

The Ethics of Humour: Preliminary Thoughts

Jim Lyttle

Abstract

An attempt is made to define humour by looking at the etymology of the word, a conceptual map of labels, and an integration of humour theories. The process of humour appreciation is assessed along with the use of humour as a tool. The need for a shared context in order to “decode” humour makes it exclusionary and the existence of a ridiculed target makes humour aggressive. Humour is ethical to the degree that the butt is consenting and/or deserving, and depends on the fiduciary duty of the initiator. It is hoped that this discussion will stimulate scholars to undertake a careful ethical analysis.

Introduction

Humour is a phenomenon that we all enjoy, more or less by definition. Like pleasure, humour seems to be a *prima facie* good.

However, as those who remember being teased in school can testify, humour can have very unpleasant effects. Some writers have attributed president Gerald Ford’s failure to earn a second term to repeated ridicule of his awkwardness by comedian Chevy Chase (Gardner, 1988). How many promotions or elections have been lost when people demonstrated insensitivity by telling rude or offensive jokes?

For all of humour’s acknowledged benefits, there are significant dangers that ought to be taken seriously. Thus it is important to begin a discussion of the ethics of humour. Unfortunately, definitions of humour and related concepts are so vague and preliminary that much of this paper must be devoted to dealing with that.

I will begin with an attempt to define terms and characterize how humour operates, so we can assess the degree to which it is an automatic process and outside of our conscious control. Then I will look at the use of humour as a tool, its exclusionary nature, the issue of the consent of the butt of jokes, and the responsibilities of those who initiate or show appreciation for humour. It is my hope that this discussion will give practitioners some ideas about how to use humour responsibly, and will generate further careful discussion by ethics scholars.

The Nature of Humour

We can begin the definition of terms by trying to deal with the word humor itself. Coming from the Latin *umor*, the word actually means fluid, as in aqueous humor and vitreous humor in medical contexts. In the Middle Ages, the body was thought to be composed of four humours (blood, phlegm, cholera, and melancholera), the correct balance of which resulted in good health (McGhee,

1979).

Over time, the word humour came to refer to the mood or temperament of a person (as in, “She’s in a good humour, today.”) and the word humourist began to be applied to those who did things to create such a good mood (Morreall, 1987). Because of this circuitous evolution of meaning, definitions of humour must deal with ambiguity about whether its essence is to be found in the stimulus itself or in our response to it (Chapman & Foot, 1976).

Since the etymology of the word itself does not provide an authoritative definition, we can try to draw a conceptual map of related terms and labels that are used for this topic.

For example, humour cannot be equated with laughter. Laughter is a physical behaviour that is often related to humour, and is properly associated with it, but can often be attributed to nervousness, courtesy, tickling, or even nitrous oxide (Giles & Oxford, 1970). Neither can humour be equated with mirth or amusement. These reactions seem to be a part of the overall phenomenon that is humour, but there are other sources of mirth (such as a report card full of high grades) and amusement (such as a fascinating new invention). Finally, humour cannot be equated with fun. Humour is fun, but so is hard work that is rewarding. Humour is not limited to jokes, or any other form of comedy. All forms of comedy are contrived to be humorous but much humour is spontaneous and not contrived at all.

Thus humour means something different from jokes, mirth, or laughter. In practice, we use the word humour as an umbrella term to cover the things that are essential to the humour; some sort of a trigger (stimulus) that comes to be seen as humorous, and the reaction of the observer who deems it so (response).

More than 100 theories of humour have been recorded (Schmidt & Williams, 1971), although the label theory is actually incorrect (Rucki, 1994). These concepts do not define related constructs so much as they try to characterize what humour is. I will categorize these theories into the three different groups that have become canonical among the 300 or so of us who call ourselves humour researchers and who belong to the International Society for Humour Studies.

The first category includes incongruity theories (e.g., Kant, 1951). At their most basic level, they claim that it is an incongruity in the trigger (stimulus) that creates humour. We laugh at things (usually pairs of things) that are incongruous but have been forced together in a joke or similar humorous event (Katz, 1993). Some advocate a version of this theory that looks at the other side of the coin, how the brain responds to such incongruities (e.g., Latta, 1998). But when will we laugh at an incongruity and when will we react differently?

The second category includes superiority theories (e.g., Hobbes, 1968). Superiority theories suggest that we laugh at things to which we feel superior. Incongruities to which we do not feel superior are threatening to us, rather than humorous.

The third category includes relief theories (e.g., Spencer, 1860), speculating about why humour exists. These range from Herbert Spencer's release theories taken up by Freud, to the arguments taken up by evolutionary psychologists (following on Minsky, 1984) that humour acts like a circuit breaker protecting us from ill-advised thought patterns such as infinite regress.

It can readily be seen that these theories are not in competition, but address different aspects of the phenomenon of humour. We laugh at incongruous (out of the ordinary) things that are non-threatening, and we laugh more when they involve the sexual or aggressive topics that are normally repressed (Hartz & Hunt, 1991).

Now we have an integrated theory of humour and a conceptual map to locate its meaning among related labels. Humour is an umbrella term to cover both a trigger (stimulus) and the reaction of an observer who finds it funny (response). What is the process that leads to this response?

In order to find something funny, I must both "see" the humour in it (understand the twist or incongruity that would qualify it as funny) and also "like" the humour (find it amusing or feel mirthful about it). Thus, there seem to be both cognitive and emotional aspects to the appreciation of humor. A few theorists believe that laughter is a natural consequence of incongruity, and that our good feelings come from that laughter having dealt with the incongruity (Latta, 1998). However, the vast majority of theorists believe that we feel good first and then laugh. (Presumably, this debate will be solved empirically, one day.)

Freud said that there are three participants in joking behaviour; using words that have been translated as *raconteur*, butt, and audience (Freud, 1928). This brings the discussion of humour from the purely individual (Goldsmith, 1991) to the social arena (Harvey, 1995). Someone tells the joke, someone else is the butt of the joke, and someone else is its audience (for without an appreciative audience, it isn't really a joke). It is clear that there are many instances of humour in which the butt of the joke is not a person at all. It may be an animal, or an inanimate object, or a language ambiguity. However, I would argue that there is always something that could be called the butt of the humour, which is also the trigger (stimulus) for the humour.

So, here is the result of our attempt to characterize humour. Incongruity theories teach us that the trigger must be unusual to get our attention. Superiority theories teach us that it must be non-threatening before we are able to enjoy it. Relief theories teach us that we laugh more when humour involves sexual or aggressive themes that are normally repressed. Humour involves both a trigger (stimulus) and a response. The trigger (butt) may or may not be human, but is always presented as being incongruous in some way. The response consists of two things. The first is noticing or understanding the humour (cognitive) and the other is enjoying the humour (emotional).

Humour as a Tool

First, I should note that we are not concerned here to develop an aesthetics of humour. Some

humour is in terribly bad taste. That does not, in and of itself, make it unethical. An aesthetics of humour might look at dimensions such as form (from slapstick to wordplay), temperament (from mean-spirited to benevolent), and decoding (from obvious to subtle) for example. However, this discussion is focussed specifically on the ethics of humour.

A topic on the mind of every humourist is political correctness (Lewis, 1997; Saper, 1995). This term is itself pejorative, since it inherently ridicules the enterprise of fostering social utopia through the responsible use of language. Today there is a groundswell reaction against political correctness (Bowden, 1993; Platt & Wilkinson, 1994). Hardly anyone will argue that the use of humour *per se* is politically incorrect, but some will argue that humour should not be used to undermine the power of groups or categories of people (Philips, 1984). To some extent, this argument has nothing to do with humour.

For example, I take it that it is not justified for men (who are, on average, larger and more powerful) to bully women (who are, on average, smaller and less powerful). Thus it is wrong for men to bully women with angry words, physical weapons, humour, or anything else. Humour's use as a tool is guided by the ethics of the enterprise for which it is being employed. In this vein, some have argued that the use of humour to communicate bad attitudes counts against its humour (Gaut, 1998).

However, there are two things we can note in specific reference to the use of humour. First, we can point out that it is a speech act rather than a physical one. Hitting people with ridicule is more like denouncing them in an editorial than it is like hitting them with a hammer. Second, we can point out that it is only a half-hearted speech act, making playful assertions only and sometimes subject to the "just joking" defense (Knox, 1951). To a degree which varies from case to case, the assertions made in humour are not meant to be true or even to be taken as true.

Admittedly, most would agree that any *good* joke has an element of truth to it (Swabey, 1961).

Furthermore, it is always possible that the person is laughing *at* the values expressed rather than laughing along with them (Hare, 1985). Some might argue that those who agree with the attitudes portrayed in a joke enjoy it more. However, one could argue that the more one agrees with the attitudes portrayed in a joke, the less it would seem incongruous.

So, when humour is used as a tool, we should judge it by the use to which it is being put, while noting that humour is a quasi-committed speech act.

The Ethics of Humour

Beyond the appropriate use of humour as a tool, what about the ethics of humour *per se*?

Humour thrives on language ambiguities and, in that sense, highlights the danger of taking our speech too literally (Basu, 1999). Like horror (Carroll, 1999), humour reminds us of the absurdity of life. The sense of humour has even been compared quite directly with a sense of what is ethical

(Davis, 1983), especially in children (McGhee, 1974). People who create humour for a living tend to be pre-occupied with ethical judgements (Fisher & Fisher, 1981, p. 35) and have been analyzed as social commentators (McGhee, 1974).

Because humour is (almost by definition) pleasurable (Pfeifer, 1994), I am willing to consider it a *prima facie* good. I would argue that pleasure should be pursued with impunity, unless or until some harm can be demonstrated. This would include harm to a person (whether the humourist or someone else), violating teleological values like maximizing total happiness. This would include harm to principles, like laughing off requests for credentials, violating deontological values. And this would include harm to the character of the humourist, such as trivializing important issues, which would violate virtue ethics.

Although we have defined humour as involving both a trigger (stimulus) and a response, it will be the response that is the subject of our ethical investigation. It seems inconsequential to wonder whether incongruities are ethical and whether they ought to exist, since they simply do exist. The interesting questions are whether or when we ought to notice them, and whether or when we ought to enjoy them.

When it comes to the cognitive element of the humour process, incongruity theories have discovered that people “get the joke” to the degree that they are well-developed cognitively, and to the degree that they are familiar with the context within which the trigger seems incongruous. I take it that someone’s level of cognitive development is ethically neutral, except to note that those who are less developed should not therefore be ridiculed (without strong justification), and that repeatedly feeding people humour that is obviously “over their head” constitutes some sort of abuse.

However, the sharing of context is a more ethically laden concept (LaFollette & Shanks, 1993). Humour is not that different from any other kind of communication, in requiring a shared context between sender and receiver in order to make sense of the message (O’Keefe, 1990). However, the “coded” nature of a humorous message makes the context even more important and even more selective. A plumber might not get a joke about carpentry.

It is precisely this quality of humour that accounts for the phenomenon of an “in joke,” and simultaneously signifies the existence of an “out-group.” While there may be in-groups that do not specify or oppose outsiders, the very existence of an in-group inherently defines an out-group even if passively.

Creating and maintaining in-groups is ethically defensible. People thrive on a sense of community (Schaefer & Zaller, 1999) and, perhaps because of our tribal heritage, we have little ability to feel included in a community the size of a modern city. We identify with smaller groups. We know that groups of people are better able to tackle large projects and deal with the environment than individuals.

However, their treatment of outsiders is a sensitive matter. For example, group members consider outsiders to be less ethical than themselves (Stephenson, Galbraith, & Grimm, 1995). In today's increasingly diverse society, most people consider themselves outsiders to one group or another. As a result, there are many who would suffer if outsiders were treated in a hostile manner. Unlike our ancestors, we live in close proximity to many different people and must get along.

Thus we have discussed the cognitive element of the humour process. Whether someone gets a joke or not depends on how well-developed they are, and how familiar they are with the context in which the observed event seems incongruous. This shared context means that humour has an inherently exclusive nature, which must be considered by anyone who wants to use humour responsibly.

Turning to the emotional element of the humour process, we have to discuss the degree to which we are responsible for our emotional responses. I would characterize an emotion as a desire to act. For example, anger makes me want to hit something, envy makes me want to take something, and jealousy makes me want to hold onto it. Emotions (perhaps chemically) force desires upon us. However, as civilized people, we are expected to control our emotions. People routinely say, "Don't get mad." Short of temporary insanity, we are responsible to check our emotions and to resist their expression if it would be harmful to others.

So far, we have seen that we should be responsible about the knowledge that humour is inherently exclusive of anyone who does not "get the joke" and that we are responsible for the consequences of humour appreciation, even if it is characterized as an emotion.

Using Humour Ethically

When initiating (creating or, more often, finding) humour, people must consider their relationship to the butt of the humour. Whether the butt of their humour is a person or not, they must first ask whether they have a fiduciary responsibility to it. For example, as a therapist, one probably should not ridicule a client. This duty of care results from the trust that has been required of the client by virtue of the relationship that both have entered.

This duty exists with or without compensation. It also exists whether or not the butt of the humour is human. For example, a preacher probably should not ridicule the Bible or the church building. It may be okay for someone else to do that, but it is not appropriate for the official spokesperson. This is because holding the position carries with it certain responsibilities and expectations about respecting the office.

Second, those who initiate humour should not bully anyone. One should only engage in such a playful attack on someone who is either consenting or deserving. To test whether the butt of any particular instance of humour is an appropriate target, consider the following.

Is the butt inanimate? Most people will think that it is acceptable to make fun of highway signs and language

ambiguities with impunity. Inanimate objects will not take offense to jokes. This does not mean that people cannot make fools of themselves by joking too much, or that they couldn't hurt the Road Commissioner's feelings by ridiculing the highway signs, or that playing with language ambiguities might not be an unforgivable digression. This means simply that the butt of humour, if inanimate, will not take offense.

I will leave it to the gentle reader to rule on whether their pets or other animals should be considered unoffendable (and thus in the same category as inanimate objects) or sensitive (and thus in the category of human victims). Although I doubt that animals are offended by most humour, they do sometimes seem embarrassed when ridiculed.

If the butt is human, is there informed consent? It is not simple to assess such consent in a humorous situation because there are strong social sanctions against complaining about humour. People who do so may be accused of lacking a sense of humour and will be told not to take things so seriously. It would be bullying to take advantage of this situation to get in a shot against someone who dare not retaliate, in my view.

People who are ridiculed are (almost by definition) different from the norm in some significant way. Those who are unusually loud and aggressive might be expected to fend for themselves when ridiculed, but those who are unusually shy and passive certainly cannot. Furthermore, the butt of humour may feel that it is a sign of weakness to even show an uncomfortable face. Sometimes the unhappy butt of a joke will go to great lengths to project the appearance of enjoying the humour to "save face." This reinforces the idea that we cannot assume our humour is working well, just because no one has complained.

I would argue, however, that consent can safely be inferred if the situation is reciprocal. If person A makes fun of person B about as often as person B makes fun of person A, there is at least presumptive evidence that the joking relationship is consensual.

If the butt of the humour is human, and whether or not the butt is consenting, is he or she deserving of ridicule in some way? Jokes about pedophiles, while tasteless, would be unlikely to face ethical censure. Those who are pompous or overly well dressed might be considered to have invited criticism. Lawyers and the Internal Revenue Service seem to have earned the ire of the American people, who love to hear jokes about them.

Besides those who deserve ridicule for their transgressions, there are some people who are considered "fair game" by virtue of their positions. For example, anyone who has achieved and benefits from fame (such as politicians, entertainers, and sports figures) is generally considered fair game for ridicule. The justification is twofold. First, having selected a life in the public spotlight, one has to expect to get public attention both positive and negative. Second, because they are visibly successful, the assumption is that they can survive such abuse unharmed.

So we have established the following. When initiating humour, one should consider the inherently exclusive nature of humour and ensure that the butt is inanimate, consenting (perhaps reciprocating), or deserving (perhaps fair game).

What about appreciating humour? Are people racist if they laugh at racist jokes? Some writers assert that anyone who enjoys a certain type of humour thereby approves of the attitude portrayed in it (de Sousa, 1987), but most agree that people can playfully entertain values that they do not really hold, for the sake of a joke (Benatar, 1999). Nonetheless, people who laugh at certain types of humour should consider that they may be seen by observers as agreeing with the attitudes expressed there.

What about being the butt of humour? Is there an ethical responsibility to speak up against this practice? Generally, it is only the self-interest of the butt that is at stake and that person can be forgiven for bowing to the social sanctions listed above and accepting the playful abuse. The only exception is when the butt represents a larger group. For example, if I were the only woman in a room and a sexist joke were being told, I might feel a responsibility to speak up on behalf of my gender.

Conclusion

Humour can be characterized as the enjoyment of incongruity (Clark, 1970). Incongruity itself has no moral dimension, but its enjoyment does. The enjoyment of incongruity is acceptable and even necessary, although in excess it could lead to chaos. Even if this enjoyment is seen as an emotion, we are responsible for its control and expression. Thus humour does not involve any processes so automatic as to be immune from ethical censure.

As a tool, humour must be judged by the use to which it is put. By nature, humour is exclusive of those who do not share enough context to “get the joke.” Thus humour initiators must consider who is excluded from each instance of humour.

As a practical matter, we can say that interpersonal joking is ethical to the degree that the butt is consenting (or reciprocating) and deserving (or fair game). Also, whether the butt is human or not, humour is ethical to the degree that the initiator is not violating a trust or exercising the power of a bully.

I hope that this discussion gives practitioners some dimensions to consider in order to use humour responsibly, and that it will trigger greater minds to undertake a careful ethical analysis of humour and its use.

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