Does the term 'animal husbandry' make you nervous?

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

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Is there anything more tragic than dying in the black?

Ronald de Sousa (in conversation)

Being Australian, I'm disposed to think well of humour that transgresses what is considered normal, appropriate, polite. Something to do perhaps with my convict past. When you come to Australia and the immigration official says: "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?", you're supposed to say: "Oh, I didn't think that was necessary anymore to get into the country." My first encounter with Ronnie in 1987 had that edgy, *let's-transgress-some-norms* feel to it. It was at the launch of *The Rationality of Emotions.* I had just arrived in Toronto; hardly knew a soul. I approached the table where he sat signing copies to get my copy signed, introduced myself, and said, pointing to the book, "Don't forget to mention what a great source of inspiration I have been." He stared at me blankly for a moment, then took up his pen and wrote "*For Debbie, a great source of inspiration, Ronnie*", like a djinn granting the quintessentially backfiring wish.

I read the book with cheese and relish. It was/is witty, erudite, astute, risqué. The Wilde man of Philosophy, I thought. So, it came as a surprise that the one chapter devoted to humour was a real bummer. Wit was held up as a sort of Platonic archetype few of us could afford, whereas most of what would have passed within my working-class family as taking-the-piss-out-of-x (for any x), was mere humour trading in stereotypes, the bastard child of malicious envy and the self-deceptive, self-alienation of your stupid, selfish, self-centred self. The chapter 'When is it Wrong to Laugh?' makes two strong claims. First, that "phthonic mirth" (from the Greek 'phthonos', personification of malicious envy) is unethical. Second, that it's not funny. It's *"a travesty of a mockery of a sham of a mockery of two mockeries of a sham"*[1] as Woody Allen might have said if he wasn't spending the subsequent decade defending himself against allegations of child sexual assault. (This is another question: can we dutifully separate the art from the artist? Should we laugh at even the neutral jokes of a spurious character?) Not every travesty of a mockery of a sham or two it seems deserves a laugh.

For those who love definitions, the chapter on humour disappoints. There is not much attempt to define humour or wit. I don't much care for definitions, so this did not bother me. I prefer to think, like Descartes, of definitions as having at best pedagogical value. Anyone who walks across a room, Descartes says, knows better what motion is than someone who says (channelling Aristotle) that it is "is the actuality of a potential being in so far as it is potential" (Descartes 1909/1985; AT 2, 598; CSM 1, 139). Definitions of humour are especially worthless. Defining humour is like dissecting a frog, E.B. White is supposed to have said—"few are interested and the frog dies of it." Try to define humour and someone will immediately invent a counterjoke that defies the definition and makes you laugh. Jokes may have all or some of the features generally attributed to them—incongruity, defying expectations, benign norm violation, catharsis or relief, sufferable superiority, etc, etc—or none of them. Better to let the frog go by calling it a 'family resemblance concept' (Brown 2005). Or, to channel Descartes, say that anyone who has felt the pleasure of the full belly laugh at a clever joke knows better what a joke is than someone with a definition growing lichen in their armpit.

[1] *Bananas* 1971

Most of those not inclined to Ronnie's view, however, baulk at the twin claims that phthonic mirth is bad and, besides, not funny. Some try to dissociate the two claims. Of ethnic humour, Ted Cohen writes:

> I wish you luck in maintaining your feeling of disgust—moral disgust, if that's how it feels to you—at the joke, but I insist that you not let your conviction that a joke is in bad taste, or downright immoral, blind you to whether it is funny. (Cohen 1999, p.83; see also Benatar 2014; Smuts, 2010[2])

The problem with anti-Semitic jokes, Cohen (1999, p.84) observes, *is that they are funny*. "Face that fact. And then let us talk about it." But even Cohen can't really understand why he is "disturbed" by jokes like:

Q: How did a passerby stop a group of black men from committing a gang rape?

A: He threw them a basketball. (Cohen 1999, p.77)

According to Cohen (1999, p.78), the joke doesn't *say* that black men are sexually violent or mindlessly committed to playing basketball; it doesn't "purvey stereotypes"; it doesn't *cause* people to believe such nonsense. So, Ted, why does it disturb you? Perhaps it is just, he says, that the joke "helps us to bear unbearable affronts like crude racism and stubborn prejudice by letting us laugh while we take a breather." (see Cohen 1999, p.84; also Benatar 2014, p.30) Oh no, Ted, really? I hear Ronnie (1987, p. 294) say 'What is the *origin* of this relief?' Could it be '*I'm glad it's not me this joke is about*'?

Philosophers who pride themselves on their rationality, their imperviousness to the cognitive biases and irrational influences that afflict ordinary folk, may think like Ted that jokes are neutral, that they have no effect on people's attitudes or behaviour or moral character—that rather they reflect a *suspension* of those influences and an opportunity perhaps for critical reflection on stereotypes. And, indeed, humour can target stereotypes, when the stereotyped group 'wins'. Here's an example I heard in Toronto, possibly from Ronnie himself:

> A young man from the south of the US on a tour of Harvard University stops a passing professor and politely asks "Excuse me, Sir, where's the library at?". The professor replies "At Harvard, we do not end a sentence with a preposition". "Excuse me, Sir," says the young man, again politely, "Where's the library at, asshole?"

Like racial slurs, jokes can also be reclaimed by socially oppressed groups. Noel Carroll (2020, p. 545 and ftnt. 9; see also Anderson 2015) notes a case of the same joke (Q: What do you call a black man with a PhD from Harvard? A: 'Professor N.') being told by racists and anti-racist activists. As jokes can have different conversational implicatures depending on the context, it seems problematic to rule any joke out as intrinsically unfunny or evil. Jokes can also occasion critical self-reflection, as in the case of self-deprecating humour or humour targeting one's own in-group biases.

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[2] Smuts (2010, p. 338) writes: "He [de Sousa] makes the incredibly bold claim that necessarily one must have a pro-attitude towards certain sexist propositions in order to find a putatively sexist joke funny". Smuts proceeds to argue that this cannot be right because jokes about a character (like President Bush) are not more funny the more morally pernicious the character is. But this is to miss the subtlety in Ronnie's view. He need not deny that cleverness or incongruity play a role in determining the degree of funniness in a joke, provided it is a joke to begin with. The question is whether acts like rape belong among the formal objects for jokes, the *laughables*, as will be explained further below.

The virtues of jokes should not blind us to their vices. Philosophers in the habit of defending humour in all its forms have a tendency to make empirical assumptions about the benign role jokes play in our emotional and moral lives that are, frankly, quite naïve (Lawless, et al. 2020). The industry of work in Psychology and Linguistics on 'disparagement humour' (DH) aligns more with Ronnie's view, as I'll endeavour to show below. What interests me more, however, are the cognitive and affective mechanisms that explain how the negative effects of certain kinds of humour are generated, and here, I think, Ronnie's contribution is still underappreciated.

Here's where I take up the de Sousa line. Phthonic mirth is ethically dodgy because it is grounded in emotional attitudes prejudicial to the target group that cannot, to use a Gricean expression, be conversationally 'cancelled' by saying 'it's just a joke'. That we are talking about *emotional* responses, not just any old stereotypical attitude one might consider in the cold light of the intellect is important, a point often lost on Ronnie's critics. There is no cancelling the content of the joke you've just laughed at, because in laughing at it, your emotional horse has already bolted. Trying to cancel a joke is a kind of inconsistency or irrationality. If you take pleasure in pulling wings off flies, and then say it's a bad thing to pull wings off flies, either you're epistemically self-deceived or you're emotionally self-deceived. Either way, it's bad. But while Ronnie and his critics argy-bargy about the semantic commitments of a joke—whether anything nasty is asserted or implied—I argue that we need to consider the role of the 'joke frame' (Carroll 2020, p.537) or, to put it in terms of Speech Act Theory, its illocutionary *force*—to evaluate a joke from a moral or political perspective. Force carries its own weight in directing the interpretation of a joke; shaping our emotional reactions to it; and contributing to its perlocutionary effects. In the context of a conversation, jokes can also be "illocutionarily disabling" (Langton 1993). Like other kinds of speech acts, jokes can subordinate others by virtue of their very form, even when their content is so absurd that no one would reasonably believe it.

There are different ways of being complicit in a sexist or racist attitude—through what is asserted, implied, or simply not denied—and worse things than endorsing such attitudes by laughing along *with* (not *at*) them. In laughing along with them, you agree to put them *beyond criticism*. That's where things get hairy. Or so I will argue.

A recipe for schizophrenia: De Sousa's account of phthonic mirth

The key move in Ronnie's account of phthonic mirth is the claim that in laughing at certain jokes—like racist or sexist jokes—one is *endorsing* the attitudes that the jokes conversationally imply. These attitudes cannot be merely "hypothetically" adopted. Otherwise, the joke will flop. Consider the following Q&A example from humour psychologist, Thomas E. Ford (2016):

(1)

Q: Why hasn't NASA sent a woman to the moon yet?

A: *It doesn't need cleaning!*

The point is not just that this sort of 'joke' *encourages* or *reflects* derogatory social attitudes towards women and what is appropriate 'women's work' or its value relative to 'men's work'; those attitudes *being held* are constitutive of its being a joke. The attitudes presupposed are so repugnant, to me, (1) is not just a lame joke; it's not a joke at all. The scenario described isn't among the *laughables*. Not only that—since I am the butt of the joke (a woman), as Ronnie (1987, p. 291) says, I thus know only too well both what attitudes have to be shared to find it funny and by whom (men). Without all this being true, we could not *criticise* a joke like this for being sexist, yet we do (Bergmann, 1986).

Many of Ronnie's critics deny that the attitudes suggested by racist and sexist humour have to be endorsed at all, but this seems incorrect. Perhaps this is true of the speaker and the hearer as individuals, but you might reasonably assume that the joke has to at least supervene on those

attitudes somewhere or lose its standing as a joke. Being a member of a community in which those attitudes are endorsed, even if not by you, can, Ronnie claims, substitute for personal endorsement and evoke laughter (de Sousa 1987, p.293). But somewhere by someone the attitudes are endorsed. If you suppose otherwise and think you can in good faith laugh at 1 without either of these conditions being met, you will have a hard time explaining why you do not find the following, structurally identical, joke funny:

(2)

Q: Why hasn't NASA sent a man to the moon yet?

A: *It doesn't need repairing!*[3]

Both 1 and 2 trade in stereotypes and incongruity, but 2 is not funny. Why is it not funny? It is not funny precisely because the stereotype of men predominantly doing repair jobs *does not imply that they are inferior to women or that it is an inferior kind of work to that which women do*. We are laughing in 1 not merely at the image of a woman *cleaning* the moon, but at the image of a *woman* cleaning (and thus on) the moon alongside men doing the 'real work'. One has to do more to laugh at 1 than merely *entertain* the stereotype and its political implications as a distant possibility to find it funny. All this is grist for Ronnie's mill.

It is interesting to compare the joke in 1, (which it is hard to conceive a woman ever uttering), with the episode of the Carroll Burnett Show—*Carroll Burnett on the Moon*—which opens with her cleaning the dusty screen of the camera and exclaiming "*Dust, dust, dust—dustiest place in the universe!*" The gag utilises the same imagery as 1 but the joke is arguably 'reclaimed'. Here, the absurdity of a woman cleaning the moon calls into question this designated role for women, as do many of Burnett's skits involving the bored housewife who has 'everything', even 'two mints in one', and yet isn't happy[4]. Who makes the joke and to whom matters to whether it is in bad taste (Cohen 1999, p.67) or morally defective (Carroll 2020,p .546). This is especially so if jokes are, as Carroll claims, *performatives*.

The second proposition Ronnie defends is that phthonic mirth involves an element of self-deception, an ambivalence towards one's group identity and resulting alienation. The scarier third proposition is that all mirth may lead us away from the objectively valuable. Saints of Frivolity preserve us! Let us examine each of these in turn.

As the discussion proceeds, there is a shelving of considerations of wit, which one infers is ethically ok, and a tripartite division between the objects of laughter: the funny, the comical, and the ridiculous—'formal objects' of mirth. (de Sousa 1987, p.277) 'Formal objects' are the kinds of situations or properties relative to which an emotion is defined as appropriate (de Sousa 1987, p.121-22). If laughter has a formal object (or three), we can ask the question: what appropriately belongs in the category of the *laughables*? We can also *evaluate* laughter by reference to such categories for axiological appropriateness. One of Ronnie's goals, aside from understanding how mirth emotionally figures in our moral life and our rationality, is to help us understand "the ambivalence so prevalent in our emotional life" (de Sousa 1987, p.277). This is the angel and the Devil within—as witnessed by Cohen's being both disturbed and amused by a racist joke, and perhaps feeling emotionally duped by his own "self-congratulatory" cleverness at getting the joke (Cohen 1999, p.75). The ethics of mirth is an ethics of *origins*, not consequences (de Sousa 1987, pp.

[3] Yeah, I know, a man has been sent to the moon. Imagine you are hearing it pre-1969.
[4] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwMUOUJSzBA. Cher makes a guest appearance on the show, wearing a Chief's headdress and not much else, and makes an unfortunate pun on 'reservation'. I do not want to suggest that the show is above scrutiny.

282-83). We must consider what our laughter is rooted in, not merely what its perlocutionary effects might be. Disputing the idea that jokes have harmful consequences (e.g., Smuts 2010) is thus to miss the point. The question is one of human values and how phthonic mirth relates to them; not the boring question whether a joke is or is not offensive to anyone and then whether offense is a harm (cf: Benatar 2014).

Cohen is perhaps a victim of what Ronnie (1987, p.287) calls the 'Walberg View' after Horace Walpole ("The world is a comedy to those who think; a tragedy to those who feel") and Henri Bergson ("Laughter has no greater enemy than emotion") (see also Morreall 1983, p. 302-03). Bergson thinks that the comic requires a "momentary anesthesia of the heart" (Bergson 1921, p.5) so that the incongruity can be constructed and processed; it is purely intellectual. This is the idea that the comic is incompatible with emotion (de Sousa 1987, p.287). Cohen's discomfort at laughing at a joke that disturbs him seems a case of misalignment between what he thinks and feels. Perhaps wit allows for dispassionate mirth; but laughing 'with' someone or 'at' someone is emotionally involving. The former draws us toward the other (identification); the latter away from them (alienation) (de Sousa 1987, p.289). Trying to put them both together by laughing at a joke that also makes one's skin crawl is a recipe for schizophrenia.

The In-n-Out Joke Joint

It is easy if one holds the Walberg view to deny in simpleminded fashion Ronnie's claim that phthonic mirth is not merely *of* or *about* sexism or racism but is a form of it. Ronnie's core example is a particularly nasty rape joke made against a prominent Canadian woman—

> M. visits the hockey team. When she emerges she complains that she has been gang-raped. Wishful thinking. (See also Bergmann (1986) for discussion.)

Sever the cognitive from the conative and you find Benatar (2014, p.31) objecting to de Sousa's analysis of this joke that

> It is not merely the contemplation of the transgressive that explains why some people find some jokes about nasty subjects funny. Rape jokes, for example, might include amusing incongruities that are enjoyed even by those who do not have morally defective views about rape.

Don't people say the darnedest things? As Ronnie (1987, p.294) says, what's wrong with laughing at a rape joke is not merely its origins in sexist attitudes; "*It also involves the presence of a characteristic mix of phthonic fear, identification and alienation…a variety of self-deception*." Humour is one way in which we try to deal with our frustration at our own mortality, our alienation and powerlessness. As was graffitied on the wall of the bathroom in our Philosophy Department for many years (in two distinct hands):

> *God is dead! (Nietzsche)*
>
> *No, you are! (God)*

For solace, perhaps, we turn to our group and humour to help us bond. For Bergson (1921, p.6), the comic may be essentially intellectual, but it is also essentially social: *"Our laughter is always the laughter of a group."* To enjoy a rape joke is to identify with the group who find it funny for all the wrong reasons; to identify oneself as one of the group of people who classify rape among the *laughables*. To hold simultaneously that rape is evil amounts to a kind of axiological inconsistency or 'identification-in-alienation'. To do so knowingly is to indulge in motivated irrationality or self-deception. None of this seems within the realm of justification, from either the perspective of

rationality or the perspective of morality, no matter the kind of moral theory to which one subscribes.

Now we see an even more dangerous side to our laughing *at* others from a socially oppressed group. To the extent that we indulge in phthonic mirth, we are not only emotionally, socially, and cognitively irrational; we are also potentially separating ourselves from objective value. This is the third thesis mentioned above. While Ronnie thinks this is a live option, he is not about to chuck the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, rejecting, first, the Bergsonian idea that comedy distorts and simplifies reality, and a second idea, namely, that frivolity takes us away from more socially 'useful' things. Mirth, like science, homes in on 'real patterns' and makes them salient (de Sousa 1987, pp.296-97), enabling them to be investigated so that they may be appropriately reintegrated into our view of reality. For Descartes similarly, both science and laughter are grounded in *wonder*, an affective response to the new or marvellous, that functions to keep the soul fixated long enough to discover a thing's nature or appreciate its value (Brown 2005, pp. 25-29). But too much wonder, like too much anything, leads to a kind of stupefaction. In the well-ordered soul, wonder has its place but is kept in check by other morally useful passions and virtues.

Ronnie's response to the third question, is a quasi-Aristotelian one. Seek moderation in the comic and, above all, *nosce te ipsum*. Ronnie (1987, pp. 297-98) is rather enamoured of Oscar Wilde, the principal Saint of Frivolity, but Wilde is arguably himself an ambivalent character. Unconstrained by conventional or indeed any morality, anything and everything is a target. "*Women are meant to be loved, never understood*." "*Never marry at all, Dorian. Men marry because they are tired, women, because they are curious: both are disappointed*."[5] It is both exhausting to meet expectations that one will always be entertaining; and alienating to hold nothing of value that binds you to your fellow human beings (except perhaps some idealised beauty in Wilde's case).

The axiological inappropriateness of humour can, Ronnie (1987, p. 295) observes, be a form of psychological self-protection. Ted Cohen thinks he jokes too much (why is this a problem?—he does not explain), but is revolted by those who ground their objections to jokes in some "stupefying moral theory" (Cohen 1999, p.83). Perhaps the Gricean maxim of Quantity applies to jokes: Make jokes as needed, and no more. Yet, Cohen will die in a ditch to defend his right to tell any joke he likes—a case of eating one's cake and leaving it in the rain at the same time. "Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand…" Mark Twain once said (cited in Cohen 1999, p.70), which is another way of saying that making people laugh is one way of erecting barricades between yourself and them. The person who tells too many jokes may find it hard to let other people in.

Disparagement humour studies

We have seen Ronnie's view attacked for both of its core claims, that phthonic humour is evil and that it is not funny, but it is also attacked for its implicit assumption that phthonic humour is wrong because it causes harm. Cohen (1999, p.81) finds it "preposterous" to suggest that jokes do "genuine harm" to anyone or that it reduces the moral character of those who traffic in them. Smuts (2010, p.339) makes the bold claim that there is "no empirical evidence for de Sousa's view", adding in a footnote that those studies arguing for a correlation between rape attitudes and people finding sexist jokes funny are "all methodologically flawed". Only one study is cited (Ryan and Kanjorski, 1998) and no analysis of its methodological flaws or that of others is offered. In the rapidly growing field of humour studies, psychologists may well meet such allegations coming from the philosopher's armchair with wide-eyed incredulity.

The first episode of the TV show, *All in the Family*, aired in 1971, and was hugely successful in North America. Its central character, the "lovable bigot", Archie Bunker, took on every sacred cow,

[5] See https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3565.Oscar_Wilde.

revivifying racial and ethnic slurs, and tormenting his “dingbat” wife, Edith, his intellectual, Polish, liberal, long-haired, PhD student-son-in-law, Mike, and his black, reverse-racist neighbour, George Jefferson. As Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) document, media reactions to the show were mixed. *The New York Times* ran a story that the show condones and encourages bigotry. Some critics agreed, pointing to how much of the fan mail was from highly prejudiced people. Others objected to the intellectualism behind such complaints, arguing that because Archie never ‘wins’, the show sends the message that bigotry doesn’t pay. The show’s producer, Norman Lear, responded to the fracas in a CBS report that the show had an educative value in pointing out bigotry and making fun of it. As Vidmar & Rokeach (1974, p. 36) explain, Lear’s argument was that,

> Mike is "always the one who is making sense" while Archie is always seen by the television audience as the one whose logic is at best a kind of "convoluted logic"; since the program brings bigotry "out in the open and has people talking about it," children "will ask questions about the bigotry ... and parents will have to answer."

Within two years, Vidmar and Rokeach had tested to see who in this debate was likely to be right. Already in the early 1970’s, there was a substantial literature suggesting that people have a tendency to “expose themselves to social stimuli and situations which are congruent with their prior attitudinal dispositions” (Vidmar and Rokeach 1974, p.38). Using a mixed methods approach involving quantitative analyses of survey data involving 237 US adolescents (students aged 14-18 years) and ethnographic interviews of 129 randomly selected (from voting lists) Canadian adults, they found that,

> Considered all together, they [the data] suggest, contrary to the CBS report, that all too many viewers did not see the program as a satire on bigotry, had identified with Archie rather than Mike, saw Archie as winning, did not perceive Archie as the character who was the most ridiculed, and, perhaps most disturbing, saw nothing wrong with Archie's use of racial and ethnic slurs. (Vidmar and Rokeach 1974, p.44)

The results were consistent across the two countries, but more extreme attitudes were detected in the US sample. To test the *selective perception hypothesis*, they also established where participants ranked relative to high or low prejudice ends of an attitudinal scale. While there was no significant difference between high and low groups in terms of their finding the show funny or enjoyable, they differed both in their rate of watching and in whether they saw Archie as winning over his nemeses (1974, p.42) (both higher for the highly prejudiced group). They concluded (1974, pp. 46-7) that,

> The present findings also seem to cast doubt on… [the] contention that by mixing humor with bigotry the show leads to a cathartic reduction of bigotry. If high prejudiced persons do not perceive the program as a satire on bigotry, they will not experience a cathartic reduction in prejudice.

There were clear (and clearly acknowledged) methodological limitations to this study. Relative to the millions of people who tuned in to the show, the sample size is relatively small. But the study’s results accord with much of what has been uncovered since in the burgeoning fields of disparagement humour studies, linguistic conversational analysis, and rhetorical studies of the use of sexist and racist jokes in social discourse. The duality of identification and alienation that is core to Ronnie’s thesis is a recurring theme in much of this research.

In his analysis of sexism in conversational joking, for example, linguist, Philip Glenn (2003) notes that "*this talk provides a resource for participants to mark aspects of identity and relationship while furthering joking and laughter. The laughables and laughter provide sequential warrants for extending such talk.*" In joking about the "wool", "coot", "shit" and "dog-meat" (young women at a city wedding), Stan and Dave are "doing identity and relationship work through this talk" positioning themselves in an in-group that achieves intimacy by demeaning an out-group, dissecting the 'other' to body parts, and analogising them to livestock. Simon Weaver's (2011) rhetorical analyses of racist jokes on the internet, meanwhile, reinforces Ronnie's suspicion that phthonic humour reflects the ambivalence prevalent in our emotional lives. Indeed,

> any rhetorical endeavour constitutes an *attempt to overcome ambivalence*, in the sense that rhetoric takes an argument that could go one way or another and guides it in a particular direction; and humour is no different. (2011, p. 416; my emphasis)

Part of the problem with racist and sexist jokes is their ability to neutralise the ambivalence that someone might have towards racist and sexist attitudes. On Weaver's (2011, p.422) reading of racist jokes,

> All of these jokes contain stereotypes that inferiorize inside a rhetorical comic device that, in certain readings, becomes more than 'just a joke' that can support racism through making the stereotype appear truthful and less or not ambivalent.
>
> Racist jokes work through a 'dual logic of racism'—of inclusion and inferiorisation, and exclusion and segregation. (Weaver 2011, p.420)

One form of exclusionary humour—labelled *proteophobic exclusion*—often features references to groups as 'waste' to be extracted and dumped. Citing Bauman (1993; 2003), Weaver (2011, p. 423) defines proteophobia as "a fear or hatred of multiform and a reaction to the 'other' who does not correspond to dominant styles of social spacing." "Proteophobic jokes form 'palliatives'" presenting "a symbolic 'end' or means of resolving the 'problem' of the ambiguous 'other'." Racist jokes often feature themes of disposal of the body of the 'other', as in,

> Why does a black man's funeral only have 2 paulbearers [sic]?cause a trashcan only has two handles (d2jsp Forum, 2003-9; cited in Weaver 2011, p. 427)

Surprisingly, however, it is difficult to establish that exposure to the content of disparaging humour reinforces stable stereotypes of outgroups relative to non-disparaging commentary or neutral humour (Olson, Maio, and Hobden, 1999). What does seem to be true, however, is that *performing* disparaging humour leads to more negative attitudes towards the out-group. *Telling* lawyer jokes leads participants to report having more negative attitudes towards lawyers (Hobden and Olson 1994). Those who *recite* Newfie jokes report more negative stereotypes of Newfoundlanders (Maio, Olson, and Bush, 1997). Ford et al. (2001, p.677) conclude: "So, it appears that *telling* disparaging jokes can have a negative impact upon the joke teller's attitudes and stereotypes of the disparaged outgroup."

It is also true that being exposed to disparaging humour increases participants' tolerance for negative treatment towards the out-group, particularly among individuals who rank highly on prejudicial attitude scales. Ford (2000) found that exposure to sexist jokes leads to greater tolerance of a sexist event compared with exposure to neutral jokes or nonhumorous sexist communications among participants high in 'hostile sexism' (people whose attitudes toward women are rooted in antagonism and indignation) (Glick and Fiske, 1996). Ford et al.'s (2001, p. 670) results align with those of LaFrance and Woodzicka (1998), who found that participants high in hostile sexism were less critical of and more amused by sexist humor compared with those low

in hostile sexism. In Ford et al.'s (2001) study, 61 male undergraduate students from sociology, marketing, and communication courses were assigned to one of six conditions in a 3(Type of Communication: Sexist Jokes, Sexist Statements, Neutral Jokes) x 2(Hostile Sexism: High, Low) between-subjects design. This study is interesting for our purposes in that it set out to test not just the hypothesis that the negative effects of being exposed to sexist humour compared to sexist nonhumourous communication or neutral jokes on participants' judgements about a sexist event would be higher the higher their baseline hostile sexism, but also their propensity to feel negative emotions like shame and disappointment in themselves when asked to imagine themselves as the perpetrator of the sexist act. The sexist event presented to participants through a vignette featured a workplace in which a male boss uses sexual 'pet names' (like 'darling') in relation to a female employee, implying intimacy, and which was perceived as threatening by the employee. Participants were asked to rate how appropriate this behaviour was and then "to indicate the extent to which they would feel (a) critical of themselves, (b) ashamed of themselves and (c) disappointed in themselves for having done so" had they behaved in this way (Ford et al. 2001, p.683). Participants in the sexist joke conditions showed greater tolerance for the sexist norm of the behaviour depicted in the vignette; were less self-critical; and experienced less negative affect in imagining themselves the perpetrator compared to those in the other two conditions (Ford et al., 2001, pp.683-86).

Drawing on findings across the DH field, Ford et al. (2001, p.686) explain these results in terms of the following two mechanisms. First, humorous disparagement activates a conversational rule that the underlying message need not be taken seriously and that the usual critical reactions to the underlying message can be suspended (e.g. Attardo 1993; Berlyne 1972). Second, compared to disparagement humour, "nonhumorous disparagement makes broader nonsexist norms *more salient*" [my emphasis] whereas "neutral humor does not imply that disparagement of women need not be taken seriously in the immediate context." "[B]y their approval of sexist humor, participants high in hostile sexism essentially acknowledged or consented to the normative standard implied by the humor that in the immediate context sexism need not be taken seriously". Importantly, moreover, Ford et al. (2001, p.678) argue that,

> These findings cannot be easily explained in terms of a priming effect… Exposure to sexist material, however, only affected tolerance of the sexist event when it was presented in a humorous manner.

These findings accord with Ronnie's suggestion that the emotional dimension of humour, like the encapsulation of perception, works to structure patterns of salience in the informational space in a way that makes it resistant to conflicting information or the prescripts of reason and morality. The Walberg view appears to have the weight of empirical evidence against it, not for it.

Taken altogether, these results are important for our purposes because they suggest that the focus on the attitudinal content of sexist or racist humour and defense of the Walberg view by Ronnie's critics is fundamentally misguided. As important as the content of sexist humour is to evaluating whether it is right or wrong to laugh at it, equally important are other features of the speech act that switch off the audience's inclination toward criticism, including self-criticism, when, through the joke, social norms about appropriate behaviour are violated or transgressed. One can, in other words, be led into failing to see the norm violation posed by the joke as less than benign because one is caught up in the pleasure of laughing. It is that the sexist or racist attitudes are presented via a *humorous* rather than *nonhumorous* mode of communication; that the joke is *performed*, *embodied*; and that it is "response-dependent" (Carroll 2020, p.536) on a laugh (in identification) from the audience, that accounts for the harms that these jokes can do. It is these emotionally involving or triggering elements that make it impossible to regard phthonic humour as morally and politically benign even if Ronnie's critics are right that such

humour is not responsible for the prejudicial stereotypes they involve or for reinforcing them.

Words are Deeds

> *A man of words and not of deeds/ Is like a garden full of weeds.* (Percy B. Green)
>
> *A man of deeds and not of words/Is like a garden full of turds.* (Me)

Well, what are we to do about it? Cohen (1999, pp.82-83) thinks not much, and nor should we: "*Not everything you dislike is illegal, or should be…You can avoid people who makes jokes you hate, or at least insist that they not tell them to you while you are present*." Similar objections often motivated by the interests of free speech have been levied (e.g., by Feinberg 1983) against feminist objections to pornography. If you can avoid it and criticise it, what's your beef, jerky? Increasingly, however, sexist humour in the workplace is being publicly perceived as a kind of sexual harassment, figuring in lawsuits against large corporations, like Chevron in 1995 (LaFrance and Woodzicka, 1998; Frazier, Cochran, & Olson, 1995; Ford et al., 2001, p.677). This makes sense since one cannot in one's workplace so easily avoid people who make jokes one hates, and it can be threatening to try to tell one's boss off for anything, let alone for their dumb-arsed jokes. But it can be hard to establish that such jokes *are* threatening or anxiety-inducing, particularly when they are 'generic'—targeted at a group—rather than intended to demean an individual or individuals personally. If so many of the negative consequences of phthonic humour depend on the context and the intentions of actors, it can be hard to establish just by who-says-what-where-to-whom, that any harm was intended or generated, and merely being offended by an utterance does not make it immoral.

The analogy with debates about whether pornography is a kind of hate speech offers a path through this thicket. Utilising concepts from Speech Act Theory (SAT), Rae Langton (1993, p. 299) has argued that pornography harms women not just by how it represents women or the negative consequences it has for women, which, she acknowledges, can be hard to establish empirically, but by constituting a form of subordination—*silencing*—in itself. SAT analyses speech acts along three dimensions—the locutionary act (what is said; e.g., the propositional content); the illocutionary force (type of speech act performed; e.g., assertion, command, question, etc); and the perlocutionary force (the effects the speech act has on the world). The type of speech act determines its 'direction of fit'—whether that is words-to-world (e.g., assertions) or world-to-words (e.g., commands), or world-to-words-to world (e.g., verdictives). Grasping the satisfaction or felicity conditions of a speech act, necessary for grasping its meaning, its implications, and responding appropriately, is thus more cognitively complex than grasping the truth conditions of the propositional content of the speech act, and a speech act can misfire for more reasons than that one's audience does not understand what one says. Langton uses this schema to develop a notion of silencing beyond having one's mouth taped shut. For example, a woman whose refusal of a sexual advance does not receive the right uptake—where saying 'no' is taken as really meaning 'yes'—may get the words out without her words successfully constituting a refusal (Langton 1993, pp.320-321). This is not locutionary failure but illocutionary failure; in Langton's words, it is a form of "illocutionary disablement" (Langton 1993, p.321).

Ronnie's phthonic mirth can be analysed along similar fault lines. Humour is a speech act—a *performative* if Carroll is right—with arguably its own distinctive illocutionary force. It is not just what is said that makes something a joke, lest paraphrases of a joke would do as well. (We know that they don't because nothing is more deadly to a joke than explaining it.) The chief perlocutionary effect—laughter—depends not just on the interpretation of content but on the recognition of the 'joke frame' (Carroll 2020, p.537). And as the same utterance can have a different force, being a question in one context (*'the door is open'*[?]—how did *that* happen?) or a command in another (*'the door is open'*—shut it, please!) so too can the same utterance constitute distinct kinds of jokes in different contexts. Consider, for example, the following joke:

Q: How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

A: That's not funny.

I have heard this joke uttered by men taking a dig at feminists, and by feminists taking a dig at men who make jokes about feminists. The same words are said but carry different implicatures, the first conveying the sentiment that feminists are humourless; the second, that jokes about feminists being dumb are neither funny nor appropriate. Both instances might produce laughter in an audience, or only one may. One can consistently be inclined to laugh *with* feminists, not *at* them. What accounts for these differences? They have a different illocutionary force—the first is a joke; the second, a meta-joke. And that makes a world of difference.

It is the illocutionary force of a joke which *explains* how it is interpreted as well as its perlocutionary effects.

In considering what is wrong with laughing at sexist and racist jokes, it is not enough to consider, therefore, just what is said. When Cohen and others say that jokes don't say or assert anything, at one level, they are correct. Jokes are not assertions. What is a joke's direction of fit? This is not an easy question to answer. If jokes trade in incongruity, they can hardly be said to seek to reflect reality the way an assertion does. But neither do they directly seek to change the world to make their content true, as other performatives, like commands or promises, do. What they do seek is to change the world by establishing themselves *as comic*. It is probably best then to think of jokes as having a world-to-words fit, but if so, it is an odd one. Their satisfaction conditions include making people laugh, which in turn constitutes themselves as funny. However one thinks of their direction of fit, jokes do not belong in the category of assertions. In fact, the opposite is true. The illocutionary force of a joke signals to us *that we are not to take the content seriously or literally*, that it is just make-believe, and *that it is, therefore, beyond criticism*. This is worse than mere endorsement; worse than Ronnie perhaps realised. If that is their force, sexist and racist jokes are deeply problematic, for anyone who objects to the sexist or racist attitudes presupposed in the 'make-believe' of the joke is likely to be dismissed as either humourless (*can't you take a joke?*) or as having confused a joke for a statement. They will be unable to make their objecting words count as an *objection*. And that too is a kind of silencing that operates at the illocutionary rather than locutionary level.

This analysis helps to explain the results from disparagement humour studies documented above, which left the problematic "normative standard" that sexism or racism in jokes was not to be taken seriously largely unexplained. Because the force of a joke is to block criticism, the most someone could do conversationally when confronted with sexist or racist jokes they object to is offer a counterjoke—e.g., respond to a rape joke as I did once with a comment like "yeah, well, no woman in their right mind would *willingly* have sex with a bloke like you!" But no one should have to play such kinds of power games and its risks are considerable, especially in contexts where the power imbalance is threatening. (As I recall, I got whacked on the head with a shoe box the guy was carrying.) Better to deny one's opponent the illocutionary force of their joke, by denying that they have the right to suspend criticism or seriousness. Better not to be drawn in to thinking the subject is laughable.[6] Speech acts are communicative acts that depend on both the speaker and hearer agreeing to conventions surrounding the act and the mutual recognition and acceptance of intentions (the 'sincerity condition'). Signalling that one's audience should suspend their criticism of rape because one has put one's utterance in the frame of a joke is no more 'just joking' than promising someone what you cannot deliver is a promise.

[6] One of my students, Bailey Carthouser, tells me that the advice on the internet about dealing with racist or sexist jokes is to ask the teller to explain it—an interesting suggestion, as it could well force the teller to make explicit how the joke relies on racist or sexist stereotypes, while at the same time defusing the joke through the very process of explanation.

Loose ends: self-deprecating and reclaimed humour

I was explaining Ronnie's view of humour recently to someone of Newfoundland-Irish heritage, whose response was that Ronnie must have spent too much time in England. The Brits, famous for laughing too much at the foibles and failings of others, especially those of the Irish, were not, in this person's view, a standard by which to compare. In many cultures, self-deprecating humour is more common. Woody Allen has made a fortune trading in his own cultural stereotypes, including that of the avaricious Jew: "*I'm very proud of my gold pocket watch. My grandfather, on his deathbed, sold me this watch*."[7] Irish humour trades on the stereotype of the dumb Irishman: *The barman says to Paddy, "Your glass is empty, fancy another one?" Looking puzzled, Paddy says, "Why would I be needing two empty feckin' glasses?"*[8] Newfoundland humour is similar. Here is one from my Newfie brother-in-law:

Q: What's the hardest thing for a Newfoundlander?

A: Grade 4.

Australian humour will often represent a mix of self- and other-deprecating humour, often featuring the slow 'cow-cocky' while taking down a 'tall poppy':

> A Texan sitting in a pub with an Australian bloke was bragging about the size of his ranch. "I send a man out on a horse to check the fences," he says, "and he be gone for three weeks!"
>
> "Yeaahhhh," the Australian replies, "I had a horse like that once."

The fact that self-deprecating humour is funny is a prima facie counterargument to Ronnie's claim that phthonic humour amounts to endorsing the attitudes the humour presupposes. If Ronnie were right, Newfies or Irish or Polish people would have to believe that they were dumb. Jews would have to believe that they are greedy; Australians, that they are slow and laconic; and New Zealanders that they like to have sex with sheep.

Well, does the term 'animal husbandry' make you nervous?

Carroll (2020, p.536) says he laughed at and told Newfie jokes long before he even knew who Newfies were, so the attitude that Newfies are dumb can't be essential to the jokes' being funny. My Newfie comrades have only one ting to say to dat: *What's black and blue and floats in the bay? A Mainlander who tells Newfie jokes!*

Reclaimed humour likewise poses similar challenges to Ronnie's view. African-American comedian, Paul Beatty's books (e.g., *The Sellout* and *White Boy Shuffle*) spin racist themes and racial slurs on their head, defying us to laugh at our white liberal hubris in thinking we live in a 'post-racial' world. As the title of Elisabeth Donnelly's article for *The Guardian* explains, "Paul Beatty on writing, humor and race: 'There are very few books [on race] that are funny.'" *The Sellout's* central character ('Bonbon' or 'Sellout') is the son of a black psychologist, is educated in agricultural science, and attempts to live a rural life as an agrarian lifestyle in what sounds like a South Central Los Angeles district. Through a series of bewildering events, he finds himself before the Supreme Court charged with reinstating slavery and segregation—slavery because an octogenarian neighbour/former black child actor has attached himself to him as a slave, and segregation because that is the only way to deal with the absurdities of the alternative— assimilation into white society. To take this as an endorsement of slavery and segregation would be to both miss the joke and the point.

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[7] https://www.allgreatquotes.com/quote-458479/

[8] https://www.irelandbeforeyoudie.com/top-10-hilarious-funny-irish-jokes-that-will-get-the-whole-pub-laughing/

What then are we to say about self-deprecating or reclaimed humour while tooting our Sousaphone? One thing to note is that such jokes often operate on a meta level or at least two levels at once. Indeed, there is something self-refuting about self-deprecating jokes. In making a self-deprecating joke, I make fun of myself, but in making the joke, I show how clever I am and in a way that negates the stereotype in which it commerces. A lovely example of this is in Cohen's book (1999, p.72) where an English foreman insists on giving a test to a qualified Irish construction worker, asking the worker to describe the difference between a joist and a girder. "*It's too easy*," said the Irishman, "*Twas the former wrote Ulysses, whilst the latter wrote Faust.*" The joke fits into the script of an Irish joke—the Irish are dumb and they speak funny, right?—but Paddy knows his Joyce and Goethe. Who among us can say as much?

The question is who is the butt of the joke, and who wins? In telling self-deprecating jokes, the teller is both, so in laughing at such jokes, the audience is either in the group (identification) and so wins, or out of the group (alienation), and so loses. One can still laugh in either case, but recognise that either way, one is in part laughing *at* oneself. Donnelly reported that the mostly white, literate, audience at one of Beatty's readings seemed "afraid to laugh", "unsure…whether they could laugh, or if it was ok to."[9] They had no trouble laughing in the reading that followed Beatty's, a short story about a man with two penises. The former is the audience's tragedy—their self-inflicted alienation; the second is as well—their complicit identification.

Conclusion

Yeah, it's a bummer but sometimes it's wrong to laugh, not just because what you're laughing at presupposes racist or sexist or other 'ist-y' stereotypes or attitudes. Neither is it because your laughing might cause some direct or indirect harm. It's rather that in laughing you're granting to what isn't laughable the force of a joke, from which point it is difficult to return. If jokes depend on social conventions like the "normative standard" that it's ok to suspend criticism and that the content is not to be taken seriously, then it may well not be up to the joke teller alone to decide when and if to invoke that standard. And just because you can get some poor sucker to laugh at something you say doesn't make it funny. Like promises and declarations and verdictives, what counts as a joke is at least in part a matter to be negotiated within one's community, even if that negotiation takes place in the wilds of everyday interactions in your lounge room over a few beers. Luckily, there are infinitely many other things to laugh about, so take heart, for as soon as one door shuts, another closes.

Postscript:

Lest this discussion leave you thinking of Ronald de Sousa as a party-pooper, I assure you nothing could be further from the truth. I direct you to his home page (http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~sousa/) where you will see that he is Himself and not another thing and the author of many witty ditties, including a biblical tome about the miracle in which Christ turns a twig into a comb (saving the people of Nazareth from dreadlock?), and clerihews like:

René Descartes
Brought thinking to a fine art
Anyone who cogitates:
"Ergo sum!"
Can't be too dumb.

And:

[9] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/10/paul-beatty-interview-the-sellout

David Hume,
We can safely assume,
Thought Natural Laws
A lost cause.

With a surname like 'de Sousa', Ronnie could easily be the subject of many, many, clerihews, and so I call upon all of you who know and love him to contribute a *clerihew pour vous*, Ronnie. (Send them to him!) Reading that he thinks Science and Religion have much the same foundation—human doubt—I propose this one to get us started:

> Ronald de Sousa
>
> In one swift manoeuvre
>
> Said Science and Religion admit no deep schisms
>
> Except that one is wise; the other, wizened.

Here's to you, Ronnie. *Chuckers!*

DB (March, 2022)

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