



Philosophy of Humor: Cancel Culture and Offense Ethics of Jokes

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of humor has traditionally been wronged by controversy, especially in our generation of cancel culture. There have been numerous attempts to delineate humor, the most notable responses being superiority (unsurpassed by Thomas Hobbes, whose sudden glory came at the misery of others), relief (Sigmund Freud learning via tendentious jokes to get rid of a psychological conflict), and incongruity (Immanuel Kant's sudden transformation of a tense expectation to nothing). Although these theories examine what causes people to laugh, the question arises: what makes certain jokes quite offensive and even harmful? Cancel culture is a social trend that may be a quick solution to report individuals (e.g, comedians) for their unacceptable jokes (e.g., punching down). In some of the later examples of comedians being canceled (Dave Chappelle, for instance), it was because they used stereotypes that serve to reinforce the power disparity. This raises the question of whether this cancellation is essential, whether it actually causes harm to a marginalized group, or if it is merely a case of censorship and a lack of creativity. I justify my points by referring to the publication date (between 2020 and 2025) considering the latest works in the sphere, including *In on the Joke: The Ethics of Humor and Comedy* by Kristian Wilk and Michael Gimbel and the articles containing powerful quotes like our focus should be on what a joke of this kind does in the context in which this joke is told. Moralists like Berys Gaut would provide a



counterargument against the notion that humor is ethically neutral, arguing that an ethical critique of a joke would render it unfunny. The counterargument would also be supported in the essay by the incorporation of benign incongruity discourses, which reveal empathy and evoke laughter in a non-harmful and non-malicious manner. Finally, the paper outlines the principles of walking the fine line between punching up and down, taking into consideration the audience and their response, rather than saying or doing anything to become free and spontaneous. Above all, it stresses the detrimental consequences of being like a mob. That is why we have expressions such as punching down and not punching up; the latter one is okay in most instances, as it is in accordance with the moral consent, and in case someone still wants to stab that one in the back, at least he/she cannot be canceled in large numbers. As one last controversial term, I selected 'cancel culture' because it often comes into conflict with humor, as the former contributes to the polarization of an already polarized society.

Introduction

Humor, much like everything else, has always been a contradictory one: a source of delight, bonding, and stinging critique, yet an instrument of cruelty, exclusion, and injury. The form and boundaries of comedy, as well as its capacity to both delight and disturb, were the issues addressed by ancient philosophers. Plato denounced comedy, which gave rise to low pleasure; Aristotle acknowledged the praise of well-chosen wit as an educative form of insolence but was cautious of the vulgarity (Rapp 118). Thomas Hobbes explained laughter as a burst of glory due to the perception of superiority over the perceived weaknesses of others, Sigmund Freud perceived jokes as the catharsis of repressive aggression or desire, and Immanuel Kant viewed amusement as the playful destruction of tense expectations to nothing.

In the wake of global media and shared anger, tensions are further heightened today. Online sites bring jokes to millions of people in a few seconds, and the so-called cancel culture (revocation of support and social disgrace of the comedians and public figures based on abhorrent jokes) has turned into a thunderbolt of discussion. Due to instances of controversy with jokes of Dave Chappelle about



transgender people and the scandals of the past, a key question remains: when is a joke no longer a joke, but ethically indefensible?

This paper will explore the philosophy of humor through its three classical theories: superiority, relief, and incongruity. Having provided a brief description of their views on the nature of comedy and its intent, I will use them as a prism through which to evaluate the morality of offensive jokes in the age of cancel culture. By doing so, I will tap into the current literature regarding the issue from 2000 to 2025, which will provide a reasonable middle ground that will guide me through the freedom of expression and the possible adverse effects of humor.

Review of Literature

John Morreall, an anthropologist and historian of humor, evaluates humor as play in his *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (2009), in which he argues that people who oppose ethnic/gender jokes mistakenly conflate play with bad will. He takes a recap of advice on ethics regarding humor and sums it up as follows: "Never play with that which you should not take seriously, humor. Oncomic moralism ("it is not funny when rate they are immoral and it is not funny when rate they are moral either) see Berys Gaut (1998) and later arguments. The idea that immoralism, which posits that a defectiveness of something should also make it more entertaining, can be found in the debate with Noël Carroll and in Aaron Smuts' (2009) argument against it. On immoralism in relation to the humor in the form of humor, see Aaron Smuts (2009), who concludes that the immoral does not add to the amusing. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by multiple authors (continuing, most recently, as of 2024), jokes are morally offensive because they perpetuate stereotypes that we should be working to unlearn. According to Thomas Wilk and Steven Gimbel (*In on the Joke: The Ethics of Humor and Comedy*, 2024), there are three broadly speaking ways to consider the ethics of humor: the restrictive (play it safe), the lax (it is just a joke), and the moderate (case by case). To discuss a group of essays on the ethics of humor, including the issues of free speech boundaries and so-called cancel culture (the one deemed an overreach or a necessary measure to combat, depending on the punching down), one may turn to *In on the Joke: The Ethics of Humor and Comedy* (2024) by Steven Gimbel and Thomas Wilk. The journal *Invention: The International Journal of Critical Thinking*, a special issue titled "On the Ethics of Humor,"r has been published. Additionally,d a volume specifically inquiring about the responsibilities of the comedia, *The Philosophy of Comedy* (2025), has been published.



Objective

Humor is a multifaceted and subjective experience for human beings, yet certain jokes and comedic ventures can be destructive, vulgar, and immoral. This research paper aims to explore the philosophical and ethical implications of humor, directly addressing the question: How and why should we consider some jokes to be offensive? Some of the classical philosophical theories concerning humor that will be examined in this paper include superiority (Thomas Hobbes), relief (Sigmund Freud), and incongruity (Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer). This will proceed to implement and critically evaluate these theories in relation to the actual case of cancel culture and its impact on free speech and comedy. The paper will discuss how cancel culture is a justified and defensible exercise of social responsibility, and how certain jokes are canceled or 'punched down' at the expense of an oppressed or marginalized group. The conflicts and criticisms of cancel culture presented in the paper will focus on the points of danger, including stifling dissent, suffocation of creativity, or insensitivity to the situation, intent, or nuance of jokes. To balance the arguments and views presented in the paper, it will provide evidence, examples, and criteria supported by the literature and practice. The following conclusions recommended in the paper include proposing a few ethical guidelines and principles of responsible and respectful comedy that would not diminish or condone the artistic and critical features of humor.

Main Text

Part 1: Classic Theories of Humor and the Implications on Ethics.

The three traditional theories of the philosophy of humor are superiority, relief, and incongruity, which relate to three traditional conceptions of laughter: triumph, psychic release, and solution to a mental puzzle. Such insights form the foundations of three traditional stances on the ethics of jokes and comedy more broadly, which are becoming increasingly popular in the culture war versus cancel culture: offensive jokes are occasionally justified based on their ethical connotation, and sometimes they are not.

The oldest and simplest theory is the superiority theory, which dates at least as far back as Plato, who was not much a fan of comedy. In the *Republic* and the *Philebus*, Socrates associates comedy with cruelty, mischief-making, and ridicule of imperfections in other people. A classical statement is attributed to Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651), which posits that the passion of laughter is no other than sudden glory occasioned by some sudden idea of an elevation in ourselves, by way of comparison with the weakness of others or of our own former selves. By laughing, we put ourselves in a better mood by making fun of ourselves due to an error, our own shortcomings, or a misfortune that has



befallen our partner. Superiority humor is therefore conspicuous in the aggression model of hostility: most of the offensive jokes are hurtful due to their derogatory nature, and laughing at the marginalized parties serves to make the powerful feel more powerful. The humor about ethics is often seen as ethical superiority, which moralists can claim is detrimental or demeaning to the target. Some individuals employing humor to belittle other groups or individuals who are vulnerable perceive it as a budget reduction as their critics of punching down humor most often argue, such comedy strengthens the hierarchy on which a joke depends. This is why superiority humor will most probably be cancelled, be it due to propagating racist, sexist, or ableist stereotypes or due to more direct damage.

A similar phenomenon is described by the relief model of laughter that is attributed to Sigmund Freud, although it bases itself on the psychological pressure. This continues to be the case in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) when Freud suggests that laughter is a way of releasing outpouring psychic energy which the society makes us repress. He drew the difference between what he called the innocent jokes and what he referred to as the tendentious jokes, which are directed to promote hostile or obscene causes: the delight which we have in telling tendentious jokes is the easement of the restraint which we must otherwise observe with regard to aggression or sexuality. Freud: a purpose satisfying itself, whose satisfaction would otherwise have never followed. The catharsis of biting humor can be analyzed into relief theory, but that theory as well attracts our attention to another more perilous point: the same outlet that relieves us can also be aggression used against the subject of a joke, trivializing pain, projecting ourselves onto a stereotype, or creating actual prejudice. The relief theory plays a rhetorical role in the cancel culture wars: always a defensive mechanism, a mechanism to relieve steam without sounding a hostility or infliction of real harm. Those who suggest that the banter should be let fly can refer to Freud, who is not in support of politically incorrect jokes with no real world impact. Opponents of this opinion cite more tendentious versus, which do also embrace gratification of purpose which cannot be experienced in life.

The incongruity theory has become supreme. It is the least emotional of all of the traditional theories: incongruity in reasoning, which is more purely mental, appears to be more remote to bodily violence or laughter as the release. The traditional transcription is the one which was given by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790): laughter is an affection that comes about in the unexpected shift of a tense expectation into a nothing. Arthur Schopenhauer picked up on this as well as modern theories such as the benign violation theory believe that we find things funny when something includes some sort of harmless threat (tension) that is abruptly alleviated or a mismatch or puzzle that is abruptly resolved. However, aesthetic forms of the incongruity theory can sound as an apology of humor and ethics: it is all a game, and



nothing bad. However, even in this case, offensive jokes may take advantage of the mindset of incongruity to capitalize on inhumane aggressiveness and demands the use of stereotypes and neglect to reflect on the actual power of these stereotypes. The jokes apply some types of cognitive traps to induce their appearance in the listener after which the apparent result is hit using a pun&chline.

The rudimentary theories give positions in the traditional philosophical controversy regarding the morality of humor: is there any case in which offensive jokes are morally bad, or is a joke without a natural moral judgment? Do ethical judgments regarding the subject of or the effect of jokes also apply to aesthetic judgments regarding their funniness? Moralists respond to both of the questions in the affirmative: a joke is aesthetically defective because it has an ethical flaw (immoral attitudes such as racism or sexism or a desire to hurt or humiliate a group of people). The answer of immoralists is no: a joke is an act of amoral play, and the content does not have any implication to the humour. Such positions are exhibited in the cancel culture discussions on offensive comedy: the moralists, whose judgment of the social effect of jokes and any power imbalance being disproportionate is dominant.

Section 2: Crime and Domination in Humour

Crime is associated with social power. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: "The fact that certain jokes make use of negative stereotypes does not mean that people endorse them, but that is the circumstance helping them to stay in circulation, which is toxic in a racist or sexist society and may support prejudice and injustice. What appears to be a harmless stereotypical joke (gender, race, identity) contributes to bias and hurts people in the long term (cumulative microaggressions).

One of the critical ethical differences is the one between punching up and punching down. Satirizing the mighty/ hitting upwards Satirism is subversive and in most cases ethical, particularly in the critical advantage theory. To moralists, punching down weakens the weak people and is thus unethical and unfunny.

Dave Chappelle is well known because of his controversial jokes that are made against people who are marginalized. This offense element in his comedy was described in his recent specials: *The Closer* (2021) and in other interviews. My comedy is no punching down, rumbled him. This is the free expression element of my art. Some of his jokes (e.g. transgender comments) made his critics feel that he was punching down. Chappelle has people who have largely criticized him.

Saction 3: The Ethical Judgment of Cancel Culture as a Response.



The cancel culture of holding a person responsible of an assumed offense enables the marginalized groups to raise their voice against offending jokes. It can be confirmed through a contemporary understanding of the harm principle as stated by Mill by incorporation of the idea of microaggressions and encouragement of systemic harm.

Nevertheless, cancel culture may result in the mob rule and the elimination of divergent opinions. In reaction to the pressure, Chappelle wrote: Fuck Twitter. Fuck NBC news, ABC news, all these dumb ass networks. I'm not talking to them. I'm talking to you. This is real life." According to Chappelle, the notion of being canceled was pushing things to the extreme of highlighting the distinction between the outrage on the internet and offline life.

Philosophically we should create a balance in that the harmful speech must be held accountable and on the other hand the danger of the freedom of speech being suppressed.

Section 4: White Collar Crimes as a Response to Cancel Culture.

The cancel culture which is the tendency of holding a person responsible to a perceived offense would enable the marginalized communities to voice their concerns against offensive humor. One can explain it with the contemporary reading of the harm principle as formulated by Mill through introducing the notion of microaggression and confirmation of the systemic harm.

Nevertheless, cancel culture may cause mob control and heckle out any other opinion. In his repressed reaction to the criticism, Chappelle wrote: Fuck Twitter. Fuck NBC News, ABC News and all these idiots networks. I'm not talking to them. I'm talking to you. This is real life." Chappelle insinuates that the concept of being cancelled was pushing it too far by highlighting the disparity between the outrage caused online and the offline life.

Philosophically, there should be a balance between responsibility of damaging speech and hazard of curbing the freedom of speech.

Part 4: Case Studies and Modern Analysis.

Examples: Netflix specials (e.g. 2021/2025) by Chappelle. Although the specials can be viewed as a defense of freedom of speech and artistic purpose, critics state that this kind of jokes constitutes a continuation of harm to the trans community in real life. These examples can be used to show that contextual moralism is a valid approach: jokes can be evaluated based on the intent of the comedian performing them, the context they are told in, and how influential they can be or are.



More recent scholarship (2000-2025), such as that of Morreall, and new volumes in series such as *The Philosophy of Humor Yearbook*, is suggesting a change towards more inclusive ethics in humor in the form of empathy and harm reduction.

Results

1. In degradation, superiority humor will most likely be violated in terms of ethics.
2. Context issues: laughter signifies the necessity of moral response in case of the innocence violation of social norms.
3. Some protection against the over-application of cancel culture must exist, and this benefit it offers is preventative in nature.
4. In literature 2000-2025, it is reflected that more emphasis is laid on contextual and inclusive considerations in humor ethics.

Conclusion

To sum up, philosophy of humor reveals the existence of a complicated tension between the emancipatory effect of humor and its possible destructive impact in the era of cancel culture and the feeling of being offended. Although classic theories of superiority, incongruity, and relief emphasize the powers of humor to expose the absurd, relieve stress, and censure the dominant power structures, they also identify threats inherent in jokes: they can reinforce harmful stereotypes, humiliate marginalized people or undermine serious misery.

The cancel culture culture exaggerates these ethical issues and usually rushes people to blame them of offensive content, yet they take a risk of overreaching, silencing free speech and especially honest dissent. We need to be fair in acknowledging that not every offense is the same, we should respond based on situations, motivation and implication. Ethical humor necessitates accountability Ethical humor attacks the institutions of power, instead of those marginalized, and encourages common sense despite laughter, in order to maintain the essential role of ethical humor in democratic conversations without stooping to an endless caustic effect or a totalitarian censoriousness. The real development is based on subtle discussion which enables humor to criticize the society without demeaning human dignity.



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