

# **Responsibility and Humor**

by  
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## **Introduction**

In this paper I first give an account of humor which describes it as a kind of playful incongruity. I then argue that moral responsibilities attach to humor, both for those who laugh and for those who are laughed at. I show that humor has particular links to friendship and that friends have particular responsibilities to each other concerned with humor. I go on to discuss offensive humor based on stereotypes, and argue that such humor is immoral even though it is not asserting anything derogatory. I also show that a joke can be offensively racist without being based on a stereotype. I describe the failure of some attempts to combat racism by portraying racists themselves as comically absurd, and suggest that more rounded portrayals of them and their targets might be more effective. I discuss two “putdowns”—comical ridicule by one politician of another—and suggest that this method is an irresponsible way of doing politics. Finally I discuss comical criticism of politicians by non-politicians, and suggest that it is dangerous to over-personalize politics by laughing too much at actual individuals or to reduce politicians to figures of fun. I also suggest that it is the responsibility of the citizens to remember that politics is more than just a joke.

## **I The Nature of Humor**

First of all, I shall clarify the sense in which I shall use two central terms: “humor” and “amusement.” “Humor” in English has many senses. In this paper I am not using it in the senses—related to each other—of a temporary mood or a prevailing disposition (the senses in which a person can be said to be in a bad humor today or good-humored in general). I am talking about humor in the sense which is connected with amusement. I am using the word “amusement” not in the sense of “an occupation for an otherwise idle

moment” but in the sense of finding something (or seeing something as) humorous, funny, or comic. Amusement in this sense is of course closely associated with, and very often expressed by, laughter, although strictly speaking laughter is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of finding something funny.

A second problem about humor concerns its category: is it a state of mind in us or a quality in things? We speak of someone as having a good, or keen, sense of humor, in the same way that we speak of a sense of beauty. This usage suggests that we think of humor or funniness as a quality that can be discerned in or attributed to humorous situations or humorous creations (jokes, cartoons, comic plays, etc.). We sometimes also see people’s behavior, including our own, as funny. There are many theories about the nature of funniness, but, as D.H. Monro says, “Most theories find the essence of humor in one or another of the following: superiority, incongruity, and relief from restraint.” (Monro 1967: 91). I shall follow John Morreall (Morreall 1983: 297-304) in his view that the essence of funniness is incongruity. He allows that superiority or relief feature as well in many cases of funniness, but maintains (plausibly, in my view) that the only element essential to all funniness is incongruity of one kind or another: departure from some orderliness or norm.

The idea of humor as incongruity may be illustrated by some standard examples of funny situations. A small misfortune, such as slipping on a banana skin, is incongruous in that there is a sudden interruption of the sufferer’s safe, steady, and perhaps dignified progress; a breach of custom, such as wearing very informal clothes on a formal occasion or *vice versa*, is an obvious case of breaching a norm; the “seaside postcard” kind of picture in which a short thin husband is incongruously accompanied by an enormously tall fat wife is contrary to normal expectations; student “howlers” are incongruous in being not ordinary student mistakes but far-fetched (though in some way comprehensible) confusions. (Here I cannot help mentioning the Glasgow University student who recently wrote: “Descartes said that the senses cannot be relied on because railway lines look as though they converge in the distance.” This is an incongruity on two levels: between the age of Descartes and that of the introduction of railways, and between the level of general knowledge one would expect of a university student and the dismal reality.)

Morreall maintains on several grounds that amusement is not an emotion. First, emotions involve having positive or negative attitudes to their objects, whereas amusement does not: people like the experience of amusement, but

need not like or dislike the thing which produces it. (A personal example: I once saw a group of snails, two larger ones and four smaller ones, on a step in my garden. They looked like a family with father, mother and four children, and I was amused by the incongruity between the usual notion of a family and the snails. This reaction does not show either that I like or that I dislike snails in themselves.) Secondly, emotions standardly involve having beliefs about their object—if I fear something, I believe it is dangerous, and so on—whereas amusement does not involve beliefs; rather it involves *seeing* something as incongruous. Thirdly, emotions typically motivate us—to flee what we fear, to attack what we are angry at, and so on—but amusement does not, except to prolong or repeat the experience of amusement. In short, in amusement our cognitive faculties operate not in a practical but in a playful mode, and Morreall has some interesting speculations about how this capacity for playful detachment, which at first sight seems not to be useful, might have a survival value which would cause it to be selected in the evolution of the human species.

As Morreall points out, this difference between engaged emotions and disengaged amusement means that emotions can neutralize amusement and *vice versa*. If someone who slips on a banana skin falls and screams with pain, the onlooker will normally not be amused because he or she will be taken over by concern and compassion. But if the fall is particularly incongruous—for example, if the sufferer drops a bizarre collection of things as he falls—amusement may, temporarily at least, banish compassion. We make use of this incompatibility between amusement and emotion when we employ humor to distract ourselves or others if an emotion (of whatever sort) threatens to become damagingly powerful.

## II Humor and Responsibility

It might seem that in claiming that humor operates in a playful rather than practical mode I have completely separated it from the sphere of responsibility, by which I mean the sphere of moral accountability. Responsibility seems primarily to concern motives and actions, and I have claimed that the only actions which amusement motivates are those which increase or prolong amusement. However, it is possible to bring amusement within the sphere of responsibility because it has effects. For example, people are often distressed if they realize that they (themselves, their doings and things which happen to them, not jokes deliberately made *by* them) are a source of amusement to others. Those who are amused are morally

responsible for causing this distress if they let their amusement become apparent, and they may be blameworthy, especially if they make deliberate jokes about the object of their amusement.

Why do people tend to be distressed when others find them funny? The question seems to answer itself: A's finding B funny seems to be a case of A's taking delight in B's being slightly odd in himself or getting something slightly wrong. If one describes the situation like that, it seems natural that B should feel both hurt by and annoyed with A; after all, no one likes getting things wrong and A seems to be *pleased* that B is in a position which no one likes to be in. Moreover, people's amusing incongruities are often manifestations of permanent minor deficiencies of character, intellect, physique, or some other kind of deficiency. For example, someone may regularly put on mismatching socks or misbuttoned shirts out of absent-mindedness, or slip or trip as he walks about out of inattentiveness, or give money to every beggar—however undeserving—out of an inability to say no, or constantly find a way of mentioning trivial successes (such as letters published in local papers) out of petty vanity, and so on. If people who are laughed at see that others are taking delight not only in the incongruities in themselves but also in their predictability, they are likely to feel further undermined. And the misery of being constantly laughed at should not be underestimated; one sometimes hears adults describe the distress they suffered as children as a result of being constantly laughed at, and clearly it can run deep.

People getting things slightly wrong are not the only things which amuse others. Sometimes an incongruity which is simply an unusual feature—bright red hair, unusual tallness, freckles, a speech accent different from those prevailing round about, a peculiar name—is made the subject of jokes. Even a desirable quality, such as conspicuous good looks, can attract humor. But people tend not to like being the target of jokes even about neutral or desirable features such as these. Perhaps personal jokes about neutral or desirable features undermine their victims in a different way: they come to feel, not that they are inadequate, but rather that they are seen as mere figures of fun—"the handsome one," "the posh one," and so on—not really taken seriously as individuals.

If people do not like being laughed at, surely it is simply wrong to do it? Those who are amused at others—I shall call them the laughers, and assume this includes all of us, at one time or another—have various defenses available. First they might say, "I can't help being amused; he just *is* funny"—or perhaps, if they are philosophers, "I can't help *seeing* her as funny."

However, often the obvious rejoinder to this is: “Well, it is wrong to let your amusement show, or to make actual jokes; you *can* avoid those responses.” Another rejoinder, if we think that certain people are too often amused at other people’s petty mishaps because they lack sympathy or imagination, is to blame them for their lack of these virtues, on the ground that people are in the long term morally responsible for their character insofar as they can modify it over time.

A more far-reaching defense available to the laughers is to shift the blame on to those who are distressed at being seen as amusing: “Don’t they realize how funny they are?,” or “Can’t they take a joke?” This is often a valid defense. There are things which happen to us and traits which we possess which would amuse us in someone else. Sometimes we are too taken up with ourselves to see ourselves as funny; but if we can find a detached standpoint from which to see ourselves as others see us, we may become able, not merely to tolerate others’ amusement, but actually to see ourselves and our own mishaps as funny, and enjoy this. This detached standpoint often arrives later. When we are describing an earlier absurd situation to others, we say, “I can see the funny side of it now.” Indeed, we sometimes predict the later emergence of the detached standpoint; in the midst of some bizarre calamity people sometimes say, “I shall laugh about all this tomorrow.” Perhaps we can and should learn to say to ourselves, “How will I regard this tomorrow?”

I suggest then that not only can people who laugh at others be held responsible—and sometimes blamed—for the discomfiture of those who are laughed at, but also people who are laughed at can be held morally responsible for their attitude to being laughed at. We praise a person who is good at seeing the funny side of himself and his own mishaps and minor failings for having a good sense of humor. Insofar as this ability is a sign of humility and freedom from self-concern, this praise is moral praise. We also tend to regard people who can’t see the funny side of things or can’t take a joke as morally blameworthy in some way. It is not easy to characterize their fault; perhaps we think of them as too much on their dignity or too self-important. We may also think they ought to learn not to spoil the fun. People enjoy laughing at other people; if one person is known to be very sensitive and others have to be careful about jokes about him or her, some of the joy and spontaneity goes out of the group, and this is partly the fault of the over-sensitive person.

These considerations do not show that all jokes should be accepted by their targets. Indeed, people are morally at fault in another way, i.e., lacking

in self-respect, if they put up with all jokes, however hurtful. But what makes a joke particularly hurtful? I suggest that there are two types of joke which are likely to be particularly hurtful and to which the butt has a right to object. First, there is the joke about a defect or misfortune which is not a trivial matter but a significant injury, handicap, or loss. We speak of such situations as “no laughing matter” and think of the joker as insensitive. (Admittedly, sometimes humor even about these situations—“black humor,” as it is called—is acceptable or even helpful to the sufferer. But this cannot be taken for granted.) The second kind of hurtful humor is a joke made in a way which suggests that it is *intended* to be hurtful; for example, it is produced in a sneering tone of voice, or the joker and his coterie laugh in an unspontaneous way which does not express genuine amusement. Such humorists, although they are motivated by malice rather than a desire to be funny, tend to fend off condemnation of their malice by claiming that “it was only a joke.” If they do this, they are morally blameworthy not only for the hurt they cause but also for the disingenuousness of their excuse.

### III Humor Among Friends

The connection between humor and friendship is complex. Commentators have written about the role played in friendship by the sharing of jokes—jokes in general, not jokes about the friends themselves.

When we laugh at the same thing, that is a very special occasion. It is already noteworthy that we laugh at all, at anything, and that we laugh all alone. That we do it together is the satisfaction of a deep human longing, the realization of a desperate hope. It is the hope that we are enough like one another to sense one another, to be able to live together (Cohen 1999: 29).

Roger Scruton, in his paper “Laughter” (Scruton 1983), suggests another kind of connection: in effect, that it is endearing to be funny. He claims that although people do not like being laughed at they may still seek it, because it is impossible to love those who are so perfect that they cannot be laughed at. In other words, those who are laughed at a good deal tend to be popular. If this is true, it gives people a self-interested reason to learn to be laughed at in addition to the moral reasons I mentioned earlier: namely, the connection between being able to be laughed at and the moral virtues of self-forgetfulness and humility.

Sometimes among a group of friends the exchange of laughter seems to be seen as a kind of game, in which every member of the group accepts and comes to enjoy the other members' laughter at their expense in exchange for being entitled to laugh at them. Such situations may turn fierce; jokes which seem to an outsider to be too savage are received by their butt with every appearance of delight and replied to with what seems like an equally savage joke at the expense of someone else. In such cases onlookers have to conclude that the group, contrary to appearances, are not fighting but playing a dangerous game, and "have only themselves to blame," as they say, if someone gets hurt. In other words, they voluntarily take part in an activity which involves risk of injury and therefore cannot blame others if they are in fact injured in the course of the game.

The eighteenth-century philosopher Francis Hutcheson in his *Reflections Upon Laughter* mentions two duties that friends have to each other which are best carried out through humor. One of these is curing one's friends of minor faults by ridiculing them. Hutcheson claims that this technique is effective if the ridiculer "testifies a just esteem for the good qualities of the person ridiculed and concern for his interests," so that the butt realizes that "our ridicule of his weakness flows from love to him" (Hutcheson 1994: 62). As Hutcheson gives no example of this technique, I will invent one. Suppose I have a woman friend who is agreeable and attractive, but talks far too much. I might try saying something like this to her: "You're so attractive and so nice—you must have a lot of admirers. But they won't ever be able to get a word in edgeways to tell you what they feel!" If she asks me whether I really mean it or am just joking, the answer perhaps is "Both." I am not literally expressing a belief that no admirer will be able to find a break in her continuous chatter in which to say something himself. But I am saying—deliberately, but in a comical way—that she talks too much. This may seem as though it is intended to be hurtful, but my aim is constructive, not destructive, and I hope that my compliments show that I am not being malicious.

Hutcheson seems to think that ridicule of faults is a better technique than what he calls "grave admonition" of them. Why might this be so? One reason may be that the recipient of straightforward criticism has to take up a position on it: challenge its validity, challenge the critic's right to criticize or admit its justice. But if what is said can be seen as a joke, the recipient can save his face by laughing merrily, while privately taking the point. However, the "joking criticism" technique is not foolproof. There is the danger that the recipient does not see that a criticism is intended. If the critic

thinks this is the case, he will have to say, “I’m not joking (or perhaps “I’m not just joking”)—you *do* talk too much.” There is also the danger that the recipient will be irritated by what he sees as patronizing attempts to spare his feelings by the use of humor, and will say: “If what you mean is that I talk too much, why not say in a straightforward way that I talk too much?”

The second task which, according to Hutcheson, friends carry out for each other by means of humor is the moderating of excessive admiration or fear:

When any object seems great in comparison of ourselves, our minds are apt to run into a perfect admiration: when an object appears formidable, a weak mind will run into a panic, an unreasonable, impotent horror. Now in both these cases, by our sense of the ridiculous, we are made capable of relief from any pleasant, ingenious well-wisher, by more effectual means, than the most solemn, sedate reasoning (Hutcheson 1994: 60-61).

In this familiar kind of activity the “well-wisher” is making deliberate use of the phenomenon I mentioned earlier whereby amusement can neutralize emotion.

#### IV Offensive Humor

Earlier I discussed the obligation not to employ hurtful humor. But we also speak of offensive humor: how does this differ from hurtful humor? There may be no sharp distinction. Roughly speaking, people find humor offensive if it is in some way against their sense of propriety, their self-respect, or their moral principles, so what is found offensive will vary according to the views of the audience. Any kind of humor will offend if it is produced on an occasion which the audience think improper for humor—though those who do not share their sense of the solemnity of the occasion will find humor all the funnier on that occasion (Palmer 1994: 164). A particular kind of offensive humor is that which is contrary to others’ sense of propriety or decency about bodily processes. Another particular kind is that which insults a particular group, whether the group is defined by age, sex, sexual orientation, religion, or any other significant quality. (What counts as an insult and what counts as significant are obviously important questions here, but I have no space to do these questions justice within the confines of this essay.) A third kind of offensive humor is that which is contrary to the moral principles of those who find it offensive. This kind of



humor has links with the second kind. For example, if I think that making or laughing at so-called racist or sexist jokes is morally wrong, I am likely to be offended if they are made in my presence, whether or not I am a member of the group targeted by the joke, because I am annoyed at being in effect invited to take part in what I think is immoral laughter. (This reaction can be distinguished from being concerned for the feelings of the targeted group; I can be offended by this kind of joke even if there is no member of the targeted group present.)

The most common kind of joke which may be held to insult a particular group is that based on a derogatory stereotype about the group. Examples of such jokes would be those which portray Jews as avaricious, Irish—or Poles or Newfoundlanders or Belgians or ... depending where you are (Davies 1988: 2)—as stupid, and so on. In the previous paragraph I said that if I think making or laughing at such jokes is morally wrong I am likely to be offended if I hear them. I now want to ask directly whether making or laughing at such jokes is immoral. A tempting view on this issue, called Amoralism by its proponents, Oliver Conolly and Bashshar Haydar (Conolly and Haydar 2005: 121-34), is that they are not. According to Amoralism, a joke of this kind is neither moral nor immoral in itself, because in telling such a joke we are not *asserting* that Jews are avaricious, Irishmen stupid, and so on; we are simply entertaining, playing with, the idea of their being so. The joke does depend on the existence of the stereotype, but those using the stereotype in this playful fashion are not thereby endorsing the stereotype or asserting anything at all. The proponents of Amoralism (hereinafter the Amoralists) correctly point out that members of targeted groups often tell stereotype jokes themselves. (Jerry Sadowitz, a well-known Glaswegian-Jewish comedian, makes use of the stereotypes that Glaswegians are drunkards, Jews avaricious: “It’s awful being a Glaswegian Jew—the Glaswegian wants to go out and get drunk every night, but the Jew is too mean to pay for it.”)

However, the relevance of the Amoralists’ assertion that members of target groups tell such jokes themselves is not clear, since that situation is necessarily different from situations in which an outsider tells them. If a member of a target group tells such a joke, it cannot readily be seen as a symptom of contempt for or hostility to members of the group, as it might be thought to be when an outsider tells it. Rather it becomes, among other things, an expression of confidence in one’s identity as a member of the group in question and, particularly when told among other members of the group, an expression of solidarity. The problem case is the telling of such

jokes by those who are not members of the group in question. We can grant to the Amoralists that telling such jokes is not in itself asserting that members of the group conform to the stereotype, but we may also wonder, as indeed the Amoralists do (Conolly and Haydar 2005: 126) whether constantly telling such jokes about the *same* group is a sign of hostility to the group in question. We can also agree with the Amoralists that if someone known on other grounds to be a racist tells us such a joke, or even laughs at it in our presence, we feel uneasy, as though implicated in his or her prejudice (Conolly and Haydar 2005: 125).

I agree that people who enjoy jokes depending on a stereotype of a group or groups need not believe that the stereotype is true. But I suggest that they may be enjoying a vague, unacknowledged, malicious, or contemptuous feeling towards the group, alongside the enjoyment of incongruity which in my view is the essence of amusement. As an example, consider a joke told by the comedian Les Dawson (Paton 1988: 214):

This Jewish bloke was crossing the road when he got knocked down by a bus. [...] A young policeman dashed up [...], folded up his cape and put it under the head of the chap who'd been run over. "There," said the policeman. "Is that better? Are you comfortable?" "Well," said the Jewish chap, "I make a living."

The policeman uses the word "comfortable" to mean "not in pain or discomfort." But the Jew takes him to mean "comfortably off," i.e., "reasonably prosperous," thereby giving the word an incongruous interpretation: only a stereotypical Jew would think first of money in such a situation! In theory people can laugh at such a joke without believing that all real-life Jews are avaricious, as I have said. But perhaps in practice part of their enjoyment, alongside their amusement at the incongruity, is a vague and pleasurable derogatory feeling which if put into words would be something like: "They do tend to be a greedy lot, not like us," perhaps combined with a resentful belief—not necessarily justified, of course—that the group in question seem to be more prosperous than themselves. Those who enjoy stereotype jokes—perhaps everyone, if the jokes are funny!—have a moral responsibility to make sure that they are not getting addicted to such jokes for racist reasons: i.e., out of a prejudice against all members of a particular race.

However, this monitoring of one's own amusement may be easier said than done. Ethnic jokes tend to be of two kinds: one kind about a group supposed to be stupid, the other kind about another group supposed to be crafty and stingy. One theory about such jokes is that they may be, among other things, a way of making statements about:

[...] the legitimacy of the situation of the majority relative to those ethnic groups above or below them [...]. Those ethnic groups who have failed economically and who provide unskilled labour [...] are labelled “stupid” with the implication that they deserve their low place in the hierarchy of classes and occupations [...]. Ethnic groups who have done better than the majority are labelled cheats and exploiters with the implication that *their* success is unfair and undeserved (Davies 1982: 390, his italics).

If this kind of subtext, presumably unconscious, underlies people’s enjoyment of what we may call ethnic humor, it will be very difficult for audiences to monitor their own reactions to it.

Les Dawson’s comedy has been said to “play on outmoded stereotypes of and attitudes towards women, the Irish and Jews [...]” (Paton 1988: 215) and to “both ventilate *and reinforce*” (my emphasis) the cultural code and social morality of the working class in the North of England” (Paton 1988: 216). I have claimed that the audience has a moral responsibility not to indulge their “vague and pleasurable derogatory feelings”; I would also claim that comedians have a moral responsibility not to reinforce the prejudices of their audiences by telling such jokes.

A comedian of this kind might try to defend his work in terms of the Amoralist position, as follows: “The stereotypes exist in the tradition, like traditional characters in a traditional pantomime. My jokes play (amusingly, I hope) with these stereotypes, but I am not asserting that *actual* mothers-in-law are ugly, wives stupid, Jews avaricious, and so on. If my creations adversely affect the attitudes of some of my audience towards real people, that is not my fault—it is the audience’s fault if they misunderstand the significance of such jokes.” This defense assumes that audiences can say to themselves, in effect, “This joke turns on the *idea* that all Jews are avaricious. But it’s not saying that all Jews *are* avaricious.” This is a rather sophisticated distinction for most audiences! Moreover, as I have already said, there may be unconscious motives at work which would reinforce a tendency to believe in some stereotypes. I therefore still maintain that comedians should not tell such jokes.

I would contend even more emphatically that comedians have a moral responsibility not to risk reinforcing what might be called *provocative* stereotypes: that is, stereotypes which encourage immoral action. Here is a Les Dawson stereotype-joke which has provocative implications:

A lass I know went to the pictures not long ago.  
“It was awful,” she told me afterwards,

“I had to change seats twelve times.”

“What was wrong?,” I asked her. “Did some bloke try it on?”

“Yes,” she said. “Eventually.” (Paton 1988: 214)

The stereotype here is the girl who seems to want to avoid sexual advances, but in reality wants to receive them. (For discussion of another joke on a similar theme, see de Sousa 1987: 289-292, Percival 2005: 93-120). What is particularly worrying about this kind of joke is its suggestion that girls are really longing for sex even if they give no sign of this. Of course the joke does not state this, but there is surely a danger that the idea may be planted or reinforced in some men’s minds (not necessarily consciously) and provide an excuse for molestation. This is a particularly irresponsible piece of humor.

As we saw, Amoralism’s defense of stereotype-jokes rests on the claim that such jokes do not assert that their subjects possess undesirable features; they only play with the idea of their doing so. I have said that despite their non-assertive nature such jokes risk reinforcing prejudiced attitudes. But jokes about a group can express hostility to it without playing on the notion that members of the group have certain characteristics. Consider the following French joke about Maghrebins (North African Arabs):

“What do you call one Maghrebin in the Seine? *La pollution*. What do you call one million Maghrebins in the Seine? *La solution*.”

(Conolly and Haydar 2005: 127)

This joke does not play with the idea that the Maghrebins have unpleasant characteristics. Nor does it assert that mass murder is the solution to the Arab problem. But using as pretext only a rather feeble pun, it entertains the idea of mass murder of a disliked group and invites the hearer to find this idea funny. I regard this as a thoroughly immoral joke.

## V The Professional Comedian’s Positive Responsibilities

Hitherto I have considered whether professional comedians have a responsibility to avoid certain kinds of stereotyping joke. I concluded that comedians should not tell such jokes and that their audiences have a responsibility to be on their guard against letting certain kinds of comedy reinforce bigoted attitudes. But comedians and those who write scripts for them have sometimes taken the view that they should also positively attack bigoted attitudes by holding such attitudes and those who have them up to

ridicule. The comedy series *Till Death Do Us Part* on British television was one such attempt:

In this series, Alf Garnett [the principal character] was intended to display the narrowness, stupidity, and ignorance of the bigot and thereby serve as an attack on bigotry. However, the context in which his bigotry was shown did nothing to reinforce the intended message. [...] There would be many who could empathise with the bitterness Alf felt in his extremis as an ex-soldier, a working man with nothing to show for his years of effort. Put into this man's mouth derisive comments about the blacks, or "coons," and for many of the white audience [...] you had an emergent folk hero. [...] His great attraction was that he *said* what others thought (Husband 1988: 158).

Indeed, BBC surveys of viewers' opinions of *Till Death Do Us Part* showed that while many viewers saw Alf Garnett as a harmless buffoon, many also thought that "some things he says are true," or even that "he's right more often than he's wrong" (Husband 1988: 163). Husband claims that it is possible to see the BBC's data as indicating "a classic situation where learning and reinforcement of existing beliefs can occur whilst defenses are down. [...] since the program is categorized as entertainment they are able to rehearse beliefs in a situation where they are freed from moral sanction and responsibility to validate statements. Thus, particularly if Garnett is regarded as a harmless buffoon, the audience need feel no embarrassment and they may reject the man whilst accepting his views" (Husband 1988: 165). Research data on a similar American program, *All in the Family*, indicated that "to an important extent, what you find in such a program is a function of what attitudes and values you bring to it" (Husband 1988: 162).

Does it follow from experiences such as this that television humor cannot be used to combat racism deliberately? The implication of Husband's account is that social developments in the UK since *Till Death Do Us Part* make it difficult to confront racism. But he also says that one deficiency in *Till Death Do Us Part* was that "there was no clear model for an alternative system of values to be found in the ranks of the other characters" (Husband 1988: 158). Perhaps, then, there is a possibility of learning toleration from the kind of comedy which shows an interplay between bigoted and more liberal characters and treats both kinds, not as caricatures, but as rounded individuals who can be taken seriously and identified with, as well as seen on occasion as funny. This of course would be comedy in a different and more demanding sense.

## VI Put-Downs

As we saw, the proponents of Amoralism maintain that stereotype jokes do not assert that the group in question possess the feature which is the basis of the joke, and base their claim that such jokes are not immoral “in themselves” on this thesis. They go on to claim that some kinds of humor do make assertions, and they apply the term “put-down” to a comically expressed derogatory assertion. Here is their example of a famous “put-down”:

[...] The British politician Denis Healey’s remark that being criticised by Geoffrey Howe was like “being savaged by a dead sheep” is a put-down which aims at capturing a truth about Howe’s ineffectual style, and does so in a funny way (Conolly and Haydar 2005: 130).

As they say, for this sort of humor it matters whether the asserted belief (here, the belief that Howe was ineffectual) is true or not; if he was not ineffectual, people will not find the remark funny. It also matters whether the *evaluative* judgment implied in the humorous put-down is sound; if people do not think that being ineffectual is a minor defect—a trait appropriately laughed at—they will not be amused. For these reasons, according to Conolly and Haydar, there is a connection between this kind of humor and morality. But there is also a more important connection which they do not mention. This is that “put-downs” of this kind, however apt, are unfair, in two ways. Firstly, they attack their victim in a way that is very hard to rebut—one can scarcely *argue* that one is not like a dead sheep. Secondly, they undermine the victim by attracting to him a lot of facetious publicity, quite irrelevant to his merits as a politician, that makes it difficult for the public to take him seriously.

The “dead sheep” put-down was an assertion which expressed—comically—the speaker’s belief about his victim. But a put-down need not be an assertion. Here is an account of a famous non-asserting put-down (a “paling” is a type of wooden fence):

Many years ago Winston Churchill so incensed a Labour Member of Parliament called Paling that the latter called him a “dirty dog” in the House [the British parliament, the House of Commons]; to which Churchill replied: “If he is not careful, I will show him what a dirty dog does to a paling” (Palmer 1994: 168-9)

This is a clever joke; clever enough to overcome distaste for a coarse joke, to silence the butt, and to restore the spotlight to the maker of the joke, without actually making any assertion about the butt. But as with assertive put-downs of the “dead sheep” kind, “mockery and humiliation devalue the butt and anything said by him: a reply by someone so low in esteem is not highly regarded, even if it is intrinsically worthwhile” (Palmer 1994: 169).

Of course humor has a place in parliamentary debate, as in almost all (perhaps all) spheres of life. But those who govern have a responsibility to make sure that the processes of government are not brought into disrepute by the wrong sort of humor. Undermining individuals through humor in the manner described above employs sharp, even cruel, wit rather than sound arguments and thereby suggests to the voting public that the House of Commons is like a kind of adolescent club, not to be taken seriously—an unfortunate notion which is already widespread in Britain. It also personalizes the proceedings of government to a perhaps undesirable degree. No doubt Churchill’s joke fulfilled his immediate political purpose, but this is an irresponsible way to practice politics.

## **VII Comedy as Political Criticism**

Not all of those who wish to make fun of politicians are fellow politicians; politicians also have humorous critics from outside their own ranks. In dictatorships, comic political criticism is widespread among ordinary citizens. Under such regimes there is no safe public way of criticizing the authorities, but private jokes which laugh at the system are often abundant and travel fast. Political jokes were particularly prevalent under the kind of regime, such as that of the former Soviet Union, which aimed at “spiritual meddling” with its subjects and demanded “the soul as well as the body” (Benton 1988: 35, 36). However, it would be implausible to say that in telling critical political jokes to each other the citizens of such regimes are fulfilling a moral responsibility. Such jokes relieve tensions and frustrations, but are not a form of active resistance, and may in fact be tolerated by the authorities because they keep people happy (Benton 1988: 41).

In a democratic society, most of the political jokes are told in public by professional comedians (Benton 1988: 34). Many of them say that they see criticism of the politics of the day as part of their job. In particular, they tend to claim that it is their responsibility to undermine any false reverence we may have for politicians by showing them in a comic light. But these aims

are problematic. There often seems to be no reverence to undermine: the political figure who is genuinely revered is rather rare, at least in the West. The ordinary run of politicians, on the other hand, tend to be all too easy to make fun of. One problem about comedians' taking politicians as their subject is that their activities may over-personalize politics. It is much easier to be funny about politicians, whether by cartoon or by impersonation, than about their policies. But it is the policies and the systems that lie behind them that most need critical scrutiny, and that is difficult to carry out by means of humor. In some cases this personalizing effect of humor goes further, and turns particular politicians into complete figures of fun, apparently not to be taken seriously and therefore not submitted to sufficient scrutiny. I think this was the case at one time with George Bush. When he first became President of the United States, British comedians were quick to mock his lack of fluency in speaking and portray him in comic cartoons as various kinds of animal; thereby, perhaps, distracting attention from his great significance for British as well as US politics and the dangerousness of his policies.

I said above that it is difficult to carry out critical scrutiny through humor of policies and systems rather than politicians. But it can be done. One way of doing this kind of scrutiny humorously is that used by John Bird and John Fortune in the comedy show *Bremner, Bird and Fortune* on UK television's Channel 4. Bird and Fortune take it in turns to impersonate, respectively, a (fictional) character called George Parr who is involved in something resembling an actual topical and controversial policy or happening, and a (fictional) television interviewer. In this way the policy or happening can be held up to ridicule by the probing questions and inept answers of the two fictional characters, without the distraction of thoughts about real politicians' past record or private life.

Another kind of humorous fictional scrutiny takes as its target aspects of the general political system. There have been two very successful comedy series of this sort on UK television. One, *Yes, Minister*, concerned the relationship between a feeble Cabinet Minister and a wily civil servant, suggesting that ministers may have little room for manoeuvre if the Civil Service decides to thwart them. The other, called *The Thick Of It*, was about the phenomenon of "spin." It showed a "spin doctor" (widely held to be a satirical portrayal of Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's Press Secretary) managing the spin to be put on the "stories" about events which bore some resemblance to real events at the time. Both these shows not only were very funny but also managed to make one wonder whether that was the sort of



thing that really did go on and realize that politics is not only about the actions of a few well-known people.

Particularly worth mentioning in this context are the satirical films of Michael Moore: *Roger and Me* (1989), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004).

In Moore's films, we travel as Lemuel Gullivers [an allusion to the hero of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*] through an all-too-familiar world, at first happy in being well-deceived, then seeing things from disruptively new but believable angles [...]. Yet, we [...] may sometimes fail to perceive that artifice plays as great a role in this process as fact [...]. As occurred in Swift's time, when a purblind Irish bishop proclaimed that he for one did not believe a word of the *Travels*, today we have critics [...] scoffing at Moore's veracity, making lists of his deceits, and wholly misunderstanding his objective of finally promoting more criticism and open enquiry of perceived injustice (Quintero 2007: 4).

It would be misleading to describe Moore's films as "amusing." They hold their targets up to ridicule and they display humorous incongruity, but they provoke anger as well as laughter. And, as the quotation above hints, they suggest responsibilities.

Humor about politicians is of many different types: private jokes; comic cartoons; comic impersonations of politicians; satirical sketches; sit-coms; films. Perhaps the very abundance of humor about politicians carries the danger that we will cease to take politics seriously. If we are to retain vigorous democracies, we need to remember that politics is more than just a joke. And the task of remembering this is the responsibility of the citizens, not the comedians.

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