

The Ethics of Humor and Comedy

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Abstract: This chapter deals with the ethics of humor and comedy by outlining and reviewing the different theoretical ethical arguments directed at humor and comedy. The chapter provides an original typology of ethical approaches to humor and comedy that is relevant for understanding and evaluating examples of controversial humor and comedy. The typology examines five interdisciplinary theories of the ethics of humor and comedy that center on a range of important features in ethical debates about humor and comedy including intention, meaning, language, identity, inequality, social relations, and othering. The chapter illustrates the typology by evaluating the applicability of each ethical theory of humor and comedy to Hannah Gadsby's Netflix stand-up comedy special, *Nanette*. We illustrate that, as the line between ethical and unethical humor and comedy is fluid and linked to changing political and social concerns, academic research on the ethics of humor and comedy is a continuing endeavor. We suggest that new research should be aware of changing structures and conventions in comedy performance and offer ways in which future interdisciplinary research could advance understanding of the ethics of humor and comedy.

Keywords: comedy, ethics, Hannah Gadsby, humor, identity, inequality, social relations, othering

1. Introduction

Debates on the ethics of humor and comedy create intense and impassioned arguments and theoretical understandings in humor studies. These debates are central to understanding the role and significance of humor and comedy within and across societies. Lockyer and Pickering (2008: 809) argue that critical analysis of humor and comedy should question their ethical limits for three main reasons. First, the centrality of humor and comedy to social interactions and the range of functions of humor and comedy – from facilitating laughter to damaging social relationships – mean that humor and comedy are far from trivial. Second, humor and comedy do not sit in direct opposition to serious communication as they can have serious implications and repercussions. Finally, analyzing the ethical limits to humor and comedy is not being anti-humor or anti-comedy and is not intended to stop people laughing. Rather, it is recognized that analyzing different responses to humor and comedy across time and space deepens understanding of social values, social identities, and social relations.

Taking humor and comedy seriously by discussing their ethical features and ramifications can be a risky endeavor. Those who argue that an attempt at humor and comedy is unethical maybe met with the “it was just a joke” response from the humor and comedy creator (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008). This can be read as a rhetorical move that shifts responsibility or ‘the problem’ onto those who are making the claim that the humor and comedy is unethical and simultaneously shuts down debate about why, when, where, and how humor and comedy may be unethical. It also suggests jokes are protected by the play frame and should be understood and treated differently to serious communication.

Alternatively, the complainant may be criticized for lacking a sense of humor, which can be difficult to accept given the value placed on having a sense of humor in most societies (Apte, 1987), and the implication that the complainant is lacking in some way (Wickberg, 1998). This again positions the complainant responsible as they are unable to appreciate the humor and comedy. Coupled with the importance of polysemy in humor and comedy (Weaver, 2011), the ways in which humor and comedy can encourage both intellectual and affective responses (Berys, 1998), and the importance of ambiguity and interpretive diversity within humor and comedy (Kuipers, 2015), this makes the ethics of humor and comedy a complex and knotty topic, or as Berys (1998, p. 51) describes it, “deeply puzzling.”

Humor studies researchers have raised various questions in relation to the ethics of humor and comedy in order to demystify this knotty topic. Where is the line between ethical and unethical attempts at humor and comedy? How, and why, does this line shift and change across time and space? How should unethical attempts at humor and comedy be dealt with?

How are challenges to humor and comedy deemed unethical made, and responded to? Why are some people offended by attempts at humor and comedy? What topics, themes, or contents cause some people to be offended by humor and comedy? How can attempts at humor and comedy that offend be understood?

This chapter unpacks this complicated topic by outlining and reviewing the ethical arguments directed at humor and comedy. The chapter does not posit one definition of ethical critique but rather examines the theoretical concepts and types of critique that have been rendered against humor and comedy, and the type of ethical arguments that support those critiques. Ethical arguments can be wedded in universalism or in relativism. Kant's "categorical imperative" represents the clearest of universal ethical principles. Kant asserted that "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (Kant, 1964, p. 62 in Blackburn, 2001, p. 104). Yet Kant himself published racist anthropological commentary and thus his work is punctuated by the relativized mistreatment and misdescription of racialized groups (Kant, 1794, 1900–66 in Chukwudi Eze, 1997, pp. 49–67). Such stereotyping, which informed colonial anti-Black racism and the content on much racist humor, emerges alongside the universal laws, reason, and rationality that made a significant contribution to problematic ethical frameworks connected with the projects of modernity, and thus does not guarantee that the universalized content of ethics is indeed ethical (Weaver, 2011).

More than that though, universalist ethics also fail to account for the polysemy of language, and for the polysemy of humor and comedy specifically. Relativistic ethics or the idea that "the rules may be made in different ways by different people at different times" and "that there is no one truth" (Blackburn, 2001, p. 17) may seem to offer a wider coverage of the polysemy of humor and comedy, the relative contexts of joke utterances, and the ethical implications of both. That said, the ethical critique of humor and comedy throughout history uses a number of recurring concepts – malice, ridicule, offensiveness, and harm – to describe an unethical humor, and thus the ethics of humor contain reference to a number of humor structures that have a non-relative component.

The chapter will chart the descriptive ethical features that mark ethical critiques of humor and comedy and unpack the normative, theoretical frameworks that underpin this work. This involves engaging with the various standpoint epistemologies, of feminism, Marxism, and anti-racism, that highlight the particular and relative inequalities of humor and comedy production and reception and also advocate for a more equal if not universalistic treatment of subjects in jokes. Five interdisciplinary ethical theories of humor and comedy are examined,

which are categorized as: 1) historical arguments on humor and comedy as malicious and an anti-social emotion; 2) theories on humor and comedy as tension relief; 3) discussions of othering that examine intention and meaning in the language of humor and comedy; 4) egalitarian theories concerned with language rights and equality in humor and comedy; and 5) approaches that examine polysemy, relativism, and subversion in humor and comedy. Such arguments, when asserted, posit different ethical implications for humor and comedy.

These five ethical arguments surrounding humor and comedy are illustrated through their application to a specific example of contemporary stand-up comedy: *Nanette* (2018), a one-hour Netflix stand-up comedy special by Australian comedian, Hannah Gadsby. The Netflix stand-up comedy special was filmed at the Sydney Opera House during the international tour of *Nanette*, the live show, in 2017–2018. In *Nanette* Gadsby covers numerous topics including misogyny, homophobia, violence against women, comedy and trauma, and the ethical limits of comedy. During *Nanette*, Gadsby announces that she is quitting comedy. This is because of the negative impact that using self-deprecating comedy as a marginalized person has on her mental health and well-being. Some described *Nanette* as “post-comedy” (Giuffre, 2021, p. 29) as it broke stand-up comedy conventions. *Nanette* received international attention, won numerous industry awards, and was discussed by academics, media commentators, creative industry workers, and audiences. Although these discussions were overwhelmingly positive, some criticized *Nanette* for making “boring, trite, and even dangerous art” (Moskowitz, 2018).

The large amount of public and media attention positions *Nanette* as “one of the most discussed stand-up performances in popular entertainment this decade” (Krefting, 2019a, p. 95). As *Nanette* centers the limits of comic performance in terms of identity politics, comedy content, joking style, and impact, it serves as a useful case study through which to explore the ethics of humor and comedy. In this chapter we explore the various ethical theories of humor and comedy via analysis of the *Nanette* performance and subsequent responses to *Nanette*, and critique the socio-political role of contemporary debates around the ethics of humor and comedy.

2. Approaches to the Ethics of Humor and Comedy

2.1. Historical Arguments on Humor and Comedy as Malicious and an Anti-Social Emotion

Early understandings of humor and comedy linked humor and comedy to “aggression or envy” and “ignorance and foolishness” (Lockyer & Pickering, 2001, p. 634). Laughter was perceived

as intricately connected to ridicule and “a socially disruptive force” (Chapman & Foot, 1996, p. 1). The first analysis of humor and laughter was offered by Athenian philosopher Plato in 360 BCE (see Plato in Romanska & Ackerman, 2017), who regarded laughter as an expression of malice towards those who are the target of the laughter. This “pleasurable form of malice” (Morreall, 2020, p. 633) is expressed as we laugh at those who consider themselves more intelligent, physically attractive, or successful than they really are. These conceptualizations of humor and laughter as malicious and aggressive contributed to the development of the superiority theory of humor – where humor and comedy are perceived as ridicule of a joke target (Aristotle, 2012; Nietzsche, 2015). Thomas Hobbes described the emotions facilitated by humor and laughter as “sudden glory when we realize that in some way we are superior to someone else” (Morreall, 1987, p. 19). These philosophical ideas therefore regard humor and comedy as anti-social (see Condren, this volume).

In his analysis of the role of malice in humor and comedy, de Sousa (1987) argues that malicious sexist and racist stereotypical views and assumptions are conveyed by sexist and racist jokes (if these were hostile or obscene jokes, Freud (1978) would refer to them as “tendentious jokes”). Therefore, those amused by such sexist and racist jokes accept and share the stereotypical views and assumptions of targeted individuals, groups, and/or societies, and feel superior to those who are the joke targets. Furthermore, those creating the humor and comedy are in a position of power to define and characterize ‘the other.’ A related area of debate in the ethics of humor and comedy is the position of the target and whether the humor and comedy ‘punches up’ or ‘punches down.’ Although it is recognized that this might be a crude way of regarding the different choices and positions comedians face, Littlewood and Pickering (1998, p. 295) argue that comedians have a choice to direct their comedy at “those who are in position of power and authority, or at those who are relatively powerless and subordinated.” It is generally regarded that humor and comedy that ‘punches up’ is more ethically acceptable than that which ‘punches down.’ This highlights the importance of the social position of both the humor and comedy creator and the target of the humor and comedy in ascertaining the impact of the humor and comedy. This debate is central to Hannah Gadsby’s performance in *Nanette*.

Gadsby explains that she has been questioning, and reassessing comedy, which leads to critical reflection on the ethical implications of using self-deprecating humor and comedy when directed at marginalized individuals and groups. Concerns regarding these ethical limits are used as the justification for Gadsby announcing in *Nanette* that she intends to “quit comedy” to protect her mental health, which is a central theme of the performance:

And I built a career out of self-deprecating humor. That's what I've built my career on. And I don't want to do that anymore. Because, do you understand, do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me. And if that means that my comedy career is over, then so be it.

Gadsby draws attention to the problematic relationship between the performer and audience in stand-up comedy. As Luckhurst argues, through *Nanette*, Gadsby announces that stand-up comedy is a “form that encouraged a mutually abusive relationship between performer and audience” (2019, p. 53) and that she “laid bare a taboo at the heart of stand-up – that, in some instances, the performance of marginality is a kind of self-harm and both performers and audiences can and should do better in terms of respect for one another” (2019, p. 62). Gadsby deconstructs comedy norms and dominant gendered expectations that encourage women comedians to use self-deprecating comedy in order to appease femininity norms.

These conceptualizations of humor and comedy as anti-social, as illustrated above, are challenged by more recent theoretical understandings that prioritize the positive impacts of humor and comedy for individuals and collectives.

2.2. Theories on Humor and Comedy as Tension Relief

Some humor and comedy scholars have examined the workings and role of humor and comedy to illustrate their positive psychological, physiological, and social functions and impacts. In the late 1800s, Kant highlighted the importance of play and pleasure in humor and comedy. Morreall (1987, p. 45) argues that according to Kant, “even though amusement is caused by a play of ideas, it is a kind of sensory gratification based on feelings of well-being, especially feelings of health.” However, these connections between humor and comedy and play and pleasure raise ethical concerns. Morreall highlights that with humor and comedy, the relationship to the source of pleasure is different to that of other types of sources of pleasure (e.g., when we eat a delicious meal, we are attracted by the taste of the food). Morreall argues “things that amuse us need not attract us. Many are funny for their *unattractiveness* ... [such as] other people we would not associate with in real life” (2020, p. 638; emphasis in original). As noted above, this raises ethical concerns due to problematic stereotyping and malicious othering.

Other ways in which humor and comedy are seen as therapeutic relate to the ways in which humor and comedy can offer tension release (see also Chapter 1 of this volume). Freud's (1978) psychoanalytical approach to humor contends that laughter in response to a joke is the release of psychic energy that is usually used in the suppression of taboo topics. Freud also saw humor as masked aggression. In a release theory of humor, the focus is on how tension builds up and is released by humor. Humor acts as a pressure valve, offering a therapeutic effect by providing temporary release from inhibitions and tension, therefore offering a sense of freedom (Berger, 2014).

As humor and comedy are social endeavors, it can be argued that they offer a range of social benefits across differing social contexts. In a sociological analysis of humor used in a hospital setting, Coser highlighted the positive social functions fulfilled by humor and comedy: "to laugh, or to occasion laughter through humor and wit, is to invite those present to come close. Laughter and humor are indeed like an invitation, be it an invitation for dinner, or an invitation to start a conversation: it aims at decreasing social distance" (1959, p. 172). This potential of increasing social connectedness through humor and comedy is particularly important when socially connecting marginalized and dominant individuals and groups in order to increase empathy and understanding and decrease stigma and discrimination (see Lockyer, 2015 on how comedy can connect disabled and non-disabled individuals and groups).

Ahmad et al. (2013) used humor to teach medical students the importance of empathy in India and demonstrated how humor can be used as a "pedagogic and communication tool" that can be used for "reflection and analysis of a situation or as a tool of social commentary to bring about corrective change" (2013, p. 30). Furthermore, Iacob's (2017, p. 323) analysis of the ethics of humor during Communism in Romania reveals how humor's subversive nature can be interpreted as a "survival technique during the communist regime in Romania" as it is a form of "escape from the gangrenous tissues of totalitarian societies." Iacob also argues that humor can be a "form of dissidence" particularly when it encounters struggles with censorship (2017, p. 332). Humor and comedy can therefore aid understanding, offer alternative ways of viewing complex political and social contexts, and resist dominant ideologies.

In relation to the ethics of humor and comedy, the questions that are raised include: Who is/is not given the opportunity to release tension? What is the nature of the tension released and who benefits socially and politically from the tension release? Who loses out? In *Nanette*, Gadsby reflects on the ways in which stand-up comedy requires a particular type of tension and release which is problematic when attempting to use stand-up comedy to explore misogyny, gender, and heterosexism from a marginalized position. In the first half of *Nanette*,

Gadsby uses the set-up and punchline joke technique to create, resolve, and relieve tension – often using self-deprecating comedy. In the second half of the performance Gadsby reflects on the ethics of humor and comedy by refusing to resolve the tension and shifting the tension outwards to the audience.

In the first part of *Nanette*, Gadsby tells the story where a young man is almost physically violent towards her. In the second half of the performance, when reflecting on how comic conventions require comedians to balance and control tension with the audience in order to generate laughter at the right times, Gadsby reveals:

... in order to balance the tension in the room with that story, I couldn't tell that story as it actually happened. Because I couldn't tell the part of that story where that man realized his mistake. And he came back. And he said 'Oh, no, I get it. You're a lady faggot. I'm allowed to beat the shit out of you', and he did. He beat the shit out of me and nobody stopped him ... And that was not homophobia, pure and simple, people. That was gendered. If I'd been feminine, that would not have happened. I am incorrectly female. I am incorrect, and this is a punishable offense. And this tension is yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like because this this tension is what not-normals carry inside of them all of the time because it's dangerous to be different.

The ethical limits to, and burden of, tension creation and release in stand-up comedy are exposed by Gadsby – as she is denied the opportunity to accurately and authentically share her experiences as a marginalized woman. As Krefting observes, Gadsby's "[p]ersonal testimony reveals the emotional pain of telling her story within the framework of comedy and complicates the notion of comedy as liberating" (2019b, p. 166). For Gadsby, stand-up comedy caused displeasure and is neither therapeutic nor a source of tension release, indeed it is quite the opposite. In her TED Talk in 2019, Gadsby shares her reflections on the impact of her comedy: "I realized that I'd been telling my stories for laughs. I'd been trimming away the darkness, cutting away the pain and holding on to my trauma for the comfort of my audience. I was connecting other people through laughs, yet I remained profoundly disconnected." If *Nanette* challenges the ethics of comedy forms that rely on tension and release (Giuffre, 2021), it challenges the pro-social aspects of such comedy, which presents release of tension as the central positive impact of comedy.

2.3. Discussions of Othering that Examine Intention and Meaning in the Language of Humor and Comedy

Discussions of the ethics of humor and comedy that examine self and other relations can be conceptualized as concerned with the intentions and meanings of humor and comedy. This includes what is meant in the telling of a joke, what meanings the joke teller or audience engage with, and the meaning of the joke for the joke target.

Approaches that consider ‘the other’ of comedy and humor have focused on the attitudes that are directed at the other, or on the intended meaning of the joke teller. As noted above, de Sousa (1987) proposes an ethics of humor that addresses the attitudes expressed in offensive joking as evidence of attitudes held. Similarly, Berys (1998) argues that it is not particular jokes that are ethically problematic but the attitudes that are conveyed by the joke teller, which can be unethical attitudes if they are aggressive or derogatory.

A significant critique of attitude-based approaches asserts that such arguments rely on the hypothetical assessment of internal attitudes that cannot be demonstrated empirically, and that may not exist in the form described (Smuts, 2010). The approach also separates the analysis of intention and meaning from the signification of sign systems, which suggests that unethical meanings can be produced outside of attitudes held. Considering Gadsby’s *Nanette* through such approaches, it is arguable that her own self-deprecation, criticized by Gadsby in *Nanette*, is a problematic fiction. This undermines a focus on intention and attitude as a root to ethical evaluation because it is clear that this self-deprecation has an ambiguous or questionable authenticity and intentionality. In sum, the performance of self-deprecation has a negative impact on the comedian, and this is not a reflection of an intended meaning or attitude and cannot be ethically evaluated through such concepts.

Contrary to an interrogation of attitudes, Gruner argues that the ethics of humor are most usefully evaluated through a consideration of the impact on the joke target (1978, see also Pettifor, 1982). This can be connected with rhetorical discourse analysis approaches that seek to outline the chains of signification created in humor and comedy, and how comic incongruity can reinforce discourses problematic for the joke target and society at large (Billig, 2001; Weaver, 2011; Abedinifard, 2016; Pérez, 2017). For an analysis of *Nanette*, a central observation here is that the rhetoric of joking can reinforce trauma through internalization and self-deprecation.

2.3.1 The Ethics of Responsibility: Discussions of Self and Others

A limited number of approaches have incorporated Emmanuel Levinas’s ‘ethics of responsibility’ (Bergen-Aurand, 2017). These see ethics towards the other develop through encountering the other. They argue that when we encounter the other, a form of ‘substitution’

of self and other takes place (Toth, 2018, p. 330), which can be described as projection or empathy. These approaches foreground a pre-existing consideration of the other or the joke target in comedy, where malice is a product of a lack of an ethical engagement and consideration. This ethics of responsibility has been argued to have a transformative potential. Toth argues that the transgressive nature of the clown can make “it possible for one to move beyond everyday logic and find new meanings and significance in things. As a consequence, clowns bear a great ethical responsibility with their work because they open ways up for accepting alterity and refusing things as they are” (2018, p. 333; see also Lane, 2017).

Gadsby’s idea that comedy is built on tension, and thus not useful for resolution of trauma, could be seen as a rebuttal of ideas drawn from Levinas that the comic is an insufficient form of empathy. However, the structural complexity of *Nanette* can be read as the positioning of simplistic, unreflexive, and unethical comic structures alongside trauma in a meta-incongruity that *does* bring the receptive audience closer to the comedian through empathy, and thus does evoke a Levinasian ethical response. As Critchley suggests, humor is often “a relation of self-knowledge. Humour is often dark, but always lucid. It is a profoundly cognitive relation to oneself and the world” (2002, p. 102).

2.4. Egalitarian Theories Concerned with Language Rights and Equality in Humor and Comedy

Accounts of the ethics of humor and comedy that align with egalitarian theories are concerned with the relationship between language usage, convention and access, and social inequality. Such approaches see humor and comedy as techniques that either promote more equal or unequal social relations.

Basu argues for the usefulness of humor in creating more equal political relations. He situates humor “between Habermas’ ideal speaking and Shklar’s scornful taciturnity” (1999, p. 385), arguing that humor is virtuous and can be incorporated into dialogic ethics (1999, p. 378). Basu argues that humor may aid inclusion in dialogic political discourse, and points towards a pro-social humor that could aid political participation and an equality of access. This is a theory where humorous play allows for the consideration of other positions and is educative because it highlights the “partial and incomplete” (Basu, 1999, p. 388) aspects of knowledge.

Although Basu theorizes political dialogue rather than particular media examples, the ideas can be applied to *Nanette*. This leads us to consider whether the performance should be read as a dialogue between the audience and comedian. Basu argues that a dialogic humor should not work towards an identity “sustained by the repression of difference, alterity,

otherness. On the contrary ... our social practices should accommodate a plurality of interpretive perspectives and ways of being” (Basu, 1999, p. 389). For Basu, humor demonstrates deprecation as a form of humility. He adds that “[i]n humor, the weak gain an additional weapon of re-description. They can enlarge upon internal criticism through the sarcastic exposure of incongruities and malevolence within the dominant on-stage discourse” (1999, p. 393).

Gadsby’s critique of self-deprecating humor as not useful for dealing with trauma may seem to refute Basu’s claim, as self-deprecation is not helpful for equality of the self or other. However, as a meta-comedy we can read Gadsby’s framing of her own critique of self-deprecation as an egalitarian comic deprecation that sees incongruity in the social expectations of *some* comedy forms versus the lived experience behind the comedy content, and thus an ethical critique of the on-stage discourse. This aligns with Basu’s account as moving towards a plurality of interpretive perspectives on comedy itself.

2.4.1 Humor and the Habitus

Humor and comedy research concerned with equality have employed the theoretical framework of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. These studies acknowledge language, and thus humor, as a potential source of symbolic violence. May (2001, p. 155) defines symbolic violence as when “those whose habitus are assigned a lesser value in the market come to *accept* this diminution as legitimate.” Thus, the humor of diminution towards the other is seen as a method for enacting symbolic violence and inequality. Most approaches to humor and comedy that draw on Bourdieu have focused on social class and comedy, with an exception of Huc-Hepher (2021), who examines humor, symbolic violence, and xenophobia. On social class, Kuipers (2006) shows how comedy taste is associated with class distinction and defined along class lines, and that jokes are evaluated through taste distinctions and tend to be liked more by the lower classes (Kuipers, 2015). Friedman (2014) provides a Bourdieusian analysis of the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, demonstrating that British comedy taste is stratified by social class. Fox (2018) highlights regional, gender, and class stereotypes in British comedy that impact negatively on the Northern working-class comedian. Such approaches may not explicitly discuss the ethics of comedy and humor, but the assertion in all is that comedy and humor reflect and impact existing socio-economic inequalities and thus are open to ethical critique.

The description of comedy as trauma that is presented by Gadsby in *Nanette* can be read as a devaluing through symbolic violence. Here the symbolic violence is the production and enactment of self-deprecation, which is the construction of an acceptance of marginality

formed through the comedian's position in social structure (through gender, sexuality, and marginality). There may well be other readings of symbolic violence that emerge from *Nanette*. For example, in a reflection on *Nanette*, comedian Sid Singh (2018) argued that:

As a brown man, for what it's worth, I did take offence (even if it's not completely fair) to Gadsby saying she was quitting comedy to tell stories. That is not the moral high ground. Or even more accurately put: my response was, 'cool, the white comedian wants to tell stories and knows that society will now still listen to her anyway.' As a brown man, if I don't tell jokes, people don't listen.

This demonstrates, for Singh, that one's embodied social position (or habitus) impact on readings of the show. There are divergent perceptions or reactions to comedy performance that connect with the embodied identity of the comedian. This points towards a need for a consideration of the intersection of different aspects of social identity in the discussion of the ethics of humor and comedy.

2.5. Approaches that Examine polysemy, relativism, and Subversion in Humor and Comedy

Ambiguity and polysemy are often acknowledged as integral to the structures of humor and comedy (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008; Weaver, 2011, 2021). Polysemy is defined as multiple linguistic meaning, as a concept it highlights how the readings of humor and comedy can be multiple (see Weaver, 2011). This concept points to the limitations of focusing on intended readings as the basis of ethical critique. Pérez and Greene (2016) use discourse analysis to examine the frames that limit polysemy in jokes about rape and create a method of ethical critique that negotiates polysemy. Weaver (2011) shows how some humor styles encourage polysemy, yet are not outside of critique because of this. Lockyer and Pickering (2008, p. 815) explain how types of performance, such as impersonation, extend ambiguity and elements of polysemy. In recent cultural studies approaches, debates on the extent of polysemy and the "foregrounding of particular interpretations" in readings of comedy have resurfaced (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022).

One significant field of humor and comedy studies that considers polysemy, relativism and subversion are postmodern or poststructuralist approaches. These rarely discuss ethics but form an ontology that has ethical implications for humor and comedy. Such approaches explain polysemy, or the multiple meanings and semantic layers of humor, as key to its anti-structure. This polysemy leads to a relativism of meaning and helps to create cultural relativism, suggesting that the funny is socially and historically specific.

Moreover, postmodern approaches argue that laughter is momentary and affective, and so not quantifiable through symbolic structures. It is this characteristic of laughter and humor that is associated with subversion. The poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida exemplifies this view in saying, following Georges Bataille, that laughter “exceeds phenomenology in general, the absolute possibility of meaning” (Derrida, 1967 in Romanska and Ackerman, 2017, p. 296). The distinctions between laughter, humor, and comedy are not always rigorously distinguished in this field (see Condren, this volume).

Regarding humor, postmodern or poststructuralist accounts often focus on irony, which is presented as a trope that emphasizes polysemy and ambiguity. Davis (1993, p. 312) says that “comics are the spokespersons for the highest virtue of postmodernism – ambiguity” (see also Basu, 1999), that they are the “first postmodern heroes” (Davis, 1993, p. 312). Why does ambiguity become a virtue for the postmodernist and what are the ethical implications? In a world where traditional social structures such as class and gender are said to have broken down, ambiguity becomes a route to freedom, is creative, and thus the ambiguity of humor becomes a mode of resistance.

However, a less positive view of the postmodern (e.g., Bauman, 1993) that sees ambiguity as a route to othering, would view the ethics of humor as ‘play’ as closer to a reconstructed superiority of ridicule. The polysemy of ambiguity itself is highlighted here – there is little evidence that polysemy needs to lead to liberation at all. These limitations of humor are pointed to by Gadsby in *Nanette*:

... I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes. And that story became a routine, and through repetition, that joke version fused with my actual memory of what happened. But unfortunately that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality. Punch lines need trauma because punch lines ... need tension, and tension feeds trauma.

This highlights that subversion, polysemy, and relativism are all present in the comic but not that they are ethically favorable. Gadsby’s historical trauma is subverted through changing its meaning, but this is not defended as an example of ethical behavior or self-care for the comedian. The meta-textual elements of Gadsby’s critique of self-deprecation could be asserted as a further play with ambiguity, but it is perhaps more accurately described as a frame through which to critique particular comedy forms, and so distinctively lacks polysemy.

3. New Avenues for Research in the Ethics of Humor and Comedy

Contemporary studies of humor and comedy that offer ethical critique rarely assert universalist principles. They tend to emerge from the standpoint of epistemologies that focus on political and social equality in relation to aspects of social structure, such as gender, sexuality, racialization, ethnicity, disability, and class, that relate to power and privilege in society (cf. Perez & Kuipers, this volume). These progressive ethics are not simply relativistic but combine the situated, relative inequalities of groups with universalized concerns about power, equality, and access to resources. This does not mean that there are no truths, standards, or ideals through which ethics can be and are asserted. It suggests that ethics are not fixed linguistic assertions or concepts at all, but rather a contested, debated, and expansive unpacking of the complexity of social and political relations.

Accordingly, the line between ethical and unethical humor and comedy is “difficult to negotiate” as it “is blurred and keeps moving” (Pickering & Lockyer, 2009, p. 15) due to its close connection to political and moral concerns. The line between humor and comedy and offense shifts as political and moral contexts change. Shifts in this line is a newsworthy topic and generates intense public debate. Therefore, as local, national, and global societies continue to change, debates on the ethics of humor and comedy will persist, ensuring the need for academic research that analyzes this dynamic and fluid topic. This suggests that academic research on the ethics of humor and comedy is a continuing endeavor.

Such shifts and changes were demonstrated by media and public debates around the ethics of humor and comedy ignited by the global Black Lives Matter protests as a result of the murder of George Floyd in the USA by a serving police officer in 2020. The Black Lives Matter protests focused on structural and institutional racism and led to increased attention to the ways in which Black people have been historically treated and represented, including in humor and comedy. Lockyer and Pickering (2008, p. 811) would refer to this attention as the “need for thinking self-reflexively about the social implications of comic representations.” Some debates focused on the use of blackface in television comedies, including *The Golden Girls*, *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Little Britain*, and *League of Gentlemen*. This led to the removal of some, or all, episodes of these comedies from streaming services such as Hulu, BBC iPlayer, Netflix, and Britbox. Future research on the ethics of humor and comedy could fruitfully explore the ethical philosophies that are being asserted in these examples of critiques of humor and comedy. It could analyze how these examples would be understood, and how they would be different depending on the philosophical approach to the ethics of humor and comedy applied.

It is important to note that societal changes can lead to what some may interpret as regression, as well as progression, in the ethics of humor and comedy. This is demonstrated by relatively recent developments in our understandings of the ethics of humor and comedy that have drawn on the ideas of “new offensiveness” (Logan, 2009; see also Hunt, 2010) in stand-up comedy. “New offensiveness” refers to the ways in which some stand-up comedians are reacting to the mainstreaming of alternative comedy that began in the late 1970s and early 1980s and was anti-racist and anti-sexist. Logan argues the “new” in “new offensiveness” refers to the return to the misogynistic, racist, and bigoted comedy of 1970s that dominated mainstream British and American comedy. For example, Hunt argues that the targets of Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle have “been all too consistent in their ‘failure’ to conform to dominant notions of femininity” (2010, p. 185). Relatedly, recent shifts and trends in humor and comedy have also seen increased circulation of jokes about rape (see Gentile, 2017) where media coverage of the debates around rape joke controversies “predominantly reinforces and normalizes male sexual violence towards women” (Lockyer & Savigny, 2020, p. 434).

Critical engagements with the ethics of humor and comedy need to remain cognizant of changing structures and conventions in comedy performance and how these impact on the ethical evaluation of humor. Traditional British stand-up comedy, judged crass and offensive by the emerging alternative comedy movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, was often defended as “just a joke.” Similar defenses are parodied by Gadsby in *Nanette*: “You hear ‘straight white man,’ you’re like, ‘No. No, that’s reverse sexism.’ No, it’s not. You wrote the rules. Read them. Just jokes. Banter. Don’t feel intimidated. It’s just locker room talk.” In later decades, the comedians mentioned above as a part of the “new offensiveness” assert the irony of their material when claims of offensiveness were made. More than “just jokes”, the defense signals an awareness and reversal of unethical material, but this cannot be known for sure. Ethics then shift to be aware of such conventions and seek to incorporate those into critique alongside an assessment of the jokes themselves.

Gadsby’s *Nanette* signals a new form of comedy convention. Metatextual discussion and criticism of comedy is clear in the show. Giuffre summarizes how it is described as “challenging what stand-up comedy can achieve.” Thus, it has been labelled a “part of a ‘post-comedy’ or ‘anti-comedy’ movement – a type of performance that moves beyond existing stand-up conventions” (2021, p. 29). Krefting describes it as “a feminist queer metacommentary on comedy” (2019b, p. 165). Rather than seeing *Nanette* as post-comedy, it is more accurately viewed as an emerging comedy form that includes metatextual discussion in an incongruity with more traditional joke structures and styles (and incongruities). It is then

not outside of comedy or its ethical assessment. In recent years, similar styles are depicted in Stewart Lee's *Content Provider* (2018), and more controversially in Jimmy Carr's *His Dark Material* (2021) and Ricky Gervais' *Supernature* (2022).

Continued analysis is required to reveal what consequences such developments in the structures and conventions of comedy performance have for social identities and social relationships, and when, how, and why they appear. These examples support the need for the continued development of "critical humor studies," which Lockyer and Pickering argue addresses:

the relations between comic and other forms of discourse and rhetoric but also focuses on what is specific to jokes and joking relationships and what makes humour and comic genres distinctive as modes of communication and representation. More importantly, this emergent field of study recognises the centrality of comic media in contemporary Western cultures and, on this basis, investigates the interface between humour and ethics (2008, p. 818).

Therefore, in a context where globally mediated and online humor and comedy are becoming ever-increasingly prevalent, so does the need for "critical humor studies" in humor research.

4. Interdisciplinary Connections

What is regarded as ethically appropriate and inappropriate in humor and comedy acts as a lens on society's values, mores, and norms. Therefore, its analysis is directly relevant to social science disciplines. However, there are a number of other interdisciplinary connections and potentials for research collaboration on the ethics of humor and comedy across disciplines. This is usefully illustrated by Palmer's work on the limits of humor and comedy, more specifically, comic offensiveness. Palmer argues that attempts at humor and comedy are found offensive due to three variables. These are, 1) a joke structure that is regarded as "a representation of the world external to the joke"; 2) the relationship between the joke teller, the joke target, and the audience; and 3) the context in which the attempts at humor and comedy are made (1994, p. 164).

Palmer observes that different instances of comic offence may see different configurations, or different combinations, of these variables come into play. Analysis of each individual variable, and interconnections across the variables, requires a range of different analytical approaches, research methodologies, and foci of investigation in order to fully interrogate this complex topic. Thus, such analysis lends itself to connections between linguistics, sociology, psychology, theatre and performance, media and communications,

cultural studies, politics, history, anthropology, and philosophy, which includes both quantitative and qualitative methodological data sources and analytical approaches and provides interdisciplinary research collaboration across these disciplines.

Such interdisciplinary collaborations or transdisciplinary discussions could be advanced by overcoming, or addressing, some of the disciplinary boundaries or styles that develop inside academic fields. These are clearly displayed in the study of the ethics of humor and comedy. An example of a clear synergy that could emerge would see an overcoming of the tendency in the philosophy of humor and comedy to deal in abstract discussion of ethics. Often, such discussions come with limited call for examples and no engagement with detailed case studies of potentially unethical humor and comedy. Moreover, many studies in the humanities and social sciences have offered detailed critique and discussion of case studies, unpacking the ideological or discursive content of humor and comedy, but with very little reference to philosophical concepts or the principles of ethics. The discussion of Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* in this chapter shows that there are a number of concepts that can be employed for the analysis of humor and comedy, and they need not remain mutually exclusive in subdisciplines.

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