



You Must Be Joking!

Are jokes sometimes funnier because they are immoral, wonders Scott Woodcock

Most of us are familiar with two common observations about the intersection of humour and morality. First, at least some jokes are immoral and ought to be publicly condemned. Sadly, it is all too easy to find examples of racist, sexist, and homophobic humour, some of which occur in the most mainstream of sources. For instance, when Seth McFarlane hosted the Academy Awards, he sang an opening number that bragged about having seen accomplished actresses nude in films that included *Boys Don't Cry*, *Monster*, and *The Accused*. His attempt to trivialize the talent displayed by women in such serious and disturbing roles was loathsome, and it was shocking to see it tacitly legitimized in a television event with so many viewers.

Yet the second common observation is sometimes thought to give moral licence to comics like McFarlane. This observation is that some jokes seem especially funny because they transgress ordinary social norms. We often enjoy 'edgy' or 'offside' humour precisely because of the fact that it so outrageously defies our expectations of what is socially appropriate. Moreover, this defiance of *status quo* conventions often serves a useful role in progressive social change. The brutal honesty of Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, and Joan Rivers arguably helped to break down social boundaries in a positive direction, and more recent comics like Dave Chappelle, Louis C. K., and Amy Schumer address controversial topics with a balance of reckless abandon and ethical awareness. Thus, one frequently hears that comedy should have no limits and that the point of subversive humour is to remain free from the constraints of social expectations.

I think the apparent tension between these two observations is illusory. While it is true that no topic should be precluded from comedy and that subversive humour has to risk offending those invested in existing moral norms, these facts do not absolve comics from a responsibility to use subversive humour in morally justifiable ways. As [Lindy West](#) convincingly argues, comics need to use the freedom to say whatever they want as a power to make the world better rather than worse, and this is especially true if one combines humour with topics that carry the potential to victimize persons who do not deserve to be targets of amusement.

Yet the tension between the observations above raises an interesting philosophical question: is it sometimes true that immoral features within jokes can *increase* their comic value, rather than detract from it? Jokes with immoral features can nonetheless be funny, whether we approve of the jokes or not, so it is interesting to consider whether the humour they generate is enhanced or diminished by their immoral content.

According to *comic moralism*, a joke can be funny, all things considered, but immoral features in the joke tend to undermine its comic value. Strong versions of this thesis claim that immoral features always detract from its humour; moderate versions assert only that immoral features sometimes diminish the humour at stake. By contrast, *comic immoralism* claims that immoral features sometimes make jokes even funnier, so it allows for some jokes to be perversely funny because of their immoral features rather than in spite of them.

Comic moralism is defended by prominent philosophers like [Berys Gaut](#) and [Noël Carroll](#), and a moderate form of the thesis is surely correct: there are at least some jokes with such offensive content that it detracts from the joke's humour. Yet moderate versions of comic moralism and immoralism are consistent, so the question is whether comic immoralism is also true. Do some examples exist of jokes with immoral content that increases humour?

In a series of recent papers, [Aaron Smuts](#) has argued that moderate comic immoralism is false, and he presents some compelling arguments to this effect. First, he reminds us that jokes with moral flaws are normally funny for other reasons, like plays on words or reversed expectations, that operate independently of the moral flaws. Second, he also reminds us that jokes can refer to immoral content without themselves exhibiting moral flaws. For example, [The Onion](#) often posts stories with sexist or racist content, but their ironic distance from this content makes for effective social commentary that creates the humour at stake. Thus, jokes can refer to immoral content in outrageous ways without being complicit in its immorality. Third, Smuts claims that no psychological explanation

exists for being amused by what one judges to be immoral. How can one simultaneously find part of a joke worthy of both indignation and comic approval? This seems to involve a conflict in the mind of an agent for whom negative emotions associated with moral disapproval will normally diminish feelings of amusement.

In 'Comic Immoralism and Relatively Funny Jokes', I reply to Smuts by proposing that standards of humour may be relative to particular groups. This sets up a counterexample to his argument by allowing racists, sexists, and homophobes to find additional humour in immoral content. The psychology of these agents is unfortunately such that no negative emotions are generated that would otherwise diminish their amusement. Quite the contrary, they find immoral content that much more entertaining and humorous.

Smuts is certainly aware of the possibility of these agents. The disagreement between us rests on whether they count as appropriate litmus tests for comic immoralism. What he, and others, claim is that comic immoralism is specifically a thesis about whether humour can be enhanced by what agents *explicitly judge* to be immoral. Racists, sexists, and homophobes don't count as fair examples for comic immoralism, on this view, because from their perspective the immoral features of a joke, separated from outrageousness and other comic elements, are not perceived as being immoral. Instead, immoral agents genuinely endorse false claims about, say, minority groups, women, and members of the LGBT community.

I believe, however, that we ought to assess comic immoralism in a broader sense that includes cases in which agents do not perceive immoral content for what it is. This is partly because I do not think it is always so easy to disentangle immorality from mere outrageousness, and it seems too convenient to say that we must be merely responding to outrageousness when we laugh at jokes with immoral content. I also think comic immoralism ought to be evaluated in broader terms because we may otherwise fail to notice cases in which certain parts of ourselves explicitly judge immoral content as immoral, while other parts of ourselves tacitly exhibit biased attitudes that respond favourably to morally compromised humour.

Consider, for example, a study performed by Robert Lynch in which subjects were given 'implicit association tests' to measure implicit preferences regarding gender roles and racial bias. Next, the emotional responses of the subjects were measured while watching a comedy routine with jokes on topics like pay equity and the dangers to whites in black neighbourhoods. Lynch found that 'the magnitude of the laughter response was specific to the content of the jokes and the implicit preferences of the participants'. If results like these are correct, then it seems strange to limit our evaluation of comic immoralism to

only those cases in which agents explicitly judge the immoral content of jokes as immoral, since underlying preferences in these agents may be responding to humour in the same way as racists, sexists, and homophobes.

If comic immoralism is false, as Smuts suggests, then a considerable weight is lifted from those of us who fear that we sometimes laugh inappropriately at immoral jokes, for it would absolve us from complicity in the moral flaws of jokes we find amusing. The truth is, I think, much less comforting. We may not be proud of it, but we may sometimes be amused because of implicit biases and not merely because of our reactions to outrageousness and other comic elements in jokes that have moral flaws. It is therefore not unreasonable to engage in self-reflection after having laughed at a joke that we subsequently judge to be immoral, and this suggests we might stand to learn something important about ourselves if we take the time to work through the moral implications of our own amusement.

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