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No laughing matter: towards an unrestrained comic discourse

Daniel Thornton

Comedy, as a discourse, is often the object of censorship and moral outrage, both of which are misguided. Here, it is argued both that censorship of any discourse is to be avoided, as it can serve no progressive purpose, and that moral outrage directed at comedy fundamentally misunderstands its nature, as it serves as a cathartic, vaccinating discourse that allows us greater understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live.

Comedy, as a discourse, provides for a catharsis otherwise increasingly inaccessible to the modern subject. It has, through the exercise of the right to free expression, the potential to democratize and demystify public discourse. A discourse, as here discussed, is a way of talking (thinking) and thus, if the reader allows the assumption of a particular subjectivism, a way of describing, defining, reality. Thus, discourse represents not just a means by which power may be exercised and projected, but the union of voice and power; the space in which voice and power define each other. Discourses may be considered to have, for the purposes of discussion, something of a simple, non-technical, but still broadly Foucauldian definition, as summarised by Iara Lessa as 'systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak.'[1]

Increasingly, there is a tendency, especially in the United Kingdom, towards the social and juridical censorship of discourses, which is nothing more than the evolution of a particular brand of paternalism in our media, in our politics and, worse, in our collective private conduct. Although the utility and necessity of free expression is, nominally, almost universally recognised in the West as a truth that need no longer permit any challenge, so thoroughly entrenched in our legal doctrine and cultural *doxa* that it transcends repeal or reproach, its erosion remains an issue in point. However, despite its conceptual incorporation into conventional political discourse, into our socio-national metaphorical frame of reference, there remains both an unwillingness to allow truly free speech and a great difficulty in its reconciliation with the other rights we now see fit to bestow**.** Censorship of any form represents an enforced voicelessness; the censor necessarily delineates the boundaries of our discourse, places undesirable ideas and concepts outwith the sphere of our intellectual perception, essentially writing them out of existence, reshaping our reality, removing the very

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[1] I. Lessa, 'Discursive Struggles within Social Welfare: Restaging Teen Motherhood', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 36 (2006), 285.

terms in which dissent is to be framed. Thus, if the boundaries of discourse are controlled by ideologically circumscribed arbiters of taste and morality, then, through this regulation and direction of the flow of knowledges, power is exerted to prevent true freedom of discourse, despite our apparently fundamental right to free expression.

Ironically, the most intellectually offensive among the dubious rights that emerge from the tangle of "common decency" and apparently humanitarian legislation is the right to be free from offence. This perceived right pervades public discourse, but is nowhere more damaging than in the public treatment of, and reaction to, comedy. Comic coverage of serious topics (national tragedies, disability, *et cetera*) courts controversy, often being construed as an attack on the vulnerable. This view, born of a certain pseudo-altruism, betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of comedy, assuming an irreverent and wilful blindness to the humanity of the issue. It conflates the ability to find humour in a situation with the inability to take it seriously, when, in fact, it serves a purpose exactly opposed, as discussed below.

Milton's *Areopagitica* foreshadowed an argument later made more fully by John Stuart Mill in his recognition of freedom of expression as *the* fundamental freedom: '[g]ive me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.'[2]

Mill later laid out perhaps the most persuasively thorough defence of freedom in *On Liberty*, an essay that now forms an integral part of the liberal politico-philosophical canon. Mill's essay not only recognises and defends the central importance of freedom of expression as underpinning all other forms of freedom, but goes further to say that freedom of expression is a necessary condition of both progress and understanding:

> [E]ven if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but […] the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.[3]

Both of these bear a particular relevance to comedy. The former, in that it is through comedy that we are perhaps best able to challenge the apparently fundamental moral and philosophical precepts of our society, and the latter in that comedy, through the challenge just

[2] J. Milton, *Areopagitica* (Oxford, 1954), 50.
[3] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford, 2008), 59.

mentioned, humanises and democratizes the lofty and the highbrow, allowing moral ideals to be lived for, in the manner of personal principles, rather than lived by, in the manner of laws handed down from on high. Through this democratization of expression comes a more conceptually complete democratization: the downward redistribution and decentralisation of power. By equalising access to the means by which one can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of public discourse, the power by which the terms of public discourse are defined is diffused**.**

While journalistic objection to offensive comedy may seem in itself an exercise of free expression, such an interpretation naively fails to account for the power relations at play. While a free press is itself entirely laudable, one must bear in mind how public discourse is generated. When the power of the media is overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of the few, this infringes on, rather than facilitates free expression: when allowed to stamp out (the) competition, media corporations approach practical statehood. Thus, the concerted efforts of the private media to enflame the public against the comic is to be regarded in much the same light as governmental attempts to stifle free speech through policy, as they are alike in two key respects: they represent an attempt to direct and manipulate (rather than contribute to) the public dialectic according to a particular interest, and they involve the action of a greatly powerful institution against each member of the public as an individual.

The discussion of the unwarranted suppression of the comic may now, after being set in context, be subjected to a more systematic approach. Firstly, a distinction must be drawn between two kinds of discourse: explanatory and exploratory. An explanatory discourse seeks to provide answers, to explain the world and our place in it. It operates as a meta-narrative, an overarching and comprehensive map of existence which is, essentially, one's conceptual territory. It is through discourses that we experience reality, and it is thus arguably only "within" discourses that we ourselves can be said to exist. Examples of such include religion, science and the general philosophical codes by which we live, though the type could extend to any value-positing, constructive system.

It is important to note that it is not being suggested that anyone operates solely within a single discourse. Indeed, the opposite; the discourse within which one operates is not only often highly context-specific, but one's operative discourse is always a synthesis of many discourses, as in the case of many Western citizens: while they adhere to religious values in their (inter)personal conduct, they trust in science as far as matters of microwaves and motorcars are concerned.

An exploratory discourse functions as a scrutinative mechanism, allowing for, unsurprisingly, the exploration or dissection of explanatory discourses. Whereas explanatory discourse provides an overarching meta-narrative of thought, an exploratory discourse is a meta-discourse with the capacity for the historical, even archaeological, analysis of systems of thought, in that it is a field of discourse that seeks to relate to other discourses from without; exploratory discourse is the self-conscious, meta-cognitive component of our explanatory enterprise. Comedy, the primary contemporary vehicle of popular social commentary, is an example of an exploratory meta-discourse, providing for an unrestrained dialectic, through which to democratize the critical and explanatory elements of philosophy.

Exemplification is perhaps necessary to understand comedy as an exploratory discourse. Comedy, as a discourse, allows for the discussion of, and thus the coming to terms with, serious issues without the heaviness of heart associated with serious and austere philosophical discussion. Comedy facilitates the conversion of the undesirable into the desirable without intrinsic alteration. The average-man-on-any-given-day is decidedly not open to an in-depth philosophical and moral examination of the allegedly institutionalised paedophilia of the Church, but may be more open to a joke on the subject. Through the joke, the issue is raised, his conscience is aroused, he is made more consciously aware of the issue and, even if briefly, he considers it, but is not forced into uncomfortable debate or the self-conscious defence of his own position. He is shielded from all inconveniences and circumvents all the barriers of, and to, philosophical inquiry. The issue is raised, the moral matters are there to be considered, but there is none of the danger entailed by putting one's self "out there". No emotional investment need be made, and thus none can be lost; no opinion need be advanced and thus there is no fear of humiliation, attack or rejection. The existential angst and uncertainty is somewhat sterilised. Comedy also allows for a more objective analysis of events. By de-contextualising socially-drawn conclusions, removing them from a prescriptive paradigm within which they make sense by definition, and placing them within a differently biased, if not unbiased, paradigm, the absurdity of such conclusions becomes far more obvious. This idea will be discussed further below, in relation to the ontic-epistemic theory[4] of humour.

To further exemplify, "racist" humour, that is, humour that plays on racial stereotypes or parodies racist views, allows the subject to reconcile themselves with the "other" that they are confronted by in the form of other races. Despite years of political correctness and racial egalitarian policy and education, there is still an obvious, though superficial, difference between a black person and a white person; one is black, and the other white. No matter how

[4] See P. Marteinson, *The Origins of Laughter* (Kingston, 2005)

enlightened or modern the subject, they are still aware of this distinction, whether they will make it aloud or not. Indeed, the evasion of this distinction, the suppression of its knowledge in submission to social pressure, has the potential to result in tension and, worse, it could encourage the internalisation and intensification of regressive, racist sentiments. Through comedy, subjects can explore the differences – perceived, projected and performative – between races with far less fear of reprisal. Allowing for this kind of free exploration, rather than the timid substitute political correctness allows for, is far more conducive to the realisation of the truth of the assertion that, ultimately, we are all human, or any of a thousand other worthy conclusions; conclusions so often reduced, by elevation beyond questioning, in the manner described above by Mill, to nothing more than incidentally progressive platitudes.

Of course, there is the fear that allowing such discourse may recultivate or legitimise preconceived racist *doxa*. This is a misguided fear, and the suppression of discourse on such grounds is fraught with contradiction. How is it possible to move towards a society unshackled by the regressive construct of race by furthering that same construct, by extending the edifice of racial realism? By granting socio-legal protections on the basis of race, rather than an undifferentiated humanity, one only legitimises the concept of race. A post-racial society is not to be brought about through some dictatorship of the egalitariat, but through free discourse, the only reliable engine of progress and real social change.

To employ a medical metaphor, comedy is a vaccination. Through comedy, we may deal with the grave and the sombre without great heaviness of heart, because it is "only a joke", or we are "just kidding". Through jokes about starvation, murder, genocide and racism, we confront and, to an extent, resolve these issues without having to deal with them directly. Comedy is essentially a watered down form of these issues through which we deal with the issue proper; comedy provides a forum to explore taboos by proxy, that is, it opens up a philosophical arena in which we can tackle these modern maladies with recourse to moral direction through figurative indirection. Exposure to the weakened, comedic form of these cultural and philosophical problems is an existential vaccination against the actual issue. In light of this metaphor, it is then somewhat amusing that such jokes are often referred to as 'sick'. Now, if this is amusing, what issue does it deal with? What psycho-social ill does it remedy? This terminological amusement, this linguistic irony, acclimatises us to the uncertainty, and the subjectivity, of the fundamental underpinnings of our existence, and the loneliness of the same. We are alienated from each other on an individual level by the labels we apply as a society, by language. Language — that which does not merely have the greatest potential for bringing us together, but in fact provides for the possibility of social being at all — is driving us apart. If we are to think about this at all, without the joke we have no option other than to

recognise that the minds of others are configured differently, that they perceive the world differently and thus, arguably, inhabit a different world; that they are in fact *other*, and thus to recognise that we are all, in our subjective realities, completely alone. The fact that this situation is entirely constructed forms the basis of the ontic-epistemic theory of humour. Here, laughter stands as a coping mechanism, almost as an alternative to that melancholic conclusion in a manner best encapsulated in the writings of the comedian Frankie Boyle:

> I think you can choose to be amused by the hopelessness of the world. Laugh at every [...] crass, awful thing […]. [T]hey say you can't choose what happens, but you can choose how you react to it […]. You can choose to just laugh.[5]

Positing laughter, the product of comedy and comic discourse, as an expression of superiority has a long tradition. This fits our theory, in that the exploration of existential issues perhaps represents, in knowing them, a sort of victory over them; a pseudo-resolution that permits us to feel, if only briefly, that the problem is solved, that we have triumphed. In *Of the Essence of Laughter*, Baudelaire writes:

> Laughter, so they say, comes from superiority. I should not be surprised if, in face of this discovery, the physiologist himself were to burst out laughing at the thought of his own superiority. And so the way it should have been put is: Laughter comes from a man's idea of his own superiority.[6]

He then asserts that this amounts to hubris, a cardinal sin[7]. Perhaps he takes refuge in this deeply pessimistic and puritanical discourse because his refusal to acknowledge the worth of comedy left him unable to resolve the issues at the heart of his own existential angst without recourse to such bleak philosophies. However, this nexus of superiority that Baudelaire alludes to is perhaps the very ground on which the controversy of comedy lies. Those easily offended by controversial comedy tend to conflate the superiority of the comic over the philosophical issue with the superiority of the comic over the 'victims' of the issue. The joke is an aid to conceptual comprehension, thus contributing to a fuller, truer compassion, rather than an attack.

Philosophy was mentioned above as an alternative field of exploratory discourse. As a field of exploratory discourse, philosophy has several weaknesses, the three greatest of which are: its blurring of the distinction between exploratory and explanatory discourses (arguably to the

[5] F. Boyle, *Work! Consume! Die!* (London, 2011), 138.
[6] C. Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* (London, 2006), 145.
[7] *Ibid*.

point of bias); its inaccessibility to the common man, and its counter-productively affected sombreness.

Philosophy, especially analytical philosophy, is only incidentally exploratory, in that the exploratory function is only the means to an end, as it is generally subordinated to the furtherance of its own explanatory discourse. Assumptions and dogmas are challenged, their weaknesses exposed, but in favour of a definite alternative. Thus, the primary distinction between comedy and philosophy is teleological: philosophy is ultimately positive, whereas comedy rarely ventures beyond implicit postulation.

While comedy is rarely without agenda, it is rarer still for it to be explicit in such; comedy is not a prescriptive discourse. Philosophy's exploratory scope is thus limited by a prescriptive tendency which, while not necessarily wrong in and of itself, is contrary to the purpose of an exploratory discourse and characteristic of an explanatory discourse. Comedy is far less susceptible to such weaknesses, by its non-positive and more intrinsically exploratory nature. Popular political discourse also suffers from the lack of a free exploratory function, as laymen are alienated to the extent that they dissent, primarily due to the political tendency to marginalise and often criminalise dissenters: one who struggles with the internalisation of the taboos surrounding race is racist, one who holds fast to the gender-roles they were raised to know is sexist, and one who struggles to accept a redefinition of marriage is homophobic. Rather than a dialectic process, it is a policy of exclusion and it is only through submission that one may achieve acceptance, a counter-productive conformity that can only breed resentment and, through this oppression, reinforce the proscribed view. Comedy, as a vaccinating alternative to philosophy, has the potential to neutralise this oppression, which is a necessary consequence of a proscription-permitting worldview; it gears our collective conscience to an unrestrained and free expression of ideas through discourse.

Prominent among the more general problems of philosophy is its inaccessibility. Whether this inaccessibility is due to the actual or perceived nature of philosophy, it exists, and there is an undeniable resultant failure on the part of the general populace to engage with the philosophical canon now so widely available. Whether the blame lies with the common man or can be shifted to one establishment or another is irrelevant; that this intellectual alienation is the case is all that matters. Public interest has waned to the extent that names such as Foucault and Stirner raise more eyebrows than responses. Outwith the ranks of the intelligentsia, the university-educated and the occasional autodidact, there is an astounding indifference to philosophy. Even within the just listed exceptions, anything approaching comprehensive, in-depth knowledge is rare. Thus, an opportunity both for self-knowledge and

for understanding and coming to terms with the nature and uncertainty of existence is missed. Unlike philosophy, there are no barriers between the masses and comedy, bar the tyranny of 'taste'. Comedy explores issues of great gravity at least as nimbly and finely as philosophy, without reliance on technicality or complex theoretical superstructures. Comedy therefore serves to democratise intellectual inquiry, which has the power to function as a coping mechanism. Already bearing, on a conscious level or not, the stress of both the micro-issues of their day-to-day lives and the macro-issues of their actual existence, modern subjects have relatively little time for the issues that fall in between, the human tragedies and moral quandaries that do not bear, in a major sense, directly on them, bar their media-facilitated knowledge of the issues. Further, the modern subject has far too little mental energy to devote to a personal resolution of the competing arguments, factors and interests at play; even the extent to which their psychic resilience is sufficient to cope with such comes increasingly under question, for the communalisation, the globalisation of misery that the modern media has brought about cannot be without consequence. Comedy effectively circumvents all of these issues.

Following from the latter point, perhaps most damning of all is philosophy's sheer sobriety, its sombreness. This criticism extends even to most non-technical serious discourse. Comedy is a serious discourse, but it is not grave. Nietzsche is one of a few exceptions, in that his is almost a comic philosophy. This is not to say that the subject matter is comical, or indeed that the conclusions reached are comical; rather, it is to say merely that there is a structural comedy of sorts. The defining characteristic of a 'comic philosophy' is a particular tension between what Nietzsche would call the Apollonian and the Dionysian.[8] In Nietzsche's writings, there is a stylistic decadence, a linguistic and expressive hedonism, a pervading sense of pleasure-taking that almost amounts to joyousness, despite the cynicism and darkness of his philosophy. The tension between these, the dour revelry of his writings, is relieved, in somewhat Freudian fashion, by the perception of a certain irony, a sardonic funniness that serves also to lighten the burden of freedom placed on the reader by his conclusions. His comedy-of-sorts is absent from philosophy in general, and this is undoubtedly one of the alienating factors at play.

In *The Origins of Laughter,* Peter Marteinson posits that the comic ensues from the sudden perception of the separateness, the alienation, of social reality; the virtual reality constructed by the factual status accorded to social constructs and beliefs, and physical reality. Marteinson argues that social and physical reality are blended in perception, creating the

[8] F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (London, 1993), 13.

illusion that they are equally real, and it is the realisation that this is not so that results in humour, a response that dispels the consequent epistemological uncertainty through the euphoria of laughter. He also posits that the funniest cultural concepts, those that 'provoke real laughter' are those pertaining to questions of identity:

> […] the social identities that we associate with individual persons; […] nationalities, social classes, occupations, kinships, friendships, professional relationships, enders and the like, [are] the primary fodder for the comical cannon, probably because the commonest and most important cultural concepts we mentally associate with social reality, in perception, are of this particular "size and shape".[9]

This theory runs parallel to the above characterisation of comedy as a de-contextualising discourse, in that it may be said to actively pursue the realisation of the fictitiousness of social reality. It also allows for the earlier characterisation of comedy as a coping mechanism, in that issues of identity pertain to one of the most pressing of the modern subject's existential concerns: who am I?

Thus, apparently offensive comedy is in fact the means by which laypersons come to know not only themselves, but others and the other. They are alienated from philosophical discourse by three main factors: its inaccessibility, its too-positive nature and its sombreness. To an extent, they are often excluded from the progressive national political discourse for exactly the reason they need it. The status quo, which denies freedom of expression to the dissenter, is brought about, shaped and directed by powers and forces beyond the subject's control. This structural alienation lends itself to the creation of a growing (disen)franchise of the powerless and the voiceless. Cathartically, comedy satisfies the needs that this creates, serving to prompt an introspective dialectic and resolve the psychic tensions resulting from the repression of socially unaccepted views, from a proscribed worldview, from a proscribed discourse. It is in the latter phrase that it becomes most painfully obvious that the censoring of comedic discourse, the modulation of comedy's inherently free voice, strays far from the realm of justified paternalism; a proscribed discourse is a banned way of thinking, a banned manner of construction, and proscription thus constitutes the creation of thoughtcrime, an unacceptable totalitarianism that cannot result in a free, fair and progressive society. Further, comedy requires special protection, above and beyond the strenuous measures that should be in place to protect all discourse, because it fulfils a deep and particular human need, the denial of which can only result in an existential crisis.

[9] P. Marteinson, *The Origins of Laughter* (Kingston, 2005), 12.

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