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Fitting Attitude Theory and the Normativity of Jokes

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Abstract We defend a fitting-attitude (FA) theory of the funny against a set of potential objections. Ultimately, we endorse a version of FA theory that treats reasons for amusement as non-compelling, metaphysically non-conditional, and alterable by social features of the joke telling context. We find that this version of FA theory is well-suited to accommodate our ordinary practices of telling and being amused by jokes, and helpfully bears on the related faultless disagreement dispute.

Our ordinary practices of telling and being amused by jokes have a normative dimension. We criticize those who joke and laugh too much as buffoons, and those who joke and laugh too little as bores. Similarly, we criticize some senses of humor as crass or immature, and praise others as funny, or witty. To those who are amused more than we are we might say “come on, it isn’t *that* funny,” and sometimes we might protest “that’s not funny at all.” Any adequate theory of humor will have to account for this normative dimension of our joke telling practices.

One way to account for this normative dimension is to appeal to evaluative properties of the object of amusement. On this sort of view, the normativity of our humor judgments derives from the goal of getting the object of amusement right. We think that the most attractive view of this type is a version of fitting attitude (FA) theory that holds that something is funny just in case it provides sufficient reason, of the right kind, for an associated sentiment; here, comic amusement. Such

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theories are attractive, we think, because they aim to capture the normativity of our humor practices without the metaphysical commitments of robust realism. The goal of this paper is to defend an FA theory of the funny against a set of objections, and thereby show that it is well suited to accommodate our ordinary practices of amusing and being amused by jokes.

1 The Funny as a Fitting Attitude Property

To call something funny is in some way to *endorse* amusement at it, not to report or predict it. The attraction of FA theory is that it purports to capture the sense that we ought to be amused at certain things because they are funny.¹

FA theories attempt to make sense of an evaluative property in terms of whether an associated sentiment fits its object.² Our focus here is on a class of FA theories that hold that a sentiment fits its object if the object provides sufficient reason of the right kind for a related sentiment.³ An FA theorist about the funny holds that a joke is funny just in case comic-amusement is a fitting response to it.⁴ So, this sort of FA theory is a species of a buck passing view⁵ as it “passes the buck” on giving an account of an evaluative property to something else, here reasons for an associated sentiment. But, the reasons must be *of the right kind*, i.e., they must be *fit-relevant* reasons. This narrow focus on fit-relevant reasons is an acknowledgement of the so-called wrong kinds of reasons problem that has been something of a challenge for various forms of neo-sentimentalism.⁶ Roughly, the problem is that in some cases we have a reason to experience a sentiment that seems to have no bearing on the related evaluative property. For instance, if Jerry Seinfeld were to hold a loaded pistol to Sarah Silverman’s head and say sincerely “be amused, damn it!” surely this threat is some reason for her to be amused, but not, the thinking goes, one that bears on the matter at hand, namely whether Jerry Seinfeld is being funny.

FA theories are attractive because they preserve the realist normative gloss of evaluative properties and the objective purport of our evaluative judgments, and so are well situated to account for our practice of rendering comic judgments, as on this view being funny is a matter of there being object-directed reasons of the right kind for amusement. But they take evaluative properties to be mind-dependent and anthropocentric, and so do not bring along with them the metaphysical

¹ Jacobson (2011).

² Early versions of fitting attitude theories were introduced by John McDowell and David Wiggins. See McDowell (1998) and Wiggins (1987). For further influential discussion of neo-sentimentalist and fitting attitude theories, see D’Arms and Jacobson (2000b, 2006). We also find a proto-FA theory in the work of Berys Gaut, see Gaut (1998, p. 60).

³ The focus of this paper is a version of FA theory that gives an account of evaluative properties in terms of fit-relevant reasons sufficient for an associated sentiment. There are other sorts of FA theory that are not our focus here, cf., McHugh and Way (2016).

⁴ We use ‘amusement’ as shorthand for the more cumbersome ‘comic amusement,’ and as synonymous with ‘mirth,’ which is currently in use in the sciences.

⁵ For a seminal account of so-called buck-passing views, see Scanlon (1998, esp. chapter 1).

⁶ D’Arms and Jacobson (2000a), Hieronymi (2005), Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004, 2006).

commitments of a robust realism about the funny. Further, they do so in a way that gives the sentiments, here amusement, a central role that respects the common thought that properties like the funny are in some important way response-dependent.⁷

2 FA Theory and Divergent Senses of Humor

Though there is a lot to like about an FA theory of the funny, there is one aspect of our humor practices that seems to be in tension with it: we are quite content to allow for a wide range of divergence in senses of humor across individuals and social groups. Adding to this is a growing body of evidence that shows that our responses to jokes can be divided along cultural lines. The English, for example, prefer “deadpan or irreverent” jokes, while Americans like jokes that contain “insults or veiled threats” (an empirically vindicated fact that likely surprises no one who has been exposed to both groups).⁸ Further, when questioned about our own sense of humor, we are often perfectly content to retreat to a subjective stance to explain it.⁹ We might find ourselves saying things like “I don’t know, I tend to like dark humor,” or simply “I’m English.” Moreover, retreating to a more or less subjective stance is not usually offered up as an explanation for why we are getting things wrong (or right for that matter). And, in cases where a friend does not share our sense of humor, say she does not go in for slapstick, while this might be something to regret, it might seem more than a bit dogmatic to insist that that she has failed in some meaningful sense to get things aright. That is, we might find ourselves agreeing with Ted Cohen in thinking that though we *want* her to share in our sense of humor, we cannot demand it of her as a rational agent.¹⁰

What we take to be relevant here is not the mere fact of divergence; we’ll find divergence in all sentiments. Rather, it is our comfort with such divergence in most contexts.¹¹ For an FA theorist this feature of our humor practices poses something of a challenge. If properties of the object provide reasons for amusement, how can we square this with the ease with which we simply accept, as a perfectly normal part of the practice of amusing and being amused, a fairly wide range of divergent attitudes toward the objects of amusement?

Of course, an FA theorist might reject our comfort with divergent senses of humor as wrong-headed, and insist that if something is funny, then in the absence of countervailing reasons, we should be amused. But, to simply reject a well-entrenched practice on the grounds that it is inconsistent with the theory is something that we should resist if we can. And, we suspect that many of those who

⁷ For some seminal articles presenting response dependent accounts of aesthetic properties, see Walton (1993) and Goldman (1990). For a recent paper raising some criticisms of arguments supporting response dependent accounts of aesthetic properties, see Watkins and Shelley (2012).

⁸ Weems (2014, esp., ch. 1).

⁹ John Bender claims that this is a feature of most third-party aesthetic disputes. See Bender (2005).

¹⁰ Cohen (1999, pp. 31–32).

¹¹ Contrast moral contexts where comfort with divergence is less common.

find themselves uncomfortable with talk of fit-relevant reasons for amusement are so because of the sort of normativity that such talk seems to invite, namely that one *ought* to be amused by some jokes.

We think that part of the hesitation about fit-relevant reasons for amusement might arise from a common thought that something like what we call the *reasons rationality principle* is true: if a person recognizes that (1) she has a reason to ϕ , (2) she has no competing reason to do something else, and (3) she has no weightier or overriding reason to not ϕ , then if she fails to ϕ she is to this extent irrational; and if she has a reason that she does not recognize as a reason, then she is to this extent unreasonable.¹² In either case, failing to do as the strongest reason bids is grounds for rational criticism.¹³ This, however, seems inconsistent with our comfort with divergent senses of humor cited above.

One possible option is for the FA theorist to say that reasons for amusement are always very weak: though they yield oughts, they are of such a low magnitude that we ignore them for most practical purposes. But, we suspect that this kind of move won't work. Some jokes merit uproarious laughter and heightened amusement, while others only merit a minor chuckle and mild amusement. We presume that for an FA theorist the most natural way to capture this is in terms of the strength of reasons for amusement. When there are very strong reasons for amusement, then heightened amusement is called for, say. But if this is right, then the FA theorist is in the position of having to claim that reasons that are very strong in their amusing-relevant capacity are very weak in their capacity to yield oughts. This, at very least, calls for explanation.

Another option is for the FA theorist to reject the reasons rationality principle with regard to fit-relevant reasons for amusement. There are grounds for thinking that the reasons rationality principle relies on an illegitimate assumption about reasons, that all reasons have the same kind of normative force and any normative difference amongst salient reasons is nothing more than a difference of strength. Though a number of philosophers have endorsed such a conception of reasons,¹⁴ and it seems to underlie some philosophers' rejection of the normativity of aesthetic reasons altogether,¹⁵ there is a body of literature that challenges this notion. When it comes to reasons there is more than one kind of normativity: some reasons entail rational requirements, others do not.¹⁶ Margaret Little, for example, cites several cases where an individual seems to have a reason to undertake an action yet is free to do otherwise, even when she does so for no *reason* whatsoever. Some of the examples that she cites are acts of heroic supererogation, weeding the garden, going to the movies, and the selection of a particular color in a painting.¹⁷ In each case,

¹² For more on the distinction between being unreasonable and irrational, see Scanlon, *ibid*.

¹³ We might add that the rational criticism could also be grounded in the strength of one's amusement response not fitting the strength of the reasons for amusement. If there are only weak reasons for amusement, but one is overcome with a bout of amused delight, then one is also open to rational criticism.

¹⁴ Raz (2002), Robertson (2008), Kagan (1989) and Broome (2004).

¹⁵ Harold (2011).

¹⁶ For different accounts of non-compelling reasons see Dancy (2004) and Wallace (2013).

¹⁷ Little (2013).

one might have a reason to undertake a particular action, say weed the garden as it is overgrown, but one would be neither irrational nor unreasonable for failing to do so even if one were to fail to do so simply because she cannot be bothered (that is, for no countervailing reason at all, but only because she does not want to do as reason dictates).¹⁸ Little uses these examples to draw a distinction between reasons whose force compels agents, and reasons whose force does not compel but instead serves to make an act intelligible or sensible. And, she claims, this is also true of some attitudes and emotions. Sometimes an emotion is inconsistent with what a properly functioning person would feel, and so one ought not to feel thusly. Sometimes it is necessary to what a properly functioning person would feel, and so one ought to feel thusly. But, sometimes it is merely consistent with what a properly functioning person would feel, and so one *may* feel thusly or not.¹⁹ For example, it would be wrong to feel anger over the racial integration of the public school system. And, it might be that one ought to feel sorrow over a terrible tragedy. But, one *may* feel joy after getting high marks on an exam, though one *need not*. Following this line of thought, an FA theorist might claim that if a joke provides fit-relevant reasons for amusement they are of the sort that makes amusement reasonable, but not required, and so our failure to be amused is not all by itself an indication of any failing on our part. A person who remained unamused by a funny joke would not, in any meaningful sense, be getting things wrong.

Conceiving of fit-relevant reasons for amusement as non-compelling can also accommodate our responses to divergent senses of humor, as there is no fit-relevant sense in which we *ought* to be amused by a joke.²⁰ Further, a fitting attitude view that asserts that reasons for amusement are non-compelling can accommodate claims like “that’s not funny!” or “it’s not *that* funny.” Even if reasons for amusement are non-compelling, we will still be open to criticism in the case where we take there to be a reason for amusement when there is no such reason, or in the case where we take such a reason to be stronger than it is—say when we laugh a little too uproariously. And, this way of thinking can capture the thought that one might be a buffoon, as the buffoon takes there to be fit-relevant reasons when there are none and she does so often. It might have a bit more difficulty capturing the bore, as she fails to respond to the reasons that are there and we might think that if the reasons do not compel then in what way can the bore be subject to evaluative critique? To capture this sort of criticism, we might think that while it is fine to ignore fit-relevant reasons for amusement in particular instances, a pattern of such failure shows that we are unable to perceive such reasons at all. This is the failing of the bore. For these reasons, we think that the FA theorist would do well to adopt a non-compelling reasons model at least when it comes to the funny.

¹⁸ This recognition that different reasons have a different normative status is an interesting one because we might be tempted to think that ignoring a reason because we can’t be bothered is a paradigm instance of a rational failing.

¹⁹ Little, *ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

²⁰ It might do even better if conjoined with the recognition that there are a very large number of reasons for amusement, and that most of us simply couldn’t possibly go in for all of them.

3 Non-compelling Reasons and the Faultless Disagreement Debate

So far, our discussion has been guided by the observation that we tolerate a high degree of divergence with regard to amusement preferences and responses. And this has led us to endorse a non-compelling reasons version of FA theory with regard to the funny. However, over the past decade or so a dispute has arisen about the semantics of judgments of taste (which would include humor judgments) in light of the thought that we don't just tolerate divergence but that divergent judgements are in fact faultless.²¹ That is, if A says that Jerry Seinfeld is funnier than Sarah Silverman, while B says that the reverse is true, we might be tempted to say that neither A's nor B's judgment is rationally mistaken. This, the thinking goes, is a feature of all judgments of taste. But, realists, which for purposes of this debate includes the FA theorist, have trouble accommodating mistake free, i.e., faultless, divergence in judgment. After all, the realist seems to be committed to the claim that at least one party to the dispute is saying something that is false. And, the realist's seeming inability to capture the faultlessness of judgments of taste has motivated some to reject realism about aesthetic judgments altogether in favor of some version of contextualism or relativism.

We readily admit that the non-compelling reasons model can't capture the kind of complete faultlessness sometimes presupposed in the faultless disagreement debate. Even if we combine FA theory with non-compelling reasons, the FA theorist is still committed to the claim that our humor judgments, which are based on reasons, are at least sometimes mistaken, and hence not wholly faultless. Still, we think that a non-compelling reasons version of FA theory can preserve a good enough sense in which humor is faultless, call it practical faultlessness. Further, we think that the sort of faultlessness that the FA theorist can preserve, i.e., practical faultlessness, is preferable to the sort of faultlessness that is (mostly) at stake in the faultless disagreement literature, call it doxastic faultlessness.

Let us begin by considering, in very broad outline,²² the main rival accounts to realism about aesthetic judgments: contextualism and relativism. Contextualists resolve the tension arising out of putative faultless disagreement by arguing that the judgment of each disputant has an implied additional parameter. For example, A's judgment should be construed as "Jerry Seinfeld is funnier than Sarah Silverman (to A)" and B's as "Sarah Silverman is funnier than Jerry Seinfeld (to B)." In this way, the contextualist can claim that each party is faultless, since each party to the dispute asserts something true.²³ Still, this sort of solution comes at a fairly high

²¹ The faultless disagreement debate has gone through several iterations and has reached a degree of complexity that would take us too far afield for the issues at stake here. For a sampling of the arguments, see Kölbel (2003), Macfarlane (2007), Schafer (2011), Egan (2014), Palmira (2015) and Baker and Robson (2017).

²² We say "very broad outline" here to acknowledge that the literature on this debate is quite expansive, and our comments here cannot do complete justice to it all. Still, we think that the version of FA theory on offer here has a novel contribution to make to this debate which can be seen by treating the debate in outline.

²³ There are other more sophisticated ways of cashing out the contextualist position, but for purposes of illustration this is sufficient.

price: what we get in faultlessness we lose in genuine aesthetic disagreement, as on this solution there is no real disagreement about the funniness of the comedian. While it may sometimes be true that disagreement in humor judgments is only apparent, we do not think that it is always so. That the contextualist's solution cuts substantively against our humor practices, we think counts against it.

The relativist takes her view to be preferable to both the realist, who has trouble accommodating the faultlessness of humor judgments, and the contextualist, who has trouble preserving the disagreement. The relativist argues that there is disagreement because each party to the dispute asserts a content that contradicts that asserted by the other party. But she further claims that this genuine disagreement is faultless, because the truth conditions for assessing each utterance is relativized to the perspective of each speaker.²⁴ As a result, the relativist can preserve some sense in which both parties disagree, as no one party could simultaneously endorse both claims without contradiction, and also preserve the sense in which neither party is making a mistake, since each party says something true. Still, the relativist alternative requires jettisoning an attractive monadic conception of truth, and this has given at least some philosophers pause.²⁵ We think that if we can avoid this unattractive consequence, we should.

So, we might think that we are left either without faultlessness, without disagreement, or with the need to reject a monadic conception of truth, and that all three are unfortunate consequences. But, we think that the version of FA theory that we have developed thus far—one that sees humor-relevant reasons (and perhaps all aesthetic reasons) as non-compelling—provides the realist a way of capturing something that is very close to the faultlessness that motivates the faultless disagreement dispute. If we are right, this will weaken the main motive for moving from realism to its contextualist and relativist rivals.

Let us begin by noting that there are at least two ways that a disagreement might said to be faultless.²⁶ On the one hand, participants might be said to be doxastically faultless. A person is doxastically at fault if there is something defective in their belief, or in their belief forming process. And so, one will be doxastically faultless if there is no such defect. On the other hand, participants might be said to be practically faultless. A person is practically at fault if there is something wrong with their actions or affective responses in the face of some input—a joke, say. And so, one will be practically faultless if there is no such defect. The non-compelling reasons account allows the FA theorist to capture the second kind of faultlessness, though not the first. The guiding assumption of this paper is that people tolerate broad divergence in amusement responses, that is, in what we find funny, in what makes us chuckle, and in what sorts of humorous events we seek out. If someone just doesn't enjoy slapstick, it is a common thought that there isn't anything wrong

²⁴ There are different ways of cashing out the exact relation in the literature. We've chosen to follow Kölbel's "perspective" language for sake of simplicity. For the purposes of this paper, the precise details don't matter.

²⁵ See e.g. Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009).

²⁶ See Palmira, *ibid.*, for a discussion of this distinction. We agree with Palmira that the datum of apparent faultless disagreement has not been adequately specified and explored to provide support for any of the views in the contextualism/realism/relativism debate.

with this. So, we tolerate, or in the language of the faultless disagreement debate, find faultless, divergent humor responses.

However, we are much less confident that we so easily tolerate doxastic disagreement about humor judgments. In many cases at least, philosophers motivate the thought that taste judgments are doxastically faultless by citing examples of disagreements that have the following structure: pick two well-regarded practitioners in a particular genre—visual art say—and describe a case where one party says that one master is better than the other, while the other party says the reverse. The authors then announce that we find such disagreements faultless, and proceed to consider how to make sense of this. For example, the leading case in Kölbel's "Faultless Disagreement" is a dispute over whether Picasso or Matisse is the better artist. For our part, we don't find these sorts of disagreement faultless, so much as we find them silly. Indeed, in Kölbel's example we are inclined to say that both are great artists, though great in different and perhaps incommensurable ways, and that a serious dispute about which is the better master all-things-considered is at the very least odd. Instead, we think that both parties to this dispute may be doxastically at fault, because each makes the implicit assumption that the relevant artistic values (however we are to make sense of evaluating artists) are likely to be commensurable in a way that would allow for a sound all-things-considered comparative conclusion regarding the merits of each. On this way of seeing the dispute, both parties would be committed to something false.²⁷

Further, we think that much of the literature on faultless disagreement misrepresents the nature of our art-critical practices. These practices usually involve much more complicated judgments about the relations between aesthetic properties; how the aesthetic properties of a work combine to strengthen one another, or undermine one another; how they are fixed by constraints of genre or art form; and how the aesthetic properties relate to other contextual features, such as the historical or political context. In these kinds of disputes, we are skeptical that participants in the art-critical debate take each other's claims to be doxastically faultless. Indeed, we have witnessed many serious disputes about these sort of matters. And, with regard to claims of this sort, we can easily imagine assertions that are proper targets of ridicule. For example, if someone stated that the movie *Ironman* was a sophisticated exploration of the ennui of the upper classes that deserves serious attention and exploration, we would probably assume they were making a joke. If we discovered that they weren't, we would have serious doubts about their aesthetic judgment. We think this provides a powerful reason to prefer our approach, which is primarily focused on practical faultlessness, to an approach that is focused primarily on doxastic faultlessness. Were someone to announce that she enjoyed *Ironman* more than *Moonlight*, or that she'd rather see *Ironman* on some particular occasion, this would be understandable. After all, some movies are

²⁷ This possibility is often overlooked in the literature, but is compatible with the realist understanding of such judgments (where realism is understood broadly to include mind-dependent theories that preserve the objective purport of such claims). See e.g. Schafer, K. *ibid.* pp. 275–277 for a discussion of this point. Baker and Robson attempt to capture a relevant sense in which people in a dispute like this would both be saying something false, and faultless. See Baker, C. and Robson, J. *ibid.*, especially Sect. 6. We don't take a stand on this issue here.

affecting in a way that can be uncomfortable. If someone doesn't go in for that sort of thing, or does so only occasionally, that wouldn't be a sound basis for criticism. But, we also think that many taste judgements, including many all-in ones are not doxastically faultless. For example, if one insisted that *Ironman* is a better cinematic achievement than *Moonlight*, we would likely assume that they simply don't know much about cinema. Though, of course, we might find them epistemically faultless, if we could not expect that they should have such knowledge. In such a case, they'd be faultless in a sense, but still wrong.

Moreover, the buck-passing component of many contemporary FA theories changes the terms of the debate over faultless disagreement insofar as a fully-informed dispute would ultimately be a dispute over reasons, and not directly over the property itself. This means that a fully informed disagreement concerning a property attribution will, at root, be over one of three things: (1) whether some consideration that putatively constitutes a reason obtains, e.g., whether the would-be joke is a pun, (2) whether that consideration really is a reason in this context, e.g., whether the pun works to favor an associated attitude, (3) whether the reasons that obtain, taken together, are sufficient to license the conclusory judgment that an aesthetic property is properly attributed to the work, e.g., whether the reasons to be amused are sufficient to warrant the amusement, and aren't outweighed or otherwise undercut. We suspect that once the issue is framed in terms of reasons rather than all-in judgments much of the supposed doxastic faultlessness will turn out not to be faultless at all. For example, if one party to the Matisse/Picasso dispute asserted "there are no reasons to see Matisse as a great artist" and the other insisted, on the contrary, that there are such reasons, we'd be surprised to find that the disagreement was faultless. Indeed, it strikes us that the former party would simply be wrong.

That said, there could be cases where we would want to accept either the contextualist or the relativist story with regard to doxastic faultlessness. We are open to there being different accounts of different sorts of judgments. Our primary goal in this section has been to make two modest points. First, we hoped to clarify that our claims are concerned with practical faultlessness, and not doxastic faultlessness. We take practical faultlessness to be less controversial than doxastic faultless, and we think it is something any story about the normativity of amusement should account for. The FA theory that we've developed here can. Second, we claim that practical faultlessness might account for much of the phenomenon of faultless disagreement. We suspect that if there are doxastically faultless disagreements, they are much rarer than many participants in the faultless disagreement debate assume, and certainly don't cover such a broad class of judgments as aesthetic judgments, or even judgments of taste. If we are right, then the non-compelling reasons account provides a way for the realist to avoid the contextualist/relativist challenge, and accommodate a kind of faultless divergence with regard to our humor responses.²⁸

²⁸ We should emphasize that we would not be inclined to accept a one size fits all account for all disputes about matters of taste. For instance, in some cases we think that the contextualist is right, and we ought to understand putative disagreements as really being statements about subjective preferences. We suspect that adult users of English do this commonly with pure gustatory "disagreements" e.g. over flavors of ice cream.

Before moving on, we note that the proposal we have developed thus far is not the only attempt to preserve realism is the face of faultless disagreement by recharacterizing the relevant kind of faultlessness. Karl Schafer argues that realists can accommodate at least one sense in which two parties to a dispute over a matter of taste are faultless.²⁹ Specifically, he argues that each party to a dispute over a matter of taste can be faultless in the sense that each is acting rationally in the face of her prior aesthetic experiences. As such, each could be forming her beliefs in accordance with good norms for aesthetic belief formation. In such a case, each party is faultless for having the belief that she has in the narrow sense that each is responding properly to her own aesthetic experiences. But nevertheless, at least one of the disputants will believe something false. Our view, however, has one advantage over Schafer's. Schafer's doesn't adequately distinguish judgments of taste from other kinds of judgments. That is, Schafer's faultlessness could just as easily be applied to just about any judgment, and does not explain the supposed distinctive way that we might think that judgments of taste are faultless. That is, for just about any judgment, there are conditions where there can be disagreement between two parties, where each party is wholly without fault in the sense that each is responding rationally to her available evidence. So, Schafer's account hasn't captured anything distinctive of judgments of taste. But, the motivating intuition was that judgments of taste are faultless in a way that at least many other beliefs are not.³⁰ Thinking of the relevant faultlessness in terms of non-compelling reasons, however, allows us to capture something that does relevantly distinguish judgments of taste from many other kinds of judgments. For this reason, the FA theory that we've developed thus far has an advantage over Schafer's.³¹

4 Inside Jokes and the Reasons–Property Relation

Having argued that fit-relevant reasons for amusement are best conceived of as non-compelling, and having highlighted some of the implications that this account would have for the faultless disagreement debate, we'd like to turn our attention to the social dimension of joke telling as it too might be thought to challenge FA accounts of humor. Many instances of joking involve a kind of social contingency which might be thought to cut against FA accounts of the funny insofar as FA theories try to preserve the objective purport of aesthetic property ascriptions. Social contingency might be thought to be at odds with this objectivity. This social contingency is most evident with the phenomenon of inside jokes, so it is to those that we now turn. To help motivate this discussion consider the following proofs-that-p jokes.

Davidson's proof that p: Let us make the following bold conjecture: *p*.

Wallace's proof that p: Davidson has made the following bold conjecture: *p*.

²⁹ Schafer, K. *ibid*.

³⁰ For a discussion of this point, see Palmira, *ibid*, especially 362–364.

³¹ Of course, it is a view that is wholly compatible with Schafer's account. And we agree that his account might capture some relevant sense in which divergent judgments of taste can be faultless.

Putnam's proof that p: Some philosophers have argued that not-*p*, on the grounds that *q*. It would be an interesting exercise to count all the fallacies in this "argument". (It's really awful, isn't it?) Therefore, *p*.

Lewis' proof that p: Most people find the claim that not-*p* completely obvious and when I assert *p* they give me an incredulous stare. But the fact that they find not-*p* obvious is no argument that it is true; and I do not know how to refute an incredulous stare. Therefore, *p*.

Anscombe's proof that p: But if someone really thinks, in advance, that it is open to question whether *p*, I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind. Therefore, *p*.

Plato's proof that p:

SOCRATES: Is it not true that *p*?

GLAUCON: I agree.

CEPHALUS: It would seem so.

POLEMARCHUS: Necessarily.

THRASYMACHUS: Yes, Socrates.

ALCIBIADES: Certainly, Socrates.

PAUSANIAS: Quite so, if we are to be consistent.

ARISTOPHANES: Assuredly.

ERYXIMACHUS: The argument certainly points that way.

PHAEDO: By all means.

PHAEDRUS: What you say is true, Socrates.³²

Proofs-that-*p* jokes are paradigm instances of inside jokes. Inside jokes are distinctive in that they are told by and for a select group of people—here analytic philosophers. Such jokes tend to ensure their inside status by trading on traits that are common to members of a particular group such as specific knowledge, experiences, and even evaluative commitments.³³ Proofs-that-*p* jokes rely on highly specialized knowledge of the practice of analytic philosophy, such as the distinctive personalities and argumentative styles of some famous philosophers, and the belief that there is something not quite above board about these modes of argumentation. In this way, they are conditional. And, this might seem a perfectly ho-hum fact about jokes. After all, as Ted Cohen points out, all jokes are in some sense conditional. For example, to be amused by a pun, perhaps the simplest joke form, you don't need much, but you do need a certain facility with the respective language.³⁴ So, the thinking goes, all jokes are conditional. Some are more so than others. Inside jokes are just extreme examples of this very ordinary fact about jokes. Still, we might wonder how exactly the conditionality of jokes bears on the reasons—

³² These jokes are taken from David Chalmers' website. Retrieved March 26, 2017 from <http://consc.net/misc/proofs.html>; and a comment thread on Feminist Philosophers. Retrieved March 26, 2017 from <http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/proofs-that-p-from-women-philosophers/>.

³³ Both Ted Cohen and Ronald de Sousa distinguish between jokes that rely only on shared knowledge between teller and hearer, and those that rely on something like shared evaluative commitments. Cohen calls the former hermetic and the latter affective; de Sousa refers to the former under the category of wit and the latter as phthonic. Here we avoid taking a stand on how to properly categorize proofs-that-*p* jokes.

³⁴ Cohen, *ibid*, pp. 12–32.

property relationship claimed by FA theory, particularly when it comes to inside jokes.

What should an FA theorist say about the apparent fact that inside jokes are in some significant way conditional? The worry is that the social conditionality of inside jokes seems to cut against the objective purport of our humor practices presumed by FA theorists. Inside jokes, we might think, are designed to ensure that only certain kinds of folks will be amused. What we think the FA theorist must say about the apparent social contingency is that it arises out of the need to have a certain kind of knowledge to understand the joke. Those who do not possess relevant knowledge sufficient to get the joke are unable to see the evaluative property. They are, strictly speaking, unreasonable with regard to the fit-relevant reasons for amusement, but we won't hold this against them. We think that this is the most promising option for the FA theorist because it preserves the sense in which inside jokes are tailored for a particular audience and the objective purport of our humor judgments even with regard to inside jokes.

5 The Social Dimensions of Inside Joking Events

Now that we have a better understanding of what an FA theorist should say about fit-relevant reasons—they are non-compelling and metaphysically non-conditional (though they are epistemically so)—we'd like to return to our proofs-that-p jokes to explore other ways in which the social features of our actual practices of telling and being amused by inside jokes bear on judgments of the funny. To get at these features, we'd like to consider why we tell inside jokes to one another. One answer is that we are trying to tell funny jokes that we expect that only insiders will get. This may in part be true, but we think that there is something more fundamental to our inside joking. Like other philosophers of humor before us, we think that inside jokes are best seen as a social phenomenon that primarily serves the end of social communication and bonding.³⁵ In telling and receiving these sorts of jokes with laughter that signals amusement³⁶ we affirm our status as members of a common group and thereby build a common bond. The teller, in assuming the recipient will get the joke and be amused, signals that the recipient is like her; the recipient, in laughing, similarly affirms the joke-teller and completes the bond.³⁷

Proofs-that-p jokes serve to highlight something odd about the discipline and ourselves as members: while we philosophers tend to think of ourselves as part of the most rationally rigorous discipline in the humanities—as members of a discipline in which the best argument tends to carry the day—these jokes expose us as biased, and as, at least at times, reliant on weak (or even no!) rational argumentation, particularly when it comes to defending a pet theory. The more famous one is, the

³⁵ See Cohen (1999, pp. 28–29), Carroll (2014, p. 85) and De Sousa (1987).

³⁶ There are two kinds of laughter, Duchenne and non-Duchenne only one of which signals genuine amusement, Duchenne. See Brown and Schwartz (1980).

³⁷ Still, we agree with Peter Kivy that such jokes also affirm others' status as outsiders. We think that this fact raises interesting issues worthy of further examination. See Kivy (2003).

more she can get away with such moves. So, though each individual joke has a particular butt, say Plato, the real butt is the discipline itself and hence ourselves as members. We philosophers are not always as rational as we hold ourselves to be. We think that this is why proofs-that-p jokes tend to be told in clusters, as extended joke-telling events where we trade joke-types, and not as stand-alone jokes.³⁸ In light of this, our amusement seems partly responsive to the social dynamics that are at play, such as: being amused at these jokes is an enjoyable joint activity, in making fun of ourselves we bond with others, and those with whom we want to form a common bond are also amused.

How might an FA theorist handle these sorts of social features of inside jokes? We think that FA theorists might see these sorts of social dynamics as reasons to be amused—that our being amused by proofs-that-p jokes will help to build a common bond is a genuine reason to be amused—but not as fit-relevant ones—they don't bear on whether the joke is funny. Of course, more would need to be said about why this is. One answer might be to claim that fit-relevant reasons for amusement are object-directed, and here the relevant object of amusement is a joke, which is properly specified in terms of something like its logical structure and representational content. Since social features of the inside joke-telling context are not part of the joke they do not bear on the discussion at hand—whether or not a proof-that-p joke is funny. Still, some philosophers claim that jokes conceived of in this way are not the bearers of evaluative properties at all,³⁹ or at least not primarily.⁴⁰ Abstract joke types are not funny; tellings are.

However we settle this dispute, everyone agrees that different tellings of the same joke can have different evaluative properties. Some tellings are funny, and some are not. This is due not to features of the joke type, but of the tokening. Might the recognition that joke tokens of the same type can have different evaluative properties open the door to the kind of social dynamics that we described earlier? Maybe not, as the FA theorist might claim that there are two objects of amusement, jokes and tellings. A telling is a combination of properties of the joke type—e.g., logical structure, representational content, and relevant incongruity—and its utterance—e.g., cadence, timing, facial expression, and body language. It is features of the telling that are responsible for the differences that we find amongst the evaluative properties of joke tokens. Nevertheless, if the social features of the joke telling context are not part of the relevant object of amusement, the telling, they are irrelevant to its funniness. On this way of conceiving things, social features of the joke telling context are wrong kinds of reasons for amusement, if indeed they are reasons for amusement at all.

Still, the issue at hand may not be settled quite so easily, as we might reframe the question thusly: might considerations that are neither part of the joke, nor how it is

³⁸ Of course, we can imagine a situation that might call for the telling of only one proof-that-p joke, say if we were attending a talk by Putnam. But, in such a case, the hearer must be acquainted with proof-that-p jokes. Otherwise, she will likely experience confusion or misread the teller as deriding the speaker. All of this operates, we believe, to defang the jokes. Since the butts are proxies for us insiders, they are less mean-spirited than an outsider might think.

³⁹ Carroll (2015, p. 243).

⁴⁰ Gaut, *ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

delivered affect how funny it is? For example, in the bar, after the day's conference presentations, we might find ourselves trading knock-knock jokes, elephant jokes, dead baby jokes, or non-sense jokes. And, we might find ourselves quite amused by at least some of them. If pushed, no doubt, we will acknowledge that the jokes themselves are bad, but this does not seem to alter the fact that we are amused by them in this social context. Imagine, for example, how we'd respond if an outsider approached us and said "hey, you know those jokes are not funny, right?" We doubt that we'd be much put off our activity. And, our amusement in such cases suggests that we find the jokes as they are told *in this social context* funny. We think that this point is further supported by the fact that laughter causes amusement, both in others and in ourselves. So, when everyone is laughing, we'll laugh, and thereby become even more amused. And, we think, this is a perfectly normal feature of joke-telling, and not something to be explained away. So, we might think that features that go beyond properties of the joke and its telling narrowly conceived—e.g., representational content, cadence, timing, relevant incongruity—such as contextual matters—e.g., the social dynamics at play—are implicated in our amusement in a way that bears on our ascriptions of the funny. To claim otherwise is to simply disregard too much of our amusement practice. And, we think that proofs-that-p jokes, when told, work this way as well: part of why we find them funny is explained by the social dynamics at play—that is, by what the telling is *doing* socially.

One way for an FA theorist to accommodate the social dimensions of inside jokes is to see them as a supplement to an FA theory of the funny. For example, an FA theorist might conceive of the activity of telling inside jokes primarily in terms of the successful navigation of a social context, rather than the telling of funny jokes. This way of thinking about inside jokes might be thought to gain support from the thought that in telling proofs-that-p jokes it is not clear that we find *the joke* in question funny; instead we might affirm the activity of joking by being amused. When everyone is laughing, everyone is bonding, and everyone is enjoying themselves, the further question "but are these jokes *funny*?" even if cogent, might sometimes be beside the point of what's going on. Remember our outsider who helpfully points out that our jokes are bad. On this view, in a social context, it may not be clear if we are responding to the successful navigation of a social context, or fit-relevant reasons for amusement. Sometimes our amusement is a recognition that a joke is funny. Sometimes that we are involved in an enjoyable social activity. And, sometimes it is both. In any case, contextual features of the joke-telling context play a central role in our joke telling practices; they just are not reasons to see the jokes, even as told in this context, as funny, or at least so an FA theorist might say.

Still, this way of thinking about things leaves us in the somewhat unhappy position of claiming that when we think that an otherwise bad joke is funny, say when we are riffing on a theme, we are wrong. While those who are "in the grip" of a certain way of thinking about FA theory may want to insist that the kinds of social dynamics that we've tried to make visible here are paradigm instances of wrong kinds of reasons, and so in the cases that we cite here the participants are either wrong in thinking that they find it funny, or they are wrong in their assessment of the joke as funny in the relevant context. And, nothing we have said here rules this

out. But, our task is to see if FA theory can make good on its promise to provide an account of the funny that is largely consistent with our actual humor practices. The FA theorist is free to insist that we would be wrong to think that our otherwise bad jokes are funny or that our proofs-that-p jokes are funnier when told in a particular context, but we think that this is something that we should avoid if we can.

We think that the social dimensions of inside jokes can be accommodated as part of an FA theory of the funny. Elsewhere we've argued that FA theory can accommodate the moral features of jokes by treating them not as reasons, but as conditions that enable or disable, and strengthen or weaken fit-relevant reasons for amusement.⁴¹ For example, we might treat the immorality of a joke as a disabling condition that undercuts the normative status of fit-relevant reasons for amusement that might otherwise obtain.⁴² We think that the social dynamics of inside jokes might similarly be brought into an FA theory by conceiving them as enabling conditions that take features of the joke that wouldn't otherwise provide fit-relevant reasons for amusement, and make them be reasons. On this way of construing things, the kinds of social dynamics mentioned above are salient normative considerations—they enable or disable, and we might add strengthen or weaken—fit-relevant reasons. But, they are not fit-relevant reasons themselves, and so do not run into the wrong kinds of reasons problem. Fit-relevant reasons are object-directed; enabling conditions are reason-directed.

6 Is the Relationship Between a Joke and Amusement a Reason-Giving One?

Despite the work that we've done here to spell out an account of fit-relevant reasons for amusement that can better accommodate our actual practices of joking and being amused, some will still harbor the suspicion that the relationship between a joke and amusement isn't a reason-giving one; it is merely causal. We think that some evaluative properties are a better fit for an FA theory than others, and we are comfortable with the possibility that different evaluative properties will have different theoretic accounts. For example, we do not think that the disgusting is a fit-relevant property. To see why, consider the following example: someone points out that the pencil you are holding is covered in a thin layer of feces. Upon finding this out, you'll likely find the pencil disgusting. We might be tempted to think that we now have a fit-relevant reason to be disgusted, i.e., the pencil is covered in feces. But, it is worth noting that here it is feces that is the object of disgust. We've been factually corrected about the state of the pencil, which triggered our antecedent disgust response. But, how might we reply to the question "why should I be disgusted by feces?" Is there a candidate fit-relevant reason that we might cite? We might point out that there are germs in it that might make one sick. But, this is certainly a wrong kind of reason, as it bears on whether it would be beneficial to feel

⁴¹ Jordan and Patridge (2012).

⁴² Assuming that this sort of counter-factual reasoning is valid. For an argument that it is not, see Jacobson (1997, p. 193).

disgust and not on whether the object is disgusting. One common feature of wrong kinds of reasons is that they tend to be inert in relation to whether we feel the sentiment.⁴³ Finding out that feces causes disease is unlikely to bring one to be disgusted, even if it will cause us to avoid the pencil. So, on this admittedly quick picture, our disgust responses do not appear to be reason-responsive in any meaningful way. One natural explanation of this is that there aren't fit-relevant reasons for disgust.

Is amusement like disgust? Here things look less clear. Imagine that you tell a George W. Bush joke that your friend doesn't find funny. After some discussion, you find out that she doesn't know that Bush is famous for his malapropisms. Now she gets the joke, and might even come to be at least somewhat amused. Have we found a fit-relevant reason for amusement? Perhaps, but it is worth noting that as in the feces case, she's been factually corrected. What we'll want to know is whether this correction has allowed us to see a reason that we didn't before, or whether it merely triggered an antecedent amusement related disposition. If our guiding cases show us only that we've misunderstood the facts—e.g., that the pencil is covered in feces, or that W. is famous for his malapropisms—it is not clear if our antecedent sentimental dispositions have been triggered, or if we are now in a position to see a reason-giving relationship between the joke and amusement. To make progress here it would help to have a case where someone explains the reason-giving relationship that obtains between a joke and amusement. But, if after our friend gets the W. joke she isn't amused, how might we bring her to see that the joke is funny? We, at least, are not sure how to do this except by restating the relevant facts or pointing to the evaluative property. E.g., "you know, Bush is famous for having a rather strained relationship with the English language, and the joke trades on that. It is making light of his inarticulateness. Come on, it's funny." And, one might worry that this is exactly what we'd expect if in articulating putative reasons for amusement, we weren't really giving reasons at all, but, like with disgust, we were laying out the causes of our own amusement. It is one thing to talk abstractly about fit-relevant reasons for amusement, it is an altogether different thing to convince us that there are such reasons.

Still, we think that an FA theory has enough going for it that, absent a rival theory that does just as well at making sense of the apparent normative dimensions of our joking practices, we should be FA theorists at least with respect to jokes. The promise of FA theory is to preserve the realist normative gloss of evaluative properties and the objective purport of our evaluative judgments, without the metaphysical commitments of robust realism, and to do so in a way that respects the thought that they are in some important sense response-dependent and anthropocentric. Our aim has been to think through a set of potential objections to an FA theory of the funny in order to determine whether or not it is well suited to accommodate our ordinary practices of amusing and being amused by jokes. In so doing, we've argued that an adequate account of fit-relevant reasons for amusement

⁴³ A similar point can be made about wrong kinds of reasons for belief—that is, reasons for belief that don't bear on the truth of the belief. Learning that it is good to believe a falsehood does not in any way contribute to our believing it. In contrast, bona fide evidentiary reasons do. See Hieronymi, *ibid.*

is one that treats them as non-compelling, metaphysically non-conditional, and alterable by social features of the joke telling context (and, as we've argued elsewhere, by moral considerations). In the end, we think that FA theory has enough going for it that, absent a rival theory that does just as well at making sense of the normative dimensions of our joking practices, we should be FA theorists at least with regard to jokes.

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