we have the value of the original, untreated condition. How the matter will resolve depends upon the particulars. Suppose the original condition were a generally recognized disease, such as Huntington’s chorea. Since there is presumably little if any value to be attached to such conditions, the interests of the child would be decisive. However, in cases where we hold that it is important not to treat the value of the original condition as second-rate, such as in the case of sex or racial selection, the interests of the child, unfortunately real though they may be in our society, may not be decisive. We do not want to treat those conditions as being of little value, as if they were diseases. The coherence of our values might not tolerate it.

Old Eugenics vs. New Eugenics

Despite the differences, the new eugenics involves the same kind of conflict that underlay the old eugenics, but with the positions reversed. The old eugenics pitted an alleged state interest in the quality of the genetic composition of the community (the gene pool) against individual rights and liberties over reproduction, i.e., the value of improving the gene pool versus the value of individual reproductive autonomy. The case for the old eugenics foundered on false empirical assumptions. Wild claims were made regarding what sort of conditions are inheritable, among which were “nomadism,” “shiftlessness,” and “thalassophilia” (love of the sea). In addition, false claims were made regarding how much gene frequencies are affected by selective breeding. A standard calculation from population genetics shows that reducing the frequency of a recessive gene from 5 percent to 2.5 percent, even with a vigorous eugenics program, would take over 200 generations! I wish I could say that the violation of individual rights was decisive in the downfall of the old eugenics, but neither history nor the courts support that view. When the public health is at stake, individual rights are seen as luxuries. Exposing the false empirical assumptions contributed to the view that the quality of the gene pool is not a public health problem, and so contributed to the repudiation of the old eugenics.

In contrast, the new eugenics pits the alleged interests of an individual against the value the state would find in not having certain human conditions manipulated—against a concern for the stability and harmony of the community. Admittedly, the ways in which a particular case of eugenics could constitute a threat to that concern will not always be entirely clear. Indeed, when the genetic condition to be altered is unquestionably defective, the state’s interest will coincide with the child’s interest since reducing the frequency of such genes is in the interest of public health. There is a danger here, however. If genetic diseases are once again held to constitute a public health problem, modern eugenics could very well share the moral collapse of the old eugenics.

—Robert Wachbroit

This article is adapted and condensed from “Designing the Goods,” a talk prepared for a workshop on Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy, sponsored by the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, held at The Catholic University of America, June 24–26, 1987.

Racist and Sexist Jokes: How Bad Are They (Really)?

In 1976 Earl Butz, President Ford’s popular secretary of agriculture, fell from grace with almost unprecedented abruptness. On a flight to California after the Republican National Convention, he committed an offense so unforgivable that the public outcry drove him from office less than seventy-two hours after the story broke. The offense: telling a racist joke. Two administrations later, James Watt, the embattled secretary of the interior whom critics had unsuccessfully tried to unseat over a host of environmental issues, finally made his fatal misstep: he remarked jocularly that his coal advisory commission boasted the impeccably balanced mixture of “a black, a woman, two Jews, and a cripple.” The joke precipitated Watt’s forced resignation.

What did Butz and Watt do that was so terrible? How can two prominent officials lose their jobs over jokes? Doesn’t that seem a kind of joke itself, laying bare our national oversensitivity and humorlessness? Millions of us tell racist, sexist, heterosexist, or ethnic jokes; millions of us are offended by their telling—especially if the joke hits too close to home. And when members of the target group take offense, the question comes: What’s the matter? Can’t you take a joke? Where’s your sense of humor?

“It’s Only a Joke”

Few presumably would defend racist, ethnic, and (hetero)sexist jokes as cultural treasures, but many of the jokes are cleverly constructed, such as the infinite variations on “How many so-and-so’s does it take to
change a lightbulb?" which deftly caricature alleged group characteristics. "How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a lightbulb?" "None: Don't mind me, I'll just sit here in the dark." "In a grim world, maybe anything to laugh about is cause for celebration.

Ronald de Sousa, professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto, asks whether humor generally can be the object of moral censure. After all, it could be claimed that humor is too trivial to merit moral condemnation; the propriety of telling or laughing at certain jokes is a matter only of good or bad taste, with the duty to refrain from racist jokes "merely a minor social duty, like the duty not to fart or burp." De Sousa concedes (which many others would not), that "laughter...does not have very significant consequences." But he counters that laughter—how a person laughs and what he or she laughs at—nonetheless yields insights into character. Even the sound of someone's laughter can be revelatory: "Imagine a man whose habitual sound of laughter is a cackle, or a snicker. Would you like your daughter to marry him?" But is such a reaction merely an aesthetic one? De Sousa concludes not. We judge laughter as a symptom not only of personal style but of moral character as well—"There are cases in which we say: 'If you can laugh at something like that, you must be insensitive [or] cruel.' " In the case of racist and sexist jokes, a natural judgment is "If you can laugh at something like that, you must be a racist or a sexist."

Philosopher Merrie Bergmann explains what sexist jokes show about character by appealing to one standard theory of humor: "the source of funniness in a humorous episode is the incongruous," attended to or contemplated in fun. The theory applies to sexist humor in this way: "Sexist humor is humor in which sexist beliefs, attitudes, and/or norms either must be held in order to perceive an incongruity or are used to add to the fun effect of the incongruity." She gives as an example a supposedly comic postcard, showing an attractive female sunbathing with a newspaper across her midriff; the headline reads, "Today's Sport." Bergmann observes, "Perceiving an incongruity here depends upon having a sexist attitude toward women. In our culture, there is nothing incongruous in a newspaper resting on the body of a sunbather. Nor is there anything incongruous in a newspaper's having a page headed 'Today's Sport.' What is incongruous is that the newspaper headline should refer to, or label, the body that is shaded by the paper, that is, that 'Today's Sport' is the female body in question. And perceiving this incongruity depends on seeing the female's body as a sex object." De Sousa argues that to laugh at such a joke is to show that one shares the underlying sexist assumptions that are necessary to "get" its humor. To laugh at a joke like this one, de Sousa says, "marks you as a sexist. It's not a convincing defense to say: 'I was merely going along with the assumptions required to get the point of the joke.' Such a joke "makes us laugh only insofar as the assumptions

on which it is based are attitudes actually shared."

Is it true that people who tell racist and sexist jokes thereby show themselves to be racists and sexists? It seems, on Bergmann's and de Sousa's theory, that someone truly concerned about racism and sexism can enjoy racist and sexist jokes only at a meta-level, where the laughter is directed not at the intended butt of the joke, but turned on the jokers themselves, who are ridiculed for being the kind of people who find a joke like that funny. There is something comical, for example, in a male boss who jokes to a roomful of female secretaries, "Why did God make women? Because sheep can't type!" and then wonders why no one else is laughing.

Can't derogatory jokes also be enjoyed by someone who, while no racist or sexist, nonetheless takes a sly pleasure in puncturing liberal pretensions and poking fun at societal pieties? The very outrageousness of determinedly tasteless humor can be oddly refreshing. This species of pleasure in racist and sexist jokes, however, seems parasitical on a prior recognition that the jokes are morally suspect. There is no naughty fun

"Hey, Sid! Remember that time last summer we were all gathered around the kill like this, someone told a leopard joke, and you laughed so hard an antler came out your nose?"
in shouting obscenities without a prior shared recognition of what counts as obscene.

**Make Jokes, Not War**

One might defend racist and sexist jokes by arguing that while the jokes may express racist or sexist attitudes, in humor these are given a harmless outlet. Konrad Lorenz, in *On Aggression*, characterizes humor as aggressive behavior held in check by reason. Laughter, according to Lorenz, "is never in danger of regressing and causing the primal aggressive behavior to break through. . . . Barking dogs may occasionally bite, but laughing men hardly ever shout." If racist and sexist jokes are not harmful, we may welcome them as an escape valve for aggressive energies that might otherwise erupt in less socially acceptable ways.

The trouble is that racist and sexist jokes are in themselves harmful. They reinforce and give social legitimacy to the racial and sexist beliefs they presuppose. Joseph Boskin, writing on the enduring comic Sambo stereotype of blacks, blames it for helping whites "in their attempt to preserve a social distance between themselves and blacks, to maintain a sense of racial superiority, and to prolong the class structure." Richard Mohr, a philosopher at the University of Illinois, charges that anti-gay jokes are similarly pernicious: "When people know few or no gays and have fag jokes as their earliest and main source of information about gays, the stereotypes which fag jokes endorse and perpetrate, by portraying and belittling gays as dizzy, flighty, unreliable, self-indulgent, sex-crazed, and plague-bearing, are especially likely to have unfortunate effects on prospective employers and on any public policy decisions affecting gays. In this way, fag jokes harm gays."

Racist and sexist jokes are vehicles not only of injury, but of insult as well. Bergmann likens the person who finds fun in sexist humor to a person who enjoys the spectacle of watching a passer-by slip on a banana peel—after having first placed the banana peel on the sidewalk: "both contribute to the stage-setting for the fun." For without the contribution of the requisite sexist beliefs, there is no fun in sexist humor. The insult of finding fun in sexist humor "is the insult of finding fun in an episode when part of the stage-setting that we have contributed to the episode, and that is necessary to the fun, hurts someone." It is an insult, Mohr explains, "for it fails to take others' pains into account as one would expect one's own pains to be taken into account by others."

Is this a special failing of racist and sexist jokes, however? Much non-racist and non-sexist humor is undeniably malicious (else why would we laugh when the fat man slips on a banana peel?); it might be said that the offense given by a joke is a mark not of its immorality but of its success! The distinctive wrong of racist and sexist jokes is that the stereotypes they evoke and help to maintain are so deeply implicated in our society's long history of injustice to disadvantaged groups.

---

**The distinctive wrong of racist and sexist jokes is that the stereotypes they evoke and help to maintain are so deeply implicated in our society's long history of injustice to disadvantaged groups.**

---

Much non-racist and non-sexist humor is undeniably malicious (else why would we laugh when the fat man slips on a banana peel?); it might be said that the offense given by a joke is a mark not of its immorality but of its success!

---

society's long history of injustice to certain disadvantaged groups. The injury and insult they cause is not an isolated or fleeting phenomenon; it is part of a pattern of systematic harms and humiliations directed by the empowered against the powerless.

**Can't You Take a Joke?**

A final strategy for defending racist and sexist jokes is to take the offensive against members of the target groups offended by them (a strategy used more often with sexism than racism). An analogy is drawn to the attitude we expect an individual to have when a joke is told on him personally. It is considered a sign of good nature to be able to laugh at oneself, to appreciate a joke told at one's own expense. Those who can't are seen as stuffy, pompous, self-righteous. If how one tells a joke shows character, how one takes a joke shows character as well.

Even in the individual case, however, we draw a distinction between laughing with someone and laughing at someone, where the one grows out of affection, the other out of derision. Dignified silence, not shared laughter, is the appropriate response to being laughed at. And there is a crucial difference between laughter focused on an individual and laughter focused on a group. One can relish a joke on oneself if it is truly a joke on oneself, if it calls amused attention to one's own distinctive traits and foibles, as cartoon caricatures do. There is a pleasure in being observed carefully enough by others that teasing is possible, as long, once again, as the teasing is affectionate.

The victim of a racist joke, however, is expected to laugh at a joke allegedly about himself that he doesn't perceive as a joke about himself at all. The whole idea of a racist joke is that nothing distinctive about the individual person himself is involved. As Mohr observes
about heterosexual humor: "The individual as distinctive is erased, dissolved into a prejudged type which determines in society's eyes all of his or her significant characteristics. The jokes... presume that a gay person is nothing but his sexual orientation and its efflorescences." The woman expected to laugh at a sexist joke, packaged as a joke about herself, wants to protest, "But this isn't a joke about me." Even this reaction is parodied in the joke where the husband says to the wife, "Women always take everything so personally," and the wife replies indignantly, "I don't!"

How are we to react, then, when a racial or ethnic joke is told by a member of that race or ethnic group? How can racist or ethnic jokes be so terrible if individuals are willing to tell these on themselves? Ethnic jokes are told on oneself in a variety of contexts. Sometimes one plugs one's own ethnic group into an all-purpose ethnic joke to be able to "get away with" telling it, without giving offense. In such cases the joke itself appeals to no distinctive stereotype of the group chosen—it satirizes, say, garden-variety stupidity—and so the punchline carries no sting. Occasionally ethnic jokes told by ethnic-group members may provide genuine examples of affectionate self-directed humor, where the joke teasingly plays on some ethnic trait the group itself recognizes, half-affectionately, half-ruefully, as its own. But too often self-told ethnic jokes show only self-directed ethnic hatred. Boskin points to cases in which blacks themselves have adopted the Sambo stereotype as self-image: "Entrapped within the illusion, the stereotyped person runs the risk of succumbing to it." That a negative stereotype, repeated and reinforced in countless ethnic jokes, can become so culturally dominant that members of the despised group at last come to internalize it is one of the most egregious wrongs that such jokes perpetrate.

Conclusion

Returning now to Mr. Butz and Mr. Watt, exiled from public service for jokes that took only a moment in the telling: did their punishment fit or exceed their crime? If racist and sexist jokes are evidence of a racist and sexist character, cause pain and harm to blacks and women, and insult and affront the dignity of blacks and women as individuals, it would seem that public administration can do without the services of those who cannot refrain from telling them.

—Claudia Mills


Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy

The Menace of Moral Relativism

Every college teacher whose classes require some discussion of values or morality has a common frustration: students who are relativists. Despairing professors want to know how to respond to moral relativism, how to deal with it, how to defeat it.

"Moral relativism" is not just something some of our students believe in. It is now also the fashionable explanation for our cultural discontents. Allan Bloom’s new book, The Closing of the American Mind, identifies moral relativism as the main culprit behind the decline of American intellectual life. President Reagan and Education Secretary Bennett likewise see our social problems stemming from a baneful relativism and values-neutrality in our schools. Relativism is the legacy of 1960s liberalism, of the abandonment of standards, of bad educational theories, of intellectual loss of nerve, of secular humanism: these and other sources are offered as explanations for the current reign of relativism.

In the following comments, I want to suggest several theses, for which I can offer no more support than twenty years’ experience of trying to teach philosophy to a broad range of college students. The first thesis is that our students’ relativism isn’t an artifact of the 1960s or 1970s and not the product of “values clarification” and other bad educational theories in our schools. (Not that there aren’t bad educational theories in our schools.) The second thesis is that our students’ relativism is an irritant to us but not a menace to society. This is because they aren’t really relativists and their moral instincts are generally sound.

Students didn’t first become relativists in the 60s and 70s. (In fact, most of mine became Maoists and Moonies; and in the 80s they became Christians and Republicans.) Relativist students abounded in the 50s and before, and their proportion probably remains more or less constant over time, not many more now, proportionately, than forty years ago. The reason this is so is because relativism grows out of the common