

2017

The Ethics of Humor: Can't You Take a Joke?

Steve Gimbel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel>

 Part of the [Applied Ethics Commons](#), [Business Law, Public Responsibility, and Ethics Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gimbel, Steve (2017) "The Ethics of Humor: Can't You Take a Joke?," *The International Journal of Ethical Leadership*: Vol. 4 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel/vol4/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Cross Disciplinary Publications at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The International Journal of Ethical Leadership by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

The Ethics of Humor

Can't You Take a Joke?

Steve Gimbel
Professor of Philosophy, Gettysburg College

Goodness. I'd like to thank Shannon and thank everyone else who had a hand in making this wonderful event happen. A lot of you in this little room. This is great. I have done stand-up for years and I usually don't play to rooms this big. This is wonderful.

So the topic is the ethics of humor. Now let me begin with an apology, see I'm a philosopher, and the way philosophers actually present is that we write papers and at our conferences we sit behind desks and we read our papers to the audience. I am not doing that. I am actually going to speak to you, so let me apologize in advance for this breach in etiquette.

So philosophy of humor, now my interest in this, like it was said earlier, I am actually a philosopher of physics so my big questions are in the nature of relativity and if the theory is true what does it say about the underlying nature of reality itself, so how did I get here? And the answer is on my 40th birthday, which was a few years ago, I was wrestling with a question and that was the question of the mid-life crisis. Now we can ask these wiser gentlemen over here is it a real thing or not? Is it a myth that around middle age there is this sudden urge, and I didn't know if it was real or not, but I thought turning 40 I ought to do something to cut it off at the pass. Now, you know, I teach ethics so, you know, having an affair with a younger woman is just not an option, the sports car, I drive so slowly Amish people give me the finger, so this would just have been ironic. So I thought what is it that I can do that I have never done and I have all my life been a comedy nerd, just loved comedy, so I thought that's it! I'll do stand-up!

So I found a club in Baltimore that had an open mic night and I went and I worked hard for about six months, tight 7 minutes of material, and I got up and I did it, and I came off and I thought, all right, check that off the bucket list but I caught the bug, and so I started performing around the Baltimore/DC areas, performed at a couple of colleges. It lasted a few years, and as I was hanging out with these comedians, I realized that the way they talked about jokes and the way they thought about jokes is

actually very different from the way the rest of us talk and think about jokes, and it's different than the way philosophers talk and think about jokes, and there is a small group of philosophers working in philosophy of humor and I realized that there was a disconnect between the sorts of things the comedians would talk about amongst themselves, the way they would talk, the way they would judge jokes, the way they would draw the line between what can and can't, if there is one, and the way that the philosophers were thinking. And so I started working in this field. There is a wonderful group that we talked about earlier, it's called the Lighthearted Philosophers' Society. We meet annually down in Florida on Columbus Day weekend, and basically have our colleges pay to send us to Florida on Columbus Day weekend, sitting around telling jokes, thinking about the nature of philosophy and humor.

So what I want to ask today is a simple question. Now before we start that, I need to draw a distinction, this is philosophy, this is what we do, we draw distinctions. I want to distinguish between humor and comedy, okay. We need to distinguish between humor and laughter. Laughter is a physiological effect. Laughter can happen for lots of reasons, right? Could be comedy, could be laughing gas, could be tickling, right? Clearly laughter different from humor, but humor and comedy, we want to draw a line between.

Comedy is an art form. So here we're not using comedy in the sense of types of classical plays, tragedy versus comedy. Here we're talking about comedy as a sort of artistic performance. Now in the roundtable that we will have afterward, I want to turn the discussion to comedy because I think there are really interesting questions there, right? Humor is what we normal people do. You hear a joke at a party, you remember it, you tell it to your friends. You see something funny on Facebook, you send it to all of your friends. It's the sort of telling of jokes that non-comedians do. The telling of jokes in normal discourse. Now these are clearly related, right? A lot of comedians tell jokes. Not all of them. But in comedy I think you have a separate question because we are creating an artificial space for a particular art form and that comes with its own set of ethical questions.

What I want to look at in this talk is, got a good one for you, that sort of joking. The sort of joking that isn't part of a performance. It is performative, right? It is something you are doing, you are performing that joke when you tell it and we all know people who butcher jokes, they just can't tell a joke, right? So they are trying to perform the joke but they are doing it badly. So joking is performing but it's doing so in the course of normal

discourse. So what we want to look at in this talk is humor not comedy. We will get to comedy, I promise, and some of the examples we'll use will be jokes from comedy, but what we want to look at here in particular is this question of ethics in humor.

Now we can't talk about humor and ethics without talking about two major figures. One is Aristotle, whom we'll come to, and the other is Freud. My favorite Freud joke was on the old TV sitcom *Cheers* where somebody asked what's a Freudian slip, to which Cliff Clavin responded, "It's when you mean to say one thing and you end up saying a mother." Brilliant line! It only took him 3 seconds. We'll keep track of you!

So Freud has a big book on jokes and the relation to the unconscious, and in that work Freud draws an interesting distinction between two types of jokes: innocent jokes and tendentious jokes. Now innocent jokes are plays on words, puns, clean jokes, right? What we all think of when we think of just telling, you know, a joke at the dinner table, assuming your family is not completely dysfunctional. Tendentious jokes on the other hand come in two flavors. He argues that there are dirty jokes, jokes about sexuality, and ethnic jokes, jokes that make a particular group the butt of the joke, where you're using a stereotype. Now he focuses primarily on ethnic but we can enlarge that group, there are lawyer jokes or blonde jokes, right.

Guy comes up to a river, he's trying to figure out how to get across. He looks up, there's a blonde across the river. He states, "Excuse me, how do you get on the other side of the river?" The blonde looks up and says, "You are on the other side of the river."

Right? So the idea here is when we tell a joke like that, what we're doing is using an architect, right? We're taking people with blonde hair and we're associating an icon with them. So that's the sort of thing we're looking for when we say ethnic notes. It may be a particular ethnic group, the Poles, right? How many Poles does it take to change a light bulb? Four: One to hold the light bulb, three to turn the ladder. That, by the way, is the first light bulb joke. That's where our light bulb, that was THE joke that started all of the other light bulb jokes.

So the idea there is when we hear Polish jokes, the flattened icon that we get of people of Polish extraction is that stupid and dirty, right? Those tend to be the two parts of that stereotype. And so Freud wanted to look at why it is that we tell these two sorts of jokes.

Now we might want to ask what is the central question of this talk so I think we will want to ask is it morally acceptable to tell and enjoy tenden-

tious jokes? Right? I just did, but of course I did it as a professional for clearly scholarly and pedagogical purposes. If we were simply sitting around this room having lunch, the 50 of us, and I just told those jokes, would there be a moral problem with that? So that's the central question we want to ask, right? We'll ask later is it okay for a comedian to tell? Because I think that's a slightly different question, but if we talk about her, you a comedian? No? Okay. Is it okay for her to tell those jokes? That's the question we want to consider.

Now in considering this joke, rather this question, we now turn to Aristotle. I promised and there it is, I delivered. Okay. Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, you haven't read the *Nicomachean Ethics*, take their class. Aristotle argues that ethical questions are really questions about the nature of one's character, and when you look at the human soul, it's divided into two parts. One part deals with the intellectual, one part deals with the ethical, the practical and the virtues of the practical are always the mean between two extremes. So if you have too much, it's a vice; too little, it's a vice; down the middle, that's a virtue. And that's true, he argues, with everything. Right? So in the case of humor, if you have too little, you are a bore; if you have too much, you are a buffoon, which is just a wonderful word we don't use often enough. But if you are right in the middle, you are a wit. And that's the virtuous way to be.

To be witty is to actualize your potential as a human being, if you want to be the ultimate human being. What's your name? Ryan. If you want to engage your inner Ryanness and transcend your mere self to be more like Ryan, then you need to be a wit. You need to find that mean between two extremes. so Aristotle is going to argue that being funny is part of the well-lived human life.

Now we can use Aristotle to frame the question we have about the moral permissibility of tangential jokes, right? That is what we can ask is whether these three categories can be used for our question. And so what we can do is take these three approaches and set out what are really the three main moral positions with respect to tangential jokes. Now there are those who are on the boorish side and those are people who say, innocent jokes are fine but tendentious jokes are immoral and should never be told. Most people tend to do that.

The buffoons, on the other hand, are going to say, "Go to town, anything goes." And in fact now says "Go to anything." So feel free to go to anything, any length, no matter what joke you have, let her rip. Right? Jokes are jokes.

The wit will say some tendentious jokes are allowed in some context, so we've got again with Aristotle set-up, those who say always, those who say never, and those who say sometimes.

Now one of the things that we worry about in philosophy are logical fallacies. That is using poorer reasoning to justify a position. You will notice that we have three words labeling our three views. Is there one you would prefer to be? Yes. This is what we call question-beginning language, we want to avoid this so we will change our labels. We will call the boorish position the cultural sensitivity position. Right? That's what we're saying if we use the phrase boorish we're clearly biasing you away from that view. There are very smart philosophers who take this position: Mary Bergman, Ronald De Sousa are two prominent philosophers who have argued this. And they generally give four types of arguments to make the case that tendentious jokes are themselves immoral, that if you tell them, if you laugh at them, you are doing something wrong. And those four are that, look, being the butt of a joke is a harm. Now if I tell retired professor jokes, they will be hurt. Why? Because we'll now look down upon them in a way we hadn't before, that being the butt of a joke is itself to suffer a harm.

The second is that tendentious jokes entrench imbalances in social power and grant justification for discriminatory beliefs and practices. That is, we live in a culture in which there is unequal social power. Some people get to give the grades. Other people have to cower before us. And so if we tell jokes about you guys, it only reinforces that you are inferior to us, as if we needed to reinforce that. So the idea here is that we live in a society in which there is an imbalance in social power; telling the jokes only ossifies that difference.

The third is that tendentious jokes are offensive and it's morally wrong to offend people. That is, offensiveness is taken as a moral category, right? This is an approach you here fairly frequently now. It's just morally wrong to offend someone, that offensiveness itself is a moral harm, and that if you are offended by something, that you've been damaged and you shouldn't damage others.

The fourth is that tendentious jokes are in bad taste. And bad taste is a moral category. So bad taste is just not a matter of etiquette, right? It's not like, you know, using the wrong salad fork. That it is in some sense over a line. It has caused harm. So that mere faux pas is really an ethical issue.

So these four are the standard arguments that are given by smart people who want to claim that these sorts of jokes simply ought not be told. The

buffoonery position is what we will call “neo-shaftesburianism,” which is a term I just coined in order to sound smart in front of you. “Shaftesbury” refers to this man, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Say it for us. “The Third Earl of Shaftesbury.” Exactly! He was a sadly forgotten philosopher of the modern period and in philosophy modern means the 16th and 17th century. For us that’s modern. And he was a fascinating figure. He was wrestling. He was an author. He wrote some plays. He wrote a number of philosophical essays. He was writing at a time when he was taking issue with a view called enthusiasm, which we would now refer to as religious fundamentalism, that there was a large segment of the population who had a very literal view of religion and apparently nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus laugh. And if we are to take the Bible seriously, that means that if we are to be good Christians, we must not laugh, either.

And so these enthusiasts were quite dower. And he wanted to argue that humor is an essential part of a well-lived life, that laughter is a joy that one ought to experience joy. Now he gets into an argument with (Lagnents), the prominent German philosopher, and the debate is this. Is there any topic that ought to be off limits to ridicule? Particularly religion. Lagnents says one ought not ridicule religion. If you disagree with somebody’s approach to religion, it ought to be a very serious matter. Shaftesbury argues that ridicule is a test of truth, that if something is true you can’t ridicule it. So if something is capable of being ridiculed, what it’s doing is it’s demonstrating to us that there is falsity in there that needs to be weeded out. So that ridicule actually plays very important epistemological role for us, that if you can make fun of something, that there’s something to be made fun of. If you try to make fun of something true, he goes back to Aristotle. That’s what makes you a buffoon. That’s what’s over the line. But if you make fun of something that needs changing, what you’re doing is you’re demonstrating that need for change, and that’s a valuable thing.

So we ought to allow absolutely every topic to be open to possible ridicule because, if it succeeds, that shows it’s problematic.

The neo-shaftesburianism position comes in three different flavors, what we’ll call the Shakespearean, the nihilistic, and the cultural cohesive. Now the Shakespearean, the reason I call it this is that in Shakespeare it’s often the fool and the fool alone who can tell the truth to the king, right? It’s only the comic, it’s only the clown who can speak truth to power, so the Shakespearean view takes this neo-shaftesburian approach because ridicule is a test of truth, so nothing should be off limits as we need to be able to

challenge power, which may obscure truth. Right? Now if Tony believes something, are you going to believe it? "It doesn't commonly happen." It may, well, it does for the exam. Right? The idea is he has the red pen, you will say what he wants you to say, right? With power comes the ability to coerce, right? The Shakespearean, neo-shaftesburian position is one which says we need these jokes, we need tendentious jokes. I need to be able to tell jokes about people because they are going to be, we can tell jokes about high school kids, right? Why? There are things about high school kids they need to come on, right? And unless we joke about them, those things aren't going to come out so they'll realize, oh, okay, I'll change. Right? So the idea here is this is better for them, it's better for society, we need a place in our discourse to ridicule aspects of our world because that's the only way we can effect positive change. So there is a special role for humor in our discourse.

The nihilistic view, which affects the size of shaftesburianism again, is called nihilistic because jokes are meaningless, right? Jokes have no meaning so there is no sense in a moral moratorium since we are only joking. Look, if I tell you that there is a pirate with a steering wheel attached to the front of his pants, I'm not reporting the truth. There is no pirate like that, right? It's the set-up to a joke. Right? You all know that joke, right? Really?

Pirate with a steering wheel attached to the front of his pants, they say, well what's that for? It's a car, it's driving me nuts. (Laughter from audience.)

This is an easy room. It's not that funny. So the idea is, look, it's just a joke. It's not that I'm telling the truth. There was never such a pirate. There wasn't! Nor am I committing myself to that belief. I am simply telling a joke. Right? It's just a joke. Lighten up. Joking is a special form of speaking. Joking is sort of like fiction, right? I'm creating an artificial world in which the result is laughter, right? It's not meaningful. So if anyone wants to hold me morally responsible for telling jokes, it's like holding me morally responsible for things that happened in a fictional story I wrote. It's like, that never happened! No pirates were harmed in the telling of this joke.

The cultural cohesive view is one that is put forward largely by anthropologists of humor. There was a man named Alan Dundes who argues, Kristy Davies is another one who argues in the same way, that jokes are a social signal that a group has been accepted into the culture well-being, allowed to maintain their identity as a minority group. So the idea is what they point out, we talked about Polish humor, you know when Polish jokes really became the rage? In the 1970s. The big wave of Polish immigra-

tion is from the 20s to the 40s. We don't start telling Polish jokes until Poles are white people, they're normal people, they're part of the normal part of our culture. Now they're allowed to maintain that identity, right? They're allowed to be slightly different while still being us, so they're not other, they're just a flavor of us but a different flavor of us, that what these anthropologists argue is that when you start to see jokes about groups is when those groups are no longer seen as scary. We can be funny about them because they're our buddies, right? You start seeing Italian jokes, Jewish jokes about the same time. Right? You don't make jokes about things you're really afraid of because that's not a joking matter. You start telling these jokes when it's basically a signal to "you're in the club." Right? Now clearly there are instances of despised communities having jokes about them.

Here's a very tendentious joke. Around World War II Germans would tell this joke: How many Jews can you fit in a Volkswagen? 104, 2 in the front, 2 in the back and 100 in the ashtray. Yeah. That's a limiting case joke right there. Right? Because on the one hand it's like, oh my god. On the other hand, that's a funny joke but it's like ew, you feel dirty realizing that is a well constructed joke. So it certainly is not always true but what the anthropologists are pointing out is that it is largely true, that when we start seeing commonly jokes about a group, in a certain sense they become innocent and non-tendentious because what we're doing is embracing that group, not actually putting them down.

The middle we will call contextualism because, here again, remember that we said this is the middle ground where sometimes these jokes are allowed, sometimes they're not. And this, too, will come in three flavors. The first is what we can call the identity politics position. That is one can only tell tendentious jokes about one's own group. So I could get away with telling that last joke—why? Because I'm Jewish. Right? And the idea here is that a tendentious joke might be innocent, that is I might just be telling it because it's a funny joke or I might be telling it because I really dislike this group of people and I'm trying to put them down and get you to think like I do that these people are inferior. But if I'm part of that group, of course I don't think I'm inferior to you guys. Right? So I would only be telling the joke to get laughs; I wouldn't be telling the joke to make my own lot in life worse. So the question is, when we hear a tendentious joke, what we're dealing with is a problem that we deal with in philosophy of language called "speaker's meaning." So if somebody says something, if she says something and he says the same thing, they could mean radically different things by them. Right?

So when I hear her say it, I need to figure out did she mean that or did she mean that? And what we're dealing with here in a certain sense is a version of that problem. When I hear somebody tell a joke, is it just to be funny or is it really underlying an aggressive act against this group? Now the only time these folks want to argue that I can be absolutely sure this isn't a bigoted attack on this minority is when the person is a member of that group because clearly no one would do that which is a detriment to their own self. So the identity of politics position says that I'm only allowed to tell tendentious jokes when they are about my group.

A version of that which we are seeing a lot more of nowadays is what we might call the humor as the sword of justice position, which is overstated dramatically I think for a reason. And here the claim is you can tell tendentious jokes that, and the phrase you will hear now, is punch up but not those that punch down. That is, you are allowed to tell tendentious jokes about groups that have social power. If somebody has especially power they don't deserve, right? Those people we can tell all the nasty jokes about them we want because what does that do? That levels the playing field. That brings them down to us. So notice that inherent in both of these is the same presupposition that we find in the cultural sensitivity position, that being the butt of a joke is a harm. Right? These people say being the butt of a joke is a harm so you should never do it. These guys say being the butt of a joke is a harm but if it's your own group, you're not harming them. These guys say, yeah, it's a harm and there are some people who deserve harm. They have special privilege that they don't deserve so we will use humor to try to take that privilege away. We will try to diminish those who are wrongly elevated, thereby creating justice. Now you can't punch down, that is you can't take somebody who is beneath you and tell a joke about them because what's that doing? Well being the butt of a joke is a harm, that's only further harming them. So you can punch up, you can't punch down. Humor can be used to harm but there are some people who deserve the harm. And this again is a position that I think you're seeing much more of.

Now, it's certainly true that humor can be used to serve social justice. The last few, which for lack of a better name we will simply call the "correct view," is that everyone's fair game. There is nobody we shouldn't be able to tell jokes about. There is nobody that we should exclude from our ability to make mutual jokes with. Right? I have a dear friend who is in the Italian Studies Department back at Gettysburg, and whenever we see

each other, he has a Jewish joke, I have an Italian joke ready to go. And it doesn't harm our relationship; quite to the contrary, it tightens it. He's a good buddy of mine. Whenever I see Alan across campus, I know a good laugh is coming. Right? So the idea is that to simply rope a group off would eliminate the possibility of this sort of interaction. So we shouldn't take any group and make them sort of impervious to this sort of joshing. But that doesn't mean that all jokes are allowed. Telling a tendentious joke I want to argue is taking a moral risk. So there are some jokes that are morally acceptable and tendentious. There are other jokes that are tendentious and are okay. You're going to tell a tendentious joke? You're taking a risk. Are you doing something that is morally allowable or something that is morally impermissible?

So in order to answer this, we now need to take a step into humor theory. Let's get philosophical. So this is actually a controversial statement. This is part of the project I'm working on. One of these questions, see in philosophy, and you'll learn this if you take any philosophy class, the first thing you do, right? You take a class it's always Philosophy of _____ (blank). Take a noun, stick it in the blank, we have a philosophy of it. Right? The first week of your class will be, well what do we mean by Blank? And now we need to give a definition, we need to set out the necessary and sufficient conditions to know when something is that thing because we've got 12 more weeks coming and we want to make sure we're studying the right thing. Right? So philosophy of humor, the first thing is what do we mean by humor? What do we mean by a joke? Now the standard approach, which I believe is wrong, is that a joke is the perception of an incongruity. Right? And that's sort of the general received view. Right? And if you think about it, it does make a lot of sense. Knock-knock. We will try this again, people. You've been fed.

Knock knock. Who's there? Two. Two who? No, to whom.

Right? So the idea, think about how the joke works, there's a set-up that leads you to think in one direction and then the punch line that makes you realize, oh, I need to reinterpret that, it actually means this other thing. Right? And so the standard view, the incongruity view, is that there are these incongruities and it's when we perceive them or some theorists think when we resolve them, that the laughter comes. I want to argue that's not true. While it is certainly true that a lot of our jokes are based on incongruity, right, think about the pirate joke, right? There were two ways to interpret the pirate's sentence and it had simultaneously two meanings, it's

a pun, and when you come to realize, oh it means this and this, hahaha, but there are other forms of humor that don't require incongruity at all. Right? So there might be some improv people here. Are there?

So he writes half the things earlier and memorizes them, and makes up the other half. Right? So the idea here is, alright think about improv comedy. How does improv comedy work. Right? Okay. Give me a celebrity, Justin Bieber. Give me a color, green, and give me a location, Las Vegas. And then what do we do? We get the troupe up here and we do something, and what's funny is not an incongruity because we started out in congruence, right? What's funny is when they're brought together and all of a sudden we see a green Justin Bieber in Las Vegas, right, and oh my god, it makes perfect sense in the scene they created and then we laugh. So what's funny there is not the incongruity. What's funny there is the congruity. Same thing if you watch Frank Caliendo or Rich Little doing impersonations. What's funny there is, god, he nailed that. That's exactly how he does it. It's the congruence. Right?

Similarly, guys have you ever seen this? This is a classic. Robin Williams, one of his concert videos, does Elmer Fudd singing Bruce Springsteen, singing the song "Fire," if you've never seen this look this up, Google this. It is magnificent. Elmer Fudd. That chases you. The Nazis, not so much. Elmer Fudd. And what's funny is, is it incongruous? Well, I mean he could have done Tweetie Bird and that would have been just as incongruous. What makes the bit funny is oh my god does it work. It fits so perfectly. It's just, I mean knock-down hilariously funny. So what's funny is congruity, not incongruity. So what I want to argue is that we need a new definition for humor and what I contended is a playful demonstration of cleverness, that is I'm making a joke, I'm putting something out there, right? And I'm putting it out there so that you can admire my cleverness. Right? I'm making a joke to show you how clever I am, and I'm doing it, now playfulness here I don't mean, "weeahh." What I mean is playful as in playing with your food, which parents hate. Right? What is playing with your food? I gave you that food, there is one thing you are supposed to do with it and that is eat it. And what are you doing? Something else. That is, you're playing with it. You're using it for something other than that for which it was intended. That's the notion of playfulness I mean. Right? Because jokes can be mean-spirited, jokes can be self-deprecating, jokes can be not playful in that way. Jokes can be very dark, right? So it's not necessarily light and playful but it is taking something other than it was intended for

and using it in a way that demonstrates my cleverness. That's what we're going to mean by humor.

Now philosophers of language have a distinction between use and mention, right? So if I say Boston has great restaurants, that's true. If I say Boston has six letters, that's true. But the word Boston is used differently. Once I'm using it to refer to the capital of Massachusetts and once I'm using Boston to refer to the symbol, the word Boston. Right? What I want to argue is that when we use language in humor, we're also using it in a strange way but it's neither using nor mentioning. There is a third way that we're using language when we tell jokes and it is what I will use the term acknowledging. That is when I use a word in a joke, when I say Polish, when I say blonde, when I say pirate, right, the idea is there are certain elements to the meaning of the word that I am now engaging but I'm not using it in the same way that I'm using Boston in Boston has great restaurants, to actually refer to the world. I'm acknowledging the meaning but then I'm using it as a play toy to show you my cleverness. So I'm merely acknowledging the term, I'm not actually using the term. But it's more than just mentioning it.

So there's this third way that we use language in humor that is really different from the way we use language in non-humorous ways. It is a really odd particular way that we use words. Now there are two ways. We had, we saw one of the views, the nihilistic, neo-shaftesburianism position which held that, looks like are just joking, they're just fiction. There are, I want to argue, such things as pure jokes, and a pure joke is when I am just demonstrating my cleverness. That's all I'm doing is I'm just joking. But there are other times, and this is a phrase that I take from now Senator Al Franken who, in his book *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot*, coins the phrase "kidding on the square," which he says using a joke to express a belief, that is sometimes we use jokes just to get people to laugh. Other times we do use humor to express actual propositional content. That is, I am trying to say something with this joke; I'm just using a joke to do it. Sometimes there are certain subjects that are just so touchy we don't want to actually say it so we make it into a joke. Other times there are things that are so delicate, sometimes we do it in order to be brash, right? But there are times where we do kid on the square, that is we use jokes to tell what we think is the truth. Think of political cartoons. A political cartoon is meant to be kind of funny, but it is meant to say something. It is meant to lampoon this particular figure or it is meant to really demonstrate metaphorically, right, the nature of this situation. So there are times when we use jokes purely just

for laughs, but there are other times when we use jokes to actually express things. And that's an important difference. Right? Now I want to argue that that makes different kinds of joke telling morally distinct categories.

So the conversational quip, right, if you're coming up with something off the top of your head, you can often get away with things you couldn't if it was a premeditated joke. Right? That is, that you hear two things and what you can do, you often bracket it. Well "one might say" or "well, if I was a bigot" you'd say, and you're just drawing that connection, and what you're doing is you're demonstrating at lightning speed in the course of our conversation that you just drew a connection that nobody else saw in a way that's really sort of clever. So the conversational quip I would argue often has the least moral responsibility attached to it. That is, if you're making a quip, you're just acknowledging this meaning, acknowledging that meaning and showing that you can connect them in this way nobody else saw. And so what you're really doing is demonstrating that cleverness, and so there is no sense in taking that person who just acknowledged that some people connected this way and attributing that belief to them. I think that is different from both constructed comedy, which we'll talk about in a bit, but when we have a comedian who . . . "Comes onto the stage, it's great to be here in Cleveland!" . . . right? Now, what is that comedian doing? That comedian is walking into a room full of people who look like that: "Make me laugh; go ahead." Right? And so this person's job, you guys are here, you go to a comedy club, these boxed lunches are going to cost you \$8 and you gotta buy two drinks, right? You're paying money for this clown to make you laugh. Go ahead, monkey, make me laugh.

And so there is a sort of contractual obligation, right? My job is to figure out what you find funny, to go there and to get the laughs from you, and so there is, I think, a very different dynamic there. So what the responsibility of that performer is, is a complicated issue which, again, we'll talk about in the next session. But I think that's different from the repeated joke. That's the joke that you hear, you remember, and you think is worth bringing up in conversation, "You need to hear this one," and then you tell that joke. Right?

Now the question that gets asked in essence to your audience is why did he tell that joke? And here's where we need to bring in one of my absolute favorite philosophers. If you're taking a philosophy class, take one in which you read Paul Grice, one of the most wonderful writers we have. He coins this phrase "conversational implicature" which is magnificent.

What it means is there are oftentimes where we say something by saying something else, right? So suppose we're talking about an over-tired professor and all of a sudden we see him, and we say, "Oh, beautiful weather we're having, isn't it?" That's a weird thing to say. That has no relation to the conversation we were having. Grice argues that there are rules that have to be followed in order to have a conversation, that conversation requires a certain, it's a rule-based activity. And when somebody breaks one of those rules, it could mean they're mentally ill, could mean they're just decided not to have a conversation with you, but what it really means is probably something else. So if we're talking about somebody and all of a sudden I start talking about the weather, what do you realize it means? Oh, here's here, stop talking. So I didn't say, "The old guy's here, stop it," but I said that, right? So what we will often do is say something by saying something else and that we come to understand what was really intended by the breaking of one of these conversational rules. That's what's called an implicature. Now after a joke, if somebody tells a joke and people call them on it morally, the first thing they always say is, "I was only joking." And so we see, you know, there are some cases where you can claim that. Now how do we know whether someone is only joking? In a certain sense, we need to make a conversational implicature. We need to decide whether this person thought this joke was really that clever that it bore repeating or whether the person was really making a bigoted statement and is trying to cover it up with, "I was only joking."

I want to argue, and again this is hardly trivial, that one of the criteria that we can use is how funny that joke is. If a joke really is that funny, then you can say, okay I understand. He was impressed by the structure of that joke, by the construction, that's a really good joke. But if the joke isn't that funny, what did the person probably mean? They probably mean that the bias that is present in the stereotype in that joke is probably the case, and so that tendentious joke is in fact kidding on the square and the person is making a bigoted statement.

So what I want to argue is that when we look at tendentious jokes, I don't think we should be able to rule them out altogether. All right? My jokes with my buddy, Alan, I don't think are in any way morally problematic. We have the utmost respect for each other and those jokes only serve to deepen the bond. At the same time, I don't think we can take the view of others, right, in the comedy we may want to talk about the comedian Anthony Jeselnik.

Yeah, that was great! I wish everybody could see this. There was initially a snort and a smile, and then there was this grimace of pain. That is exactly what he's going for. So what he does is he takes the too soon question, right? Is it just too soon? He violates that intentionally. He will take every horrible disaster that causes human harm and he will immediately make a joke about it in order to press that line, to say there is nothing we shouldn't be joking about and largely he gives this wonderful interview in the *New York Times*. He gives the neo-shaftesburianism line that, look, my job as a comedian is to help you make meaning of things. And if there are some things that are untouchable, some things that are sacred cows, that's going to lead, since he argues, to fascism. That we need to put everything on the table and that we need, even while the wound is still open, we need in the same way that Shaftesbury argued to ridicule. Now it becomes painful to watch. And so the question is, is he over the line or not? And I think he intentionally tries to be over the line in order to, I think in part, create this sort of conversation. So I think clearly there are going to be elements, there are going to be jokes that we have to say, "Dude, no." Right? That was just not okay. But the fact that we can say there are tendentious jokes that are allowed and there are tendentious jokes we have to rule out doesn't mean that it's never the case. So how do we draw the line? I want to claim that it's an esthetic criteria, that if the joke is that funny, you get away with it. If the joke isn't that funny, you should not have told that joke. And that ought to strike you in some sense as somewhat controversial.

This is philosophy, people. We like to say controversial things and then ask for questions. Or we can have people just walk out on us. That's how controversial this is. So with that, I will say thank you and ask for questions. Questions or jokes.

AUDIENCE: *Well it's a very clever and enjoyable presentation . . .*

GIMBEL: So you're saying this was all one big joke?

AUDIENCE: *I actually, yes, I'm going to say that is the definition of humor seems to me, ____.*

GIMBEL: Ah, well done

AUDIENCE: *Because, if that's all humor was, if that was its essence, why on earth would anyone ever play the game of ____.*

GIMBEL: I think that's perfectly fair. I think when you look at humor, it certainly is the case that well executed humor in certain context will

generate pleasure. Daniel Dennett has a wonderful big book where he argues that the structure of the brain is such that we are forced to leap to inferences with such speed in order to survive, so evolutionarily it's bred into the brain to take shortcuts and inferences that will allow us to run away from the tiger before we sit and process okay, tiger, tigers eat meat, I am a human being, human beings have flesh, you know, by this point you're lunch. So the idea is that the human brain reacts before it has good reason to, but then it continues to process and if the brain finds an error, it corrects it. Now what has evolved over time is that this error correction is a positive force and so we have evolved a means of regarding ourselves for error detection and that, he argues, is laughter. And so what we're doing in comedy is just exploiting this structure of the brain which has been bred into us, and so I know how you're wired and so I am going to set up a situation which leads you to think one way, I'm going to give you a punch line which makes you realize there was an error in my way of thinking, you'll correct the error and then you'll reap the emotional benefit that comes from this evolutionary, and so the idea there is that humor is in certain ways connected with pleasure but it doesn't mean it always is. Right?

Like I say, I hung out with stand-up comics and stand-up comics were always being dumped. Which on the one hand is very good for material, but the reason they were always being dumped is they didn't know when to stop. They would tell jokes and you would see them sometimes having fights with their significant others and they would be using humor as a weapon, and it was not funny; it was nasty. So in that case I don't think the humor does create this sense of mirth and I think the reason why it's almost omnipresent in philosophy of humor is that philosophy of humor is written by a bunch of people who love to tell and hear jokes. So for them that's what humor is about, but when you see humorous people, they're often actually quite dysfunctional. It's interesting, if you look at surveys, you know, think about this: Top 5 things, what do you want in a romantic partner? Almost everyone will put sense of humor in that top 5. Right? And yet the people who have the most developed sense of humor, who really work hard to make a professional life out of a sense of humor, are horribly dysfunctional and part of it is they use that humor not just for creating mirth but also for creating pain, also for self-deception. We use humor for a hundred different purposes, one of which I think, and I don't know if Dennett's right or not, this takes an evolutionary biologist who would have to do a lot more, and I'm not sure how one would even do the sort of

research to get the evidence needed to justify that sort of evolutionary claim. I mean, it's a wonderful just-so story that, if it were true, would explain, but I think one of the reasons why we do seek out humor, we watch Comedy Central, we watch sitcoms, we go to comedy clubs, support live comedy, one of the reasons we do that is there is a pleasure involved, unless you're seeing Anthony Jeselnik, in which case it could be quite painful.

AUDIENCE: (unintelligible comment)

GIMBEL: Interesting, and so there was the need to complete it even though, so you're the person who goes into the dining hall, gets something and you really hate it but you have to clean the plate before you go back and get something you want.

So, I mean, I think there is a reason why but I don't think it undermines what's happening here because I think what those comics are doing is they're both, when they're on stage with the stool and the mic demonstrating their cleverness to these people, but I think also with their partners they're demonstrating their cleverness and in that sense asserting superiority which leads the partner to say, "Yeah, see ya."

AUDIENCE: *So you talked about evaluating whether someone gives a bigoted statement or whether it's a joke based on how funny the joke is, what about laughing at other people's pain? Say you're walking with your friend, your friend slips on a patch of ice and as soon as you check if they're okay you're laughing your ass off and you're rolling around on the floor and so how does that play into this how/why that you've created and what about like when we see people we don't know who are skateboarding and they do a jump and they land and hit their nuts on the bar, you know? Everyone's laughing because it's hilarious, you have movies are centered around this sort of slapstick comedy like the Daddy Daycare and movies like that. How does that type of humor fit into this system?*

GIMBEL: Sure. Going back to Buster Keaton. Now I want to argue, and there are some humor theorists who want to put these two in the same category, that is humor is that which we find funny, which may end up being circular but the idea is what they're looking at is there's a certain phenomenon, there are things we see and we laugh at, now how do we make sense of that? What I want to argue is that there are two different sorts of things. I think there is found funniness, you can see something and find it funny, versus constructive funniness, which I think is humor, so I don't necessarily think that there are times when you see somebody slip on the patch and when the line that's often taken is that, well look, if

real harm has been observed, you're not going to find that funny, you're going to rush over and make sure the person's okay. I think half the time we're stifling the laugh until, so we did find it funny, we just won't allow ourselves to show it because that will make us seem insensitive to our friend despite the fact that, oh man, your feet were about 3 feet above your head and when you came down, you should have seen the look.

So you know, Mel Brooks says the difference between comedy and tragedy, tragedy is when I cut my finger, it's bleeding, it hurts. Comedy is when you fall into an open manhole and die. Right? What he's arguing is that if, you know, you're not directly experiencing the pain, now hopefully you're an empathetic person, right? We know that you're the best of all human beings so clearly you have a well-developed sense of empathy and surely empathy is a central psychological component that's required for one to be a moral human-being.

AUDIENCE: *What about creating physical humor? We have these ___ that are scripted and played out and of course the actors themselves probably don't get hurt, but some of the funniest movies actually happen, like you read how they shot the movie and the actor did get hurt or he was doing something stupid, and that's the final scene that got put into the movie because it was the funniest.*

GIMBEL: Yes, but you'll get Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, right? Early film comedy was all about the sight gag. And I think there is certainly something there. Now it may be, you know, in the case of Keaton and Chaplin, that it was so clever the way they set it up, so that it builds tension and then something wacky happens, and so really what they're doing with images is similar to what we're doing with words. I think M.C. Escher, if you look at certain Escher works, I think they're visual jokes. That is, you look and it's like, wait a minute, it's, oh, that's hilarious! So I think that process can be replicated non-linguistically. And I think the thing with Escher is like, man, that's really clever. Had those posters in my dorm room, too. Right? At the same time, your friend wasn't being clever; your friend just hit a patch of black ice. So I think that you may be pointing to a weakness in my position where I want to say these two things are separate. Others will say, no, they're very similar things. We're laughing at both of them. We should have a single view that counts. I think it's different. I think you can find things funny that aren't humor, and I think a number of comedians aren't humorous. There are shock topics, for example, who we know that if we're emotionally overwhelmed, one of the reactions will be to laugh.

I mean, there are some people I'm sure you all know who laugh at highly inappropriate times and they can't help it. It's not that they find it funny, it's just that they laugh under the stress and I think a comedian whose job it is in part to create laughs, and you can do it through humorous or non-humorous means, right? I think there are others of these cognitive imputes that will cause laughter that aren't necessarily humor. Now, if you want to be a good philosopher, you can say, "Steve, you're wrong! They need to be part of the same category. You're making a category mistake." I'm trying to argue they're different. Maybe it's because I'm tied to a theory, but I would argue that slipping on the ice in reality is different from Chaplin slipping on the ice, but you may want to say, "Well look, you're just observing, you're seeing the same thing and they're both funny for the same reason." I think it's a very good question.

AUDIENCE: *(unintelligible)*. . . *if you're saying like, I was dumped and all these terrible things happened and everyone laughs at you, like that's not a demonstration of cleverness, that's just kind of sad.*

GIMBEL: I think there's a difference. We all have people, friends, who are just whiners and then we have those who are self-deprecating. And I think if you listen to Richard Lewis, right? One of the great Jewish kvetching comics, right? Everything is always wrong and he's going to tell you what's wrong with his life, and you wouldn't believe. Right? I think it is. I think self-deprecating humor, when, Jewish humor largely self-deprecating. Freud deals with this significantly, why would groups do this to themselves? And I think in the case of self-deprecating humor, what we're doing is humanizing ourselves, is that, right, the philosopher Robert Solomon says, "I think the Three Stooges are very funny. Why? Not because of Mo hitting people in the head, but because of Larry and Curly getting hit on the head." That is, what we get is we feel a sense of sympathy, that is what humor can do contrary to what say Plato and Hobbes say, which is that humor is superiority over someone, what he says is oftentimes what's funny is we now can empathize with you, we can see your pain and say, "Oh, I'm a poor schmuck, too!" Right? I'm, you know, bad things to me, a bad thing happened to you, now look, we're both human in our fallibility. And so self-deprecating humor, right, the difference between just whining and complaining and self-deprecating humor is taking that bad thing that happened to you and telling it in a clever way. So what I'm doing is I'm using my cleverness not in the way these comedians, you know, having a

fight with their partners are, you know, beating them over the head and showing that I'm superior, is I'm using my cleverness in essence to diminish myself and make myself more approachable. So we can use humor in a number of ways and I think one of those ways is really, in essence, I can show my cleverness in making myself more human. And so that's what I think is happening with self-deprecating humor. I think it's very much a common usage and I think we can account for it in this.

AUDIENCE: *Whether it's ___ or real, why is a pratfall funny? That doesn't tie in with this congruity or incongruity ___ that you mentioned.*

GIMBEL: Incongruity theorists are going to say it is the incongruity, that normally I'm walking and I take a step, and normally one step just follows another and now suddenly an unexpected thing happens. And so it's the unexpectedness of it. Somebody, like Solomon is going to say that I saw what happened to you was a bad thing, bad things happen to me, trust me I get it, I fall down when I'm in fancy dress to give a presentation, too, now suddenly I sympathize with you. You know, why we find it funny, I mean, in essence I want to argue that's a psychological question. Who do we ask? We ask the psychologist. So why is that funny? Funny, I think, is a cognitive state, it's a state of mind, and philosophers love to talk about states of mind as if we owned them, where we really don't, that's a matter of social science, and I think in philosophy of humor we often make this mistake in that we lapse into sort of a priori social science. We try to do psychology without the lab rats. You know? We try to do psychology from our ivory tower instead of getting down there with the observables, and so that's a question that I think is a wonderful question that I would want to hand off to the psychologist.

AUDIENCE: *You're saying you don't know and ask a psychologist.*

GIMBEL: Yes.

AUDIENCE: *Okay, fair enough. So (unintelligible) if something physical happens like you fall over and then somebody makes a joke about that, would that still be a conversational quip or would that just be like, Hey, would that be something different?*

GIMBEL: I think the question is how quickly it's done. So this table almost fell over and if I had come up with something like that, we would have thought of it as a conversational quip, whereas if you had been telling this story later, so you had to really set it up so you had time to think about: a) should I tell this story; b) how to tell this story. I think that becomes a different category of utterance that gets judged differently.

AUDIENCE: *Why would telling the story be funny? Would that go back to the psychology thing?*

GIMBEL: I think that's very, yeah, that is a psychological question but it also has, you know people who tell stories amazingly funny. What's the adverb? Funnily? Humorously! There are some people who just know how to tell a story and there are other people who just, aw, they're awful. Part of it is tightness, part of it is making sure the punch is there, part of it is building it up. Timing. Exactly. There's an artistry that some people have, some people don't. You can work on honing and crafting. so I think certainly those are elements that I think psychologists need to work. And there ought to be friendly relations between philosophers and psychologists because, you know, they work on parts of question we work on, but I think too often we do things that really should be their job. And I think, you know, that's a great question but I think that's part that needs to go to them.

AUDIENCE: *And so your position about judging jokes stays off of how funny the joke is (unintelligible). Now I don't know, because you only had an hour to give your position, but I think that it would need to be nuance more, because I wouldn't say kidding on the square is always wrong if it's not funny. Because I was just thinking about the political race nowadays and I think a lot of people would agree that, even if the joke is not funny, it's okay to make a joke about Donald Trump because he has caused, he will probably cause harm to others, based on what he said in the media, you know, about building a wall, Muslims, etc. So is that okay to tell a joke that's really not funny about him, but it's hitting on the square.*

GIMBEL: You're exactly right. I don't want to argue that all kidding on the square with tendentious jokes is morally wrong, but when it's morally wrong, that's what it often is. So you're right. There are times when we want to use humor as the sort of justice, that humor is a weapon that we want in our arsenal, that we certainly want comedians who will challenge the status quo, right? Pryor, Carlin, what made them so magnificent is they were pointing out problems in the culture. Bill Hicks, you know, the next generation, right? Pointing out real structural problems with the nature of our society and one of the roles, and I don't think all comedians need to be this way, but there ought to be social critics for comedians because it is incredibly powerful and I think you're exactly right.

AUDIENCE: *But then we have to judge, well who can we make fun of in not just the political realm but just in general, like who can we, because if we're saying,*

okay, it's okay to make fun of Donald Trump because we think he's a bad person, then we need some criteria of why we think he's a bad person, and like who we can actually criticize here.

GIMBEL: Yes, but the question then becomes when are jokes in a different category than other sorts of criticisms. So I can criticize lots of people and maybe I'm right in criticizing them, maybe I'm wrong in criticizing them. The question is are joking utterances fundamentally different? Do I get judged differently if it's a joke? In this case, I don't think it's the case. I think that we would go back through the standard ethical question of what can I say about whom, whether it's a serious comment or a joking comment, right? So, you know, if I make a joke about John Kasich, which is really hard because there's just, I mean, god, it's like making a joke about vanilla ice cream, but not even French vanilla. Right? The idea here is it's hard to make but, would it be different if I leveled just a normal criticism or if I framed it in a joke, kidding on the square? I would think we would use the same moral criteria which means that there isn't anything special in that case about joking. So maybe there is, maybe there isn't. I think in that case there probably isn't and so basically we don't have a new philosophical question, we just have the usual philosophical questions about free speech. Right? What can I say? What should I be allowed to say? What should be off. And I think there are cases in which humor is a special category of speech. I think in those cases I think it's just speech and so we go back to the conversation we have been having anyway.

AUDIENCE: *A little bit about morality of the recipient of the joke because, you know, when somebody's telling it there's part of the group that (unintelligible) tells where they're coming from, but if somebody tells a joke to me and it's clever and off-color, and I laugh it for one of the clever reason, and people don't know why I'm laughing, so sometimes it's both a conscious choice to not laugh at something funny because of the perceptions of others.*

GIMBEL: I think that's absolutely right. We often take laughing at a joke as a sent to the stereotype used in the joke. That is, if you found the joke funny, you must be saying, "and the stereotype that was used in creating the joke is true of the world." I think the problem is in that inference. That is, maybe it's because I'm somebody who has tried for years to write jokes and that when I look at a joke I really look at the structure, I look at the architecture, I look at, you know, the craftsmanship, and that joke about the Volkswagen, god is that a dark joke but it's a good joke. Really,

it should tear at you in this way. I mean, I think laughing, what I want to argue is that laughter is a physiologic response. We don't choose to laugh. We can choose to try to stifle the laugh, we can choose to fake laugh, and we do that often. There is a psychologist from the University of Maryland, Bob Provine, who has written a book called *Laughter*, where he examines, I actually took my Intro to Psych from him. He studies what he calls contagious behavior. So his latest book looks at three: laughter, yawning, and the passing of gas, all of which apparently are if you see, hear, or I suppose smell somebody else, why farts are funny, that's a different question, the inner 8-year-old in all of us, right? There is higher likelihood that you're going to engage in that activity. Laughter, I want to argue, following Provine, is in large sense there's a social way of laughing and there's a biological way of laughing where it just comes out of you, and you may be, we've all had this, you're ashamed that you laughed at that joke but you laughed at it, not because you chose to laugh. You didn't sit and think, okay, laugh, not laugh, laugh. It just erupts out of you. So I think it is, in the way Daniel Dennett argues, there is something happening in the brain so I don't think it's right, if you guys were here and this guy starts yawning, do I get offended by that? Now there are a lot of professors who would, right? But, you know, we used to work at the Naval Academy and so what would happen is I would be lecturing and all of a sudden a student would go like this and then after awhile he would sit down and someone else would pop up. And I thought, okay, is this just you know, mess with the civilian, sort of mid shipman whack-a-mole? Turns out no, if you fell asleep in class it's dereliction of duty. You get reported and get your pay docked. You get in trouble. If you're standing up, it's harder to fall asleep. So, you know, the idea is maybe he was walking guard duty up Euclid, I don't know. But the point is he may be exhausted for other reasons. It's like physiologic response. It isn't he's saying, "Steve, you're boring." And I think in the same way that we do interpret that, right? If I look out and I see my audience yawning it's like, man, I'm offended. But should I be? And I don't think I should be because it's a physiologic response. He's not saying something about my lecture. All right? It's just my own insecurities coming out. In the same way, I think honest laughter, what the psychologists call Duchenne laughter, which is this sort of explosion of sound, I think it's an anatomical effect. It's something physiological. So I don't think we can attach moral worth to it in the same way that, you know, you may be married and there may be somebody who walks down the street and

your brain goes, whew. But you didn't decide that. It just, you know, you decide not to act on that because you're a married man, right? But the initial whew is just a physiologic thing that happened in your brain. Well, we can make jokes about that later but tendentious as it would be, but the idea then is that I think in that sense we do attribute moral meaning to something that may not deserve it, but now there are other ways that we do show acceptance of certain jokes. One is re-telling them and I think that does, so when you see the politician who is forwarding the racist joke about Obama, it's like, well look, you took the time to re-tell this joke, why are you re-telling it and I think part of it, if you're judging it, part of it has to be the humor but part of it when we make the Grice implicature, the inference, is also what are these person's beliefs, and if we had reason before to believe that you probably have these racist tendencies, then I think it's also a good inference to say that telling that joke, even if it's funny, it's going to reinforce a rational belief that you do hold these biased views.

AUDIENCE: *(unintelligible) it's a physiological thing and so as you're telling it, might kind of see kind of a hang on, where's this going? I do not want to be laughing at that? It's something you think ahead of time, but if it hits you off guard, then that kind of spontaneous laugh, then you re-think it and went oh, I shouldn't have laughed at that, or whatever, but yeah.*