Book Review

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Steven Gimbel. *Isn't That Clever: A Philosophical Account of Humor and Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 196 pp. Cloth, $140

Steven Gimbel's new text may be the most comprehensive, well-argued account on the topic, and should be required reading for anyone interested in performing or studying comedy. Prior to this text, the best resources in the philosophy of humor were texts by John Morreall, the most prolific philosopher on the topic. Morreall's texts, while foundational, leave much to be desired.

It is in the introduction that Gimbel sets the tone for the work itself. He acknowledges that rigorous studies of humor more often than not result in dry, humorless texts that are only of interest to a handful of scholars (1). Gimbel's study, I contend, may be the only philosophically rigorous work on the topic that maintains a genuine air of enthusiasm and joy in its execution. The text flows seamlessly between critical engagement and real-world examples, creating a narrative experience for the reader that is anything but cumbersome. The achievement of this style is that the conversational style and tone is performed without sacrificing depth and nuance in its analysis. Stylistically, the text is accessible to popular and undergraduate audiences as well as those scholars exploring the field for the first time. In terms of content, depth of analysis, and argumentation, this text is what many already familiar with the field have long been awaiting – a text which manages to be both lighthearted and critical, rigorous and readable.

Chapter 1, appropriately called "The Obligatory Chapter", is a literature review of the philosophy of humor. Gimbel acknowledges that, since this area remains under-researched, any new contribution to the discourse requires a lengthy literature review. What distinguishes Gimbel's review from others is its comprehension. Gimbel gives clear and concise summaries, followed by criticisms, of the "big three" theories: the Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief theories. Many scholars stop here – this collection covers the majority of historical philosophical accounts, and the vast majority of contemporary scholarship advocate for variations of the Incongruity theory. Gimbel, however, is truly comprehensive in this review, not only by including interdisciplinary contemporary theories (such as Adams, Dennett, and Hurley's evolutionary account, 23), but also in giving individual theories attention in and of themselves rather than subsuming them under one of the Big Three categories. Robert Solomon's 2002

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Inferiority theory (10), for example, is not given any treatment in Morreall's 2009 *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, and the theories do appear in Morreall's text are often reduced to oversimplified characters, such as Victor Raskin's Script-Opposition View (19 in Gimbel, 51 in Morreall).

Gimbel's account of humor focuses on the principle of cleverness as the unifying feature of humor – in doing so, he argues that not only can he explain the incorporate previous theories of humor, but can also outline objective criteria for the aesthetics judgment of humor, outlined in chapter 5. His definition is as follows: "An act is humorous if and only if it is an intentional, conspicuous act of playful cleverness" (37). This definition has many moving parts: first, humor is an action, not an abstract category under which all things funny can lie. Second, humor is not accidental; an unplanned fall may be funny, but it would not, under Gimbel's definition, be humorous. Third, the act of humor is done for an audience for a reason (and that reason may or may not be to generate pleasure or laughter). The final part of this definition, and the essential element of humor, is that this act is one of playful cleverness. It is this final piece that I will focus on in this review.

Gimbel's definition of cleverness, the crux on which his theory rests, is: "a display of cognitive virtue… it [cleverness] displays a train of thought that would be advantageous if applied outside of the play frame" (43). What follows is a list of cognitive virtues, such as attention to detail, open-mindedness, creativity, and metaphor creation (44-45), alongside explanations of how each is displayed in a humorous act. While Gimbel insists that none of these virtues alone are sufficient for humor production, is it unclear whether they exist in any sort of hierarchy or if there is a specific number of virtues displayed for humor to be caused.

Gimbel's working list of virtues builds on the single cognitive virtue specified by the evolutionary account of Hurley, Dennett, and Adams (46). These authors argue that humor originated as a means of error detection – Gimbel says that while this may be true, his stimulus-side account does not require error detection to be present in the audience for the stimulus to be properly classified as humor. In fact, whether or not the audience understands an act as humorous at all is completely irrelevant to Gimbel's account. The cognitive virtue *of the actor* must be displayed in the act in order for the act to be humorous; that is, the cleverness of the gag is wholly dependent on the cleverness of the creator of that gag. As Gimbel explains, "one cannot come up with a gag that turns on a given cognitive virtue unless that person possesses that

virtue" (46). In other words, Gimbel insists that humor is not dependent on what it does, but only on how it is. This makes arguments regarding the ethical or sociopolitical effects of humor distinct from the question of defining humor itself – de Sousa's insistence that the finding of a racist or sexist gag to be humorous is indicative of racist or sexist attitudes is thus refuted (113). Neither the audience reception of the gag nor the moral character of the subject has anything whatsoever to do with whether the gag is, in fact, humor.

Gimbel concludes the chapter by arguing that his theory has explanatory power that others do not. He claims that the theory is specific enough to describe humor itself without being so broad as to be applied haphazardly to anything that one might find funny. His theory is a single, unified account that can subsume previous theories of humor in a coherent way while solving the problems of each theory respectively (47). Finally, he claims that his theory can explain all instances of humor proper, not just verbal gags. His arguments are convincing, though given that the remainder of the text focuses on verbal humor specifically to show the strengths of the theory, this final claim remains relatively unsupported. Jokes, analyzed in the next chapter, can indeed be understood according to the Cleverness Account very well, and can be easily applied to the physical gags of Charlie Chaplin and the like, but there seems to be something about physical comedy that is left out of the account.

The third chapter, Joking Matters, is a treatment of jokes in terms of the cleverness account. Filled with a host of examples and analysis, the chapter does well to show the applicability of Gimbel's thesis to verbal humor. The most controversial sections of this chapter are its moral claims, which take strong stands against Bergmann (2002) and de Sousa (1987). Contra these philosophers, Gimbel argues that the "use and appreciation (of stereotypes in humor) implies only familiarity, not belief" (59). As mentioned, de Sousa has famously argued that appreciating racist or sexist jokes indicates a racist or sexist character; Gimbel argues that one not need to hold the belief to understand the referent.

Stereotypes are "icons" for Gimbel, and are by their very nature caricatures of reality, not representations of it. *Acknowledging* a stereotype, he argues, is not equivalent to *using* a stereotype (61). To determine which is present in a joke, one must know the intention of the comic, and Gimbel argues that the intention of the comic is in the perlocutionary force of the joke. "Pure" jokes are jokes that intend only to make the listener laugh, "impure" jokes are jokes which are told for some reason other than generating laughter (such as to distract someone) (65).

Impure jokes with multiple perlocutionary forces are called "complex jokes" (66). If the comic's intention is to tell a pure joke, then the joke was acknowledging an icon, not using a stereotype, and therefore is morally blameless. This argument is unsatisfying – first, people with ill intention defend excuse themselves by claiming that they were "just joking" to avoid the moral responsibility that they should take. Secondly, as racism is often unconscious, it may not be clear to the comic that their joke is acknowledging an icon or using a stereotype. Third, often comics will tell terribly racist jokes, using stereotypes, for the pure purpose of getting the audience to laugh; this seems morally problematic, at the least.

Further argumentation regarding the ethics of comedy appear in the sixth and seventh chapters. Gimbel's conclusion is ultimately that one can tell a pure iconic joke only if it is funny; the aesthetic funniness of the joke negates any negative moral value, while lack of funniness makes the telling morally blameworthy (133): "If your joke bombs, you are morally responsible for an unethical act. But if it kills, then it is considered 'justifiable homicide'" (133). Thus, it is the responsibility of the comic to read her audience, establish a playframe of appropriate "thickness" as relative to their material, and to make sure that if the joke is rough, it's at least funny (151). The implication then, is that the comedian has moral responsibilities and insofar as she fulfills those responsibilities she is morally "off the hook" for any negative affect that results from her set. In other words, the moral responsibility of the comedian is not for what she puts out into the world in any sort of broad, culture sense, but rather her attention to controlling the room in which she performs.

While Gimbel clearly disagrees with Morreall that comedy has absolutely no effect beyond creating mirth, he seems to underappreciate the effects of comedy on the cultural level despite his acknowledgment of perlocutionary political and rhetorical intentions of impure jokes. He offers us a flow chart to determine whether or not a joke is morally permissible; the chart includes questions such as "was there legitimate offence; i.e., was anyone actually harmed" and "is there a moral good that would balance the legitimate offense?". For example, a joke about a corrupt politician may genuinely harm that politician, but removing the politician from office is a higher moral good that makes the harm morally permissible (153). Legitimate offence, or actual harm, is determined by whether the bit takes the audience out of the performance; in Gimbel's terms, if the joke is so rough that it penetrates the play frame: "we need to judge the roughness of the joke with the thickness of the play frame" (151). Only pure iconic jokes can be judged from

by these criteria, however. Impure iconic jokes, he claims, ought to be judged like any other utterance, as their motivations are not limited to generating mirth (153).

The final chapter concerns normative claims regarding the heckler and the comedian in response to the heckler. Gimbel again provides a helpful taxonomy of hecklers and the problematic nature of each kind, paired with the corresponding moral line that the comedian must not cross in their attempt to regain control of their audience. Here again there is a lack of consideration of cultural impact of what occurs outside of the walls of the comedy club. What happens there does not stay there, as Gimbel demonstrates through an analysis of the Michael Richards heckling incident that spelled the end of his stand-up career. The moral failing of Richards in this situation was not merely going overboard in their punishment of the heckler, but the racist name-calling he spontaneously generated. The incongruity between Richards' Kramer and Richard himself was shocking to many, and had perlocutionary effects unintended by the comic. Furthermore, we agree that the racist utterance cannot be defined as a joke, and that the unequal power relations coupled with the history of the word amounted to "a linguistic atomic weapon" out of proportion to the context of the heckle (179). I would emphasis not just the history of the word in listing Richards' moral failing, but also the reinforcement and perpetuation of it. Gimbel is aware of the history of particular utterances but does not take seriously the moral failing of repeating them, even in jokes, and how this may contribute to continued power imbalances.

Gimbel offers an objective standard through which to measure the aesthetic of comedy. The degree of success of the humorous act can be judged aesthetically based on three axis. The first factor is a locutionary axis, that is, does the bit land or fall flat? A bit lands if the audience gets it, and fails if the audience gets lost, or can't follow the joke. The next is an illocutionary axis, or the degree of cleverness: is it quality or hack? A quality joke can be quality in three ways – in terms of content, in terms of formulation, or in terms of delivery. A joke with quality content will have one or more virtues; witty, fresh, sharp, etc. A joke with quality formulation will have virtues such as innovative, tight, elegant, and/or punched. A joke with quality delivery will be quick-witted, well-timed, and/or owned. There are also vices of content, formulation, and delivery that will take a bit down a peg, such as a bit that is cheap, obnoxious, derivative, shallow, slow-witted, etc.

The final axis is the perlocutionary goal: does the bit kill or bomb? As Gimbel notes, "Locutionary and perlocutionary success are determined by whomever the audience happens to

include" while "illocutionary success requires a developed sense of humor" (97). On this model, a bit can be successfully clever while still failing to engage an audience, and vice versa, a bit can get an audience rolling with a clever-less bit. To determine if a bit is good art, I ought to consider each of these axis, recording audience reception and determining the number of virtues or vices present in the quality of the joke; then I make a judgment on a three-planed continuum. The closer a bit comes to landing with the audience, absolutely killing, and being of highest quality, the better art it is. The explanatory power of this method is impressive, as it allows one to understand why hacky comedy can still get roaring laughter and brilliantly clever comedy to be met with silence. Particularly interesting, Gimbel argues that the aesthetic quality of a joke must be taken into consideration when judging the moral value of the act (134).

Gimbels' text is a remarkable resource for those interested in the philosophy of comedy and provides a well-argued take on the question of defining humor itself. Written in a highly accessible and entertaining style, this book could serve as the perfect introductory course to the history of humor research as well as providing a framework through which to explore ethical and aesthetic aspects of comedy. Ultimately, the theoretical work is impressive and the ethical arguments leave the reader with questions that invite further analysis and is a strong contribution to the literature.

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