

Commentary article

Amoralism and jokes

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Abstract

Is it possible to joke about everything? Are there topics that we should not joke about? Is it possible to say which jokes are good and which are wrong, or are jokes simply beyond good and evil? This issue seems to be more pressing in today's multicultural world. In this study I reason, contrary to amoralism, that there are some jokes that can be morally judged. In order to present my argument, I use the type and token distinction as well as the results of debate between Bartel and Cremaldi (2018) and Brandon Cooke's (2014) arguments in the favour of amoralism in art in general. I argue that, even though amoralism is right in the case of some joke types as well as in the case of some joke tokens, not all jokes are fictive utterances. Therefore, the study concludes that it is reasonable to morally assess certain joke utterances.

Keywords: humour, jokes, type and token, ethics and morality, amoralism, ethicism.

1. Introduction

When blonde women claim that dumb blonde jokes are sexist, or when philosophers express annoyance about philosopher jokes, those women and philosophers may seem to lack a sense of humour. After all, jokes are jokes because they are not meant seriously, and 'I was just kidding' often serves as an excuse for just about anything. So goes the common-sense explanation of the nature of jokes. For the amoralist, jokes are also beyond the realm of ethics. Jokes are not descriptions of facts, they are not statements about reality, nor do they perform anything (Austin, 1962). According to the amoralist, to believe that jokes can be properly judged morally is to take them for the kind of illocutions they are not. Despite the dumb blonde jokes, many women dye their hair blond, people keep joining the police force, seek jobs in IT, or go into politics. Even Chuck Norris probably laughs when he hears a good Chuck Norris joke.

On the other hand, some jokes have led to serious public discussions about morality. Take, for instance, the public response to the shooting of the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015.

Or, more recently, an article by the British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson in *The Telegraph* entitled “Denmark has got it wrong. Yes, the burka is oppressive and ridiculous – but that’s still no reason to ban it”, published online in August 2018, and eventually Mark Knight’s caricature of the tennis player Serena Williams that was published in *The Herald Sun* on 12 September 2018.

Could we have been mistaken about the nature of such jokes? Was Aristotle perhaps right when he wrote that “a joke is a kind of abuse. There are some kinds of abuse that lawgivers forbid; perhaps they should have forbidden certain kinds of jokes” (Aristotle in: Moreall, 1987, p. 15). Or is Ted Cohen, the most prominent representative of philosophical amorality, right when he claims (Cohen, 1999, p. 69–86) that jokes do not say anything at all and are pieces of fiction?

In this paper, I will try to convince you that contrary to general belief, comic fictionalism (the view that jokes are short stories) does not entail comic amorality. Since that is the standard defence of many comedians, including Daniel Tosh, Andrew Dice Clay, or Bernard Manning (Dadlez, 2020), as well as politicians in the public space, I consider this topic highly important. I shall argue my point in three steps. First, I present comic fictionalism. Secondly, I argue against comic fictionalism’s claim that all jokes are fictive utterances. In the third part, I show that, even if all jokes were fictions, this would not entail amorality. In the course of this argument, I review some older argumentation showing that, even if jokes are fictive, they can still have real-world effects. They can be therefore judged based on their effects. But what about jokes that do not have any external implications? Are these now amoral? Following Bartel and Cremaldi’s (2018) arguments concerning the moral responsibility of viewers, I argue that listeners, too, can be subject to moral judgment, because finding morally offensive jokes funny can cultivate immoral desires.

2. Amorality

The amoralist view of jokes is common. For instance, the following joke suggests that policemen are not very clever:

A policeman is working on a jigsaw puzzle. Finally, after six months, he finishes it and reads on the box: from 2 to 3 years. ‘I am a genius’, he says. ‘I did it in a quarter of the time.’

If I were a policeman, I might well feel offended by the joke – and such reaction would probably be considered inappropriate. If I expressed such feelings, the likely response would be: ‘Come on, it is just a joke! If you take it seriously, you evidently lack sense of humour.’

Would things be perceived differently if, in our joke, we replaced the word ‘policeman’ with ‘gay’, ‘black’, or ‘Muslim’? The amoralist would probably claim that it would make no difference, and argue that members of these groups probably tell similar jokes to one another. The humour amoralist would take that as proving that these jokes are not offensive, and our moral concern is misplaced.

Moreover, the amoralist would likely argue that jokes use a variety of devices to achieve a ‘comic distance’. The most effective way of doing this is by disconnecting the joke from reality by emphasising its fictional character. Joke introductions such as ‘Have you heard the one about ...?’, ‘I am going to tell you a joke...’, the tone or gestures of the joke-teller, and, in cartoons, the use of noisy or dissonant music, garish colours, or caricature – all these function as disclaimers. Sometimes it is the world of the joke that helps create the comic distance. In the world of cartoons, the laws of physics (including the law of gravity) do not apply, and dimensions are not as stable as in real life. For instance, Wile E. Coyote in his endless pursuit

of the Road Runner seems never to suffer – let alone die – from things that would be painful, sad, or even fatal in real world. In anecdotes, animals speak, aliens visit the Earth, etc. This is some of the reasoning implicit in the ‘It is just a joke!’ explanation. From a philosophical point of view, ‘It’s just a joke!’ is a version of the ‘It’s just a story’ argument.

This approach to jokes was recently taken up by Jesse Rappaport and Jake Quilty-Dunn (2020). Following Austin’s speech act theory and Grice’s intentional theory, they argue that comedians’ speech acts never qualify as true assertions. Consequently, everything in a stand-up performance should be interpreted under the *universal pretence view*, which holds that “comedians never make assertions (perform genuine speech acts), but instead all apparent speech acts in the routine are merely pretend” (Rappaport & Quilty-Dunn, 2020, p. 481).

It can then be argued that the pretence status applies also to jokes, which are conceived of a kind of fictional utterances. According to this view, a joke is taken to be an utterance “that prompts or invites a sequence of imaginings; the utterance is made with the primary intention of inviting the members of its intended audience to engage in the prescribed imaginings” (Cooke, 2014, p. 318–319). Crucially, the proper reaction to a fictional utterance is the adoption of the fictive stance, i.e., a stance where the listener or reader entertains the idea of a fictive world with its special rules and inferences. Facts of the fictive world may contradict our knowledge of the real world – and yet we should not infer anything about the real world based solely on the fiction. Cooke concludes that, in fiction, “utterance is to be imagined, and imagination is a mental activity that prescind from any alethic commitments” (Cooke, 2014, p. 319). In other words, fictive imagination does not aspire to having a truth value.

For the amoralist, this applies to all jokes, both those which are tendentious and those based on simple wordplay. Consider, for instance, the following: “Two fish in a tank. One says to the other: ‘So, how do we drive this thing?’” (Cave, 2005, p. 142). Since the joke automatically brings to mind two fish in a fish tank, it initially makes no sense. To get the joke, though, one need not believe that fish can breathe on land and drive armoured vehicles. We should merely entertain the idea of fish driving a tank.

An amoralist would claim that this interpretation applies equally to the following joke: “What is the definition of rape? Assault with a friendly weapon” (Carroll, 2014, p. 96–97). The joke invites us to entertain a sexist attitude according to which women are frivolous in matters of sex and rape is not grievous assault. According to the amoralist stance, the joke says nothing about rape in our reality or about the attitudes of listeners or the person who invented this joke.

Let us now summarise the amoralist position:

- (i) Fiction does not warrant moral evaluation (fictive amoralism).
- (ii) Jokes are fictive utterances.
- (iii) If x is a joke, it is a fictive utterance and it makes no sense to feel offended by it or to hold someone morally responsible for it.

3. Type and token

But are all jokes fictive utterances? Philosophers such as Berys Gaut (1998) and Noell Carroll (2014) argue to the contrary. To advance their argument, they draw a distinction between joke types and joke tokens. For instance, when a homophobic person tells a particular joke about homosexuals and when a gay person tells the same joke about homosexuals, the context of the joke actualises some of the possible meanings implicit in the joke. What we have are two different instances of the same joke.

Gaut (1998, p. 51–68) proposes that the different instances of joke telling constitute joke ‘tokens’, while what is exemplified in the different instances are joke ‘types’. One can think of

joke types in terms of recipes, while joke tokens are like the meals prepared based on those recipes. According to Gaut, any joke whose tokenisation clearly reflects the speaker's immoral attitudes is not a fictive utterance and is morally reprehensible. Anyone who uses a joke to express their intolerant attitudes to other religions, minorities, etc., can be morally condemned for telling the joke.

When it comes to joke types, the situation is somewhat more complicated; while Carroll (2014, p. 159–160) believes that joke types are beyond moral evaluation due to their unrealised nature, Gaut holds the opposite view. According to him, one can make moral judgments not only about individual joke tokens but also about joke types, whereby such judgements apply to the implied speaker, the author of the particular type (Gaut, 1998, p. 51–68). The 'implied speaker' is a theoretical construct, a hypothesis on the part of the listener about the author of the message (Nehamas, 1981). This hypothetical construct naturally can, and usually does, differ from the actual author. Therefore, Gaut argues, some types of jokes can be condemned even before they are tokenised. It can thus happen that we read a joke on a computer screen and given its content, we suspect that such a joke cannot be told anywhere (e.g. the abovementioned: "What is rape? Assault with a friendly firearm").

Some people find the joke token vs. joke type distinction problematic. Its most comprehensive critique has been formulated by Conolly and Haydar (2005). Let us now go through some of their objections to the type–token distinction.

Their first objection is that the distinction does not capture our intuitive understanding of joke telling. Consider, for instance, the following joke: "How did the passer-by stop a group of black men from committing gang rape? He threw them a basketball" (Cohen, 1999, p. 77). It would be odd to suppose that by telling this joke, a black man and a white racist are telling different jokes (tokens). According to Conolly and Haydar (2005), our intuition tells us that there is just one joke – a bad one.

I would like to argue that this is not the case. The type–token theorist does not claim that this example contains two different jokes. Rather, they argue that there are two different tokens of the same type, just as there can be two dishes based on the same recipe, one better and one worse.

Conolly and Haydar continue their argument by noting that the assumption of tokens and types makes the joke theory unnecessarily complicated. We would be better off, they argue, with just one joke. Again, I do not believe this to be the case. It is like saying that we can only live with ready-made meals and cookery books make food preparation unnecessarily complicated. Admittedly, one does not usually eat recipes or laugh at joke types. The distinction between types and tokens is, however, theoretically useful: it helps us, for instance, to accommodate our intuition that some people are not very good at telling jokes. If Peter tells the same joke as Mary and we laugh at Mary's joke but not at Peter's, we know it is Peter's fault: the problem is in how Peter tells (exemplifies) the joke type. The distinction also helps us quantify jokes, such as the following:

A new prisoner is surprised to hear his cellmates burst out laughing after one of them called out a number. 'Your turn', they say to a fellow comrade in crime. Another number gets called; more laughter rocks the gaol. The new prisoner asks what is happening. 'Well', says an old lag, 'We've been in prison so long—we've gone through our jokes so often—that we save ourselves time. We know the jokes by number; we just call out the number of the joke that we want people to enjoy.'

Some weeks later the new prisoner, now feeling at home and having seen the numbered jokes' list, decides to join in the fun. 'Number 19!' he announces at a joking session. There is an embarrassed silence. He tries again. 'Number seven.' Still, no luck. 'Why isn't anyone laughing?' he whispers to his friend. 'Well, it's the way that you tell them!'

(Cave, 2005, p. 142)

The incongruity in this joke is that the prisoners mix the types and tokens together. In their list, they numbered the joke types gleaned from the countless jokes they have told each other over time in prison. All in all, they have identified at least 19 types. But now they use types as tokens. This confusion of types and tokens is the source of incongruity highlighted in this joke, and this is what makes it funny. Without the type–token distinction, we would not laugh at it. Ultimately, the distinction makes the world funnier, too: with the type–token distinction, we have more possible incongruities than without it. A world with more possibilities to laugh is a better world.

Carroll had recently abandoned the type-token distinction, saying that “trying to fix the identity conditions for joke types seems so elusive to me that I have given up the idea of joke types. There are just the tellings, which resemble each other in some respects that are neither necessary nor sufficient” (Carroll, 2020, p. 541). I think that Carroll’s reason is not persuasive enough. We can consider the types and tokens not in terms of necessary and sufficient identity conditions, but in terms of family resemblances.

Assuming that the type–token distinction makes sense, we can argue – *pace* amoralism – that not all jokes are fictive utterances. This position can usefully be summed up as follows:

- (i) It makes sense to feel offended or hold someone morally responsible only for things that are taken seriously or are real.
- (ii) Not all joke tokens are fictive utterances.
- (iii) Some joke tokens are immoral.
- (iv) One can be legitimately held morally responsible for some joke utterances.

What follows from Carroll’s position is that amoralism is right when it comes to joke types. Joke types are just recipes. It makes little sense to morally evaluate cookbooks, and even if the recipes were full of poisonous ingredients, we would still be evaluating recipe tokens in our imagination. We would imagine them being served to certain people or beings at certain occasions. The same is true of jokes: it is their tokens, not types, that are potentially harmful.

Following Carroll, we have to accept that amoralism is right when it comes to ‘pure jokes’, i.e., when we just *fictively imagine* or entertain the ideas necessary to get the joke. But one can then also argue, following the type–token distinction, that not all joke tokens are fictive utterances. In everyday life, we come across many joke tokens, some ‘pure’, others in fact ‘put-downs’ in disguise.

4. Fiction and consequences

The type–token distinction weakens the amoralist’s position only to a certain extent. In particular, it fails to address the first premise according to which fictionalism entails amoralism. As noted above, unlike amoralism, fictional moralism claims that fiction can have real-world effects, and that those effects can be morally evaluated. Therefore, although some jokes are fictive utterances, they can be morally evaluated regarding their consequences. Even on Cooke’s account, fiction is morally wrong if it helps to *spread* or *encourage* immoral beliefs in the real world. Cooke would agree that it is not problematic to fictively imagine some immoral *x*, but it is problematic to use fictive imaginings as the means of export of morally dubious messages. Moreover, the message of the joke does not need to be an explicit part of the fiction: the message of a joke or story can be that ‘love prevails’ without this specific phrase occurring explicitly in it. By the same token, a racist joke is any joke that encourages public approval of racist attitudes (Cooke, 2014, p. 323).

Since Cooke and others are more interested in fiction in general, I consider it useful to mention the position of Dadlez (2020), who argues that even if we ascribe to jokes and stand-up comedy fictional status (which is problematic), it does not make them immune to ethical criticism. For Dadlez, all acts of imagination have epistemic underpinnings. We cannot, for example, find something dangerous in imagination if we consider it perfectly safe. Stand-up comedy therefore can,

by subtly acting on the tolerances of audiences, affect their attitudes or affect their predispositions toward self-policing and restraint. It can reinforce certain convictions, or make selected beliefs and attitudes (principally, beliefs and attitudes about what is harmless) appear in a new light: as less deviant than formerly believed, or as more acceptable. Thus, another facet of moral criticism of stand-up comedy might focus on the ease with which such audience susceptibilities could be exploited to problematic ends rather than laudable or neutral ones.

(Dadlez, 2020, p. 522)

A moralist who accepts the attitude endorsement theory may agree that, to understand a joke, one must merely be able to entertain the propositions it relies on. One does not need to accept that they are funny. For instance, one may entertain the idea of a world where women are generally promiscuous and rape is not serious crime, yet not laugh. One may find the idea so (morally or otherwise) repulsive that, no matter what, one just cannot find it amusing. On the other hand, if one finds it funny, it means that one not only entertains the idea but also endorses it.

Yet, as Smuts (2010) and Carroll (2014, p. 97) demonstrate, there are serious problems with the claim that attitude endorsement is a necessary precondition for finding a joke funny. For one thing, does it mean that to enjoy the fish joke I must believe that fish can drive an army tank? Another problem is that it is unclear what propositions I must hold. Do I have to believe that fish can drive vehicles – and breathe on land as well? What if my friend and I find the joke funny for different reasons? I might find the idea of a fish in an army tank funny, while for another person it is the homonymy that is amusing. The third problem is that one does not necessarily find all jokes that match one's own attitudes funny. In short, attitude endorsement is not a sufficient condition for finding a joke funny. Nevertheless, the amoralist may still legitimately claim that merely entertaining ideas in fictive imagination is sufficient for finding a joke funny.

As suggested above, Dadlez (2020) also opposes premise (ii). At least in the case of stand-up comedy there are some considerations that seem to disprove it. First, audiences *de facto* understand stand-up performances as self-referential. Comedians not only impersonate themselves: they are also authors of the content of the show. It is therefore natural to suppose that their choice of material reflects their personal attitudes. Moreover, comedians use observations from real life. Sometimes, they even explicitly distinguish between real remarks about their friends, family, or wives, from mere jokes. And finally, there is the form of a stand-up show to be considered: it is more like a one-sided dialog rather than a theatre show. According to Dadlez, all these factors taken together indicate that “[a]ssertions made in the course of these comedians’ performances, or at least many of their assertions, are taken to be assertions about the world and taken to reflect their beliefs about it” (Dadlez, 2020, p.517).

So far, we saw that amoralism does not hold regarding premise (ii) because some joke utterances are not fictive. We have also seen that (i) does not hold since some fictive utterances can be morally evaluated regarding their consequences. But what about jokes that do not have any external consequences? Are they amoral? Regarding the debate on fictive imagining in pornography, Bartel and Cremaldi (2018, p. 37) have recently argued that “it can be morally wrong for a consumer to engage in fictively imagining”.

According to Cooke, we cannot infer from the fact that someone is fictively imagining *x* that they desire it or approve of it. Cooke agrees that fiction is morally wrong if it helps to *export* or *encourage* immoral beliefs in real world, so that a racist joke that inspires public approval of racist attitudes is morally dubious (Cooke, 2014, p. 323). On the other hand, consumers cannot be held morally responsible for fictively imagining *x* as long as they are taking a fictive stance. Bartel and Cremaldi (2018, p. 43) oppose this and claim that Cooke underestimates the possible moral responsibility of consumers, including the consumers of jokes. At least regarding pornography, consumers not only engage in fictive imagination but also indulge their desires and some desires, they argue, are simply morally wrong (e.g., the desire to rape or kill). A person who lacks such desires is morally superior to a person who has them. Cultivation of immoral desires, even if only in fictive imagination, can therefore be immoral (Bartel & Cremaldi, 2018, p. 43). In light of this argument, it seems that we may indeed be legitimately held morally responsible for some of our imaginings.

Since Bartel and Cremaldi (2018) focus on pornography, let us take a look at whether their argument could also be legitimately applied to jokes. When transferring the argument to the realm of jokes, we should be able to show that jokes engage not only our fictive imagination but sometimes also our desires.

Freud had claimed that desire plays a crucial role in joke telling. He argued that the most pleasurable jokes function as means of fulfilling our desire for obscenity and hostility despite the obstacles of reason and rules of good conduct (Freud, 1960, p. 140). Consider this joke: “What do you have if you have a lawyer buried up to his neck in sand? Not enough sand.” Freud would argue that this joke hides hostility to lawyers behind the incongruous play on words, while inviting others to join in the desire to do away with lawyers. Although Freud’s claim is open to discussion, we may, for the sake of argument, admit that at least in some jokes we engage not only our fictive imagination but also our desires. If the desires activated by a joke are immoral, one is morally responsible for cultivating them by telling that joke.

There are some objections to this position that ought to be addressed. The first can usefully be called the ‘catharsis objection’. It states that it is better if consumers satisfy their immoral desires in fantasy rather than in reality. Consequently, rather than being immoral, cultivation of desires in fantasy is a morally conscious decision. Imagine a person who becomes a vegetarian for moral reasons but keeps satisfying her desire to eat meat by fictively imagining cooking and eating meat with the help of magazines and cooking shows (i.e., using what some people call ‘food porn’). If eating meat is immoral and cultivation of immoral desires in fantasy is immoral as well, is she, despite becoming a vegetarian and having good intentions, still acting immorally? Yes, Bartel and Cremaldi argue, it is immoral. They claim that the catharsis argument shifts the focus from *cultivation* to *satisfaction*. According to them, even if it is better to satisfy immoral desire in fantasy than in reality, it is still immoral to cultivate immoral desires – regardless of whether they are satisfied (Bartel & Cremaldi, 2018, p. 43–44). Being a vegetarian would in this case be only a lesser evil.

The second objection focuses on the nature of desire. Bartel and Cremaldi (2018) emphasise one type of desire: the desire to experience things in reality. But we have desires not only about reality but about fiction, too. We want to see people fighting space invaders and we want to read a story where the heroine is abducted by a handsome Persian prince. Yes, we do have such desires. On the other hand, we usually want these things to remain fiction, especially in case of horror films. Bartel and Cremaldi acknowledge this but claim that it is unimportant for their argument. To that end, they present the following example:

Smith is a heterosexual male who has a sizable collection of pornography. A cursory study of Smith’s porn collection reveals a curious fact: that all the women depicted in his collection are redheads. A natural conclusion to draw would be that Smith is attracted to redheads, not just in his fantasies, but in reality as well. But suppose that, looking more

closely at Smith's collection, we also discover that all the works in his collection contain a fictional rape narrative. While it is possible that Smith desires merely to see this content only in fiction, it is at least equally plausible that Smith's fantasies reveal something about his real desires.

(Bartel & Cremaldi, 2018, p.45)

The same applies to jokes. Take, for instance, the joke about a genie who appears to an African American, a Jew, and a redneck. He grants each a wish. The African American wishes that his people be returned to Africa; the Jew that his people be returned to Israel. Once the redneck realises that the blacks and the Jews have all left America, all he wishes for is a Budweiser (Carroll, 2014, p. 240). Told by one liberal to another, this gets a laugh at the expense of the redneck and his limited desires. Told at a white supremacist gathering, the joke may celebrate communal hatred.

A joke about Oscar Wilde can serve as another example: "Why was Oscar wild? Because he did not get his Daily Mail." There is a funny wordplay hidden in this joke. Yet, told at a local pub by a group of 'lads' it may cultivate their real immoral desires and attitudes, just in Smith's case. Nevertheless, it is not the joke but the men who may rightly be subjected to moral scrutiny for deliberately indulging in their character flaws.

Bartel and Cremaldi (2018) thus show us two things. First, that inappropriate attitudes are not always *exported* from fiction into reality: sometimes, they are *cultivated* from within. Second, they shift the responsibility from the joke teller and the joke itself to the listener because now it is the listeners who are morally responsible for helping to cultivate their own immoral desires by listening to certain kinds of jokes. Therefore, it is not just the jokes that becomes subject to moral evaluation but the audience as well.

Should we therefore return to amoralism? Isn't the whole question wrong after all? Is it the people and not the jokes who are the subjects of morality? I do not think so. Jokes, which sometimes export immoral attitudes, can be judged as morally reprehensible on their own merits. But the overlooked responsibility of the audience should be highlighted. It is not always the joke's fault. Like in the case of the Budweiser or the Oscar Wilde joke, these jokes do not *prima facie* help *export* anything morally dubious. And cannot be morally condemned based on the fact that they may help someone cultivate their immoral desires. It is not the joke's but the listeners' fault if their deliberately indulge their character flaws instead of curbing them.

5. Conclusion

My aim here was to show that, when faced with a moral critique of one's joke, the excuse 'It was just a joke' is an untenable position. This excuse rests on two assumptions: (i) fiction does not warrant moral evaluation (fictive amoralism) and (ii) jokes are fictive utterances. In the above, it has been shown – with the help of the type vs. token distinction – that one cannot without serious problems hold (ii). Moreover, I have argued that even if all jokes were fictive utterances, it would not follow that moral evaluation of fiction is not possible. One can conceivably evaluate fictional works based on their real-world consequences or the overall message. Therefore, *pace* amoralism, it is reasonable to morally assess jokes and hold people morally responsible for telling certain jokes.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that any joke that has possibly problematic tokens can be straightforwardly subject to moral evaluation. We are quick to blame both jokes and comedians, while forgetting that sometimes we as listeners are to blame. Using Bartel and Cremaldi's (2018) argument, I have therefore suggested a line of reasoning that also, among other actors in the story, considers the responsibility of the listener. If someone uses, or can possibly use, a joke to

cultivate some immoral desires, beliefs, or attitudes, it is not always the joke's fault: it is the listener's fault.

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