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The Joke's on Who? The Performative Possibilities of Humour

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that humour is an underutilized tool in countering social injustice. Within feminist epistemology much has been made about implicit bias stemming from knowledge gaps. Yet studies have shown that awareness of our implicit bias does little to change our behaviour. Instead, I argue that overcoming bias might require a less purely intellectual, more creative approach. Wittgenstein speculated that one could write a book of philosophy entirely in the form of jokes. In part, he thought that jokes offer an illuminating synopsis or overview of a state of affairs. We might even say jokes offer a fresh *Gestalt*. It's not just about a picture of the facts, but of our *attitude* towards them. As a result, while it can be tempting to respond to oppressive comments or slurs with outrage and indignation, there is a unique effect when we respond with a joke. First, jokes can reframe the perspective suggested by the slur. Second, jokes allow the speaker to make a lateral conversational move to evade being trapped in a defensive argumentative position. Using tone to open up new discursive planes allows for more communicative possibilities on an emotional as well as intellectual level.

Keywords: feminism, epistemology, Wittgenstein, aspect-perception, performativity, humour

Although humour has been discussed in philosophy, most of what you will find are theories about what makes something funny. In his 2002 book *On Humour*, Simon Critchley outlines three broad theories: the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory. The superiority theory, which has been around since the ancient Greeks, suggests we take pleasure in our superiority over others. The relief theory emerged in the nineteenth century in the writing of Herbert Spencer, further popularized by Freud, suggesting that laughter is a release of nervous energy. The incongruity theory suggests that humour arises from the distance between our expectations and the picture the

joke presents. I suspect humour involves all this, at different times in different ways. In this paper I am more interested in examining some aspects of humour's performative power in the context of a public exchange. Although taking into account why certain utterances are funny is relevant for the conversation, my main focus will be on its particular discursive force.

Within feminist epistemology much has been made about implicit bias stemming from knowledge gaps. Yet studies have shown that education and awareness of our implicit bias does little to change our behaviour. Instead, I argue that overcoming bias might at times require a less intellectual, more creative approach. Wittgenstein speculated that one could write a book of philosophy entirely in the form of jokes. In part, he thought that jokes offer an illuminating synopsis or overview of a state of affairs. We might even say jokes offer a fresh *Gestalt*. It's not just about a picture of the facts, but of our *attitude* towards them.

Politically speaking, humour can be used to include and to exclude, to oppress but also to undermine those in power. Regarding the latter, innumerable contemporary examples range from Rowan Atkinson and Hugh Laurie's parodying of the aristocracy in *Black Adder* to Sarah Cooper lip syncing to Trump's speeches on Tik Tok. In this paper, I argue that humour is an underutilized tool in countering social injustice in everyday discourse. More specifically, in cases where someone utters a demeaning or marginalizing comment, while it can be tempting to respond directly with outrage and indignation, there is a powerful effect when we respond with a joke. Specifically, there are two discursive effects of this move. One of humour's many possibilities, I argue, is that it reframes the facts we already have – giving us not so much different information as an emotional reorientation towards the facts. This reorientation is, in Wittgenstein's terms, a dawning of a new aspect that offers a new meaning or way of seeing our everyday experiences. This feature of comedy can be used to illuminate the often-invisible perspective of an oppressed class, drawing particular attention to potential harms. Second, the joke can allow the speaker to make a lateral conversational move in the moment, one that evades the limitations of direct responses.

1. Discursive Cornering

One consequence of being the object of a sexist utterance is that the recipient finds herself in a double bind. Either she responds defensively, or deflects it, passing it off as no big deal. Consider the cat call. Often the speaker defends it as 'a compliment' but in reality the person who utters it forces a woman into playing a supportive role in the performance of his masculinity. Either she submits to the performance and accepts the objectification, or she pushes back which risks escalation.

This kind of discursive cornering isn't just a product of the limited content we have at our disposal, but also because cat calls, among other things, also take advantage of the limited aesthetic position the object of the cat call finds herself in. Patricia Hill Collins has written about problems of patriarchal family structures (Collins 1998), which normalize gender and age hierarchies in ways that seep out beyond the nuclear family, making it difficult for women, for example, to be taken seriously in public as well as private life. It's no surprise that women's claims of sexism are often not taken seriously, but Collins' more specific point is that our voices sound whiny and childlike, because we are asserting ourselves beyond our 'natural' station. In other words: there is an undeniable aesthetic barrier to being taken seriously. This means that any attempts at straightforward pushback begin with us on our back foot.

Another point of background I want to note here is that research into implicit bias has shown that simply being intellectually aware of our biases doesn't eradicate them. Anthony Greenwald, the psychologist who developed the test that exposes implicit bias, was interviewed by *Knowable Magazine* in 2020 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. In the interview, he acknowledges that simply making people aware of their biases doesn't have an impact on the biases themselves. When asked what might be effective, Greenwald says that in the short term, taking human judgement out of the equation as much as possible helps. Beyond that, Greenwald admits he isn't sure what the long-term solution is.

I submit that humour[1] provides edifying opportunities that have more of an impact on our understanding than simple facts while also helping the recipients of slurs or disparaging comments to evade the discursive cornering of the double-bind.

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[1] While I speak of both humour and jokes, jokes are a self-contained phrase or set of phrases that are a subset of humour. What I say applies to both, but for my purposes here I focus on jokes as they provide a clearer text to analyze.

2. Jokes as Sensus Communis

Towards the end of his book on humour, Critchley, aligning himself somewhat with Shaftsbury, suggests humour is a function of the *sensus communis*. Contrary to Hobbes who thinks that laughter is "that passion that hath no name" (2002: 81), the implication being that humour is an expression of our animalistic rather than intellectual selves, for Shaftsbury jokes are expressions of meaning. When an audience laughs at a joke, they are grasping something that has a shared meaning or resonance.

As such, jokes invite agreement or affirmation. If I make a joke and you don't laugh, either it isn't a good joke (or a joke at all) or it's been lost in the translation of my delivery. This shared element is even more public than when we collectively experience a film or artwork – our laughter audibly indicates whether we are sharing a similar reaction. It is immediately evident how we feel about how a joke frames a context.

In his biography of Wittgenstein, Norman Malcom writes that Wittgenstein once said that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes (2001: 27-28). Far from being trivial, jokes illustrate something for us about how we see things. Our attitudes about our beliefs are inextricable from what we believe. Critchley picks up on this, and, steering away from Kant's rather bland remarks on humour, claims that he would rather make "a more Wittgensteinian point and speak about jokes as clarificatory remarks, that make situations perspicuous, that provide us with some synopsis or overview of a particular state of affairs" (2002: 86).

More specifically for Critchley, jokes reveal to us familiar experiences in a new light, and are, as such, a kind of anamnesis – a reminder of what we already know. They bring us back into a shared world. It does this in two ways: by reinforcing a sense of cultural distinctiveness, or superiority on the one hand, or by throwing those shared practices into question by showing them in a new light. For a comedian like Eddie Izzard, Critchley writes,

> a simple trip to the launderette turns into a surreal phantasmagoria, with clothes taking on personalities and Eddie's socks arrive half an hour late, complaining about being stuck in traffic and demanding to be let into the washing machine (2002: 87).

Furthermore, we might appeal to Wittgenstein's remarks on aspect-seeing to amplify the point:

> I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience 'noticing an aspect.' (PI II, xi, 193e).

The comedian offers their ability to see these aspects, and ultimately, as Wittgenstein says, "we *see* it as we *interpret* it" (PI, II xi, 193e).

Notice, though, Wittgenstein's emphasis on the union between our understanding and our sensory experience. Meanwhile, Critchley goes on to argue this reframing element of humour is an abstraction that is a kind of 'anesthesia of the heart' that allows us to distance ourselves from our experience. Critchley's remarks view what humour does as intellectual. This point diverges from Wittgenstein's whose larger point is that our beliefs are inextricable from our *attitudes* about those beliefs.

Contrary to the academic impulse to locate humour in the abstract intellect, my claim is that its power resides in the fact that we experience it with our bodies. There is a distancing of one perspective, perhaps, but it's replaced by the impact of the comedian's perception. My unreflective frustration at the routine difficulty of keeping track of socks during a laundry cycle is suddenly replaced by a sense that yeah, it does seem sometimes like the socks are being inconsiderate. Izzard's reframing of that experience strikes me precisely because it has a visceral resonance, rather than a distance. So, we learn something in an immediate, instinctive way. Consider how we speak about jokes as 'landing' or how things 'strike' us as funny, or how the conclusion to a set-up is the punchline. Jokes have a visceral impact.

As such they cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts, but have to be experienced as a whole. There is nothing unfunnier than trying to explain to someone a joke they don't get. The eventual logic might come across, but the magic gets lost. This echoes what Wittgenstein wrote about poetry in a letter to Engelmann: "if you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – *contained* in what has been uttered" (1990: 151). It doesn't seem a stretch to draw a parallel here between what he says about poetry and the force of jokes. The form of the joke communicates something that direct, explicit language cannot.

This new perspective may not offer a different quantity of information, but a new way of looking at the facts: we realize something about what we're seeing

or experiencing, and it takes on a new meaning. Referring to the famous duck-rabbit, Wittgenstein writes

> And I might distinguish between the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect, and the 'dawning' of an aspect.
>
> The picture might have been shewn me, and I have never seen anything but a rabbit in it (PI II, xi, 166e).

The comedian takes our ordinary experiences and transforms them for us, not by changing what we experience, but by making it salient.

3. Dissensus Communis

Jokes can highlight the similarities between two things that might ordinarily seem very different. They can also point out meaningful differences between our expectations and reality. Critchley also suggests that some humour arises from what he calls a *dissensus communis*, distinct from the dominant common sense. These sorts of jokes indicate how things could be otherwise. His remarks on this end here, but this seems a good way to identify another dimension of the kind of humour I am trying to illuminate.

To turn to a specific example, a friend of mine, Marianne, was walking along the street with her cousin Matthew when she was catcalled. Without missing a beat, her cousin turned to the guy, winked and said "why thank you." She described it as "wonderfully deflationary – neither an escalation to a fight nor something that made me feel self-conscious."

Her description underscores the way Matthew sidestepped the double-bind. But he did so in a creative, edifying way. His response completed the exchange in a dissatisfying way for the cat caller. In his attempt to perform masculinity by objectifying a woman, Matthew's accepting the remark and winking back presents Matthew as the intended audience, not only deflecting attention away from Marianne but injecting a homoerotic dimension, likely to provoke the homophobia of the cat caller, creating embarrassment and anxiety in him rather than Marianne. Instead of a routine performance of bravado that we might ordinarily brush off without much thought, Matthew revealed the insecurity that underlies it.

Contrary to Critchley's claim that jokes distance us from experience, the jokes that interest me here bring us back into our experience in a new and

uncanny way. The comedian makes a joke that illuminates something we already knew but didn't know, presents the information in a new way, and in making that public, can change the performative force of the initial utterance.

Let me take another example in which the target of a cat call turns the exchange around. A friend of mine, Lisa Anita Wegner, is an artist whose installation was a part of the 2013 *Nuit Blanche* art exhibit in Toronto. Her piece was called the *Queen of the Parade*, and involved a twenty-foot-high dress. At the top, Lisa stood on a platform designed to look as though she was wearing the dress. On the front of the skirt was a ten-foot-tall screen, which depicted a video recording of her stocking legs walking, complete with the sound of her heels clicking on the treadmill.

During the night people would mill around the bottom of the skirt, looking up at her, sometimes waving and shouting greetings. Late in the night, in front of the crowd, one man climbed halfway up an adjacent pole, and shouted up at her, for the entire crowd to hear: "I'm going to jerk off to you tonight!" In response, Lisa looked down, smiled, pointed right at him, and said with a tone of amusement "You're the third person to say that to me tonight!" The crowd burst into laughter, and the man flushed with embarrassment.

Again, an attempt at asserting privilege was overturned. Lisa's installation presented her as an imposing figure. His reaction to this was to belittle her, to assert that to him, she was reducible to a sexual object for his own gratification. Lisa's simple and astute response informs him that what he took to be an assertion of his power revealed his own banality. That in stark contrast to her and her artwork, he, as an individual, had absolutely nothing to offer. His attempt to reduce her individuality to her gender culminates in her reminder that it is precisely his individuality that is in question.

Critchley writes that humour of the dissensus communis shows how things could be otherwise, but these are cases in which it's more accurate to say that they reveal how things are *already otherwise*. Much of the writing on both sensus communis and dissensus communis presumes that our social set of meanings is rather monolithic, but what these exchanges bring out are the ways that as a community, we already contain subsets of communities – some of which are heard often, others of which are frequently overlooked or silenced. Lisa's simple yet witty reply revealed that man's comment as sexist. Moreover, she was able to harness the power of a large audience whose laughter affirmed

her reframing of the exchange. She may or may not have educated her interlocutor, but she certainly had a powerful impact on bystanders.

4. Audience Responsibility

The laughter we express at jokes makes comedy something which doesn't just seek assent but for which assent or dissent is immediately obvious – both to ourselves and those around us. The phenomenon of laughter is complex and I won't diagnose the many varied reasons we laugh in the space of this paper, but one minimal thing I will say is that what our laughter does is express acknowledgement. We laugh because something resonates with us, because we recognize the truth of it in some way. And, as any stand-up comedian will attest, audiences are nothing if not brutally honest. It also communicates to us, possibly better than simply thinking could, how we experience the world.

My final comments will be about the responsibility that attends both the truthfulness (or lack thereof) of jokes, and the laughter that acknowledges them. Lisa's retort and Matthew's wink go beyond merely communicating an alternate worldview: they reject the initial gambit (or, perhaps we could say refuse the language game) by replacing one picture of the world with another, and as such are a kind of *challenge*. These responses ask the other to take responsibility for their words and the ideology that lies behind them. Discussing Wittgenstein's approach to 'seeing as', in relation to film, Cavell notes that

> The ideas Wittgenstein enters with that concept have to do with my relation to my own words and with the point at which my knowledge of others depends upon the concepts of truthfulness and interpretation. Empirical statements that claim truth depend upon evidence; statements that claim truthfulness depend upon our acceptance of them. My acceptance is the way I respond to them, and not everyone is capable of the response, or willing for it. I put this by saying that a true statement is something we know or do not know; a truthful statement is one we must acknowledge […] or refuse to acknowledge (1979: 157).

Responding to someone's joke by laughing at it is an audience's way of acknowledging the truthfulness of it. Cavell rightly distinguishes between truth and truthfulness, and to put it another way we might think truth is about what we know, intellectually, but here truthfulness describes what *feels* real to us, regardless of our intellectual commitments. Laughter at a joke, then, has an

epistemic and a rhetorical force, where some views are acknowledged as truthful and others are not.

There is a kind of attendant responsibility to that power. Cavell also references Wittgenstein on this point, writing that

> Wittgenstein is known for his emphases upon the publicness of language. But his emphasis falls equally upon the absoluteness of my responsibility for the meaning I attach to my words. Publicness is a shared responsibility; if what we share is superficial, that is also our responsibility (1979: 127).

This shared responsibility cannot be meaningfully separated from the role of the audience and their laughter. This is addressed explicitly by Hannah Gadsby in her 2018 comedy special *Nanette*. The particular genius of this show, in my view, is not only the insight she offers regarding issues of being an oppressed minority in comedy, but how she weaves her point into her show performatively. The first half hour seems like a normal comedy show. She tells self-deprecating jokes about being a lesbian from a rural town in a remote part of Australia, casually forgetting to come out to her grandmother, and about how she narrowly evaded a violent beating from a guy who initially thought she was another man hitting on his girlfriend. She peppers this section with the refrain "just jokes though. Just jokes."

A third of the way in, however, the tone begins to shift. She discusses the performative structure to most stand-up comedy, drawing our attention to the all too familiar comedic convention of self-deprecation she's been invoking. Participating in this convention, she explains, has felt like she was punching down at herself in exchange for the audience's permission to speak. Furthermore, she has intensely edited her jokes, prioritizing the comfort of the audience over subjecting them to the harsh reality that she was in fact too full of self-hatred to ever come out to her grandmother, and that, it turns out, she didn't evade the beating after the man felt that he had social license to beat her up because she was gay.

Her claim in this show is ostensibly that she needs to 'quit comedy,' but we might turn this claim around, and see it as an invitation: Gadsby will only continue to perform stand up so long as she no longer has to participate in these entrenched comedic conventions that prevent her from speaking truthfully. Whether audiences will accept that is up to them. (The undeniable success of her subsequent special *Douglas*, released by Netflix in 2020, was her answer.)

She also asks us to reflect on what we laugh at. In retrospect, we, the audience have been unwittingly complicit in a damaging dynamic. A new aspect dawns, as Wittgenstein might say, and the refrain from the first half of the show now appears deeply ironic. Her jokes were never 'just jokes' – they have the potential to cause real harm. Her show isn't just about her own career but a general call for a reckoning, asking us as a society who we diminish, who we give permission to speak, and what pictures of the world we affirm with our laughter.

What I hope I've started to draw attention to here is one of the many ways humour is a discursive force that has not only the potential to edify in aesthetically unique ways, but to help someone who has, we might say, been discursively cornered by offering alternate ways of responding. These help deflect attention away from the target and often cast a light on the initial oppressive utterance in a way that calls the underlying worldview into question and, further, asks the utterer to take responsibility for the way they see things. Our ability to do this also depends in part on the assent or lack thereof of the audience, allowing audiences to be active rather than passive bystanders, but, precisely because of that, reveals the responsibility of the audience to consider how they, too, see things. Jokes are rarely 'just' jokes. Our own visceral reactions can tell us more accurately and immediately than our thoughts which ways of seeing the world resonate with us, and which do not.

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Biographical Note

Lisa McKeown has a PhD in Philosophy from The New School for Social Research. Her dissertation critiqued contemporary feminist diagnoses of silencing, arguing that any good theory must incorporate a diagnosis of why not only language, but body language, appears to be illegible to certain sexual aggressors. In addition to her philosophical writing, Lisa has written on feminism and philosophy for public audiences, including *She Does The City*, a prominent Toronto publication. She also freelances as a theatre reviewer, and has written and performed stand-up-comedy since 2017.