

**James E. Caron\***

I like this book. I like its slim size and compactness of expression. I enjoyed reading it. I laughed out loud more than once at its menu of jokes. If I were still teaching rather than enjoying retirement from the classroom, I would be ready to use it in an upper-division class on comedy and humor, or in an Honors seminar on satire. It could even be a useful gambit for a graduate class on comic artifacts and comic laughter. If professors Gini and Singer had been in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's College of Business while I was still teaching those kinds of classes, we would have been collaborators, I am sure, and our pleasure doing so would have caused all manner of talk and suspicion among colleagues.

The first thing I would comment on is the subtitle, which implies that politics is something traumatic or awful that one has to endure and survive, like a root canal or an extended vacation with in-laws. Satire, then, functions as a funny prophylactic, something pleasurable that prevents becoming crazed about what goes on in the public sphere, or perhaps satire operates as a therapy that helps one to recover after having become crazed about events in the public sphere. These functions are not exactly like the relief theory of humor in a Freudian sense, wherein jokes about psychological pain are deployed to protect the ego, but the central thesis of the book that satire functions as psychic savior of sanity for anxious citizens strikes me as very similar.

The book is apropos as a topic within a conference about the philosophy of humor because that is what the authors are really trying to do. In effect, they are saying *let's promote the sanity-saving function of humor and joke telling and comedy and laughter and especially satire*. That is what the true title should be, but I suppose that would not fit on the spine of a book so modest in physical size. So the authors had to choose one of those large and messy categories of speech acts for focus, and given the explosion of comic artifacts for the last twenty-five years or so, many of them satiric, and given the absurdity of the Trump administration the last four years, satire was the best choice.

So, *J'accuse*. I accuse professors Gini and Singer of being closet philosophers of humor, and not just any sort of philosophers of funny stuff: they want to celebrate humor and laughter as

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existentially invaluable and as inherently human activities and habits. They want their audience to feel better amidst all the recent and, sadly, on-going social turmoil.

In arguing along with Reinhold Niebuhr that laughter in the face of life's contingencies is a high form of wisdom (27), the authors claim that comic laughter and the comic artifacts that induce such laughter offer a refuge, a respite, a reprieve, or an escape, though temporary, from those inevitable and built-in contingencies. I get it. Who has not felt better after a good laugh about something bothersome, if not menacing? And who has not told a story about a mishap one has had, say, on that tortuous vacation with in-laws, and recounted it at a later date to highlight the comic qualities of the event or events? Laughter signals an emotional distance from those bothers and mishaps, which is what Henri Bergson has at least partly in mind when he speaks of the "momentary anesthesia of the heart" that happens with the comic, as he says in his book, *Le Rire*.

The authors tell us: "Joke telling and satire are, at the very least, a pleasant distraction. They are a time-out. They offer a moment of reprieve. They are a safety valve" (31).

But that function, I would argue, mistakes satire, and here I think our authors are talking about Sigmund Freud's "Der Humour," not satire. If anything, satire does not offer a reprieve or escape, but on the contrary rubs our faces in reality. Yes, satire if it is clever will achieve that goal and yet still make an audience laugh. "Satire is both in the business of entertainment and in the service of change, renewal, and reform" (35). That quote from the book strikes me as the better formula. The delivery system is comic, but the end result is not escape but engagement. Satire amuses but it educates too; it can make us laugh but it should make us think as well.

"Comedy [I think they mean satire here] . . . challenges the audience to think and interact differently as citizens" (64). Thus engage, not escape: stare the problem down but do it with laughter that ridicules in order to say *there is something wrong here*.

I think Gini and Singer are correct to highlight the link between satire and the public sphere: as they say, "comedy does have democratic benefits. Democracy isn't just good for comedy. Comedy is good for democracy" (69); and "comedy plays a special role in a democracy" (72). The authors in this stretch of the book repeatedly say "comedy," which is odd for a book about satire, but they mean "satire," I think, and I will come back to this issue of terms with which I have been dallying.

Satirists are quite willing to run the risk of not being rated as comic or funny in their ridicule of venality and stupidity and absurdity because the butts of their ridicule at times are so enormous or profound that laughter—at least of the out-loud variety—seems to be lost and replaced by a caustic, blistering tone. Lots of examples of satire dwell within this darker tonal domain because they might force an audience to look hard at terrible things that are usually right in front of them. As Shaftesbury writes, “The greater the weight is, the bitterer will be the satire” (qtd. in Critchley 2002, p. 82), a thought which is like landing lights for a jumbo jet labeled “humour noir.”

Which brings me to another part of my indictment of our authors: they are so cheerful! They emphasize the celebratory, liberating possibilities of Der Humour, without inviting readers to peer around the corner at the darkness in existence that humor sometimes makes light of.

Laughter gives us a distance on everyday life, and there is a certain coldness at its core. I think this is what Bergson means . . . when he speaks of the comic as demanding ‘something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart’ . . . “But if there is a coldness at the core of the comic, then this can also be disturbing, as in the case of *humour noir*. (Critchley 2002 p. 87)

Simon Critchley argues that “In humor we orbit eccentrically around a black sun” (50). Though I have friends who say I should be able to lay claim to belonging to a universal curmudgeon club, that formulation for me is too much *gloomy gus*, too much Eeyore against Gini and Singer’s cheerful Winnie the Pooh, if asserted as the essence of humor as philosophy. Both views are necessary to capture the complexity of humor or Der Humour, but Critchley’s formula does have the advantage of (again), allowing for some talk about *l’humour noir*, I think, for at the least he invites us to approach those precincts, the melancholy [black bile] and absurdity “that Breton suggests in his notion of humour noir” (Critchley 2002, p. 71). Mark Twain said “The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow; there is no humor in heaven” (1996, p. 119). To which we could add Friedrich Nietzsche: “Perhaps I know best why man is the only animal that laughs: he alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was *compelled* to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as might have been expected, the most cheerful” (1914, p. 74, original *Israeli Journal of Humor Research, September 2021, Vol. 10 Issue No. 2*

emphasis). Leave it to Nietzsche to combine Eeyore with Winnie the Pooh. These quotes all imply that the notion of “humor” expresses a strategy to cope with the human condition, and that is the profound level that Gini and Singer drill down to as philosophers. (Also, what Critchley drives at in his book: it is the core function for his notion of “true humour.”)

For satirists, a willingness to cross into not-so-funny-yet-still-comic territory relates to the debate about ethics and offensive humor. I am particularly pleased about the book’s staging the debate because it’s a vexed issue when discussing comic artifacts of all sorts. Gini’s argument for limits of what can be ridiculed implicitly acknowledges that joke telling cannot be always a positive thing, which I think is an important corrective for some of the sunny generalities about jokes and joke-telling that are touted in the early chapters. Let’s face it, many, many jokes provide a reactionary humor, or simply reinforce social consensus. The problem with restricting comic speech, however, is the same as prior restraint for serious speech: who will decide the rules of laughable engagement?

Singer argues for no restraint because “Comedic speech is radically different from other forms of speech” (134). Standup routines are not op-eds (145). Furthermore, the notion of “role ethics” grants license for behavior that are otherwise off-limits for regular folks, like the use of force granted to police officers. The same is true for “comedians”: though there are professional restrictions that should obtain, normal restrictions are not applicable (136). In general, then, it is forbidden to forbid what can be laughed at.

Singer’s big point is that “almost anything can be joked about as long as it is joked about well” (145). The question then becomes: is the satire funny? If yes, that makes it ok. These formulae seem reasonable until we ask what “well” means and who will decide. Singer admits that “judgment will not always be easy, and opinions will differ” (151), but if the punchline “lands,” all is ok: the audience agrees. Yet this ignores the people who will laugh at, for example, a racist joke.

I agree with both of them (that signals either my critical cowardice or critical diplomacy): we need discussion about limits, but satirists (and comedians in general) have a license to say what is otherwise repressed, and that is a good thing because comic speech has a special status. I agree.

Yet the debate uncovers another vexed issue for satire (and all comic artifacts): the role, indeed, the problematic of the audience.

Satire is weird, a paradox mashup of the very serious and the howlingly funny. That is why not all comedians are satirists but all satirists would claim to be comedians. That is why John Oliver and Stephen Colbert, for example, deny that they are pundits or journalists. That is why Jon Stewart kept telling Tucker Carlson in the famous *Crossfire* episode that the premise of his critique about Stewart was off-base, an argument Stewart had to repeat when interviewed by Chris Wallace of Fox News or when Stewart would have mock debates with Bill O'Reilly.

If we are honing in on satire, it is not, in my view, comic journalism, whatever Hasan Minhaj or others say (e.g., political scientists and professors of media studies) or any sort of journalism. Maybe, maybe we can say "mock journalism," but of course Stewart made *The Daily Show* famous, in part, by making mainstream journalism and corporate TV punditry a big satiric target, so maybe "mocking journalism" is even better for a lot of what is broadcast and streamed these days and tagged as satire.

Some of the best evidence to be had for my indictment that Gini and Singer are really closet philosophers of humor is the way that they use basic terms interchangeably, so that "satire" is "humor" too when it isn't "comedy." This habit troubles me some, and perhaps we will want to talk about it, but I read it as part of a divided-against-itself quality of the book, wanting to focus on satire but *really* wanting to talk about the wisdom of laughter and the gift of humor. Notice how in the following quote from the chapter "Why Are Jews So Funny?", the word "satire" is never used because the larger goal to discuss is that humor is a wisdom and a gift, of which satire is a part. What is the answer, the authors say, as a comic pushback to life's pain and disappointment? "Joking in the face of horror. Humor as an antidote to suffering. Comedy as a response to pointless tragedy. Mirth to combat the murder and madness of it all. Laughter as a celebration of survival." (114). And in the pages-long riff that ends the chapter and continues on the power of humor and laughter, a riff that includes material on one of the all-time darkest topics, the Holocaust, the word "satire" is never used (114ff).

*The Sanity of Satire* accomplishes a lot in an economical fashion. It's readable and informative. May you sell many copies and help to spread some sanity to those who read it.

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