Chapter 1

Thank God Paul Revere was white, ‘cause we wouldn’t be sittin’ here now. ‘Cause if he’d a been black, somebody would have shot that nigger, “Oh that nigger stole that horse.” They’d a shot Paul Revere.

Hey, who do the white people say sewed the flag? Who’s this white woman supposed to have sewed the flag? Betsy Ross...ain’t that a bitch. Now come on, they had slaves. That bitch was asleep at six. You know some big black fat Aunt Jemima was up all night sewing that flag.

Paul Mooney “Paul Revere/Betsy Ross”

Once upon a time racial humor was on the cutting edge. Lenny Bruce was arrested and run out of comedy for it. Dick Gregory pioneered talking about black/white relations as a black comedian in front of white audiences. Richard Pryor, one of the best to ever do it, didn’t really become a household name until he stopped pretending to be Bill Cosby and adopted sharper—explicitly racial—material. Perhaps the master of racial humor is Pryor’s former collaborator Paul Mooney. Known for his brutally biting humor, Mooney delivered unabashed and unadorned comedy about race and racism. In particular, his sets were structured to displace white interests as the center of the universe. As the Lauren Michele Jackson notes in a New Yorker postscript on Mooney, “He liked his sets to unsettle the white constitution.”

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1 (Watkins, 2002)
2 (Jackson, 2021)
Undoubtedly, Mooney was a controversial, if beloved, figure. Racial humor, in general, tends to spark controversy. Comedians like Andrew Dice Clay, Bill Maher and Roseanne Barr have all been criticized for making jokes thought to be racist. Why is racial humor so volatile?

Part of the goal of this book is to provide one possible answer to this question. In this chapter I will attempt to lay the groundwork for that discussion. In order to do that, I will discuss how I am thinking of terms like *racial humor* and *the funny*. I also consider what ethics has to do with humor. Some have argued ethical considerations are irrelevant to judgments about humor. I argue this is mistaken and that ethical considerations bear directly on our ability to find things funny. But let us first begin by getting straight on what we are talking about, racial humor.

**Racial Humor**

What is racial humor? It is one of those things it seems like we know when we see it. Paul Mooney’s work, for instance, obviously counts as racial humor. A straightforward answer is that racial humor is humor about race and racism. This would easily mark humor that explicitly uses familiar racial terminology. But is this all that should count? What about issues that are heavily impacted by race but not necessarily described in explicit racial terms? [insert example]

Humor, like anything with cultural import, bends to the times. Some topics, due to their near-taboo status in the public domain, emerge as prime material for amusement while others appear banal and not very amusing. Race has consistently been a hot-button social topic in the United States since its founding. This is also true in European countries that have significant racial minority communities like the U.K. Although gender, especially matters concerning trans* people, may seem to have taken pride of place on the scale of taboo, race can still be a tricky
thing for humorists to navigate. Naveen Kumar recounts a routine from Rosie O’Donnell in a 2019 show in Provincetown, Massachusetts where she uses a mock Indian accent to mimic her doctor. Kumar says that before telling the joke O’Donnell apologized if any Indian people were in the room. The pre-emptory apology already suggests O’Donnell was aware of the potential her bit had for stoking offense. Controversies over racial humor are often, though not exclusively, generated by white comedians. Chapter 2 on racist humor will provide a framework for figuring out why that is. For now, I will focus on a few examples to give the reader a sense of the kind of thing I have in mind.

In his brief essay “Humor and Race,” sociologist Simon Weaver identifies a few types of humor that employ race. The first sort is what we might call racist humor. This is the kind that uses stereotypes to produce mirth. A paradigm example of this sort is minstrelsy. Shows in the UK like *The Kentucky Minstrels* and *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, and US-based shows like *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, where white actors (and later Black actors) wore blackface to present humorous caricatures of Black people and Black life, are now seen as unambiguously racist. Minstrelsy was the most popular form of humor in the late 19th and early 20th century. Though it has since been widely denounced, people’s fascination with blackface as a form of fun persists, as evidenced by various controversies over its continued use in Halloween costumes.

A second form focuses on the use of race in humor to satirize racism. An example of this is the film and subsequent Netflix series *Dear White People*. It is described as an “American satirical dark comedy-drama” that “focuses on escalating racial tensions at a fictitious,  

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3 (Weaver, 2016)  
4 Well, there is some argument that black performers used blackface as a way of satirically critiquing anti-black racism. See Taylor and Austen (2012), Cantwell (1992), and Sotiropoulos (2006).
prestigious Ivy League college from the perspective of several black students.” Racial humor of this type takes as its target racism or racial stereotypes not only to produce mirth in an audience, but to subvert or undermine harmful social attitudes about race and members of racial groups.

The third type Weaver identifies points to humor produced by racial and ethnic minorities, as in UK-based shows like *Goodness, Gracious Me* that centers British Indian life or the stand-up of comedians like Ali Wong, Lenny Henry, Bruce Bruce, Dulcé Sloan and Katt Williams. The focus is on racial and ethnic identity as opposed to the content of the material.

This understanding of race humor is analogous to what used to be called *race records*, early 20th century sound recordings made exclusively by and for African Americans. Blues albums made by Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters are examples of recordings labeled as race records. The recording industry’s use of this label essentially segregated and ghettoized music by black artists, excluding it from the “regular” stuff. Similarly, defining race or racial humor by who produces it or which figures are most prominent has the same segregating effect. Sitcoms and stand-ups shoveled into the racial or ethnic category are presented as special interest novelties and selectively marketed based on those categorizations.

One harm of this practice is that it creates the false impression of a world apart by treating particular racial or ethnic experiences as foreign or alien. Consider two 90s era sitcoms, *Living Single* and *Friends*. *Living Single* debuted in 1993 on Fox, set around an predominantly black cast with Queen Latifah, Kim Coles, Kim Fields, Erica Alexander, T.C. Carson, and John

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5 (Wikipedia, n.d.)
6 (Encyclopaedia., 2020)
Henton as the main characters. Set in Brooklyn, New York, the show centered on the lives of four successful black women, three of whom were roommates. Omar Sanchez, writing for *Entertainment Weekly*, notes that *Living Single* was labeled a ‘black show.’ This is undoubtedly due to its mostly black cast. Contrast that characterization with the NBC show *Friends*. In an interview with the *Guardian*, David Schwimmer, who played Ross on the show, remarked that there should be an all-black *Friends.* It was pointed out, however, that *Friends* itself was “a lily-white reboot of *Living Single.*” Indeed, *Friends* was structured almost identically as *Living Single*, except for it having an all-white cast and set in an all-white section of Manhattan.

Unsurprisingly, shows centered around white main characters are typically not described as white sitcoms. You can find plenty of “Best Black Sitcoms of All Time” lists on the internet, but search in vain for a white complement. This is because whiteness is treated as the unnamed norm. Things that pull attention away from white people and white interests are normally treated as deviations or abnormalities. Thus, the special marking of humor produced by racial or ethnic minorities has the effect of ghettoizing it.

Another effect of specially marking humor simply by the creator’s identity creates different categories of evaluation. It does this by limiting race humor’s merits to a comparison with other things in that category. And for the unnamed white humor, its evaluation excludes the achievements of racially and ethnically marked humor. For instance, mainstream critics never—as far as I am aware—critique *Friends* in light of *Living Single’s* aesthetic achievements,

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7 (Sanchez, 2020)  
8 (Smith, 2020)  
9 (Judge, 2020)  
10 Cite ref
even though the former is derivative of the latter. Because they are presented as different 
types of humor, they are often treated differently. I’d go so far as to say that differential 
treatment sustains the perception of the worlds apart thesis presented above.

Coming to an understanding of racial humor also means drawing on a notion of race. 
There has been much written on this subject by philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and 
political theorists. My own understanding of the concept will rely on the work of Michael Omi 
and Howard Winant. In their influential book *Racial Formation in the United States*, they 
characterize race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by 
referring to different types of human bodies.”¹¹ They offer this description as a way of 
straddling between two common temptations: race as an essence and race as a mere illusion. 
Conceiving of race as an essence usually means thinking of it as an immutable characteristic or 
feature of human beings. Historically, this understanding of race has been used to make rigid 
judgments about a person’s moral and intellectual abilities as well as justify oppressive public 
policies. Conceiving of race as an illusion, on the other hand, minimizes the actual impact it has 
on our social structures and everyday experiences.

Racialization has a long and varied history. Many think of racial categories as natural and 
obvious—something taken for granted as a fact of nature—but human beings have not always 
thought of themselves as divided up in this way. As [so and so] points out Greeks thought of 
themselves one way—cultured, civilized, cultivated—and everybody else in another— 
barbarians. It is not really until the 17th century that conceptions of races—as we understand 

¹¹ (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55)
them—began to emerge. François Bernier’s *New Division of Earth by the Different Species or Races which Inhabit It* is believed to be the first comprehensive racial classification. Bernier identified four races: (1) European, North African, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Native American race; (2) East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Central Asian race; (3) Sub-Saharan African race; and (4) Lapp race. Things have developed in racial thinking since then, but the general approach of classifying people according to morphological traits persists.

We can discern at least two things happening in these types of racial projects. First, there is the idea that science can deliver truths about differences within human populations that justify identifying various classes or types of people. But second, there is a further step, inferring that physical differences explain moral and intellectual differences as well. To be sure, talk of moral and intellectual traits has shifted in our day from being based on ideas of genetics to considerations about culture but you can still hear people make claims about the work ethic or greed of “those people.” We might say that culture has become a sort of proxy for race.

Well, what does all of this have to do with racial humor? As I mentioned with humor, race is also a complex phenomenon serving multiple purposes. Sometimes it is about scientific classification; sometimes it is about culture. On plenty of occasions it is vague and unhelpful talk that obscures more than it clarifies. Nonetheless, it is a phenomenon that impacts our lives in ways we do not always recognize. Because of this variability, humor that targets race will itself be about a multitude of things. Mostly it will be about the ways differently racialized people and groups interact with one another.

This characterization is admittedly broad. What this means is that for something to count as an instance of racial humor does not mean that explicitly racial terms must be used.
Perhaps an example of this might be impressions of members of racial groups by someone who was not also a member of that group. For example, think of Richard Pryor’s impersonations of white people having sex or being angry. The impressions need not involve any explicitly race-identifying terms. Pryor is instead relying on more subtle ways we’ve developed to mark racialization, like the way one sounds when talking or certain types of words used. Racialization has taken up deep roots working its way into the most mundane parts of our lives. Racial humor that is innovative and interesting often reveals the depths of this process.

Finding Things Funny

The next thing we need to work out is what is happening when we find racial humor funny. Sometimes people encounter humor concerning racial experiences they have no connections with and feel uneasy about finding it funny. Other times, a person’s amusement at such humor raises suspicion. What do we think is happening when people laugh at something?

It is commonly said that humor is subjective. What this typically means is that different people find different things funny. Given the diversity of opinion about funniness, the statement would appear to be true. Think of different varieties of humor and differing responses to them. Some people find the shock humor of comedians like Eric Andre, Jimmy Carr and Sarah Silverman hilarious while others do not see the appeal. Some adore the physical comedy of Johnny Knoxville or the subversive shenanigans of Sascha Baron Cohen; others not so much. Usually, people seem to be ok with this kind of diversity in taste. You don’t have to share my tastes in humor.
But there are also times where we find fault with others for their sense of humor. Protests over some comedian’s controversial material are often met with charges that the protester lacks a sense of humor; “Why can’t you take a joke?” At other times, a person who laughs at everything is thought to be too silly or easily amused. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle spoke about achieving a mean in between the two extremes of the bore and the buffoon. The bore fails to appreciate humor enough while the buffoon is too easily set off. As we can see from the examples above, something like Aristotle’s distinction still resonates. These types of judgments suggest we think there is something objective we can appeal to about humor. But if we think humor is both subjective and objective, we arrive at an apparent tension. How are we to make sense of these two seemingly contradictory thoughts?

One consideration involves determining whether amusement is a response-dependent or a response-independent feature. Thinking of amusement as a response-independent feature is to claim that something is funny because of features it has independent of the attitudes or judgments of the amused. A useful formulation of this idea is given by David Shoemaker (2017):

*Response-Independence about the Funny*: The funny consists in a property of objects that makes amusement at the objects appropriate, a property whose funny-making status is ultimately independent of, and grounds, any actual amused responses to it. Something thus merits amusement if and only if, and in virtue of the fact that, it is antecedently funny.

This kind of view identifies some property in objects that explains why it is funny. This means there is a fact of the matter about whether Mooney’s Paul Revere/Betsy Ross joke is funny. A response-independent account provides a straightforward explanation for those occasions.

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\(^{12}\) (Shoemaker, Response-Dependent Responsibility; or, a Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Blame, 2017)
where we disagree with someone else’s judgment about a performance’s funniness. Naturally, this wayward critic has gotten things wrong because they have failed to appreciate the factors that make this particular performance funny.

Once we begin to take a closer look at this view, we can see it will need much more nuance in order to work. How do we identify which features determine funniness? Given the predictably varying—and conflicting—options presented, how can we tell which features are the relevant ones? A leading account, the Incongruity Thesis, claims that perceived incongruity is the relevant feature. According to this view, “comic amusement is a deviation from some presupposed norm—that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be.”13 The incongruity thesis would explain the humor of Mooney’s joke by pointing to some incongruity it expresses or relies upon. This explanation is questionable, however. If anything, the humor in Mooney’s joke is better explained by how the joke uncovers something obvious yet typically unstated. Word play or puns are also objects that are amusing, not because of some perceived incongruity, but because of their cleverness or wit. Therefore, incongruity does not always explain what makes something funny.

A further objection often made against this view is that not all incongruities lead to amusement. Some incongruities, like in a vexing mathematical problem or a surrealist painting or film, tend to cause perplexity rather than amusement.

13 (Carroll, 2014, p. 17)
There are other perhaps more fundamental concerns that any independence view will face. A consequence of the view is that it commits us to the claim that something could be funny in principle even if no one is ever amused by it. Think about this for a moment. What does it mean to say there is some joke or routine none of us recognizes as funny, but in fact, is? Is this possible? Probable?

If we accept this view of things, it seems to commit us to a further idea. Not being amused by something objectively funny—under favorable conditions—would result in a kind of aesthetic failure. It would be like getting the wrong result in a multiplication problem; you did something wrong, which explains why you didn’t get the correct answer. Admittedly, on some occasions we seem ready to admit such a failure. I can recognize not finding something funny because I did not “get” some crucial part of a joke. Maybe I was not thinking straight at the moment or preoccupied with another thought, so not sufficiently attentive. In cases like these I am more willing to say there was something about me and not the joke that explains why I didn’t laugh.

But what about those times when I do “get” the joke but am still not amused? If I am not amused by the comedy stylings of Andrew Dice Clay, my first thought is not that I didn’t “get” it, but that he is not for me. There may be an assortment of reasons for my lack of amusement and no one’s pointing out that some routine of his is “objectively funny” compels me to change my mind. I suppose a fan of the response-independence view could just deny that you can get the joke and still be unamused (provided the joke is good). The underlying assumption appears to be that a genuinely funny joke always compels you to be amused. This would not be very convincing, however. For one, the claim relies on the assumption that we all
must respond to things in the same way. As a sociological and ethnographic observation, however, we notice a wide variety of tastes in humor among people who share the relevant backgrounds in common. Those who insist that some work or performance is objectively funny may be privileging one particular set of tastes over others. We need more justification for why the tastes they’ve identified are the truly objective ones.

Lastly, the fan of response-independence might suggest that there is a gap between *amusement* and *funniness*. Amusement refers to that sensation, emotion, or feeling you experience when you enjoy a bit of humor. Funniness refers to a kind of aesthetic judgment about humor. For instance, if a joke has good timing, compelling content, an interesting cadence, etc., then it is funny. The move would then be to suggest you could judge something funny while not yourself being amused by it. You see how someone could be amused even if you aren’t.

As a technical move this could work, but it still fails to make sense of ordinary practice. The word ‘funny’ is used in various ways, sometimes to indicate judgments of the sort I’ve identified above; other times to make a moral claim. It can also be another way of saying I find something amusing. If we restrict ourselves to defining *funny* as referring to aesthetic judgment, it might make sense to claim we can judge something funny while not being amused by it. Even though this move makes sense logically, it pulls apart two things often thought to be intimately related. In essence, it sacrifices our experience for the sake of theoretical tidiness. Sometimes that is called for, but the proponent of this kind of view should provide a compelling reason for that choice in this particular case. It is not clear yet what that reason is. In the end, a response-independence view must accomplish at least two things: (a) provide a compelling
explanation of how to identify the correct features of amusement, and (b) provide a compelling explanation of why we are wrong not to be amused, even when we “get” the joke.

Response-dependence views claim that something’s being funny depends in some way on the audience member’s response. To give you a sense of how this type of view might work, let us take a brief look at an account by Max Kölbl. In his essay “The Judge-Dependence of Aesthetic and Moral Judgments,” Kölbl provides the following schema:

\[(JD) \text{For all subjects s and all objects o: it is correct for s to apply C to o if and only if s is disposed to have experiential response R to o under favourable conditions.}\]

According to this schema, a person correctly applies the concept funny to a joke if and only if they are disposed to have the experiential response of amusement to the joke under favorable conditions. The schema allows for judgments about funniness to vary from judge to judge and from time to time.

Essentially, something is funny if it tends to trigger a particular experience in you and you are right to call the thing that brings about this experience funny. If you look carefully, though, you will notice that Kölbl adds the phrase “under favourable conditions” to this schema. This means that not just any judgment of funniness is correct; only those given under the right conditions. I understand him to mean by this conditions that allow you a more or less undisturbed engagement with an object. Situations where you are sad, angry, afraid are thought to be less favorable for appreciating humor because you are not in the right state of mind.

Kölbl also says that a person must be disposed to respond in a certain way in favorable conditions. This implies more than a one-off instance; the person needs to have a certain
disposition that typically leads them to be amused. If in favorable conditions you are inclined to be amused by certain types of things—and the thing you are engaging is of this type—then you correctly judge it funny.

Comparing this style of response-dependence view with the response-independence account described earlier, we can see some advantages. First, it makes sense of our ordinary observations of wide varieties in taste while seemingly preserving the further idea that we can sometimes be mistaken in judgment. Judgments about an object’s being funny are tied to a judge’s experiences, but the relevant judgments are those you are inclined to have under the right conditions.

At this point, someone might say: But wait a minute! What exactly are “favorable conditions?” Kölbl does not provide a detailed description and without one, things start to look similar to the objective features view we just turned down. Shoemaker (Shoemaker, 2017), for instance, raises doubts about the very possibility of devising an account of the relevant conditions. There are some things to say, however, that feel intuitive. For example, if we are listening to a stand-up comedian we should be able to hear what is being said clearly, be in an appropriate mood (hard to be amused when you’re sad or angry), and understand the language and references. These appear to be commonsense things on which we can all agree. But is it enough?

Consider engaging humor under the influence of some substance. Does engaging humor while intoxicated or high constitute unfavorable or less favorable conditions? In some contexts, we think drugs and alcohol impair one’s ability to function properly, which is why we penalize driving under the influence. On the other hand, humor is the kind of thing best enjoyed when
relaxed and uninhibited. There is a case to be made that certain substances can loosen you up—perhaps, in moderation—make you less inhibited mentally. If so, then having a couple of drinks or a few puffs might make conditions for engaging humor more favorable. As you can see, there are details to be worked out before we can buy onto the kind of view Kölbl proposes.

Some have proposed what they regard as a middle way between the two previous views. Philosophers Stephanie Patridge and Andrew Jordan provide an example of this middle way, the *merited-response* view. According to them, “something is funny just in case it provides sufficient reason, of the right kind, for an associated sentiment; here, comic amusement.” Finding something funny means endorsing it to some extent. What you are saying when you say something is funny is that you too should find it funny. This communicates that there is something objective-like present that we ought to recognize. But as we’ve seen, saying what that thing is can be quite difficult. We also want to preserve the idea that there is something subjective about humor—remember the old adage, humor is subjective. How does this view account for both of these impulses?

Patridge and Jordan frame their discussion around our ordinary practices of rendering comic judgments about things. We make judgments about jokes that are typically neither wholly objective nor response-dependent. In judging something funny, there is a sense in which we believe it is funny “for us.” But there also appear occasions where we judge someone negatively for failing to share our judgment. We also typically allow quite a bit of latitude with

14 (Patridge & Jordan, 2018)
respect to sense of humor. We understand that various considerations give rise to divergences in humor, a fact we are more or less comfortable with.

I basically think this is right as a description of ordinary practice. It is commonplace to allow for divergences in senses of humor because of cultural, ethnic, national and age differences. I am less convinced that a fitting-attitudes account gets the story right. For one, fitting attitudes accounts in general face charges of being circular. Krister Bykvist, for instance, notes that this is because “the fitting attitude is best seen as an evaluative judgment or an evaluative experience.”

Consider a structurally similar case for ‘good.’ Suppose $a$ is good just in case $a$ is a worthy or fit object of admiration. This analysis of ‘good’ ends up being inadequate for two reasons. First, it is not very informative to say that an object’s goodness consists in being worthy of admiration; that is the very thing we are trying to explain. And second, the verb admiration is itself an evaluative concept, one that likely involves the judgment that the admired object is good.

Now reconsider Patridge and Jordan’s formulation: $a$ is funny just in case it provides sufficient reason, of the right kind, for comic amusement. You could also worry that ‘amusement’ includes the thing we are trying to explain, the funny. It could very well be that to be amused by something is to find it funny. If true, that would obviously make the analysis circular.

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$^{15}$ (Bykvist, 2009)

$^{16}$ (Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2004, p. 395)
The view of funniness I find most appealing has both response-dependent and response-independent elements. What this means is there are real properties an object must have to be funny. But there are also things subjects and environments must exhibit for that object to appear as funny. Some act or performance’s “being funny” is a coordination between these three components: (a) features or properties of the object, (b) features or properties of the context, and (c) features or properties of the audience member.

[more to be said]

On the Ethics of Racial Humor

Humor, according to the philosopher Noel Carroll, is the object that gives rise to comic amusement, a kind of emotional state the laughers experiences. Humor is often associated with play so one might think as a result standard moral norms do not apply here. There is an historic debate within the aesthetics literature about the place of morality in art. For some, morality has no place, as it is the wrong sort of consideration when evaluating an artwork’s aesthetic qualities. For others, moral elements are woven into a work’s aesthetic quality. We can see this divide play out in disagreements over offensive humor. Defenders of an offensive bit of humor are quick to point out “it’s a joke,” thinking this should relieve the offended party of any pretensions about moral appropriateness. Those offended, on the other hand, charge the bit with being in poor taste or the kind of thing only a person of poor ethical character could enjoy. Both positions reflect background beliefs about the role ethics should play in evaluating humorous works.

There are basically two major ways to think of the relationship between humor and morality: either moral considerations are relevant for evaluating humor or they are not. Well,
maybe a better way to put the distinction is whether moral considerations should be relevant since, in actual practice, for some people they do affect evaluation. For those who do not believe moral considerations are relevant for evaluating humor, there is essentially one view that captures this. Comic amoralism denies the relevance of morality to humor, in essence, thinking of it as a category mistake to bring it up. Something is funny regardless of moral considerations. Sure, one could raise moral concerns about the stereotypes used in humor or a belief that telling such jokes potentially increase negative attitudes toward the humor’s target, but these concerns have nothing to do with whether something is funny or not. Analogously, someone might have concerns about the treatment of meat sources in the factory farming system, but this would be irrelevant to judging whether a filet mignon was delicious.

According to the comic amoralist, even though racial humor may draw on troublesome stereotypes any decent person would normally find problematic, in the context of humor they do not actually bear on funniness. I find this a rather strong statement. There is a sense in which I understand the claim; whether something is funny or not has more to do with things like timing, if the punchline is unexpected in some way, if the bit presents me with a nontrivial way of viewing things, and so on. But it is undeniable that moral considerations do sometimes affect my experience of humor whether the amoralist believes they should or not. For all I know, the comic amoralist and I may just disagree about the funniness of particular bits of humor. That is, what they would dismiss as my moral prudishness I simply regard as a difference in taste. This would be consistent with a common idea that different people just possess different senses of humor.
In fact, there are moments when a bit’s immoral elements prevent you (me, someone) from being able to appreciate any humor. In these moments, the audience member is either unwilling or unable to imagine or believe something for the sake of enjoyment because that thing is found to be so revulsive or unbelievable. This is sometimes referred to by philosophers as imaginative resistance. Bence Nanay describes the problem of imaginative resistance as follows:

a) We experience resistance when we are engaging with fictional works which present certain (for example, morally objectionable) claims
b) We experience resistance when we imagine that certain states of affairs have certain properties (for example, that a morally objectionable state of affairs is not morally objectionable)
c) Sometimes authorial authority breaks down: the author of a fictional work cannot make certain (for example, morally objectionable) claims true in fiction (Nanay, 2010: p. 586).

If we accept the comic amoralist’s position, what are we to do with imaginative resistance? We surely cannot deny it since I am sure we can all recall moments where we have experienced it. Take the ambitious action thriller that calls upon you to imagine an ordinary human being can outrun a speeding car or that a reasonably intelligent person would behave in such absurdly naïve ways in order to make the plot work. It is clear that sometimes the audience is asked to imagine things that go beyond what our imagination can bear. This can include physical as well as moral matters. In those instances, we don’t think the unbelievable element is irrelevant to enjoyment. Rather, the artist has failed to skillfully produce their work. There are, of course, considerations for both the artist’s and the audience’s responsibilities in engaging with some work, which I will address more substantively in subsequent chapters.

The upshot is that sometimes the jokester fails to present potentially offensive material skillfully enough to ensure audience enjoyment. Because such material can also include
immoral elements, the comic amoralist is wrong to claim morality is irrelevant for evaluating humor’s funniness.

The comic ethicist, in contrast to the amoralist, thinks immoral elements affect the funniness of humor. In their view, it always detracts from humor. The comic ethicist, however, does not think this means a joke that trades on some questionable stereotype cannot be funny, just that other elements must outweigh the immoral ones in cases where it is.

Some comic ethicists defend their view by appealing to the merited response argument. Humorousness is judged on whether a joke merits a positive response rather than on how many people actually find it funny. As we saw, the view tries to allow for a balancing between formal and affective components. Where things like wit and wordplay are more prominent, these can outweigh ethical flaws. The converse of this, then, means that the joke does not merit amusement.

Carroll argues that the inclusion of an appropriateness condition in the concept of comic amusement imports extra considerations that are inappropriately revisionist; our common notions of amusement do not include them. Also, the comic ethicist assumes the very thing they are supposed to prove, namely, ethical flaws detract from a joke’s humor.

Comic immoralists think ethical flaws enhance the funniness of humor. There are two versions of this view: strong comic immoralism and moderate comic immoralism. Strong comic immoralism says ethical flaws always enhance humor’s fun; moderate comic immoralism says ethical flaws can sometimes enhance the fun.

Carroll remarks that it is difficult to even assess the truth of the immoralist’s claim, however. Subtracting the immoral element of a joke will often leave us without a joke to judge.
Moderate comic moralists believe that, at least sometimes, the presence of ethical flaws can render humor unfunny or less funny. In cases where moral flaws undermine amusement, this is due to its impact on the imagination. According to this view, some moral flaws bring about imaginative resistance in some. The design of the humor blocks uptake in the audience member that makes it difficult or impossible for that person to be amused.

These views attempt to describe the relationship between humor and ethics, and in some cases, how ethically flawed elements can impact our ability to be amused. As a descriptive claim, I find myself siding with the comic moralist; the presence of ethical flaws can occasion imaginative resistance. But there is a separate question not covered, or at least, not adequately covered by the previous views. When, if ever, is humor morally wrong? This is a question we can ask either from the perspective of the creator or the consumer of humor.

Taking the perspective of the creator first, an answer to our question depends on what we think that person or persons are putting into the world. Are they doing something harmful? Suppose you could reliably predict that Chappelle’s jokes about Trans* people will provoke a measurable increase in hostile attitudes toward them, attitudes that will motivate some to persecute people. That would seem like a relevant basis for condemning those jokes as morally wrong. Appeals to social scientific research on predictors of speech-motivated acts of harm could support this kind of judgment.

These kinds of jokes may also include language that some argue is harmful in itself. Mary Kate McGowan, for instance, argues that some speech constitutes harm. Some instances of speech can be seen to constitute acts of (verbal) discrimination, and should be considered analogous to other acts of discrimination—like posting a ‘Whites Only’ sign up at a hotel. If it
can be shown that a bit of humor expresses this type of speech, then we have another basis on which to support a judgment that it is morally wrong.

For the consumer of humor, perhaps the relevant question to ask is whether indulging certain things reflects a poor character. If you are the kind of person who enjoys watching animals be abused, then this is evidence that you have a defective moral character. Likewise, if you are the kind of person that enjoys humor that villainizes socially disadvantaged people, you similarly show evidence of having a defective moral character.

In order for either of these proposals to be made compelling, more needs to be said in their favor. We will need to say more about the way language functions within humorous contexts and how it differs from serious speech, provided this is the right way to make the distinction. We also need more information on what makes for a good moral character.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we’ve discussed what racial humor is, what makes humor funny, how ethics and humor are related, and what explains morally wrong humor. All of this provides a basic groundwork for discussions about racist humor, racial satire, potential obstacles to appreciating racial humor, and racial roasts.