

The Feministecles: A Dialogue on Humor and Sexism

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Abstract

The Ethics of Humor has focused on the question “Can your sense of humor be wrong.” In our dialogue, we explore the feminist origins of that question which center on sexist humor. We suggest that returning to the feminist context and the tools of feminist inquiry provides a more effective and informative framework for evaluating the ethics of humor. In particular, we focus on the tools of Standpoint Theory and Relational Autonomy from contemporary feminism, and their interactions with Philosophy of Mind. The namesake of this dialogue argues that our focus on the individual’s sense of humor, mistakes the problem for an issue with a few bad actors when the issue is really an issue with our social contexts and the norms in play within that context. As such, our attempts to resolve the problems of sexist humor will have to broaden their contextual focus.

Keywords: Humor, Feminism, Dialogue, Ethics

I

In 1986, Merrie Bergman posed the question, “What is sexist humor and what’s wrong with it?” She sought to criticize sexist humor and the underlying sexism pervading our culture. Her question charges us to discover why feminists think sexist humor isn’t funny. Over the next thirty years the debate pivoted away from Bergman’s concern to a more generalized and sanitized question, “Can our sense of humor be wrong?” In 2010 Aaron Smutts examined the state of the debate, and distilled the responses to this question into three general strategies. Our project examines these strategies as well as Smutts’ response to them and argues that all are normatively inadequate as they fail to address systemic concerns for sexist humor. Additionally, we offer an alternative account which aims to meet the challenge posed by these systemic

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concerns by returning to the feminist insights which motivated Bergman in the first place.

In order to explore these issues we frame the discussion in the form of a dialogue between two philosophers in the Socratic tradition. The function of this dialogue is to illuminate feminist concerns in the area of philosophy of humor, as well as to illustrate problems that women in the academy often face as a result of their gender. We value the pedagogical force of the Platonic Dialogue format which is why we've chosen to represent these issue in a dialogue format. Plus, it's funny.

In this dialogue, we introduce two characters, Feministecles and Mysogynistus. Within the dialogue, Feministecles and Misogynistus represent the feminist critique and traditional theorists of humor respectively. The interplay between the characters elucidates both the progression of the debate, as captured by Smutts, as well as how the seemingly innocuous abstractions made as the debate progresses undermine our ability to address the core issue. Additionally, the social dynamic between Misogynistus and Feministecles, reflects feminist concerns with patriarchal culture. In this way, the dialogue also deals with issues of erasure of women's concerns from academic scholarship, mansplaining, and positivist dogma. Each of these issues represent particularly salient problems historically faced by women in the academy. Our hope is that these choices help to both reinvigorate the debate, and return the discussion to its feminist roots.

II

Two philosophers are walking through the crowded streets of their polis. After leaving a street performer telling jokes, Feministecles' brow furrows, and she turns to her compatriot.

Feministecles – What's the deal with Sexist Humor?

Misogynistus - What do you mean?

Feministecles – I've been reading Merrie Bergman's paper "How Many Feminists Does It Take To Make A Joke: Sexist Humor and What's Wrong With It", I mean what's the deal? Why is women's oppression so funny? (Bergman, 1986)

Misogynistus – That's an interesting question, Can our sense of humor be wrong?

Feministecles – That's not what I asked.

Misogynistus – Feministecles, there is a long history of philosophical discussion on this issue.

Over the last thirty years many people have tried to address that question, so I'm certain that's what you meant.

(Feministecles pauses and looks towards the fourth wall for recognition, as her companion continues...)

Misogynistus – Some believe the solution lies in assessing the attitudes involved in making and laughing at the joke. So instead of assessing the joke itself, we should use the joke as a proxy for the attitudes held by the people hearing and/or laughing at the joke. Those would then be morally assessable. So, if the joke indicates morally problematic attitudes, then ... (Smutts, 2010)

Feministecles – So then, Sexist jokes are only problematic because some people have bad attitudes? How do we know that's why they're laughing? Maybe they're just nervous or uncomfortable.

Misogynistus – (ponders her statement momentarily, before responding) Yeah, this might be why we should abstract away from the sexist issues Feministecles. We need to look at a generalized problem and not get caught up on identity politics. It could be any form of morally problematic attitude.

Feministecles – But then it just seems like you're saying "I'm not a sexist but..."

Misogynistus – Sure but we could use this for any number of Associated Similar Subgroups. The morally problematic attitude could be a racist one, a classist one, an ageist one, etc.

Feministecles – So then we might call this the "I'm not sexist (and Associated Similar Subgroups) but..." Problem.

Misogynistus – That's a bit long winded. Yet another virtue of abstraction is that...

Feministecles – Then how about the Sexist A.S.S. Problem.

Misogynistus – Well that's shorter, but...

Feministecles - But the Sexist A.S.S. problem points out that more is going on here. After a while, I stop believing you're not a sexist

Misogynistus – That's an interesting point. But I think this focus on sociological issues is damaging the philosophy. Maybe we should consider the Merited Response Solutions to the general problem.

Feministecles – I'm not quite sure we've solved the Sexist A.S.S. problem yet.

Misogynistus – Sure we have...(Pause)...The key is to think abstractly about the Objective

Normativity in the form of the joke.

Feministecles – Right, now I’m thinking abstractly about the form of the Sexist A.S.S.

Misogynist – Are you sure you’re not thinking of an instance?

Feministecles – (Glaring) Oh... no, ...I am!

Misogynist – (calmly) Maybe you should stop thinking about buts....Maybe there’s a fact of the matter as to whether or not a joke is funny.Feministecles – (chiding) I’ve heard you tell a joke ...there is.

Misogynist– (chagrined) Right, but I mean morally, not aesthetically. The Merited Response Solution is to say that a joke is funny or not in part based on moral normativity. So going back to your original question “Can our sense of humor be wrong?” (Smutts, 2010)

Feministecles – That wasn’t my original question.

Misogynist – (blithely) Yes, our sense of humor can be wrong when it violates moral norms.

Feministecles – So, sexist jokes are bad because sexism is bad?

Misogynist - No...I think you’re overly focused on Sexism and it is getting in the way of your objectivity. I don’t understand your obsession with this issue, how often does it really come up?

Feministecles – Constantly.

Misogynist – I hardly ever encounter sexism.

(Feministecles turns to stare blackly back to the fourth wall)

Misogynist – (continuing) You see, if we abstract away from the sexism issue we can see what is really going on here. These jokes are not bad because sexism is bad. They are simply not funny, and the people laughing are responding in error.

Feministecles – Simply not funny, and laughter is in error. Sounds like a Dane Cook performance.

Misogynist – Exactly. Problem solved.

Feministecles – But, it seems like there is something you can do with sexist humor, but there is nothing you can do with Dane Cook’s jokes.

Misogynist – What do you mean?

Feministecles – Sexist humor can be used to redress harms done by sexism. Consider Charlie Hill’s stand-up performance. He’s a Native American comedian who begins his set by saying “I bet you didn’t expect to see a Native American comedian. Most people don’t think Native Americans are very funny. ... Well... we don’t think you’re very funny either.” (Hill, 1977)

Misogynist – Yeah, I still don't see what this has to do with Sexism.

Feministecles – You're not being abstract enough. Similar things get done with sexist humor as a means of reclaiming power. And we don't want to take that tool away by telling disenfranchised comedians that they objectively can't be funny while doing so. In this case, Hill is retaking the political discourse by highlighting why the dismissive characterization of Native Americans as humorless is itself steeped in a context of oppression. By doing so, he reclaims the narrative about his people surrounding the perceived phenomenon.

Misogynist – Wow, I've never really thought about how reclamation projects could generalize that way.

Feministecles – Who's not being abstract enough now?

Misogynist – It's probably still you. Perhaps the best solution to this problem is to go with an Emotional Responsibility or ER theory. This says that our sense of humor can be wrong when/because of the harms done by certain jokes. (Smutts, 2010)

Feministecles – So, sexist jokes are wrong because they do a harm to women?

Misogynist – I guess you could say that given your intentness on doggedly pursuing this particular non-issue.

Feministecles – But what about cases where no woman is present.

Misogynist – Well that's just locker room talk. People say all kinds of things in locker rooms.

Feministecles – I don't know what you say in locker rooms, but it seems like women can still be harmed by the context created by the acceptability of that talk.

Misogynist – I'm not immediately sure how that could be, I mean if no women are present then...

Feministecles – Then someone could talk about grabbing women by the...

Misogynist – Right. Okay so that could be a problem.

Feministecles – By the pussy!

Misogynist – Feministecles, our polis is relatively conservative, you can't use such inappropriate language here. People might get offended.

Feministecles – What about the women who are getting grabbed by...

Misogynist – Got it!!

Feministecles – By the pussy...

Misogynist – Are you through... people are staring.

Feministecles – I bet they are offended. And that talk set up a context where some men think it's okay to grab them.....

Misogynist – I think we get the point!

Feministecles – By the pussy.

Misogynist – So you're saying that Emotional Responsibility should extend to the society at large, not just the potential victims that are present.

Feministecles – (sighs) It seems like we lack the resources to fill all of ER's expensive prescriptions – it's not clear that we can control what we find funny, the phenomenology of laughter makes me think that I don't really choose when I laugh. ER's diagnosis doesn't differentiate the community ailments, but it sticks us with the bill for accidents for which we aren't at fault.

Misogynist – (grinning) I see what you're doing there. Well, maybe we shouldn't be too judgmental here. Given we don't know why people are laughing, we would have trouble knowing what their laughter says about their character. Smutts suggests we shouldn't be so immodest as to impugn the purveyors and recipients of sexist humor for bad character. (Smutts, 2010)

Feministecles – Smut suggests?

Misogynist – Smutts.

Feministecles – Plural?

Misogynist – No, just one guy... Aaron Smutts.

Feministecles – That's an inauspicious name.

Misogynist – You should hear what he calls his view. The Effects-mitigated Emotional Responsibility View.

Feministecles – That's not exactly succinct. We should shorten it. We can call it the EER View.

Misogynist – Ears don't have views.

Feministecles – (smirking) Was that a joke?

Misogynist – (deflated) Apparently not... Okay let's just call it EER.

Feministecles – (mumbling) That's basically just what I said.

Misogynist – (upbeat) Okay so on Smut's EER...

Feministecles – (exasperated) I hate you.

Misogynist – No you don't.

Feministecles – (chidingly) Don't be so sure.

Misogynistus – ...Right...so on Smuts' EER we should still focus on the Emotional Responsibility, but we should maintain epistemic humility. We don't know what a person's character is like for sure based on their telling of a joke or laughing at the joke. We also can't always control when we laugh. As such, we should mitigate our responses to those who engage in or laugh at sexist humor. (Smutts, 2010)

Feministecles – I see the point, but I'm not entirely sure I can't tell in every case...like that sexist comedian Lady Gaga Fonzy...Lady Fonzy Gaga...

(Misogynistus shrugs, looking confused.)

Feministecles – You know the guy with the slicked backed hair and the glitzy leather biker jacket...

Misogynistus – Oh you mean Andrew Dice Clay.

Feministecles – Right...Fonzy Lady Gaga. I'm pretty sure he was just sexist...despicably sexist...Didn't you say you thought that that was funny back then?

Misogynistus – I'd really rather not talk about it. I was young and foolish then.

Feministecles –And what are you now?

Misogynistus – (pondering for a second) Old and foolish... look everyone thought it was funny back then.

Feministecles – Everyone?

Misogynistus – Well...a lot of people. He was really popular in like '89.

Feministecles – Well here's where Feminism can do something for Smutts.

Misogynistus – Maybe the name is not so inauspicious after all.

Feministecles – We can go back to Bergman's feminist insight.

Misogynistus – But, each of these theories seemed to get something right. Attitudinal theories point out the importance of character, Merited Response theories point out objective normative concerns, Emotional Response theories draw our attention to harms done, and EER points out that we can't always control our responses. Maybe we just have to abstract more.

Feministecles – Maybe we should abstract less. Bergman's feminist insight is that the cultural context itself is the subject of evaluation. Readings of Bergman's work focus on the influence of sexism on cultural contexts, but overlook the bidirectional nature of those cultural contexts. Sexist jokes and the sexist circumstances in which they are made tend to

reinforce each other.

Misogynist – How is that supposed to work?

Feministecles – Well let's consider a case. Do you remember that comedian Liz Miele and her Feminist Sexual position jokes?

Misogynist - Yeah, she was the one who made those sexual position jokes after finding her younger brother telling jokes about sexual positions where the guy does something weird and the punchline was misogynistic.

Feministecles – Right, her jokes are structured similarly but they promote feminist critiques of our society like:

Position 1 – A dude is going down on a woman. She squirts in his face. He learns to respect women. It's called the 19th amendment.

Position 2 – A woman is riding a dude. She gets him about 30% of the way to an orgasm. But she gets up and leaves. It's called the equal pay act.

Position 3 – A woman is masturbating in a kitchen. A dude walks in sad. It's called make your own dinner.
(Miele, nd)

Misogynist – You know, there seems to be a bit of a delay there in processing of her jokes that isn't present in the old school version of sexual position jokes. That makes me think about Lafoylette and Shanks' Paper "Belief and the Basis of Humor". (Lafoylette & Shanks, 1993) They think that the listener is engaged in an active process when they get a joke. They then argue from phenomenology to humor as a fluctuation between possible sets of beliefs.

Feministecles – So standpoint theory could explain the delayed processing. (Harding, 2003) When Miele presents her jokes there is a heavier cognitive load as we consider the implications of alternative standpoints.

Misogynist – Okay, I see where you're coming from. I'm not against feminist theories, but that still doesn't get us to this bidirectional cultural context thing.

Feministecles – Well it does, when we consider Relational Autonomy.

Misogynist – Is that the ability to be autonomous while in a relationship?

Feministecles – Yes, but not really the way you are thinking.

Misogynistus – How do you know what I am thinking?

Feministecles – I know you well enough to understand your cultural context. ..just hang in there it will all make sense in a minute. So, when we think about what it takes to be autonomous we often overlook the cultural conditions which enable our decisions actions and beliefs. Feminists have developed theories of Relational Autonomy to address this. The basic idea is that we are both the product of and the creators of our cultural contexts, and our ideas of Autonomy should reflect that. (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000)

Misogynistus – Uh huh, but why should I believe that this is bi-directional?

Feministecles – Cognitive Penetration.

Misogynistus – Cognitive Penetration? Sounds like mind rape.

Feministecles – It sort of is, at least in the contexts we're worried about. It's when background beliefs or contexts influence the contents of perceptions, in this case, auditory perceptions. When Miele makes her jokes they rely on a series of beliefs about the conditions of women in our society. On one hand we have the cultural context under which the sexual position jokes are understood. On the other hand we have the feminist critiques of the culture at large that are placed in proxy for the sexist attitudes assumed in these jokes.

Misogynistus – I think this is starting to cognitively penetrate.

Feministecles – Additionally, Miele relies on cognitive penetration mechanisms similar to those discussed by Susana Siegel in "Cognitive Penetrability and Perceptual Justification". (Siegel, 2012) By understanding the cultural contexts our community members share, Miele can use pragmatic implicature and explicature to frame the jokes so as to lead us to expect certain outcomes. (Grice, 1975) Then given the expectations inherent in our cultural contexts, she utilizes the cognitive penetration of the beliefs underlying those expectations to highlight the absurdity and oppression inherent our culture's expectations of women in terms of sex, equality, and various types of social labor. As we consider that absurdity, laughter defuses the resistances that would normally arise when we're confronted with the negative import of our biases.

Misogynistus – And I thought there were going to be more dick jokes here.

Feministecles – Oh, there are, we're not going to limply ignore this opportunity and just let it peter away. The fact that you think of dick jokes when you hear the term cognitive penetration

proves that cognitive penetration is in play.

Misogynist – Does it? Maybe there is just something about the verbiage?

Feministecles – you mean like how the first phoneme in Penetration and the first phoneme in penis are the same.

Misogynist – I think that’s a stretch.

Feministecles – I’ve found that it’s not polite to talk about size in these sorts of conversations.

Misogynist – I’m getting a bit weirdly uncomfortable here.

Feministecles – That’s because this conversation has shifted the social power dynamics.

Misogynist – I’m picking up on that.

Feministecles – Through cognitive penetration. And note that were Miele to switch the gender roles, the actions described would be nonsensical. Such calls for equality are asymmetric in our cultural context. Also the inherent disrespect in the format is highlighted, where our cultural context normally obscures it. This leads us to consider our culture’s inherent oppression. The disrespect in the joke doesn’t manifest as harmful to males. Instead it enables our identification of the harms this destructive context causes to us all.

Misogynist – Those size jokes seem at least a little pointed though.

Feministecles – Agreed, fair enough. The difference is in the overall scale of these sorts of harms that are implicit within the culture. These size jokes are more harmless in part because we are in a culture where there are fewer impositions and less oppression towards men.

Misogynist – Right. Okay so our sense of humor can be wrong when it contributes to the oppression of others. And we have an obligation to correct not only our own character, but that of our society where we can. As participants in that project, we are responsible for the damage caused by both our own attitudes and the attitudes that set the baseline understanding of social interactions.

Feministecles – Yep. Our standards for considering the ethical status of sexist jokes should utilize a harm principle that is sensitive to the disparities between various group members in our shared cultural context. Those jokes and our sense of humor aren’t criticizable or of concern when they use this harm principle. More importantly, when they seek to correct the ills of our society, these jokes can be not only funny, but laudable.

Misogynist –... It seems like we should end this with a joke.

Feministecles – Agreed, but I can’t think of any.

Misogynist – We could do that one about Mansplaining.

Feministecles – Mansplaining...that is...

Misogynist – You see Feministecles, mansplaining is where a guy explains something to a woman in a case where she actually has a better understanding.²

Feministecles – Seriously?!?!...That's been the whole discussion!

Misogynist – Huh!?? What makes you say that?

Feministecles – Arrgh! (turns and walks briskly away from Misogynist)

Misogynist – (calling after her) So... I'll see you tomorrow then?

(Feministecles gives no response as she leaves the scene)

III

Our contention in this paper is that we cannot understand or address the harms of sexist humor unless we acknowledge the social nature of joke telling and humor more generally. While the solutions offered thus far do illustrate specific features which are worthy of consideration, they each fail because they fail to address the wider social context in which these harms take place. Note that were Miele to switch the gender roles, the actions would be nonsensical. Such calls for equality are asymmetric in our cultural context. Also, the inherent disrespect in the format is highlighted, where our cultural context normally obscures it. This leads us to consider our culture's inherent oppression. The disrespect in the joke doesn't manifest as harmful to males. Instead, it enables our identification of the harms this destructive context causes to us all.

Some might argue that the mechanism advocated by Feministecles is so generally applicable that it doesn't address what's going on with sexist humor specifically. We could, presumably, employ this strategy to train society out of its disposition to find fart jokes funny. However, we maintain that there is no obligation to address such dispositions. Fart jokes don't support systemic harms to a subset of affected persons. Additionally, dispositions which support sexist jokes are problematic because they build on systemic inequalities and entrench those inequalities more deeply. Many joke categories don't have analogous systemic inequalities. In the

² We wish to thank Zack Garret for this particular joke, which he inserted into a conversation regarding this project.

cases of racist, ageist, homophobic, trans-phobic, etc. jokes, we think our strategy offers promise. Our obligations in these cases are similar, and we take this sort of generalization to be a feature, rather than a cost, of our view.

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