1. Short Intro

Stand-up comedy is usually about the comedian getting the audience to laugh. For that to work, the comedian has to bring the audience on-side. My focus in this paper is on that process: the comedian gaining the trust of the audience. My aim in this paper is to establish that the language of trust can be applied to comedy, and to show the dimensions through which it works. Through applying an analysis of trust I will show how trust is integral to understanding humour, and I will also draw out further implications concerning the relationship between trust and the evaluation of humour. I discuss this mainly through talking about trust and humour, since stand-up comedy is mainly an art of humour.

This paper is a bit of a crude reduction of a broader piece so I will move quickly. The first two sections will be to establish how I am talking about trust and humour. Section three will be to take these two sections and map trust onto humour. In the fourth section, I will offer an implication of this analysis, which is that trust may create a level of indeterminacy in humour, and this allows for the category of ethically dubious humour.

1. Quick humour

Humour primarily as a social phenomenon: a social practice centred around the evocation of laughter. The unit of humour is the humour act (such as a joke, a gag, or a prank) and comprises up to three roles: that of the humourist, the audience, and the target of the humour.

1. Quick trust

Trust is in three places. A trusts B in domain D.

Reliance: A relies on B to x such that A acts on the supposition that B will x.

Reflexivity: B take’s A’s reliance as a direct but defeasible reason to act in accordance with A’s reliance.

1. Mapping trust

Trust may affect how a humour act succeeds (or suffers) with respect to both that act’s comprehensibility and its ability to bring about participation. I will begin by focusing on trust and comprehension, where a humour act’s comprehensibility may be affected by trust in two ways. The first way is that the audience must trust that what the would-be humourist is doing is in fact an attempt at humour. For example, when my uncle leans across the table to me and asks, “How do you sell a deaf man a banana?” I am trusting him that he is beginning a joke and not earnestly asking me how to sell a deaf man a banana. The reliance condition is met because I am acting — listening, interpreting, understanding — on the supposition that my uncle is joking. I am playing the role of audience to the joke. The reflexivity condition is met by my uncle taking my acting as audience to tell the joke with me as audience. How much the would-be humourist is trusted depends substantially on how well the audience knows them, and what the audience thinks of them. I know my uncle quite well, I know the sorts of things he talks about, and I know the sorts of jokes he likes to make, so it is easy for me to trust that he is joking when he asks me, “How do you sell a deaf man a banana?” Were I asked the same question, in the same tone of voice, by a stranger on the bus, I would be much less likely to trust that they were joking. The stranger would have to do something to build that trust, like ask “Would you like to hear a joke?” For the joke to be comprehended, the audience must trust that the would-be humourist is joking.

Just as it can be unclear whether a putative humourist is actually joking, it can also be clear that the humourist is joking but unclear what the joke is about. Consider an example where my uncle is making fun of someone for how they dress, with me as his audience. His target is a woman wearing an extremely large and oddly coloured designer hat. The content of the joke depends on whether or not my uncle is trusted to know that the hat is specifically a designer hat. If my uncle does not know that it is a designer hat, then the joke may just turn on its odd size and colour. If he does know, however, then the joke may instead turn on any number of things, from the hat’s high price to the reputation of the designer. The reliance and reflexivity conditions are met in this example in the same way that they were in the previous one: I listen, interpret, and understand my uncle’s joke on the supposition that he has some knowledge about fashion designers, and my uncle takes me as his audience because I make that supposition. Something worth drawing out is that how much I trust my uncle in this regard will depend on what sort of person I consider him to be. I may not know precisely just what he knows about fashion, but I may consider him to be the sort of person who knows something about fashion. This sort of judgement about what sort of person the humourist may be thought to be will be important when discussing ethically dubious humour.

These examples suggest two domains in which the humourist is trusted: competence and intent. Competence just means the would-be humourist’s ability to construct and enact the humour act. Intent has to do with what the humourist means, and what she is attempting to convey. For the sake of this paper, I will talk about meaning in the sense of Gricean reflexive intentions (for A to mean something is to say that A intends for B to understand what A means by way of B recognizing that A intends for B to understand what A means) since that offers a clear way of talking about meaning, but I do not believe that anything I write substantively depends on adopting the Gricean approach to reflexive intentions.

It is important to recognize that trust is not absolute. I can trust my uncle more or less with respect to both his competence and his intent. Since humans have a lot of experience with basic forms of humour — jokes and mocking being prime examples — it is rare for people to be totally incompetent in humour. Most people can construct a joke where it is reasonably clear that they are joking and it is reasonably clear what they mean. At the same time, very few people are expert enough to be perfectly competent and clear in intent all the time. Accordingly, with respect to humour, there will often be some trust of the humourist, but not total trust. Similarly, one of the goals of the humourist is often to build the trust of the audience. In a casual setting, this could be as simple as the earlier example of “Would you like to hear a joke?”

1. Trust, Intentions, and Examples from the Stage

Focusing on intentions through the lens of trust brings forward an important fact about humour: what is important is not just what the humourist intends, but what the audience understands the humourist to intend. In turn, what the audience can understand the humourist to intend is limited by what they believe the humourist to be capable of intending. It is at this point that the stand-up comedian begins to be evaluated substantially differently than the average stranger or acquaintance trying to tell a joke, albeit only in degree. The stand-up comedian will, by default, have more trust with respect to whether or not they are joking. This is because the comedian’s performance takes place in the context of a show, which is an institutionalized performance. “Would you like to hear a joke” has been implied by the advertising, the stage, the microphone, and the introduction.

Even though the comedian is more readily accepted as trying to be joking, there are still further questions about what they intend, and what they might be trusted to intend. There is not just whether the comedian intends to tell a joke, but whether he intends to treat that joke’s target affiliatively or disaffiliatively, and also how he conceives of his target. These issues are most readily brought out in the case of jokes that use marginalized groups. Consider the work of Russell Peters, an Indo-Canadian stand-up comedian who deals in ethnic humour. He makes jokes concerning the behaviour of ethnic minorities, immigrants, and people of colour. (These groups are often coextensive in his comedy.) Peters is also extremely popular with people of colour. For example, in his shows he will ask if there are any Mexicans in the audience. He will then single out the respondents and make jokes concerning Mexican stereotypes and affect a stereotypical Mexican accent. This sort of humour could easily be considered unacceptably racist, but it is accepted and specifically accepted by members of the target communities. Peters succeeds, I suggest, because he often focuses on his own upbringing as a racialized immigrant and how that sets him apart in Canadian society. His most famous line concerns his heavily-accented father threatening to beat him, often in relation to Peters trying to follow the lead of a white friend. Peters gains the audience’s trust by showing deep familiarity with the experience of being marginalized for being a racialized immigrant. He is not only trusted to be joking affiliatively about Mexican immigrants, but he is also trusted to have a positive conception of Mexicanness.

While the Peters example highlights the sort of humour that is usually ethically evaluated, the dynamics of trust hold in more basic cases of stand-up too. The comedian has to gain the trust of the audience with respect to her competence and her character. If the comedian is trying to joke affiliatively, then audience has to be willing to be part of the group of the comedian, and that means the comedian demonstrating that they are trustworthy: that they have good intentions, and that they are capable of having good intentions.

1. Gesturing at indeterminacy and dubiety.

Two of the points I have presented in this paper are that humour may succeed or fail based on whether the audience trusts the comedian, and that trust is not necessarily absolute. If you put these two points together, you get the result that there is a level of indeterminacy in engaging with humour: the audience may not have sufficient knowledge of the comedian’s knowledge, competence, or intentions to completely trust her. There is also the fact that, as I have argued, comedy makes use of trust in multiple domains. A comedian may be trustworthy in some domains, but not others. A comedian whose competence is trustworthy might be untrustworthy in her intent, and vice versa. If trust is often partial, and the success of humour depends on that trust, then the success of a comedian’s humour will often be partial.

Given my argument that trust is rarely absolute, most ethically-valanced humour will be dubious to some degree. A comedian’s intentions, and how she conceives of the groups she’s joking about, will often be to some degree opaque to the audience. What is inside her head is still inside her head, no matter how good she is at externalizing her thinking. The point about how a group is conceived of is particularly relevant: while a comedian can insist that her intentions are positive (or at least aim towards affiliative or disaffiliative humour as appropriate), making clear how she perceives of a group is more difficult. Consider the Peters example given above: I can easily imagine a reader of this paper accepting it but still harbouring a little bit of doubt. The sort of doubt that says “I accept what is being said, but nevertheless…”

1. Conclusion

There is more to say but I’ve been trying to move quickly. I hope I have at least shown to your satisfaction the following:

1. A way of understanding humour and comedy through trust
2. That understanding humour through trust suggests that there is often a level of indeterminacy in humour, and that this affects evaluation.
3. This indeterminacy is relevant with respect to the ethical evaluation of humour, where humour may be thought of as ethically dubious, as distinct from virtuous or vicious.