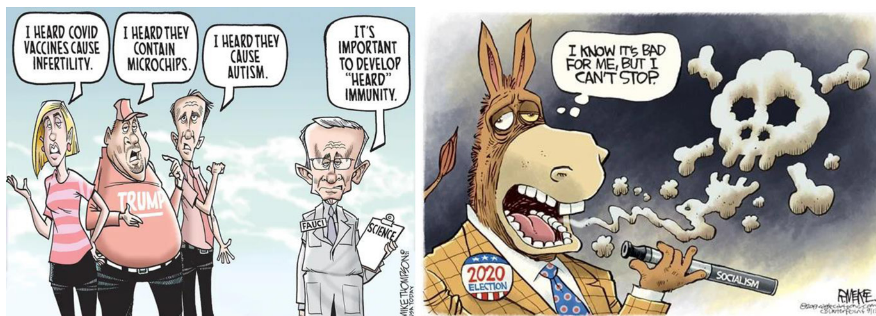
Jon Stewart's joke and General Ripper's diatribe are also *funny.* I think they are funny, in part, because the objects that they direct us toward are *ridiculous.* These things are ridiculous because of their moral flaws. Satire is a way of *making fun of immorality* and in this way, immorality plays a role in explaining the aptness of satire.

Call this view,

> *Explanatory Ridicule Immoralism: The funniness of a comic object is sometimes explained in virtue of the object's having some qualities that are ridiculous in virtue of their immorality.*

In this way, I contend that something being ridiculous is often sufficient for us to find it funny. Of course, it is not the case that funniness is *always* a result of something being ridiculous. Nor am I claiming that ridiculousness is always sufficient to make something funny. Sometimes jokes are harmless, frivolous, fun and nothing flawed needs to enter into the picture and sometimes ridicule is too cruel or offensive to amuse. My claim is only that *some* humor is generated by apprehending the ridiculous.

Satire functions by revealing the ridiculous to us and encouraging us to acknowledge it as such. Our judgements about when satire is successful as opposed to when it is unsuccessful support our conceiving of it in this way. Consider the following two political cartoons:



The cartoon on the left attempts to satirize the anti-vaccine conspiracy theories. It utilizes frequent conspiracy theorist talking points depicting people who have heard that the vaccine causes autism or infertility or that it contains microchips intended to track the biometric and geographical information of the American public. To the right of these people, a tired looking Dr. Fauci, who is taken to represent scientific vaccine consensus, says that the American public needs to develop "Heard" immunity, immunity to what they have heard from unreputable sources. A pun on *herd* immunity.[2] The cartoon on the right contains a donkey, as representative for the Democratic Party of the United States, smoking a vape-pen labeled SOCIALISM. The donkey knows that socialism is bad for it but is addicted to it, and so continues to exhale smoke, which forms an evocative skull-and-crossbones.

I find my reaction to these political cartoons quite different. In particular, I think that the cartoon on the right is less successful than the one on the left. Why is this the case? I think it is because there are many legitimate moral criticisms of the Democratic party and none of them are about the party's supposed embracing of socialism. In fact, it is a common refrain among young progressives that the party remains too corporate and too willing to bend the knee to capitalistic concerns over things like socialized healthcare and student debt forgiveness. The idea that Democrats are too "socialist" simply seems false, and thus, the cartoon rings hollow, its humor thereby rings hollow as well.

The cartoon on the left I find funnier, though I must confess not terribly, *raucously,* funny either. I think this success is, in part, because the cartoon satirizes what I perceive to be a genuine moral flaw. The American public *is* too prone to conspiratorial thinking, and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories are among the most absurd and the most pernicious in our society. If your beliefs are different from my own, and you think that vaccines *are* a deep-state conspiracy theory, and you believe the Democrats *are* genuinely socialists then I predict your judge-

2 Jokes are better when you explain them, see?

ments about these cases would be reversed. I think this is because we judge satire to be unsuccessful when it critiques something which we do not judge to be genuinely flawed, or when it gets the contents of its critique wrong. It seems a plausible or intuitive way of thinking about satire, that we will judge it to be less successful if we judge that its critiques are in some sense shallow or misguided. I think that this adds support to the idea that satire is funny, when it is funny, because it is directed at something which is *genuinely* flawed, and thus *genuinely* ridiculous.

4.4 Clarifying Ridicule Immoralism

It might be objected that I have made my case for ridicule immoralism in a deceptive way. I have said that our actual comic practices support ridicule immoralism. In doing so I have singled out satire as an example. Yet, it is reasonable to be concerned by this. As I have said, immoralism is a thesis about the funniness of comic objects. The view says that comic objects are sometimes funny in virtue of their moral flaws. But of course, satire and political humor are not *themselves* morally flawed. The *comic object,* that which is said to *be funny*, in the case of satire is a satirical *film* or a political *joke.* It is not the flaws *themselves* that are funny. As such, I have not given any reason for you to think that comic immoralism is true.

Both Gaut (Gaut 1998b, 60–61) and Smuts (Smuts 2013) may have voiced similar concerns. Let us consider Smuts's case, since it directly addresses the issue of satire. In his discussion of immoralism and satire Smuts says, "Without the moral outrage *appropriately directed* at the butt of the joke, the satire could not work (Smuts 2013, 58)." According to Smuts, we should conclude from this that, "[Satire] is funny, in part, precisely because of its genuine moral *virtues*" (Smuts 2013, 60). This seems an intuitive way of talking about satire. The best satires are those that ridicule something whose moral flaws we judge to be most heinous. This is why *Dr. Strangelove* is so beloved, even today. Its criticism of the American system and the military industrial complex specifically still rings true to us. This movie is great because it is *right* to ridicule these things, they are worthy of moral condemnation. As such, according to Smuts, the funniness of *Dr. Strangelove* is to be explained, *at least in part*, by its moral praiseworthiness rather than its flaws.

We ought, in response to this worry, to make a distinction between two kinds of comic objects which satirical comedy involves. My claim is that in many, maybe all, cases of satire there is more than one relevant comic object. We should note that this does not conflict with our normal way of talking about funniness. "Comic object" is merely a placeholder for the amorphous "whatever it is we would identify as *being funny.*" Comic objects do not constitute some perfectly elegant natural kind. We sometimes say that movies are funny, we sometimes say

that books are funny. But we also sometimes identify *scenes* of the movie as funny and *passages* of the book as funny. A single film might be considered a comic object which is constituted by a bunch of other, smaller comic objects. Or, alternatively, it might be that the film is a singular comic object of which it cannot be said that any particular *part* is funny. Such a film may only be funny when appreciated as a *whole.* When we talk about what is funny, there is no implicit restriction about the *number* of things about which we are speaking.

In the case of satire, there are *two* distinct but related comic objects: the ridicule and the ridiculous. The *ridicule* is active: it is the activity by which something is insulted, represented as absurd, or satirized. The *ridiculous* is the *thing which is flawed.* In the case of *Dr. Strangelove,* for example, the film itself is the ridicule while the American military culture is the ridiculous. The ridicule is the comic work. The ridiculous is the found humor towards which the comic work directs us, and upon which it is parasitic. As such, I claim the funniness of satire is explained, at least in part, by the ridiculous object which clearly plays a role in the creation of good satire.

I contend that the ridiculous objects are funny in their own right in virtue of their ridiculousness. This is not to say that ridicule bears no significant relationship to the ridiculous. The ridiculous serves as the *impetus* for the ridicule, it is that in virtue of which ridicule is *apt.* It is the ridiculous which calls out to *be ridiculed.* Ridicule *directs our attention* to the ridiculous and aims to expose its flaws. We might think that the ridicule *points at* the ridiculous. Ridicule is, by its very nature, ostensive.

The claim that the ridiculous is funny on its own is not entirely *ad hoc.* We have independent reason to think that the ridiculous is funny in its own right, even separate from any given instance of ridicule. We need only apprehend something *as ridiculous* in order to find it funny. Consider the infamous moment in which Sarah Palin scribbled talking points on her hand in sharpie before delivering a speech at a conservative Tea Party conference ("Sarah Palin's Hand" *The Guardian*, 2010). Or the moment when she claimed that her home state of Alaska's proximity to Russia would constitute a benefit to her foreign policy credentials ("Exclusive," CBS News 2008). It is true that both of these moments *were ridiculed,* endlessly even. But we need not actually *ridicule* them to find them funny. It is sufficient that we apprehend them in the right context. In these cases, we laugh because we observe that Palin is foolish, this constitutes a flaw by virtue of which we perceive her to be ridiculous and it is sufficient to generate amusement. Thus, we can find something funny because it is ridiculous, regardless of whether or not it actually *gets* ridiculed by anyone.

On this view, the ridiculous is funny in virtue of its moral flaws. The connection between the ridicule and the ridiculous is one of ostension. The ridicule *points*

out some flawed thing in the world and directs us to find it funny. The funniness of satire is, thus, explained by reference to multiple objects, the ridicule and the ridiculous. The satirical joke has an *aim*, it points at something. Without the existence of something which is genuinely ridiculous, the satire would be pointing at thin air. Recall now the irksome political cartoon of the socialist donkey: the failure of that satire is a failure of ostension, there is ozone where the cartoon predicts rabid socialists. Thus, in the case of satire there may be two comic objects of which it is apt to say, "*That*'s funny!" But even if it is insisted that satire is or ought to be strictly distinguished from the found humor to which it directs us, that found humor is funny in its own right, and that is sufficient for ridicule immoralism to be true.

Returning to Smuts's concern that moral *praiseworthiness* of satire is what makes it funny, we are now equipped to say that say that a *morally-right-making* feature of satirical works is that they be directed at *genuine flaws. Dr. Strangelove* is to be commended morally for calling attention to or raising awareness about the deep flaws in the American military industrial complex. Thus, it is plausible that in order for there to *be* morally praiseworthy ridicule, we need genuine evils or injustice in the world towards which said acts of ridicule are directed. In effect, Smuts is right that moral praiseworthiness counts in favor of a satirical work's aesthetic virtues, but this does not conflict with explanatory ridicule immoralism being true.

4.5 Fat Bastard

With ridicule immoralism fully described, we can now return to the example with which we began this paper, the case of Fat Bastard. In accordance with ridicule immoralism Fat Bastard can be funny in one of two ways: (1) Fat Bastard is a satirical character created with the intention of ridiculing fatphobic standards more generally or (2) Fat Bastard is the result of flawed writers who *buy in* to fatphobic stereotypes for the purposes of getting a laugh at fat people. Given the era of comedy in which *Austin Powers* movies were made as well as the relative recency of most of the work on "fatphobia" we might be justified in accepting that (2) is the likelier option. Nevertheless, we are justified in laughing at Fat Bastard in *either case.*

If (1) is the case, then Fat Bastard provides a critique of society and asks us to consider how ridiculous our views of fat people really are, and to laugh at prevailing standards of health and beauty which can be regarded as fatphobic.

If (2) is the case, then Fat Bastard provides a glance into the deeply flawed psychology of his era. The major difference in (2) is that we are no longer laughing

along with authorial intent. Some may insist that this is a serious problem, and it may make the work *Austin Powers* less aesthetically successful. But the aesthetic successes of this movie *qua work of cinema*, do not necessarily need to be in place in order for it to be a rich source of *found humor.*

In this way, with regard to (2) our enjoyment of Fat Bastard is similar to our general enjoyment of *bad movies* as in the case of Mystery Science Theater 3000, a television show built around the enjoyment of films which are deeply flawed. Indeed, many famously bad movies such as *The Room* are enjoyed primarily for the sake of their comedic value. Such value can only be *found humor*, but it is humorous nonetheless.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been twofold: (1) to standardize and clarify the nature and scope of immoralism as a general thesis about the relationship between aesthetic and moral value and (2) to show how immorality can play a role in making ridicule funny. To these ends, I have argued that found humor has a role to play in discussions of comic immoralism, though its roles in moralist or ethicist theses also remains to be explored. I have argued that the relationship between immorality and funniness is one of *explanation* rather than *enhancement.* Furthermore, I have argued that moral flaws sometimes make things ridiculous, ridiculous things are often funny, and ridicule is funny when it is targeted at the ridiculous. In this way, immorality plays a role in explaining why satire is funny, as well as playing a role in explaining how some found humor comes to be funny. Ridicule is a critical enterprise, and some of its aesthetic success rides on its critical success. Further elucidation of this critical dimension of humor may, indeed, be useful for further theorizing about the nature and role of humor in our lives.

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