I. Why Care About the Ethics of Jokes?

At its basis, the ethics of humor is essentially an argument between two camps—those who think we take jokes too seriously (the “users”) and those who think we don’t take them seriously enough (the “killjoys”). These two groups disagree on even the most basic question concerning humor ethics, namely: is joke-telling an ethical issue in the first place?

The “users” think not.¹ This is because jokes hold a special cultural status: we are not supposed to take them seriously. This idea is a basic tenet of humor; even eight-year-olds know that if they say “just kidding” after any statement, their audience will not take it seriously.

Many use this argument as a way to demonstrate that jokes somehow transcend ethics, positing that we should live in a world where people can make whatever jokes they want without worrying about moral culpability.² After all, humor can be a means of coping with the most disturbing aspects of existence, and can therefore be cathartic and therapeutic, so limiting that through rigorous moral rules undermines the social and emotional necessity of humor.

There is no denying that we need jokes about dark, taboo subjects as a means of understanding and coping with them. However, while humor’s status as “not serious” allows comedians to address bleak topics and taboo subjects, it doesn’t mean that jokes somehow transcend ethics. In using this argument, the “user” camp straw-mans the “killjoys” by assuming they believe one can’t make a joke about sensitive topics without being immoral, an assumption which is completely untrue.
Not all jokes about race are racist, not all jokes about women are sexist, and not all jokes about the holocaust are anti-semitic.

That said, jokes have the capability to psychologically hurt people and reinforce racist, sexist, homophobic paradigms. Jokes allow people to talk about taboo ideas in a socially acceptable way, which can support destructive ideologies. Also, jokes provide psychological distance from destructive events, which can be a helpful way to cope with trauma, but also allows people to laugh at suffering when compassion is really what is necessary. For example, Simon Wiesenthal, holocaust survivor and author of the memoir *The Sunflower*, recalls seeing a gallows in Lemberg with three executed Jews hanging, with a sign next to it saying “Kosher Meat.” Although this statement is supposedly not said in earnest, the sign offends and disturbs Wiesenthal, as it distances the viewer from the plight of the Jews and makes light of a disturbing, dehumanizing situation.

Because jokes can harm people and reinforce damaging social norms, jokes should be held to the same moral standard as any other type of speech. But there is still the controversial question of when a joke is immoral, with hotly debated answers that are often misunderstood by “users” and “killjoys” alike.

II. The Offense Trap

Most people have a very simple method to determine whether a joke is immoral: if a joke is offensive, it must be immoral. But one cannot equate the two terms; an offensive joke is not always an immoral one. In fact, offense is neither necessary nor sufficient for a joke to be immoral. For example, if a group of racist white people are sitting around and telling racist jokes, even if no one is offended, those jokes are still immoral. This example reveals that there is more to immoral jokes than mere offense, that a joke can be immoral in reinforcing harmful social norms.

But a joke can be immoral even if it has nothing to do with societal ills. For example, if someone told a joke meant to hurt another person’s
feelings, that joke is immoral. Aiming to hurt someone is unethical, and doing so in a purportedly funny manner does not change anything about that. But even in this example offense doesn’t enter the equation. The joke is immoral because the joker intended to harm, not because the butt of the joke felt bad. In this way, offense has no role in determining whether or not a joke is immoral. It is only when a joke has the intent to harm that a joke becomes immoral.

But even if we have determined when jokes become immoral, there still exist further questions, the most pressing being: who is morally blameworthy when an offensive joke is told? The comedian or the audience?

Most argue that comedians are morally responsible for the immoral jokes they tell. In this framework, the way to avoid telling a joke that reinforces negative social paradigms is determined by the context in which the joke is told—when telling jokes about race, a white comedian telling a joke has a different moral status than a comedian of color. Many people develop rules concerning the ethics of jokes based on the social status of who tells the joke—a white comedian can’t tell derogatory jokes about black people, a man can’t make derogatory jokes about women, a straight person can’t make derogatory jokes about gay people. While this approach seems like common sense, there are actually many flaws with this argument, in that it often assumes broad similarities between in-groups that may or may not be true, while also assuming that people within a group cannot be internally racist or sexist or homophobic.

Both the most extreme “users” and the “killjoys” can agree that the audience has the biggest say in determining whether or not a joke is immoral, but to opposite ends. “Users” contend that the world is a tough place, and comedians should not adjust their material to suit their most sensitive audience member. Instead, the audience should develop a thicker skin and learn not to take jokes so seriously. Meanwhile, the “killjoys” argue that when an audience laughs at an immoral joke, they are endorsing the joke’s offensive position and therefore are morally blameworthy.

In this context, the “killjoys” seem, well, like killjoys—so this position is often dismissed as a product of an overly-PC, humorless, liberal
academic culture. But this position is not as ridiculous as it may initially appear; to explain it, we must first consider this question: Can a joke be funny and immoral at the same time?

This answer lies in the different reactions we have to jokes we find funny versus offensive: we laugh at jokes we think are funny and groan at jokes that we think are disrespectful. Go to any comedy show and witness this in action; a recent example is Louis C.K’s monologue on the May 16th 2015 episode of SNL, where his jokes about child molesters incited more groans than laughs. In this way, an audience can tell when a joke has crossed the line, and will respond to it by not laughing. Therefore, a person’s sense of humor can be tuned and developed to suit his or her moral compass.

Humor theorist Robert De Sousa, the ultimate “killjoy,” uses this idea to argue that because one does not laugh at jokes they find offensive or distasteful, in laughing at an offensive joke a person must endorse in some way the offensive position the joke postulates. Therefore, laughing at an offensive joke is immoral.

The many philosophers who disagree with this position argue that you do not have to endorse an offensive position to find it funny, you only need to assume the attitude of a racist/sexist to find an offensive joke funny. This is evident in the fact that the many people who make and laugh at “dead baby” jokes do not actually have a latent desire to murder children. Rather, they assume the position of a murderer and laugh at the joke through that lens.

But this position isn’t logically sound. In order for jokes to be funny, they cannot be entirely theoretical—they have to be at least partly based in fact. Even absurdist humor is funny only because we have a set of ideas about the way the world works and absurdist humor defies this set of conventions. In order to find a joke about stereotypes or other offensive paradigms funny, it must exist in accordance with reality. For example, if someone made a racist joke about how white people love oranges, nobody would find this joke particularly funny. In this way, jokes need to work in accordance with the way we experience the world in order to be funny.
So if we can decide that jokes must have some sort of basis in reality in order to be funny, you cannot laugh at an offensive joke without implicitly accepting the truth of whatever offensive position used in the joke. However, this doesn't necessitate that one has to endorse a joke's offensive position to find it funny; one could just believe that this attitude exists in the world to laugh at it. To go back to the “dead baby joke” example, people can laugh at the dead baby joke not because they want to murder babies, but because seeing the world through the eyes of a baby-murderer is a funny thing to do. But this becomes more complicated with jokes about race, gender, and sexuality, because seeing and addressing differences between race and gender is inherently racist and sexist. In this way, laughing at jokes about the differences between gender and race is immoral, because it reinforces the idea that differences between the races and genders exist in the world, which is an intrinsically racist/sexist thing to do.

Focusing on the audience rather than the comedian in the quest to determine the ethics of humor is actually very reasonable, because, in the relationship between comedian and audience, the audience has the power. If an audience doesn't find a joke funny, the comedian will stop telling those jokes. If laughter is an implicit endorsement, and there already exists a tradition to groan at jokes people find immoral, an audience can and should train their sense of humor to be sensitive to traditionally oppressed groups.

The “users” argue that this is extreme and damaging, as it would be harmful to adjust our perceptions of what is funny to suit the most hypersensitive audience members. For example, what if an audience member had a negative experience with apples, and found any joke about apples offensive? In that case, it would be difficult to make jokes about any sort of taboo subject, because at least one person would be offended by them.

But this argument rests on the assumption that a joke is immoral because it is offensive, which we've already established is not true. If a joke doesn't reinforce harmful social norms and doesn't intend to harm anyone, the joke is still acceptable, even if someone is offended by it.
We need to stop making offense the villain in the discussion of humor ethics. Good humor often offends people, and in this way has the power to shift the status quo. As Garry Trudeau put it in a strip from *Doonesbury*, humor has the power to “comfort the afflicted by afflicting the comfortable.”

Good jokes are powerful and necessary precisely because they can agitate those with comfortable authority, because they can offend. Offense is an emotional wallop, and can therefore force people to reevaluate their beliefs and see things in a new way.

The power of offense also means we cannot do away with it entirely. While offense is by no means the most reliable or important metric in joke ethics, it still plays a small role in determining a joke’s morality. Since offense is a such a powerful emotion, it can alert people to the fact that a joke may be immoral, even when it might not be. Seeing someone offended by a joke is like seeing smoke in the woods—it could be the beginnings of a forest fire or a signal for help, or it could just be a campfire. Similarly, an offended person could signal an immoral joke, but it might not. Either way, it doesn’t hurt to check.

Notes


4. Ibid.


8. Ibid.


13. Ibid, 337.

14. An example: What is the difference between a baby and a watermelon? One is fun to hit with a sledgehammer, the other one is a watermelon.


16. Ibid.

Bibliography


