A Grasshopper Walks Into a Bar: Humor as a Tool of Normativity

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***Abstract**: This paper presents a position on the pragmatic significance of humor. Setting aside questions of the aesthetic and phenomenal qualities of the experience of humor, I focus on its role in correcting and enforcing adherence to the norms of other social practices. I emphasize that humor can come in two forms, a congenial and a denunciatory one. In the former, we correct and reaffirm the status of other agents within the practice, while in the latter we excoriate others and make no amends. Though this makes even good clean fun sound cruel, I argue that when looked upon in the right light, most forms of humor can be reconciled with our moral and political obligations.*

"You could read Kant by yourself if you wanted, but you must share a joke with someone else."

- Robert Louis Stevenson

A grasshopper walks into a bar. The bartender says, "Hey, we have a drink named after you!"
The grasshopper says, "You have a drink named Murray?"[1]

The exchange described above would strike most of us as funny, given the requisite poetic licenses about talking grasshoppers that visit houses of libation. It would be what we think of as a joke or a piece of humor. This joke is a fairly ritualized piece of language, as many are, though jokes might take many other forms. A series of non-linguistic actions and situations, suitably arranged, might count as a joke. Pieces of music sometimes play this role. Mozart's "Ein Musikalischer Spaß" made its musical joke by intentionally including misconstructed passages and several clichés as a jab at his less able contemporaries. The Beatles' "Back in the USSR" ribbed the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson by showing that even an autocratic police state could sound groovy when pictured with his characteristic melodic phrasings and harmonies.[2] So by invoking the notion of a joke here, I hope to appeal to the widest conception possible. Roughly, it would be any distinguishable set of performances or practices (such as a repeatable song type as mentioned above) we might share with others that we might call humorous. We

might assume that there is some difference between a piece of humor like this and the effect it has on us, which we might call amusement. We may come across a piece of humor that does not amuse us and I may be amused by something unlike the humor described above.

This paper is not meant as a piece on aesthetics, where most serious consideration of humor is conducted, if you will forgive the play on words. Nor is it meant as a refutation of rejection of those sorts of concerns. I have no wish at this point to challenge the assumption that there are distinct characteristics of our experiences of humor that set them apart from other categories of experiences, and nothing I say here should conflict with the intuition that there is some special sort of affective state that we experience in finding something funny. I will not even assume that such aesthetic experiences are homogenous; laughing at bathroom humor may be a wholly different phenomenological creature from chuckling over Kierkegaard's dissection of bourgeois complacency. I will leave as much room as possible for differing views here. Rather, it is my aim to say something about what it is we do when we try to be funny to one another and why that might be of some greater practical significance to us. The notion of *trying* to be funny is pivotal here. I do not offer an account of the experience of finding something funny, so I do not claim to offer an account of everything we find funny. Rather, my goal here is to say something about what it is to attempt to do something funny for ourselves and for others. Despite the panoply of social practices embraced by different communities, we all seem to want to be funny sometimes and this paper will suggest some reasons for this congruence. Even if the potential for the aesthetic experience of humor and laughter are somehow part of our makeup as the creatures we are, we must still ask why such an apparently odd assembly of conditions should amuse us in these ways and why this seems to shift from one social setting to another.

Hobbes suggested, with a note of suspicion, that laughter was caused in people by "some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them, or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves." (Hobbes 1994, Part 1, Chapter 6, §42) This has been seen by many as a paragon of the 'superiority' theory of laughter and humor, which is widely panned for its inadequacy in the face of humor that does not involve

denigrating the inferior, not least of it humor where we laugh at ourselves. Yet something about the second disjunct seems right about overt displays of humor; there is no joke unless someone or something is its object of ridicule. However, this begs as much explanation as it offers. We generally find ridicule unpleasant and unwelcome when directed towards us, and empathy leads most of us to see others in the same light. If all humor is as mean-spirited as this would imply, why do we practice it with friends and loved ones and why do they take such great pleasure in it with us even when they themselves are ridiculed? Don Rickles, a famous 'insult' comedian noted for his acerbic tongue, often tells stories of people who not only demand to be made fun of, but take offense when he is unwilling. It also seems curious that jokes, or at least putative jokes, with similar characteristics could either be hilarious or viciously offensive. I will argue that this reflects a deeper pragmatic significance to the use of humor, namely an exercise in affirming the bonds of community between us. Both the rewards of a good joke shared and the harm of one taken too far emerge from this function. I do not think it is trivial that we share jokes with one another. Humor is, as Wittgenstein would put it, a family of language games. (See (1953).) This is a curious family of games to have at our disposal, so it remains to be said why we should deploy them at all.

Many of us will be familiar with the "Black Knight" scene from the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. For those who are not, a caricature of King Arthur from the famous legends is searching the countryside for knights who will join him on a quest for the Holy Grail. He encounters the Black Knight and engages him in battle. The battle is swift as Arthur quickly slashes off both the Black Knights arms; yet the Black Knight insists that he is not defeated and fights on with ineffectual kicks at Arthur's shins. Finally reduced to a limbless stump, the Black Knight announces, "Allright, we'll call it a draw." Now consider a more recent event. In 1999 in Washington, DC, radio personality Doug "Greaseman" Tracht played a brief portion of a song by African-American musician Lauryn Hill. After the song, Tracht said, "Now I see why they drag 'em behind trucks," alluding to the death of James Byrd, Jr., another African-American who had recently been dragged to his death behind a truck by a group of white men in Jasper, Texas.

The dragging death resulted in the partial dismemberment of Byrd's body. Tracht's comments quickly got him fired and at the point at which I write this, he has not worked in radio again. There seems little doubt that Tracht's comments were far beyond the bounds of taste and not at all funny, as Tracht himself has admitted. Yet that joke turns on the violent dismemberment of a man at the hands of others, just as the Black Knight scene does. One strikes us as funny, the other repugnant, though the scenes they present are equally gruesome. What makes these jokes so different? Some consideration of how we interpret the salient aspects of a joke is needed to address this.

One thing that distinguishes human beings from other phenomena in the world is the complex array of social behaviors and practices in which we participate. Although bees have hives and fish have schools, people engage in self-critical practices and institutions that set them apart. There is a long, vaguely pragmatist tradition that one may trace through figures including but not limited to Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Sellars and Brandom that casts this sort of interaction with communities in social practices as the basis for personhood and rationality.[3] I endorse this general line of thinking for reasons that I will not elaborate here, but I do not believe that one must do so in order to see the point I wish to make. Even those among us who believe that some sort of individual subject exists prior to its social relations and that it carries with it the potential for some sort of purely non-contextual rationality will believe that human beings must grow and develop into rational beings and that they remain imperfect practitioners in their fully mature states. Norms for correctness, whether developed by those social interactions or sewn into the fabric of the universe, must be in place and must be adhered to in order to have the sorts of lives we lead. Thus, corrective behavior - noting someone's deviation from a norm and compelling them to correct it - is crucial to any account of human thought and comportment. Haugeland (1982) channels Heidegger and several of the influences named above to create a picture of us as "conformist" creatures for whom this corrective impulse is the complement to our natural capacity to observe and mimic the behavior of our fellows to form complex behavioral dispositions. Creatures who are to be or become rational must be

both obedient and protective of their norms by discouraging deviance and reinforcing adherence. This enforcement is as much a part of participation in a social practice as our own attempts to obey a norm would be.

So the view here is one in which persons occupy many roles in a network of social practices and for whom maintaining the integrity of these practices is at least as much a public matter as a private one. To be a player in the language game is to be an umpire as well. Now it should be noted that the facts presented so far do not prescribe a particular method of correction for deviation from the norm. Indeed, there is a multitude of different methods as varied as the range of human interactions. If you do something wrong, I may inform you of this with anything from a flick of my eyebrow to a gentle word to a stern lecture to a large rock delivered forcefully to the back of your head. Generally, my selection of a strategy for making your missteps known to you should not and will not be arbitrary. I save the gentle words for minor mistakes by friends and family and the more aggressive tactics for more serious matters. What I would like to suggest is that humor is one such strategy that we employ in order to highlight someone's deviation from the norm. Like any other strategy, there are times when it is appropriate and times when it is not because the practice itself has a certain practical character and significance that may or may not fit a given situation. An analysis of that practical character will follow below, but its most significant characteristics are the way in which it induces embarrassment in those who are being corrected and the sense of solidarity it induces in those who share the joke. By making someone or something the butt of a joke, we hold him, her or it up to public ridicule, inviting others to enjoy the sense of another's shame. At the very least, we enjoy it ourselves and make the butt of the joke aware of that discredited feature. A gentle word aims to avoid such embarrassment and a rock to the back of someone's head is generally delivered without much concern for their sense of embarrassment.

At first glance, this may seem like an endorsement of the 'superiority' thesis I alluded to earlier. However, it is not my intention to embrace such a theory, at least not to the exclusion of all others. A superiority theory would say that the experience of amusement consists in our

feeling superior to that at which we laugh, as Hobbes suggested earlier. Beginning with Aristotle and Plato, continuing on through Hobbes, this approach has been defended more recently by Lorenz (1966) and Rapp (1951). However, it seems a poor fit for many jokes, not least of them the one with which I began this paper; even if we must have something to laugh at, we need not feel superior to it in every case. A more popular theory in recent times has been that humor arouses amusement in us by presenting us with incongruities of one form or another. Such a view took root in Kant and Schopenhauer and finds contemporary support in Swabey (1961), among others. These accounts show a greater flexibility than the superiority thesis and thereby cover a wider range of plausible cases, which adds to their plausibility for many people. Freud also suggested that these factors, if necessary, were only sufficient when conjoined with a sense of surprise and a consequent release of tension. (See Freud (1976).) As I said, my point is not an aesthetic one about the different sorts of experiences that these views would emphasize, though I am generally inclined to think that ruling any one of them out altogether is a bad idea. So I will not adjudicate this issue for now. What I want to consider is what pragmatic effect humor might have beyond the arousal of such aesthetic experiences, i.e. what it does for us as speakers within a linguistic community for whom the normative status of actions, assertions and social standing is an issue.

To bring my view back into balance, we must see how the exclusive element of this corrective impulse is complemented by an inclusive one as well. Since humor calls upon us to note some deviation from a social norm and, it also implicitly invokes a certain sense of social commonality. Where there is a joke, there is a "we" who laugh at it and a "them" at whom we laugh. These commonalities are shifting like sand beneath our feet, though; I may be smart enough to laugh at someone's stupidity on the one hand, but clumsy enough to be the butt of a joke on the other. We may be "in" several such commonalities and "out" of several others in any given situation and these relations may not even occur to us until someone invokes them and put us on notice. Humorous acts play the complementary roles of telling some people that they are out of the loop while reaffirming to ourselves and others that we are inside it. It both announces

the exclusion of some and reaffirms the solidarity of others. This is to invoke what Foucault might have called a 'power relation'; when you are fit for ridicule, we invoke our entitlement to drag your faults and failures (from the perspective of our practices) into the open, assert our superiority and cast you into a subordinate position in various sorts of social reckoning. I shall say more about this later, for the types of power relations that we invoke in telling jokes and the status we claim in light of them is going to be an important factor in saying why some things are funny and others are simply veiled insults. However, this enhancement of solidarity among those who share a joke will play a prominent role later on and is at least one respect in which my view is not simply a superiority theory.

In its various forms, humor functions by making explicit the ways in which someone or something breaks with our expectations and thereby overtly demonstrates that someone or something stands outside our community or does not jibe with our norms. When we make fun of someone or can personify the butt of the joke, they are in the unenviable position (at least from our perspective) of being on the outside and wanting back into the fold. The effect of such a performance is not simply pleasure at the character of the joke's target, but an affirmation of our own status (we who share the joke) as members in good standing with respect to the norms they violate. Think of humor that turns on someone's stupidity. It turns on our expectations that (1) others should be knowledgeable in the practices that they are engaged in, (2) the fact that we hold them epistemically responsible for things in those contexts, and yet (3) in some cases they fail miserably. Such a joke is possible only if the audience who hears a joke has command of the things that the butt of the joke does not. We have to see how that person is stupid in light of what we clearly know as a matter of common knowledge. Thus, who can be made fun of for their stupidity varies according to a joke's audience; as that audience grows more and more knowledgeable about more and more complex matters, more and more people are subject to ridicule.[4] (Not all features we ridicule will admit to such correction of conduct. I may mock someone's being short or unintelligent without any hope that they will get taller or smarter, and

so presumably some jokes turn on the affirmation of those who enjoy the joke to a far greater extent than their corrective effects.)

Another point common in the pragmatist tradition I have described is that although humans emerge only within such networks or social practices, one thing sets them apart from flocks of birds and schools of fish is that rational agents like us internalize those roles of player and umpire to become reflective *self-correctors*. To someone thus developed, it is generally sufficient to point out that one has deviated from the norms to get that person to adjust their behavior. We grant some leeway to rational agents in choosing which norms to adhere to, but once they reach a mature level of comportment, it is enough to point out their mistakes to get them to correct them. One way in which to prompt this sort of self-correction would be to induce the sort of embarrassment that humor may arouse in self-aware targets. If you are strongly inclined to adhere to a norm and get it right in practice, then subtly making you aware of your deviance from it and showing you that the rest of us know about it is a strong incentive for you to correct things promptly. Conformist creatures would hate to look like fools.

This would account for much of the humor that we deliver directly to people's faces, but it remains to be said what function it could serve when we cannot expect it to change anyone's behavior. We can tell the grasshopper joke above all we want, but no one will be a better bartender for it. In these cases, I suggest that the personification of the butt of a joke and consequent assignment of responsibility approaches nil, leaving only the effect of enhanced solidarity among those who share the joke as a pragmatic effect. This is why the most inoffensive humor generally has no one person or group as its target, focusing instead on things that unite us by their propensity to frustrate or disappoint. No sense of superiority over another party need be aroused in such cases to amuse us, but the effect of sharing a piece of humor to uncover or refresh the bonds between a humorist and her audience are still very much present.[5] It is this shared sense of solidarity in making something the subject of humor for fellow speakers that separates the function of humor from that of ordinary correction. In simply telling you that you have inferred badly or misspoken, I need not connect with an audience (beyond those I

correct) to affirm our bonds. If we accept this general outline of the pragmatic significance of a piece of humor as shared content, then our attention should turn to the social economy of such performances and the ways in which we might treat such performances. For now, I will speak largely of cases where a particular person is the target of humor and suggest some ways of extending the account along the way.

Given what I have said thus far, humor may sound acutely vicious and parochial. Indeed, a great deal of humor just is as cruel as all of this would suggest. Yet as I said, humor is often something we share with our closest friends and family. Such delight in the discomfort of others seems out of place in those relationships, or at least one hopes it does, which might lead the reader to wonder what is absent from my account . They key element of some forms of humor that must still be explained here is that in many cases, we make a joke only so that we can 'take it back'. That is to say, we do not really "mean" the joke or the embarrassment that it inflicts on someone else. Upon closer inspection, this should seem like an odd claim; surely if I have noted something about you and asserted or suggested it and it captures some fact about you enough to upset you, I cannot un-assert it. Any sense in which I "did not mean" what I said cannot be purely semantic, for my joke was anything but word salad.

I suggest that what is being taken back or revoked is the authority inherent in a joke's invocation of some norm or norms and the power relations in which they play a role. To take back the joke is to have all that the pragmatic and social significance of the joke made apparent, but then to overtly forego one's entitlement to reject the person who is the butt of the joke from one's community and practices. A joke is thus a sort of mock-ostracism in which I bring up some deviation on your part and invite those who care to listen to take pleasure in your embarrassment, but then, having shown that I have the authority to at least chastise you, I pass on further and full exercise of that entitlement and welcome you back into the fold. The ways in which I can show that I pass on my entitlement to invoke that authority are quite broad, covering much of the field of possible human interactions. I can certainly verbally express my retraction, and this seems especially appropriate when dealing with strangers or people who may find it

difficult to recognize the more subtle features of my interaction with them. Among those closest to me, such explicit retractions are not necessary and may even seem pedantic. The fact that I welcome them (and they welcome me) into the community is manifested in a wealth of interactions I already have with them. I help my friends out, I support my colleagues, my family has a special sort of value and importance, and all of this is demonstrated by the actions I have committed myself to taking and have already taken with respect to them. My actions demonstrate this more definitively than a sentence or two ever could. Now, it is not the case that we do take every joke back, and I do not believe it is incumbent upon us to do so in some cases for reasons I will touch upon in a moment. Whether or not we take the joke back, either by our words or by the shape of our relationship with the butt of the joke, makes an enormous difference in the practical significance of the joke, dividing humor into what we might call its *congenial* forms and its *denunciative* forms.

In its congenial form, humor involves making the sort of observation of a deviant feature of someone or something and rebuking them to public delight described above, and then the rebuke is revoked as I take the joke back. As we have seen, this involves a willingness on the part of whoever tells the joke to make their point, enjoy another's embarrassment and then to pass on the opportunity to inflict further rebuke. It would be a mistake to think of the dynamic of this situation as unilateral, though. The butt of the joke must fit in as well. If I tell a joke at someone else's expense, I will often do so over matters that are not of enormous consequence. (Larger issues are usually handled without humor.) The butt of the joke may object that I have made too much of a minor matter and that despite her faults and mistakes, she deserves a certain respect as a member of the community and one had best not go around threatening her status in these ways. This person might not be able to "take" a joke as we say. For this sort of humor to work, the butt of the joke must be willing to play along and take a few lumps. Doing so demonstrates a measure of humility before the group that affirms the propriety of setting deviations and faults aside and welcoming someone back. We mock you, you concede the point by laughing along, we take it back and all is forgiven. Thus, a measure of trust is involved in the

process. If you are making a joke at my expense, I must *trust* you to take it back and if and when you do, that trust is confirmed.

I think this is why self-deprecating humor is so common; by using it, I demonstrate that I am not so immodest as to think myself beyond the corrective reach of the community. For instance, the following joke made the rounds in my department in the mid-90s:

> Q: How many [insert the name of the author here] does it take to screw in a lightbulb?
> A: Just one. But let me tell you about this one time I was screwing in lightbulbs. This was back when I was living in Pittsburgh, not in the last apartment that was so cheap and so great, but in the really lousy one I had before that...

I suppose this joke explains itself, but the point is that I have a tendency to tell long, verbose stories full of esoteric detail at the drop of a hat. (The choice of details here also fits a pattern of many of my stories.) It was also a joke that I told at least as much and probably more than anyone else did. Why should I do so? Because to do so demonstrates to others a recognition of a habit that can be annoying to others and a willingness to allow them to enjoy my embarrassment so that they can see I do not consider myself above their assessment and reproach. I make the joke for them and hope they will pass on their entitlement for further rebuke as they do in taking a joke back. Self-effacing humor, teasing humor and "roasts" - parties where everyone is invited to make cruel jokes at the guest of honor's expense - fit this pattern quite well, but I think that puns and "shaggy dog stories" do as well. In those cases, the butt of the joke is the person to whom it is told; she is laughable because she has been fooled into listening to this extended narrative with great attention, only to have the rug pulled out from under her at the end. "Slice of life" humor that mocks common practices and conventions works in a similar way by making it clear to all of us that we pick up foolish habits and preoccupations by immersing ourselves unreflectively in the social world we inhabit. In these cases, taking the joke back is a matter of shared recognition of our faults and frailties and granting ourselves permission to carry on as best we can.

The denunciative forms of humor follow the pattern laid out thus far in presenting a joke, but it differs in that we make no attempt, explicitly or implicitly, to take the joke back. The

denunciation of the butt of the joke from our community is real and we mean it. We mock them for their difference and we have no intention of ignoring their deviation and welcoming them back. This sounds like a much more malicious form of humor, and I do think that just about all of what we think of as mean-spirited humor falls into this category. Things like racist jokes are clear candidates here. Someone notes that members of another group are somehow different and invites ridicule of them without any pretense to taking that denunciation back and making them welcome in the community. This sort of humor expresses the corrective impulse in a much more exclusive fashion and leaves the insulting, mocking character of the joke out in the open as a message to those it mocks. The degree to which we can appreciate this humor turns on the degree to which we can accept such exclusion. Racist jokes are probably one example where we cannot accept it for strong moral reasons - the exclusion suggests that people of other races are not human in the way we are, and the very suggestion of this is morally repugnant to us. When someone invites us to enjoy such a joke, we must conclude that they are aware of the power relation that those norms and practices put them (and us) in and they both approve of it and relish it in a way that we cannot condone. They have that power and they really do want to exercise it.[6]

But denunciative humor need not be morally repugnant in its own right. If we think of Charlie Chaplin mocking Hitler in *The Great Dictator*, we do not think of Chaplin as morally suspect because we take Hitler and dictators like him to be worthy of our contempt. What denunciative humor does is bring to mind norms that bind communities of people (e.g. norms about thinking too highly of ourselves, norms that tell us not to strive to oppress others, norms about respect for other persons and a slew of other things that Chaplin's caricature of Hitler was grotesquely negligent in obeying). By bringing those to the surface, we announce what it is that makes us "us" and them "them" at least in part and we say that we will have no part of them in our community. This is the pragmatic significance of such humor and we must come to understand it prior to any moral evaluation of such practices. To say that all such exclusion is morally suspect - that humor should never be mean or unforgiving - is to take it that all such censures are based on morally suspect grounds, such as the enjoyment of social status afforded

by racist practices described above. However, the censures we offer can be based on moral grounds that we would endorse as well, as Chaplin's caricature was. The degree to which we refuse to find something funny is not necessarily a measure of the vitriolic sentiments expressed by the act or artifact itself, but by the appropriateness of those sentiments in our estimation with respect to the butt of the joke.

It should also strike us that the same joke, at least in all the salient details of its execution, can be congenial in one situation and denunciative in another. The most obvious form of this is the sort of teasing that siblings and groups of friends practice. I can remember a friend from college (we'll call him Joe) who was endlessly gibed about being short among a small circle of friends. Yet that same circle of friends took offense at anyone else who would mock him for the same feature; the strangers had done nothing to establish that their jokes would be taken back. They said nothing to this effect and they had no personal history with Joe to demonstrate their amiable intentions, assuming they had any. Here, the same sorts of jokes operate congenially among a small group of friends because that group shares a set of norms and expectations - including what people are supposed to look like and which of their features are fit for criticism and ridicule - that they borrow from the larger culture. The general camaraderie among them makes it clear to all that those in the group are welcome, so the sting of these jokes is undone by the assurance that all is taken back and everyone is welcome in the end. By taking the joke as well as he dishes it out, Joe demonstrates a trust of his friends that reaffirms their bonds. Coming out of someone else's mouth, this joke would seem denunciative in the sense I have described.

This point can be extended beyond smaller groups like families and groups of friends to incorporate any sort of social group within the larger community, so long as people carry some conception of what it means to be a member of that group and take it to be part of their identity. Race, gender and other social roles provide the sort of broader groupings I have in mind. The same joke may function congenially or denunciatively depending on whether it comes from someone you identify as a member of your social group or not. For instance, take a social group

that I belong to, like academics. We are a curious lot, up to our thick-rimmed glasses in idiosyncrasies. I can hardly ever meet members of our clan without someone poking fun at one or all of us about our esoteric concerns, our pitiful salaries, our lack of style in clothes, or the hideous parts of our lives like the hunt for tenure. Someone might say, "How many epistemologists does it take to screw in a light bulb?...Well, how do we know the light bulb is broken?" We all laugh about this and go back to our esoterica. Yet when people who have never tried to do anything academic poke fun at my earning potential as a philosopher, I simply find them annoying and myopic. The disparity emerges from the sense of community we share. Once it has been established that these other people are academics, a sense of community is established and I know that these people have shared certain types of experiences and probably hold certain views similar to my own.

The source of the humor in this situation is pointing out that we all deviate from the broader social norm in some way; *normal* people would not be so concerned about such details or take jobs that pay less. By using these norms to poke fun at ourselves, we collectively acknowledge the unorthodox nature of our behavior, but by doing so among similarly unorthodox people, we indirectly endorse that sort of practice. Whatever makes us similar enough to take such a social group as part of our identity also makes us dissimilar enough to the rest of the community to be deviants of a sort, which invites humor. Coming from one of our own, we assume that no malice is intended and the joke is taken back because someone who shares our position cannot reasonably be thought to be exercising some sort of power relation over us. You can't think you're better than me when you know you're the same as me, at least with respect to whatever is at stake in the joke.

Having said this, it does seem as though we must recognize that on an everyday basis, there are some sorts of boundaries on what would be funny to anyone. While a fool, someone who departs from our norms about intelligence, is funny to us, someone who violates our prescriptions on rape or genocide is not funny at all. While comedies of all forms get a lot of mileage out of buffoons, it is difficult to imagine an audience laughing at a recurring rapist

character.[7] Even Chaplin's caricature of Hitler did not visit any concentration camps and I cannot recall a joke about the rounds of genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s. Surely if these are the most odious departures from the norm across the broadest sets of communities and social practices, they should be most ripe for humor. I do not have in mind here the enjoyment that those who commit these acts might take from performing them or remembering their victims, but the sort of entitlement we who despise these acts might feel in ridiculing their perpetrators. It is certainly true that there are exceptions to this generalization. I can recall spates of jokes following the arrest of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer and a host of similarly gruesome events, though both met with a great deal of scorn for their questionable taste. And there are always people who revel in the fact that they offend others and never seek any more subtle sort of humor. Still, it seems clear that this sort of humor turns upon relishing the thoughts of others' suffering and at least in the Dahmer case, the subject of the joke is more widely the object of scorn. There should be some reason that these subjects are generally not fit for humor by broad public opinion.

The fact that they are not strikes me as a matter of the pain associated with those subjects, rather than any fundamental difference in the subject matters. Anyone who has had a friend or loved one suffer at the hands of a pedophile or a rapist or been made a victim in such acts knows the pain they endure and the damage that is caused. Invoking it, even with the intent of denouncing the villain, invokes the subject itself in a more immediate fashion for those who know something about it. Empathy discourages us from enjoying anything about the subject at all. It is just not possible for most of us, even the more vicious among us, to overlook how painful those sorts of experiences generally are because our awareness of the pain of others far outweighs whatever enjoyment might come from the thought of someone else's deviance. I am inclined to believe that this is a matter of degree, though. All of us have had horrible experiences of one sort or another and one sure symptom of coming to terms with them is being able to laugh again. In rare cases, survivors might find humor an ample weapon in fending off the barbarity of

their experience, though I cannot presume to speak for victims of crimes like genocide or rape on this matter.

If this view fits the way we work as a community, then it should be clear that it carries political ramifications as well. By "political" here, I do not mean to suggest the formal operations of legislative bodies, but rather the exercise of power within a social context. In this sense, whether or not your boss can fire you for certain reasons is as politically significant as how many candidates are on the ballot. Who we ridicule and how we do so reflects the framework of social practices in which we do so and invites the same sorts of political questions and concerns as anything else about how we choose to live. A joke's reflection of the power relations that constitute its social contexts makes it fit for the sorts of evaluations we put other practices to; humor cannot be shuffled off as "all in fun" and the relations between the speaker and the butt of the joke are relevant to that evaluation. Yet the deliberately harsh form of censure delivered by humor is not a morally bankrupt sort of practice. We do not merely laugh at the fool, we *join* in laughing at the fool and thereby collectively reaffirm what makes us the persons that we are. As the Stevenson quote above suggested, jokes are things that we *share* with each other. They present us with a pleasurable way of exercising the corrective impulse that Haugeland described while revitalizing some of the bonds and relations to other people that we enjoy for all the right reasons. This also suggests a reason for making jokes behind others backs when we cannot hope to correct their behavior. Sharing the joke, whatever its corrective effects, is a way of affirming what the speaker and the audience have in common by demonstrating its absence in the butt of the joke.

Taking that pleasure at the expense of others may seem morally objectionable or rationally shabby (as Plato and Aristotle feared) at first blush, but as the progeny and sole executors of a set of social practices, we have the responsibility to uphold those norms and rebuke some offenders. Some things, we might say, do not deserve our respect. That pleasure demands a certain penance when we want to welcome the offender back, but the viciousness of

the display sets the bonds of trust that exist between members of a community in a bolder relief than other forms of exchange ever could.

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Endnotes

[1] This joke, like several others that appear throughout this paper, is not my own. The hand-me-down oral transmission of most jokes makes them familiar to us, but it virtually impossible to pin down their authors in many cases. I cannot attach authors to many of the jokes included here, but I claim credit for none of them. Two people who do deserve substantial credit here are Chris Latiolais and Neera Badhwar, each of whom read drafts of this and offered helpful comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Pacific Division Meetings of the APA in March 2001 under the title "Humor as a Tool of Normativity", where Dr. Badhwar also served as a commentator.

[2] Mozart's "Ein Musikalischer Spaß (A Musical Joke)" is K.522 in his corpus and "Back in the USSR" appears on *The Beatles* (1968), more commonly known as the 'White Album'.

[3] I am alluding to a whole tradition here, so obviously a complete bibliography would direct the reader to an enormous amount of material. Particularly important chunks of it would include Kant, Hegel and Dewey as background, along with the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein (1953). More digestable chunks of the recent literature would include Foucault (1977), Brandom (1979, 1994, Ch. 1, and 2001).

[4] Of course, this strategy can backfire on those who offer the joke at some point. At some point, such humor becomes just plain cruel. A joke can also become so esoteric that its audience comes to look foolish for their preoccupation. Saying, "One of my students thought three use/mention equivocations didn't make his paper incoherent enough, so he argued from the consequent for good measure!" is likely to make philosophers chuckle, but to the rest of the world, our preoccupations are funnier than the mistakes.

[5] To emphasize this point, we might look at a contrasting case – the humor of comedian Andy Kaufmann. Despite some notoriety for his work in more conventional outlets, Kaufmann was widely reviled or written off as simply annoying rather than funny for his most distinctive work. In retrospect, it is clear that this was due to his style of crafting material to play jokes on his audience, either by adopting unlovable characters, dragging out tedious and

inane skits, or breaking with various comedic conventions as a way to confound his audience. Those who watched unreflectively were strung along and thus became the butt of the joke themselves. Many audiences simply did not find him funny and I believe this can be attributed, at least in significant part, to the fact that the very nature of his humor precluded a straightforward solidarity with those who heard it. Only a particular sort of self-awareness and reflection and a strong sense of irony could make it funny to you and most people simply don't want to go that far for a laugh.

[6] Much humor that turns purely on incongruity may also fit into this category in a less pernicious way; something strikes us as inane or off kilter – *wrong* in some way - and we share in the amusement caused by such aberrations. By mocking what appears and often afflicts all of us, we recall some universal plight and thus bring to the fore what is common to us and the fact that there is something common to all of us. Hence no morally significant agent is excluded by the joke, no retraction is needed to smooth things over and it makes for widely palatable inoffensive humor.

[7] Though it is not impossible to imagine something similar. In fact, *Hustler* magazine ran a series of cartoons in the 1970s and 1980s featuring "Chester the Molester", a serial pedophile. What made the strip more repugnant to many people was that its visual cues seemed to suggest that we should sympathize with Chester. However, public outrage ran very high against it, and this example may say more about the cartoon's audience than it does about humor in general.