Comic Normativity and the Ethics of Humour

Comic moralism holds that some moral properties impact negatively on the funniness of certain items that possess them. Strong versions of the doctrine deem the impact to be devastating: the possession of such a property by one of these items ensures the item is not funny. Weak versions deem the impact merely damaging: any funniness one of the items possesses is diminished, but not destroyed, by its possession of the property. Various species of comic moralism hold, respectively, various moral properties to impact negatively on funniness. For example, one species holds as much of the property “manifests attitudes that are morally wrong,” but other species hold as much of different moral properties. Comic moralism, or a species of it, can be unrestricted, or restricted, depending on whether it pertains to all the items that possess the negatively impacting moral property or properties, or to just a subset of these items.1

In part because of an analogy between jokes and works of art, the species of comic moralism most frequently discussed in recent literature is restricted to jokes, and pertains, in the first instance at least, to the property “is sexist or racist,” or, more generally, to the property “is offensive.” The strong version of it has an echo in everyday life. As Walton (1994: p. 30) observes, we sometimes “declare pointedly [of e.g., a racist joke or political cartoon] . . . that it is not funny—precisely because its message is offensive.” On occasion, then, we speak and act as if we are strong comic moralists about offensive (and hence sexist or racist) jokes: we say of an item that it is not funny because it is offensive. Yet as Walton himself continues, whether our so doing amounts to our being strong comic moralists of this ilk is open to debate: “we must not simply assume that [the aforementioned] . . . declaration is to be taken literally.” The point of declarations of this kind might be, not to contest the funniness of the item in question, but merely to express and prescribe a refusal to admit it. Perhaps we just feel that “admitting [its funniness],

as well as allowing ourselves to enjoy the . . . humour, amounts to subscribing to . . . [its] evil message—so we don’t admit it.”

In any event, strong comic moralism about sexist or racist jokes has met with little sympathy in the literature. To my knowledge, only de Sousa (1987) and Anderson (1993) have been thought to advocate it. Yet (tentative) attributions of the doctrine to Anderson by Jacobson (1997: 171–72), and by d’Arms and Jacobson (2000: 80), are questionable, while Gaut’s (1998: 56) attribution of it to de Sousa is definitely mistaken. de Sousa (1987: 290) comes nearest to advocating comic moralism about jokes that are sexist or racist, when, having related a rape-joke, he says that “to find the joke funny, the listener must actually share . . . [certain] sexist attitudes that are implied by the joke.” Even if de Sousa also claims that no joke is funny unless someone who lacks sexist or racist attitudes can be amused by it (something he does not do explicitly), this remark still falls short of the thesis Gaut attributes to him. It pertains not to rape-jokes in general, but to jokes that are “entirely devoid of wit.” de Sousa’s conclusion that no one could be amused by the joke unless they have attitudes that are sexist, is based not on the joke’s sexism, but on the fact of its being phthonic (from ‘phthonos’, meaning ‘malicious envy’): “in contrast to the element of wit,” he says, “the phthonic element in a joke requires endorsement [of the attitudes it implies]” (my italics). His explicit thesis, therefore, is that any phthonic element in sexist humour presupposes sexist attitudes. So his discussion leaves open—implies even—the possibility of sexist or racist jokes that are, in virtue of their wit, funny. Not only does de Sousa not advocate the strong comic moralist thesis that no sexist or racist jokes are funny; he positively rejects it.

In contrast, opponents of the thesis are legion. It is rejected by Philips (1984: 75), who begins his paper with the words “Racist jokes are often funny;” by Gaut (1998: 63), who says that “it is not true that [all sexist or racist] jokes . . . are simply not funny”; by Jacobson (1997: 162), who claims that “morally dubious [and, in particular, sexist or racist] jokes can be funny;” and by d’Arms and Jacobson (2000: 80), who maintain that “some offensive jokes are funnier than others, and not because they are less offensive.” Only Gaut’s (1998) attack on the thesis is accompanied by a retreat to the weak version of comic moralism about jokes that are sexist or racist.

Nevertheless, a simple argument for this species of comic moralism has achieved a certain prominence. It runs as follows:
(A) It is morally wrong to be amused by jokes that are sexist or racist.

(B) The property an item possesses just when it is morally wrong to be amused by the item impacts negatively on funniness.

So

(C) The sexism or racism of a joke impacts negatively on funniness.

Since this argument is valid, the status of its conclusion turns in part on the question as to whether its premises are true. In rejecting it, Jacobson and d’Arms grant (A) for the sake of argument before proceeding to attack (B). My strategy, in contrast, will be to articulate some difficulties with (A) before arguing that there is more to be said for (B) than Jacobson and d’Arms would have us believe.

I

I.1 (A) is not true definitionally: jokes that are sexist or racist are not defined as (a certain sub-class of) jokes it is morally wrong to be amused by. Typically, arguments for it interpolate one or more of the following properties between the property of being sexist or racist, and the property an item has just when it is morally wrong to be amused by it:

\[ P^1 = \text{df the property of being such as to “imply” attitudes that are sexist or racist.} \]

\[ P^2 = \text{df the property of being such as to “manifest” sexist or racist attitudes.} \]

\[ P^3 = \text{df the property of being such as to “carry a message” that is sexist or racist.} \]

\[ P^4 = \text{df the property of being such as to embody negative stereotypes pertaining to a social group characterised by gender or ethnicity.} \]

\[ P^5 = \text{df the property of being such as to either wrong, or be intended to wrong, members of certain victimized groups in relation to their} \]
sexual or ethnic identity; or create, or be intended to create, a community of feelings against such a group; or promote, or be intended to promote, beliefs that are used to "justify" such a group's mistreatment.  

\[ P^6 = \text{the property an item has just when it is such that one can be amused by it only if one possesses attitudes that are sexist or racist.} \]

Let \( T' \) be the thesis that sexist or racist jokes have \( P^6 \). So \( T^6 \) is the thesis that one can be amused by a joke that is sexist or racist only if one has attitudes that are sexist or racist. \( T^6 \) offers the prospect of an immediate vindication of (A): plausibly, it is morally wrong to possess sexist or racist attitudes; hence, if \( T^6 \) is true, only those who possess attitudes that it is morally wrong to have can find amusement in a sexist or racist joke; therefore, provided an attitude is morally wrong if it presupposes an attitude that it is morally wrong to have, amusement by a joke that is sexist or racist is morally wrong. (Whether this prospect is illusory is a question to which I return in Section I.iii.)

\( L_{ii} \) \( T^6 \) is no more definitionally true than is (A) itself—sexist or racist jokes are not defined as jokes that can only be found amusing by people with sexist or racist attitudes—and its advocates (who are few in number) have yet to make a persuasive case for it. If Moran (1994: 93–94) embraces it, he does so without giving explicit grounds: he simply appeals to it in order to illustrate a point when arguing that emotional responses to fictional artworks, and attitudes that underlie these responses, are real.  

La Follete and Shanks's (1993: 336–37) discussion is more concentrated, but claims they make on its behalf are plainly untenable. In particular, their assertion that "a joke which belittled women . . . could only be humorous to someone who had the appropriate sort of higher-order beliefs, in particular, beliefs that women are mentally or morally inferior to men" is untrue. When Xs are belittled in some Y's joke, they can be inferior to Ys in respect R, it cannot be the case that it requires them to believe that Xs are either mentally or morally inferior to Ys: respect R might be neither mental nor moral. Indeed, for Ys to believe that Xs are inferior to Ys in one respect is consistent with Y's believing that Xs are superior to Ys in other respects that really matter. Hence, even if all jokes that are sexist or racist belittle members of some group X, and it is true that anyone who finds such a joke amusing must possess beliefs that
ground such belittling of Xs, it does not follow that any such person must have attitudes that are sexist or racist. It would follow that such a person must believe members of the group in question are inferior in some respect. But it is not the case that a Y who believes that members of X are superior to Ys absolutely, though inferior to Ys in some minor respect R, must have sexist or racist attitudes towards Xs. In particular, although a belief that Xs are inferior to Ys in even a very minor respect might be sexist or racist, it needn't be.

The most prominent figure to whom T⁶ has been attributed is de Sousa (1987). The basis of this attribution is his aforementioned remark that one must have sexist attitudes if one is amused by the rape-joke he discusses. Contrary to the readings promulgated by Goldstein (1995: 29), Gaut (1998: 56–57), and d’Arms and Jacobson (2000: 80–81), however, this remark is directed not at the joke’s sexism, but at its lack of wit. Accordingly, it leaves open—and implicitly endorses—the possibility of a person who has no sexist or racist attitudes being amused by a sexist or racist joke (that is witty).

T⁶ is an extremely strong thesis, and it is hard to see how it could be true. The range of items human beings ‘can’ be amused by is extremely broad, and no principles are known by which to rule out the possibility of someone who lacks sexist or racist attitudes being amused by a given joke. Ironically, de Sousa’s treatment of the rape-joke he discusses serves to bear this out. The joke concerns a woman, ‘M’, who is reported as having a reputation for being promiscuous. de Sousa (1987: 290) suggests that because the joke is entirely lacking in wit, a precondition of being amused by it is a belief that “all women secretly want to be raped.” Even if one allows that the joke implies that M herself secretly wants to be raped, no claim of this kind about a particular woman could imply a belief about all women, however: even in the context of hearing the joke, belief that all women secretly want to be raped could hardly succeed in eliciting (phthonic) amusement were mere belief that M secretly wants to be raped bound to fail.

It might be objected that if a person who finds the joke amusing must believe that M secretly wants to be raped, a person who finds the joke amusing must be presumed to have inferred this belief from the more general belief that all promiscuous women want to be raped. Yet this objection is immaterial unless the antecedent to the conditional is true,
and the fact is that de Sousa’s case for it is unconvincing. Here is the joke in full:

M visits the hockey team. When she emerges she complains that she has been gang-raped. Wishful thinking.

This joke is in two parts. In the first, a fictional situation concerning M is described, while in the second, a supposedly humorous remark—“wishful thinking”—comments upon this situation. To find the joke amusing, therefore, one must discern some amusing element of wishful thinking on M’s part in the situation described. de Sousa contends that this element has to be the gratification of a secret desire on M’s part to be raped. Because the situation described is fictional, however, the use of ‘discern’ here is stretched: the joke enjoins us to imagine some amusing element of wishful thinking on M’s part. One ought not to expect the problem such an injunction poses to have a unique solution, and alternative solutions to the one de Sousa propounds are equally viable. One that is perfectly ‘true’ to the fictional situation described is the gratification of a desire on M’s part that she be attractive enough to provoke simultaneously lust in all the members of a hockey team. But there is no requirement on alternatives that they be entirely true to the fiction: it is enough that they cohere to some degree with it, and that it brings them to mind. An alternative in this category is the gratification of a desire on M’s part that she have group sex with the members of a hockey team.

It might be conceded that these ‘solutions’ are no less viable than the one de Sousa proposes, but objected that they, too, involve sexist attitudes, either in the route by which people who embody them come to imagine M having such desires, or in the route by which such desires, or their gratification, could be found amusing. This just isn’t so, however. To take the most difficult case, that some agent should envisage M satisfying a desire for group sex upon hearing talk of her being gang-raped does not require, as de Sousa (1987: 290) seems to imply, that the agent believes that “rape is just a variant form of sexual intercourse”: psychological connections between mental states like imaginings and pretences can be non-epistemic. Nor must one have sexist attitudes in order to be amused by the thought of M having, or satisfying, such a desire. Exposure of a clandestine sexual desire can be amusing, and even if the desire is thought of as
open in the first place, amusement at the thought of a woman desiring to have group sex with the members of a hockey team can be as much a celebration of female sexuality as its condemnation. de Sousa is right that the joke is totally lame, but I remain unconvinced either that it is impossible to find humor in it in the absence of sexist attitudes, or that any humor found in it must be purely phthonic.  

Although a thorough evaluation of T6 can only emerge from accounts, respectively, of what makes jokes, and attitudes, sexist or racist, a good case can be made against it in their absence. At the very least, necessary and sufficient conditions for a joke being sexist or racist must be close to one of T1—T5. But none of these doctrines afford T6 direct succour. On the contrary, on the assumption that implying, manifesting, promulgating, embodying, and wronging, are all things that can be done wittily, or not, irrespective of any moral evaluation of their objects, T1—T5 all give prima facie reason to think that T6 is false. When sexist or racist attitudes are called for, manifested, or promulgated, or sexist or racist stereotypes embodied, or ethnic or gender groups wronged, in a witty way, why shouldn't an appreciation of the wit involved be possible in the absence of any attitudes that agree with or endorse these doings' objects? Of course, the assumption that such doings can be effected in a witty way might be false. But if one of T1—T5 is correct, this would be tantamount to the doctrine of strong comic moralism about jokes that are sexist or racist. It follows that T6 could only emerge as a corollary of strong comic moralism about jokes that are sexist or racist, and that attempting to argue for this doctrine on the basis of T6 (via (A)) has to be misguided.  

I.iii What then of the status of (A)? Upon reflection, its truth would not be ensured by the truth of T6 after all. Notwithstanding the apparently favourable prospects of an argument from T6 to (A), the gap between the two is unbridgeable. Suppose an evil demon assures one humanity will suffer terrible torment unless one is amused by the next joke one hears—and one is then told a joke one can only be amused by if one has attitudes that are sexist or racist. To maintain, on the basis of T6, that in these circumstances amusement by the joke would be morally wrong, takes to a hugely implausible extreme any hostility one might feel towards a consequentialist view of the moral evaluation of (emotional) attitudes. In such circumstances, amusement by the joke would not be morally wrong, even if it required one to possess attitudes that are sexist or racist. Mutatis
mutandis, this example also shows that (A) cannot be derived from any of T₁–T₅.²⁰

On the other hand, it must be admitted that even a demonstration of the literal falsity of (A) that appeals to circumstances that are rare would be somewhat beside the point. Philosophical niceties aside, the issue (A) raises in practice is whether amusement in commonplace circumstances by jokes that are sexist or racist is morally wrong. This issue is not decided by the falsity of T₆. Nor, even, would it be decided if it turned out that few people who find jokes that are sexist or racist amusing possess sexist or racist attitudes. As we have seen, it can be morally wrong for an agent to be amused by a sexist or racist joke even when the agent’s amusement involves no sexist or racist attitudes: amusement can be morally wrong because it exhibits (or constitutes) gross insensitivity.²¹ The point is especially clear with respect to amusement at the expense of an individual. One need bear no phthonic, hostile, stereotypical, or discriminatory attitudes towards Clare to be amused by a joke at her expense, even if the joke is made in her presence and constitutes an unjust and vicious attack on her, or contributes to her systematic oppression and victimisation, or touches upon one of her rawest nerves, or happens to catch her in an openly vulnerable state. Gross insensitivity would be quite sufficient, both for one’s amusement, and for its moral wrongness.

This observation transfers readily to the political sphere: obviously, amusement by a joke at the expense of some social group that is made in the presence of members of that group can be grossly insensitive in similar ways. More controversial cases in which amusement at a joke made at the expense of Xs is not in the presence of Xs, or is entirely solitary, are also profitably approached via the individual case. Just as amusement by jokes made at Clare’s expense behind her back can be culpably insensitive, either to the damage such jokes do her (unjustly), or to the mere fact of her having had an especially hard time of late, so, too, can amusement by jokes made at the expense of Xs that are not made in the presence of Xs be culpably insensitive.

These considerations show that in one respect, T₆ has been a bad influence. It has encouraged the assumption that if amusement by a sexist or racist joke is morally wrong, it is a sin of commission (i.e., in so far as it involves the possession of beliefs and emotional attitudes one is morally
 Those who enjoy sexist or racist humor typically employ this assumption when they protest that they have no attitudes that are sexist or racist. In one respect, however, their protest misses the point. Much morally wrong amusement is a sin of omission: it involves a failure to possess attitudes—care, concern, sympathy, sensitivity—one ought to possess. Though those who condemn the enjoyment of sexist or racist jokes pay insufficient attention to this fact, perhaps they intuit it at some level. If so, this would go some way to explaining the dispute’s intractability and longevity.

Switching focus from commission to omission in this way also has important consequences for the nature of sexist jokes, for the appreciation of jokes in private, and for the moral evaluation of amusement itself. To restricts the class of jokes that are sexist or racist, since the jokes one can be amused by only if one has attitudes that are sexist or racist are few in number. It also narrows the gap between the public and private spheres: mere privacy or solitude does not exonerate attitudes that are sexist or racist. And it deflects the charge of moral wrongness from amusement itself to the sexist or racist attitudes it is said to exhibit. In contrast, allowing for amusement to be a sin of omission tends to broaden the class of sexist or racist jokes: any joke at the expense of those who are grouped together on the basis of gender or ethnicity can be accused of insensitivity if their victimisation is sufficiently severe. It also widens the gap between the public and private spheres. What duties of care, concern, and sympathy require of one is a matter that is more dependent on one’s circumstances than is one’s obligation not to have, e.g., racist beliefs. It would be altogether too demanding to insist that amusement by jokes that are made at Clare’s expense made behind her back, and which would be grossly insensitive to make in her presence, must always be culpable. Our duty to engage Clare with sympathy and concern is not unrelenting: even in her most vulnerable moments, we may assume an emotional distance from her, and laugh at her infirmities. The same is true in the political case. If members of a certain social group are severely victimised, we are obliged not to be grossly insensitive to their plight. This is not to say, however, that concern for them must consume our every waking moment. Made in public, any display of amusement by a joke at their expense is likely to be culpably insensitive. Private amusement at their expense,
however, might well amount to a well-earned break from the demands of
duty. Lastly, amusement by a sexist or racist joke can *itself* be viewed as
morally culpable if the culpability is an omission: insensitivity can *consist*
in being amused.

II

II.i Even if (A) is true, the thesis that the sexism or racism of a joke
impacts negatively on the joke’s funniness does not follow unless (B)—
which I will call “basic comic moralism”—is true too. Basic comic moralism
claims that if an item is such that it is morally wrong to be amused by it,
this fact impacts negatively on the funniness of the item. A simple argument
for this claim stems from the thesis that funniness is “normative,” i.e., in
so far as it is associated with amusement’s *evaluation*. The simplest way
of formulating the normativity of funniness is as follows:

\[ \text{(N)} \quad \text{X is funny iff amusement by } X \text{ is merited.} \]

\(\text{(N)}\) offers basic comic moralism an immediate grip, *via* the further thesis
that ‘morally wrong’ impacts negatively on ‘merited’:

\[ \text{(U)} \quad \text{If it is morally wrong to be amused by } X, \text{ the moral wrongness of}
\quad \text{amusement by } X \text{ impacts negatively on the merit of amusement}
\quad \text{by } X. \]

Basic comic moralism follows once (N) and (U) are supplemented by:

\[ \text{(1)} \quad \text{If (N) is true, whatever impacts negatively on the merit of amusement by } X \]
\[ \text{impacts negatively on the funniness of } X. \]

Call the argument having (N), (U), and (1) as premises, and basic comic
moralism as conclusion, the “merited-response argument.”

II.ii Jacobson and d’Arms object that the merited-response argument
fails to respect the degree to which normativity is pluralist. They agree
that amusement is subject to normative constraints, including moral ones,
and that these constraints can be stated, loosely, in terms of “merit.” They
insist, however that the norms to which amusement is subject are of various kinds. Amusement is subject not just to moral norms, but to prudential norms, too: for example, amusement that is not immoral might be imprudent. Furthermore, different kinds of norm are associated, respectively, with different notions of merit. For example, amusement that is merited prudentially need not be merited morally, and potential conflict between these and any other kinds of merit yields a further, higher-order, notion of merit. This is the notion of “all-things-considered” merit that is implicit in a question like: “If amusement is merited in one respect, but unmerited in another, what should I feel?”

Accordingly, Jacobson and d’Arms observe that care must be taken when interpreting the merited-response argument to identity the kind(s) of merit spoken of, and to guard against the danger of equivocation. Just as they accept (U)’s presupposition that amusement is subject to normative constraints, so too do they accept (N)’s claim that funniness is normative. They protest, however, that the notion of meritedness that funniness encapsulates is different from the notions of moral, prudential, and all-things-considered merit. In their view, funniness encapsulates specifically comic norms. In their view, (N) is only true if its notion of merit is interpreted as a sui generis notion of ‘fit’. 24

In the light of these distinctions, Jacobson and d’Arms claim that the merited-response argument is indefensible: either it equivocates, or else it begs the question. Whether (N) and (U) are true depends on how the notion of merit they employ is interpreted. But among univocal interpretations, when (N) is true (U) begs the question, and vice-versa. (N) is true if ‘merited’ is interpreted as ‘fitting’. But using this interpretation (U) becomes:

\[(U^c)\] If it is morally wrong to be amused by X, the moral wrongness of amusement by X impacts negatively on the comic meritedness of amusement by X.

Any argument for basic comic moralism that uses (U^c) as a premise begs the question (especially in the light of (N) and (1)). In effect, (U^c) is just a statement of basic comic moralism.

Similarly, (U) is true if ‘meritedness’ is interpreted as ‘moral meritedness’. But using this interpretation, (N) becomes:
(N⁰) X is funny iff amusement by X is merited morally.

Any argument for basic comic moralism using (N⁰) as a premise begs the question, since (N⁰) is little more than a statement of (the strong version of) the doctrine.

II.iii Though there is much to admire in it, Jacobson and d’Arms’s presentation, and analysis, of the merited-response argument contains an oversight. Their critique aspires to neutrality on several fronts. Whether one’s preferred account of the moral wrongness to which (Uᶜ) adverts is consequentialist, deontological, or virtue-theoretic, they say, makes no difference: the merited-response argument fails, and basic comic moralism is still a fallacy. Similarly, they claim neutrality regarding how norms of different kinds interact: they say they need take no stand on whether moral considerations must be weighed against non-moral considerations, or whether, on the contrary, they “override” them.²⁵ In this latter regard, however, their critique lacks the neutrality and flexibility they claim. For it presupposes the incorrectness of an important conception of the relation moral norms bear to non-moral norms.

Jacobson and d’Arms neglect of this conception is most transparent when the normativity of funniness and pluralism about norms are expressed in terms of ‘reasons’. Prima facie, the notion of ‘merit’ and ‘reason’ are linked, and there is no normative appraisal of amusement and other emotional responses in the absence of pertinent reasons: e.g., amusement is only merited if there is a (good) reason for it. So the merited-response argument can be reformulated as follows:

(NR) X is funny iff the funniness of X is a reason to be amused by X.

(UR) If it is morally wrong to be amused by X, the moral wrongness of amusement by X impacts negatively on the extent to which there is reason to be amused by X.

(1R) If (NR) is true, whatever impacts negatively on the extent to which there is reason to be amused by X impacts negatively on the funniness of X.

So
B) The property an item has just in case it is morally wrong to be amused by it impacts negatively on the item's funniness.

Faced with this reformulation, Jacobson and d'Arms's insistence on normative pluralism will now appear as an injunction to respect the fact that there are different kinds of reasons. They will insist that funniness is allied with neither moral, nor prudential, nor all-things-considered reasons. Rather, they will say, (NR) is true only if 'reason' is read as 'comic reason' (the notion of a 'comic' reason being sui generis). Interpreted similarly, so as to avoid equivocation, (UR) becomes:

(URc) If it is morally wrong to be amused by X, the moral wrongness of amusement by X impacts negatively on the extent to which there is comic reason to be amused by X.

The limitations of Jacobson and d'Arms's critique are now evident. To accuse (URc) of begging the question is to ignore the influence and weight of a moral theory—McDowell's—that is implicit within it. According to McDowell, the moral wrongness of an act does not merely "override" non-moral considerations. It "silences" them by destroying what might otherwise have been non-moral reasons in the act's favour. In his view, we have:

(2) If it is morally wrong to Y, there is no non-moral reason to Y.26

Extending this view to the moral normativity of states we have, in particular:

(S) If it is morally wrong to be amused by X, there are no non-moral reasons to be amused by X.

Trivially, we also have:

(3) If there are no non-moral reasons to be amused by X, the funniness of X is not a comic reason to be amused by X.

Putting these considerations together, we arrive at a 'silencing' argument for the strong version of (unrestricted) basic comic moralism:
The Silencing Argument

(S) If it is morally wrong to be amused by X, there are no non-moral reasons to be amused by X.

(3) If there are no non-moral reasons to be amused by X, the funniness of X is not a comic reason to be amused by X.

So

(4) If it is morally wrong to be amused by X, the funniness of X is not a comic reason to be amused by X.

But

(NRc) X is funny iff the funniness of X is a comic reason to be amused by X.

Hence

(Bc) If it is morally wrong to be amused by X, X is not funny.

This argument couples a natural reformulation of the merited-response argument with a familiar view of the normativity of moral wrongness. It therefore displays a shortfall in Jacobson and d'Arms's critique. Although much of the argument's load is carried by the 'silencing' premise (S), it would not do for Jacobson and d'Arms to repeat their earlier strategy by protesting that (S) "begs the question." McDowell (in particular) adduces several theoretical considerations in favour of the practical version of silencing on which (S) is based. Any who wishes to deny that basic comic moralism follows from the normativity of funniness must first refute (the premises of) the silencing argument.

II.iv The point I have just made against Jacobson and d'Arms is largely negative. To advocate (strong) basic comic moralism on the basis of the silencing argument one would have to substantiate the silencing premise (S) for the benefit of those—the majority no doubt—for whom it lacks credibility. I cannot attempt this here. Instead I will give an example that serves to illustrate both the attractions of silencing and its significance for comic moralism.
Suppose that Smith’s mother has lived a virtuous life, and that she is making certain gurgling noises the sound of which is completely characterisable by the physical property P. Smith is sitting a short distance away from her, and finds himself amused by them. Consider two cases:

**Case 1:** Smith’s mother has fallen asleep at the Christmas dinner table, in the company of her children and grandchildren, and Smith is sitting opposite. The P-noises r1 she is making constitute snoring.

**Case 2:** Smith’s mother is dying, and Smith is sitting at her bedside. The P-noises r2 she is making constitute a death-rattle.

In Case 2, Smith’s amusement is morally wrong even if his amusement in Case 1 is fitting and shared by the other family members: morality requires Smith not to be amused by his mother’s death-rattle, irrespective of how funny duplicates of it are in other contexts. At least four models of how comic and moral norms interact in this case are worthy of consideration:

(i) No comic error

   (a) *Inappropriate attention*: Smith’s mother’s P-noises r2 afford him a comic reason for amusement, but it is morally wrong for him to be amused by them because this would require him to attend to them, and, situated as he is, it is morally wrong for him to attend to them.

   (b) *Misjudgement*: Smith’s mother’s P-noises r2 afford him a comic reason for amusement, but it is morally wrong for him to be amused by them because, situated as he is, he has a moral reason for not being amused, and this reason outweighs (or overrides) the comic reason.

(ii) Comic error

   (a) *Contextual*: Smith’s mother’s P-noises r2 do not afford him a comic reason for amusement, because the context in which they are made provides him with a moral reason for not being amused that silences what would otherwise be a comic reason for amusement.\(^{28}\)

   (b) *Non-contextual*: Smith’s mother’s P-noises r2 do not afford him a comic reason for amusement. This is not because of the presence of any silencing moral reason, however. Nothing in the situation described is so much as a candidate for being a comic reason.
Of these alternatives, model (i) (b) is least attractive. In Smith's situation, a virtuous person should discern no reason for amusement. So the question becomes: Should no such reason be discerned because none is present (as on (ii) (a) and (ii) (b)), or because, in context, it is morally wrong for Smith to attend to comic reasons (as on (i) (a))? There are two ways of articulating the latter alternative, depending on which context is taken to be operative. If Smith's context is the crucial one, someone differently situated from Smith—a stranger watching a video of the death years later, say—would be permitted to attend to the comic reason (with amusement). To my mind, however, no such thing is permissible. Finding amusement in the death-rattle of an actual person is morally objectionable, even if it is found long afterwards whilst watching a video of the event. So model (i) (a) should hold that it is the comic reasons' own context that requires that it not be attended to. But this alternative is in tension with the response-dependency account of funniness that so many have found attractive, and is therefore doubtful. This leaves a choice between (ii) (a) and (ii) (b), with (ii) (a) being favoured by the idea that in some sense something could have been funny had the situation in Case 2 been different.

These remarks are no more than suggestive. But on balance they do reveal, at the very least, that there is much to be said for model (ii) (a)'s claim that Smith's amusement at his mother's death-rattle violates not only moral norms, but comic norms, too, because what would otherwise be a comic reason for amusement is silenced by moral considerations.

II.v Let those who advocate the view that moral considerations can silence potential comic reasons for amusement be called 'silencers'. I would like to conclude this paper by considering whether silencers can avoid (strong) basic comic moralism. Since the silencing argument is valid, this issue must turn on the status of the remaining premises other than (S). More specifically, since (3) is unassailable, it must turn on the status of (NRc), the silencing argument's specific formulation of the normativity of funniness. Only (NRc) stands between silencers and (basic) comic moralism.

Silencers might try to reject the approach to funniness (NRc) embodies. They might seek reasons to question the claim that funniness is normative. This strategy seems hopeless, however. The notion of funniness plays an integral role in a normative practice whereby people shape one another's comic responses. To respond to someone's amusement by saying "It isn't
funny,” and really mean what one says, is to object to his response, and to invite him to reconsider it. Whether silencers must be (basic) comic moralists turns, therefore, on whether (NRc)'s formulation of the normativity of funniness is correct. Again, one might try to reject this formulation on the general ground that comic normativity does not translate into the language of reasons. This course also appears desperate. How could amusement be ‘(comically) appropriate’—that is, ‘fitting’—in the absence of (normative) comic reasons? Moral reasons play an important role in moral normativity, as do prudential reasons in prudential normativity. How could comic reasons fail to play a part in comic normativity? Of course, paradigmatic moral and prudential reasons are practical. But there are cases outside the practical sphere in which normativity does embody reasons, and various emotional attitudes are certainly among them. Whether anger, for example, is fitting, depends on whether there are (good) sui generis reasons for it. Why should amusement be any different in this respect?31

The only hope silencers have of avoiding (basic) comic moralism is by refuting (NRc) on matters of detail. They must acknowledge a connection between funniness and comic reasons, while arguing that this connection is misdescribed by (NRc).

II.vi One fault that might be found with (NRc) concerns the relationship between its left- and right-hand sides. (NRc) claims that X is funny iff the funniness of X is a comic reason to be amused by X. Often, however, whether something constitutes a reason for an agent to perform a certain act, or to respond in a certain way, depends on the agent’s situation. Silencers might hold that this much is true of the fact of something’s being funny: for some items X, whether the funniness of X is a comic reason for an agent to be amused depends on the agent’s situation. In that case, (NRc)'s right-hand side has an unstated contextual dependence. This would be of little consequence if its left-hand side carried the same dependence on context, but it doesn’t. The funniness of an item is not context-dependent in the same way. Whether the telling of a joke is funny depends on the telling’s properties. But this is not to say that, e.g., Fred’s actual telling of a joke at noon on Christmas Day 2001 is funny relative to one observer’s context, but not to another. In short, silencers might try to resist the silencing argument by objecting that (NRc) is untenable because the notion of a (comic) reason for an agent to be amused is sensitive to the agent’s circumstances, but the funniness of an item is not.
Although this objection to (NRc) is probably sound, there is little prospect of relieving silencers of a commitment to (strong) basic comic moralism by means of it. A natural response to it is to refine (NRc) into an ideal-observer theory along some such lines as:

(NRci) X is funny iff, for all ideally situated ideal agents A, the funniness of X is a comic reason for A to be amused by X.32

But although the silencing argument is now blocked, since (NRci) does not engage (4), it is easily enough revived. Once context-dependence is also made explicit in both (4) and the premises from which (4) is derived (as it must be, since the ground for finding it in (NRc) applies equally to them), an ideal version of the silencing argument remains valid:

The Silencing Argument (Ideal Version)

(Si) For all ideally situated ideal agents A, if it is morally wrong for A to be amused by X, there are no non-moral reasons for A to be amused by X.

(3i) For all ideally situated ideal agents A, if there are no non-moral reasons for A to be amused by X, the funniness of X is not a comic reason for A to be amused by X.

So

(4i) For all ideally situated ideal agents A, if it is morally wrong for A to be amused by X, the funniness of X is not a comic reason for A to be amused by X.

But

(NRci) X is funny iff, for all ideally situated ideal agents A, the funniness of X is a comic reason for A to be amused by X.

Therefore

(Bsi) If, for all ideally situated ideal agents A, it is morally wrong for A to be amused by X, then X is not funny.
(Bsi) should be thought of as an improved formulation of (strong) basic comic moralism. If the moral wrongness of an agent's amusement by something never depends on the agent or the agent's situation, (Bsi) is equivalent to (Bs). But if, as is surely the case, the moral wrongness of an agent's amusement by something can depend on the agent and/or the agent's situation, (Bs) contains an implicit relativisation that needs to be disambiguated.

(Bsi) does not permit a straightforward inference from the fact that it would be morally wrong for the white members of Smith's audience to be amused by his antics, to the conclusion that his antics are not funny. Nevertheless, it is far from empty. Even if there is no item such that, in every possible situation, it is morally wrong to be amused by the item, at least some items that are candidates for being funny are such that it is morally wrong for even ideally situated ideal agents to find them amusing. Smith's mother's death-rattle, a slip on a banana-skin that causes severely debilitating head injuries, and the telling of a rape-joke that causes great distress to rape-victims who happen to be in the audience, fall into this category.

On the other hand, this last example suggests that (NRsi) does not make fully explicit the extent of the context-dependence in (NRc). Whether it is morally wrong for an agent to respond in a certain way to an item depends not just on the agent, and the agent's situation, but on the item's context too. The contexts of spatiotemporal items like canvasses change as these items are moved around. Ordinarily, it is not morally wrong to be amused by a witty, but inoffensive, caricature that is drawn on a sheet of paper. Yet it is morally wrong for a police-officer to be amused by it if the only occasion on which he thinks of it is upon his noticing it taped to the forehead of the mutilated victim of a sadistic killer who prides himself on his sense of humor. In other cases, only modal variation in the item's context is possible. That the telling of a joke causes great distress is not one of the telling's essential properties. The members of the audience who are greatly distressed by it might not have been present, and, had they not been present, it would not have had all of the harmful effects it had. This suggests that the normativity of an item's funniness should be idealised not just with respect to the agent and the agent's situation, but with respect to the item's situation too. Some modification of the ideal version of the silencing argument is needed to make this explicit, but the intended effect can be read into it as it stands without too much difficulty. One need only stipulate that an agent is ideally situated only if the item X in question is itself ideally situated.
On this interpretation, \((B^{si})\) amounts to a still weaker formulation of basic comic moralism. Nevertheless, it remains far from empty. Perhaps the telling of the rape-joke that caused certain members of the audience great distress now slips through the net: had the contextual properties of the telling been ideal, it would not have caused distress and it would not have been morally wrong for an ideally situated ideal agent to be amused by it. But some items—and in particular a death-rattle that happens to have a duplicate that is risible—remain caught.\(^{34}\) It follows that silencers who wish to avoid basic comic moralism cannot rest content with \((NR^{ci})\)'s formulation of the normativity of funniness.

II.vii A second fault that might be found with \((NR^{c})\) is retained in \((NR^{ci})\). Their right-hand sides accord funniness reason-giving powers. They take the funniness of an item to (sometimes) be a (comic) reason (for some agents) to be amused. This is problematic, however. If funniness were such a reason, one would expect judgement that something is funny to be internally related to amusement in much the same way that judgement that an act is morally wrong appears to be related internally to motivation. But judgement-internalism about funniness lacks the plausibility of judgement-internalism about moral wrongness. My conscious judgement that, e.g., *Annie Hall* is funny produces no inclination in me to be amused. Rather, reflection upon *Annie Hall* disposes me to amusement only when I recollect certain of its scenes. This suggests that the funniness of an item is not itself a comic reason. It is merely a mark or indicator of the existence of a comic reason.

The significance of this suggestion for the silencing argument depends on how \((NR^{ci})\) is modified to accommodate it. The simplest modification retreats to neutrality regarding the nature of the comic reason funniness indicates:

\[
(NR^{cin}) \quad X \text{ is funny iff for all ideally situated ideal agents } A, \text{ something is a comic reason for } A \text{ to be amused by } X.
\]

This modification gets the silencer who wishes to avoid basic comic moralism nowhere, however. The silencing argument is reinstated once premises (3) and (4) are similarly modified (by replacing ‘the funniness of X is not’ by ‘nothing is’).

A second way of accommodating judgement-externalism about funniness promises greater rewards. The funniness of X does not mark the existence
of just any comic reason: it marks the existence of a comic reason \( X \) itself provides. One modification of (NRci) to accommodate this point would be:

\[(\text{NRci}^*) \quad X \text{ is funny iff, for all ideally situated ideal agents } A, \text{ there is a property } P \text{ such that the fact that } X \text{ has } P \text{ is a comic reason for } A \text{ to be amused by } X. \]

\( \text{(NRci}^*) \) is incongruous, however. In particular, it is bizarre to suppose that some property of *Annie Hall*—its containing such-and-such a gag, for example—is a comic reason to be amused by *Annie Hall*. Rather, the funniness of *Annie Hall* consists in the fact of its having properties that are themselves comic reasons for amusement *per se*. This invites a more radical modification of (NRci):

\[(\text{NRcid}) \quad X \text{ is funny iff, for all ideally situated ideal agents } A, \text{ there is a property } P \text{ such that the fact that } X \text{ has } P \text{ is a comic reason for } A \text{ to be amused.} \]

If (NRci) is replaced by (NRcid), the silencing argument will only remain valid if (4i) is modified so as to engage the right-hand side of (NRcid), and this modification is repeated on the right-hand side of (Bsi). So as to remain neutral regarding any changes that must also be made to the left-hand sides of (4i) and (Bsi), let us first modify them to:

\[(4i^1) \quad \text{For all ideal situated ideal agents } A, \text{ if it is morally wrong for } A \ldots, \text{ there is no property } P \text{ such that the fact that } X \text{ has } P \text{ is a comic reason for } A \text{ to be amused.} \]

and

\[(Bsi^1) \quad \text{If, for all ideally situated ideal agents } A, \text{ it is morally wrong for } A \ldots, \text{ then } X \text{ is not funny.} \]

Provided (NRcid) is the correct formulation of the normativity of funniness, then, whether silencers are committed to (a completed version of) (Bsi) turns on whether they are committed to (a completed version of) (4i).
How should the ellipsis in (4\textsuperscript{i}) and (B\textsuperscript{si}) be filled? There are two alternatives. It can be filled either by ‘to be amused’, or by ‘to be amused by X’. On the first alternative, (B\textsuperscript{si}) becomes:

(B\textsuperscript{si}) If, for all ideally situated ideal agents A, it is morally wrong for A to be amused, then X is not funny.

while (4\textsuperscript{i}) becomes

(4\textsuperscript{i}) For all ideally situated ideal agents A, if it is morally wrong for A to be amused, then there is no property P such that the fact that X has P is a comic reason for A to be amused.

which in turn follows from:

(S\textsuperscript{ia}) For all ideally situated ideal agents A, if it is morally wrong for A to be amused, there are no non-moral reasons for A to be amused.

and

(3\textsuperscript{ia}) For all ideally situated ideal agents A, if there are no non-moral reasons for A to be amused, there is no property P such that the fact that X has P is a comic reason for A to be amused.

Silencers are surely committed to (S\textsuperscript{ia}), while (3\textsuperscript{ia}) is trivially true. Hence, (NR\textsuperscript{cid}) commits silencers to (B\textsuperscript{si}). (B\textsuperscript{si}) is either vacuous, or absurd, however. If its antecedent is false, it carries no consequences for the funniness of anything. If its antecedent is true, it makes the absurd claim that nothing is funny. The latter alternative needn’t worry silencers, since the antecedent to (B\textsuperscript{si}) is clearly false: it is not the case that for all ideally situated ideal agents A, it is morally wrong for A to be amused. Accordingly, taking (NR\textsuperscript{cid}) to be the correct formulation of the funniness of normativity has the consequence that silencers escape (basic) comic moralism if (4\textsuperscript{ia}) is the strongest completion of (4\textsuperscript{ia}) to which they are committed.

To see whether silencers are committed to anything stronger, let us consider the second way of completing (4\textsuperscript{i}) and (B\textsuperscript{si}). Upon substituting ‘to be amused by X’, (B\textsuperscript{si}) becomes (B\textsuperscript{a}) itself, while (4\textsuperscript{i}) becomes:
(4ib) For all ideally situated ideal agents A, if it is morally wrong for A to be amused by X, there is no property P such that the fact that X has P is a comic reason for A to be amused.

It does not appear to be possible to get to this from silencing, however. It is the original silencing premise (S') that is relevant here. (S') says that for all ideally situated agents A, if it is morally wrong for A to be amused by X, there are no non-moral reasons for A to be amused by X. But this merely tells us that the moral wrongness of A's amusement by X precludes the existence of any non-moral reason for A's amusement by X. In itself, this says nothing about the existence of non-moral reasons for amusement per se. To get to (4ib) from (S') and (3i), we would also need:

(*) If there is a property P such that the fact that X has P is a comic reason for A to be amused, then there is a non-moral reason for A to be amused by X.

But (*) seems not to be true. On the proposal at hand, for an agent to be amused by X is for there to be a property P such that the agent is amused for the reason that X is P. So a more explicit version of (*) is:

(**) If there is a property P such that X has P is a comic reason for A to be amused, then there is a property P such that there is a non-moral reason for A to be amused for the reason that X is P.

(**) appears to be false. Suppose that there is a property P such that the fact that X is P is a comic reason for some ideally situated, ideal agent A, to be amused. Either A attends to the fact that X is P, or not. If A is not attending to the fact that X is P, there might be no non-moral reason for A to be amused by the fact that X is P, since there might be no non-moral reason for A to attend to this fact. But nor need there be a non-moral reason for A to be amused for the reason that X is P if A is attending to the fact that X is P. If the fact that X is P is a comic reason for amusement, and A is ideally situated and ideal, and A is attending to the fact that X is P, then, on occasion at least, A just will be amused for the reason that X is P. To suppose that in such circumstances, there must be some further reason for A to be amused for this reason, would be to embark upon a vicious regress.
Accordingly, if \((NR^{cid})\) is accepted, silencers escape comic moralism on both ways of completing \((4^a)\) and \((B^{si})\). Although they are committed to \((4^{ia})\), \((B^{sia})\) is vacuous. Conversely, while \((B^{sib})\) is a version of comic moralism, they are not committed to the thesis \((4^{ib})\) on which it is based.

II.viii Whether the strong version of basic comic moralism is true depends in part on whether McDowell’s doctrine of silencing—for which I have shown some sympathy—is correct, and in part on how the (comic) normativity of funniness should be formulated. If the funniness of an item is itself a comic reason for being amused by the item, silencers are committed to holding it to be true. But if the funniness of an item merely indicates the existence of a certain kind of reason to be amused, silencers are not so committed. I have suggested that the fact that judgement about funniness is externally related to amusement favours the latter view. In the final analysis, then, my objection to Jacobson and d’Arms’s treatment of the merited response argument ends up complementing their critique. Silencing fails to yield the conclusion that if it is morally wrong for even ideally situated ideal agents to be amused by an item, the item isn’t funny.36

Philip Percival

Glasgow University

NOTES

1. My use of the expression ‘comic moralism’ generalises, and tries to improve upon, the use made of it by Jacobson (1997: p. 162), and the use made of ‘moralism’ by Gaut (1998). Basically, these authors use ‘comic moralism’ and ‘moralism’, respectively, for what in my terms are particular species of a version of strong comic moralism that is restricted to jokes. They both identify the kind of distinction I make using the terms ‘strong’ and ‘weak’. Although Jacobson (1997: n. 28) speaks of “weak” versions of the thesis he calls “comic moralism” in connection with the doctrine that any funniness a sexist or racist joke possesses is merely diminished (and not entirely destroyed) by the joke’s sexism or racism, however, he deems this doctrine insufficiently important to give it a name. But Gaut contrasts this doctrine with the thesis he calls ‘moralism’, and calls it ‘ethicism’. He argues that it is true.

2. Whether the doctrine should be attributed to Anderson (1993: p. 2) turns on how she should be interpreted when she writes: “A person may laugh at a racist joke, but be embarrassed at her laughter. Her embarrassment reflects a judgement that her amusement was not an appropriate response to the joke. The joke was not genuinely good or funny: it did not merit laughter.” Jacobson’s (1997: pp. 171–72) suggestion that this passage endorses a strong version of a species of comic moralism about (sexist or) racist jokes is threatened
by the purpose with which Anderson writes. The express aim of the passage is to illustrate her view that “to experience something as valuable and to value it are not to judge that it is valuable.” But this aim would be served were the passage to constitute no more than the observation that it is coherent to be amused by an item while judging on some ground—its racism, say—that the item is not funny. It places no obligation on her to claim, further (as on Jacobson’s interpretation), that if one judged as much in these circumstances, and the item were indeed racist, one’s judgement would be true.

3. In a personal communication, de Sousa confirms my interpretation of his text. He writes “lots of sexist and racist jokes are funny to anyone if they are witty (though we may smirk and be shocked as well as laugh). But if there is no other possible source of mirth than the nasty attitude, then you’re left just with the racism or sexism to explain why someone finds it funny.”

4. Philips indicates that what he says about racist humour is to be taken to apply to sexist humour too.

5. I think d’Arms and Jacobson include jokes that are sexist or racist in the category of offensive jokes.


12. The remark on the basis of which d’Arms and Jacobson (2000) attribute T₆ to Moran is only in passing. Moran (1994: pp. 93–94) writes: “… the person who finds himself chortling with appreciation at a racist joke cannot excuse himself by insisting that he no more really shares in the attitude his laughter expresses than he really believes the fictional truths that make up the details of the story.” (In part for the sake of convenience, I assume he intends what he says about racist jokes to apply to sexist ones too.) There is no argument for T₆ in this remark: whether laughter at a racist joke “expresses” any attitudes other than amusement is the point at issue. Nor does his argument for the conclusion that emotional responses to fictional artworks, and attitudes that underlie these responses, are real, yield T₆ as a special case. In particular, to concede to him that attitudes underlying amusement by a joke that is sexist or racist are both real and morally culpable would fall short of conceding T₆. Nothing Moran says precludes the possibility, on occasion at least, of explaining such attitudes’ culpability without supposing them to be sexist or racist. (An alternative explanation, for example, would be that they are morally wrong because they are grossly insensitive to the victimisation of certain social groups.)

13. See my discussion of de Sousa’s remarks about this joke in the introduction above.

14. See n. 3 above for evidence of the correctness of my interpretation of de Sousa’s text.

15. Compare Benatar’s (1999: pp. 197–99) criticisms of de Sousa’s claims about this joke.

16. This conclusion generalises Benatar’s (1999) contention that one need not have sexist or racist attitudes to be amused by jokes that embody negative racial or gender stereotyping, and observations in Goldstein (1995: p. 31) and Gaut (1998: p. 63). Goldstein argues in convincing detail that in contrast to the joke that is the subject of de Sousa’s analysis, some rape-jokes are witty, e.g., in virtue of involving intelligent word-play and incongruity, and that it is by no means necessary that one have sexist attitudes in
order to be amused by them. Goldstein takes his discussion to run counter to de Sousa's, but it is actually complementary. de Sousa focuses upon (what he takes to be) a phthonic rape-joke in order to draw his contrast between phthonic humour and wit. In effect, Goldstein juxtaposes a witty rape-joke against de Sousa's in order to emphasise the same contrast. Similarly, although Gaut takes himself to be undermining de Sousa's viewpoint when he identifies, illustrates, and exploits (what he takes to be) the possibility of sexist or racist humour that is genuinely witty, in so doing he merely reiterates one of de Sousa's main themes.

17. In particular, (A) alone does not entail T. The supposition that it is morally wrong to be amused by jokes that are sexist or racist is compatible with the supposition that one does not have to have sexist or racist attitudes in order to be amused by such jokes. (This point is expanded in note 12 above, and in the next subsection.)

18. Although T could only emerge as a corollary of strong comic moralism about jokes that are sexist or racist, one should not presume that it would do so. If jokes that are sexist or racist are not funny, an explanation is required of why some people find them amusing. But there are alternatives to an explanation in terms of racist and sexist attitudes. One alternative is provided by the possibility that some people are amused by such jokes on account of their being insensitive to morally pertinent facts that prevent what would otherwise be funny from being funny. (I explore this kind of explanation in depth in Sections II.iii–II.vii below.)

19. See Section 1.i above.

20. The example also shows that (A) is not necessarily true.

21. Note 12 above.


23. The exposition that follows is freely based on the papers by Jacobson (1997) and by d'Arms and Jacobson (2000).

24. This is the terminology of Jacobson and d'Arms (2000). Earlier, Jacobson (1997) had preferred the term 'warrant'. Jacobson and d'Arms argue that this sui generis notion of 'fit' is applicable to a wide range of emotional states.


27. See the references in n. 26 above.

28. Though model (iia) identifies Smith's amusement as an instance of comic error, and has been categorised accordingly, it does not hold Smith's comic sense to be at fault. Rather, it holds his moral sense to be defective. The explanation it gives of how Smith comes to judge funny something that is not funny alludes merely to his moral failings. In this respect, (iia) is closer to case (i). Only model (iib) postulates a failing in Smith's specifically comic sense.

29. This is not to say that, necessarily, everyone is required not to attend to it, whatever their situation. If the Devil threatens humanity with a terrible fate unless one attend to it, attending to it would not be morally wrong.

30. The basic idea of such an account is to elucidate the notion of funniness in terms of the notion of amusement. Since comic error is possible, however—one can be amused by what is not funny, and fail to find amusing what is funny—the connection between the two cannot be mere co-extensiveness. A natural refinement of the idea is in terms of agents and contexts that are in certain respects ideal: in ideal circumstances, funniness coincides with what amuses. There is little prospect of any such refinement accommodating the idea that Smith's mother's gurgling noises constitute a comic reason one is obliged not to attend to,
however. These noises cannot be re-located to an ideal context in which a virtuous person
might find them amusing: they are essentially a death-rattle. Yet response-dependency
holds that they are funny only if a virtuous and ideal agent who is ideally situated would
find them amusing. (This objection does not presuppose that the responses to which a
response-dependency account alludes are confined to those of virtuous persons. It merely
presumes that they are not confined to those of non-virtuous persons.)

31. Basic comic moralism’s most articulate opponents accept that comic reasons are
integral to comic normativity. For example, Jacobson (1997: p. 178) speaks of “various
types of reasons to feel [e.g., amusement],” and says that “there are a variety of different
kinds of reason for and against an emotional response, only some of which are relevant to
whether the response is warranted.”

32. The notions of “ideal” agent and “ideal” situation employed here pertain specifical­
ly to the comic. Roughly, they are the notions of an agent who is ideally sensitive to what
is funny, and of a situation that is ideal for the appreciation of funniness. There is no
question-begging presumption that agents who are ideal in this sense are morally virtuous.

33. After all, for each X, one possible situation in which amusement by X is valuable
morally is the situation in which an evil demon has ensured that humanity will suffer
eternal torment unless one is amused by X. (Compare the remarks at the beginning of I.iii
above.)

34. I assume that a person’s death-rattle remains a death-rattle even in ideal situations
(which it will do, if, as I suppose, it is essentially a death-rattle). (Compare the discussion
of Case 2 in Section II.iv above.)

35. This is very rough, and plainly incorrect as it stands. For example, containing one
successful gag does not suffice to make a film funny. I rest content with this defect because
I wish to pursue what I take to be a deeper problem.

36. I would like to thank audiences at Glasgow and Edinburgh, and in particular
Richard Holton, Rae Langton, and Mike Ridge, for helpful comments. I am also grateful
to Keith Pigott, who gave me an opportunity to write the final draft whilst enjoying a
beautiful haven within the Norfolk countryside.

REFERENCES

University Press.
Affairs Quarterly, 13, 191–203.
Literature, 22, 51–68.
