

THE NORMATIVITY OF HUMOR

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In this paper, I'd first like to explore the idea that the concept of humor is a distinctive kind of normative concept. In particular, I'll argue, the concept of humor should be understood as involving a kind of *violation* of the norms that constitute other normative concepts. Because there are a variety of other normative concepts and a variety of norms associated with each, there are also a variety of categories of humor, as well as various salient subclasses of those categories. I'll first survey several categories of humor—the categories that are to be understood as involving violations of practical, epistemic, and aesthetic norms—and then I will explore the consequences of the account of humor that that survey suggests. Next, I'll argue that the key to distinguishing the humorous norm-violations from the non-humorous norm-violations is an understanding of the practical, epistemic, and aesthetic virtues that successful instances of humor manifest. The resulting picture is one on which the concept of humor is doubly normative; it results from the violations of (practical, epistemic, and aesthetic) norms, and succeeds when it manifests many of the same (practical, epistemic, and aesthetic) features that give rise to other kinds of normative successes.

One important caveat: there are crucial differences between what Hartz and Hunt 1991 call “advertent” humor—roughly, humor that is deliberately produced by an agent—and “inadvertent” humor—roughly, humor that is not.¹ Examples of the former include comedic essays and jokes; examples of the latter might include someone unintentionally slipping on a banana peel, a non-human animal making a funny gesture or noise, or a natural formation of rocks that happens to resemble Richard Nixon. My primary focus in this paper will be on advertent humor, though much of what I have to say will apply to inadvertent humor as well. I won't defend a view here about whether one of these kinds of humor is more “fundamental” or

“primary” than the other, but in what follows I will try to draw attention to some of the similarities and differences between them.

1. Practical Norms

In his insightful book *Comic Relief*, John Morreall advocates a Play Theory of (advertent) humor, according to which “in amusing people we are out for their pleasure, and not to gain information or to accomplish anything . . . amusing people is a way of playing with them.”² In developing his account of the kind of play that is involved in humor, Morreall makes extensive use of Victor Raskin’s idea that in joking we use words in a “*non-bona-fide* way.”³

To understand this view, we first need to understand what it is to use words in a bona fide way. On the standard picture of speech-acts due to Austin, the *locutionary act* is the speech-act of *saying* particular words (with a certain sense and reference), the *illocutionary act* is the act performed in saying those words, and the *perlocutionary act* is the act performed *by*, or *in consequence of* saying those words.⁴ For example, at the end of the wedding ceremony, the officiant might in one breath perform the locutionary act of saying “I pronounce you married,” the illocutionary act of pronouncing the couple married, and the perlocutionary act of causing the couple to kiss and the audience to clap.

On Morreall’s view, when we are joking, “we may exaggerate wildly, pose questions sarcastically, say the opposite of what we believe, express emotions we don’t feel, make hostile remarks to friends, and break other linguistic conventions.”⁵ In other words, when we joke with each other, we perform locutionary acts that would under different circumstances constitute the illocutionary acts of asserting, asking, saying, expressing, insulting, etc.; however, because we are joking, those locutionary acts *fail* to have their ordinary illocutionary force. For example, the person who jokes that he plans to kill his friend out of jealousy at his upcoming vacation might perform the very same locutionary act as a would-be murderer—saying the words “I’ll kill you!” with a particular sense and reference—but whereas in the would-be murderer’s mouth those words constitute the illocutionary act of *threatening someone’s life*, in the friend’s mouth the words have no such illocutionary force. In fact, on Morreall’s view, in the friend’s mouth those words have *no illocutionary force at all*—in saying the words the friend isn’t *really* doing anything at all, but is merely *playing at* doing something (namely, threatening the vacationer’s life). I’m not entirely sure that Morreall is correct here; perhaps the right thing to say about the friend who jokingly says “I’ll kill you!” is instead that the friend *did* thereby perform an illocutionary act: namely, the act of making a *play-threat* or a *joke*. I’m not sure whether this view or Morreall’s view is correct, but this issue doesn’t matter at all for

my purposes. I'm interested in the idea that joking often involves *violating* the norms in virtue of which spoken words and bodily gestures have the illocutionary force they normally have. And I think it's clear that this occurs in a joking threat, regardless of whether the correct verdict here is that the joker illocutes a play-threat or fails to illocute at all.

Other examples of this general phenomenon abound. When we joke with each other, we play at giving advice, proposing plans, criticizing, apologizing, asking permission, hypothesizing, promising, and far more besides. Satirists often play at defending proposals or arguing for positions, as in Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal."⁶ Stand-up comedians often play at expressing confusion, outrage, or alarm. Moreover, the phenomenon is surely not limited to linguistic acts; various physical jokes involve playing at attacking, cowering, laughing, crying, falling asleep, being sick to one's stomach, recoiling in pain, or removing a knife from one's back.

This suspension of normal illocutionary force in jokes explains the protestation "I was just joking!" when one's audience perceives a genuine threat, suggestion, insult, etc., where (it is claimed) only an ersatz version was intended. This protestation can be appropriate, I think, in some cases of genuine miscommunication or blameless ignorance. But making the protestation surely doesn't always constitute a satisfactory defense—in some contexts, for example, pretending to advocate something rude or offensive is itself to do something rude or offensive. Maybe in such cases the person isn't really pretending to do something rude; since he actually does something rude, he is merely attempting to pretend to do something rude, while actually doing something rude. Regardless, in such a case, the fact that the speaker intended (and attempted) to pretend to say something rude doesn't mitigate the speaker's rudeness; it merely (partially) explains the rudeness. This is why "I was just joking!" can ring so hollow in the ears of someone who is understandably put off by a poorly conceived or executed attempt at humor.

Is the phenomenon that Morreall has in mind better called *irony* than *joking*? These two phenomena are surely very closely related, and I'm open to the suggestion that all joking involves irony of a certain sort. Irony certainly often involves normative violations of different kinds. Verbal irony (such as saying "Great job!" to someone after a spectacular failure) involves violations of practical norms governing the appropriateness of performing locutionary and illocutionary acts. Situational irony (where a surprising or unexpected event occurs) involves violations of our expectations or inference patterns (about which much more in the next section). And dramatic irony (where the "audience" of a fiction knows or understands something about the fictional world that one of its characters does not know or understand) involves evaluating situations and actions relative to multiple (often incompatible) contexts and/or perspectives.

Other practical norms are also violated in humor. Norms associated with etiquette and social propriety, for instance, are often deliberately breached in advertent humor, and accidentally breached in inadvertent humor. In

Taking Laughter Seriously, Morreall argues that jokes often violate Grice's maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner—in many cases, more than one of these maxims.⁷ We often joke by wildly speculating or guessing; by speaking vaguely or obscurely; by alluding to irrelevant considerations; by being ambiguous, long-winded, or overly terse; or by giving too much or too little information.

Inspector Clouseau asks the Hotel Clerk “Does your dog bite?” and the Clerk says “No.” The dog bites Clouseau, and Clouseau exclaims “I thought you said your dog did not bite!” to which the Clerk responds, “This is not my dog.”⁸ The Clerk implicated that the contextually salient dog was his by failing to correct Clouseau's (mistaken) presupposition that it was his, violating the Maxims of Quantity, Relation, and Manner.

Mitch Hedberg says: “I used to do drugs. I still do, but I used to too.”⁹ He deliberately violates the Maxim of Manner; he could have conveyed the same information more briefly and less obscurely by saying “I've been doing drugs for a long time.” Instead, he generates the implicature that he no longer does drugs, which he then immediately cancels.

A Jewish guy calls his mother and says “Mom, how are you?” The mother says, “Terrible, I haven't eaten in 38 days.” He says, “Why haven't you eaten in 38 days?” And the mother says, “I didn't want my mouth to be full in case you should call.”¹⁰ The mother is lying as well as being deliberately obscure (and, crucially, passive-aggressive), violating the Maxims of Quality, Quantity, and Manner.

Some cases of semantic ambiguity (both advertent and inadvertent) also fit into the Gricean mold. The famously ambiguous headline “British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands”¹¹ is ambiguous between two very different readings, and hence violates the Maxim of Manner; moreover, the unintended reading clearly violates the Maxims of Quality and Relation when printed in a serious newspaper. Similarly with “Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case,” “Farmer Bill Dies in House,” “Prostitutes Appeal to Pope,” and “Stolen Painting Found by Tree.”¹²

So-called Superiority Theorists of humor have identified another way in which humor often involves violations of practical norms. On their view, all humor has a “target” or a “butt”—i.e., the thing that is being *made fun of* in a joke or the thing that is being *laughed at* in an instance of inadvertent humor. Humor, then, just is the feeling of superiority that we feel over these targets. As Hobbes puts the point,

Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.¹³

On my view, Hobbes was wrong that humor *just is* this “sudden glory” caused by perceived superiority. As Hutcheson points out, “burlesque

allusion” and other witticisms serve as counterexamples to the necessity of superiority for humor:

... we may observe, that we often laugh at such allusions, when we are conscious that the person who raises the laugh knows abundantly the justest propriety of speaking, and knows, at present, the oddness and impropriety of his own allusion as well as any in company; nay, laughs at it himself. We often admire his wit in such allusions, and study to imitate him in it, as far as we can. Now, what sudden sense of glory, or joy in our superiority, can arise from observing a quality in another, which we study to imitate, I cannot imagine.¹⁴

Hutcheson also identifies several counterexamples to the sufficiency of superiority for humor:

If we observe an object in pain while we are at ease, we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing; and yet here is occasion for Hobbes’s sudden joy... It is a great pity that we had not an infirmary or lazaret-house to retire to in cloudy weather, to get an afternoon of laughter at these inferior objects.¹⁵

Still, while Hobbes and the other Superiority Theorists were wrong to *identify* humor with feelings of superiority, there is little doubt that *some* instances of humor really do operate by exposing a weakness, flaw, contradiction, or deformity in an identifiable target or butt. *Making fun of* someone or something isn’t all there is to humor, but some jokes really do have targets. Such jokes often violate practical norms that require politeness, deferral to authority, flattery, respect, and even dishonesty. Of course, some such jokes are crass or mean-spirited, in some cases even racist, sexist, or otherwise morally problematic. But in other cases a joke with a target can be an act of social or moral protest, or an apt criticism of a deserving target, or a gentle teasing of a friend. What all of these jokes have in common, I submit, is their violation of particular practical norms governing appropriate treatment of the target in question.

Psychologist Paul McGhee has identified and distinguished four stages in the development of humor in children.¹⁶ In the first stage, “Incongruous Actions toward Objects,” children deliberately misuse objects, for example pretending to eat something non-edible. In the second stage, “Incongruous Labeling of Objects and Events,” children deliberately misuse words, for example calling their father “mommy” or their mother “daddy”. In the third stage, “Conceptual Incongruity,” children are amused by incongruities such as a dog that meows or an elephant in a tree. And in the fourth stage, “Multiple Meanings,” the child begins to enjoy puns, homophones, and other verbal ambiguities. At each stage, the child experiments with a new kind of inappropriateness—i.e., a new kind of violation of the norms that they are learning and internalizing as they develop. While of

course humor continues to get more sophisticated beyond the fourth stage, there is good empirical reason to think that it is violations of norms associated with words, actions, and concepts that form the basis of our senses of humor.

Finally, some instances of humor involve representations of violations of various practical norms that are moral in nature; consider the prevalence of violence, condescension, callous indifference, sexism, racism, and heteronormativity in nearly all forms of comedy. The humor of Archie Bunker from *All in the Family* derives largely from his sexism and racism; the humor of Moe Szyslak from *The Simpsons* derives almost entirely from his unwarranted aggression, fraudulent business practices, and immoral hobbies; and the humor of nearly every character in *Seinfeld* and *Arrested Development* derives from their self-involvement, pettiness, and almost pathological lack of empathy. In each case, a moral (and hence practical) norm is being violated for comic purposes.

2. Epistemic Norms

The second important category of norms that are routinely violated in humor are epistemic norms.

Though Plato's view of humor was different from Hobbes's view, Plato was also a Superiority Theorist, and saw humor as a kind of ridicule of a specified target. For Plato, humor has as its target the ridiculous; someone is ridiculous when he or she violates the directive to "know thyself."¹⁷ So, for Plato, humor is directed at someone who is self-ignorant, either about his wealth, his physical state, or his wisdom. While I think it is highly doubtful that *all* humor has self-ignorance as its target, I don't think that it can be seriously doubted that many instances of humor are, as Plato suggests, a reaction to epistemic failings in ourselves or others. Ignorance, stupidity, delusion, narrow-mindedness, absent-mindedness, irrationality, and other forms of epistemic failure are mainstays of comic characters in literature, film, and television.

A variety of theorists with very different perspectives on humor in general have observed that humor often essentially involves a kind of *surprise* or *violation of expectations*. For Hobbes, "... whatsoever it be that moves laughter must be new and unexpected."¹⁸ Moreover, for Hobbes, the *suddenness* of the apprehension of one's superiority over another is crucial: "*Sudden* glory, is the passion what makes those grimaces called laughter... I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden* glory arising from some *sudden* conception of some eminency in ourselves..."¹⁹ In the course of developing a very different Superiority Theory of humor, Descartes writes, "And I can only observe two causes which thus make the lung inflate *suddenly*... The first is the surprise of admiration or wonder."²⁰

For Descartes, wonder is the experience of something *new*, and is the basis of all of the passions:

When our first encounter with some object surprises us and we find it novel—i.e. very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed it should be—this brings it about that we wonder and are astonished at it. All this can happen before we know whether the object is beneficial to us, so I regard wonder as the first of all the passions. It has no opposite, because if the object before us has nothing surprising about it, it doesn't stir us in any way and we consider it without passion.²¹

So, for both Hobbes and Descartes, humor arises from a sudden violation of our expectations, causing an excitement of our passions. Thus, for both philosophers, the source of humor is a particular kind of dramatic presentation of an epistemic violation.

Incongruity Theorists of humor also tend to focus on violations of expectations as the crucial ingredient in humor. As with Superiority Theory, there are a variety of very different Incongruity Theories, but Incongruity Theorists are united in the thought that humor is a reaction to the juxtaposition of incongruous ideas or perceptions. For Hutcheson,

That then which then seems generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea.²²

For Kierkegaard,

... wherever there is life, there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present ... A caricature is comical, and why? Because of the contradiction between likeliness and unlikeliness.²³

For Kant,

In the case of jokes ... the play begins with the thoughts which together occupy the body ... and as the understanding stops suddenly short at this presentment, in which it does not find what it expected, we feel the effect of this slackening in the body ... Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.²⁴

And for Schopenhauer,

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity.²⁵

Contemporary Incongruity Theorists also focus on the juxtaposition of incongruous perspectives on the same situation. LaFollette and Shanks, for instance, characterize the humorous response as a kind of active “flickering” back and forth between incongruous perspectives.²⁶ They give an example of inadvertent humor: a child is scolded by her parents for kicking her sister in the stomach, to which the child responds “I didn’t mean to kick her in the stomach . . . I meant to kick her in the head but she moved.”²⁷ The response is humorous, LaFollette and Shanks claim, because it causes us to flicker back and forth between the perspective of the parent who is admonishing the child for kicking her sister *at all* and the (incompatible) perspective of the child who interprets the admonition far more narrowly. This “flickering” occurs in many cases of advertent humor as well. In the classic “Who’s On First?” routine, we flicker back and forth between a perspective on the dialogue from which “Who,” “What,” and “I don’t know” have their ordinary meanings and a perspective from which they are all proper nouns which name players on a baseball team.²⁸ Extended humorous metaphors cause us to flicker back and forth between the literal content and the metaphorical content of the relevant words. Chris Rock similarly causes us to flicker back and forth between incongruous perspectives in his famous joke about Marion Barry, the Washington DC mayor who served six months in federal prison after being videotaped smoking crack cocaine, and was later re-elected to the Washington DC mayoralty:

How the hell did Marion Barry get his job back? Smoked crack, got his job back. How the hell did that happen? If you get caught smoking crack at McDonald’s, you can’t get your job back. They’re not gonna trust you around the Happy Meals.²⁹

In this case, the “flickering” is between a perspective from which a felony conviction is a serious enough offense to prevent someone from being trusted in a fast-food restaurant and a perspective from which that offense isn’t serious enough to prevent a person from being trusted in a position with *far* more weighty responsibilities. In causing us to “flicker” in this manner, Rock reveals the *inappropriateness* of judging someone to be trustworthy enough for the mayoralty when we would judge a person in similar circumstances *not* to be trustworthy enough to work at a fast-food restaurant; he thereby reveals the incoherence of such a position and the absurdity of Barry’s reelection. More generally, when we “flicker” between incompatible perspectives, it is made vivid to us that we can’t take both perspectives at the same time, as one perspective leaves no epistemic room for the other.

Similarly, semantic ambiguities often lead to humor when the audience’s understanding of the semantic content of a sentence or utterance is violated or contradicted.

- “In New York, every five minutes, someone is mugged. He’s getting *really* tired of it.” The audience initially understands the first sentence to be of the form “ \forall five-minute intervals, \exists a person who is mugged during that interval.” However, the second sentence makes sense only if the first sentence is interpreted as being of the form “ \exists a person such that, \forall five-minute intervals, he is mugged during that interval.”
- Rodney Dangerfield says, “I told my psychiatrist that everyone hates me, but my psychiatrist replied, ‘That’s not true. Not everyone has met you yet.’”³⁰ The audience initially understands the quantifier in the first sentence to have a domain restricted to the set of people that Dangerfield has met. However, the psychiatrist’s response makes sense only if her quantifier ranges over the set of all people. The audience hears the beginning of the psychiatrist’s response—“That’s not true”—and expects the psychiatrist to go on to say something reassuring; instead, by using her quantifier in the less-restricted way, the psychiatrist implicitly concedes that everyone *who has met* Dangerfield hates him.
- Groucho Marx says, “One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I’ll never know.”³¹ The audience naturally interprets “in my pajamas” in the first sentence as modifying “I,” whereas the second sentence makes sense only if “in my pajamas” modifies “elephant” in the first sentence.
- A doctor said to a patient, “I can’t find the cause of your illness,” then paused thoughtfully and added, “but frankly I think it’s due to drinking.” “That’s OK,” replied the patient, “I’ll come back when you’re sober.”³² The audience naturally interprets the “it” in “it’s due to drinking” as referring to the patient’s illness, whereas the the patient’s response makes sense only if the “it” refers to the fact that the the doctor can’t find the cause of the patient’s illness. The patient’s politeness and calm in response to the suggestion that his doctor is drunk is a further incongruity, as is the irony that it is the *patient* in the story who has the drinking problem, not the doctor.

In their recent book *Inside Jokes*, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams have identified an important and related epistemic dimension of humor. Though there are elements of an Incongruity Theory in their approach, their theory of humor is most centrally a *computational* theory; on their view, humor is to be understood as a “category of information processing involving most of the faculties of thought, including memory recall, inference, and semantic integration.”³³ More specifically, the authors argue that our capacity for humor is an error-correction mechanism designed by natural selection to catch errors that have surreptitiously entered our mental spaces:

Our brains are engaged full time in real-time (risky) heuristic search, generating presumptions about what will be experienced next in every domain. The

time-pressured, unsupervised generation process has necessarily lenient standards and introduces content—not all of which can be properly checked for truth—into our mental spaces. If left unexamined, the inevitable errors in these vestibules of consciousness would ultimately continue on to contaminate our world knowledge store. So there has to be a policy of double-checking these candidate beliefs and surmisings, and the discovery and resolution of these at breakneck speed is maintained by a powerful reward system—the feeling of humor; mirth—that must support this activity in competition with all the other things you could be thinking about.³⁴

The cases of semantic ambiguity that we considered above arguably fit well into this theory; the assumption that some term is to be interpreted one way “enters into our mental space” and then that assumption is revealed to be a mistake. But the phenomena that Hurley, Dennett, and Adams’s theory handles are more general than just cases of semantic ambiguity.

- “How do you get a philosopher off your porch? Pay for the pizza.”³⁵ The audience’s covert assumption is that the philosopher is on their porch for the purposes of doing philosophy, leading them to expect a philosophy-related strategy for getting rid of him; instead, the answer reveals that this assumption was mistaken, as the philosopher was there to do the only job for which he is qualified.
- “Two muffins are in the oven. The first one says, ‘Boy is it hot in here!’ and the second responds ‘Wow a talking muffin!’”³⁶ The punchline draws our attention suddenly to the fact that we have been willing to stipulate the plausibility of a talking muffin, which we’re then (due to a talking muffin!) invited to rethink.
- Dave Barry writes:

We were trying to sell our house. We had elected voluntarily to move to Miami. We wanted our child to benefit from the experience of growing up in a community that is constantly being enriched by a diverse and ever-changing infusion of tropical diseases. . . . After we threw away our furniture, we hired two men, both named Jonathan, to come over and fix our house up so prospective buyers wouldn’t get to laughing so hard they’d fall down the basement stairs and file costly lawsuits.³⁷

When we read “enriched by a diverse and ever-changing infusion,” we assume that it will be followed by reference to something positive and enriching; this assumption is revealed to be a mistake. Similarly, when we read “. . . fix up the house so prospective buyers. . .” we assume that it will be followed by reference to increased purchasing interest from the prospective buyers; this assumption too is revealed to be a mistake.

Finally, some jokes explicitly violate some epistemic rule or principle, and derive their humor from that violation.

- Here is an example of a joke wherein a character fails to infer to the best explanation from a stipulated body of evidence:
 - “Why do elephants paint their toenails red?”
 - “I don’t know.”
 - “So they can hide in cherry trees.”
 - “But I’ve never seen an elephant in a cherry tree!”
 - “See! It works!”³⁸
- And here is a joke wherein a character engages in circular reasoning:
 - “My friend John talks to angels.”
 - “How do you know?”
 - “He told me he does.”
 - “But couldn’t he be lying to you?”
 - “Oh come on, do you really think that someone who talks to angels would lie?”³⁹

3. Aesthetic Norms

Just as humor can derive from particular violations of practical and epistemic norms, so too can it derive from violations of aesthetic norms. It is extraordinarily difficult to articulate aesthetic norms with much precision, and that task is certainly not a central focus of this paper. But I will try to provide a general sense of the ways that humor can in some cases work by violating recognizably aesthetic norms.

On the Classical Conception of beauty, beauty consists in an integration of parts into an organic whole. Central notions here are those of harmony, proportion, symmetry, and order. In the *Poetics*, for example, Aristotle says that “a beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order.”⁴⁰ Very often, humor is a reaction to situations or images that are disharmonious, out of proportion, asymmetric, and disordered; cases of both advertent and inadvertent humor fit into this mold. We often laugh at the ugly and disharmonious, or at things that violate our sense of order or unity. This happens in some cases of the sort of incongruities that the Incongruity Theorists draw our attention to; incongruity isn’t simply a violation of what we *expect* to go together, but also a violation of what we think *should* go together as it relates to order and unity.

The simplest, and perhaps least interesting, examples of this are cases of “gross-out” humor, wherein the explicit goal is to present an ugly, disgusting, or disturbing image that violates accepted norms of beauty. The “bathroom humor” of children and adolescents is an instance of this, as are genres of joke such as the “dead baby” joke. Even in more sophisticated contexts, use of vulgar words, concepts, and images is quite common for the purposes of producing comedy.

Comic characters throughout literature and film are often grotesque, misshapen, and chaotic. In the foreword to *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Walker Percy describes the protagonist Ignatius Reilly as a “slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one.”⁴¹ Charlie Chaplin was expert at contorting his face and body into unnatural positions, and at walking in his distinctively awkward and asymmetrical manner. Comic characters in television and film are often exaggeratedly ugly, pathetic, annoying, obese, uncoordinated, clumsy, and disgusting—consider the panoply of comic characters played on *Saturday Night Live* by John Belushi, Chris Farley, Will Ferrell, and Kristen Wiig. The comic trope of men in drag playing female characters is often employed specifically to convey an image of a disproportioned and ugly female form.

There are also several historically important pieces of art featuring humorous elements that derive from contravention of aesthetic norms. Marcel Duchamp’s “L.H.O.O.Q.” is a low-resolution postcard reproduction of the Mona Lisa with a goatee and mustache added in pencil; when the letters of the title are read in French, they sound like the French sentence “Elle a chaud au cul,” which translates to “She is hot in the ass.” The work of Dali and Magritte contains similarly playful comic elements which violate the ordinary rules of composition and unity.

4. Violations of Norms

One of the central philosophical questions about rules is what is involved in *following* a rule or norm, as opposed to merely *acting in accordance with* the rule or norm.⁴² The planets, for instance, act in accordance with Kepler’s laws, but they do not seem to *follow* those laws in anything like the sense in which an *agent* can follow a rule. There is a corresponding question about the distinction between *breaking* a rule or norm, as opposed to merely *failing to act in accordance with* it. I’ve been using the more generic language of “violating” a rule or norm, which I’ve been meaning to encompass both rule-breakings and failings-to-act-in-accordance-with-rules.

Most cases of advertent humor, I think, involve deliberate violations of norms that correspond to *breakings* of rules, whereas most cases of in-advertent humor involve non-deliberate failings to act in accordance with norms. To give a sharp characterization of the difference between advertent and inadvertent humor, then, we’d need a sharp characterization of the difference between rule-breakings and failings-to-act-in-accordance-with-rules. Unfortunately, I don’t have a precise account of this distinction to offer here. I’ve characterized humor in terms of *violations* in general, as I think that these more generic violations are what all instances of humor have in common.

Does this picture of humor leave room for “rules of comedy”? In a sense, yes: there are numerous rules of thumb for how to violate various norms in

an effective manner. The comedic “rule of threes,” for instance, derives from the effectiveness of using the first two items to set up a pattern or expectation which is then violated with the third item. Other comedic patterns and stock situations work similarly; the pattern of the character who overhears and misinterprets two other characters conversing also lends itself to violations of the expectations and understandings of the characters involved. But, as humor is an essentially norm-violating domain, it is not surprising that the putative “rules” of comedy are also broken in many instances of humor; the “anti-joke” which deliberately violates an established joke pattern is a prime example of this.

5. Humor’s Virtues

The question remains, of course, of why only some violations of practical, epistemic, and aesthetic norms are humorous. Making an error in reasoning isn’t always—or even usually—funny, and neither are all ethical or aesthetic transgressions. There’s nothing funny about witnessing a serious accident or injury, our usual reaction to moral transgressions is disapproval and outrage rather than humor, and most bad art isn’t remotely funny.

The approach to humor that I favor is a virtue-theoretic approach, analogous to the virtue ethics of Aristotle, Hursthouse,⁴³ and Slote,⁴⁴ and to the virtue epistemologies of Sosa⁴⁵ and Zagzebski.⁴⁶ While of course virtue approaches vary quite significantly, I take the central commitments of a virtue approach to humor to be that the humorous properties of jokes and events are to be understood in terms of the virtues they manifest. On this approach, the reason that only some violations of norms are funny is that only some violations of norms manifest the relevant virtues.

Interestingly, the virtues relevant to humor seem to categorize naturally into practical, epistemic, and aesthetic virtues, and thus at least roughly mirror the categorization of that norms that are violated in humor. I think that this has to be more than mere coincidence; precisely in virtue of violating certain norms, successful jokes can reveal something about the nature, structure, application, or impact of those norms, and thereby manifest one or more of the humorous virtues.

The practical virtues of humor include sensitivity, empathy, politeness, courage, and moral fortitude. Jokes can be more or less sensitive to audience or context; an ability to “read the room” and to make sensitive determinations regarding how particular words or topics will be received by particular audiences is a key skill of the humorist. Relatedly, an empathetic humorist will avoid topics that are especially difficult or traumatic for her audience, and will present material that takes the backgrounds and experiences of her audience into account. A polite humorist has a well-developed sense of which rules of etiquette can be breached in a particular situation and which ones

cannot; a joke that is a bit off-color for the situation might be perfectly funny, whereas a joke told at the expense of a gracious host might fail because of its impoliteness.

Moral courage is also manifested in some jokes, as when a joke criticizes an unjust system or practice. A recent example of this is comedian Hannibal Burress's joke on stage in Philadelphia in October 2014 about the hypocrisy of Bill Cosby's admonishment of African Americans to "pull their pants up" given that forty-two different women have credibly accused Cosby of sexual assaults since 1965.⁴⁷ Burress has been roundly praised for this act of moral protest—of Cosby himself, of media outlets that have failed to adequately cover the overwhelming evidence that Cosby has repeatedly victimized young women and then attempted to cover it up, and of a culture that has effectively overlooked these accusations because of the popularity of Cosby's television show in the 1980's. Similarly, historical and contemporary satirists—including Aristophanes, Erasmus, Chaucer, Austen, Swift, Voltaire, and Twain—manifested profound moral fortitude by criticizing the unjust practices of their days. The satirists of our day—Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, John Oliver, Amy Schumer, Sarah Silverman, and Louis CK, just to name a few—speak out against perceived injustices in this same spirit.⁴⁸

There are a variety of epistemic virtues manifested in humor. The best comedians are unflinchingly *observant* about matters both trivial and momentous; they are *insightful* about social and political problems; and they *articulate perspectives* that might not be communicated as effectively in a non-humorous way. A central technique of humor is exaggeration; as discussed in Sections 1 and 2, exaggeration can constitute a violation of both practical norms regarding accuracy and epistemic norms regarding evidence and truth. But in order to be humorous, exaggeration must be executed in the service of developing some perspective or viewpoint. The most common humorous uses of exaggeration are aimed at revealing some irregularity, tension, or error by magnifying it; a political misstep is presented as the action of a buffoon, a misguided plan is presented as a farce, and a flawed ideology is taken to its logical extreme. By exaggerating, the humorist magnifies that which she intends to draw our attention to, and when she does so effectively we see the situation more clearly than we did beforehand. Effective jokes can expose ignorance, lies, unjustified assumptions, prejudices, double-standards, and faulty reasoning. In some cases, we even go so far as to characterize a joke in explicitly epistemic terms: as *accurate*, or *smart*, or *fair*, or even *true* (as in "it's funny because it's true").

Humor can also be used to make *arguments*. Of course, humor might also contribute to an agent's ability to *persuade* other people; that's an empirical claim, and probably a true one, but I think point is deeper. Often an effective way to object to a plan, position, argument, or reply is to expose its weakness with a well-crafted and well-targeted joke. This exposure can be quite vivid, and I think it's plausible that this might constitute an irreducible way of

being acquainted with a content like “Thesis t leads to absurdity.” But even if it’s just a *different* way of being acquainted with such a content—distinct from thought experiments or inferences or testimony or perception—that still leaves a quite significant role in our epistemological story for the humorous presentment of contents.

Various authors have explored the sense in which the concept of humor is an aesthetic concept, and there do seem to be several important similarities between humor and (other) aesthetic concepts. For example, in the cases of both art and humor: people develop tastes for certain types or styles,⁴⁹ imagination and surprise play a crucial role,⁵⁰ and there is a limited sort of “autonomy” or immunity to certain kinds of criticism that would be appropriate in other contexts.⁵¹ Hartz and Hunt argue that further similarities between art and humor include: the involvement of pleasure in contemplation, the requirement of a non-threat situation for enjoyment, the importance of “artful” deployment of particular skills in successful execution, the “necessary authenticity” of both the humor response and the aesthetic response, and the importance of incongruity within a congruous setting.⁵² Following Kant (as well as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Addison), Morreall focuses on distancing and disengagement from practical concerns as the hallmark of aesthetic reactions to both art and humor; for Morreall, aesthetic experience is “a kind of appreciation in which we perceive or contemplate something for the satisfaction of the experience itself, not in order to achieve something else.”⁵³ Morreall allows that, just as an artwork can be appreciated non-aesthetically—say, by a collector who is more concerned with how much money a painting will make him or with how much it will impress his friends—so too can jokes be appreciated non-aesthetically, as in the case of the “sexual joke told to shock or embarrass.”⁵⁴

Successful instances of humor can instantiate a variety of aesthetic virtues, just like other works of art. Humor, like other works of art, can be *subtle* (as opposed to “on the nose”) when the author conveys his or her perspective delicately, without drawing unnecessary attention to the mechanisms through which he or she accomplishes this. Humor can be *organic* (as opposed to “forced”) when it emerges from a situation that calls for it, as opposed to being imposed on a situation for which it is inappropriate. Humor can be *clever* when it is constructed in creative, resourceful, surprising, and/or elegant ways; this accounts for certain similarities between successful items of humor and well-crafted puzzles, and for the similar sense of satisfaction that derives from “solving” a puzzle and “getting” a clever joke or riddle. Humor, I think, can also be more or less *authentic* depending on the extent to which it is a genuine expression of an author’s life experience or worldview; humor that is “cheap” or “easy” or “shallow” fails to fully express a viewpoint in analogous ways to “cheap” or “easy” or “shallow” works of art more generally.

On the other side of these virtuous items of humor, of course, are the vicious jokes. There are jokes that manifest insensitivity, impoliteness, cowardice, prejudice, or undeserved malice; jokes that have flawed premises, or that are based on a misunderstanding, or that are off-target in their criticisms; and jokes that are confusing or inexpertly crafted.

So far, I've been focusing on the virtues manifested in items of advertent humor, and indeed the various practical, epistemic, and aesthetic virtues of humor are manifested most clearly and effectively in deliberately crafted jokes. But I think that some of these virtues may also be relevant in cases of inadvertent humor. We certainly don't find all inadvertent norm-violations funny, and so the question naturally arises of why we find some inadvertent norm-violations funny and not others. As a partial answer to this question, I would like to suggest that even cases of inadvertent humor can manifest (practical, epistemic, and aesthetic) virtues to varying degrees. An inadvertent breach of etiquette, for instance, can be funny because it is *revealing* about either the person who is doing the breaching or the rule of etiquette itself. Similarly, the innocence of young children's questions can strike us as funny because they expose us to a novel or surprising perspective that we hadn't previously considered. Moreover, we often experience cases of inadvertent humor "as if" they were deliberately produced. I recently had a clog in my kitchen sink, and in order to fix it I removed the u-pipe under the sink, cleared the clog, placed a bucket under the drain, ran some water through the drain to confirm that the clog was cleared, and then . . . threw the water from the bucket into the sink, spilling it all over the cabinet below. I found it rather funny, both because it revealed the highly conditional nature of the rule "Throw waste water into the drain to dispose of it" and also because it seemed exactly the sort of scene that an author would write to effectively convey a character's absent-mindedness and focus on one relevant component of a problem to the exclusion of others.

Each of the virtues I've considered above, and their corresponding vices, deserves far more elaboration and discussion than I can provide here; so far, I have merely gestured at the sorts of practical, epistemic, and aesthetic virtues that contribute to humor. As a result, this is merely the beginning of an answer to the question of why some norm-violations are funny and others aren't; I've said that the funny violations exhibit humorous virtues (and not the vices) whereas the unfunny violations fail to exhibit humorous virtues (and perhaps do exhibit the humorous vices), but this story is surely incomplete as long as we have an incomplete account of the ingredient virtues and vices.

Notes

1. Hartz and Hunt 1991, p. 304.
2. Morreall 2009, p. 34.

3. See Raskin 1985 and 1992.
4. See Austin 1975.
5. Morreall 2009, p. 34.
6. See Swift 2004, wherein Swift plays at suggesting that impoverished Irish people might solve their financial problems by selling their children to rich people to be eaten.
7. See Grice 1975 and Morreall 1983, pp. 79–81. To oversimplify a bit, these maxims are roughly as follows: Maxim of Quantity: Try to give as much information as is needed and no more. Maxim of Quality: Try to give information that is truthful and is supported by evidence. Maxim of Relation: Try to be relevant by giving information that is pertinent to the discussion. Maxim of Manner: Try to be as clear, brief, and orderly as possible, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.
8. *The Pink Panther Strikes Again*, 1976.
9. *Strategic Grill Locations*, 1999.
10. <http://www.joyofjewish.com/jokes.html>
11. http://www.alta.asn.au/events/altss_w2003_proc/altss/courses/somers/headlines.html
12. http://www.alta.asn.au/events/altss_w2003_proc/altss/courses/somers/headlines.html.
13. Hobbes 1987, p. 19.
14. Hutcheson 1987, p. 26.
15. Hutcheson 1987, p. 29. Notably, the latter sentence of this quote is itself a joke, sarcastically mocking Hobbes's Superiority Theory of humor.
16. See McGhee 1979.
17. Plato 1987, p. 11.
18. Hobbes 1987, p. 20.
19. Hobbes 1987, p. 19. Italics mine.
20. Descartes 1987, p. 22. Italics mine.
21. Descartes 2010, p. 17.
22. Hutcheson 1987, p. 32.
23. Kierkegaard 1987, pp. 83–88.
24. Kant 1987, p. 47.
25. Schopenhauer 1987, p. 52.
26. LaFollette and Shanks 1993.
27. LaFollette and Shanks 1993, p. 330.
28. Bud Abbott and Lou Costello performed "Who's on First?" numerous times throughout their careers, rarely performing it exactly the same way twice. An abridged version was featured in their 1940 film debut, *One Night in the Tropics*. They also performed the sketch in their 1945 film *The Naughty Nineties*, as well as numerous times on radio and television (including in *The Abbott and Costello Show* episode "The Actor's Home.")
29. Chris Rock, *Bring the Pain*, 1996.
30. Capps and Capps, p. 26.
31. Capps and Capps, p. 40. This joke appears in the Marx Brothers film *Animal Crackers* (1930).
32. Capps and Capps, p. 41.

33. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams 2011, p. 5.
34. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams 2011, p. 12.
35. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams 2011, p. 137.
36. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams 2011, p. 137.
37. Barry 1997, pp. 54–55.
38. Capps and Capps, p. 32.
39. This joke has something like the status of a stock example in philosophy, and appears in a variety of sources. I first heard it in Jim Pryor's Phil 3: Introduction to Philosophy course in the Fall of 1996 at Harvard University.
40. Aristotle Part VII.
41. Toole 1987, p. viii.
42. See Boghossian 1989 for an excellent and thorough overview of this literature.
43. See Hursthouse 1999.
44. See Slote 1993.
45. See Sosa 2007.
46. See Zagzebski 2001.
47. See http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/11/21/bill_cosby_accusers_list_sexual_assault_rape_drugs_feature_in_women_s_stories.html
48. I say “perceived” injustices because I don't want to assume that all of these satirists are always correct in their moral assessments; though I share some of their viewpoints, I do not share others. Still, to speak out against perceived injustice, I think, manifests a certain sort of moral virtue.
49. Martin 1987.
50. Martin 1987, Morreall 2009 p. 71.
51. Morreall 2009, p. 71.
52. Hartz and Hunt 1991.
53. Morreall 2009, p. 70.
54. Morreall 2009, p. 72.

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