

WHY WE STAND UP: COMEDY AND ITS IMPACT

by

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A THESIS

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This thesis is a socially-aware analysis of comedy, specifically that of stand-up. It takes a look at the disparities between those enjoying stand-up, and those working the craft itself. Although art in general tends to have a social message of some kind, stand-up comedy takes a more direct approach in saying what it believes, since the art form is simply one person on stage telling jokes and giving their opinions. This can lead to people disagreeing with the comic, and if the audience member is really shocked by what the comedian says, they may call the comedian “offensive”. The latter term is the focus of this thesis. It is a term used often, but not necessarily analyzed for what it actually means. This thesis wants to find out what makes a particular joke offensive, funny, or both.

To answer this question, willing participants answered a survey that was posted online during the winter of 2019. This survey comprises five compilations of comedians talking about five

controversial topics, namely Religion, Domestic Abuse, The N Word, Being Gay/Lesbian, and Gun Control. The comedians discussing these topics are, in order of their presentation: Sarah Silverman, George Carlin, Woody Allen, Chris Rock, Louis C.K., Jimmy O. Yang, Wanda Sykes, Alex Edelman, Dwight Slade, and David Cross. Survey participants watched these compilations and answered questions on what parts of the jokes they found offensive or funny. An example question is “Which clip do you find more offensive? Why?”, in order to discuss two comedians joking about one of the above topics. People who took the survey were put into a drawing, and could win a free Apple Watch.

The second part of this thesis that addresses the nature of offense within humor is the interviews I conducted with local comedians, both on and off the campus of the University of Oregon. These interviews allowed those writing jokes to give their opinion on this topic. An example question from these interviews is: “Is there any topic or type of joke that is off-limits? Why or why not?” Those that answered this survey received a \$50 gift card for Amazon.

This thesis provides a background on comedy and what made a joke funny throughout the years, since the era of Aristotle. With an understanding of what makes a joke objectively funny, as well as answers from the survey and the interviews on the nature of offense

within humor, this thesis will attempt to find out what makes a joke offensive, funny, or a combination of the two.

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Introduction

This thesis was born out of a term that has commonly been used in the past few years: “politically correct”- this term goes back to the 1930s, and as it has evolved, it has become more and more of a pejorative (Gibson). It is seen as an adjective describing someone who is not really in favor of giving voice to those that need it, but rather force their opinions of what is “correct” and “incorrect” on those that need a reminder (Gibson). This thesis, being written in 2019, is observing one particular facet of this culture of political correctness: that of being “offended”. Being offended is a completely normal feeling, one that often motivates the one feeling it to explain to the offender how they have transgressed, giving them the chance to learn from their mistakes. However, just like the term “politically correct”, being “offended” is a feeling or a trait that has divided modern American culture in two. There are those that speak out online and in the media that are adamant that being offended is unacceptable and their concerns should be respected, versus those that expect people who are offended not to be so sensitive.

How This Relates to Stand-Up Comedy

Art has a tendency to speak to the culture in which it was created. Stand-up comedy is no different. However, it is, in its essence, a one man/woman show where the comedian tells jokes, and through these jokes voices their opinion. Therefore it is very common for someone to find parts of a stand-up show to be repugnant. The comedian Daniel Tosh had to apologize to a woman in his audience when he said it would be funny if five guys raped her and she subsequently posted about it (Hartsell). Stand-up as an art form is very direct, and often not subtle in how it expresses the comedian’s ideas.

Comedians will hear about those that are offended, and joke about it in their later shows. In an interview on The Pete Holmes Show, comedian Bill Burr was joking about gay divorce, and when the audience groaned, he said: “ ... You guys are taking this really seriously, like, does he really think that’s how gay people break up? I’m just messing around. He introduced me as a comedian, right? ... ” (Holmes 2013). The comedians Daniel Sloss had a different take: “You are fully, 100% allowed to be offended by any one of the jokes in this show. That is your right. All I ask, is that if you are offended by one joke, could you just have the common ... decency, to be offended by the rest of them?” (Sloss 2018). These are just a couple of examples of a comedian giving their take on those offended by their jokes. The result can be a vicious cycle where neither the audience nor the comedian feels like their opinion or their art is really understood. This thesis is trying to dig deeper into understanding both sides of this cycle.

Research Question

In this thesis, I try to determine what makes a joke offensive to the modern public living in California, Oregon, and Wisconsin? Can we find the distinctions between a joke that is simply funny, funny and offensive, or just offensive? The texts used to answer these questions have focused specifically on what makes a joke funny i.e, what makes us laugh? This thesis will go beyond these texts by determining the perspective of the public and performers on what makes a joke not just funny, but offensive as well.

I am aware that my data will be adjusted by only getting responses from people living in three states. The political, religious, and social ideas of the majority of people

living in CA, OR, and WI may be different than those that live in the other states.

However, I am focusing on these states due to the fact that it is the most attainable for me for this specific project. If I were to do this project again, and with more resources, I could expand the type and number of people I use to gain opinions and data points. That would make that next project a better representation of the country as a whole, and its opinion on what makes a joke offensive, or funny, or both.

Methods and Organization

This thesis is split up into four parts. The first part will cover what makes a joke objectively funny, motivated first by a section clarifying why the study of comedy is important. We will look at a discussion of comedy in ancient plays designed to help us comprehend our logos and eros, a text discussing how comedy in novels, such as those of Jane Austen, helped feminism to develop, and two modern articles describing why comedy has helped many today improve their confidence and find a sense of humanity in their life. Next, in Chapter 2 we will discuss the beginnings of comedy, going back to the definition first made by Aristotle, and further discussing the plays of logos and eros by Aristophanes. Following this, Chapter 3 considers why we laugh, through the definitions of a variety of philosophers from Hobbes to Heidegger to Bataille, in order to find a concise and complete definition of what makes a joke objectively funny.

The second portion of my study focuses on a survey. This survey took approximately half-an-hour to complete per person. It was shared in February 2019, following approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I shared the survey through my social media and the University of Oregon's social media, as well as by posting flyers around campus. One incentive to complete the survey was a drawing for a

free Apple Watch. All answers are anonymous, but the participant must write down their email during the survey in order for me to include them in the drawing. No email addresses were included in the final presentation or thesis document, but information about the participants' gender, age, race, and current living situation was included. There were roughly 26 respondents.

The survey itself consisted of five sections, with a video for each section. Each video is on a specific topic: Religion, Domestic Abuse, The N Word, Being Gay/Lesbian, and Gun Control. These five topics were covered by the following pairs of comedians, namely Sarah Silverman/ George Carlin, Woody Allen/ Chris Rock, Louis C.K./ Jimmy O. Yang, Wanda Sykes/ Alex Edelman, Dwight Slade/ David Cross, respectively. I chose the topics because they are controversial as well as of popular interest at the moment. I chose these comedians to get a variety of opinions, as well as a variety of races, age groups, religious backgrounds, ethnicities and genders. I wanted to have comedians talking about various topics, but also coming from different places with regard to life experiences. After watching the video, the participant answered a few questions about what offended them in the video and what they found funny, and then moved on to the next topic. An example question is "Which clip do you find more offensive? Why?" The questions are simple and broad to encourage the most extensive and genuine response.

The survey questions were designed to gather information on what factors into making a joke seem offensive and unfunny, versus funny and still offensive, or simply funny. Concepts from the texts reviewed in Chapters 1-4 help us define the nature of humor, and these are combined with the survey results to identify among the comedians

key examples of how humor and offense can be together or against each other. I identify a number of features that influence what makes a joke offensive to a modern individual from CA, OR, and WI, including when the joke was said, whether or not the comedian has personal experience relevant to the topic of the joke, whether or not the rest of the audience are responding the way the individual audience member expected, the pure shock factor of certain words or statements, or whether the comedian makes light of personal experiences/of others close to them.

These questions will be better answered if I also talk to those that create comedy. That is the third part of my thesis. In the months of January and February 2019, I talked to professional and amateur comedians in the Eugene area, and got their take on how humor relates to offense. The interviews were conducted with both students (amateur comedians), and non-students (professionals). The students were working on their comedy with the UO Stand-Up Society at Falling Sky, and the professionals performed stand-up at a variety of venues in the local Eugene area. I will only ask them four questions, including “Is there any topic or type of joke that is off-limits? Why or why not?”. The incentive to participate is a free Amazon gift card for fifty dollars. I hope to get six interviews in total, three from students and three from outside the university. By discussing this topic with performers as well as with audience members, it will be easier to mend differences between those who are offended and those who are not, as well as give us an insight into how it is different to experience jokes in a live setting versus at home in a smaller crowd.

The final part will look at other texts that have asked similar questions to what I am studying. I will look at their idea of why we get offended, and how they relate to my theory in their own way.

There are some issues with my thesis methods. Mainly, there are a number of ways that I cannot control what kind of answers I get from my survey. I do not know if the participants are taking the survey alone, or if their responses are swayed by the people around them, whether they are telling the truth about their personal information, or whether they are even telling the truth on their responses. This survey assumes people will give their real opinion, but online it is hard to know if that is the case. However, this is always hard to know, no matter the situation. The honor code is required in a study such as this. I will also request in the consent part of this survey that each participant take the survey alone. There also might be an uneven selection of participants, since it is not completely random who decides to participate, for it comes from the pool of those I know and those that go to the University of Oregon. I may get too many people that are like-minded. My current solution to this includes clarifying that these results only really speak to the opinions of those from California, Oregon, and Wisconsin. Also, my talking to comedians as well as administering the survey expands my information, for I will get comments from those that are outside my friends, family, and University of Oregon circle. They will most likely be less like-minded to those that do not perform comedy.

Once these last three parts of my thesis are completed, it can be inferred what makes a joke offensive. With the conclusion of part one in mind, this thesis will finally conclude whether each of the ten jokes are objectively funny, funny and offensive, or

simply just offensive, for people of the year 2019 living in California, Oregon, and Wisconsin. My goal, through discovering this, is to have comedians and audience-members think more deeply about why they are offended, and why they believe their joke is worth keeping. Instead of getting angry at the opposite party, a conversation can start that explains better why an individual feels the way they do.

Chapter 1: Why is Comedy Important?

This chapter covers first and foremost why comedy is important to society, no matter where or when that society is found. Looking at three different places at three different points in history, this chapter will show how comedy brought out the best in our intellectual and societal mental growth. I will discuss Ancient Greece and the comedic plays of Aristophanes, early 19th century England and the novels of Jane Austen, and contemporary society through two articles about what stand-up comedy means to comedians and audiences alike.

Comedy = Philosophy

Before discussing these three case studies of comedy's relation to society, a connection between comedy and philosophy, a topic that is often considered intellectual and impressive, needs to be shown (Trahair 2). The philosopher Georges Bataille proposed a philosophy of laughter, which comes out of experiencing statements in comedy that turn the known into the unknown (4). Essentially “ ... he proposes that the cause of such laughter is both unknown and unknowable: *‘That which is laughable may simply be the unknowable.’* ... And for Bataille this very unknowability is essential: *‘the unknown makes us laugh.’* ... ” (4). This description challenges our understanding of philosophers as great thinkers who are always wise and always knowledgeable, and instead shows that philosophers ask questions about things that do not have an answer (4). This suggests that comedy and philosophy share a common goal. Comedy makes us think about the unknowable through statements that explore boundaries, just like philosophy does. After Bataille's philosophy of laughter, we can see that there is a reason to potentially study comedy.

The Importance of Aristophanes' Comedy

We begin with a discussion of the impact of comedy in the time of Ancient Greece, through the comedic plays of Aristophanes. Aristophanes' plays look at two aspects of being human: our ability to act through logos, and our inherent eros. "Genuine logos" will be defined in this section as it was in the analysis of Aristophanes' plays by Bernard Freydburg: "... an exchange of speeches, thoughts, arguments that aim at a good solution, whether that solution concerns intellectual truth, ethical goodness, or aesthetic beauty" (Freydburg 15). Eros can be more simply defined by the word "folly" (112). As demonstrated by arguments made by Freydburg (112), it is clear that eros is in all of us. It therefore is something we need to be aware enough of, so as to not only control it when trying to act through logos, but also to use it as a way to show that nothing is beneath being ridiculed. Nothing is so serious that it cannot have its true flaws shown (112). Aristophanes' plays can illustrate qualities of logos and eros. In his play "The Clouds", Aristophanes shows the importance of logos. This play follows the lives of a very unhappy family. They are middle class, although the mother comes from a wealthier family and therefore has more expensive tastes. Her son takes after her: he chooses the most expensive of everything he buys, particularly when it comes to race horses (13). The father decides that in order to protect himself and his wealth from his and his son's creditors, he is going to send his son to a school run by Socrates, who will teach him in the ways of logos (14). His son refuses to go, demonstrating his lack of interest in becoming a better person, or in shifting his focus away from material things (17). The father decides to attend the school instead (17-18), thus showing more interest in understanding morality. However, he still would rather push the problem onto his

son, and avoid paying his debts by using illegal means, rather than figure out a legal way to live a prosperous life along with his son and wife. They both are too stubborn to look within and adjust themselves. As Freydburg says: “For genuine *logos* to take place, some common ground of agreement must be found” (15). Therefore, this first play of Aristophanes, which is considered a comedy, effectively shows the importance of fostering *logos*, by not being stubborn and by looking internally at your own flaws. The play pushed the audience into applying such an evaluation to themselves as well.

However, Aristophanes’ plays do not just make us think of *logos*. In “Assemblywomen”, he analyzes how the human tendency for *eros* makes us more aware of ourselves and our surroundings. In this play, the protagonist, Praxagora, is intelligent to the point of being a philosopher, and is also very beautiful with many leadership qualities (113-114). The men in town, according to Praxagora, are not allowing the town to reach its full potential, so she decides to help the women take over (113). However, they do so using lies and deception, which ultimately turns her into the type of ruler she was trying to get rid of in the beginning. (114-115). So although she is intelligent and beautiful and comes across as a serious and respectable character, she still is flawed and easy to laugh at. As Freydburg emphasizes: “Since folly is a feature of every one of us, it is simply *impossible* for *logoi* to make disappear what the eyes see, and to reserve our laughter only for the foolish and the bad. Similarly, it is impossible for us to regard only goodness as beautiful” (112). Therefore, this play, which is also a comedy, shows that anything can be deemed ridiculous, and through realizing this, we become more aware that there is no one thing that is completely

respectable and all-knowing. Everything has folly, and we do our best to be aware of it and work around it in an ideal society.

Aristophanes' plays were shown during the Dionysian festival, where a lot of well-respected and thought-provoking art was shown. Therefore these plays were not simply comedic, but were watched by those ready to think deeper about the plays they were watching. This comedy helped a society, by allowing them to see that everything has folly, and being aware of it in everything including yourself is important.

The Importance of Jane Austen's Comedy

People were also provoked to think more deeply in early 19th Century England, with the novelist Jane Austen. In this period, humor and women seemed like two parts of society that could never overlap. Women were polite, laughter was not. According to Bilger, there were two types of comedy at the time: false humor and humor (17). False humor was more crude and critical, while humor was more sympathetic (17). One came from the mind; the other your heart (17). Women who wanted to seem feminine would not laugh or tell jokes that were in the category of false humor (21). Laughter demanded that respect for the existing hierarchy should be diminished, and women laughing therefore made some people afraid (Bilger 16). Such humor allows for people to think of changing the way society works, and allowing women to play a bigger role than just a housewife.

It is in this "false" humor that Jane Austen's satire breaks tradition. She is funny intellectually, and not in a sympathetic way. She is not afraid to show the true colors of those types of men and women she met in her immediate social circle. A couple examples of characters in *Pride and Prejudice* that you might have found in Austen's

real life are Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas. Neither one of them understand truly what it means to be honest with someone out of respect for them. Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist, without once acknowledging that he has no real feelings for her. He rambles on about how it is right for a clergyman to marry, and how his patroness requested he find a wife (Austen 105). When rejected, he finds solace in the arms of Charlotte, who marries Mr. Collins simply because he has money and a decent living situation (125). She takes away his opportunity for a genuine relationship without discussing this with him (121-122). These are the kinds of people Austen makes fun of in *Pride and Prejudice*. Bilger says that Austen “combined an insistence on realism with a decided taste for the ridiculous (29). Due to the fact that Austen was breaking the status quo, and showing more and more how equal women were to men through her complicated and relatable female protagonists, others that read her work described it critically. Sir Walter Scott, a poet and playwright of the same era, said about her novel *Emma*: “Cupid, king of gods and men, who in these times of revolution, has been assailed, even in his own kingdom of romance, by the authors who were formerly his devoted priests” (29). Scott dislikes *Emma*, due to the fact that it is a novel by a woman that describes a romance, but in the most realistic and non-romantic of styles. The end of *Emma* shows a romance in the most practical of ways. Emma admires her future husband for his “superiority of character” (480), and is content to know she will be “respectable and happy” (482) in her marriage state. This is not a romance where she is blown off her feet, rather a companionship between two people that genuinely appreciate each other. According to Bilger, Scott wishes the novel of a woman to keep up the illusions of romance for young men, in order to ennoble their

male character (29). Therefore, Jane Austen requested a little more deep thinking from her society, just as Aristophanes did.

The Importance of Comedy to Modern Western Society

The final case study of this chapter looks at two articles written in the years 2014 and 2016, respectively, that discuss how communities in America and England have been improved by comedians and comedy workshops. The first article is “The Science of Comedy: Can Humour Make the World a Better Place?” by Stuart Jeffries, in *The Guardian*, and it looks specifically at comedy in the UK. He starts off the article by saying that recently comedy has been considered an area that deserves legitimate academic study (Jeffries). He also adds that there are examples where not only is it interesting to study, but it is socially beneficial too. There is a Centre for Comedy Studies Research at Brunel University in Leicester that noticed that despite the fact that the media says that comedy is controversial and offensive only, in reality it can help bond communities (Jeffries). Dr. Sharon Lockyer, who set up this centre, says that those that were previously diminished and bullied, are now using their comedy skills to open up about their differences and get people to laugh along with them, not at them (Jeffries). Her proof is that in 2005 a group was started called “Abnormally Funny People”, and this group has allowed disabled people to gain more of a stand-up stage presence. It has been successful since then (Jeffries). In London there was also a *Playing for Laughs* Symposium looking into the same thing. A speaker at this conference, Rob Gee, who used to be a psychiatric nurse and is now a comic, said that he has “organised award-winning workshops in sports centres and acute psychiatric units aimed at adults with severe and enduring mental health problems, and is often

invited to schools to teach kids improvisation and sketch performances” (Jeffries). These workshops have been a success, and Gee finds that the children enjoy writing comedy sketches and improvising comedic lines, and in the process their self-esteem and confidence are boosted (Jeffries). Therefore, there are intellectuals and workshop creators that have expanded who is allowed to do comedy, and the results are more people feeling confident and fewer feeling ostracized.

The second article continues on this same topic. This article starts out discussing a tour done by Irish comedian Maeve Higgins and Welsh author Jon Ronson, where they talk about their experiences living in New York for their first time (O’Hara). They said that they loved the energy in the room, and that everyone could relate to what they were joking about. The comedy brought everyone together (O’Hara). Ronson even exclaims that ““This is totally a therapy for me, doing this show”” (O’Hara). The article then continues on to explain that comedy can be a good response to confusing contradictory things in our lives (O’Hara). The cognitive neuroscientist Scott Seems, discusses this in his book *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why*, and he continues saying: “Humour that is in bad taste or cruelly targeted at particular groups may generate conflict, but, ... humour is our way of working through difficult subjects or feelings” (O’Hara). The article then ends by adding that there are many comedians who not only want to make us laugh, but also want to spread knowledge. An example of someone who does this successfully is John Oliver (O’Hara). Shows like his would not be so popular if people were not willing to listen to jokes but also learn from them. This article, just like the previous, demonstrates that comedy can be a force for good, whether it be bringing confidence to young children writing sketches, or political

comedians on television joking about world affairs, as well as teaching their audience about the world affairs at the same time.

Conclusion

Comedy has been important at different times and at different places. Whether it is bringing a voice to women in 19th Century England, bringing a voice to the disabled today, or making audiences in Ancient Greece think about their logos and eros, comedy is always making us as a society more aware of how we can improve. Not only do these stories prove that comedy is important, but they are also linked because every one of the comedians/organizers of comedic clinics are teaching their audience about logos and eros. Austen is writing about the logos and eros revolving around male/female relationships in her society, and today the comedians and organizers are teaching those listening to them about how to overcome the logos and eros they struggle with everyday, both inside them and with others. Now that it is clear how much of an impact comedy can make, this thesis will discuss what past philosophers and intellectuals considered the qualities needed in order for a particular bit or play to be laughed at, with the goal of trying to find a conclusive concise definition of what makes a joke objectively funny?

Chapter 2: The Beginnings of Comedy

Comedy is a big part of our lives today. However, has it always been this way? When did our idea of comedy start, and is that idea of comedy still applicable today? This is important to note because if comedy from the beginning and from now have not changed all that much, then that means there is something inherent and standard that goes into all things that make us laugh. This chapter will cover how the idea of comedy began and give some examples, and then the following will continue on from this idea to try and find what standard is needed in order for a joke to be objectively funny, not when comedy started, but in the modern era.

Aristotle's Comedy

We must start by looking back at how the term “comedy” was first coined. It was first used by the philosopher Aristotle, when he wrote about a festival known as “*komos*” (Simpson). This festival entailed many men cavorting, singing and dancing, around a large phallic structure (Simpson). So right from the very beginning, comedy has an association with light-hearted fun, raunchiness, and sexuality. Comedy, then and now, would take place in a private room, not in the middle of a war, and would celebrate humanity and its eros. This still applies today, as many comedians in the modern era, push the limits of what is acceptable when describing their thoughts and physicality of sex. To see a good example of this, watch Louis CK's take on the difference between men and women (here is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iGsm-OV-f0>). It also applies today, in that it could be imagined that the type of environment surrounding a festival like this, could be very similar to the type of environment in a modern comedy club. However, instead of a everyone surrounding a

large phallic structure, they would surround a performer describing his personal experience with his own phallic structure.

Aristotle not only described this festival of “*komos*”, of which its title soon became the term “comedy”, but also described how comedy is used in storytelling. The key ingredient that makes a story a comedy rather than a tragedy, is that the story ends happily (Simpson). Even if the story does not have many sexual innuendos or pratfalls, if the character ends the story in a more ideal place than he was at the beginning of the story, than he/she was successful, and therefore an audience can rejoice and laugh with them. Another ingredient that allows the first to really work well for an audience, is having the central character be sympathetic (Simpson). If an audience does not relate to the protagonist, then they will not care whether or not the character is successful, and will therefore not feel the need to rejoice when the comedy is over. This also works in a modern atmosphere, since most comedic movies end happily, and having a sympathetic character is necessary in almost any film, play, or even stand-up routine. It is hard to like a comedian if one cannot relate to the humorous stories he/she went through.

According to Aristotle, there is even more that is necessary to a central comedic character. The character, although sympathetic, does not have to be a “hero” in the traditional sense of the term (Simpson). The traditional hero is a protagonist with at least one great talent, and with strong morals and principles (Ray). This person tends to be of a higher social status, and when they are a “tragic hero”, they have one quality that eventually leads to their downfall (Ray). Their unhappy ending is apparent right from the start of the story. The “hero” of a comedy is not like any of these types of heroes. A comedic hero is usually just sympathetic enough to get the audience on

his/her side (Simpson). They do not need to have an impressive talent in anything, but they also cannot be so wretched that no one cares what happens to them. As far as morals go, they have to be “average or below average” (Simpson). The protagonist is moral, but only as moral as an everyday person is. Furthermore, the protagonist tends to be middle or lower class (Simpson). They are not an aristocrat who has to deal with intense political or religious issues. They are just a basic citizen having issues with relationships or with money or with succeeding at a new job (Simpson). If one were to have a comedy following someone with a well-to-do background, that main character would have to be so cartoonish that people would not feel like they were watching a realistic drama of upper class people (Simpson). For example, the character could be very pompous or self-important, meaning that even though they literally are considered noble, in heart they are about as far from being noble as one could be (Simpson). This would mean that by the end of the story, they would understand that flaw, and become in personality what they are in status. For a story with a lower class person, they would more likely be plucky and ambitious, and be noble in heart, but need to become noble in the eyes of society (Simpson). This is the general idea of a comedy according to Aristotle: a sympathetic character with little to recommend him/her, that goes through a relatable journey, and ends up in a better place than where they began. Once again, this all applies to modern ideas of comedy. As art consumers, we prefer sympathetic main characters, comprehensible life journeys, and happy endings.

Examples of Aristotle’s Comedy

To look at some specific examples of what Aristotle was discussing, let us look once again at the plays by Aristophanes: “Clouds” and “Assemblywomen”. In “The

Clouds”, the protagonist is Strepsiades (Freydberg 13). He is the father in the story, who comes from the lower middle class, but is surrounded by those with expensive taste (13-14). He is not particularly moral, but not hard to like either, as he has money issues and family issues that anyone could sympathize with. At the end of the play, he burns down Socrates’ school, and the Chorus seems to approve (53). He also acts violently against his debtors as well (48). In a way, he ended up better than he was at the beginning, so he is a middle class immoral character who has a happy ending. This is one example of Aristotle’s comedy.

The other example is the “Assemblywomen”, and its protagonist Praxagora. Praxagora, unlike Strepsiades, is richer and more intelligent (113,114). She is the protagonist who needs to have a major flaw in order to be a comedic protagonist, because otherwise she is too rich, smart and respectable. She happens to have the flaw of becoming the kind of devious, clumsy leader that she finds men to be at the beginning of the play (114-115). This equates with the average person, so everyone can still laugh at her and her story. Despite the fact that society is not much better by the end of the story, Praxagora has control over the laws, so she herself has a happy ending (147, 152). This play also fits into the expectations of what Aristotle considers a comedy.

Conclusion

So it is clear that Aristotle's comedies existed at the time and have similarities to today, but what separates today's comedy from the comedy of Ancient Greece? The following chapter will look at what more recent philosophers considering what is essential to making us laugh, and through these texts we will see how comedy has evolved into what it is today, as well as what makes a joke objectively funny.

Chapter 3: Why Do We Laugh?

Now that it is clarified that comedy can be a force for good, and seen generally as how it used to be seen, this thesis can now dive into more recent comedy, and what makes a joke objectively funny. This chapter will cover a number of theories, from philosophers like Hobbes to Bataille, and what these theories tell us about why we laugh, aka what made the joke funny. The year these texts analyzing these theories were published, will define the order through which they will be seen in this chapter. Then in the following chapter, this thesis will point out what these theories all have in common, to conclude with one statement that can decide whether a joke is objectively funny or not funny.

Meredith and the Audience

The first text this chapter will discuss is *An Essay on Comedy, and The Uses of the Comic Spirit*. This is an essay published in New York in 1897 by Victorian author and poet George Meredith. In this essay, Meredith, an author of the Victorian era, spells out what he has observed when it comes to those writing comedy and those enjoying comedy. One theory he lays out for why some comedy is not successful while others are, is the type of audience being subjected to the comedy. At the beginning of his essay he says: “People are willing to surrender themselves to witty thumps on the back, breast, and sides; all except the head: and it is there that he [the comedian] aims. He must be subtle to penetrate. A corresponding acuteness must exist to welcome him” (Meredith). Even if the comic artist has the right intentions, a play or a joke is not funny unless it is also well-received by the audience to whom the comedy is shown. There are two types of audience members that can define whether or not a joke or a scene or a

play was funny. The first kind that are referred to are called Puritans, when speaking about comedy of the stage (Meredith). These are essentially people who refuse to laugh at anything, due to their own moral compass (Meredith). Meredith describes them as such: “We have in this world men whom Rabelais would call agelasts; that is to say, non-laughers; men who are in that respect as dead bodies, ... the laughter-hating, soon learns to dignify his dislike as an objection in morality” (Meredith). These audience members do not laugh at anything, as ridicule of anything means not taking it seriously, and therefore is immoral to that subject.

The second group are the exact opposite. These people, when audiences of a comedic play, are referred to as Bacchanalians. They laugh at everything, no matter what (Meredith). They consider themselves the antagonists of the former group (Meredith). Meredith writes: “We have another class of men, who are pleased to consider themselves antagonists of the foregoing, and whom we may term hypergelasts; the excessive laughter, ever-laughing, ... who are so loosely put together that a wink will shake them” (Meredith). This group laughs so much, that they essentially take away any meaning of humor each joke had individually (Meredith). That is why, when looking at whether or not a joke is objectively funny, the puritans and their judgement are more crucial. This idea will be continued in the next chapter.

An example of what is impossible for either group to really appreciate is the play *Le Tartuffe*, by Molière (Meredith). This play, according to Meredith, is too intellectual for one group and too humorous for the other (Meredith). Therefore, these groups are foes to joke-makers, such as Molière himself (Meredith).

To summarize, Meredith believes that the meaning of a joke comes from the response of the audience, and he identifies two different types of audience members. In the following chapter we will look at what this theory of what makes a joke objectively funny has in common with the ones to follow.

Olson and Audience/Object Relations

This second text is from the year 1968, by Elder Olson. It is called *The Theory of Comedy*, and from right at the beginning, it covers three very essential categories of theories on why we laugh that originate from the works of a variety of famous philosophers/great thinkers.

The first category focuses solely on the object of the laughter. It identifies why the audience laughs at the joke because of the object being described, separate from its environment and its environment's impact upon it (Olson 5). This idea originates from a piece by Plato called *Philebus* (5). He essentially says that "The ridiculous is a form of evil—the kind due to one's manifest self-ignorance with respect either to one's possessions or person or soul; provided that one is weak and unable to retaliate when slighted, since otherwise he would be hateful and formidable" (5-6). An example of this might be a joke about Nazis, since the object itself is so abhorrent that no matter the spin on it we still are inclined to laugh at them. To summarize, this category covers theories that say that why we laugh is simply because the object we are observing or listening to being described, is absurd and immoral, and therefore worthy of being laughed at.

The second category looks once again, like Meredith, at the ones who are laughing. It originates from the writings of great thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and

Charles Baudelaire (6). This category covers the theories and ideas that say the reason we laugh comes out of a sudden change in the temperament of the individual in the audience. Here are specifically the theories given by Hobbes and Kant: “The second group, who look for the cause of laughter in the one who laughs, find it in mind or body or both. ... Hobbes, with his view of laughter as ‘sudden glory’ —that is, sudden rejoicing in one’s superiority to another; ... Baudelaire, who sees laughter as stemming from a fault, not in the object of laughter, but in the one who laughs ...” (6). Basically, these theories say that a joke is funny when the one listening has a sudden change in how they feel. For Hobbes, the sudden change is the individual becoming prideful in themselves as the superior person, compared to the object being joked about. An example of this might be a joke on children, because the audience member would laugh at the joke for feeling more educated and aware than a child might be. For Baudelaire, the change comes from realizing our own history of Christian sin and how humans have changed since the beginning (6). An example of this might be a joke about a bad moment in history, and how ridiculous things were then. We would laugh at our current knowledge, and how they did not have that knowledge back then.

The third category looks at the relationship between the absurd object being laughed at and the individual having the change in temperament. Philosophers’ theories in this category include Jean Paul Richter and Theodor Lipps (6). Richter’s ideas are as follows: “... [He] sees the ridiculous as founded upon three ingredients of objective contrast, physical circumstance, and subjective contrast ...” (6). Richter believes that our idea of the absurd comes from looking at an object, in relation to us, and seeing it not just objectively, but in its physical form and in a subjective way that contrasts the

objective way. An example of this would be the marriage between Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is objectively a bad match, subjectively points out the flaws in each character, and the physical circumstance of their society, and how flawed it is as well, is also clear through this humorous situation. Lipps “ ... sees it as an objective pretense greatness belied by a subjective realization of insignificance” (6-7). Lipps’ theory is recognizing oneself as great, seeing your relationship to the object in question, and then through this new relationship realizing you are actually insignificant. For this theory, an example might be seeing and laughing warily at our relationship to corporations, and how much power they actually have. These kinds of theories are ones where the one creating the jokes and the one listening, are both playing a part in how the laughter is created.

In summary, Olson’s text discusses three theories by a variety of famous philosophers. The first category of theories say laughter comes from the immorality of the object. The second says that laughter comes from a change in oneself. The third says that the change in oneself comes from an adjustment in one’s relationship with the object being described in the joke. All in all, Olson says these theories are incomplete (7). However, they are still well-recognized, and as Olson says there is no one theory of comedy that is completely unexceptionable (7). Therefore, these theories and their categories still need to be considered when trying to find a succinct reason why a joke is objectively funny.

Nelson and the Theories of Incongruity and Arousal

The text *Comedy: The Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema*, from the year 1990 by T.G.A Nelson, adds more theories that fall into the second

category by Olson. The first is the Theory of Incongruity by Arthur Schopenhauer. This theory essentially states that the reason we laugh is that there was something different from the punch line of the joke than the expectation raised from the build-up (Nelson 7). There is incongruity in that joke. An example of this given by Schopenhauer is as follows: “An actor is forbidden to improvise during his act. Soon afterwards, he is required to ride a horse on stage. The horse drops dung, to the amusement of the audience: the comedian reproves his mount for some of the humour of this story derives from incongruity” (7). The humor of the scene was not expected, not even by the actor himself. Therefore people laughed because the action was unexpected. However, Hobbes’ theory could also work in this situation, as the audience may be feeling superior since the director demanded there be no improvisation, and yet some happened anyway (7). Both theories work, therefore one does not prove the other wrong, and they are both worthy of noting.

The second theory proposed by Nelson (1990), that also falls into the second category with Hobbes and Baudelaire, is called The Arousal. This process is described by philosopher James Feibleman: “[It starts off] first of terrific fear, then of release, and finally of laughter at the needlessness of fear” (7). We laugh because we were anxious about the situation of the joke, but once the joke ends, we realize that there was no need to be anxious. Another story example of this is from the novel *Rates of Exchange* (8). In it, there is a meek professor who moves to an East European country (8). He is afraid of all the soldiers and security-men at the airport (8). He is ushered into a large room with large security guards, and is seized and pushed. However, it was only a hug (8). The anxiety of the story is dropped, and we laugh in relief (8).

In conclusion, Nelson adds more theories on why we laugh. There is the theory that it comes from the incongruity of a joke from what we expected. There is also the theory that it comes from the release of tension within the one laughing, when the punchline reveals that there was no reason to feel tension. These theories, like the previous ones, will be looked at in the next chapter, to see how they can be broken down to find the objective truth of why a joke is funny.

Trahair and the Philosophy of Bataille

This text looks at the philosophy of comedy from the famous philosopher Georges Bataille. It is *Comedy of Philosophy: The Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* from the year 2007 by Lisa Trahair. Although this text does discuss a lot of films by Buster Keaton specifically, the part in this book that most relates to this topic is her discussion of Bataille's ideas on philosophy and comedy.

Bataille was an unusual philosopher for two reasons. Firstly, he considered philosophy to be comedy (Trahair 3). Secondly, he considered philosophers to be those that were friendly with doubt and questions, not friends of wisdom and knowledge. They did not simply know things, but instead continue to ask questions (4). These two new ideas coagulate when one realizes what Bataille believes is the reason comedy is funny.

Bataille believes that comedy works when it takes what is considered known, and makes it the unknown (4). Essentially, comedy can take any topic, and continue asking questions about it and changing our connotations of it, like Bataille's philosopher could do (4). Trahair says it as follows: "... Bataille audaciously declares that in as much as he is a philosopher, his is a philosophy of laughter. ... he proposes

that the cause of such laughter is both unknown and unknowable: ‘That which is laughable may simply be the *unknowable*’” (4). So basically for Bataille, any joke that gets a laugh, got that laugh because it took what the laugher thought they knew, and turned that on its head. An example of this is “Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side”, because it takes our notion of chickens and makes us think beyond them.

Returning to why Bataille was so odd, his theory that comedy is the unknown shows why he believed what he did. He believed comedy was a philosophy, because it makes us question everything, and philosophy is always asking questions, therefore it is comedy. Bataille’s theory will be crucial to the next chapter where these theories are broken down to figure out what is the real objective reason why jokes are funny.

Nikulin and the Rebuttal of Bataille

Dmitri Nikulin wrote a book in 2014 called *Comedy, Seriously: A Philosophical Study*, which again discusses what makes us laugh. Although he does not call upon the theories of past philosophers in the section of the text looked at here, his ideas still add to the list of theories as to why we laugh, as he is an author and intellectual from the present day.

Nikulin disagrees with the ideas of Bataille. He says: “Against the interpretations of comedy that take it as entirely undefinable, irrational, heterogeneous, and unknowable, I argue that comedy is the most *rational* of all dramatic genres” (Nikulin 49). For Nikulin, what makes comedy funny is how honest and truthful it is. Through the structure of a comedic play, the judgement it states in its message, and the reflection of society that comes out of that judgement, comedy is very understandable

and rational (49-50). Essentially, comedy is funny because of its imitation of known things. As Nikulin puts it: “When comedy tells a story, it does so by showing its narrative through imitative action” (49). An example of this is the clip from before, of Louis C.K. mimicking having sex. It is a known story that he is imitating, and we laugh because of our personal understanding of it. All in all, comedy is not the unknown, but more known than what we consider reality.

Nikulin gives a rebuttal to the theory by Bataille, that comedy makes the known unknown. He finds comedy to be funny through its rationality. Although these two ideas seem to be in complete opposition to each other, they still have some common ground which will help construct the one argument for this thesis on what makes a joke objectively funny.

May and Subjective Purpose

In the year 2015 Shaun May published a book called *A Philosophy of Comedy On Stage and Screen: You Have to be There*, which further outlines why we laugh, and looks at the theories of past intellectuals. He first clarifies why we can laugh in the first place, and then goes on to explain why we laugh since we have the ability.

May claims that the term to explain why we have the ability to laugh is “phenomenology”. Using Taylor Carman’s words that described the philosophy of Heidegger in *Being and Time*, May says that essentially this term is the “ ‘ ... conditions of interpretation, conditions of our understanding something as something’ ” (May 7). Phenomenology is our ability to see the meaning of something subjectively. In other words, the object only has meaning in a particular place and time, and with the correct

mindset one can appreciate that meaning. This is the first part of May's discussion on why we laugh.

The second part is clear through his analysis of the purpose of objects and animals (humans included). He says that the philosopher Simon Critchley believes that animals becoming human is funny because it does not fit into our assumptions of our reality (38). This applies to humans becoming animals as well, although in those cases we laugh without amusement (38). May believes that there is not enough proof in Critchley's work to say that this is always the case (39). To prove that this shift is funny, May says: "What is required is an account of the everyday way in which animals are among us, and how this changes in their 'becoming more human' (39). His book continues on to discuss with more than just literary examples why this shift makes a situation humorous.

Not only is it funny for these great thinkers to see humans and animals become the other, but it is also funny when objects become human-like and vice versa. However, once again, May becomes more specific in his analysis of this idea, saying that we have to observe objects changing in a humorous way, both with the context of their environment and without that context (41). So essentially, what is funny, is animals like Pumbaa and Timon in "The Lion King" (2019), quoting "Beauty and the Beast" (1991), like they have seen it. It implies that the animals in the movie have watched the same movies that humans have; that they have our consciousness. Also an object like the furniture in "Beauty and the Beast" (1991), being personified and having human feelings is funny as well. In this case, the characters of furniture are feeling the same feelings of not doing enough with their lives as humans do. Again, they have the same

consciousness. Overall, May believes what makes a joke funny is the adjustment of something in our world to a different identity or purpose.

In summary, May describes both how we find humor and why we find jokes funny. The how is in our ability to understand something purely subjectively. The why is in the adjustment of that understanding, through the change of an animal, object, or person. This theory will again tie into the others in the following chapter, in order to find an objective reason why we find jokes objectively funny. Although this theory makes it seem that it is impossible to find the reason behind humor objectively, if there are enough theories on why we laugh that all come back to the same idea, that reason is concrete enough to be considered more or less objective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter looked at a number of intellectuals that have given reasons why we find comedy funny. It could be the type of audience that sees the jokes, it could be the joke made something supposedly known unknown, or it could be that an object, person or animal was adjusted to be more like one of the other two things. Although all of these theories are understood to a point, the fact that there are so many other theories makes each theory seem less and less completely true. In the following chapter, this thesis will look at how each of these theories can be narrowed down to one main idea, which will be the concrete reason used in this thesis on what makes a joke objectively funny. The next chapter will also address some of the issues with these previous texts, and whether or not they are still valid with these problems in mind.

Chapter 4: What Makes a Joke Objectively Funny?

It is now clear that throughout the history of intellectuals thinking about why we laugh, a number of theories have been concluded. All of these theories also fit into the three categories noted by Olson. Let's summarize these theories and what category they land in, in table format:

Intellectual	The joke is funny because ...	Which Category?
George Meredith	there was not a puritan audience listening to the joke.	Audience (A)
Plato	the object of the joke is immoral, and therefore ridiculous.	Object (O)
Thomas Hobbes	we the audience feel superior to the object of the joke.	Audience (A)
Charles Baudelaire	we the audience notice our own sinful qualities through the joke.	Audience (A)
Jean-Paul Richter	it notes an objective and subjective relationship between the audience and the object of the joke, as well as notes the context.	A/O Relationship

Intellectual	The joke is funny because ...	Which Category?
Thomas Lipps	the audience member realizes their insignificance through the change of their relationship with the object of the joke	A/O Relationship
Arthur Schopenhauer	the punchline was unexpected.	Object (O)
James Feibleman	there was a release of unnecessary pent up fear.	Audience (A)
Georges Bataille	it takes something that seems known and understandable, and makes it unknown and more incomprehensible.	Object (O)
Dmitri Nikulin	it is truthful.	Object (O)
Shawn May	we the audience notice people, objects, or animals in the joke acting differently than we assumed they would.	A/O Relationship

Table 1.1

Although these theories can be fit into each of the three categories, they can all fit into one different category as well. This category is the theory of comedy by Georges Bataille, that says that what makes a joke funny is that it makes the known unknown. This is the answer that summarizes what makes a joke objectively funny. This chapter is going to prove that each theory is a more specific adaptation of what Bataille theorized, and hence they all do describe why we laugh, but only to an extent. Bataille's theory is that comedy makes what we the audience consider to be known unknown, or it makes us question what we think we understand (Trahair 4). Bataille's theory works for every joke.

Theories on the Object

The first of these theories is by Plato. He stated that we the audience laugh at a joke when the object of the joke comes across as more immoral and ridiculous than ourselves (Olson 5-6). This is one specific version of what Bataille theorized because if we laugh because of what Plato theorized we are seeing the object of the joke in a more immoral and ridiculous light than we had before the joke was made. This means we are seeing the object in a new way, which means it is now a little more unknown to us than it was previously. We do not feel like we have as comprehensive an idea of the object as before. Therefore, the object is turning from known to unknown in our minds, hence it is one specific version of what Bataille theorized.

The second theory in this category is by Arthur Schopenhauer. He stated that we laugh when the end of the joke was not how we expected the joke would end (Nelson 7). The joke is funny because it is incongruous. Therefore, it also works as an example

of what Bataille theorized, as the joke itself changed in a way that turned it from known to unknown.

The final theory in this category is by Dmitri Nikulin. He said that jokes are funny through their rationality and truthfulness, and that comedy is good because it imitates reality (Nikulin 49). He even said that comedy being unknowable is the opposite of what he believes (49). However, what he is stating still fits in Bataille's theory. He says that comedy imitates reality, meaning that when we see a play or hear a stand-up special that imitates what we do not question, it makes us look at reality more honestly, which is not what we normally do. This in turn automatically means that we are taking our reality and seeing it in a new light, making it unknown. Therefore, once again, this theory is a version of what Bataille stated, that comedy makes the known unknown.

Theories on the Audience

The first theory on the audience is by George Meredith. He stated in his *Essay on Comedy*, that the humor in a joke, is based on the type of audience receiving the joke. The first type is puritan, and these are the audiences that laugh at nothing due to their sense of morality (Meredith 3). The other type is bacchanalian, and these are the audiences that laugh at everything, no matter whether the thing stated is actually funny or not (4). This means that puritans are the only ones whose laugh can help us define why we really laugh. If one were able to make a puritan laugh, that would not be expected by them. Therefore, their expectation was flipped on its head in order for the laugh to come out. Their expectation, something known to them, became the unknown for them.

The second theory is by famous philosopher Thomas Hobbes. He stated that the humor of something came out of the audience member laughing finding themselves more superior than the object being joked about (Olson 6). This is also a form of what Bataille discussed because the audience member is now seeing themselves as a newer version of themselves, or an unknown version of themselves, because they are now more superior to an object than they were before. Therefore, once again, this theory is another form of what Bataille stated.

The third theory is by poet and intellectual Charles Baudelaire. He said that what makes us laugh is realizing our own sin in the scene or joke (6). He ties it back to our origins in the Bible with the original sinners of Adam and Eve (6). Although this seems like the opposite of what Hobbes theorized, it still works as an example of what Bataille discussed. The audience member laughing is seeing themselves in a lower or higher light than before, depending on how much progress they believe we have come since the Christian beginning, and therefore their known version of themselves becomes unknown since they are reevaluating who they are.

The fourth and final theory in this group is by author James Feibleman. He stated that what makes us laugh is when there is a release of pent up fear, when the audience member laughing realizes that the fear was unnecessary (Nelson 7). This means that what the audience member thought was going to happen during that moment or joke on stage is not what ended up happening. Therefore, the joke itself became unknown, because it was incongruous from what the fearful audience member expected.

Theories about Audience/Object Relationships

The first theory in this category is by philosopher Jean-Paul Richter. He believed that the humor of a scene came from it noting the subjective and objective situation between the object of the joke and the audience, as well as its context (Olson 6). This means that a joke in a scene is funny because it is confronting the relationship between the audience and the joke's object. By confronting this relationship, it makes the audience rethink what they consider known, making it unknown, just as Bataille predicted.

The second theory in this category is by Theodor Lipps. He stated that what makes a joke funny is the audience member realizing their insignificance in relation to the object of the joke (6-7). This means that the audience member realizing their new insignificance, changes their perception of who they are. In other words, someone they thought was known to them, themselves, becomes unknown, which means that this theory is another version of what Bataille theorized.

The final theory in this category is by Shawn May. He said that the humor of a joke comes from the object, person, or animal discussed in the joke is acting differently than how one would expect. This means the things in our reality are becoming unknown to us, and we laugh because of it. Therefore, the known things in this world are becoming unknown, and this theory works with the theory of Bataille.

Conclusion

This chapter was devoted to showing that every theory from Chapter 3 could be reworked into clearly stating the exact theory that Bataille believed defined what makes comedy work. It is now evident what makes a joke objectively funny: if someone

laughs at a joke, the joke took what they thought was known and turned it into the unknown. This works whether what is unknown is the object itself of the joke, the person laughing, or the relationship between the one laughing and the object of the joke. Now that it is evident what makes a joke objectively funny, the following chapter will look at the results from the survey, and start to discuss what makes a joke objectively offensive.

Chapter 5: Survey Results

Introduction

We have previously seen in this thesis a theory for why we laugh. If we laughed, then the expected became the unexpected. However, why do we get offended? What leads us to respond to a joke with a feeling of disgust instead of a feeling of surprise and joy? And where are the defining lines between a joke that is simply offensive, offensive and funny, or simply funny? This chapter will look at why we get offended, and where these lines are.

This thesis is more than just an essay. I also put out a survey online on SurveyMonkey.com, to get people's responses to particular jokes on topics that are commonly controversial. This means they would be more likely to get offended by the material, if not laugh as well. The survey went out in February of 2019. It ended in May of 2019. The survey collected thirty-five responses, of which twenty-six of them were usable. The other nine were not completed enough to get any real responses out of them. The minimum required for me to use the response was to answer two of the ten questions. Here are 26 survey-takers with their demographics, to prove that there was some variety in the people I got answers from:

Table 1.2

Survey Taker	Work Situation	State of Residence	Race	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Religion	Political Party
#1	Worker	CA	Caucasian	54	Female	Heterosexual	Catholic	Democrat
#2	Student	CA	Caucasian	21	Male	Heterosexual	Agnostic	Democrat

Survey Taker	Work Situation	State of Residence	Race	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Religion	Political Party
#3	Student	CA	Asian	23	Male	Heterosexual	Atheist	Democrat
#4	Worker	OR	Caucasian	49	Male	Queer	Buddhist	Democrat
#5	Worker	CA	Caucasian	22	Female	Heterosexual	Atheist	Democrat
#6	Student	CA	Arab	20	Male	Heterosexual	Agnostic	Centrist
#7	Worker	CA	Caucasian	29	Female	Heterosexual	Love	Democrat
#8	Student	CA	Arab	24	Male	Heterosexual	Muslim	Democrat
#9	Student	OR	Caucasian	21	Male	Bisexual	Deist	Democrat
#10	Student	OR	Caucasian	21	Female	Heterosexual	Deist	Democrat
#11	Stay At Home	CA		84	Male	Heterosexual	Atheist	Democrat
#12		CA	Caucasian	62	Male	Heterosexual	Atheist	Democrat
#13	Worker	CA	Caucasian	56	Female	Heterosexual	Agnostic	Democrat
#14	Student	OR	Caucasian	22	Female	Heterosexual	Atheist	Democrat
#15	Student	CA	Caucasian	34	Male	Heterosexual	Atheist	None
#16	Worker	CA	Caucasian	70	Male		Agnostic	Democrat
#17	Worker	CA	Caucasian	61	Male	Heterosexual	Christian	Republican
#18	Student	CA	Caucasian	24	Male	Heterosexual		Democrat
#19	Student	CA	Mixed	27	Male	Heterosexual	Christian	Independent
#20	Worker	WI	Caucasian	55	Female			

Survey Taker	Work Situation	State of Residence	Race	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Religion	Political Party
#21	Stay-At-Home	CA	Caucasian	58	Female	Heterosexual	Protestant	
#22	Worker	CA	Caucasian	61	Male	Heterosexual	Christian	Independent
#23	Worker	CA	Caucasian	56	Male	Heterosexual		Democrat
#24	Student	CA	Caucasian	24	Male	Heterosexual	Atheist	Democrat
#25	Worker	CA	Caucasian	59	Female	Heterosexual	Seeker of Truth	Democrat
#26	Student	OR	Caucasian	21	Male	Heterosexual	Agnostic	Democrat

The survey included ten comedians discussing five topics: Religion, Domestic Abuse, The N Word, Being Gay/Lesbian, and Gun Control. The comedians were Sarah Silverman and George Carlin, on Religion, Woody Allen and Chris Rock on Domestic Abuse, Louis C.K. and Jimmy O. Yang on The N Word, Wanda Sykes and Alex Edelman on Being Gay/Lesbian, and finally Dwight Slade and David Cross on Gun Control. The questions asked for each topic were “Which clip did you find to be the most offensive? Why?” and “Which clip did you find to be the most funny? Why?”. The results are officially in. This chapter will look at what jokes were considered the most offensive, which were found to be the most funny, both based on the number of votes for each comedian in both categories, and what is the core reason behind our getting offended. The reasons behind why a comedian is voted funny or offensive is also in their responses, due to all of the responses being open-ended. I am going to

argue the core reason behind us getting offended is how the individual audience member reads the personal intention the comedian has behind his/her joke. This may not correlate with what the comedian is actually thinking, but if he/she does not communicate that effectively enough their joke may come across as offensive.

Religion

The first comparison was Sarah Silverman and George Carlin on Religion. Sarah Silverman joked about Scientology and how silly it is to worship a guy named Ron. She also discussed how easy it is to get into heaven, since all you have to do is say sorry. George Carlin pointed out how all religion is “bs”, and that God seems to have trouble never collecting enough money. These clips got a variety of reviews in my survey, on how funny or offensive they were. George Carlin got 15 votes for offensive, and 19 for funny. Sarah Silverman got 10 for offensive, and 5 for funny. Carlin was both funnier and more offensive, due to him getting more points in each category. Why was this? The reasons given by those that took the survey for why Carlin was offensive is that he over simplified his issues with religion. He generalized all religion as “bs”, had a hostile tone, belittled religious people, and connected the word of God to the word of the clergy and the church and their need for money. These reasons boil down to Carlin was read as ignorant and angry in how he performed this bit. Ignorant and angry people do not have the best intentions when they are going on and on about something, therefore Carlin was read as having bad intentions, and this lead to his joke seeming offensive to the majority of survey-takers.

Carlin was also deemed the funniest. This is because, despite his angry ignorance, he also surprised people with his directness of complaints about Christianity,

his exaggerated expressions and body language, and his lack of awareness when it came to how much he knew and how serious the topic is. This means he made the known unknown: he made comedy a more extreme thing to watch, he made specific claims about Christianity most people don't dream of saying, and he joked about a subject that in and of itself many people do not deem approachable when it comes to jokes. He changed everyone's expectations, more so than Ms. Silverman, hence why he was considered funnier than her.

Domestic Abuse

The second two were Woody Allen and Chris Rock, discussing Domestic Abuse. The survey-takers gave Woody Allen 15 offensive points, and 5 funny points. Chris Rock got 15 funny votes and 7 offensive votes. This means that Woody Allen is the more offensive one and Chris Rock is the funnier one. Allen was considered more offensive for a few reasons. They were that he makes fun of the experience of a specific person, it reminded the audience of his allegations, and he was talking about something too real in an insensitive, sadistic manner. To clarify, the allegations made against Allen that made him seem more offensive was that he may or may not have sexually abused his ex-wife's son Dylan, on top of the fact that he is currently married to his ex-wife's adopted daughter Soon-Yi (Chval). This personal history of his, on top of the other reasons given, mean that the audience read his intentions as cruel and not sympathetic. He is talking about the experiences of what feels more like a real person than what Rock discusses, and goes about it in a way that feels callous. Therefore, because his intentions are read as cruel, his joke is read as cruel, therefore he is the more offensive one of the two.

Rock was the funnier one, also for a few reasons. He was seen as more energetic, not talking about anything too individual, charismatic and positive, and what he said was more hypothetical. Being hypothetical, energetic and positive is hard when one is discussing domestic abuse, yet he pulls it off. He pulls it off, therefore he surprises the audience with this ability, and makes the known, what we think of when we think of domestic abuse, and makes it the unknown. To summarize, Woody Allen is the more offensive one, and Chris Rock is the more humorous one, for the reasons given.

The N Word

The third category was The N Word, with the two comedians being Louis C.K., and Jimmy O. Yang. The survey-takers found Louis C.K. more offensive at 23 points, and less funny at 4 points. Jimmy O. Yang got no points as offensive, and 19 points as funny. This means C.K. is the more offensive one, and Yang is the funnier one. C.K. was considered offensive for a variety of reasons. The main ones were that he cussed a lot, used the whole N word, and is oblivious to how bad the word and its history is, due to him never being able to experience it as an African-American. This means the audience read C.K.'s intention as ignorant and mean. A part of why he was deemed this was rooted in his allegations as well. Five women have come out saying that he masturbated in front of them, whether they said yes or no (Ryzik). Although this does not have to do with race, it certainly lowers the survey-takers' opinions of him. Therefore, the response was he just wanted an excuse to say the word without repercussions, and was not aware of how bad it is to say the word in full as he did.

Whether or not C.K. was actually thinking this way, this is how the audience read his intention, so he was deemed offensive.

Jimmy O. Yang was voted funnier by a large majority. This was because he made the known unknown. Reasons given were his use of the microphone stand was funny, the situation of singing to a song was relatable, and he has funny facial expressions, body language, and pauses. This all comes down to making the known unknown. The use of the stand was unexpected, people rarely compare stands to humans. The situation of singing to a song with the N word is relatable, but people rarely realize how common it is with other people as well, and his facial expressions, body language, and pauses, were also unexpected. This means his bit was surprising and understandable, so it is both known and unknown. This is why he was voted as the funnier one between him and Louis C.K.

Being Gay/Lesbian

The fourth category was Being Gay/Lesbian, and the two comedians were Wanda Sykes and Alex Edelman. Sykes got 2 offensive points, and 19 funny points. The survey-takers found Alex Edelman offensive at 15 points, and less funny at 8 points. This means Edelman did something to make his intentions seem mean. The reasons given for why he was considered offensive are: he is trivializing the process of coming out, he is oblivious to what he speaks, he is stereotyping, he is mocking and making light of coming out, trying to make his family uncomfortable/he is “ageist”, and he is making a caricature of LGBT issues. All of these reasons are the audience reading Alex Edelman as being ignorant and purposefully mean, both to the LGBT community and his family. Whether or not he is actually intending to mock, if he is seen as

intentionally mocking or intentionally making light of coming out, then he will be read as offensive/will offend others. If he seems hateful on the inside, people will read him as hateful on the outside.

Wanda Sykes was deemed funnier, due to her ability to make the known unknown. We do not hear often a joke of black rights and LGBT rights in a comparison. Sykes was voted funnier for a variety of reasons. For one, the comparison of being gay to being black was appreciated by many. Also, she skewered racism and homophobia well, and was empathetic and used her own experience. Finally, she had lots of allegory and had great timing, voice and a personal story kept in the audience's head. All of these are her turning the known into the unknown. People do not always expect a comparison like she made, or her ability to call out racism and homophobia in one joke. They also don't expect so much empathy, great timing, great voice, allegory, and a personal story staying in people's heads so easily, from every comedian. She does all of this well enough that her joke that could have been simple, became more of the known turning into the unknown.

Gun Control

The final group discussed Gun Control, and the two comedians were Dwight Slade and David Cross. The more offensive one was David Cross, at 14 points, and also funniest at 13 votes. Dwight Slade got 8 votes of offense, and 9 votes of humor. David Cross was considered offensive for a few reasons. They are: he was cruel, mocking and shocking, he attacks a group of people, both people who dislike gun control and religious people, as well as kids dying and kids having sex is horrifying. This points out that what the audience reads Cross' intentions as is purely to shock, to attack their

values/faith, and be cruel. It seemed to them that he was not trying to do good with his act. Therefore, his intentions seemed hateful so he was deemed offensive. However, his cruel act also gave quite a few people laughs as well.

David Cross was also the funnier one of the two. This means he both seemed to have bad intentions, and made the known unknown, same as George Carlin. The reasons given for why he was funny, are: Cross was non-sequitur/unexpected, he was ludicrous/absurd, they enjoyed him mocking certain kinds of people, and he made a good point about Christian-centric views. This means that for those that found him funny, Cross either simply surprised them, impressed them with his ridiculousness, or made a point they agree with in a new way. No matter which way, Cross turned what they expected into the unexpected. He made the known unknown.

Conclusion

In conclusion, here are the tallies the comedians got:

Table 1.3

Comedian	Offensive	Funny
Sarah Silverman	10	5
George Carlin	15	19
Woody Allen	15	5
Chris Rock	7	15
Louis C.K.	23	4
Jimmy O. Yang	0	19
Wanda Sykes	2	19
Alex Edelman	15	8
Dwight Slade	8	9
David Cross	14	13

The clear reason why we get offended by certain jokes and not others is that those jokes come across to the individual as if the comedian is saying them with hate. If the joke comes from a place of ignorance, the joke might be seen as less offensive. If it comes from a place of curiosity, people might be ok with the joke, no matter what it is. However the audience member reads the intentions behind the joke from the comedian, the joke itself turns into offensive or not.

Also, how can a joke be both funny and offensive? If the person listening to the joke finds that the comedian is making the known unknown, but also the joke is coming from a place of hate, then they will find the joke to be in both categories. If they find neither to be true, then the joke is neither funny nor shocking to them in any way.

Chapter 6: Interview Results

Introduction

This thesis not only looked at the audience members' opinions on comedy, but the comedians too. What do they think makes a joke offensive? I interviewed three professional comedians, and three student comedians from the University of Oregon, all of whom will be anonymous, to get their take on what makes a joke offensive versus funny or both. The specific questions I asked them are:

1. In your past experiences doing stand-up, what types of jokes have you noticed made the most audience members the most offended? Why do you think that was? Do you think they were right to be offended?
2. Is there any topic or type of joke that is off-limits? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever been offended at a comedy show, by another comedian or an audience member? What happened?
4. Do you think comedy is important to society, or does it hurt more people than it helps? Why or why not?

This chapter will look at their answers, and how they further prove that what is really behind the offensiveness of a joke, is how the audience perceives the intentions of the comedian.

Professional Comedian #1

The first professional comedian had a lot to say on the first question. She gave many reasons for why people get uncomfortable or offended. She mentioned embarrassment, talking against the status quo, discussing the unknown, and hate speech.

What it comes down to though, is this: “It depends on what you are trying to do with your comedy”. If the comedian is not simply just trying to get laughs, if they are doing something more, that more could be interpreted as hateful, and then people get offended. It’s especially easy for that to happen if one attacks a marginalized group or talks about a serious crime like rape. However, she says “It’s so easy to write jokes about Jews and ashtrays”, but if you add a clever element you might get away with a controversial joke like that. So even if you are doing more than just getting laughs, if you surprise the audience by being clever, then you might get away with being offensive, because you made the known unknown (something awful put in an intellectual light). Essentially, she has noticed that people get offended when things are discussed that are controversial, in a way that is to be expected, and the intention behind it is not clearly just to make people laugh, due to it seeming hateful.

To the second question, she said comedians need to be more aware of their power. If they say the wrong thing, it can lead to violence and bullying. It can be the catalyst to someone being really harmed. Free speech has consequences, according to her, so the safest thing to joke about is to attack the protected. This means that people will not have to worry about your intentions, therefore you will not be deemed offensive.

The third question was a rough topic to discuss. She mentioned the pussy grabbing joke, and how it makes her viscerally uncomfortable. We need to be “addressing it as a terrible thing”. If people do not know where the comedian stands on a topic such as that, and they are joking about it, the joke becomes awkward and

offensive. In other words, the comedians intention is crucial to how the joke is perceived.

For the final question, her official answer is that it is more important than hurtful. She says that it is not good to censor to that point that everything is status quo, but hurting the harmed in comedy is not ideal either. It's good to bridge divides and mention what we've all experienced. That would be making the known unknown, by pointing out things we all experience, that we might not realize everyone does. Hurting the harmed would be having bad intentions, so the joke becomes offensive. Overall, all her answers lead back to the same conclusion: that if the intention is bad or unclear, the joke becomes offensive.

Professional Comedian #2

The second professional comedian had a different perspective on the four questions. For question number one, he mentioned how many people who are offended for another group, are actually more criminally against them than they will admit. He is offended by those that are being offended for the sake of someone else: "A lot of the on-behalf of, is as offensive as what they're talking about". He finds hateful people to be offended. He also says they are not looking at it the way the comedian is. They just want to "shut down my entire world and [make me] apologize". This means that they see hate in everything the comedians say, no matter what. Also those same people offend the comedian due to their hateful ways. In the end, the intention behind the statement and how it is interpreted makes the offense come out of the phrase, whether it is the comedian or the hateful audience member who is being offended.

For the second question, this comedian believes that the more off-limits the topic, the more it should be discussed. For him, the bottom line is that the topic is being addressed, which is better than no one saying anything. This means he believes in people being offended, because then at least the potentially hateful thoughts of someone are publicized, and so is who they really are. This means that the possible mean intentions behind the joke of a comedian are what lead to offense being taken by an audience member.

For the third question, this comedian has a hard time being offended. The only time he was offended was when he was treated dumb as an audience member. He has even been called out for saying offensive things and even then he was not offended. He says: "It's his problem [to fix]". He is ok with comedians improving and changing their comedy, and allowing them to bomb. It is better to be hateful and be called out than to sit in your cruelty. This is why he is not easily offended, because he welcomes hateful phrases that can be adjusted.

For the final question, this comedian says that "subversive comedy is necessary". Comedy is more important and not hurtful, since the groups that are attacked usually are "those groups [that] deal with s*** with humor". Therefore, it is important to have comedy, and allow people to laugh through their pain. It is also important because subversive comedy allows society to rethink its ideals and talk some more about them. This once again proves that offensiveness comes from potential hateful intentions, since if he is not offended, and wants subversive comedy for the sake of talking more, then he wants hateful statements so that the problems with society are discovered and fixed.

Professional Comedian #3

The third comedian believes the type of people listening defines how offensive a joke is. He says it “depends on like your audience”. It also depends on how good the joke is. If it is bad, then “they [the audience] just won’t laugh”. He says when discussing something, especially sensitive, there’s a good way and bad way to go about it: “But it’s true ... you gotta nuance it better than that”. If you discuss something in a bad fashion, then people will respond with: “Yeah, you’re really f*****’ cool”. If there is no good angle, then do not tell the joke. That is what this comedian does when working through material. Clearly, the issue with a joke when an audience dislikes it is that it comes across not nuanced, not clever, and mean. Therefore the comedian comes across as having bad intentions, and the joke is offensive. This comedian even said directly: “[Make sure] it’s from a good place”, and “It’s the intention behind the words [that makes or breaks the joke]”.

For question number two, his answer is that nothing is off-limits. He says that “if you’re a nice person you can joke about the most horrible s****”. It comes down to your perspective and your goal. How much do you know on the subject, and how do you feel on the subject? If your answer is you are not super angry at the discussion, and you are very educated, then you are probably safe to talk about anything. However, do not be 100% safe, because then you are reinforcing ignorance in the audience. In other words, if your intention seems hateful or ignorant, the joke will be offensive, but do not be afraid to try out new jokes and material, even if it seems to be headed in that direction.

For the third question, this comedian says he is not easily offended. He says: "Taking offense, it pisses you off". He does not like people who get offended, because they are just waiting to go on Facebook afterward and chastise people. He also says he dislikes offended people since "anybody who says they know how comedy works is full of s****". He wants ideas to flow, and he wants rules and guidelines broken. But he also recognizes, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, that if someone is genuinely mean, or seems to have that intention, they will not get away with a lot.

For the last question, he finds that comedy is more helpful than hurtful. The only time it is hurtful is when people with bad perspectives do comedy. He says: "People with s***** perspectives are not funny". This means that people who are hateful seem hateful, and the audience can read into that, leading to them being offended by the joke. As long as the joke comes from a place of goodness, fewer people will be upset by what a comedian says.

Student Comedian #1

The first student comedian had an interesting response to question number one. He said first off that a lot of people play it safe in Eugene. That being said, he pointed out that "cancer jokes are not very popular", because they affect everyone. He also says people dislike when a comedian does something called "punching down", where you make fun of someone with less power. Furthermore, if someone uses a joke as a way to cope with something like a bad thought, the audience is more offended. So people are offended by punching down, jokes on negative things that hurt everyone, and bad coping skills. In other words, if the comedian is being hurtful or discussing something

that is hurtful to everyone, or has bad coping skills, the audience will find that those intentions are negative and find the joke offensive.

The second question was answered by him as “I would like to think there are no topics that are off-limits”. He says it is important to know who you are performing for. The audience will get tense if the material does not match what they are expecting. In general, he says there is “no topic that is off-limits as a blanket statement, but be aware”. This means that if your intentions are off according to the audience, then you should not use that joke, but in general, there is no idea that you can’t try out in front of them.

For the third question, there is nothing he is personally offended by. For him, everything said: “It’s a joke ... nothing mean-hearted about it”. However, one time, a comedian came up and yelled at one individual in the audience. That offended him. The guy “blew it [comedy’s limits] out of proportion”. However, in general, he finds jokes to not be mean, so they are okay to say. This means that he only gets offended when the comedians intentions are mean. Therefore, the intentions of the comedian in a joke are crucial to an audience member’s feeling of offense.

For the fourth question, he said that comedy is more important than hurtful. A quote by him on this topic is: “The day that we stop laughing, is the day that I want to die”. Stand-up is the last form of storytelling. It’s important for him, and many others. However, if it comes from a place of hate, then the comedy is more hurtful. It is crucial, according to him, that the joke is backed up with a statement of support. If the intentions of the joke are hateful, then comedy becomes hurtful, and also offensive.

Student Comedian #2

The second comedian says that she notices people offended when there is not a universal message in the joke. She says that without that, “this [the joke] is putting a certain group in a bad light”. That being said, they have the right to be offended, but there are nicer ways of being so. Don’t walk out or boo. If an audience member is not laughing, the comedian may adjust their material. They read into things like that. Comedians may not respond to someone being rude while being offended. So, to sum up, putting one group in a bad light offends people, who then may be rude. They are offended because putting one group in a bad light is a hateful thing, or seems to have mean intentions.

For the second question, she says that there is no topic off-limits: “No, [nothing is off-limits,] as long as it’s funny”. She says it is important to play on your perspective, and try not to tear each other down. For her, people are so diverse that anything could work as a joke. So long as there is some humanization of the subject and/or its trauma, then anything can work. This means that not being humane, and being harsh, leads to people being offended, because the comedian’s intentions seem cruel.

This comedian gets offended as an audience member when the comedians “talk down to me [her]”. She also finds it condescending when the comedians harp on the offended. There are comedians who say “I’m too edge for you”, which she disapproves of. Do not make the audience feel lower and you higher, make fun of yourself as a comedian instead. If you do this, you will not seem condescending, so your intentions will not seem this way, therefore you will not be offending as many people.

For the last question, this comedian points out that comedy is both harmful and important. She uses the example of Joan Rivers. She was harmful, but also radical. However, when being radical, you have to be responsible for what you say as well. You also “shouldn’t necessarily be mean-spirited”. If one is mean-spirited, their intentions seem mean, and they will offend people, and be harmful as well as possibly important. Therefore, intentions define offense.

Student Comedian #3

This final comedian discussed his past stand-up and what people found offensive. He said the first time no one was really offended, but uncomfortable. He mentioned his virginity, and people did not like listening to that. The second time he did stand-up, he made fun of one person, a friend of his. He said: “I felt really comfortable ... digging at him”. However, his friend was not happy, and the comedian says what he did was “not cool at all”. He says that what made his second bit offensive was that he called out the individual. He says that it is worse too to say “you are lazy vs your actions are lazy”. It hits harder, and is more hurtful. This means that if people think your intention is to attack an individual, and bully them, then they will be offended. The same thing occurred here that happened with the Woody Allen bit from before.

For the second question, this comedian says there are jokes off-limits to certain comedians. For example, he says he cannot make a rape joke. However, “a comedian who had been a victim ... totally within their right [to tell a rape joke]”. It depends on the experiences a comedian has had in their real life. Without the experience he says, “they’d just sound like an enormous d*****”. It comes down to are you enlightened or ignorant. If the audience sees your intentions as coming from ignorance, they will be

offended, hence if one is avoiding offending people, some jokes are off-limits to certain comedians.

For the third question, he says that he dislikes virginity jokes. He considers them a “dig on me [him]”. At the time he was a virgin, and it was a “place of insecurity”. After his first set, someone came up and said his set was sad, so he felt offended and hurt. He felt like as an individual he was being picked on. This further shows that if the intention seems to be to hurt an individual, people listening get offended.

Finally, for the last question, he said that comedy is more important than it is hurtful. Comedy for him, is a good way to talk about experiences without being shut down. People are more engaged in one’s story if in the comedy context. It also “engages this sense of empathy”, and addresses issues that are not always mentioned on a larger scale. However, some people will always be hurt, just fewer than those that enjoy it. So the good outweighs the bad. This means that although many will read the intentions of a comedian as to hurt an individual or a group of people, the majority will see the intentions as simply to try and make people laugh, which is an intention no one can be mad at. It can, if done right, and with good intentions, stir empathy as well. If doing comedy right means getting laughs and stirring empathy, then comedy is good, and only comedians with immoral intentions, or seemingly immoral intentions, get called out as offensive.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at my interview responses with three professional comedians, and three student comedians from the University of Oregon. They agree with the overarching idea that offense is taken when the intentions of the comedian

seem to be hateful. For example, when the third student comedian attacked one individual, and was too harsh, or when the second professional comedian was treated dumb as an audience member. If it seems like you are not simply trying to make people laugh or engage in empathy, then the response is that the audience is hurt by what one said on stage. Therefore, we are offended by jokes where the comedian seems to or has mean intentions behind the joke, and we laugh when the known becomes the unknown in the joke. I will further prove my reason for why we get offended with my literature review.

Chapter 7: Literature Review

Finally, I wanted to look at other studies that have addressed a similar question to what I have in this thesis. Through five related studies, I have discovered that what I believe to be the reason for why we get offended concurs with what they have found as well. This chapter will cover those five studies, what they address, and how their idea of offense falls in line with what I believe.

Humor in the Workplace

In an article in 2006 called “The judicious use and management of humor in the workplace” (Lyttle 2006), Jim Lyttle discusses how humor works in a workplace setting, and how people can get offended as well. He says that offending someone in a workplace is more likely if the workplace is more diverse (Lyttle 241). He writes: “In general, when we define an in-group of people who share our views and our sense of humor, we automatically characterize others as ‘outsiders’” (241). This means that people get offended when they have a different mind-set from the one telling the joke, which means they are more likely to interpret the joke as lacking in empathy, and therefore having a bad intention, of/toward those that are different from the joke-teller.

Being Offended at Late Night Comedy

The second article, by the name of “Image Repair in Late Night Comedy: Letterman and the Palin Joke Controversy” (Compton, Miller 2011), looks at those offended by a joke by David Letterman about Sarah Palin. The joke was about Sarah Palin going to New York to see a baseball game with her 14 year old daughter (Compton, Miller 1). However, the punchline was about her 18-year old daughter

getting pregnant (Compton, Miller 1). The blurring of these lines made the joke seem like Letterman was okay with a 14-year old getting raped (Compton, Miller 1-2). Todd Palin said: ““Any ‘jokes’ about raping my 14-year-old are despicable. Alaskans know it and I believe the rest of the world knows it, too”” (Compton, Miller 2). This means that those who were offended by Letterman’s joke saw him as making fun of teenagers being raped. Therefore, this meant that he was seen as lacking in empathy, or in other words having bad intentions in his joke.

Different Cultures Being Offended

The third article looks at how people get offended based on the culture they grew up in. It is called ““When a joke’s a joke and when it’s too much’: Mateship as a key to interpreting jocular FTAs in Australian English” (Sinkeviciute 2013). This article says that “explicitly stating one’s personal achievements and being ‘fond of the ‘self’” seems to be valued in the American cultural context; however, from an ‘English English and Australian English point of view, [such] statements [...] are liable to violate cultural proscriptions’ ...” (Sinkeviciute 121). This means that depending on the culture you are from, you may take offense at certain statements over others. If a comedian does not understand how differently cultured audiences take different jokes, they are liable to be considered offensive, for having a bad intention in a joke that they maybe did not see as offensive, due to where they grew up.

Offense and the N Word

This article discusses the use of the N word in the film Pulp Fiction. It is called ““When is a slur not a slur? The use of n— in ‘Pulp Fiction’” (Allan 2015). In it, he discusses the use of the term in Tarantino’s film, and how they are acceptable for a

variety of reasons. In one example, he points out that Spike Lee dislikes Tarantino's choice of using the word so much (Allan 192). However, Allan then says it is ironic that Lee is okay with black people using the term but not white people (192). He continues: "Nevertheless the prejudice is explicable as analogous to the situation in which you as an in-grouper can criticise your own mother but if an out-grouper does it you feel hurt, offended, and maybe angry" (192). This further proves my point. If someone has a different mindset, or is an outsider to a certain group's mindset, then them trying to joke about certain related topics will come across as having a bad intention, whether it be just ignorance, or full-on malicious-seeming intentions.

The Wealthy Getting Offended

Finally, there is an article called "The rich are easily offended by unfairness: Wealth triggers spiteful rejection of unfair offers" (Ding, Wu, Ji, Chen, Van Lange 2017). It discusses the mindset of people based on their wealth. It is written: "Moreover, our research suggests that the wealthy, or people who temporarily feel wealthy, are more easily offended by unfairness" (Ding, Wu, Ji, Chen, Van Lange 143). This means that rich people expect things to be a certain way, more so than those that are less wealthy. Therefore, they are not as open-minded, and will in turn read more statements as having bad intentions, because their expectation of how things should be is more limited than it is for others. This makes them more likely to get offended.

Conclusion

In conclusion, here are a few articles that support my theory on why we get offended. It is a fascinating topic that interests many, whether they are studying cultures or wealth or problems in the workplace. All in all, we want as few people to be offended, so long as the status quo is not in turn so unchanging that people never improve.

Conclusion

Why We Laugh

This thesis was intending to figure out the boundaries between what makes us laugh, what offends us, and what is both. For the first section of this thesis, I looked at texts by various philosophers and academics, on what they consider to be the reasons for why we laugh. Various reasons were given including, but not limited to: the punchline was unexpected, the audience feels superior to the object of the joke, and the joke released unnecessary pent up fear in the audience member listening. These reasons, among all the others, are just a reworking of the theory by Bataille, that a joke is funny if the known becomes the unknown. So suddenly there is a surprising unknown punchline, or a new relationship between the audience and the object is made, or a fear that is expected to stay unexpectedly leaves, so your known becomes unknown. This is why we laugh, and even if we are offended, if we laugh as well then this has happened.

Why We Get Offended

This thesis also determines what makes a joke offensive. It used answers from a survey, where survey-takers watched clips of comedy, and wrote what they found funny and what they found offensive. The offensive jokes all had one thing in common: if the intention behind the joke by the comedian seemed to the audience to come from a place of hatred, or another negative feeling, then the joke was deemed offensive. This was true of Woody Allen, who is considered an immoral person in his personal life, so his comedy is given the same light, Alex Edelman, who was considered offensive because he was ignorant to what he spoke about and the hardships of coming out of the closet,

and David Cross, who seemed to have the intention of purely being shocking and pissing people off. David Cross and Alex Edelman offended fewer people, since their intentions are not as cruel as what Allen's may have been. This theory that audience-read intention defines offense is true for the other comedians from the survey that offended the survey-takers as well.

This thesis also used the responses from comedians to figure out what offends audiences. They said the same thing: a comedian can say what they like, so long as it comes from a good place. If the intentions are negative, so will the response be. Therefore, offense is taken based on read intention, and laughs are given based on how unknown the joke ends up being. If a joke is both, offense and laughter are the response, and if the joke is just one or the other, the response will be one or the other.

Reconciling the Two Theories

Bataille's theory discusses why we laugh. But how come a joke can make the known unknown and still people just get offended? This is because their reading of a joke having bad intentions leads them to refuse to acknowledge the transfer of known knowledge to unknown knowledge. They cannot laugh because the bad intentions of the comedian take away from them being allowed to recognize the clever adjustment made in the joke. Therefore, if someone is offended, they refuse to acknowledge the change from known to unknown, if it is there, and if they laugh, the known becomes the unknown and the intentions seemed nice. If they are offended and laugh, then the intentions seemed bad, yet the known becoming the unknown was something the audience member still had to acknowledge.

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