



## Introduction

Is it okay to be racist? For most people in America the answer would be no. Discrimination based on sex, gender, race, religion, age, etc, while also taboo in most other countries, is considered immoral in the United States, where people of all races live and work together while upholding the American values of freedom and equality. This is not to say that discrimination does not exist in America; at many points in American history various national and global events have prompted surges of racism and prejudice against marginalized groups. Yet the underlying culture is one that punishes blatant displays of discrimination, whether legally or through the "court of public opinion."

The discussion about immorality takes a different turn when discussing dark or immoral humor. Despite the prevailing culture of the United States decrying racism, many Americans find immense humor in jokes making fun of minorities, public figures, and serious topics such as climate control. Mirth, or the feeling of amusement, is difficult to study, with many scholars creating studies that, while useful for tentative assumptions, lack complete conclusions. When it comes to philosophy, many conclude that immoral jokes are problematic for a multitude of reasons ranging from the argument that immoral jokes numb the heart to real-world problems to arguments postulating that they reduce the artistic value of the joke itself. I am interested in the philosophical debate around immoral humor and why many take issue with the "it's just a joke" defense. This project will dissect a few of these anti-immortality stances, first defining the mechanism of humor itself, then outlining the arguments concerning immoral humor, and finally utilizing real-world examples to explain the impact of immoral humor on American audiences. Despite its inherent problematic nature and potential for misuse, I will argue that immoral humor is a necessary part of the artistic landscape and will remain for as long as humans make jokes.

## Methodology

Research on immoral humor, and humor in general, is unlike that of the formal, study-based research of other fields. While there are some studies that tried to understand humor's impact on social beliefs, many are inconclusive due to small sample sizes or struggle with too many variables. As such, the most prominent works in the field are philosophical analyses built on historical evidence instead of scientific. There isn't a scientific experiment that can accurately describe what humor is and how it works so humanities scholars build arguments based on accepted theories and add their own ideas to evolve the larger discussion.

For my research, I found three arguments concerning immoral humor and used those to create a background so reader could understand how immoral humor is generally viewed by scholars. I supplemented those arguments with more research on humor in general and other prolific arguments in the field concerning immoral humor as it affects different races. Then I analyzed two different comedians, Dave Chappelle and Louis C.K., to compare how their immoral humor was received by the larger audience.

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/artistic flaws.

## Background

### 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 perception 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 incongruous 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.

## Immoral Humor

### Immoral humor: three arguments

In *Just Joking: the Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor*, Berys Gaut (1998) centers his argument around morality and ethics. He splits the debate into three camps: the anti-moralists, the immoralists, and the moralists. The anti-moralists argue that humor and ethics do not interact with each other. As such, it is impossible to characterize jokes according to any moral standard. The immoralists, on the other hand, embrace the vicious nature of such jokes, acknowledging that they reflect immoral ideas or behavior, but arguing that they add to the humor itself. Unlike the other camps, immoralists rely on the superiority, relief, and incongruity theories to support their position. By contrast, moralists simply argue that the viciousness of jokes "undercut" their humor, concluding that that "our sense of humor is fully answerable to ethical considerations."

Instead of thinking about the issue in terms of morality, Gaut (1998) suggests that it instead be considered through an ethical lens. Gaut uses the term 'morality' to refer to good versus bad, whereas 'ethics' refers to right versus wrong. The subtle difference allows bad things to be right ethically and vice versa. Through ethicism, the ethically bad attitude of an utterer counts against the funniness of the joke, like moralism, but allows the joke to retain some humor. Such humor can be enhanced by its viciousness when given a deserving target, such as a criminal or repugnant person. Thus through a lens of ethicism, we can attempt to understand and justify the appeal of immoral humor as well as consider a type of immoral humor that only chides those who deserve it: virtue to the viciousness.

Jerrod Levinson (2017) begins his essay, 'Immoral Jokes,' by claiming that immoral humor is less funny than regular humor because the audience must feel conflicted in some manner about the joke, diminishing its funniness. This serves to propagate the ideas at the core of the joke, spreading normalcy around the morally questionable ideas. Levinson's piece pivots around this argument, continuing to question whether the audience member is morally complicit with the joke's subject matter, insisting that the audience finds "guilty pleasure" in immoral humor and are "ashamed or at least uncomfortable" with their own amusement. Yet Levinson does not wish to provide a solution to this problem, instead he wants the audience to accept that immoral jokes are not redeemable despite the setting, teller, and venue, (unless it is a subversion of the immoral idea) and that, as we can find immoral humor funny, the audience is also in some part immoral.

Tanya Rodriguez (2014) examines immorality in humor from a different angle than the previous theories. In her article "Numbing the heart: racist jokes and the aesthetic affect," she argues that racist jokes ultimately 'numb one's heart' to real world discrimination. Like the others, Rodriguez builds her argument on the assumption that racist jokes are less funny than moral ones because they require the audience to interact carefully and more deliberately with the material to "get" the humor while avoiding potential propagation of racism. This is where the desensitizing begins, as the audience must "adopt the position of the racist character to get the joke;" resulting in a real life distancing from the real people who serve as the racist joke's punchline. This ties into the aesthetic effect as Rodriguez argues that such a distancing is the exact opposite of what art should be. In her words, "art should bring the world into focus and make us feel more of the world, not less."

## Case Studies

It is necessary to test these 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 well known and respected for his craft, and Louis C.K., a white satirist who fell out of the public's good graces after a public scandal in 2017.



"Everybody in the car respects the T's, but everyone also... respects the T's. It's not the T's' fault, but everyone in the car just feels like the T's are making the trip take longer. Anything the T's say gets on everybody's nerves. And then, the T's don't even say anything bad. They just be in the back talking to themselves." - Excerpt from *Sticks and Stones*

- Of the many satirical jokes made in the special, this one received a significant amount of backlash from prominent members of the LGBT+ community. Many found the joke tasteless due to its reliance on stereotypes. Yet this joke, and *Sticks and Stones* in its entirety, was received positively by critics and the general public alike. Simply put, it was funny, and went on to win the Best Comedy Album at the 62nd Grammy Awards.

"You're not interesting because you went to a high school where kids got shot... Why does that mean I have to listen to you? Why does that make you interesting? You didn't get shot, you pushed some fat kid in the way, and now I gotta listen to you talking?" -recording from a New York show in 2018



While the joke may have been funny at the comedy club, it certainly was not when told by the various news outlets slamming C.K. for his scathing remarks. Contextually, it could have been funny in the same way Chappelle's joke could have been seen as unfunny outside of the context of a comedy special. Is it fair to criticize the joke outside of the context? The major difference between C.K. and Chappelle is how they are viewed by the public in terms of their status as satirists and comedians. C.K.'s image is tainted by his scandal, many newsletters alluded that the joke was an attempt to distract others from focusing on his accusations of sexual assault. It is impossible for some to consider the context in relation to Louis C.K.

## Case Studies (cont.)

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 people laughing. As opposed to making jokes relying on mild stereotypes 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 will always be 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

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 tactless 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 rigorous 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. Gaut argues that immoral humor poses 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 taboo of the joke, making it a guilty pleasure. 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. I do not discount 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 racist 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 accepting of immoral humor while the white participants were very concerned with the offensive material (Green & Linders, 2016).

Immoral humor is a necessary part of comedy. It takes taboo subjects and satirizes them and, like other art forms such as music and visual arts, they open up discussions about those topics. It is a tool that, like all tools, possess potential for misuse. The jokes are funny, simple as that. People should not be ashamed of finding immoral jokes amusing, it's only when those jokes are used to harm others that immoral humor exposes its dangers. At the same time, it is important to not prop up immoral humor as something beyond what it is: it is not some medium for social justice nor is it an agent for discrimination and hate. They're jokes, clever words or phrases told to elicit laughter. While there is nuance to be had, it is important to recognize that simplicity.

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