

## POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HUMOR

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*Abstract:* This paper discusses some political implications of humor, using as a point of departure the mechanisms that explain the sources of the comical. First, I briefly present the main explanations offered for why we laugh. I then focus on the cognitive view proposed Hurley, Dennett and Adams, according to which humor carries out the epistemic function of eliminating the errors that covertly entered a mental space. In the second section of the paper, I present two accounts of how liberalism continues to extend the scope of individual liberties. I use these views on liberalism as a background for my analysis of the political implications of humor, advancing the claim that, as a result of its epistemic function, humor has a strong conservative bias.

*Keywords:* humor, liberalism, conservatism, oppression, redescriptions.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Humor is usually considered an effective strategy of fighting off political tyranny. Because it sparks a visceral reaction, it is often seen as a direct and honest way of conveying a political message. However, humor has a rather dual condition, as it can be employed to support both progressive and conservative causes; it can be used to propose new individual rights in the same measure in which the establishment may employ it to prevent emancipating measures from being carried out. The aim of this paper is to explore some moral and political implications of using humor as a rhetorical weapon. Looking more closely at how humor functions, the paper aims to give an answer to the following interrelated questions: How does humor defend individual rights and when does it forestall their implementation? Considering the mechanisms of humor, what does it mean to make an edgy or an over the line joke?

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The argument of this paper will unfold as follows. First, the paper briefly presents the main theories that attempt to explain the sources of humor, using these accounts of how a joke works as a point of departure in the endeavor concerning the ethics of humor. More exactly, the aim is to bring to light what the internal mechanisms of humor can tell us about the political implications of using humor as a rhetorical weapon.

In the second part, the problem of political change is tackled, focusing on how it relates to the modification of moral perceptions. First, the article briefly discusses two accounts of how liberalism continues to extend the scope of individual liberties. Secondly, it emphasizes how the moral problems of humor pose a threat to the advent of liberalism.

## II. THE SOURCES OF HUMOR

The Incongruity Theory is arguably the most popular explanation of why we laugh. According to this account, mirth ensues when something violates our expectations and an incongruity is perceived. Humor arises from the sudden encounter with an unexpected and innocuous element. Kant, one of the supporters of this approach to humor, explained the internal mechanism of a joke in the following way:

„In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment.“  
(Kant 2007, 133)

According to Schopenhauer (Morreall 2012), another proponent of the incongruity theory, humor arises when we discover an incongruence between an abstract concept and an object that was supposed to fall under it. A discrepancy is thus suddenly found between what is thought and what is perceived.

Another popular theory of humor emphasizes its unpleasant social implications. This approach is known as The Superiority Theory and focuses on the existence of a butt of the joke whose inferiority is found comical by those who suddenly discover it. The most famous articulation of this view belongs to Hobbes, according to whom

„‘sudden glory’ is the passion which maketh those ‘grimaces’ called ‘laughter’; and is caused either 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 1997, 36)

According to this view, humor is malicious and undemocratic, as it tends to establish hierarchies. However, Hobbes finds humor blameworthy for strategic reasons, claiming that when one indulges himself in the pleasures of humor, he will tend to surround himself with weak people, whose inferiority will make him laugh. (Hobbes 1997, 36)

Yet another approach to humor is The Release Theory. Freud, maybe its most prominent defender, claimed that through laughter we release the nervous energy that has been suddenly rendered useless, as we have stopped performing the psychological task for which this energy was summoned in the first place. A clown's clumsy actions spark laughter because we suddenly realize that we don't need the nervous energy we have initially summoned for understanding his behavior. (Morreall 2012)

A more recent strategy of explaining humor consists in uncovering its evolutionary roots. These approaches are radically different from the aforementioned theories, as an evolutionary explanation tries to identify not the essence of humor, but a particular form of humor that has enhanced the reproductive success of individuals. For example, R. D. Alexander (Polimeni, Reiss 2006, 351) claims that humor generated an advantage in reproduction by raising the social status of the individuals who tell jokes. However, it is obvious that not all forms of humor can be explained in terms of raising the social status of the person who produces it. It would be very difficult to understand how a clown raises his social status by being clumsy. Evolutionary approaches to humor tend to see the forms of humor that do not fit their explanation as mere exaptations. For this reason, an explanation like the one offered by Alexander is immune to counterexamples and hence logically impossible to disprove.

A more empirically laden theory of humor is the one advanced by Ramachandran, according to whom the laughter is the sign of a false alarm (Polimeni, Reiss 2006, 351). Ramachandran claims that „the main purpose of laughter is for the individual to alert others in the social group that the anomaly detected by the individual is of trivial consequences“ (Polimeni, Reiss 2006, 351). He cites examples in which people burst into laughing when they suddenly realize that what they initially thought was a threat is in fact an innocuous presence.

Polimeni and Reiss (Polimeni, Reiss 2006, 351) notice that theories of humor are not mutually exclusive, as they focus on different aspects of this issue. The aforementioned theories offer a rather fragmentary view of the subject, each of them focusing on a single feature of humor and utterly ignoring the others. For example, the incongruity theory emphasizes the cognitive features of humor, while the superiority theory brings into focus its social use. However, none of the two theories does explore the link between incongruity and the tendency to create social hierarchies, so as to put these two features in the same picture.

For this reason, I will now turn my attention to a more comprehensive theory of humor. Hurley, Dennett and Adams advanced a cognitive-evolutionary explanation for why we laugh, emphasizing how enjoying a joke is akin to problem solving (Hurley, Dennett, Adams 2011). According to them, humor evolved because of its epistemological use. Thus, the pleasant sensation of mirth is the reward we get for identifying an error that covertly entered our conscious mind. In other words, humor evolved because the cognitive mechanism underlying it served for debugging the mind.

Mirth may occur, for example, when, after frantically looking for our glasses, we suddenly discover we had them on top of our head the entire time. The sensation of mirth is the reward we get for discovering the incongruity and eliminating the false belief. Without such a reward, it would probably be more difficult to make sense of what just happened.

According to Hurley, Dennett and Adams,

- „humor occurs, when
- 1.an active element in a mental space that has
  - 2.covertly entered that space and is
  - 3.taken to be true within that space
  - 4.is diagnosed as false in that space – simply in the sense that it is the loser in an epistemic reconciliation process;
  - 5.and the discovery is not accompanied by any (strong) negative emotional valence.“ (Hurley, Dennett, Adams 2011, 121)

For example, if we reduce a joke to a setup and a punch line, the former will covertly comprise an error, which will be suddenly disclosed by the punch line. The setup of the joke usually suggests a direction that the punch line will unexpectedly prove wrong.

We should notice that this explanation of humor also encompasses some of the theories I mentioned earlier. The reaction of laughter we have when suddenly realizing that what we thought was a threat is in fact innocuous can be explained in terms of the scheme proposed by Hurley, Dennett and Adams. Thus, the belief according to which we are in danger is suddenly identified as mistaken. Their view can also be seen as a more specific variant of incongruity theory. For this reason, I will take it as a point of departure in my attempt to analyze the moral consequences of humor. At this point, the article aims to give an answer to the following question: What does Hurley, Dennett and Adams' theory of humor tell us about its political implications?

It is not the object of this paper to assess the accuracy of the view Hurley et al. proposed for how humor works. I take their theory as a point of departure because, as I already mentioned, it encompasses the main traits of the prevailing views on humor, only adding an evolutionary twist. It advances an explanation based on the resolution of an incongruity, but it also suggests the „sudden glory“ generated by the lack of any tormenting element. Besides,

the epistemological implications of the view proposed by Hurley et al. give us a glance as to why the incongruity and the „sudden glory“ go hand in hand. The punch line of the joke does not bring with it a mere incongruence, but also the triumph over something we didn't understand and now we do.

### III. SOME POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HUMOR

A political implication of humor derives from its epistemological limitations. More exactly, the problem is posed by the lack of epistemological accuracy of the scheme I presented. Humor emerges when errors are identified and eliminated from a mental space, but this process of epistemic reconciliation always occurs against a background that is not questioned as well. The scheme proposed by Hurley, Dennett and Adams depends on a shared language that may contain verbal remnants of old discriminations. The language is a living organism that changes slower than our conception of justice and usually has biases we are not always aware of. We cannot control all the implications of the words we are using as we are immersed in a language in which meanings are interconnected in ways that escape our perception. For example, a word like „manly“ continues to have meanings that are not appropriate for a society in which men and women are considered equal and no gender should have a monopoly over the idea of bravery. However, words evoking an oppressive past are still in use, being a part of that background against which errors are identified as such. It follows that progressive policies that purport to further individual rights are easy to ridicule, as the humorous discourse will sanction any departure from the entrenched language.

A possible objection against this interpretation is that the error discovered at the conclusion of the joke is only relative to the setup. In many cases, the humor derives from exposing the absurdity or the double meaning of some common expressions, as it is the case with the following joke: „I went to the corner shop. I bought four corners.“ The element whose lack of sense is denounced here is part of the common language. However, it is hard to believe that people will stop talking this way as a result of the phrase being ridiculed.

Two observations should be made in relation to this objection. First, the claim supported by the epistemological limitations of humor is not that humor is always conservative, but that it has a strong conservative bias. In other words, the main contention is that we run the risk of mocking a progressive view without realizing how unfair we are. An entrenched point of view regarding social issues can also be mocked, as long as the premise of the joke is set up so as to support the progressive leaning punchline. However, it is easier to use the common view as a setup than to carefully devise a wholly different one in hopes of leading to the liberal conclusion you want to support.

Sometimes supporters of rather progressive causes have to go great lengths to mock an entrenched view. In the following example, an attack on

the conservative view according to which art is immoral and useless had to be attached to a more progressive Dadaist critique of art in order to become comical:

„Republicans, Dadaists, Declare War On Art

Citing the „proliferation of immoral and offensive material throughout America’s museums and schools,“ and waving placards emblazoned with agit-prop fotocollage reading, „diE KUnst Ist tOT, DadA ubEr aLLes“ (“Art is dead, dada over all”), a coalition of leading Republican congressional conservatives and early 20th-century Dadaists declared war on art in a joint press conference Monday.

Calling for the elimination of federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts; the banning of offensive art from museums and schools; and the destruction of the „hoax of reason“ in our increasingly random, irrational and meaningless age, the Republicans and Dadaists were unified in their condemnation of the role of the artist in society today.“ (The Onion, 1997)

The second observation pertains to the moral bearing of the abovementioned joke, as there is no controversy whether the language should be devoid of any equivocal meanings. In other words, the joke is not part of an ongoing debate between two quarreling sides. Everybody agrees language has breeches that allow double meanings and virtually nobody wants to reform the language so as to exclude any equivocal use of words. The play on words type of jokes take aim at the way we usually use language, but the point of departure, the position from which the critique is launched, is also part of the common language and does not pertain to a progressive view someone wishes to impose.

According to the scheme I mentioned, errors are always diagnosed as such against the background of a common language that is not always a reliable guide. A similar objection is usually brought against custom (Posner 2003, 151-152), as it changes slower than our needs in terms of legislation. According to Posner, „custom, being acephalous, tends to change very slowly. If economic or other social practices are changing rapidly, custom will often fail to keep up and will become a drag on progress“ (Posner 2003, 152). Like custom, language is a spontaneous growth and any verdict it gives will lack epistemological accuracy, as it will be marred by the slowness of its development. In the same way in which custom is not a reliable guide for legislation, the connotations words happen to have may not follow the lines of the discourse about rights we are currently supporting.

This problem is similar with the objection Hayek brings against conservatism. According to him, conservatism lacks a proper critique of the present, as it sanctions any departure from the status quo using the present as a yardstick. According to Hayek, „one of the fundamental traits of the conservative

attitude is a fear of change, a timid distrust of the new as such.” (Hayek 2011, 522) A conservative critique of the present is possible only to the extent to which the present has not acquired legitimacy in the light of the traditional institutions, only inasmuch recent changes have not become entrenched. To put it briefly, conservatism is not able to deliver a proper critique of the present because it lacks a set of general principles in relation to which the present can be judged. In the same way, humor will have a strong conservative bias as its attitude is based on a language already entrenched. In other words, the truth humor conveys is ascertained against the background of the language that is currently in use. For this reason, any progressive attempt to reveal a form of oppression is prone to be sanctioned as ridiculous.

A possible objection against this argument is that humor does not claim to convey any truth. What jokes deliver is the rather pleasant sensation of mirth, not a political argument. However, according to Hurley, Dennett and Adams, humor originally had an epistemological function, as people usually equate the message of the joke with a surprising insight. A simple act of introspection will reveal the fact that, when people tell a joke, they tend to agree with the punch line, not with the claim placed under attack. More than that, humor is effective when used in political debates, as it puts the person who employs it in a good light. In other words, not only do people agree with the conclusion of the joke they tell, but they also tend to persuade the others that their point is sound.

Another Hayekian argument concerning the morality of humor is based on Hayek’s mixture of conservatism and liberalism. Hayek complements his rather conservative view on the spontaneous development of liberal institutions with a Kantian test of universalizability, meant to decide whether a rule is just. According to him, „the test of the justice of a rule is usually (since Kant) described as that if its universalizability, i.e. of the possibility of willing that the rules should be applied to all instances that correspond to the conditions stated in it (the ‘categorical imperative’)“ (Hayek 1969, 168).

In order for a rule to pass the test, it has to be general and avoid any references to a particular group of people. The only forms of discrimination that are accepted are the ones on which we have the agreement of majorities from both outside and inside the class of people which is singled out. (Hayek 2011, 222-223) However, there is a close dependency between the two elements I mentioned above (*i.e.*, the process of cultural evolution and the universalizability test), as we are constrained to apply the universalizability test within the conceptual confines of what our contingent language allows us to think. In other words, in order to rationally decide whether a rule is just, we have to work with morally laden concepts that are the product of a contingent path of societal evolution.

In order for this limitation to become clearer, let us consider the interpretation Gray offers for the Hayekian universalizability test. He claims that

Hayek's test is able to ensure a protected domain of the individual, thus disproving the critique formulated by Hamowy (Hamowy 1978) and Raz (Raz 1979). According to Gray, the process of universalizability has three stages (Gray 1998, 60-62). The first stage aims at the consistence between similar cases. The second stage of the process of universalization tests whether we are ready to accept that the rule will govern the conduct of others toward ourselves. The final stage aims at the impartiality between preferences and ideas about the good life, irrespective of whether they are ours or they belong to other persons and are contrary to what we think about how life should be lived. However, we have no rational criteria to decide whether a preference or an idea about the good life is legitimate or the externalities it carries with it make it unacceptable. The only guide we have is the moral attitude of the society in which we belong. It results that we always apply the universalizability test within the confines of a contingent language, thus being prone to refuse liberties because an entrenched vocabulary limits our perception.

In this context, humor functions as an additional hindrance, as it sanctions any departure from the official discourse, from the prevailing rhetoric. In other words, humor can be employed as a rhetorical means to reduce the already scanty leeway reason has in evaluating a rule against a contingent background of concepts. In the cases in which the two sources of rules – the societal evolution and the application of the universalizability test – suggest different outcomes, humor employed as a rhetorical weapon is prone to have a bias toward the former, as it usually reinforces the common sense. For example, critics of the liberal tendency to come up with less offensive phrases mocked this penchant for reforming the language by proposing further redesignations: *vertically deployed antipersonnel device* instead of *bomb* and *sexually focused, chronologically gifted individual* for *dirty old man*.<sup>1</sup>

A possible objection to this critique of the conservative bias of humor consists in the fact that we cannot know for sure which inequalities are justified and which should be discarded. Some forms of discriminations (e.g. against lazy people) may function for the advantage of everyone, as other discriminations, like the one against people of a certain religion, are utterly illegitimate. However, it is not clear whether the legal bias against some categories of people should be discarded or maintained. Humor provides a good way of dealing with this uncertainty, being part of a debate in which the pretensions of equality are appraised. Without such a mechanism, any claim to a more egalitarian scheme would be accepted unconditionally, without being sure whether the inequality plays any role. As I already mentioned, some forms of discriminations the law makes are legitimate according to Hayek as long as they are accepted by majorities from both inside and outside of the class of people singled out by the rule.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the the web page <http://www.funny2.com/dictionary.htm>.

Rorty's view on the rise of liberalism highlights another problem of humor. According to him, liberalism has developed as the solidarity between people deepened and individuals gradually accepted more and more groups into the sphere of what they defined as „we“ (Rorty 1995). This kind of change was propelled not by rational arguments, but by powerful redescriptions, which made people sympathize with the less fortunate (Rorty 1995).

However, humor seems to go in the opposite direction. It reinforces the connection with the other members of the group as it relies on the language and the references we share. We should notice that even the liberal humor does exclude others, as it is based on drawing a clear line between us and them, conservatives being seen as backward for not agreeing with more progressive policies. In the terms of the scheme proposed by Hurley et al., people are able to take part in the identification of the error only as long as they share the language against which the anomalous element is identified as such. If liberalism developed through gradually extending the limits of a group, so as to include new categories of people, humor reinforces the limits the group already has.

Moreover, humor blocks our empathy, given that in order to see the humor in other people's unusual behavior you should not try to understand them. This conclusion is also supported by Bergson's view on humor, as he claimed that laughter is accompanied by insensitivity. According to Bergson, „it is enough for us to stop our ears to the sound of music in a room, where dancing is going, for the dancers at once to appear ridiculous.“ (Bergson 2003, 8)

To summarize, the main moral problem posed by humor can be described using the following conjunction:

- 1) In a liberal democracy, an important danger consists in not being able to perceive all the forms of oppression that surround us, because of the common language in which we are immersed.
- 2) Humor is based on an epistemological mechanism of identifying the errors using as a benchmark a common language that is not similarly questioned.

However, we should notice that in a dictatorship, humor is more effective in supporting individual rights. In a tyranny, the main problem is not that we cannot perceive some forms of oppression, as the presence of the oppression will be obvious for everyone. In these cases, the rulers usually try to devise an artificial legitimization discourse that can easily be questioned in the terms of the common language. For this reason, humor will prove useful in denouncing the transgressions of a dictatorial government. In communist Romania, for example, the most common form of humor was the one directed at the political situation, as the official language of the rulers was obviously spurious and could be easily identified as such. The following joke is a clever take on the fact that grocery stores were insufficiently supplied:

A man walks into a store and asks the clerk:

„Do you have bread?“

„I am sorry, sir“, answers the clerk, „but this is the store where we don't have meat. The store where they don't have bread is just across the street.“

The punch line reveals the despairing reality lying behind the façade of the official discourse. What is denounced are the pretenses of the communist government, according to which you can find bread and meat in any store that purports to sell these items. The background against which the debugging is carried out includes the observation that the dearth of the communist economy makes the grocery stores to be insufficiently supplied. The error that has been identified is stated in a clever manner: if a store purports to sell bread, what the storefront sign really says is that you can be sure you won't find any bread in there.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Humor is usually used as a rhetorical means by both conservative and liberals. However, I argued in this paper that humor has a strong conservative bias, as jokes are made against the background of an established discourse that is not questioned as well. For this reason, more progressive causes are easier to ridicule, which makes humor prone to perpetuate stereotypes. I used as a point of departure the cognitive interpretation of humor offered by Hurley, Dennett and Adams. According to their view, humor has been selected during the process of evolution because of its epistemological use, as it helps at eliminating the errors that covertly entered our minds. However, this process of debugging the mind is carried out against a contingent background that escapes a similar evaluation. After briefly presenting two views on liberalism, I argued that the epistemic limitations of humor function as hindrances in the way of denouncing covert forms of oppression.

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