

## Does the term ‘animal husbandry’ make you nervous?

### 35 Years on and yes, it can still be wrong to laugh

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**Abstract** In 1987, Ronald de Sousa, despite being renowned for his comic genius and outrageously funny behaviour, shocked his philosophical fanbase by telling us not only that there is evil in laughing at certain kinds of jokes—‘phthonic’, involving malicious glee—but also that they are not funny. There is, he argued, no laughing at racist and sexist jokes without *endorsing* the prejudicial attitudes that they trade in. Most of his critics focus on this claim, advocating a dissociation between the attitudes alluded to and the pleasure taken in the incongruity of such jokes. This, I argue, is to miss Ronnie’s point and to adopt a simpleminded view of the way in which such jokes make us complicit. Drawing on disparagement humour studies and a speech act theoretic analysis of how phthonic humour produces its negative effects for socially disadvantaged groups, I argue that such jokes do not so much perpetuate or endorse harmful stereotypes as put them *beyond criticism*. This is a matter of their illocutionary force as much as their locutionary content. The force of such jokes explains how they *silence* objectors as well as increase tolerance for sexist and racist events, especially among those already high on hostile sexism or racism scales. I conclude that the insights in Ronnie’s view about the axiological inappropriateness and irrationality of phthonic humour and its role in structuring relations of identification and alienation continue to be validated, 35 years on.