

## Owed to a Gricean Earn: Live Comedy and the Ethics of the Appropriately Appreciative Audience

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### Abstract

Much has been written about the moral responsibility of comic performers, but little work has been done in terms of the obligations of audience. Joking is an asymmetrical relational act, that is, it is directional. The joke-teller controls the conversational context during the telling, but after the punch line it is the audience who wields the power. The use of this power to reward, punish, or ignore the joke teller who took a conversational risk comes with moral responsibilities. However, the nature of that relationship—and thus the ethical obligation—depends upon the context of the joking, for example, whether the joke-teller is a friend in conversation or a professional comedian.

**Key words:** humor, ethics, pragmatics, performance

### Introduction

Brad ran a great room north of Baltimore. I had some new material I wanted to test-drive and e-mailed early enough in the week to get a plum spot on the list. I sat in the back with the other regulars I knew, when a young guy, a kid in his early 20's I had never seen before, went up. He was good, really good. He clearly patterned his schtick after Mitch Hedberg, but the material was fresh and clever and his delivery was tight—good presence, good tone, good timing. But the room gave him no love...just crickets. He died a flaming death up there. But, he had been good. When Brad came to the mic to introduce the next comic after the set, he chastised the audience. The kid was better than the reception he had been given. Brad let the audience know they were wrong. The tone he used made clear the sense of wrong he meant. It wasn't that they were factually wrong or wrong in judgement; he told them unequivocally that they were morally wrong in the way they treated that performer.

The question here is whether Brad was right. Are there moral responsibilities one takes on by agreeing to be a member of an audience at a comic performance? If so, what are they? Clearly, there are the usual moral expectations that comes from merely being in a social context. One

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should not shoot other members of the audience at random with a gun. Clearly, there are expectations associated with being an audience member at a performance of any type. Taking the loud cell phone call during a movie, concert, or lecture is, of course, problematic. But are there moral obligations that are specific to live comic presentation? Much ink is spilled on this question in terms of the responsibility of the performer, but what about the audience? If the performer has done a good job, does the audience have a moral responsibility to show some love?

### **Humor as Performance**

The reason there is a lack of consideration of the audience side of the equation is that most philosophers are only consumers of comedy. Comedy is consumed, for the most part, passively. By this, I mean, that it is watched on television, streamed on Netflix, listened to on satellite radio, or, if you are sufficiently old school or hipster enough, played from a comedy album. The audience in all of these tokens of comic performance is removed from the performer. The performance has been reduced to a thing.

But comedy is essentially a relational activity. Comedy is performed in community. A performer needs an audience. The performer has to not only write the material and speak it in public, but must do so in a fashion that creates a relationship with the audience. While all of the passive forms mentioned above alienate the comic and the audience in space and time, the bits were initially performed in a club or auditorium in which the comic was delivering the material to the audience in a way that allows a direct communicational connection.

Comedy is a relational activity at its heart, and, as both H. Paul Grice and my marriage counselor have correctly noted, relationships require behavioral expectations to be followed or violated for allowable, specific reasons if the relationship is to achieve its goals. The goals are determined by the needs of the members of the relationship and the expected structure of the relationship. The question, here, then, is, “Given the context of a live comedy performance, what are the goals and nature of the relationship between performer and audience that generate specific behavioral expectations of a comedy show audience member?”

Let’s begin by clarifying what is meant by the term “comedy performance.” This could be broadly construed to mean any situation in which there is someone whom another seeks to amuse. This is far too broad for this discussion. The question is being considered here solely in terms of the formal performer/audience relation at a stand-up comedy performance.

We will follow Avner Ziv (1984) in distinguishing between what he terms “amateur humorists” and “professional humorists.” Amateur humorists create humor in informal settings. These are the funny people we all know and love...or at least know. Let us use the term “humor” or “jokes” for their performative acts.<sup>1</sup> Professional humorists, on the other hand, perform in structured venues designed for the explicit purpose of the performance. Amateur humorists create the space of performance, enveloping the audience—whether they chose to be witness to the performance or not. Professional humorists perform within arranged settings within which audience members have intentionally chosen to be a part, knowing that the performance is intended to be humorous. We will term such intentionally created formal contexts, “comedy.”

There are significant differences between informal, amateur humor and comedy. While both involve the telling of jokes by a performer to an audience, it is a difference in kind, not merely of degree because the nature of the relationship and of the members of the relationship are different. As such, the goals and expectations, and thus the moral expectations associated with the act, also differ. But since both involve the telling of jokes, it will be informative to see what we can and cannot take from a treatment of the informal, amateur context and apply to the context of the audience and comedian at a comedy performance.

### **Asymmetric Gricean Maxims**

I have argued elsewhere (Gimbel 2018) that the act of joking belongs to a particular class of conversational behaviors, those in which there are asymmetric power differentials. The behavioral expectations in a classroom, in a court of law, or at a wedding are different from those of the usual conversational context because in these sorts of cases, there is an uneven distribution of conversational power.

Grice’s conversational maxims (1975) were developed not for these cases, but for the standard case of two co-equal conversants. For the case in which one is speaking to a conversational equal, the maxims work quite well.

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<sup>1</sup> Not all acts of humor are jokes, but for the purposes of this paper, the distinction can be ignored as the cases to be considered are only those of the amateur humorist telling jokes and the professional humorist telling jokes.

Recall his four maxims:

1. *Maxim of Quantity*: Make your contribution neither more nor less than is required.
2. *Maxim of Quality*: Be genuine and not spurious. Do not say that which you believe to be false.
3. *Maxim of Relation*: Make your contribution appropriate to the conversation at the stage at which you contribute.
4. *Maxim of Manner*: Be clear.

Conversation is a teleological activity and as such, for the sake of progress toward the goal of meaningful discourse, it is expected that all conversants will either (1) follow the maxims to allow for meaningful conversation, or (2) violate the maxims only to communicate with your co-conversants through conversational implicatures, that is, through clearly meaningful inferences that explain your deviation from expected conversational behaviors.

This scheme works well when the goal of the conversation is meaningful discourse among equals. But we enter a context of conversational hierarchy, in which there is an uneven distribution of conversational power, when there is a different goal for the discourse. In the classroom, the goal is the professing of knowledge from the superior instructor to the inferior students. In the courtroom, it is for the orderly presentation of evidence and oppositional argument to determine likely truth that could potentially give rise to a life sentence involving a loss of personal freedoms in a life of hard, seemingly purposeless labor. In the case of a wedding...well, pretty much the same thing.

Because the goals of the discourse are different, the behaviors expected in the conversational contexts are different. These sorts of cases require a reworking of the standard Gricean account of conversational behavior specific to the context.

Joking, like these other examples, involves an uneven distribution of conversational power. The joker commands attention and the audience is passive, unless and only unless they are expected not to be. In these situations, the contributions of the audience are clearly prescribed. If the joker says, "knock, knock," the answer is "who's there." The expectation is not only that the audience will respond, but respond in a certain way, in a certain time, with a certain rhythm, in a certain tone. There are conversational roles being occupied in the telling of jokes and those who are fluent in the process have internalized the expected behaviors on both sides of the punch line.

The case of joking is similar to the above cases in being a situation with unequal conversational power, but it is even more complex and more interesting than the classroom, the court of law, or the wedding because the asymmetric power relation between joker and audience is dynamic. The power differential changes three times from the initial equilibrium during the joking process.

Joking, in the case of amateur, informal humorists, occurs in four stages. Stage 0 is the initial context of standard Gricean conversation. Jokes are told during pre-existing conversations and we start with the standard case of two co-equal conversants.

Stage 1 occurs when one conversant, the joker, requests to the other, the audience, that the Gricean maxims be temporarily suspended and replaced so that a joke may be told. Given that the act of joking requires moving from an equal to an unequal distribution of conversational power, the joker has to convince the audience to surrender conversational power to him in order to seek the new goal of comically amusing the audience. "Want to hear a good one?" is a standard way of selling the move to unequal conversational power. At this point, it is the audience who possesses the advantage in conversational control because the request allows the audience to veto the move to a joking context and rebuffing the offer, thereby remaining in the Gricean co-equal stance.

But, if the audience agrees to enter the joking context, conversational power shifts during stage 2 at which point the joker is now in control of the conversation. The joker is active and the audience is passive. The joker is free to speak as he will and the audience can only react in the prescribed fashion expected.

These behavioral expectations can be codified in the Gricean style for each role. For the joker:

1. *Maxim of Quantity*: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke.
2. *Maxim of Quality*: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke.
3. *Maxim of Relation*: Say only what is relevant to the joke.
4. *Maxim of Manner*: Tell the joke efficiently.

For the audience:

1. *Maxim of Quantity*: Do not interrupt the flow and timing of the joke and only answer when prompted.

2. *Maxim of Quality*: Be open-minded enough to allow the joke to determine the rules of the world of the joke and fill in the rest of the world of the joke with reasonable expectations of how the joke world works.
3. *Maxim of Relation*: When prompted to speak, say only what is expected by the set up of the joke.
4. *Maxim of Manner*: Follow the joke to its conclusion without trying to step on the joker's punch line. A joke is not a riddle, do not try to solve it before the joker is allowed to properly time the punch.

Both the joker and the audience follow the prescribed behavioral expectations of the respective roles and the joke is told.

The delivery of the punch line concludes stage 2, which immediately commences stage 3 wherein the audience responds to the joke. The response may be laughter, may be words of approval, may be a rolling of eyes, may be shrugged shoulders with a verbalized, "I don't get it," may be moral condemnation, may be a slap across the face... may be any number of reactions. But the reaction constitutes a judgment of the joker. This judgement may contain aesthetic, moral, and/or social elements. But it is the audience's prerogative to judge the performance as a social and artistic act as she sees fit. As such, there is a power reversal between stages 2 and 3 wherein the audience moves from the inferior position of passivity and the joker of superior activity to a place where the audience wields the conversational power over the joker by sitting in judgement.

This concludes the joking act and the conversation can then resume with the restoration of an equilibrium of conversational power...or, if the joke was sufficiently offensive, the judgment may preclude such a state and the conversation will no longer be possible. But, either way, the joking as a prescribed, dynamic exchange of conversational power has ended with the goal of comic amusement of the audience being successfully or unsuccessfully reached.

This is the structure of the informal, amateur humorist. It is akin to someone saying, "Hey, let's bake a batch of cookies." The case of the formal, professional humorist, on the other hand, is like someone saying, "I am going to hire a personal pastry chef." The expectations of what comes out of each is different because the relation and the members of the relationship in the two

cases are different. In both, you end up with a sweet treat, but surely what might delight in one case would rightly disappoint, and thereby constitute a failure to satisfy one's duty, in the other.<sup>2</sup>

In the informal, amateur case, we begin with two people who have a pre-existing conversational relationship based on mutual recognition and equal conversational power and in the midst of this equality arose an island of dynamic conversational inequality which resolved itself and the conversation and relationship continued (or didn't) based on the usual goals of conversation, e.g., sharing of perspectives, exchange of information, personal engagement...

This was only interrupted because one co-equal conversant thought it appropriate to try to comically amuse the other in passing. Some of your friends are good at this, others are not, yet others think they are, but aren't.

The formal, professional humorist seems *prima facie* to do what your funny friend does, only better. Both tell jokes. Both strive to amuse. Both use similar linguistic means in doing so. We would think that the sort of modified Gricean account should hold equally well for both accounts. But this is wrong. There are three crucial differences in the contexts: (1) the members of the relationship, (2) the nature of the relationship, and (3) the setting of the speech acts.

### **Members of the Relationship**

We usually think of professional humorists like we think of professional basketball players. We all have friends who are good at basketball. Take all of the people who are good at basketball and find the best among them. We make them the professionals. Our friends who are good at basketball are just like the professionals, except that they just aren't quite good enough at it.

In the same way, the standard view works, we all know funny people, people who know lots of jokes and who are really good at telling them. These are the people who are the life of the party. We get these people together and the funniest of the funny people are made professional comedians. Our funny friends are just like professional comedians, except they aren't quite as funny.

It turns out that this view is wrong. If we look at the people who are our funny friends, they are markedly different from professional comedians in several important ways. Ziv both surveyed existing studies and conducted his own research into the personalities of these groups

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<sup>2</sup> Successful completion of one's duty in this context would be considered a case of just desserts.

and found that in the case of amateur humorists, that is, funny friends, these people tend to be extroverts who “feel at ease with others and enjoy being liked. Their use of humor is primarily motivated by the need for acceptance. It is certain that giving others pleasure by making them laugh increases their social status (Ziv 1984: 168).” In terms of intelligence, there is not a significant difference between the funny and not-as-funny friends.

The funnier among us normal people tend to have good relationships with parents. Emotionally, funny friends tend to be stable and up-beat. They “are generally in a good mood; anxiety and worry are alien to them. Optimistic, fun-loving *bon vivants*, amateur humorists love life and tend to be of the sanguine temperament described by Hippocrates (Ziv 1984: 171).”

Professional comedians tend to follow a different personality profile than funny friends in important ways. In terms of intelligence, where amateur funny people can be found anywhere along the intelligence spectrum, professionals tend to be significantly more intelligent than average with creative abilities far above normal. Unlike their amateur counterparts, professional comedians tend to come from turbulent homes in which there was discord between the parents, but they themselves tended to have rocky parental relations, especially with their mothers. “comics were found to have better relations with their fathers, while their mothers were critical and demanding” (Ziv 1984: 138-9).

Unlike their amateur counterparts who tend to be extroverts with a sunny outlook, professional comedians are the opposite. “A striking fact that one rapidly discovers when working with professional humorists is that most of them are very serious people; contrary to expectation, they do not laugh much” (Ziv 1984: 145). While they make their living standing in front of people, they tend to be introverts. “Performers have to mingle and interact with many people in their professional lives, but in private they are rather reclusive. They report having few real friends...they hate being part of a crowd. They do not use their talents as humorists much in social gatherings” (Ziv 1984, 145).

Emotionally, “as a group, professional humorists are highly emotional. The existing studies, in general, support the old stereotype of the sad clown” (Ziv 1984: 147). Professional comedians are less emotionally stable than the average person with negative self-image, anxiety, and deep insecurities with a sense of inferiority.

In terms of personality, then, there is a significant difference between funny friends and professional comedians. Since humor is an inherently relational act, informal, amateur comic



experiences set the audience in relation to a very different conversational partner than when the same audience is engaged with a professional comedian.

### **Nature of the Relationship**

In the case of the informal, amateur humorist, the occasion for humor occurred within a pre-existing relationship in which both the joker and the audience had voluntarily engaged each other as equals. They came to know one another in a non-humorous context with a shared conversational goal that need not have involved humor or amusement in any way. The humor occurs within a pre-existing inter-personal relationship in which both parties come to know the other as a co-conversant to some degree as a full person and the attempt at humor was couched within the developing relationship between these two individuals who see each other as autonomous individuals to be engaged as such. To use Martin Buber's terms, in a conversation we see the other as a Thou, not as an It. If you have a conversation with someone and then come across her on the street a week later, it would be rude for her to fail to acknowledge you. She needn't assert a friendship as the result of the conversation, but the engagement of a conversation creates a degree of familiarity that brings with it the sort of minimal care-based relationship discussed in thinkers like Nel Noddings (1986). To have conversed is to have accepted the other as a being-for-themself.

But in the case of the professional comedian, the formality of the context of the speech act eliminates that sort of relational residue. Even if the comedian was doing crowd work and singled you out in a playful way, asking your name and asking about deeply personal matters about which she then joked, that sort of engagement does not bring with it the expectation of being treated after the fact with any degree of familiarity. The formal context creates a frame around the stage that alienates the comedian from the audience in a way that does not exist for the amateur joker. The amateur is engaging the audience as an individual seeking to deepen the relationship between them through the joy created by humor, whereas the professional comedian is engaging the audience solely for the sake of that moment.

It is certainly the case that the performer cares who the audience is as people. When I performed in east Baltimore, the audience was very different than when I performed in suburban Washington D.C. Not caring who was in front of me would lead to failure as a comedian. There had to be a relationship for the humor acts to succeed, for the jokes to land. But the care about the identity of the individuals was a very different sort of care. It was one with a constrained horizon.

It seems odd to even label it as care because the comedian holds no long-term concern for the well-being of the audience. Rather, it is an interest for the sake of the short-term, mutual goal of the comedy, that the audience comes to be in a state of entertainment during a sufficient proportion of the set.

The goal of the joking in the informal and formal cases is quite different. Both involve creating comic amusement in the audience, but in the informal case, this is a means to another goal—the goal which launched the non-humorous conversation. On the other hand, the comic amusement is not a means, but an end for the formal act.

This is not to say that the performer may not have an ulterior goal. The comedian may seek to influence the audience's political beliefs or seek to be famous and wealthy and therefore the causing of amusement is a means to that goal. But in the time on the stage, the telos of the speech act is the amusement itself. If it were not, then finding and taking an alternate route to the secondary goal would not change the overall act itself. But in the case of an audience going to see a comedy performance, only to have the comedian do something other than comedy, would surely change the speech act.

So, if the nature of the relationship between the audience and the formal, professional humorist is a different relationship, what kind of relationship is it?

The obvious first option is that the professional comedian/audience relationship is that of employer/employee. The people paid their cover charge and two drink minimum, that is the fee in return of which they receive comic amusement. The comedian is their employee. It is a purely contractual relationship. If we take Carol Gilligan's (1983) sense of contractual relationships, then this would explain the lack of lasting engagement after the fact.

But this not the correct model. From a trivial, structural point of view, the audience does not pay the comedian. The club books the comedian and the audience pays the club. The existence of the middleman, here is not trivial. The relationship between audience and performer is not based on direct exchange.

It is certainly true that the comedian needs money (as all in a capitalist society do) and hopes to be able to live comfortably based on the income from humor work, but the goal at the level of comedian/audience interaction is not one of direct exchange.

When one sells one's labor to, say, work as a salesperson or in a manufacturing plant, then the goal of the activity is provided by the employer. The boss tells the employee what to do and

she must do it to earn the wage. The wage is the worker's goal in performing the labor and the completion of the labor is the employer's goal.

In the case of the comedian, the wage is—but for a tiny minority of big-named headliners—meager. At times, it is not money, but drink tickets. If one enters the world of stand-up comedy for the money, one is delusional. The purpose of the labor is not the wage. The audience/comedian relationship is based on a common goal of a successful, effective artistic performance. The comedian needs money, but seeks the opportunity to perform for the sake of the performance.

The performance, from the point of view of the performer, is a token, not a type. Each performance is a test to see how the material goes over. Each performance provides an opportunity to test, to tighten, and to hone the set. There is a relationship between the particular audience and audience member and the performer, but that relationship from the performer's perspective is mediated by the jokes. The comedian wants the audience to be comically amused and seeks to relate so that they will be, but the relationship involves the evolving bits that are used.

As such, we see that the relationship is different from employer/employee. In that sort of relationship, the employee does whatever the employer wants for the sake of the wage. In the comedian/audience relationship, the comedian does what the comedian does, seeing how to make it mutually desirable in meeting the goal of the particular audience.

But what is it that the comedian does? What are the jokes that mediate the relationship? The material the comedian presents is her own creative output which is likely drawn from her lived experience or her observation of the culture and her cleverness in interpreting and presenting it in an unexpected fashion.

This mediated relationship leaves the performer vulnerable in at least two ways: as a performer and as a person. The performer is vulnerable qua performer in that ineffective performance implies a lack of creativity, a lack of presence, a lack of insight, a lack of cleverness. To be unable to perform this artform successfully demonstrates a lack of virtues striven for.

But the vulnerability in this artform is also more personal. Whether it is Amy Schumer making jokes that make her seem racist, Steve Martin making jokes that make him seem imbecilic, or Anthony Jeselnik making jokes that make him seem sociopathic, the mediating material, because it comes from the mind of the performer, risks making the performer feel exposed as a truly flawed individual. The material must connect with the audience and given that all human beings are flawed, the most common approach to humor is to evoke commonality by presenting

and/or exaggerating one's flaws. But this sort of emotional exposure leaves one vulnerable. This is a vulnerability that is not often experienced by the funny friend telling a good one he just heard.

Comedy is most likely to be successful when it is honest. As such, the flaws that the comic employs in crafting the humor, will often be in some way related to his true self. When there is a lack of honesty, the material often falls flat, it fails to resonate. To connect with the audience, to create the relationship necessary for comic amusement, the comedian crafts mediating material that he thinks will resonate with the flawed audience, that is, that will build an emotional bridge of connection from the specifics of his lived context to the audience's. But that often requires a truthfulness that we keep hidden from public view in order to create the mask of decency we want others to see when they look at us. Removing that mask in order to show a commonality of the underlying face risks alienating the audience and diminishing the performer as a person. This is a personal risk far beyond that accepted by the funny friend in hoping you will like the good one he just heard.

### **Setting of the Speech Act**

The final difference is in the context of the humor act. In the case of the informal, amateur humorist, the joke is sideshow. If it fails—assuming the failure is not catastrophic in terms of offensiveness—then the conversation simply continues on with an eye roll or a head shake. If it succeeds, it may impart an additional boost in interpersonal connection, what Ted Cohen (2003) termed “joke intimacy,” or it may be a temporary island of amusement in an otherwise interesting or banal conversation. Since comic amusement was a passing interest, not the central goal of the encounter, success or failure of the joke is secondary to the larger goal of the conversational interaction.

But in the case of the formal, professional humorist, it is the sole purpose of the forming of the temporary relationship. There is naught but a stool and a mic stand to hide behind. The comedian stands metaphorically naked in front of a room full of strangers and told to make these people she's never met relaxed enough to laugh.

The success of the comic act is entire basis on which the short-term relationship is built. It is a teleological relationship, built upon this and only this goal. But that goal is difficult to achieve precisely because of the structure of the forum in which she has to achieve it. We know that people laugh genuine Duchenne laughter much more easily with people they know well. Yet, we are

demanding that within minutes of introduction and the ability to only relate from the alienating confines of a stage.

This spatial alienation is amplified in some cases because there is a spotlight. In my first performance, I was shocked that with the spotlight, I could only see about six of the hundred or so people in the club. I had to form a human bond strong enough to allow laughter from people I could not even see.

In the case of informal, amateur joking, the humor act is embedded in interpersonal space within a conversation that has pre-connected the joker to the audience, in other words, a situation that aligns the most germane factors to support the possibility of succeeding in comically amusing. On the other hand, the formal setting of the professional comedian is designed in a way that makes what is already a difficult act even more challenging. There is a lack of interpersonal connection and a spatial alienation that must be overcome (or used creatively) in order to achieve the preconditions that are most likely to give rise to laughter.

### **The Anti-Social Contract**

So, if we synthesize the three differences between the contexts of informal, amateur humorist and the formal, professional humorist, we see that the professional is often a deeply insecure, emotionally unstable person with a mother who was critical and demanding, instead of supportive and caring. We take this kind of person and place him in a financially insecure role in which the ability to provide the basic means of survival for himself and possibly those he loves most depends on his ability to take random rooms of complete strangers and make them comfortable enough to laugh at his flaws which he presents to these strangers who will judge him for his ability to make his personal failings relatable to them. “Them” being people who would never tell him of their foibles, yet get to judge him and his. But, we in the seats have paid a cover charge and ordered two drinks, so, go ahead, make me laugh... That is the reality of the interpersonal relation between audience and comedian.

As is the case with Gricean standard sort of situation with co-equal conversants as well as the asymmetric cases of the classroom, courtroom, and wedding, and the dynamic asymmetric case of the informal joke, there should be Gricean principles guiding the formal, professional comic conversational context. I have collected these in what I have elsewhere termed “the anti-social contract”:

1. The comedian willingly undertakes responsibility for doing an act which is intended in good faith to serve at least one of the twin goals of amusing the audience and/or advancing the artform.
2. The bounds of acceptable speech are significantly loosened for the comedian's act.
3. The audience allows the comedian to command the audience's attention for the sake of meeting one or both of the goals.
4. The audience judges the comedian's success in meeting his/her/their responsibility and may communicate that judgment in ways that do not impede the ability of the comedian to undertake his/her/their performing responsibility.

The question at hand clearly concerns condition 4. Elsewhere, I have considered the ramifications of this condition in terms of the communication in cases of extreme dissatisfaction with the material or delivery. Does it justify heckling? But in this case, the question concerns both the judgment and communication in a quite different case, one in which the comedian's work was not unsuccessful, but not to the taste of the audience.

What ought to be the behavioral expectations that derive from the sort of relationship sketched above in this sort of situation? If the audience is following these Gricean-type rules and if the comedian performed a decent set in good faith, what does the audience owe to the performer in terms of communication, regardless of whether the successful set was their cup of tea? If we assume that the performer is performing in good faith, trying to do a good set, are the factors involving the personality of the performer, the nature of the relationship between performer and audience, and the facts about the setting mitigating in such a way that the aesthetic or moral judgment cast on the performer for her material should be graded on a curve?

Consider a case where there is this sort of moral curve. Let's say that you have just acquired a medical condition that requires a restricted diet. All of your usual fare is off the menu. Your partner decides to try to be nice and make you something new that fits your needs. She shops and spends hours preparing a dish for you...and it is the opposite of delicious. How do you respond as a caring partner?

You express gratitude and you soft peddle your distaste. "Not my favorite, but it's o.k. Thank you for doing this. I know how hard you tried. It's certainly not as good as your lentil loaf. That was one of my favorites. How did I get a lentil allergy all of a sudden? I miss my favorite

foods.” The failure is not to be directly expressed. It is not lying, but the report of the lack of aesthetic success should be moderated by the context from which it arose.

Is this the case with the comedian? There are some similarities in the contexts, but two important differences that should obviate the need to soften the news of the failure. First, there is no pre-existing nor *post facto* relationship as in the food case. The person who prepared the food, did so just for you. The comedian did tell the jokes for you, if you happened to be in audience that show, but it was not as a result of some relationship external to the performance.

Second, the mediating material is being evaluated and evolving. If something (or everything) fails to land, it helps to know. It hurts to know, but it helps to know. So, there is no requirement to express gratitude through appreciation—tepid or enthusiastic—regardless of the success or failure of the humor act.

However, audiences should take into account two factors that do effect assessment. First, the difficulty and vulnerability of the performer ought to provide a multiplicative coefficient. In competitive diving, judges give marks for the technique of the diver, but to calculate the final score, there is an additional factor for the difficulty of the dive. It ought to be same in comedy. It’s hard and when something hard is done for your benefit, that fact ought to figure in your judgment of the act.

The second is the case in which a comedian performs successful jokes that are not to your taste. The jokes did not fail. They were good jokes, well delivered. It just isn’t the stuff that tickles your particular funny bone. While the best of all reactions to comedy is a burst of uncontrollable Duchenne laughter, this is not the only possible positive reaction to successful jokes. But limiting the reactions to laughing or not laughing makes the reaction ambiguous to the comedian.

Recognition of a job well done that does not result in a guffaw can warrant what comedians call “clapter,” that is, appreciative applause as a direct response to a joke. Comedians hate clapter because to them it means that the joke was cognitively, but not affectively effective. It often signals agreement with the sentiment behind the joke, but failed to create the neurophysiological outcome hoped for. But comedians need to get over this. Clapter is an audience’s way of expressing appreciation for a job well done. Audiences should have multiple ways to express comic appreciation and those means should be accepted as such.

And those sorts of reactions should have been employed in Baltimore that night. By sitting stone-faced throughout a successful set, by not providing any positive feedback to a comic who

performed successfully, the audience was morally culpable. They did not need to laugh. To fake laugh is to lie. But the material was well-structured and well-delivered. The comedian had exposed himself emotionally for the sake of the audience's amusement and satisfied his end of the bargain. He was owed what he earned and what he earned was a positive reaction from those for the sake of whom he performed.

Brad was right. They were wrong, morally wrong.

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