

Authors' Response

Abraham Singer* and Al Gini**

We would like to thank our commenters for taking the time to read our little book and for engaging with it so thoughtfully. This was a book that mainly grew out of a friendly love of jokes. That it is being taken at all seriously by anyone with a reasonable claim to being a serious person themselves is a delightful surprise.

That said, in reading these various comments, we are reminded of a line from our favorite satirist who didn't make the book, Groucho Marx. For we stand accused of conflicting things. According to Caron and Basu we are overly optimistic, believing as we do that that comedy can address some quite weighty social and moral problems. But if you listen to Welbaum and Gimbel, you might think we are too pessimistic, emphasizing as we do the various downers of the human condition and humor's relation to it. Is the glass half-full or half-empty? Apparently, according to our critics, whatever it is, we're against it.

To these conflicting claims we'd like to say: guilty as charged! The book is reflective of a kind of gloomy optimism or a sunny pessimism, depending on how you look at it. We might save ourselves some time and energy by just ending our response here ("Hello! I must be going!") But given the care of our interlocutors in crafting their comments, we'll try to respond to some of their comments.

Let us start with our more cheery-eyed critics. Welbaum worries that our account of comedy grows from an overly-dismal view of existence, that we think "life is something with which we need to cope" rather than celebrate or enjoy. He is right to note that our celebration of comedy emphasizes its ability to help us deal with the harms of life. However, ours isn't a concern primarily with the metaphysical or existential dread of the human condition generally, but rather the specific sort of tragedy that is inherent to the political condition. While we probably wouldn't enlist Heidegger in making the point, Welbaum is right that there are worldviews and life-orientations that allow one to approach the mysteries of life in a joyous manner. Our point, though, is that part of living a full human life entails living in society with others, which necessarily invites politics: in the form of power dynamics, disagreements that need to be settled, and rules and procedures that all must abide to facilitate cooperation. These, being human inventions, are inherently imperfect and often commandeered to the benefits of some and the harm of others.

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This is the thing with which we need to cope, and which satire helps us with: we are drawn to a life that requires politics, and yet inevitably find that political life underwhelming if not outrightly abhorrent. The solutions proffered by politicians and philosophers can only ameliorate but never solve this intractable dilemma. Thus enters the comedian. Not to solve the problem but to confirm our underlying suspicions: “yes, there is an absurdity inherent to all this. No, you are not crazy.” If we’re talking in terms of Bill Lawrence characters, our champion is neither Lasso nor Cox, but the Janitor, who thumbs his nose at all pretension. To mangle an A.E. Housman line: Harpo can do more than Karl can, to justify God’s ways to man.

Speaking of Jewish misfit-cum-sages, Gimbel thinks our portrayal of Jewish humor is also far too mired in a pessimistic outlook of the Jewish experience. Using the great Rube Goldberg as an example, Gimbel notes that some of the greatest Jewish comedians have been the least persecuted, with their humor having less to do with finding refuge and respite than we portray. On his view, “Jewish humor is not meant to accent our Jewishness (even if it was delivered with a Jewish accent), but was meant to highlight how we would be the life of the party...if you’d invite us to the party.” Jewish humor can be an expression of a positive outlook just as much as it is a response to a history of marginalization.

In making this point, Gimbel highlights an important mistake of ours: to overly-homogenize the Jewish experience and, as a consequence, to homogenize the nature and genesis of Jewish humor. While, yes, the downtrodden peasants of the shtetl joked in Yiddish, so too did the educated doctors of Vienna. The diaspora is characterized by a plurality of experiences, and thus a plurality of motivations for humor. Yet, we want to emphasize, they still share the experience of diaspora. Whether its finding refuge in gallows humor, or trying to ingratiate oneself into mainstream society, the comedy still comes from a place of the outsider. That such comedians may have been successful in joining the party, and that they now find themselves the life of it, doesn’t erase the fact that they felt they were not initially invited, and that they felt compelled to knock on the door and put on a show for entry. For us, there is something unique in Jewish humor that comes from this position, even if it is expressed in very different ways.

If our view of why comedy exists is deeply pessimistic, our other interlocutors are right that our view of what comedy can accomplish is rather optimistic. Perhaps too much so. We argue in the book not only that satire and comedy provide a refuge from the tragedy of our political lives but that it can do some work to solve it!

Basu worries that the actual history of comedy is far more ambivalent than we let on. While political humor may have democratic properties in the sense that it can elicit certain sorts of attitudes and weaken pretensions of power, it can also harm those projects. Trump's rise to power was, Basu rightly observes, motivated by the humiliation he felt by being mocked (for instance by Seth Meyers). His success in being elected President was similarly aided by the mocking disposition of his critics, who didn't take him seriously until too late. Satire does not only undercut the powerful; it can also goad its targets into further treachery. Comedy can also be hijacked by the powerful and used—in the form of self-satire—to inure oneself of criticism.

These are fair points, which we readily concede, though we note that the logic of such an argument can be applied to most things as well. The consequences of an action are generally hard to predict, which is always the burden of a consequentialist approach to morality. Yes, satirizing a Trump might serve to further embolden him; but so too might treating him seriously have given him a sort of credence and respectability that might have had other consequences. Our point isn't that comedy always and everywhere is positive in its effect. Specific instances may lead to disastrous results, and (as Basu rightly notes) more honor-bound cultures will tend to respond in far more severe ways to satire. However, the more general thrust of the argument is that, generally speaking, comedy tends to have these positive effects in a democracy, and that democracies which cultivate the sort of attitudes that allow comedy to flourish can reap the benefits, despite the misfiring that is bound to happen.

Caron similarly accuses us of being overly-celebratory about the possibilities of humor, and not paying attention to the “darkness in existence that humor sometimes makes light of.” We understand why he thinks this. Our emphasis is not on the existential darkness of the human condition, and so the Nietzschean who thinks humans uniquely laugh because humans are unique in their suffering and unhappiness will find our argument a bit too sunny. But again, we want to insist there is a darkness at the core of our argument. However, it is a political darkness brought about by humans' tense relationship with the political life, both needing it and detesting it.

This point perhaps helps shine further light on Caron's observation that our definition of satire is slippery, if not downright elusive. Indeed, as he notes, we sometimes forget to discuss satire at all, and just simply talk about jokes and comedy. Part of this slippage is due to what Caron charitably refers to as the “divided-against-itself” quality of the book, but which might more accurately be described as “the burdens of co-authorship.” *Mea culpa*. However, some of this

slippage is due to our political conception of what comedy does and is for. If, as we argue, the first joke is the political joke, and that almost all humor takes facets of our socio-politics lives either as targets or for granted, then the line between satire-in-a-strict-sense, and comedy generally does get blurry. Pete Seeger once noted that we are often far too narrow in what we conceive of as an act of politics or protest: “a lullaby is a propaganda song, in the opinion of the three-year-old who doesn’t want to be put to sleep. A Hymn is a controversial song. Try singing one in the wrong church.” So too can a fart joke be political, we say, when it is set against the background of tense gender relations. If this doesn’t fully excuse it, this perhaps at least sheds light on why our use of the term "satire" is murky; because we take the distinction between satirical and non-satirical comedy to be murky as well.

Again, we thank our commenters for their generous engagement with our little book, and Lydia Amir for her hard work (and deep patience) in bringing this event together.