The relief theory was developed under the assumption that humor was a major focus, however, was to dissect the arguments that characterized immoral focusing on the simplicity of immoral humor as a medium to make people laugh. A larger audience.

the larger audience.

works in the field are philosophical analyses built on historical evidence instead of understanding humor's impact on social beliefs, many are inconclusive due to small

long as humans make jokes.

that immoral humor is a necessary part of the artistic landscape and will remain for a long time.

Background

Introduction

Immoral humor: three arguments

Immoral humor

Case Studies (cont.)

Immoral humor is and will likely remain a contentious topic in philosophical discussions. There is an inherent problem with immoral humor: jokes making light of bad things will always seem tasteless and wrong. Scholars can complicate the dilemma, essentially turning “it’s just a joke” into some sort of window into the joke-teller’s personal beliefs. The three critiques of immoral humor, while insightful, reflect their author’s beliefs, but do not really offer a coherent argument about the nature of immoral humor. Despite slight differences in their approaches, they tend to agree in some capacity that immoral humor is a negative form of expression. Gau argued that immoral humor causes moral and ethical problems because humor and ethics interact in ways that can hurt others. Rodriguez and Levinson argue that immoral humor causes some sort of internal struggle; Levinson claimed that those who listen to immoral humor have to weigh in their mind the social taboos of the joke, making it a qualitatively bad joke. Rodriguez argued that immoral humor was a vehicle for the transmission of racist ideas, lessening the impact of what should be reprehensible jokes. Those jokes desensitize a person to real-world injustice, overall making people less empathetic. These perspectives, while well articulated, do not. I would argue, accurately portray the average person’s interactions with immoral humor.

One core aspect of immoral humor was only briefly discussed by these scholars: context. Context truly matters when it comes to immoral humor, as the potential harm immoral humor can inflict but it is necessary to note that such harm is highly reliant on the context in which a joke is told. A racist joke told to a racial audience will probably reinforce racist ideas. A racially charged joke, a joke that plays on racial stereotypes instead of flat-out promoting those stereotypes, told to the average audience may or may not enforce those stereotypes. It is impossible to claim with any degree of certainty that immoral humor can create or reinforce discriminatory ideas in those who do not already subscribe to those ideas. I think it is presumptuous to assume people reflect so deeply on the jokes they hear. In a small study done on white and black participants, for example, researchers found that the black participants were more conflicted in some manner about the joke, diminishing its funniness. This serves to appeal of immoral humor as well as consider a type of immoral humor that only applies to those who desire it: virtue.

Finally, I created a counter argument breaking down the conclusions of the three scholars. My argument was based around a different philosophical idea. Rather than looking at humor from the standpoint that it was inherently inferior to regular humor and inherently harmful, I argued from a more realistic standpoint, focusing on the simplicity of immoral humor as a medium to make people laugh. A major focus, however, was to dissect the arguments that characterized immoral humor as some moral wrongdoing with aesthetic/crass.

Case Studies

It is necessary to test those theories of immoral humor against the realities of popular immoral and satirical humor. I will briefly explain and break down two very different jokes: one told by Dave Chappelle, a black comedian, and respected for his craft, and Louis C.K., a white satirist who felt out of the public’s good graces after a public scandal in 2017.

Theories of Humor

Historically, theologians, scientists, and philosophers have created many different theories of humor, three of which are still widely referenced today in academia.

Relief theory

The relief theory was developed under the assumption that humor was a form of relief from “excessive nervous arousal.”

Superiority theory

The superiority theory argues that people find things funny when it places them above others. As in the case of the relief theory, it also lacks a mechanism of humor, a reason why people would find humor only from the perspective of superiority over a target.

Incongruity theory

According to this theory, people find things funny when their expectations are subverted or when a situation is incongruent with what is typical or normal. Therefore, both clever, logic-based jokes like riddles and puns can be categorized under the same theory as jokes targeting certain people or events. While it struggles to differentiate between types of incongruity, it is the most referenced theory of humor as it applies to most types of humor.

Chappelle, on the other hand, is viewed as a comedian, through and through. The things he says are to be viewed as non-representative of his personal views, jokes to get a laugh that he’s opposed to making jokes opposing to his views about the LGBT+ community, making light of a tragedy is an easy way to alienate your audience and galvanize those who already dislike one’s humor. The key to immoral humor is that someone who is wounded offended — one making immoral humor has to craft their humor with this in mind, constructing the joke so that it is widely regarded as funny more than it is considered offensive.

Conclusion

Chappelle

I would also like to thank CURF for giving me this amazing opportunity to pursue research despite the sudden limitations of COVID-19. I would also like to thank professor Ralph Rosen for exposing me to the academic side of comedy. Exploring contemporary and ancient comedy was illuminating, allowing me to view modern rhetoric (and humor as a whole) with a new lens. Your passion for this subject is inspirational and your calm and helpful mentoring made this experience awe-inspiring.

Acknowledgements

References


