Ethics, Comedy, and Free Speech

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Abstract
I introduce some philosophical considerations concerned with free speech, drawing on the work of J. S. Mill and rejecting some commonly heard arguments for thinking that threats to free speech, whether in general or in comedy, have been exaggerated. I then move to moral objections to certain sorts of comedy, noting the distinction between objecting to the intrinsic badness of jokes and objecting to offending people's sensibilities. I argue that it is hard to resolve arguments about the supposed intrinsic badness of comic material, since the parties to these disputes often have profoundly different worldviews. I then turn to reasons given for thinking comedy can be morally bad, for example that it is racist. I argue that while there are certainly some things comedians should not say, there are contextual factors that can confer 'comic licence' in certain cases. I also suggest that morally bad features of comedy can be offset by compensating comedic features. Moreover, there is an important distinction between genuinely punching down at vulnerable groups, and punching up at ideological frameworks that seem to support these groups, but do not. I consider this last point with reference to some work of the satirist Andrew Doyle.

1. Introduction

The subject of free speech and expression has become a staple of the so-called culture wars of recent years, and its application to comedy has become a significant part of the debate. What should be the limits to free expression in general, and do the defining features of comedy – that it is supposed to be entertaining and amusing – add any new dimensions to the question? Might comedy possess 'redeeming features' that should exempt it from moral disapproval or censorship? In 1960, the 'Lady Chatterley' trial established literary merit as a defence against conviction under the Obscene Publications Act 1959 for publishing material that had 'a tendency to deprave and corrupt'. Should 'comic merit' or more prosaically, the ability to make people laugh, be a defence of material that would otherwise be considered objectionable, at least from a moral point of view? This question is relevant both to the question of what material should be allowed and to our moral assessment of such material.

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2. The Question of Free Speech

However, before looking at the moral question in more detail, we should briefly clear up some common misunderstandings that arise in the free speech debate. There are disputes both about what counts – in general terms – as curtailment of free speech and about whether free speech should be curtailed in individual cases. Many disagreements concern speakers who were invited and then disinvited from addressing meetings on university campuses, or controversial lobby groups being forbidden the use of rooms for their meetings. Other examples include comedy events. For example, in August 2022 the comedian Jerry Sadowitz had his show cancelled at the comedy venue *The Pleasance* in Edinburgh after just one performance, because the management said the show did not align with the values of the venue (Logan, 2022). Questions arise both about what counts as censorship and what counts as a *wrongful* denial of the opportunity to express one's views. Several commentators deny the existence of a problem, claiming that no one has a right to a platform, or a right that people should buy or read their works, or a right to express their opinions 'without consequences'. These things are often said in response to complaints about limits imposed on speech in particular cases (Riley, 2021, pp. 15–17).

Unfortunately, these responses exemplify the half-truths and distortions that abound in the debate about free expression. It is true that many people who address audiences have no *right* to be invited. If they happen not to be invited, this does not violate their rights. Nevertheless, invitations have sometimes been followed by disinvitations or attempts to prevent the speaker from being heard, violating a reasonable presumption of a right to speak once they have accepted an invitation. It is true that if you say something provocative, you should expect consequences. But the crucial question, often sidestepped, is about what the consequences *ought* to be. It is one thing to be strongly challenged or even heckled. It is another to be banned, threatened, defamed, physically stopped from getting a message across, fired from one's job, harassed, or spoken to by the police. We also hear that since no one is obliged to buy someone's works or attend their performances, their rights are not infringed by boycotts. That is generally true, but it all too easily obscures the question of whether there are good reasons for these boycotts. Boycotts, while legitimate in principle, are sometimes promoted by unfounded or malicious claims about the work or its creator and by intimidation of publishers and retailers.

When it comes to justifying limits on freedom of expression, the usual ground offered comes from J. S. Mill's 'harm principle'

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(Gray and Smith, 1991, p. 30). Mill was a passionate advocate of freedom of thought and discussion but allowed that liberty may be limited if its exercise would cause serious harm to others. Hence, incitement to violence, threats of serious harm, and defamation should all be prohibited. This is generally accepted in the legal systems of liberal democracies, and to these ends the United Kingdom has the Public Order Act 1986, the Communications Act 2003, and the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006. There is disagreement over what should count as harm and what harm thresholds, with respect to the harm's nature, likelihood, immediacy, and magnitude, justify limiting freedom of expression. However, working in the background, at least in Mill's work, is a strong presumption in favour of freedom of expression. Mill's most influential argument is that anyone who suppresses an opinion may be suppressing the truth. This is sometimes called the 'Galileo defence' – the idea that if the Church had succeeded in suppressing Galileo's work, we might still believe in a geocentric universe. Free enquiry and discussion are needed to acquire, disseminate, and preserve knowledge.

Much lip-service is paid to Mill's stance – sometimes by people whose genuine commitment to it is questionable. But the argument's application to art and literature is less straightforward than to, say, discussion of ethics, science, politics, or religion. Scientific enquiries are supposed to discover truths that may be important, even if their conclusions cause distress and outrage (as the theory of evolution by natural selection continues to do in parts of the world, including the US) or harm the reputations of people whose ideas are debunked. Ethical enquiries aim to improve or at least clarify our ethical thinking, and if some people reject their conclusions, at least they are free to express their objections. Literature and the arts may enhance our understanding of the human condition, sometimes by causing shock and disturbance. But not all artistic and literary works have this lofty, improving quality and they may even do the opposite. During the 'Lady Chatterley' trial, some defence witnesses felt they had to exaggerate the literary merits of the novel to get the ban lifted. In general, it was not uncommon for works that were liable to be banned under the Obscene Publications Act or even the blasphemy laws (which have now been abolished in the UK, apart from Northern Ireland) to benefit from rather stretched defence of their artistic merit. We need more than the Galileo defence to justify artistic freedom.

One such defence has its roots in Mill, who draws a distinction between expressions that cause genuine harm and those that merely upset or annoy people. This does not deny that harmfulness can be a ground for banning artistic works but rather warns against

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over-expansive notions of harm. It is hard to justify blanket restrictions on artistic expression merely on grounds of offensiveness; after all, different people are offended by many different things and sometimes offence is taken unreasonably. Public discourse or art that is guaranteed to offend no one has a diminished chance of being interesting or insightful. In any case, 'taking offence' all too often amounts to merely strong disagreement or disapproval of some activity or opinion, and this alone is a weak ground for limiting freedom of expression. Another ground for a presumption of free expression is framed in terms of the rights of would-be consumers. Would-be censors of artistic expression want to deprive would-be viewers or readers of the opportunity to judge for themselves whether a work is objectionable, and some reason needs to be given for giving a special right to the censor, denied to ordinary people, to read or view the works in question, if they choose to do so.

3. Artistic Expression and Morality

For the purposes of this essay, we do not need to say much more about the right to free expression. Of more interest is the relationship between artistic expression, especially comedy, and morality. Many people who object to certain kinds of comedy do not want to ban it, but simply say the material is morally objectionable and that taking offence at it is a mark of moral decency.

The examples that regularly come up in the context of the 'culture wars' are often about allegedly racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic material – material that comedians should not perform, even if they should not be prevented from performing it. In days gone by, sexual or allegedly blasphemous humour tended to produce far more anger and revulsion than, say, racist jokes. The National Viewers and Listeners Association campaigner Mary Whitehouse, a well-known figure from the 1960s into the 1980s, objected to swearing, nudity, normalizing representations of homosexuality, and sexual *double-entendre* on TV. The 1979 film *Monty Python's Life of Brian* provoked anguished protests from religious spokesmen such as Malcolm Muggeridge and the Bishop of Southwark, Mervyn Stockwood. Although some Christians were amused by the film's satirical take on sectarianism, extreme biblical literalism, and mad prophets, many found the final scene, which seems to turn the Crucifixion into comedy, highly offensive. But whether outrage at comedy concerns racism or blasphemy, we need to be clear about the exact nature of the objections.

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Some objections might be made on grounds of harmfulness, whether in its effects on specific individuals or in undermining societal respect and concern for vulnerable groups. But although this is part of the story, it may not get to the root of the matter. People who morally disapprove of stand-up routines using material they consider to be racist or transphobic probably fear that the material has harmful effects on minorities. But their fundamental objection is that the material is morally bad in itself: people should not make racist jokes because racism is bad, and making racist jokes reflects badly on one's character. Similarly, while Whitehouse, Muggeridge, and the Bishop of Southwark feared that the publication of blasphemous or irreverent materials would lessen people's respect for Christianity, their fundamental objection was to the mockery or making light of sacred things, quite apart from its effects. Whitehouse felt so strongly about blasphemy that in 1977 she brought a successful private prosecution for blasphemous libel against *Gay News*, for publishing a homoerotic poem featuring Christ (Kirkup, 1976, p. 26).

Furthermore, to describe these campaigners' objections to mocking religion as merely 'moral' would be inept – for them, the assault on the sacred, especially with a sexual theme, was shocking in a deeper way than can be captured in ordinary moral terms. The point wasn't that Christ could be harmed by the poem or the Monty Python film, or even that Christians' sensibilities were outraged (after all, upsetting religious *believers* is hardly blasphemy). The real and profound wrong was in the wilful disrespect towards holy things. Whitehouse said that if this poem wasn't blasphemous, she couldn't think what was, and that she prosecuted *Gay News* from love of the Lord.

The upshot is that dialogue is difficult between people who object to material for these kinds of reasons and those who do not. In the religious case – and leaving aside the question of whether the material should be banned – those who are offended by what they consider to be attacks on sacred things are moved by a worldview that is profoundly at odds with that of people who do not react in this way. Whitehouse based her objection to the poem in *Gay News* on her Christian convictions. People without her beliefs cannot regard the poem as blasphemous, except in an 'inverted commas' sense; for them there does not exist anything worthy of that kind of worship or reverence.

However, non-believers might still think it is wrong to publish things that cause needless offence to believers, and this objection came to the fore in the controversy that arose in 1988 over Salman

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Rushdie's magic realist novel *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie, 1988) especially after the Ayatollah Khomeini, then Supreme Leader of Iran issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) in February 1989, calling on 'all valiant Muslims wherever they may be in the world' to kill Rushdie.[1] The same goes for the *Monty Python* team's comedic treatment of events related in the New Testament. If Jesus was not the divine Son of God who was crucified for our sins, then there is no basis for the fundamental objections mounted by Muggeridge *et al*. But as with *The Satanic Verses* – which contains passages that appear to satirise Islamic doctrine about the origin of the Qu'ran – we might still balk at the outrage caused to religious sensibilities, even if we have no religious convictions of our own. It was perhaps with this in mind that Pope Francis reportedly said: 'You can't provoke, you can't insult the faith of others, you can't make fun of faith' (Deseret News, 2015). But the most biting satires of religion aim precisely to ridicule what believers consider most sacred, to show that our sense of the sacred can protect harmful absurdities. To make progress deciding whether such material is intrinsically objectionable, we must settle certain religious questions – and people with strong views on these matters are not easily persuaded to abandon their positions.

But perhaps we can get further with the more contemporary concern about comedians who produce material deemed to be racist, misogynistic, homophobic, or transphobic. I shall assume that everyone with views worth taking seriously in this debate opposes these things, although there is legitimate debate about what they amount to. To keep it simple, I take racism to be a disposition to see certain people as somehow superior to others, and their interests as having greater moral importance than the interests of others, on account of their race. I take transphobia – whatever the current controversies surrounding the term – to consist of negative attitudes such as fear, hostility, or hatred towards transgender people because of their being transgender, and wrong for the same basic reasons that racism is wrong. Hence the debate about racist (*etc*.) comedy should not be about whether racism (*etc*.) is bad, but about a wider range of things, including whether the fact that we are talking about *comedy* adds any extra dimension to the moral question.

I assume that there are, in general, some things you should not say, even if they are true. You should not normally tell people that they are

[1] 'Ayatollah Sentences Author to Death', BBC News, 14 February 1989, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/14/newsid_2541000/2541149.stm.

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overweight, even if they clearly are, because this is likely to hurt their feelings to no good effect. For the same reason, it is *prima facie* reasonable to think there are things that should not be said even in comedy, even if we believe in some degree of comic licence. This is not as controversial as might seem. Just as some self-styled 'free speech absolutists' admit, if reluctantly, that there are things we should not be allowed to say in public (such as calling for someone's murder), so performers whose brand is 'saying the unsayable' will usually admit that they should not promote a genuinely hateful message, at least if it amounts to 'punching down'. There are probably not many comedians prepared to make fun of children who die of cystic fibrosis or tell jokes at the expense of the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017. Arguments about what comedians should not joke about usually focus on the thresholds for acceptability and the reasons for those thresholds.

4. Comic Licence

However, within these minimal constraints, there are comedians who believe in a sort of comic licence. On this view, things that it may not be acceptable to say outside comedy may be said within it. Some think the only thing that matters is that the performance is funny, and the only test of that is whether the audience laughs. The comedian Jerry Sadowitz, reflecting on his own literal cancellation at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2022, told *The Guardian* (Logan, 2022): 'There are no lines to be drawn in standup, if standup's an art form. No lines… There are thousands of comedians out there, or people calling themselves comedians. If you want a commercial act, there's loads to choose from.' He doesn't think that tweaking an act in response to evolving sensitivities always amounts to 'a total sell-out', but bluntly says that this is not what he does. 'Sometimes I say things that I mean. Sometimes I say the exact opposite. Sometimes there's a deep level of irony. Sometimes I say things for pure spite. Mainly I just try to be funny….' Sadowitz is criticised for making sexist remarks, exposing himself on stage and using the 'P-word' to describe the British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

This defiant attitude is found to a lesser extent in the reflections of other comedians. The flamboyantly Glaswegian comedian Leo Kearse said on GB News,[2] in a debate about free speech with the

[2] GB News, 'Leo Kearse Debates Kate Smurthwaite on freedom of speech in comedy', 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGyHpwAsfrg&list=PL03DVaOdm1AswgUz-eQ8P5YFqHG1esUEn&index=1.

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comedian Kate Smurthwaite, that no one is forced to watch a show they do not like and that if the audience doesn't find the performances funny then they fail as comedy. Kearse's loud, rapid-fire, and interruptive performance during the debate was itself something of a stand-up routine. In a way, his and Smurthwaite's contributions presented, in microcosm, the mismatch between rational, discursive modes of thinking about comedy, and comedic modes. The thinking that underlay his manner might be summarised thus: 'Stop taking this so seriously and stop being so pompous and moralistic about it! We are talking about comedy. To make sense of comedy, we need to think comedically. My loud, impatient interruptions, ridiculously tangential outbursts, and non-sequiturs in response to your rational interjections are my performative way of making this point!' But in that case, we should not expect much productive dialogue between comedians like him and other people, including comedians like Smurthwaite, who hope to have productive rational discussions about the ethical limits of comedy.

Sometimes the thrill of well-crafted comedy lies precisely in its transgression of the boundaries of ordinary polite discourse. Just as a child might swear loudly in the classroom just because she is not meant to, so a comedian might say something outrageous just for the sake of being outrageous. The act is sometimes helped by its cathartic effect – the comedian boldly puts into words what the audience is thinking but is too nervous or uncertain to say. The effect, if it works, is both laughter and guilt at the laughter. The American stand-up performer Scott Capurro has mastered this art. One of his gags is about paedophiles. 'The great thing about paedophiles – they drive carefully near schools.' If we laugh, it is partly because we know that it is not at all funny that people drive around near schools hoping to get sexual excitement from watching children. In the same act, he gets on to the Holocaust, quipping *sotto voce* 'What Holocaust?' Of course, the audience – or so one hopes – does not really think that Capurro condones paedophilia or denies the Holocaust. Those who appreciate this humour (and not everyone will, even if they understand its intent) enjoy the outrageousness and suspense it creates. Just how far will he go? How am I meant to react? Should I feel guilty because I find it funny? Has he really crossed into genuinely unacceptable territory, or merely come tantalisingly close to it? It is the comic analogue of the dangerous thrill at a fun fair. You know the rollercoaster is unlikely to toss you to the ground, but there is fear and excitement in the idea that it might.

The question of where the line is between the almost unacceptable and the genuinely unacceptable (whether funny or not) can even be

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explored in a comedy act. In his 2011 *Being Funny* show (Carr, 2011),[3] Jimmy Carr asks the audience to rate the acceptability of a variety of gags. He starts with jokes about Catholic priests who are sexual abusers, with *double-entendres* suggesting sexual acts. He notes that the audience does not mind this, since they laugh. Then he jokes about Jews not liking the Germans, even though the Germans have 'treated them mean to keep them keen'. The audience continues to laugh, and Carr affects to be shocked by their laughter. He proceeds to a gag about how Princess Diana could not have worn a seat belt before the fatal car crash: 'You try snorting cocaine off a c**k in the back of a limo while wearing a seat belt…'. Maybe we should be alarmed that the audience was so caught up in the mood he skilfully created. Yet, for all that, it is not clear that Carr really has a nonchalant attitude towards clerical sexual abuse, Nazi crimes against the Jews, or the circumstances of Princess Diana's death.

So much for the defence of such material because audiences find it funny. We can anticipate the objection that they should not find it funny and that it shows something bad about them that they do. Moreover, some will insist that Carr's fans finding it funny hardly redeems the material. After all, audiences are largely self-selected and venue owners book performers with niche audiences in mind. These audiences mostly know what to expect, and many people avoid shows they know will be like this. Objections like these are far more likely to come from people who adopt a rational, discursive approach to the question than from those who embrace the attitude shown by Leo Kearse on GB News. They will insist that just because some comedians refuse to engage with reasoned moral arguments does not show that the rest of us should not. After all, most people will find *some* humour unacceptable, and it should be possible to say why.

5. Comedy and Flippancy

Many people see the unacceptability of resorting to humour when they see public figures try to wriggle out of criticism for their dishonest or selfish behaviour, by presenting it as a joke that only poker-faced, moralistic bores could object to. This was justly said of the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who corrupted government by habitually joking and charming his way out of having to account for himself. Many political commentators, including some

[3] Jimmy Tests Socially Acceptable Jokes (2011).

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who cannot be accused of left-wing bias, complained of how Johnson blustered, jested, and 'winked' when accused of dishonesty and lack of moral seriousness, and how he degraded those around him by sucking them into complicity. If Johnson could present his behaviour as trivial, amusing, or charming, there was seemingly no end to what he could get away with – from concealing how his flat decorations were paid for to allowing parties in Downing Street during lockdown and then misleading Parliament about them.

The danger that we stop taking bad things seriously because they can be made to seem funny was pointed out by C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* (Lewis, 2001, pp. 53–56) in which a 'senior devil', Screwtape, gives advice to a 'junior devil', Wormwood, on the best ways to lead humans to hell. Screwtape gives shrewd advice on the destructive use of humour: while the Devil hates 'Joy' and 'Fun', his favoured tactic is to encourage 'Flippancy' – a pervasively unserious attitude towards everything, that assumes that the joke has already been made. Serious vices and misdeeds seem not to matter because they can be turned into a joke – or we might now say, treated 'ironically' – and people get away with appalling conduct by displaying a contagiously flippant attitude towards it.

Lewis makes an important point with characteristic wit. But can his insights be applied to comedy that is, or supposed to be, objectionable? Lewis warns against a porous flippancy that corrodes our moral responses. But 'edgy' comedians and their audiences might not be guilty of this flippancy – after all, they have lives outside comedy shows. A comedian can be serious about many things. Indeed, she might be criticised for being too serious if she tries to use comedy to advance her moral causes. Audiences might laugh at Jimmy Carr's gags about Princess Diana without really thinking her death was funny, though her devotees would be unlikely to laugh. I suggest that whereas 'real-life' flippancy corrodes all it touches, good comedy is a tourniquet that prevents certain kinds of laughter from leaking outside the context of the show. Similar considerations apply to art in general: while reading a novel or enjoying a play, we do not typically believe that what is portrayed is real, yet we suspend disbelief and imaginatively engage with it. As David Benatar notes, laughter can be a way to cope with anxiety (Benatar, 2014, p. 35). People often joke about suffering and death, precisely because they take them seriously. 'Gallows humour' is apparently not uncommon among doctors and undertakers.

Still, even if it is within a safety net, comedy may be morally criticised for making light of the wrong things. Such criticism is

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sometimes justified. However, there are at least two ways in which the moral criticism may be answered, at least in certain cases.

One is to admit that, taken in isolation, a particular joke is objectionable, but show that in its proper context it is acceptable. By way of analogy, consider the provision within the Obscene Publications Act for allowing the publication of a work that is *prima facie* obscene, if it has redeeming artistic or social merit. A particular scene in a film might be judged excessively violent or sexually explicit, were it not for its place in a wider artistic context. If we watch the scene on its own, we might think it is a clip from a pornographic film, but once we see that the film taken in its entirety is not pornographic, we realise that the scene, in this wider context, is not a pornographic scene. On the analogy, we might regard a certain joke as racist if it is part of an overall racist performance, but not if the general thrust of the performance is clearly not racist. It may be hard to find examples, but we should admit the possibility. Whether this defence is credible partly depends on how well integrated the joke is within the wider context.

The second way to deal with the moral criticism of a joke is to admit that it is objectionable even in the wider context but claim that its badness is compensated for by the good features of the whole performance or work. To compensate for some bad feature is not to neutralize it. The bad feature remains bad even in the widest possible context, but there is so much that is good about the work, all things considered, that the bad feature does not significantly take away from its merit. This is the kind of judgement critics make when they award four rather than five stars to a performance. It would be better without this undesirable feature, but it is still worth seeing. The point is not hard to understand, but easily forgotten if we damn the whole performance, or even call for it to be banned, just because of this one feature. Such harsh reactions are symptomatic of the polarisation we see in the 'culture wars'. If we see highly talented performers 'cancelled' just because of one thing they said, we rightly suspect that a moral concern, even if reasonable, has gone into severe overdrive. Such punishments are not only unjust but encourage timid blunting of comedic edge or the panicky avoidance of certain topics altogether. Also, as Benatar notes, we often tend to focus too much on the negative aspects of humour. Humour that some find objectionable may also have positive benefits.

There is another, more radical way to deal with moral critiques of humour. This is to remind ourselves that comedy is an art form and that the relationship between good art and morality is unclear. Arguably, the artistic or literary quality of a work is diminished

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when a moral purpose intrudes. Oscar Wilde (Wilde, 1985, Preface) makes the point as follows: 'No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style'. Moreover, he says, 'Art shall have no other aim than being art and it should be protected from subordination to any moral, didactic, social or political purpose'. But much depends on how we interpret this. We can say that our evaluation of a work *as art* is separate from any moral evaluation since artistic criteria are not moral criteria. To say that a work is good art is not to say that it is morally good. It is also clear that a 'moral, didactic, social or political purpose' can diminish the artistic value of a work if this purpose is too crude or obvious. Socialist realist art, whose purpose was simplistic propaganda, rarely if ever succeeded as art, because its artistic features were merely instrumental to the political exhortation.

At the same time, great literature can be replete with moral discernment, even if not with one-dimensional propaganda. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* has moral themes at its core – illusion, disillusionment, self-sacrifice, duty, hypocrisy, self-deception, worldliness, and vanity. She shows how human virtues and failings subtly operate in a world we cannot control, without thrusting a moral message upon us. The *invitation* to moral discernment in the work is central to its greatness. In addition, while art, including comedy, cannot be evaluated solely in moral terms, this does not imply that moral evaluations cannot be part of their overall evaluation.

An analogy from moral theory helps here. In a classic discussion of moral sainthood, Susan Wolf (Wolf, 1982, pp. 419–39) invites us to consider the idea of a morally perfect life and how it might be deficient, all things considered, precisely because it is morally perfect. The moral saint who spends almost all her time and energy trying to be as good as possible, whether as a 'Rational Saint' or as a 'Loving Saint', does not lead a well-rounded life. There is not enough space in it for non-moral virtues, interests, or commitments. Devotion to morality might diminish your interest in other good things in life. Wolf's thesis is controversial – perhaps she should place these seemingly non-moral goods within a more inclusive conception of morality. Nevertheless, whatever we say about this, she does not reject morality. Leading a morally decent life is an important part, even if not the only important part, of leading a good life. Likewise, when applied to art, although there is far more to good art than can be stated in moral terms, nevertheless the overall value of a work of art (including comedy) can include a moral component. There can be morally objectionable comedy, even if it has good non-moral features. It might be wrong to tell a certain joke (at least in

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certain contexts) even if it is very funny. This is probably accepted by even the most controversial comedians. David Benatar accepts it, despite arguing that we often get too worked up about morally objectionable humour.

6. 'Anti-Woke' Satire

If this is right, we can at last look at the sort of humour sometimes condemned nowadays because it is racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or punches down at relatively powerless groups. When comedians are disinvited from venues or face calls to be 'cancelled' these days, it is usually for this reason. Female comedians who advocate gender-critical views have recently suffered this fate, generating debates about whether they are being treated unjustly or merely facing 'consequences' for their supposedly bigoted material. (I have already noted the trope that no one has a right to speak 'without consequences'.)

In response to this, the last few years have seen the emergence of comedians who use their acts to push back against 'Woke' ideas. In early 2018, *Comedy Unleashed* was launched at the Backyard Club in East London and has hosted many acts of this kind, from performers including Andrew Doyle, Mary Bourke, Tania Edwards, Geoff Norcott, Scott Capurro, Ria Lina, Simon Evans, and many other greater- or lesser-known figures. It has a vigorous free speech ethos and welcomes anyone who wants to enjoy comedy, regardless of their opinions on Brexit, gender, or politics in general. Its general view is that mainstream comedy has been dominated by a progressive, 'Woke' agenda and that it is time to try out something new.

Critics deny that mainstream comedy is dominated by this agenda, pointing to comedians like Jimmy Carr and Ricky Gervais who still have a high profile, despite performances that can hardly be described as 'Woke'. Against this, it is argued that although long-established comics can get away with this material, it has become much harder for new comedians to be adopted by the mainstream media if they openly oppose progressive agendas. But whatever the facts of the matter, what is this movement really trying to do?

The satirist and performer Andrew Doyle is a co-founder of *Comedy Unleashed*. He has written extensively against the 'Woke' agenda (Doyle, 2022a, 2022b). It is important to understand what is at issue in the debate about 'Wokeism', both in comedy and in general. For it seems to many that the word 'Woke' has become a cheap pejorative term that is rarely used with the meaning it had in

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mid twentieth-century America, when it denoted a 'waking up' to racial injustice. Rather – it is often said – the term is now used to sneer at social justice concerns that are legitimate and important. 'You're just being Woke' is, on this understanding, a way to dismiss justified grievances without any serious engagement with evidence or argument. It merely produces cheap laughs, while reinforcing the complacency of those who laugh.

There is some truth in this – legitimate concerns are sometimes dismissed in this lazy way. But the pejorative use can be perfectly reasonable. For Doyle and many other commentators, there is a great difference between being opposed to racism, sexism (*etc*.) and being 'Woke'. But can we define the term purely descriptively? I doubt that we can do this, if we mean a precise set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being 'Woke'. Rather, the term denotes a relation of 'family resemblance' between loosely connected beliefs, such as the following: most white people are racist; non-white people cannot be racist; most or all inequalities of outcome between groups are caused by social injustice; human variation is mostly or entirely caused by social factors; society is structured by powerful, invisible, oppressive hierarchies of race and gender; biological sex is a non-binary spectrum; if you feel you are a man/woman, then you are (and to question this is bigoted); 'knowledge' that was transmitted to indigenous people by colonial powers is no better than 'indigenous' knowledge; 'lived experience' is a far better route to truth than objective enquiry; free speech advocacy is merely a tactic to silence the powerless; implicit bias is everywhere, and many disabilities and disorders should be considered political identities. Moreover, anyone who questions any of this is not merely wrong, but morally bad. Thus, this worldview amounts to a *faith* and performs many of the same psycho-social functions as traditional faiths, but without the self-awareness, humility, tolerance, and willingness to forgive that are found in the best of them.

People will say this is mostly a caricature and that no one entirely believes any part of it, still less the entirety of it. But while the 'anti-Woke' do sometimes caricature the phenomenon, versions of these views are widely found in progressive circles, even if with some reservations or qualifications.

The target of much of Doyle's satire is the 'Woke', roughly as described. He certainly sees the phenomenon as pervasive. He argues (Doyle, 2022b) that 'Woke hysteria' is comparable to the Salem witch trials in the 17th century and gives examples, including: the police questioning people about 'non-crime hate incidents'; attempts to ban comedians from telling certain jokes; activists

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demanding the removal of statues of Churchill, Gandhi, and T. H. Huxley; major corporations hiring speakers to tell employees to be 'less white'; politicians who are unable to say what a woman is; male rapists housed in women's prisons; gay children told they are transgender, and Stonewall saying that lesbians who refuse to sleep with trans women are bigots. According to Doyle, this worldview has been adopted by Hollywood, Big Tech, all major corporations, academia, the mainstream media, the US government, and the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

Doyle is also the creator of the parody X/Twitter account of 'Titania McGrath', a 'healer' and 'radical intersectionalist poet'. He has published two spoof books under her name (McGrath 2019, 2020). He has thoroughly researched his targets and, as 'Titania', churns out a stream of absurdities, comic non-sequiturs, and contradictions. She hopes a child of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex will be 'brought up as Black'. She is on the lookout for Queer venues in Gaza and Saudi Arabia and would rather live in a Soviet Gulag than in a capitalist country.

To some people, of course, this sort of parody is a cheap way to make social justice look ridiculous. There is a lot of material that ridicules 'gender ideology'. Perhaps, therefore, this kind of comedy is pernicious because it punches down at the marginalized.

But does it punch down? It is debatable who, or what, is 'up' and 'down'. A worldview that dominates in one *milieu* may be opposed to one that dominates in another. The attitudes that prevail in Middle England, the police, the army, the retired, or the audience of GB News are markedly different from those found in academia, the arts, the museum world, the public sector, large corporations, Big Tech, and parts of the media. Doyle agrees with his critics that comedians should not punch down but regards himself as punching *up* against a 'Woke' bureaucracy that pervades many, though obviously not all institutions. Even if people exaggerate the problem, it is hard to deny it. In academia, for example, lecturers and outside speakers have been harassed, 'cancelled', or even fired for the views they expressed or are suspected of having (Benn, 2022).

Since these bad things happen, and moreover are perpetrated by people with considerable power in their own *milieu*, there is a good case for the satirical mockery of the ideas that underlie them. Some people will still say that the picture painted is a gross distortion – that 'Woke' ideas are not endorsed by most of the population and that there has been an obsessive and largely successful backlash against them. For example, the right-leaning press regularly runs 'anti-Woke' hit pieces, the Conservative government is always

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pushing against 'Wokeism' and media outlets like GB News and Talk TV have been established to combat it. But these things are merely evidence of polarization. Some 'progressive' ideas have certainly been put on the defensive, for example by recent legal rulings that affirm the protected status of gender-critical beliefs under the Equality Act 2010. But that does not mean that satirizing them is 'punching down'. This would be plausible only if defending the rights and dignity of minorities required us to embrace these ideological stances, and there is no good reason to believe this. A more classically liberal position is perfectly able to do the job.

Satire does not always succeed. It can be overblown and wrongly targeted. But successful satire is bound to offend, and rightly so. It exposes embarrassing elephants in the room. It reveals the nakedness of emperors. It delivers blows where rational argument is almost comically dry or polite. As H. L. Mencken put it, 'One horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms. It is not only more effective; it is also vastly more intelligent'.

7. Conclusion

There is no need to deny that there are certain things comedians should not say in their performances. But comedy also functions as a safety net, allowing us to entertain, without necessarily endorsing, a range of thoughts that might be questionable outside comedy. When critics fail to see the overall context in which an offensive joke is made, or that jokes are not always literal expressions of a comedian's opinions, or that the shocking nature of some comedy might serve a serious moral purpose, then something has gone wrong. Moreover, we need to be clear what it is to punch up or down and distinguish attacks on minorities from attacks on ideological frameworks that claim to support them. Sound judgements on these matters cannot always be codified. But humour, especially satire, has the power to bring us to our senses in ways that plodding and detailed arguments may not. That is why autocrats and censors, whether of the globally dangerous or the merely petty variety, fear mockery more than almost anything else.

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