https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CRUEL JOKES AND NORMATIVE COMPETENCE*

By David Shoemaker

Abstract: *Some moral responsibility theorists think that certain agents (like psychopaths) can be morally responsible—and morally criticizable—for their actions and attitudes even though they lack any competence in grasping or responding to moral norms (a blindness to moral reasons that is typically called "normative incompetence" or, more accurately, "moral incompetence"). In this essay, I provide a new argument against these theorists by exploring the intersection between two normative domains, the funny and the moral. There are, it turns out, interesting and significant ways that properties from each domain bear on reasons to respond in the other, and so there are interesting and significant ways in which people's responses to cruel jokes or insult humor may be criticizable. I then survey various personality and psychological impairments that seem to undercut criticizability in this intersecting domain. Learning about these people and their impairments yields a wealth of information about what true normative competence actually requires, as well as why competence of the specifically moral variety really is required for moral criticizability.*

KEY WORDS: normative competence, moral competence, moral responsibility, moral criticism, humor, moralistic fallacy, Dark Triad, autism

I. Introduction

Many theorists think normative competence is essential for moral responsibility. But what is it, and in what respect(s) is it essential? There are two very general, perhaps complementary, accounts. The first advances it as a condition of morally responsible agents. R. Jay Wallace puts this *agential characterization* of normative competence as "the ability to grasp and apply moral reasons, and to govern one's behavior by the light of such reasons."[1] Susan Wolf has advanced a slightly different version of the agential characterization of

* For really helpful comments on a previous draft of this essay, I'm grateful to Justin D'Arms and Elinor Mason. Michael McKenna went above and beyond by giving detailed and insightful feedback on *three* drafts. I also got helpful feedback from discussion of the essay with reading groups at the Gothenburg Responsibility Project, at Stockholm University, and at Uppsala University. In particular, from that Swedish tour I'd like to thank Erik Angner, Jessica Brown, Erik Carlson, Sofia Jeppsson, Jens Johansson, Ben Matheson, Per Milam, Jonas Olson, Katherina Berndt Rasmussen, Andrew Reisner, Olle Risberg, Paul Russell, and Andras Szigeti. I got great feedback on the essay from Chad Van Schoelandt, Peter Railton, Cristina Bicchieri, Dan Kelly, Jerry Gaus, John Thrasher, and Ryan Muldoon, among others. And conversations with Michael McKenna, Shaun Nichols, Bas Van Der Vossen, and Steve Wall were particularly productive and had the greatest influence on the final version of the essay.

[1] R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1. Others who essentially accept this formulation as is include David O. Brink, "Immaturity, Normative Competence, and Juvenile Transfer: How (Not) to Punish Minors for Major Crimes," *Texas Law Review* 82 (2004): 1569; Dana Kay Nelkin, *Making Sense of Freedom and*

doi:10.1017/S0265052518000080
© 2018 Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation. Printed in the USA.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

normative competence as a kind of "sanity" presupposed by our moral practices, "the minimally sufficient ability . . . normatively to recognize and appreciate the world for what it is."[2] She also describes it as "a set of psychological dispositions and capacities the possession of which tends to allow someone to recognize and appreciate the Good."[3] In both Wallace's and Wolf's versions of the agential characterization, though, normative competence is a necessary condition for an agent's being aptly susceptible to various sorts of responsibility responses (for instance, resentment).

Alternatively, a few theorists have talked about normative competence as a condition on responsibility *appraisers*—those who hold others responsible—calling it "an ability to criticize courses of action competently by relevant normative standards."[4] Call this the *appraiser characterization* of normative competence.

What both characterizations have in common is that the competence in question is really about the ability to grasp, apply, and/or act on *moral* norms.[5] This is why it is often explicitly called "moral competence."[6] And this is also usually taken to be, more specifically, about whether one can see and respond to the fact that certain moral norms counsel against some proposed action or attitude. As David Brink says about the agential characterization of moral competence, agents "must be able to recognize reasons for and against action and be able to regulate their actions in accordance with this normative knowledge."[7] Call this requirement—that to be morally responsible one must be able to grasp and respond to specifically moral reasons—the *moral competence requirement*.

There are a couple of arguments that advocates of the moral competence requirement give in favor of it, but the primary one appeals to fairness:[8]

Responsibility (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Michael McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Gary Watson also adopts this as one form of normative competence; see Gary Watson, *Agency and Answerability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 152–53.

[2] Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," in Ferdinand Schoeman, ed., *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 56.

[3] Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 129.

[4] Paul Benson, "Freedom and Value," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 465–86. For discussion of the explicit connection between the agential and appraiser characterizations, see Paul Russell, "Responsibility and the Condition of Moral Sense," *Philosophical Topics* 32 (2004): 287–305; McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility*; and (more implicitly) Watson, *Agency and Answerability*.

[5] Albeit not necessarily performed under that description. See Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[6] Susan Dwyer, "Moral Competence," in K. Murasugi and R. Stainton, eds., *Philosophy and Linguistics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); Shaun Nichols and Joshua Knobe, "Moral Responsibility and Determinism: The Cognitive Science of Folk Intuitions," *Nous* 41 (2007): 663–85; and Matthew Talbert, "Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest," *The Journal of Ethics* 16 (2012): 89–101.

[7] Brink, 1569.

[8] Another appeals to the superficiality of any kind of responsibility that is absent such a condition. See Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Moral Responsibility," and *Freedom Within Reason*, 39–45.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If someone lacked the ability to grasp and respond to moral reasons, she would lack the opportunity to avoid certain actions (at least for those reasons). Insofar as blame is a sanction, it would be unfair to blame people who lacked the opportunities to avoid actions that were subject to such sanctions.[9]

There are some influential responsibility theorists, however, who deny the moral competence requirement, even though they essentially agree with its general characterization.[10] Call them the *moral competence requirement deniers* (or *deniers*, for short). They think that as long as one is able (i) to make judgments as to the worth of reasons in *non*moral domains, and (ii) to act for these reasons, and one is also able (iii) to judge that nothing else counts against one's proposed action, then one is answerable in the moral domain, and so is susceptible to moral criticism/blame, even if one is blind to the moral considerations against doing the thing in question.[11]

One argument for this view just denies that blame is a sanction, and so views worries about the unfairness of blaming those who cannot recognize moral reasons as moot.[12] A related (and for our purposes more relevant) argument claims that even when blameworthy agents *can* grasp and respond to moral reasons against their actions, that is not the reason they are blameworthy for those actions. Rather, it's that they acted on their own corrupt values and judged that nothing else mattered, that is, they had a bad quality of will. But if that is what grounds their blameworthiness, it doesn't matter whether they had access to non-corrupt values and reasons.[13] It would seem, for instance, that slaveholders could be blameworthy even if, owing to the indoctrination of their upbringing and culture, they were blind to the moral reasons against owning people (or had severe difficulty seeing these reasons). After all, their judging that the interests of their slaves didn't matter expressed a contemptible attitude. And whether or not *we* think slaveholders were blameworthy, surely their *slaves* could have appropriately blamed them![14] It's enough for their being blameworthy that the slaveholders judged that they had (prudential, that is, nonmoral)

[9] See, e.g., Wallace, and Nelkin.

[10] They are led by T. M. Scanlon, in *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Angela M. Smith, in "Moral Blame and Moral Protest," in D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, eds., *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27–48; and Matt Talbert, "Blame and Responsiveness to Moral Reasons: Are Psychopaths Blameworthy?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 89 (2008): 516–35, and "Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Moral Protest."

[11] See Angela M. Smith, "Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: In Defense of a Unified Account," *Ethics* 122 (2012): 575–89, and "Moral Blame and Moral Protest"; Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*; and Talbert, "Blame and Responsiveness to Moral Reasons," and "Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest."

[12] Pamela Hieronymi, "The Force and Fairness of Blame," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 115–48.

[13] Talbert, "Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest," 91–93.

[14] Ibid., 95–97.

reason to own humans and they also judged that the interests of their slaves provided them with no reason of any kind (or insufficient reason) to do otherwise, even though they were unable to recognize those interests as providing a countervailing moral reason.[15]

This is not an idle, ivory-tower debate. It goes to whether certain real life marginal agents, such as psychopaths, those with autism, or those from unenlightened cultures (such as, yes, slaveholders or male chauvinists) can be morally responsible agents and appraisers, and so may be treated or criticized in certain ways. Those who require moral competence tend to think not; the deniers tend to think so, given certain of these agents' *other* reason-governing abilities. I have taken a stand on this debate many times previously, siding with the former group.[16] My aim in this essay is to offer a new and different sort of argument against the deniers, an argument that should also have implications for the study of norms and normative interaction generally. I will first motivate and defend a much richer account of the nature of normative competence than has previously been developed. I will then show why normative competence is indeed necessary for moral responsibility. One important takeaway here will be that there is no such thing as a freestanding *moral* competence; rather, to be "morally competent" is really to be more generally normatively competent, that is, competent across a wide range of (moral and nonmoral) normative domains.

I will advance this position primarily by discussing the *appraisal characterization* of normative competence, which is about having apt attitudes in response to others. By coming to understand this version of normative competence, as well as why some people lack it, I think we will come to a greater understanding of the agential characterization as well, insofar as appraisers, in appraising others, do so relative to norms whose violation or adherence may render these appraisers themselves susceptible to appraisal by others. That is, appraisers are themselves agents who may be criticizable (or praiseable) for their own appraising attitudes of others, in light of our norms of appraisal.[17]

I will start in what might seem an initially obscure fashion, by exploring insult comics and cruel pranks. I will then show how different types of personalities respond to nasty humor or normative boundary-bending, which will give us insight into the ways in which norms from different domains actually impinge on one another, and so will reveal that what it takes to be a competent and responsible member of one normative community is being a competent and responsible member of a host of other normative communities. All of this will finally reveal why the deniers' view, at the end of the day, is in serious trouble.

[15] Cf., Scanlon, chap. 6.

[16] See in particular David Shoemaker, "Moral Address, Moral Responsibility, and the Boundaries of the Moral Community," *Ethics* 118 (2011): 70–108; "Psychopathy, Responsibility, and the Moral/Conventional Distinction," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49, Supplement (2011): 99–124; and *Responsibility from the Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chap. 2 and part II.

[17] Cf., Daniel Jacobson, "In Praise of Immoral Art," *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997): 155–99.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

II. Amusement and Anger

To start, I am focused on appraisers, and in particular on the various emotional responses appraisers have to how others are or to what they do and say. I am concerned in this essay only with the amusing and the blameworthy, so the relevant appraisal responses are apt amusement and apt blaming anger.[18] Both responses are clearly guided by norms—norms whose violations by an inappropriately-responding appraiser could justifiably bring criticism his or her way. For example, if something is funny but I see no reason to be amused, I am liable to criticism for my poor sense of humor (other things equal).[19] And if someone has treated me, my children, or others horribly, then (other things equal) if I see no reason to be angry I'm liable to criticism about my poor sense of self-esteem, parental love, or justice.[20] What, then, are the norms for these appraiser attitudes?

One natural approach for identifying them would take seriously the pronouncement by Alan Alda's arrogant comedy director in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: "If it bends, it's funny; if it breaks, it's not funny." One could most easily do so by combining two popular recent theories, one about the funny and the other about the moral. The first claims that what's funny, and thus what grounds apt amusement, are (all and only) *benign norm violations*.[21] So norm violations are funny until they

[18] I prefer talk of blaming anger for a couple of reasons that I've spelled out elsewhere. First, it aptly captures more cases of the blameworthy than mere "resentment" and "indignation." These latter are cognitively sharpened versions of anger (see Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Significance of Recalcitrant Emotion [or, Anti-quasijudgmentalism]," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 52 [2003]: 127–45; and "Anthropocentric Constraints on Human Value," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 1 [2006]: 99–126). But there are some cases where anger is apt as a blaming emotion with no cognitive sharpening. Of course, some might think anger captures too much, as it also may seem appropriate for non-agents like computers and the weather. Here I distinguish between two forms of anger—goal-frustration anger and blaming anger—in terms of their distinctive sorts of action tendencies (the former aims at avoiding or eliminating the blockage; the latter aims at communicating the anger, often in a retaliatory way). I then adopt only the latter for talk about responsibility, which is what I'll do in this essay. See Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*, 90–91. See also David Shoemaker, "You Oughta Know! Defending Blaming Anger," forthcoming in Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan, eds., *The Moral Psychology of Anger* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield); and "The Forgiven," forthcoming in Michael McKenna, Dana Nelkin, and Brandon Warmke, eds., *Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[19] One obviously doesn't have to be amused to see apt reason for amusement. Consider professional comedians who respond to each others' jokes by saying, in a completely deadpan way, "That's funny."

[20] Recently some responsibility theorists have been challenging this claim on metaphysical grounds, maintaining that blaming anger presupposes the kind of libertarian agential capacities we very likely lack. See, e.g., Derk Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Gregg Caruso, "Free Will Skepticism and its Implications: An Argument for Optimism," in Elizabeth Shaw and Derk Pereboom, eds., *Free Will Skepticism in Law and Society,* forthcoming. I don't have space here to respond to this sort of worry, but I do so at length in "You Oughta Know! Defending Angry Blame."

[21] Peter A. McGraw and Caleb Warren, "Benign Violations Making Immoral Behavior Funny," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 8 (2010): 1141–49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cross over the line of benignity. And when does a norm violation become non-benign? Many theorists would say that one's blaming anger (such as resentment or indignation) at someone becomes appropriate for (all and only) violations of *wronging norms*.[22] These include actions or attitudes that produce or express unexcused or unjustified harm, rights-violation, promise-breaking, unfairness, and/or disrespect.

Each theory as it stands is false, though, rife with counterexamples. Regarding the former, there are plenty of false positives, examples of benign norm violations that just aren't funny, as when I forget to floss, or I wear white after Labor Day.[23] Regarding the latter, there are plenty of false negatives, cases in which appropriate blaming anger isn't restricted to wrongings, as when my neighbor mows his lawn early on a Sunday morning,[24] or I ignore a stranger's polite request for the time.[25]

The more serious problem for our purposes, though, comes from pairing these theories together in the aforementioned fashion. That's because some things don't cease to be funny even when they start to have immoral features. Consider "insult humor." Perhaps instead of calling someone "stupid," or an "idiot," you say, "I bet your brain feels as good as new, seeing as you never use it." Or consider pranks. Perhaps as I'm walking by you in the cafeteria, you slyly drop a banana peel before me, causing me to slip exaggeratedly and send my tray full of food flying across the room. Let's say the whole cafeteria audience laughs hysterically at me, even though I'm a bit dazed (both psychologically and physically). Consider finally sick or offensive humor, a domain that includes racist and sexist jokes but also includes the misanthropic, as in "Today I wanted to burn a lot of calories. So I found a fat kid and lit him on fire."

Funny insults and pranks, in particular, often generate asymmetrical responses: the butt of the joke may be angry, whereas the insulters or harmers are merely amused. So is one side right and the other wrong? We do often counsel against one response or the other. For instance, if I'm insulted in a clever way and feel angry, the insulter might say to me, "Oh, come on, have a sense of humor!" Or if after slipping on the banana peel I break my finger, someone might say, "Hey, stop laughing; I think he's really hurt!" But there may be no ultimate agreement on this point: The insulted person may persist in feeling hurt and angry, regardless of attempts to get him to lighten up, and the insulter may persist in feeling amused, because, as she might say, "It's still funny!"

[22] Many would point to Stephen Darwall (*The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006]) as a leading proponent of this view. But Wallace seems an early and influential proponent as well.

[23] See Lauren Olin, "Questions for a Theory of Humor," *Philosophy Compass* 11 (2016): 338–50, at 344.

[24] Julia Driver, "The Suberogatory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1992): 286–95.

[25] Note that these may still, arguably, be wrongs. But they surely aren't wrongings. If a stranger asks me for a minor favor (like tell her the time), she has no claim on me whatsoever that I do so. Nevertheless, my failing to do so is apt grounds for her blaming anger.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What such phenomena reveal are two types of reasons to which we regularly refer and assume to obtain: *comic* (or *funny*) *reasons*, and what I will term *slighting* (or *moral*) *reasons*. "Comic reasons" refers to considerations in favor of amusement. "Slighting reasons" refers to considerations in favor of blaming anger, and so at least includes facts about insults, disrespect, harm, rights violations, various vices, failures of politeness, emotional insensitivity, and more.[26] These distinct types of reasons are clearly evident in the above cases: those who remain amused are responding exclusively to the purported comic reasons and those who remain hurt are responding exclusively to the purported slighting reasons. But having two distinct types of reasons in play means I may recognize both and then weigh them against one another to determine what I should *all-things-considered* feel. For instance, if I have been really cleverly insulted, I may recognize both the reasons for amusement and the reasons for anger involved, but in the end think the reasons for amusement outweigh the reasons for anger, given that the insult was just so damn funny.

The fact that there are multiple types of reasons in play is what enables the commission of what's known as the *moralistic fallacy*.[27] The fallacy paradigmatically involves objecting on moral grounds to emotional appraisals of certain nonmoral values, holding that the fact that some emotion is immoral thereby renders it unmerited by its appraised object, that is, renders it *unfitting* (and so renders its appraised object nonvaluable).[28] For example, one might think that because envy is immoral (it's a vice), nothing merits its appraisal as such (as enviable), even when one's rival, say, really has done much better for herself. And so, in the intersecting domain we have discussed, someone commits the moralistic fallacy in claiming that one has no reason to be amused by an immoral joke, that is, immoral jokes just aren't funny. Many people object to racist or sexist jokes in this way. If you are amused by a sexist joke, they say, you're a sexist, insofar as you must share the assumed sexist stereotype, but because sexism is immoral (they continue), we never have reason to be amused by a sexist joke: sexist jokes just aren't funny.[29]

[26] I've given multiple arguments for why "slights" is indeed the best gloss on "the immoral" for purposes of blaming anger. See David Shoemaker, "Qualities of Will," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 30 (2013): 95–120; *Responsibility from the Margins*, chap. 3; "You Oughta Know! Defending Angry Blame"; and "The Forgiven." In my discussion about the distinct types of reasons in play here, what their role is, and how they contribute to all-things-considered reasons, I am drawing on a series of insightful and influential articles by Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, including: "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61 (2000): 65–90; "Anthropocentric Constraints on Human Value"; and "Wrong Kinds of Reason and the Opacity of Normative Force," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 9 (2014): 215–44.

[27] D'Arms and Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of the Emotions."

[28] Ibid., 68–69.

[29] Ronald de Sousa takes a line like this in *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The moralistic fallacy rests on appealing to a "wrong kind of reason," a reason from one evaluative domain (the moral) that is fallaciously thought to bear on the value in another.[30] What amusement does is represent events with certain properties as meriting amusement (as *amusing*). Consequently, if something actually has comic properties, one does have at least *a* reason (of fit) to be amused by it, even if there's some seeming immorality in its midst. Of course, whether one has *all-things-considered* reason to be amused by it is a function of both types of reasons (as well as other relevant types, for example, aesthetic or prudential reasons). One may thus be legitimately criticizable for being amused (instead of angered) by something with only minor comic properties but major immoral properties in virtue of one's poor weighing of reasons across the two evaluative domains. But the *funniness* of that thing isn't a matter of all-things-considered reasons; instead, that is solely a function of the thing's comic properties.[31]

I want to introduce here an analogous fallacy running in the opposite direction—what I will call the *funny fallacy*. To commit the funny fallacy is to reject an emotional appraisal of a non-comic value on grounds of funniness. In the intersecting domain I am concerned about in this essay, then, the fallacy would be to say that the target of a funny insult has no reason to feel angry, given the slight's funniness. In other words, says the person who commits the funny fallacy, funny slights just aren't *angersome* (worthy of anger). The problem, though, is that the amusing and the angersome are two distinct domains of value, generating reasons of fit for two distinct types of emotional appraisals (respectively, amusement and anger). But the reasons from one evaluative domain don't bear on whether there exist reasons for a certain emotional appraisal in another; rather, those latter reasons come only from the existence of evaluative properties in that domain. Now one might have *all-things-considered* reason not to be angry at a funny slight if, say, the comic reasons turn out to be weightier than the slighting reasons. But the comic reasons won't *eliminate* the reasons for anger, as the comic reasons just speak to a different value than what anger aptly appraises (slights).

The moralistic and funny fallacies involve one general type of mistaken appraisal. There is a related but subtly different sort of mistaken appraisal I want to bring out as well. Suppose, for instance, that a roaster insults the

[30] See, e.g., Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value," *Ethics* 114 (2004): 391–423. I should also add that it's just false that one can't be amused by a racist or sexist joke without sharing in the objectionable assumption behind the joke. One can instead *recognize* the racist or sexist assumption and find the joke funny in light of it even when one doesn't *share* in the assumption. For this point, see David Benatar, "Taking Humour (Ethics) Seriously, but Not too Seriously," *Journal of Practical Ethics* 2 (2014): 24–43.

[31] For powerful arguments against the aesthetic moralists who believe otherwise, see Jacobson, "In Praise of Immoral Art"; D'Arms and Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy"; and D'Arms and Jacobson, "Wrong Kinds of Reason and the Opacity of Normative Force."

"guest of honor" in a tremendously funny fashion.[32] Here one might think that one is vindicated in committing the funny fallacy, as it might seem that the funniness renders the insulting slight not angersome at all, precisely because the slight was so funny. But this isn't right. Instead, I want to say, the insult *wasn't a slight* to begin with. It was just a joke. In fact, such jokes might be expressions of respect ("I came up with the very best 'slams' I could because I regard you so highly."). Think also of ribbing conversations between close friends (a busy barber shop in a black neighborhood will typically offer plenty of hilarious examples). There are insults flying around like crazy, with the most awful things seemingly being said with a straight face. Yet in most cases no one gets angry—nor should they, because no one is being slighted. Why not? No one is aiming to *hurt* anyone else. The appropriateness of anger at an insult joke is—often, anyway—at least partly a function of the ill intent of the joke teller.[33] But as the insult comics Don Rickles and Jeffrey Ross both say, "I kid because I love." People enjoy being the butt of their insults because it's obvious that the comedians don't really mean it, and being picked on is actually an honor for an audience member. The same is true for close friends: the joshing and teasing are expressions of love, not slights. Consequently, were someone to object to an insult joke solely because it involved an *insult*, and so reject any reason for amusement thereby, urging that we only have reason to respond instead with anger because insults are slights, this person would reveal a bad—criticizable—sense of humor. Call this mistake, wherein one thinks there is a reason for anger at a slight where in fact there is no slight, the *no-slight mistake*.

I'm putting forward a subtle distinction, so one might have a subtle worry about it.[34] On my account, some insult jokes aren't slights, so one doesn't commit the funny fallacy in saying there are no reasons for anger at them. But it might be natural to think that the reasons something isn't a slight in these cases *are just* the reasons one has for thinking it funny. This would mean that if there really aren't slights here, what makes the insults non-slights are just their comic properties. But if this is true, then the funny fallacy would sometimes not be a fallacy. In other words, comic values might bear on the appropriateness of anger after all.

[32] For example, in roasting William Shatner for a Comedy Central Roast in 2006, Jeffrey Ross said to a fairly plump Shatner, "You've let yourself boldly go."

[33] I'm not saying that for an insult to be a slight it has to have ill intent; there are of course insults involving unintended slights. What I'm saying instead is that the lack of ill intent is often sufficient to make it the case that the insult isn't a slight, albeit likely in combination with other features (which I won't detail) of the social context. Indeed, social context is quite relevant sometimes. If a white guy were to walk into the black barbershop and try saying some of the same things as the black guys, it may not be funny at all. I'm grateful to Katherina Berndt Rasmussen and Matt Talbert for discussion of these points.

[34] As did Jonas Olson, in conversation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

My response is twofold. First, plenty of things that aren't slights aren't funny either; things don't count as slights for a whole host of reasons, only some of which have to do with the presence of comic properties. In the case of insult comics, what prevents the insults from being slights, I have claimed, is that there is no ill intent behind them, that is, no disrespect or disregard. But that has nothing to do with the *comic* properties obtaining in the insult, that is, the properties generating fitting reasons for amusement. These have to do instead with the structure and execution of the joke. After all, the same comic properties may be in place in both non-slighting and slighting insult jokes. In these cases, the comic properties are not what is making the insult not a slight, and so this is not a version of the funny fallacy (and so it is certainly not a version of a *vindicated* funny fallacy).

Nevertheless—and this is crucial for my thesis—there are *some* cases in which the presence of comic properties *is* incompatible with the presence of slighting properties, and here it might seem as if the funniness of something really is what makes it not a slight. Nevertheless, there are typically multiple features of an event that contribute to its comic value. As noted above, structure and execution together contribute to comic value; one without the other typically strips the joke of humor (think of young children clumsily telling made-up knock-knock jokes). But there are often other contributing features, including features like social context, cleverness, and intent. Occasionally, I claim, the presence of one or more of these features renders slighting properties impossible. But when they do so, the slight is not rendered impossible by "the funny"; rather, it is rendered impossible by *one* (or more) of the properties that, *in combination with others*, makes the thing funny. But then this is not an example of a vindicated funny fallacy.

In illustration, return to insult comics. It might be that part of what contributes to an insult's funniness in such cases is actually the *respect* being expressed, as mentioned above. If so, then a slight that incorporates a property of disrespect is incompatible with such a joke. This doesn't mean the joke's *funniness* blocked it from being a slight; rather, it means that one of the properties contributing to the joke's funniness (a property which, on its own, *would not be funny*) made a (disrespectful) slight impossible in that context.

Analogously, there are some cases in which something simply can't be a joke due to the presence in it of properties contributing to a profound slight, cases where comic properties are just incompatible with—they cannot arise because of—the presence of certain disrespectful, hurtful, or other slighting properties. And this brings us to cruel jokes. Perhaps the cruelest in literary history is the elaborate prank that the classmates of Stephen King's *Carrie* play on her, one that culminates in her thinking she's the prom queen as they pour a bucket of pig's blood over her on the auditorium stage. Many of her classmates find this hilarious . . . until

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Carrie gets a bit irritated and destroys the town with her telekinetic powers. But, I maintain, this prank just wasn't funny.[35] We might say there were feints in the direction of a joke—some pranks are funny, and this prank had a joke-like set-up and structure—but in reality it *was no joke*. Consequently, those who were amused by it were criticizable for being amused, making what I will term the *no-joke mistake*.[36]

Let me bring the strands of this preliminary discussion together. I have laid out four scenarios in which it seems appropriate to criticize people for their poor responses to the intersection of the comic and the slighting. First, there are those who commit the moralistic fallacy, failing to see reasons for amusement where there actually are some, given their blinkered focus on the slights that they see in the joke. Relatedly, and second, there are those who make the no-slight mistake, seeing reasons for anger at "slights" where certain of the comic properties in place prevent there from being any slights. Third, there are those who commit the funny fallacy, failing to see reasons for anger where there actually are some, given their blinkered focus on the presence of funny properties. Finally, there are those who make the no-joke mistake, seeing reasons for amusement at "jokes" where certain of the slighting properties in place prevent there from actually being any jokes.

We criticize people for making any of these four mistakes. Making one of the first two mistakes expresses what we typically think of as a poor sense of humor. Those who criticizably commit the moralistic fallacy or make the no-slight mistake I will thus call *priggish moralists*. Making one of the latter two mistakes expresses what we typically think of as a poor sense of slight (or morality). Those who criticizably commit the funny fallacy or make the no-joke mistake I will call *profligate humorists*.

We tend to organize our lives in response to these critical assessments of appraisers. After all, who wants to be a friend with someone who can never tell when you're just kidding or plays cruel pranks on people that he thinks are hilarious? But what if we were to find out that such agents

[35] Perhaps the prank's comic reasons were just outweighed (heavily) by the slighting reasons? Perhaps, in other words, the cruelty actually provided greater all-things-considered reasons to be angry (and not amused)? This might be true, and I don't want to rely overly much on my response in the text. Indeed, uncertainty here about the "real" story—about whether there are comic reasons for amusement that are outweighed by the slighting reasons or whether there are no comic properties at all in light of the cruelty—is a function of what D'Arms and Jacobson call "normative opacity" (in "Wrong Kinds of Reason and the Opacity of Normative Force"). But if this case doesn't work for you, surely you can concoct a better one in which there are no comic properties at all in place even though the event had a joke-like structure. Perhaps while in a museum one sees the strange angle of a skeleton's skull in relation to its body in a comic light until one reads the placard saying that this is what happened when a Nazi broke a Jew's neck.

[36] I'm very grateful to Justin D'Arms for discussion of the points in this and a few previous paragraphs, and I'm also grateful for his suggestion to phrase these as "feints in the direction of a joke." I'm also grateful to an anonymous referee for making various helpful suggestions about how to express these points more clearly than I had. I should stress again that I'm by no means suggesting that some cruel jokes aren't funny, only that this sort of cruel "joke" wasn't.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

had a kind of *impairment*? What might that consist in, and what would it imply for their criticizability (and our subsequent treatments of them)? I turn now to that topic.

III. Humor Styles

One way of coping with the world is via one's sense of humor, and there are adaptive and maladaptive ways of doing so. In exploring the relation between humor and well-being, psychologists in recent years have developed a "humor styles" questionnaire (HSQ), which identifies four dimensions of individual differences in uses of humor: affiliative, self-enhancing, self-defeating, and aggressive.[37] The first two are the positive or adaptive styles of humor; the last two are the negative or maladaptive styles. Affiliative humor is the type of humor people use in facilitating social relationships: joking around with friends, telling funny stories, and so forth. Self-enhancing humor is the type of humor people use to cope with the travails of life, to look on the sunny side, and in general to see things (both good and bad) in perspective. Self-defeating humor, on the other hand, involves self-disparaging or ingratiating humor, making fun of oneself, for instance, or allowing oneself to be the butt of others' jokes, so as to engage in a kind of defensive denial of certain negative feelings. Finally, aggressive humor involves criticizing and manipulating others through the use of sarcasm, teasing, and ridicule, as well as jokes expressed with no regard for how others might react.[38]

The HSQ was originally designed and implemented in order to identify humor differences between genders, but it has more recently been deployed to see if there are any correlations between humor styles and various psychological disabilities and disorders. The findings here are fascinating.

IV. Autism and the Comic Domain

To many neurotypicals, one particularly disorienting feature of individuals with autism[39] is their occasionally inscrutable sense of humor. While they do find some things funny that many neurotypicals do—slapstick, visual puns, semantic cartoons—there are other things they don't find

[37] Rod A. Martin, et al., "Individual Differences in Uses of Humor and Their Relation to Psychological Well-Being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire," *Journal of Research in Personality* 37 (2003): 48–75; Livia Veselka, et al., "Relations Between Humor Styles and the Dark Triad Traits of Personality," *Personality and Individual Differences* 48 (2010): 772–74; and Rod A. Martin, et al., "Relationships Between the Dark Triad and Humor Styles: A Replication and Extension," *Personality and Individual Differences* 52 (2012): 178–82.

[38] Martin et al., "Individual Differences in Uses of Humor."

[39] While I will occasionally make this explicit in the text, I will be talking here and throughout essentially just about those on the higher end of the autism spectrum.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

at all funny, and they find funny many things that just puzzle those without autism. Regarding the latter, in a study of children with autism, their parents "spontaneously mentioned that the children laughed at strange or odd things, at odd times or at incomprehensible or inappropriate stimuli."[40] Regarding the former, most children on the spectrum do not engage in teasing.[41] Across age groups, individuals with autism score low on affiliative humor. They also tend not to find socially inappropriate humor funny. This is humor violating certain conventional norms, such as (in the case of children) a mother waddling like a duck or sucking from a baby bottle.[42] They also rarely engage in, or respond to, play fighting,[43] and they have difficulty understanding or engaging in pretend play generally.[44]

And what about aggressive humor styles? Matters here get a bit complicated. In general, those on the autism spectrum score low on mean-spirited humor, that is, they don't go in for ridicule or teasing.[45] However, one recent study showed no difference between high school students with autism and non-autistic controls when it came to enjoying aggressive humor.[46] Now this is just one study on high school students in China, but it nevertheless raises some important issues for us. The authors speculate that those with autism enjoy aggressive humor at this level as a result of having been teased much more than non-autistic individuals in lower grades, so they began to laugh along and use the aggressive humor style as an attempt to fit in, thinking that that is what's done.[47] This makes the style less "aggressive" than a form of strategic prudence, it would seem—a failed attempt at affiliative humor.

[40] Vasudevi Reddy, Emma Williams, and Amy Vaughan, "Sharing Humor and Laughter in Autism and Down's Syndrome," *British Journal of Psychology* 93 (2002): 219–42, at 228. See also Andrea C. Samson, Oswald Huber, and Willibald Ruch, "Seven Decades after Hans Asperger's Observations: A Comprehensive Study of Humor in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders," *Humor* 26 (2013): 441–60.

[41] Reddy et al., 230.

[42] Ibid., 220, 235–36.

[43] Elizabeth Holmes and Teena Willoughby, "Play Behaviour of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders," *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability* 30 (2005): 156–64.

[44] Christopher Jarrold, "A Review of Research into Pretend Play in Autism," *Autism* 7 (2003): 379–90.

[45] Erin A. Heerey, et al., "Understanding Teasing: Lessons from Children with Autism," *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 33 (2005): 55–68, at 62; Samson et al., "Seven Decades after Hans Asperger's Observations."

[46] Ching-Lin Wu, et al., "Do Individuals with Autism Lack a Sense of Humor? A Study of Humor Comprehension, Appreciation, and Styles among High School Students with Autism," *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 8 (2014): 1386–93.

[47] Ibid., 1392. See also Andrea C. Samson, Oswald Huber, and Willibald Ruch, "Teasing, Ridiculing and the Relation to the Fear of Being Laughed at in Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 41 (2011): 475–83, at 480, who point out that children on the autism spectrum are four times more likely to be bullied than those not on the spectrum.

Those on the autism spectrum thus tend to have inapt responses to cases in the intersection of the funny and the slighting.[48] But—and this is a foundational intuitive datum—we do not think they are criticizable. Why not? Because first and foremost, I believe, we view them as having a comic incompetence.[49] Individuals on the spectrum tend to be perplexed or upset by humor that seems to violate certain social norms (for instance, someone wearing pants five sizes too big).[50] But socially "inappropriate" forms of humor can be hilarious; indeed, this is the plausible foundation of the implausible benign norm violation theory of humor. For illustration, just watch the movie *Borat*. What's being missed, then, is that the so-called "norm violation" is merely *play* (thus the smiles and laughter typically associated with mucking about or play fighting, to signal "just playin'"). This is because those with autism have great difficulty recognizing the norm "violator's" *intention*, the thought that "I don't really mean the bad thing it looks like I'm doing." The inability to see this would seem to be a direct result of the autistic individual's impairment in Theory of Mind, the ability to understand what others are thinking.[51] This is a kind of empathic impairment. Neurotypicals can usually pick up on what others are thinking via their facial expressions, body language, or vocal inflections, but individuals with autism have a (sometimes extremely) hard time doing so. And having difficulty determining another person's intentions will obviously impair one's ability to determine that their seeming norm violation is all in fun, if all one can understand is that some behavior occurred that, on its face, broke a rule.

Problems in the Theory of Mind help explain both sorts of study results on aggressive humor too. On the one hand, many of those with autism tend not to laugh at or engage in teasing, sarcasm, or ridicule. To the extent that some gentler forms of these activities can be quite funny, they are missing the joke by, again, having difficulty reading the intentions of the joke tellers. But to the extent they *do* occasionally engage in aggressive forms of humor (as in the Wu et al. study), we might wonder why they don't stop using this hurtful form of humor on others if it was the type of thing that hurt their own feelings. The answer again implicates empathic deficits: it's hard for them to put themselves in the shoes of others to feel that the hurt they're causing is akin to the hurt that they themselves once felt.[52]

[48] This is not to say that there is an objective fact of the matter about the funny that is being missed; rather, it could be an intersubjective fact that is a function of our humor sensibilities. I discuss these metaethical matters in "Response-Dependent Responsibility; or, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Blame," *Philosophical Review* 126 (2017): 481–527.

[49] I will use the phrase "incompetence" simply to refer to "quite less than full competence." It's a matter of degree I'm talking about when talking about real life marginal agents, as should be obvious. The degree of the "incompetence" will then tend to correspond to the degree of its related psychological impairment.

[50] Heerey et al., "Understanding Teasing: Lessons from Children with Autism."

[51] Ibid.

[52] Peter Bui, et al., "The Effects of Empathy on Disparagement Humor," *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research* 21 (2016): 119–26; Samson, et al., "Teasing, Ridiculing and the Relation to the Fear of Being Laughed at in Individuals with Asperger's syndrome."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Those on the spectrum thus occasionally exhibit two distinct flaws: they commit the moralistic fallacy and the no-slight mistake. But we view them as criticizable for neither, that is, we don't view them as priggish moralists. This exemption seems clearly due to our belief in their comic incompetence, a result of their impaired Theory of Mind. Consequently, being criticizable as a priggish moralist must, we think, require a sufficient degree of comic competence in this intersecting normative domain, that is (a) the ability to recognize and judge the worth of certain comic reasons (ones that involve, say, merely play "violations" of social convention), and (b) the ability not to be fooled into taking facts about feints-in-the-slighting-direction as reasons for anger (or at least as reasons not to be amused).

But notice: Both types of comic incompetence are a function of a more fundamental *moral* incompetence, consisting in either an overrating of, or a dysfunctional recognitional mechanism pertaining to, slighting reasons. That is, either those on the spectrum think the slighting reasons are so powerful or dominant that they eliminate any comic reasons (and so they commit the moralistic fallacy), or they think there are slighting reasons where there aren't any (and so they commit the no-slight mistake). Both mistakes involve impairments in grasping or judging the proper worth of slighting reasons. But this is just what it means to have a moral incompetence. The difficulty that those with autistim have dealing properly with slighting reasons is what generates their comic incompetence.

If I am right thus far—that those on the high end of the autism spectrum who commit the moralistic fallacy and the no-slight mistake are not criticizable as priggish moralists due ultimately to a kind of comic-incompetence-generating moral incompetence—then we are in a position to a explore a mirrored incompetence that will present the deniers with a serious dilemma.

V. The Dark Triad and the Moral Domain

In personality psychology, *The Dark Triad* refers to three distinct but related personality types: narcissism, (subclinical) psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Narcissism is characterized by self-absorption and feelings of entitlement, grandiosity, extraversion, dominance, and superiority.[53] Psychopathy is characterized by impulsive thrill seeking, low empathy, callousness, shallow emotion, deception, and manipulativeness.[54] Finally, Machiavellianism is characterized by "self-interest and tendencies toward deceptiveness and manipulativeness."[55] These three are all socially

[53] Robert Emmons, "Factor Analysis and Construct Validity of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 48 (1984): 291–300.

[54] R. D. Hare, "Comparison of Procedures for the Assessment of Psychopathy," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 53 (1985): 7–16.

[55] Martin, et al., "Relationships between the Dark Triad and Humor Styles: A Replication and Extension," 178; see also R. Christie and F. L. Geis, *Studies in Machiavellianism* (New York: Academic Press, 1970).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

aversive personality types, and they also correlate negatively with emotional intelligence. Members of the Triad tend to be "uncooperative, emotionally unstable, and less disciplined individuals"[56] than those who aren't. This tends to lead to their lower overall well-being (at least on the conceptual understandings and measurement scales of personality psychologists).

While these are three distinct personality constructs (with distinctive evolutionary histories[57]), they are nevertheless closely related enough to provide valuable predictive power on some dimensions, namely, "All three show an indifference to the harm they cause to others in the course of achieving their goals."[58] Their different personality types will lead them to highlight different considerations, though. To the question, "Why is it okay for you to be indifferent to the harms you cause others?" the Machiavellian would reply, "Because they are just pawns in this game," the narcissist would reply, "Because I'm superior to them and so entitled to do so," and the psychopath would reply, "Why shouldn't I?"

What is the common core of the Triad, that is, what traits do they all have in common that provide the predictive power that comes with grouping them together? This has been a matter of some controversy in the literature.[59] However, an answer has emerged that seems most explanatorily sound: What the three constructs share in common is *manipulativeness* and *callousness*.[60] All three members of the Triad share a desire to manipulate and lie to others, and they also share a lack of empathy (as "callousness" is understood) and concern for those they hurt.[61]

Early maladaptive styles of humor are one of the coping tactics that mediate later psychopathologies,[62] and what was found when the HSQ was deployed on members of the Dark Triad was unsurprising: All three personality constructs correlate significantly and positively with aggressive humor.[63] The thought, then, is that youngsters with certain pathological tendencies adopt this humor style to cope with various vulnerabilities, and this adoption in part pays the membership fee for their entry into the Dark Triad as adults.

[56] Veselka, "Relations between Humor Styles and the Dark Triad Traits of Personality," 773.

[57] Daniel N. Jones and Delroy L. Paulhus, "Differentiating the Dark Triad within the Interpersonal Circumplex," *Handbook of Interpersonal Psychology: Theory, Research, Assessment, and Therapeutic Interventions* (2011): 249–69.

[58] Ibid., 253.

[59] Adrian Furnham, Steven C. Richards, Delroy L. Paulhus, "The Dark Triad of Personality: A 10 Year Review," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 7 (2013): 199–216.

[60] Daniel Nelson Jones and Aurelio Jose Figueredo, "The Core of Darkness: Uncovering the Heart of the Dark Triad," *European Journal of Personality* 27 (2013): 521–31.

[61] Jones and Paulhus, "Differentiating the Dark Triad within the Interpersonal Circumplex."

[62] David J. A. Dozois, Rod A. Martin, and Breanne Faulkner, "Early Maladaptive Schemas, Styles of Humor and Aggression," *Humor* 26 (2013): 97–116.

[63] Veselka et al., "Relations between Humor Styles and the Dark Triad Traits of Personality"; Martin, et al., "Relationships between the Dark Triad and Humor Styles: A Replication and Extension." Machiavellianism and psychopathy, but not narcissism, also correlate significantly and positively with self-defeating humor (see ibid.).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To the extent that the aggressive humor style is strongly correlated with members of the Dark Triad, and the common core of the Triad is manipulativeness and lack of empathy, is there a case for either or both of these traits to be the ultimate psychological ground of the humor style? It actually seems that the empathic deficit is more fundamental. There have been significant negative correlations found between aggressive humor and perspective-taking empathy, empathic concern,[64] and emotional perception.[65] As noted above, empathy is a crucial component of emotional intelligence, and low emotional intelligence leads to all sorts of maladaptive consequences: "[I]ndividuals who tend to use aggressive forms of humor report a lower ability to provide emotional support to others . . . and to manage conflicts in relationships.[66] Empathy is also necessary to form friendships.[67] Consequently, empathy has again and again been found to be significantly associated with *social competence*.[68]

The style of humor most closely associated with the Dark Triad is aggressive, consisting in ridicule, sarcasm, disparagement, putdowns, and, yes, cruel pranks. But occasionally such things just aren't funny, especially when intended primarily to hurt. (Remember, the HSQ measures just what people are amused by, not what's actually funny.) Now if one common core of membership in the Dark Triad is a lack or impairment of empathy, and this is the source of such people's amusement at some things that aren't funny, then members of the Triad look as if they lack a kind of competence where the funny and the slighting intersect.

What is the relevant incompetence, though? When they are amused at *Carrie*-like cruel pranks, say, they are impaired at recognizing that some things that have a joke-like appearance simply aren't jokes, in which case they commit the no-joke mistake. If, alternatively, they think the target of a mean insult joke has no reason to be angry *given that* the joke was funny, then they commit the funny fallacy. But they have an empathic impairment. As a result, it makes sense to describe them as having a hard time seeing when certain cruel joke-like things aren't jokes, or they

[64] William P. Hampes, "The Relation between Humor Styles and Empathy," *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 6 (2010): 34–45.

[65] Jeremy A. Yip and Rod A. Martin, "Sense of Humor, Emotional Intelligence, and Social Competence," *Journal of Research in Personality* 40 (2006): 1202–1208, at 1206.

[66] Ibid. See also P. Salovey and J. D. Mayer, "Emotional Intelligence," *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality* 9 (1990): 185–211; and P. Salovey, J. D. Mayer, and D. Caruso, "The Positive Psychology of Emotional Intelligence," in C. R. Snyder and S. J. Lopez, eds., *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[67] C. Izard, et al., "Emotion Knowledge as a Predictor of Social Behavior and Academic Competence in Children at Risk," *Psychological Science* 12 (2001): 18–23.

[68] J. Levine, and E. Zigler, "Humor Responses of High and Low Premorbid Competence Alcoholic and Nonalcoholic Patients," *Addictive Behaviors* 1 (1976): 139–49; A. S. Masten, "Humor and Competence in School-Aged Children," *Child Development* 57 (1986): 461–73; D. S. Pellegrini, et al., "Correlates of Social and Academic Competence in Middle Childhood," *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines* 28 (1987): 699–714; and Yip and Martin, "Sense of Humor, Emotional Intelligence, and Social Competence."

have a hard time seeing the reasons there are for anger at cruelty, likely because they can't recognize the normative import of the degree or kind of hurt these "jokes" cause others. But this is an impairment at recognizing slight-grounded reasons, reasons against hurting others. And that's moral incompetence.

They are, however, morally incompetent in virtue of their *comic* incompetence. When they commit the funny fallacy, they are overemphasizing the worth of comic reasons in thinking those reasons eliminate all slighting reasons, and when they make the no-joke mistake, they are manifesting a dysfunctional comic recognitional mechanism in thinking there are comic reasons when there aren't. They thus cannot properly grasp or judge the worth of comic reasons, and this comic incompetence is what makes them morally incompetent; it is what makes them mistakenly amused, for instance, by plain cruelty. Once again, then, criticizability in the intersection of the comic and the slighting domains requires independent competence in each.

VI. The Deniers' Dilemma

Navigating the intersecting domain of the funny and the slighting is obviously sophisticated business. We have seen two types of agents who tend to have real difficulty doing so. In certain cases, those with autism commit the moralistic fallacy and make the no-slight mistake, whereas those in the Dark Triad commit the funny fallacy and make the no-joke mistake. I have pointed to what I think is the most obvious explanation for their doing so, namely, a type of multi-domain normative incompetence grounded in empathic impairments. We are most likely to describe those with autism as having a dysfunctional sense of humor, whereas we are most likely to describe those in the Dark Triad as having a dysfunctional sense of slight. But those with autism are comically incompetent because of their inability to judge as to the proper worth of slighting reasons, a moral incompetence. And those in the Dark Triad are morally incompetent because of their inability to judge as to the proper worth of comic reasons, a comic incompetence.

But now we can see why those who deny the necessity of moral competence for moral responsibility are mistaken. Suppose a member of the Dark Triad were heartily amused at a seriously cruel prank someone (or he) played on me. The deniers would maintain that he is morally criticizable as long as he was competently able to make two judgments: (a) that he had a reason for amusement; and (b) that my being hurt provided no reason against his being amused. In other words, as long as he can recognize and make proper judgments about comic reasons, that's sufficient to ground moral criticism and blaming anger at him for his moral faults, *even if he is blind to the moral reasons against hurting others*. Some deniers have explicitly maintained this view about psychopaths (or the morally blind more

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

generally).[69] The key is that, as long as the psychopathic agent can recognize and respond to the positive reasons in the relevant *non*moral domains for doing what she does (and can also judge that there are no countervailing considerations), she is then open to *moral* criticism. Psychopaths are morally criticizable, on this view, even if they aren't morally competent, given that they are *comically* competent.

This position cannot be sustained, though. That's because where the comic intersects with the slighting, a competent and criticizable agent needs to be able to recognize and judge the worth of reasons from *both* domains in order to be able to recognize and judge the worth of relevant reasons from *either* domain. In other words, knowing whether some insult is funny (and so provides a reason for amusement)—being comically competent—requires knowing which, and the extent to which, moral properties bear on it, that is, knowing whether the insult is a true slight or is only a feint-in-the-slighting-direction. This means being morally competent. And knowing whether some socially inappropriate gag is immoral (and so worthy of my anger or moral disapproval)—being morally competent—requires knowing which, and the extent to which, comic properties bear on it, that is, knowing whether there was a real norm violation or whether it was only play. This means being comically competent.

So suppose a member of the Dark Triad, let us stipulate, were to be wrongly amused by a *Carrie*-like cruel joke. The deniers would say that he would be morally criticizable to the extent he was able to judge that he had a (comic, nonmoral) reason to be amused (as well as to judge that there were no reasons not to be amused). This view generates a dilemma. Either he could recognize and make judgments about the worth of the comic (nonmoral) reasons for amusement or he couldn't. If he could, then, given my arguments, he must also have been able to recognize and make judgments about the worth of the *moral* (slighting) reasons—reasons that bear on the existence or weight of the comic reasons—and so must have been morally competent after all (and so he must have merely botched the exercise of his competence in this case). He would indeed be a criticizable profligate humorist, criticizable in virtue of his having improperly rejected or downplayed the moral reasons *he could nevertheless have recognized as such*.

But if, on the other hand, he was unable but to think he had a reason of amusement at a cruel prank when he didn't, then he would be morally *in*competent on the denier's own understanding of the term. Why? Precisely because he couldn't recognize or judge the worth of the slighting properties that prevented the prank from being a joke.

[69] Talbert, "Blame and Responsiveness to Moral Reasons: Are Psychopaths Blameworthy?"; Matthew Talbert, "Accountability, Aliens, and Psychopaths: A Reply to Shoemaker," *Ethics* 122 (2012): 562–74; T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 178; and Smith, "Moral Blame and Moral Protest."

Consequently, he would be off the hook for moral criticism *for that reason*. In other words, his inability to recognize or make judgments about the non-existence of funny reasons would be entailed by his inability to recognize or make judgments about the existence of moral (slighting) reasons.

Consequently, this member of the Dark Triad would either be criticizable in virtue of his moral competence, or he would not be criticizable in virtue of his moral incompetence. But in neither case could the denier continue to maintain that the member of the Dark Triad could be both criticizable *and* morally incompetent.

VII. Possible Replies?

There are two replies I can imagine the deniers giving.[70] I have space to treat them both only very briefly here. The first says that members of the Dark Triad who are amused by unfunny cruel jokes do at least judge that they have a reason to be amused, *even if they don't actually have one*, and that's enough to ground moral criticism. A psychopath, for example, can seemingly understand and deploy the concept of the amusing, so when he says, "I laughed at Carrie because it was amusing, and no other reasons mattered," isn't that sufficient to criticize him for his poor quality of will?

It's hard to see this as exhibiting the kind of (nonmoral) rational competence the deniers themselves require. They do, after all, require that morally criticizable agents at least have the ability to make judgments about the worth of relevant nonmoral reasons. But in what respect is the person who is blind to the comic reasons in the intersecting domain (because he's blind to the relevant moral reasons) able to do this? He can't recognize what comic reasons there even are, so it's hard to see in what sense he could be competent in making judgments about the worth of being amused. Young children, after all, think they have a reason to be amused by their bizarrely-crafted knock-knock jokes, but they're just wrong, precisely because they are comically incompetent.

The second reply deniers might have is to give some ground but maintain that it's not that much ground to give. After all, the intersection between the comic and moral domains isn't that large, one might think, so while there may be some restricted number of cases in which the paired incompetence obtains, it won't be much, which could leave those in the Dark Triad still criticizable in a wide range of other domains.

There are two points to make in response. First, the deniers are interested in the grounds for moral criticizability, for when an agent is responsible

[70] Collected from discussion with Michael McKenna, Matt Talbert, and Steve Wall.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and criticizable for violating some moral norms.[71] But having a poor sense of humor will only be *morally* criticizable precisely in the cases where the humor norms intersect with the slighting norms in just the ways I have discussed. When it is simply a matter of not being amused by a clever but morally innocuous pun, moral criticism is not on the table.

Second, the kind of interaction that occurs—and multi-domain competence that is required—for legitimate moral criticizability isn't restricted to the intersection between the comic and the moral; it occurs between the moral and many, if not all, other normative domains as well. This is because morality often plays a curtailing role, constraining, shaping, or denying existence to reasons that one might take to count in favor of one's nonmoral pursuits. So if one is blind to moral reasons, one will not be fully competent to recognize the reasons for certain responses in wider aesthetic domains, athletic domains, and prudential domains on which moral properties also bear. Or one may see aesthetic, athletic, and prudential "reasons" that just don't exist when their contributing properties are incompatible with the properties contributing to serious immoralities. For example, there might be cruel art-like-but-not-art events that one actually has no reason to admire, but one won't be able to recognize that fact without a functional moral sensibility.[72] Most apt moral criticism is a response to someone's culpably ignoring or failing to give sufficient weight to moral considerations as constraints on other (nonmoral) reasons. But these are also going to be instances in which my argument suggests that a multi-domain normative competence is required for legitimate moral criticizability, in which case the deniers must give significant ground indeed.

VIII. Summing Up

I have spent all this time discussing amusement and anger in order to bring out a number of abilities I think are necessary to being a competent appraiser in intersecting normative domains. My focus has only been on the amusing and the angersome (the moral domain of slights). To negotiate either of these domains in a competent fashion, it looks like one must have the abilities to do the following:

[71] Angela Smith, in "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life," *Ethics* 115 (2005): 236–71, is an exception, as she uses "moral responsibility" to refer to "attributability," which obtains just in case some action or attitude depends on one's evaluative judgments. This means one may be "morally responsible" for all sorts of nonmoral actions or attitudes. In her "Control, Responsibility, and Moral Assessment," *Philosophical Studies* 138 (2008): 367–92, she discusses her terminology and suggests that the type of responsibility grounding genuine moral criticism is *deep*, which is a matter of the content of the norms being violated, namely, those articulating what we owe to each other. Take this to be the restricted domain of moral criticizability I'm referring to in the text, then.

[72] For discussion of cases in this neighborhood, see Jacobson, "In Praise of Immoral Art."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1. Recognize and respond (with anger) to slighting reasons, or at least see slights as the *pro tanto* apt target of anger;
2. Recognize and respond (with amusement) to funny reasons, or at least see funny things as the *pro tanto* apt target of amusement;
3. Recognize and respond all-things-considered appropriately to the relative weights of different *pro tanto* moral reasons (or see them as such), the relative weights of different *pro tanto* funny reasons (or see them as such), or the relative weights of different *pro tanto* funny and moral reasons.
4. Recognize and respond appropriately to slight-like comic properties that aren't slights (without anger and with amusement, or to see such responses as *pro tanto* appropriate), as well as to joke-like slighting properties that aren't funny (without amusement and with anger, or to see such responses as *pro tanto* appropriate).

If you lack one or more of these abilities, you lack normative competence in a significant swath of interpersonal life.[73] Those who talk about normative competence in the moral responsibility literature, however, have spoken *only* about the first capacity. But it's clear that competence to negotiate a lot of ordinary life requires more than just the ability to grasp and respond to moral reasons. Consider 3. Suppose you have access to all of the moral reasons bearing on some situation, but you have no idea of their weights relative to each other. You know, for instance, that there are moral reasons against lies and moral reasons against allowing someone's murder, but you have no way of knowing that the latter weigh more heavily than the former when the axe murderer comes to the door asking after the friend you are harboring. This is surely a kind of moral incompetence. Or suppose you have access to all the moral reasons there are as well as all the comic reasons there are, but you can't see how much they weigh relative to each other. You will have no idea what your all-things-considered attitudes should be to a racially-charged Chris Rock comedy special, or to the complaints of an overly sensitive subject of very gentle teasing.

I have focused here on the fourth condition, though. It seems to me that both those with autism and those in the Dark Triad have disabilities or serious difficulties meeting this condition, and so are neither (fully) comically nor (fully) morally competent. As a result, they are off the hook

[73] Paul Russell has criticized the standard view of normative competence as well, adding what I think is the very plausible condition that a genuinely normatively competent agent must not just be able to meet certain agential requirements for being responsible but must also be able competently to hold others responsible. This is to have a true "moral sense" (Russell, "Responsibility and the Condition of Moral Sense"; and "Moral Sense and the Foundations of Responsibility," in Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011]; see also McKenna). I completely agree. Think of my arguments here as piling on top of Russell's.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for certain kinds of (comic and moral) criticism *thereby*. The source of both difficulties is similar, grounded in empathic impairments, so a capacity for a certain threshold degree of empathy is necessary for having a competent moral sense. But, as should by now be clear, it is also necessary for having a good sense of humor.

Philosophy, Tulane University

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052518000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press