

# A Sensibility of Humour

BSA Prize Essay, 2022

Zoe Walker

*What does it say about you if you enjoy sexist humour? One answer to this question holds that finding sexist humour funny reveals that you have sexist beliefs, whilst another holds that it reveals nothing deeper about you at all. I argue that neither of these answers are correct, as neither can capture the feeling of unwilling complicity we often get from enjoying sexist jokes. Rather, we should navigate between these two positions by understanding the sense of humour as a kind of sensibility or taste, analogous to Anne Eaton's account of erotic taste. This allows for a fleshing out of the purely belief-centred understanding of the sense of humour, adding emotional, perceptual and motivational aspects to it. Finally, I propose that one's sense of humour is shaped the representations one engages with, which suggests a possible avenue for habituating it in a more egalitarian direction.*

Since life includes relaxation as well as activity, and in relaxation there is leisure and amusement, there seems to be here too the possibility of good taste in our social relations, and propriety in what we say and how we say it. And the same is true of listening . . . . Clearly, here, too, it is possible to exceed or fall short of the mean. People who carry humor to excess are considered vulgar buffoons. They try to be funny at all costs, and their aim is more to raise a laugh than to speak with propriety and to avoid giving pain to the butt of their jokes. But those who cannot say anything funny themselves, and are offended by those who do, are thought to be boorish and dour. Those who joke in a tactful way are called witty, which implies a quick versatility in their wits.

Aristotle 1128a1-11 (1987), *Nicomachean Ethics*

## Introduction: Between Boor and Buffoon

In his brief discussion of sense of humour in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that a good sense of humour is a virtue to be found between two vicious extremes: the humourless boor, who jokes and laughs too little, and the vulgar buffoon, who jokes and laughs too much. By contrast, virtuous jokers are 'witty' yet 'tactful' (Aristotle, 1987: 15): they are quick to make and enjoy a joke, but not when doing so would cause pain to those around them. Is it a matter of luck whether one has a virtuous sense of humour or not? Aristotle does not say so here, but inferring from his wider discussion of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it seems fairly evident that he takes sense of humour, like other emotions and character traits, to be a disposition that can be cultivated towards the virtuous mean.<sup>1</sup>

1 Interestingly, as Robert Clewis has observed (2020: 75), Immanuel Kant makes similar remarks about humour: 'A mechanical (spiritless) laughter is insipid and makes the social gathering tasteless. He who never laughs at all at a social gathering is either sullen or pedantic'. (2007: §7: 264).

In recent debate on the ethics of humour, this idea that one's sense of humour can be a virtue (or a vice) in its own right has been challenged from two directions. On the one hand, there are those who hold that the moral status of one's sense of humour is entirely parasitic on the moral status of one's beliefs. You can have a morally bad sense of humour, but at base what that amounts to is that you have bad *beliefs*. This first position might to some smell a little of humourless boorishness—if not quite in Aristotle's sense—because it tells you, in a rather scolding, moralizing tone, that if your beliefs were really thoroughly moral, you would never be amused by immoral jokes. As Ronald de Sousa puts it, 'to laugh at the [sexist] joke *marks you as sexist*' (1987: 239).

On the other hand, there is a view that a sense of humour has no moral significance as such—a tendency to find certain kinds of thing funny cannot *in itself* be morally bad—and what we find funny reveals nothing about our character: as Aaron Smuts puts it, 'we are standing on shaky ground if we say that merely finding any given joke funny is itself reprehensible' (2010: 346). To some (especially holders of the other view), this might smell buffoonishly permissive.

In this paper, I am interested in navigating between these two positions, by resurrecting (a version of) the Aristotelian cultivation view of the sense of humour. In Section 1, I outline the two contemporary positions described above in more detail, and argue that while both get something right, they both miss out important features of the sense of humour as a result of focusing too exclusively on the role of belief. In particular, I argue that neither can capture the feeling of *unwilling complicity* that we often get from immoral pieces of humour. In Section 2, I argue that the solution is to take seriously our talk of a *sense* of humour, understood as a sensibility or taste, which I develop via an analogy with A.W. Eaton's account of erotic taste. This allows for a fleshing out of the purely belief-centred understanding of the sense of humour, adding emotional, perceptual and motivational aspects to it. In Section 3, I consider how this sensibility develops, returning to Aristotle to speculatively suggest a habituation-by-representation picture that, I argue, has empirical support.

## 1. Funny in the Head

### *The Belief-Centric View*

To begin with, let us consider the view that holds that the badness of one's sense of humour is parasitic on the badness of one's beliefs. According to this view, a joke is immoral if it contains immoral presuppositions that are not subverted, and you can only find such a joke funny if you believe those presuppositions. This approach is taken by both Merrie Bergmann and Ronald de Sousa, who hold that the difference between finding a joke with unsubverted sexist presuppositions funny, and merely *understanding* the joke, is that you must agree with those presuppositions. Thus, Bergmann claims that 'being aware of a sexist belief is not the same as holding it. Because a feminist is aware of sexist beliefs, she may see why particular episodes are thought to be funny yet nevertheless not find them funny herself' (1986: 74–75). De Sousa makes the point more explicitly, claiming that '*merely to know* [the presuppositions] *doesn't make the joke funny*. What's more, to laugh at the joke *marks you as sexist*' (1987: 239).

The claim, then, is that no one with thoroughly feminist beliefs would find a sexist joke—a joke that makes sexist presuppositions—funny. But this seems straightforwardly

false. Consider the following ‘light-hearted and high-decibel exchange ... witnessed in 1990, at a Melbourne football game’:

St. Kilda supporter to sluggish player: ‘Get *on* with it, Laurie, you *great girl!*’

Alert bystander: ‘Hey, what’s wrong with a girl?’

St. Kilda supporter: ‘It’s got *no balls*, that’s what’s wrong with it!’

(Langton, 2018: 145)

The St. Kilda supporter’s quick-witted response relies on the unsubverted sexist presupposition that women ‘have no balls’ because they are less courageous than men. Rae Langton—fortunate witness to this exchange—is interested in the difficulty of challenging presuppositions of this kind. But there is something else to notice about the exchange as well: with its witty pun on ‘balls’ and its lightning-quick delivery, the remark is also a joke—and one that I, for one, find funny.

I find it funny, even though I do not believe its sexist presupposition that women are less courageous than men. And this phenomenon is not specific to this example, nor (I am reassured) to me. Rather, the phenomenon of being amused by a joke that one morally disagrees with is, I take it, a familiar one. We enjoy a joke—perhaps even laugh—and then regret our enjoyment, because we find the joke to be morally objectionable. Bergmann and de Sousa are quite wrong to deny this possibility.

In particular, I think what Bergmann and de Sousa cannot capture is the feeling of *unwilling complicity* that comes with hearing an immoral joke—that guilty and regrettable giggle when we are made a part of a piece of immoral humour despite ourselves. This, it seems to me, is a very central phenomenon when it comes to engaging with immoral humour, and one that a good account of the ethics of the sense of humour ought to be able to capture. Bergmann and de Sousa can capture the feeling of *complicity*—because on their account one’s beliefs are plugged in to determine what one finds funny—but they cannot explain why it is *unwilling*.

De Sousa’s response to someone who thinks they can find a joke funny while disagreeing with it is to suggest they imagine the joke slightly modified so that the sexist presupposition no longer applies—for example, by changing the gender of the character in the joke. Doing so, he thinks, necessarily renders the joke unfunny, and this proves his point.

But this exercise does little to help his case. For let us try this trick with our joke, which gives us the following:

St. Kilda supporter to sluggish player: ‘Get *on* with it, Laura, you *great boy!*’

Alert bystander: ‘Hey, what’s wrong with a boy?’

St. Kilda supporter: ‘It’s got *balls*, that’s what’s wrong with it!’

I think there are two contexts we can imagine for this new joke, neither of which supports de Sousa’s argument. On the one hand, we might imagine this joke being made by a feminist, and with feminist intent—for example, as a deliberate attempt to subvert the ‘men are more courageous than women’ belief with the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that in some contexts, so-called manly bravado or ‘balls’ can actually get in the way of progress. Understood in this way, I think the joke *is* pretty funny, which if anything counts against de Sousa’s claim that removing the sexism equals removing the funniness.

Absent this subversive feminist context, on the other hand, I think the remark simply does not make sense as a joke (or really as a response at all). De Sousa is right that I would not find it funny, but that is because it is no longer a coherent joke, rather than because it has become an unfunny joke.<sup>2</sup> Either way, it has not been shown that I only find the original joke funny because I share its sexist presuppositions.

I am not the first to doubt de Sousa's position that amusement in this sort of case is contingent on one's moral beliefs. Other critics have tended to locate de Sousa's fault in bringing in the moral where it does not belong. For instance, [Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson \(2000\)](#) accuse de Sousa (and others with a similar view) of committing the 'moralistic fallacy'; that is to say, confusing reasons why it might be morally or prudentially good or bad to be amused for reasons why it might be *fitting* to be amused. They argue that contra de Sousa—while the fact that a joke makes an immoral presupposition might provide one with a moral reason not to be amused by it—that has no bearing on whether amusement is fitting; on whether the joke is in fact amusing. Thus, one can judge that it is wrong to find a joke funny, but still be amused by it.

I agree, of course, with D'Arms and Jacobson's point that what we find funny, and what we judge that we *ought* to find funny, can come apart. To deny this is indeed to make a moralizing mistake. However, I think there is another mistaken aspect of this belief-centric view about amusement that is also worth emphasizing: it over-intellectualizes the problem, by focusing too exclusively on the role of belief in joke-hearing.

Proponents of the belief-centric view such as de Sousa and Bergmann are right that there is some cognitive work that goes into getting a joke: jokes are, as Ted Cohen puts it, *conditional* on hearers having certain information (2001: 12–13). For example, we saw that understanding the St. Kilda supporter's joke requires being aware of the belief that women are less courageous than men. As a result of this, it may be tempting to infer a yet bigger role for belief in joke-hearing, as de Sousa does, thinking we must have to actually *believe* that women are less courageous than men in order to find the joke funny. Indeed, as we will see, this intellectualizing tendency seems to be a common feature of analytic feminist aesthetics in general, and has caused many feminist philosophers to miss less intellectual (but extremely important) features of aesthetic engagement. Instead, we will need to follow Langton's proposal to move 'beyond belief' (2012: 74) and notice that speech acts can call on us to share in certain desires and emotions as well as beliefs. It is these other sorts of attitude that will be key to whether we find jokes funny.

Bergmann and De Sousa are committed, as Robert Clewis has shown, to an 'attitude endorsement' theory, according to which 'in order for a person to feel comic amusement in response to a joke that is sexist (etc.), the adoption [i.e. endorsement] of the questionable attitudes, beliefs or norms is required' (Clewis, 2020: 90). But, as I have argued, the alternative is more plausible: 'that the questionable attitude can be merely *entertained* in imagination' (2020: 91).

---

2 Aaron Smuts (2010: 340) makes a similar point: 'we have good reason to think that de Sousa has confused the failure of a joke to be readily comprehensible with it failing to be humorous'. And there is a similar point in Roberts (1987: 136).

Similarly, Roberts has argued that enjoying jokes ‘does not mean that you adopt the corresponding beliefs. Instead, you “see the world” temporarily through those propositions, much in the way you may entertain an interpretation of a text that you do not believe to be the correct interpretation’ (1988: 137). This is right as far as it goes, but more needs to be said about why entertaining the assumptions of the joke *amuses* us. In Section 2, I will supply this missing piece.

### *The Attitude-Independent View*

So far, we have seen that de Sousa’s focus on the role of belief in the sense of humour has resulted in him missing the possibility of finding jokes funny even if one disagrees with their immoral presuppositions. A more recent view, from Aaron Smuts, takes a very different line, moving away entirely from the thought that one’s sense of humour betrays anything much about one’s morals or moral character: ‘we are standing on shaky ground if we say that merely finding any given joke funny is itself reprehensible’ (2010: 346). I agree with Smuts that one’s sense of humour does not reflect one’s moral beliefs—so if there’s anything that can be wrong with one’s sense of humour, it is not that it betrays immoral beliefs. So can anything else be wrong with it? Smuts thinks amusement can be immoral when it is harmful, and the only harm he identifies is when one’s amusement ‘snowball[s] into laughter’ (2010: 346): laughter can, in some situations, leave people who feel targeted by it with ‘genuine emotional scars’ (2010: 346).

I agree with Smuts’ move away from belief, but I disagree with his apparent conclusion that sense of humour reflects nothing at all about one’s character, and thus that no wrongs can be located within the sense of humour itself. While it is certainly true that the behavioural expression of one’s amusement can be harmful, it seems to me that there is a wrong that is possible independently of whether one’s amusement causes harm—namely, the aforementioned wrong of being *complicit* in a piece of immoral (e.g. sexist, racist) humour, in the sense that it is some immoral part of one’s character (of one’s beliefs/attitudes/motivations) that is what is making the humour funny. We saw that de Sousa cannot capture the feeling of unwilling complicity that the enjoyment of immoral humour can give us, as he cannot capture the *unwillingness* of it, but neither can Smuts, because he cannot capture the *complicity* of it. When he dismisses the idea that one needs to *believe* anything in order to find a joke funny, he seems to conclude that one does not need to have *any* sort of attitude to find a joke funny—so that amusement becomes almost like a sneeze or a cough, rather than the result of some attitude(s) on the part of the amused party that can be co-opted by an immoral joke to make one feel complicit in it.<sup>3</sup>

3 Smuts does make one claim that sounds amenable to the Aristotelian cultivation account I will be arguing for: when it comes to the question of responsibility for one’s sense of humour, he proposes that ‘in so far as laughter can cause harm, and in so far as laughter is caused by humor, and in so far as our sense of humor can be trained and blocked, we can be culpable for finding something funny’ (2010: 345). It is not clear what Smuts has in mind by the ‘training and blocking’ of the sense of humour, but one reading is that if indeed one can change one’s sense of humour, then one ought to do so. If this is what Smuts means, then the Aristotelian account is very much compatible with his thought here, and can be viewed as offering an explanation of how this training of the sense of humour is possible.

## 2. A Funny Taste

If the sense of humour is not merely a function of one's (moral) beliefs, yet is not as arbitrary as a sneeze or a cough, then what exactly is it? I propose that in order to get a fuller picture, we need to take seriously our talk of a 'sense' of humour, and treat humour as a matter of taste; a sensibility with emotional, motivational and perceptual aspects as well as cognitive ones.

To get started, let us consider an analogy with another sort of taste: erotic taste. A. W. Eaton discusses erotic taste in the context of the feminist critique of pornography, and she begins by remarking on 'feminist analytic philosophy's generally intellectualist tendency ... [That is to say] a tendency to conceive of sexism primarily in terms of people's (misguided) *beliefs* about the two sexes' (2017: 246). As such, 'contemporary feminist thought, at least in the analytic tradition, tends to eschew considerations of the role of taste in sustaining the current order' (2017: 246). Anti-porn feminism in particular, Eaton notes, 'tends to suffer from this tendency of being overwhelmingly concerned with the falsehoods that pornography propagates—for instance, falsehoods about female inferiority, rape myths, etc. that it purportedly leads its audiences to accept, whether consciously or unconsciously' (2017: 246–247).

What anti-porn feminism has neglected, Eaton thinks, is the role of '*erotic taste*' in sustaining sexism. Taste, for Eaton, is 'an individual's or collective's standing disposition for evaluative sentiments regarding some *x*—whether a particular thing or a kind of thing—where these sentiments are partially or fully constituted by or based on pleasurable or displeasurable responses to some of *x*'s properties' (2017: 244). By sentiments, Eaton has in mind mental states like 'emotions and also some feelings and pleasures' (2017: 244), and these sentiments need not involve explicit appraisals of their objects, but rather they 'present their object as valuable and so worthy of experiencing, having or preserving' (2017: 244). For example, one might have a taste for designer shoes, which would mean tending to experience pleasure and joy when seeing or wearing designer shoes, and thus perceiving designer shoes as worthy of experiencing, having or preserving.

*Erotic taste*, then, is a category of taste that includes 'a person's sexual taste—for instance, her positive and negative preferences for particular types of sex acts, or orientation toward certain kinds of sex partners—but also ... extend[s] to one's general sense of what makes a person sexy or even simply attractive' (2017: 245). Engagement with pornography plays an important role in shaping erotic tastes in a patriarchal direction—what Eaton calls the 'eroticization of dominance and submission' (2017: 247, referencing MacKinnon, 1991)—but this shaping is not a result of our *beliefs* about the sexes.

Eaton's claims, then, amount to this: analytic feminism has overplayed the role of beliefs in sustaining sexism, and underplayed the role of taste. An important way in which pornography, in particular, sustains sexism, is to eroticize patriarchal norms so that we find them attractive, even though we may *believe* that these norms are wrong.

I want to concur with Eaton's claims about the importance of taste and apply them to the realm of humour, where, I believe, they shed the necessary light on what sense of humour is. Applying Eaton's account of taste to sense of humour, we get the suggestion that a sense of humour—usually of a person, but potentially of a collective (e.g. a national

sense of humour)—is a standing disposition for an evaluative sentiment of amusement regarding some *x*—whether a particular thing or kind of thing—where this amusement is constituted by or based on pleasurable responses to certain of *x*'s properties. These sentiments of amusement need not involve explicit appraisals—being amused need not involve making the explicit judgement 'this is funny'—but these sentiments do present their object as valuable, and so worthy of experiencing, having or preserving. On this account, a taste for puns, say, is a disposition to feel pleasurable amusement towards puns, and to see puns as valuable and worth experiencing as a result of their tendency to give one pleasurable amusement.

It is worth noting here an interesting analogy between erotic taste and what we might call 'comic taste' as compared to other sorts of taste. In both the case of finding something funny and finding something sexy, there is a particularly pleasurable reward in the offing—pleasurable amusement and thus potentially laughter in the former case, and pleasurable arousal and thus potentially orgasm in the latter case—and thus things that tend to give us these experiences are especially valuable to us; more so than, say, a nice pair of brogues is valuable to someone with a taste in leather shoes.

This Eatonian account of comic taste fits well with our ordinary talk about sense of humour. People do in fact seem to enjoy different kinds of humour, and find that kind of humour to be worth experiencing and seeking out, so it makes sense to treat sense of humour as a matter of taste. It also fits well with the common conception that different cultures have distinctive senses of humour, and the culture shock often experienced by those who go to a different country and find that they are unable to see what is so funny about the new country's comedy, and that their own jokes also fall flat.

At this point, it will be illuminating to ask: are there any criteria something must meet for it to be the kind of thing one can develop a comic taste for, or can one develop a comic taste for *anything*? Here are some things that I think we do ordinarily take people to be able to have a comic taste for: for toilet humour, for darkly morbid humour, for politically incorrect humour, for slapstick, for wordplay, for the absurd, for 'dad jokes' or for meta-jokes—jokes *about* jokes. This is quite a range; however, there do seem to be limits: it sounds very odd to say that someone could have a taste for jokes about chairs, say, or for jokes about summer.

A search for the difference between the plausible candidates and the implausible ones takes us to a theory in the philosophy of humour that we have not yet touched upon: the incongruity theory. This widely accepted theory comes in many different varieties (e.g. Clark, 1987; Martin, 1987; Morreall, 1987), but its basic form is that for something to be amusing, there must be something *incongruous* about it—something that is unexpected, or rule-breaking, or pattern-defying, or otherwise strange. That there is some kind of essential connection between humorousness and strangeness is supported, as John Morreall points out, by the fact that 'funny' means both 'humorous' and 'strange', and most other European languages also have a word with this dual meaning (1987: 188).

This incongruity theory fits well with our distinction between plausible and implausible candidates for things for which one could have a comic taste. In all of the plausible

cases, there is some kind of incongruity at play, whether it be incongruous compared to certain norms of politeness and respectability, or norms of physical behaviour, or norms of language or norms of jokes. Chairs and summer, on the other hand, are not incongruous per se (at least, not in the world we live in), and while a joke or humorous episode featuring a chair could be incongruous, it would not be the presence of a chair in itself that explained the incongruity. Thus, a chair is not the kind of feature of humour for which one could have a comic taste. Rather, it looks as though what one has a comic taste for is particular kinds of incongruity.

At this point, it should be noted that the incongruity theory is not universally accepted, although it is certainly the most popular approach to explaining what makes something funny. One prominent rival view is the superiority theory, which holds that finding something funny essentially involves feeling superior to the person one is laughing at—which is supposed to explain why we often find it funny when other people act clumsily or make mistakes. The other is the relief theory, which holds that amusement essentially involves a release of nervous energy—which is supposed to explain why we often enjoy jokes about subjects that make us nervous, like death and sex. I join the majority of commentators in preferring the incongruity theory, given that it can accommodate the cases that motivate the other two views, while avoiding clear counterexamples (clearly, not *all* humour involves feeling superior, and nor does it always involve releasing tension—most puns, for instance, meet neither condition).<sup>4</sup>

For this reason, I will talk as if some version of the incongruity theory is the correct theory for the remainder of this paper. However, I believe that whichever of these three views one takes, my point about the sense of humour being a matter of taste still stands. Whether or not one thinks that incongruity, superiority or relief are *necessary* for funniness, plainly none of them is *sufficient* for funniness—in life we encounter many incongruities, numerous opportunities to relieve nervous energy and a few occasions to feel superior (if we are lucky) which do not make us laugh. Even more recent versions of the incongruity theory do not succeed in identifying a form of incongruity that is sufficient for funniness. For example, A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (2010) have argued that benign norm violations are necessary and sufficient for humour. But clearly, not all benign norm violations are funny. For example, as Lauren Olin points out, ‘fashion blunders violate aesthetic norms, and are generally thought unimportant, but the poorly dressed aren’t uniformly hilarious’ (2016: 344).

So what is it about the humorous cases that mark them apart? I believe the answer is simply that those who find them funny have a comic taste for them, and not for the other cases. There is no deeper, intrinsic similarity that unites them; indeed, whether or not they are found funny differs from person to person, which makes it very hard to see how an intrinsic common thread could be found.

To return to developing my account of comic taste, then: I have argued that the sense of humour is a comic taste for a particular kind of incongruity. But how do these incongruities make one feel if one does not have a taste for them? There are two possibilities

---

4 A similar critique of the superiority and relief theories can be found in Olin (2016).

for how one might feel when one *lacks* a comic taste for something. First, one might lack any kind of sentimental disposition towards it altogether, and feel quite apathetic. Alternatively, one may have a comic *distaste* for that kind of thing. Eaton mentions distaste when first laying out her understanding of taste, saying that on her account, ‘to have a distaste for x is to have the standing disposition to be displeased by (or to have an aversion toward) x based on some of its properties’ (2017: 244). What kind of displeasure might comic distaste be? Reflecting on different reactions people might have to an incongruity suggests to me that there is not one particular displeasure that accompanies comic distaste, but rather one could be disposed to feel one or more of a variety of displeasurable sentiments towards an incongruity, such as irritation, boredom, disgust or pity.

We now have a pretty well fleshed-out account of the sense of humour, with emotional, perceptual and motivational facets to it. This richer account captures the phenomena of sense of humour better than the positions discussed in the previous section, and as such, it will allow us to make sense of where they go right and where they go wrong. On the one hand, it vindicates the thought that one can be amused by things that are at odds with one’s moral beliefs, because having a taste for something does not have to involve making any explicit judgements or having any particular beliefs about it. I can have a taste for sexist jokes—find them funny—without believing their sexist assumptions. This explains why Smuts moved away from the thought that one’s sense of humour reflects anything about one’s general character. On the other hand, it offers an explanation for why de Sousa and some others thought sense of humour did reflect belief: because one’s taste in jokes *could* match one’s moral beliefs, so for some people it may be the case that they do not find funny anything that they judge to be immoral. Perhaps de Sousa is disposed not to feel amusement at sexist jokes—if so, then his mistake is only in inferring that this is a necessary truth.

What de Sousa *is* right about, and Smuts wrong, is that sense of humour does reflect something about one’s character, which is what allows us to capture the phenomenon of complicity that Smuts’ account could not capture. To enjoy, say, sexist humour is to have a standing disposition to experience pleasure when one perceives it, and to see sexist humour as worthy of that amusement and worth experiencing—to see amusement to be *apt* with regards to that humour, even though you might *believe* that such humour is morally bad. And crucially, this disposition for pleasure and perception of aptness is *subjective*—there is no fact of the matter about whether sexist humour is funny or not, and it reveals something particular about you that you find it funny: there is something about you that is being co-opted to make you complicit in the humour.

At this juncture, it is worth saying a little more about what exactly makes sexist—or otherwise immoral—humour wrong, and thus makes one’s complicity in it immoral. So far, I have been characterizing sexist humour as humour that relies on sexist presuppositions without subverting them. But why is it sexist to use sexist presuppositions in this way—especially when one is ‘only joking?’

There are broadly two approaches to answering this question in the existing literature on sexist and racist humour, which track two approaches to defining sexism and racism in general. One centres on the harmful *consequences* of jokes that rely on such

presuppositions (e.g. Philips, 1984; Benatar, 1999), and the other centres on the *beliefs/attitudes* of those involved in the joke-telling episode: either those of the joke teller (e.g. Garcia, 1996, adapted to humour in Anderson, 2015), or, as we have seen, those of the audience (Bergmann, 1986). Perhaps the most sophisticated account is Luvell Anderson's definition of racist humour (2015), which accommodates both aspects, and distinguishes between racist humour and merely racially insensitive humour.

While I do believe that sexist and racist humour, and one's enjoyment of them, can harm the relevant social groups, my aim in this paper is not to determine which comic tastes are moral and immoral—virtuous or vicious—by appeal to *consequences*. Rather, I am interested here in the attitudes of the joke teller and their audience. I believe there is something immoral about having a taste for jokes like the St. Kilda supporter's joke—about having a standing disposition to see such jokes as worthy of amusement—regardless of whether the joke, or one's enjoyment of it, has any bad consequences for women. For, as my discussion of comic *distaste* showed, to have a disposition to find a particular kind of joke funny is to *not* be disposed to respond to it with a negative emotion such as irritation, boredom, disgust or pity. A comic taste for jokes like the St. Kilda supporter's joke, then, is a disposition *not* to see the kind of sexist incongruity used in this joke as worthy of a negative reaction—and it is this which makes the disposition immoral.

A similar point about complicity with racist jokes has been made by Tanya Rodriguez, who argues that 'ironic racist joking requires a certain complicit objectivity on the audience's part. Listeners cannot empathize with the particular ethnicity being disparaged' (2014: 14). To enjoy such a joke, the hearer must have a certain kind of ironic distance from the subject of the joke, which precludes empathy with that subject—we cannot be amused and empathetic at the same time. Here, Rodriguez is picking up on an observation first made by Henri Bergson about the absence of feeling required by comedy: 'to produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart' (2013: 11).

It is just this anaesthesia of the heart—this temporary suspension of empathy, and with it, other negative reactions to sexism/racism—that, I am suggesting, makes our enjoyment of such jokes an immoral habit. Having a taste for jokes like the St. Kilda supporter's joke, which rely on sexist or racist presuppositions without subverting them, means having a disposition to suspend our aversion to this sort of presupposition and our empathy with those it disparages—thus making us complicit in the joke teller's disregard for the relevant group. And if this is right, then it is possible for one's sense of humour to be immoral regardless of the consequences of being amused. Smuts is wrong to claim otherwise.

The second place where I disagree with Smuts is in his reluctance to attribute a moral value to the sense of humour itself. Smuts seems to think that one can only be held responsible for one's amusement insofar as one could have contained one's amusement but fails to do so. However, I am going to suggest in the following section that not just physical manifestations of the sense of humour but the sense of humour itself is something that can be changed, and therefore that one has more control over one's amusement than one might have thought, and thus more responsibility for it.

### 3. Farce of Habit

If this picture is right, then the next natural question is: is there anything I can do to cultivate my sense of humour in a more virtuous direction? In this section, I will make the somewhat speculative suggestion that our comic tastes are the result of habituation, and that cultivating one's sense of humour in a more virtuous direction will be a matter of engaging with good (that is, morally good) kinds of comedy—a suggestion that, as we will see, is thoroughly Aristotelian.

In determining how comic taste is formed, I once again take my cue from Eaton's account of erotic taste. Eaton, very appropriately for my purposes, endorses 'an Aristotelian model of habituation' (2017: 250),<sup>5</sup> according to which:

the disposition to feel properly about some object in the world is inculcated in a subject by repeatedly getting the subject to have that feeling with the right intensity toward the object. Representations ... can play a critical guiding role in habituation by encouraging their audiences to imaginatively engage with represented objects (characters, inanimate objects, events, situations, and the like) . . . . Representations solicit from their audience particular sorts of sentimental responses and train them on represented objects in our imaginations, and in repeatedly doing so over time, inculcate in this audience a predisposition to respond similarly to similar objects in the real world. (Eaton, 2017: 250)

In the realm of *erotic* taste, the idea here is that what we find attractive is shaped by what is, time and again, represented to us as attractive. A key part of this habituation will be engagement with representations, including visual media generally (such as advertising) and, as Eaton wants to claim, pornography specifically. Constantly watching certain bodies and acts portrayed in an eroticized light—'presented with particular vivacity and detail aimed at erotically stimulating its target audience'—gradually leads us to find those things erotic, regardless of what we *believe* about equality of the sexes (Eaton, 2017: 251).

As a result, Eaton recommends that the key to combatting sexism sustained through erotic taste is by encouraging the creation of, and engagement with, *feminist pornography*, that, for example, eroticizes female pleasure and empowerment, and features much more varied body types, thus habituating people's erotic tastes in a more egalitarian direction.

I find this Aristotelian model plausible as applied to erotic taste, and I want to propose that comic taste is developed in the same way (although incorporating the essential feature of incongruity): what people find funny is shaped by what is represented to them as worthy of amusement. Repeated engagement with sexist jokes, and sexist humour more broadly, will develop in people a taste for sexist humour, regardless of their beliefs about the sexes. Much as pornography depicts certain acts in an eroticized light, which habituates people to consistently find those acts erotic, comedy depicts certain speech/sounds/

---

5 Eaton's account here 'is based on Aristotle's discussion of virtue and habituation toward virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially Book II. Aristotle discusses the use of representations in habituation toward virtue in Book VIII of the *Politics*, the *Poetics*, and also the *Rhetoric*'. (2017, Footnote 3.)

acts in a humorous light—that is, delivered with a pace and tone that indicates a punchline, or accompanied by canned laughter, or portrayed in a way that foregrounds similarities with other things widely considered to be funny—which habituates people to consistently find said speech/sounds/acts funny.

Notice that this proposal fits well with the earlier observation that different cultures and social groups have distinctive senses of humour. If people are habituated by the comedy they are exposed to, and people make comedy based on what they already find funny, then within a culture, a particular sense of humour will be perpetuated. But because what we find funny is not objective—there is no fact of the matter about what is funny and what is not—between two cultures, there can be big differences in what people find funny.

For this proposal to really look promising, it will need to be supported by the psychology of humour. For instance, if something like this habituation model is right, then we would expect very young children's sense of humour to develop in response to cues from adults, or older children or comedic media—cues that *x* event or object, or image, is something that is appropriately laughed at, the most powerful cue being the laughter of others at that event/object/image.

And indeed, this does seem to be supported by psychological research. Developmental and cultural psychologist Vasudevi Reddy writes that 'in infancy, other people's responses to events can change the emotional atmosphere, enabling the carving out of objects of fear, distaste, and funniness' (2019: 189), implying that whether children learn to respond to incongruities with fear, distaste or funniness is shaped by other people's responses to those incongruities—how those incongruities are framed to the children.

And the importance of cuing is apparent in 'the phenomenon of infant clowning, where the infant seizes on others' laughter to (sometimes accidental) actions by the infant and repeats them to re-elicite laughter' (2019: 189). Examples from the study suggest that:

actions by infants ... appear to have become humorous objects solely by virtue of the parent's amusement at them ... Just as adult clowns pick up on things that amuse others and play on these things, so infants are both sensitive to, interested in, and motivated enough by others' laughter to pick up on the causes of others' amusement and repeat them. (Reddy, 2019: 90–91)

Across several studies (Reddy, 1991; 2001; Reddy, Williams and Vaughan, 2002), Reddy 'found numerous examples from infants from the age of about 7 months (when the earliest study began) of infants seizing on adult laughter to a variety of actions and repeating them' (2019: 191). Again, it looks as though what children come to find funny depends on what is framed or represented to them as funny, primarily through the laughter of adults.

There appears, then, to be some good empirical support to suggest that representations are key in shaping how children come to find things funny. If this picture is right, then the upshot is that the way to cultivate one's sense of humour is to stop engaging with comedy that represents as humorous the kinds of thing it is bad to find humorous, and to start engaging with comedy that represents as humorous the kinds of thing it is good to find humorous. These things may not seem funny at first, but after enough immersion in this sort of humour, one will eventually develop a taste for it.

Now, this empirical evidence supports this habituation picture as regards the initial development of the sense of humour in young children. However, even if it is true that children come to have a particular sense of humour through habituation via representations, this does not entail that the same kind of habituation is possible for adults. It could just as well be the case, based on this evidence, that once a person develops a particular comic taste, this taste stays with them for life, and habituation is no longer effective.

I grant that, based on my argument so far, this possibility is left open. If it is actual, then it only serves to underscore the importance of taking care with what is represented to children as funny, as the consequences of this will be extremely far-reaching.

I cannot prove that this possibility is not actual. However, I do think the alternative is highly plausible. Speaking anecdotally, it seems as though adults' comic tastes do continue to change throughout their lives, and often re-engaging with comedy one used to find funny leaves one baffled as to how one ever enjoyed it—either one is left cold by it, or one has come to find that kind of incongruity sad, or disgusting, rather than funny.

Even if it is plausible that adults' comic tastes can be habituated, though, it may well be thought rather less plausible that passively watching comedy one does not currently find funny will eventually change one's sense of humour. I am sympathetic to the thought that once one already has an established sense of humour, it may be hard to change it via passive engagement with comedy alone. Rather, I want to propose that the most effective means of habituation may well be something more deliberate: an intentional cultivation of one's tastes via purposeful attention and genuine openness to new possibilities.

In an article on the politics of sexual desire, Amia Srinivasan writes about the work of fat acceptance activist Lindy West, who:

describes studying photographs of fat women and asking herself what it would be to see these bodies—bodies that previously filled her with shame and self-loathing—as objectively beautiful. This, she says, isn't a theoretical issue, but a perceptual one: a way of looking at certain bodies—one's own and others'—sidelong, inviting and coaxing a gestalt-shift from revulsion to admiration. (Srinivasan, 2021: 90, referencing West, 2016: 76–77)

Here Srinivasan is discussing the same problem as Eaton, of how one might go about changing one's erotic tastes to be more egalitarian and inclusive. For her, this requires not just *looking* at the bodies in question, but *looking in a particular, attentive and open way*. Given that the odds are stacked against egalitarian taste, passively perceiving in the way one has been habituated to do will not suffice, and a more active project of seeking out the beauty of certain bodies, or the eroticism of certain acts, is necessary.

Might this sort of project of purposeful attention also be applicable to comic tastes? Certainly, it is possible to approach comedy with charity and willingness to be amused, just as it is possible to go in assuming the worst, and trying one's best to find every joke lame or cringeworthy or boring. These methods certainly do not work every time, and we often find ourselves being unable to laugh no matter how hard we try, or giggling despite ourselves. But an openness and attentiveness to finding the funny in progressive comedy seems a more promising way to go about changing one's tastes than pessimism, reluctance

and resistance. Moreover, progressive comedy has in its favour the virtue of novelty, and treading new ground, rather than reworking the same old tired subjects, so there will often be some new insight to seek out and enjoy, if one looks for it.

In other words, if we are interested in habituating people's tastes in a more egalitarian direction, perhaps the most effective way to go about it is to call on those with immoral comic tastes to do what feminists have been called on to do for so long: to see the funny side.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have proposed a richer account of the sense of humour, which brings out its emotional, perceptual and motivational aspects, by analogy with erotic sensibility. This has allowed me to accommodate the possibility of enjoying humour that is at odds with one's moral beliefs (a possibility missed by Bergmann and de Sousa's position) while simultaneously showing that one's sense of humour makes one complicit in immoral humour (a possibility missed by Smuts' position). Moreover, I have suggested that one arrives at one's sense of humour as a result of habituation via representations, and proposed that, as such, the way to change one's sense of humour, if it is possible at all, is likely to be by engaging with comedy that represents as funny the kinds of thing one wants to find funny. This kind of engagement, I have suggested, will likely be more effective if it involves purposeful attention; a deliberate attempt to see potential objects of humour as funny—to see them as *worthy of amusement*.<sup>6</sup>

Zoe Walker

Trinity College, Oxford University, Broad St, Oxford OX1 3BH, United Kingdom  
[zoe.walker@trinity.ox.ac.uk](mailto:zoe.walker@trinity.ox.ac.uk)

#### References

- Anderson, L. (2015). 'Racist humor'. *Philosophy Compass*, 10: 501–09. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12240>.
- Aristotle. (1987). 'Nicomachean ethics, book IV, ch.8', in Morreall, J. (ed), *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 14–16.
- Benatar, D. (1999). 'Prejudice in jest: when racial and gender humor harms'. *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 13: 191–203.
- Bergmann, M. (1986). 'How many feminists does it take to make a joke? Sexist humor and what's wrong with it'. *Hypatia*, 1: 63–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1986.tb00522.x>
- Bergson, H. (2013) *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic*. Tr. Brereton, C. and Rothwell, F. New York: Dover Publications.

---

6 This paper has benefitted greatly from comments from a number of colleagues and advisers. In particular, I owe thanks to Anne Eaton, Rae Langton, Lucy McDonald, Matyáš Moravec, Jessie Munton, Jack Wearing and two anonymous referees for the *British Journal of Aesthetics*. I am also grateful to Daniel O'Shiel and Viktoras Bachmetjevas for their comments on a preliminary conference version of this paper, published in their volume *Philosophy of Humour: New Perspectives* (2023).

- Clark, M. (1987) 'Humor and incongruity', in Morreall, J. (ed), *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 139–55.
- Clewis, R. R. (2020) *Kant's humorous writings: an illustrated guide*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Cohen, T. (2001) *Jokes: philosophical thoughts on joking matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- D'Arms, J. and Jacobson, D. (2000). 'The moralistic fallacy: on the "appropriateness" of emotions'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 61: 65–90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2653403>
- De Sousa, R. (1987) 'When is it wrong to laugh?', in Morreall, J. (ed), *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 226–49.
- Eaton, A.W. (2017) 'Feminist pornography', in Mikkola, M. (ed), *Beyond speech: pornography and analytic feminist philosophy*. Oxford: OUP, pp. 243–58.
- Garcia, J. (1996). 'The heart of racism'. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 27: 5–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.1996.tb00225.x>
- Kant, I. (2007) 'Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view', in Loudon, R.B. and Zöller, G. (eds), tr. Loudon, R.B. (eds). *Anthropology, history and education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 227–429.
- Langton, R. (2012) 'Beyond belief: pragmatics in hate speech and pornography', in Maitra, I. and McGowan, M.K. (eds), *Speech and harm: controversies over free speech*. Oxford: OUP, pp. 72–93.
- Langton, R. (2018) 'Blocking as counter-speech', in Fogal, D., Harris, D.W. and Moss, M. (eds), *New work on speech acts*. Oxford: OUP, pp. 144–64.
- MacKinnon, C.A. (1991) *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Martin, M.W. (1987) 'Humor and aesthetic enjoyment of incongruities', in Morreall, J. (ed), *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 172–86.
- McGraw, A. P. and Warren, C. (2010). 'Benign violations making immoral behavior funny'. *Psychological Science*, 21: 1141–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610376073>
- Morreall, J. (1987) 'Funny ha-ha, funny strange, and other reactions to incongruity', in his *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 188–207.
- Olin, L. (2016). 'Questions for a theory of humor'. *Philosophy Compass*, 11: 338–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12320>
- O'Shiel, D. and Bachmetjevas, V. (eds) (2023). *Philosophy of Humour: New Perspectives*. Leiden: Brill.
- Philips, M. (1984). 'Racist acts and racist humor'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 14: 75–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1984.10716369>
- Reddy, V. (1991) 'Playing with others' expectations: teasing and mucking about in the first year', in Whiten, A. (ed), *Natural theories of mind*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 143–58.
- Reddy, V. (2001). 'Infant clowns: the interpersonal creation of humour in infancy'. *Enfance*, 53: 247–56. <https://doi.org/10.3917/enf.533.024>
- Reddy, V. (2019) 'Humour as culture in infancy', in Loizou, E. and Recchia, S.L. (eds), *Research on young children's humor*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer: 187–201.
- Reddy, V., Williams, E., Vaughan, A. (2002). 'Sharing humour and laughter in autism and Down's syndrome'. *British Journal of Psychology*, 93: 219–42. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000712602162553>
- Roberts, R. C. (1988). 'Humor and the virtues'. *Inquiry*, 31: 127–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201748808602144>

- Rodriguez, T. (2014) 'Numbing the heart: racist jokes and the aesthetic affect'. *Contemporary Aesthetics* (Journal Archive), 12 (6). Available at: [https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts\\_contempaesthetics/vol12/iss1/6/](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol12/iss1/6/) (Accessed 24 April 2023).
- Smuts, A. (2010). 'The ethics of humor: can your sense of humor be wrong?'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 13: 333–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-009-9203-5>
- Srinivasan, A. (2021) 'The right to sex', in her *The right to sex*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 73–92.
- West, L. (2016). *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*. London: Quercus.