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### **The Social Account of Humour**

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Abstract:

Philosophical accounts of humour standardly account for humour in terms of what happens within a person. On these internalist accounts, humour is to be understood in terms of cognition, perception, and sensation. These accounts, while valuable, are poorly-situated to engage the social functions of humour. They have difficulty engaging why we value humour, why we use it define ourselves and our friendships, and why it may be essential to our self-esteem. In opposition to these internal accounts, I offer a social account of humour. This account approaches humour as a social practice. It foregrounds laughter and participation, and thereby gives an account of humour that helps to understand why we value humour, why we use it as we do, and why we use it to define our relationship to the world.

## The Social Account of Humour

The dominant philosophical accounts of humour understand it by what happens within the person: by a cognition, or a sensation, or a perception. Noel Carroll (2014a), for instance, understands humour by way of the cognitive emotion of comic amusement, which is aimed at the formal object of something that is perceived as incongruous (4, 55-7). John Morreall (2009) provides the cognitive shift theory, which understands humour by way of the sensation felt during certain shifts from one cognitive state to another (63). Matthew Hurley et al (2011) suggest that humour is to be understood through the epistemic emotion of mirth, which is rooted in a cognitive mechanism for identifying and resolving incompatible committed beliefs (66, 116, 240). While these accounts have their virtues, they are all limited by staying within the body. But humour is also a social phenomenon. It involves how we engage the world, how we interact with each other, and what we value. These are issues that cannot be addressed by looking at how humour makes us feel. They are fundamentally social questions involving how we do humour.

Opposite the internalist accounts, I provide what I call the social account of humour. This holds that humour is a social practice, which is to say that humour is fundamentally something that people do. Specifically, I suggest that humour is a practice centred on evoking laughter. Accordingly, this account gives a prominence to laughter, and so runs contrary to the internalist accounts, which tend to minimize laughter's importance. This paper will be devoted to articulating and justifying the social account, and not to arguing against the internalist accounts. This is the social account can happily cohabit with an

internalist account, though I believe that the social account is ultimately more interesting and more useful.

My paper contains three sections. The first is dedicated to developing the account. I explain what the account is and offer some finesses to address immediate concerns. Section two defends the social account with respect to the foregrounding of practice and the foregrounding of laughter. Here I appeal to the diversity of humour practice and suggest that what unifies them is the pursuit of laughter. Lastly, I consider the applications of the account. This section shows both the account's usefulness in understanding the social role played by humour, and how it makes available new philosophical avenues.

### I. The Account Explained

I hold that humour is a practice centred on evoking laughter. Understanding humour as a practice means understanding it primarily as something that people do. A practice may be as wide as absurd humour or as narrow as my uncle's game of attaching clothes pegs to unsuspecting victims. In this section I elaborate this basic account, and present three basic success conditions I believe this account provides. I begin by briefly elaborating what it means to say that humour is "centred on" laughter, and that laughter must be "evoked."

Evoking laughter is at the core of humour practice, but particular humour practices have developed in such a way that laughter is less important to them. These practices may de-emphasize humour in different ways. Some humour, like literary humour, tends to be engaged with alone. Research suggests that humans laugh far more readily in social

situations, and so will laugh far less when reading alone (Provine and Fischer 1989, 301). Nevertheless, literary humour developed out of humour practices based on getting people to laugh (such as storytelling, jokes, and singing). The literary humourist is doing something that developed to evoke laughter. Similarly, there exist humour practices like disgust humour that pursue reactions other than laughter. As with literary humour, these developed out of humour practices based on getting people to laugh (for example practical jokes and transgressive humour). I suggest that if these practices could not be tied back to a practice of evoking laughter then they would be less readily considered humour. Laughter is at the core of humour, but particular humour practices have developed in directions that pursue other reactions. Acts from particular humour practices that standardly pursue laughter may be used for purposes which do not pursue laughter. Just as a statue may be used as a weapon against a home invader, a joke may be utilized as an insult with no concern for aesthetic appreciation. I will defend the centrality of laughter in the next section.

To write that the humour seeks to “evoke laughter” is to hold that the goal of humour, broadly construed, is to bring about the laughter of the audience. Some theories of humour hold that specific sorts of laughter are humour-appropriate, and other sorts are not. At the far end is the theory of Hurley et al (2011), which speculates that all humour-appropriate laughter is Duchenne laughter, which is laughter characterized by a furrowed brow and upturned corners of the mouth, and is considered particularly difficult to falsely imitate (19). I want the social account to allow any sort of evoked laughter to be humour appropriate, and I will defend this position in the next section. The second clarification is that to say the laughter has to be evoked is just to close off issues related to pathological laughter, deviant

causation, or performed laughter responding to stage directions.<sup>1</sup> I want to leave what counts as properly evoked laughter open-ended and sensitive to particular humour practices. In particular, the theory allows that in mass-audience settings individual audience members' laughter is often evoked by the laughter of others. Tickling is not conventionally a humour practice but it is not in principle excluded by the social account, and could qualify under different cultural circumstances.

The social practice of humour includes different roles. First there is the humourist, who performs the humour act. Opposite the humourist is the audience, whose laughter is pursued by the humourist. Then there is the laughable, which is the subject of the laughter. In a lot of humour the laughable is the butt of the joke, but not all humour has butts, so the laughable is worth considering as a role independently of the butt. These roles may be filled by the same person. All three roles might be played by the same person, in the case of someone doing self-deprecating humour for themselves. These roles enable us to identify three basic success conditions for humour, which support a distinctive aesthetics of humour. Attempts at humour that excel by these conditions are better as humour and are thereby be considered funnier. Attempts which are inferior by these conditions are worse as humour and are thereby considered less funny, or even not funny at all.

1. Comprehensibility: For a humour act to succeed it must be comprehensible to the audience.
2. Participation: For a humour act to succeed, the audience must participate as prescribed.

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<sup>1</sup> "Deviant causation" includes things like drug use or electrically stimulating the brain. It does not include the use of laugh tracks, which are a regular component of some humour practices.

3. Plurality: Different humour practices may have their own standards for success, which must be met in addition to Comprehensibility and Participation.

The comprehensibility condition captures that, since humour is a practice, the audience should recognize that the act in question is an act performed within this particular practice. This means that recognize that what the humourist is doing is humour, and respond to it as such. Note that this condition holds that the act must be *comprehensible* and not that the act must be *comprehended*. These conditions are for a normative, not descriptive, evaluation of the humour act. If, for example, I fail to recognize that my friend has told a perfectly good joke because I am daydreaming, that failure belongs to me and not the humour act.

Participation captures the fact that humour pursues particular responses. These are standardly but not necessarily laughter. We have already seen that particular humour practices have developed to pursue reactions like consternation or disgust. Framing this success condition as “participation” also acknowledges that the audience, by reacting, are fulfilling their role as audience. This allows for cases where humour is worse because the people being courted as audience by the humourist ought to reject their role as audience. This will prove significant in the later section on ethical evaluation.

Lastly, plurality captures that there are myriad particular humour practices, and many come with their own particular standards. Puns, for example, require a similarity between either different words or different concepts. An attempt at a pun that fails to achieve that similarity fails as a pun. Gross-out humour that fails to be disgusting fails as gross-out

humour. The plurality condition allows the social account to fit with different popular theories of humour, like incongruity or superiority. The adherent to the social account may allow that these are just different approaches to humour, without having to commit to one of them reigning supreme. The plurality condition also manages cases where humour succeeds according to one condition but fails according to another. Consider “hack” jokes, which draw laughter but are otherwise considered inferior.<sup>2</sup> The joke may be strong by the participation condition but considered poor by a practice-specific criterion (perhaps to do with demonstrating the skill or creativity of the humourist).

### 1.1 Points of Finesse

Before moving to the defence of the social account, there are two small points to finesse. The first is how to understand what I call “found humour.” There are many things regularly called funny — an oddly-shaped potato, someone falling down a manhole and dying — that are not performed by a humourist but just encountered in the wild. Since these things are intuitively funny despite the absence of any humourist, there is the question of how the social account accommodates them. My position is that instances of found humour are appreciated by socially-learned ways of engaging humour. The found object or event is engaged by a subject in the ways that they have learned to engage humour. I believe this move can be made at no cost. Psychological research suggests that whether or not subjects find something funny depends on whether or not they are primed to believe that that thing is intended as humour (Martin and Ford 2018, 64). This research applies just as much to

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<sup>2</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for this example.

internalist accounts as it does to the social account. This means that internalist accounts must also permit that how funny something is may depend, in part, on whether it is engaged as humour. Accordingly, in this case, the social account does not demand the invention of anything new. I will discuss engaging humour as something socially learned more in section II.III.

The second point of finesse is in properly understanding who the audience is. There are forms of what might be called guerilla humour, where their performance involves exploiting an unwilling audience. Practical jokes are paradigmatic of this sort of comedy. Andy Kaufman became famous for bewildering his audience, and Eric Andre has a very successful talk show centred on embarrassing and unnerving unsuspecting guests. In each of these cases, it seems like the humour does not actually pursue the participation of the audience. Andy Kaufman is not trying to get the people watching him to laugh, he is trying to bewilder them. In cases like these, it is important to be clear that the audience that is relevant to the humour act is not always the same as the audience which is immediately watching the performance of the humour act. The humour-relevant audience for Eric Andre are not the upset and unnerved riders of the New York Subway who are watching him pour Froot Loops and milk on himself, but a later audience who understand and appreciate what he is doing.

### II.I The Account Defended: The Tension between The Social Account and Actually Existing Internalist Accounts

The social account's treatment of laughter is at odds with existing internalist accounts. The dominant internalist theories of humour sideline laughter on the grounds that laughter is



neither necessary nor sufficient to humour (Shaw 2010, 113). At most laughter is typical, and the laughter that is appropriate to humour is of a certain type. To show that laughter is not necessary, theorists appeal to the fact that laughter is primarily a social signal with the result that people who are not in social situations seldom laugh at the things they find humorous; research from Robert Provine and Kenneth Fischer (1989) suggests that laughter is thirty times more frequent in social settings (301). On the point that laughter is not sufficient, theorists appeal to humour-inapt laughter. I have already mentioned that Hurley et al (2011) speculate that only Duchenne laughter is humour appropriate (19). Carroll (2013) does not appeal to Duchenne laughter directly but also rules out certain types of laughter such as the triumphant, the joyous, the nervous, and that which derives from recognition (78-79).

Internalists may drive the separation between humour and laughter further by appealing to neurological evidence. Hurley et al (2011) cite research that laughter runs on its own neurological circuitry, separate from anything they consider to define humour (21-22). The association between humour and laughter, on this account, has developed over time through habituation. Morreall (2009) tells a similar story: laughter was originally a safety signal that encouraged relaxation, and early humans developed ways of exploiting this response to produce the pleasurable cognitive shifts that define humour (44-45). In both of these cases, internal phenomena are prioritized. Humour is defined by Hurley et al's neurological circuitry or Morreall's cognitive shift, and laughter is humour-apt insofar as it can be associated with these internal phenomena.

The social account, as I have formulated it, is in tension with these accounts. All of Carroll, Morreall, and Hurley et al only allow some laughter to be humour-apt, and the humour-aptness of laughter is determined by some or other internal phenomena. The social account allows humour to trade on any sort of evoked laughter. To the extent that it is true that different types of laughter correspond to different internal phenomena, the social account of humour accepts as humour acts which would not be classified as humorous under existing internalist accounts. On the social account, humour that trades on triumphant laughter or joyous laughter is just as much humour as that which trades on what Carroll would consider comically amused laughter.

I turn to a brief historical survey on humour practices. These historical examples show practices which should be expected to trade on different types of laughter, and possess different success conditions. These examples are at odds with existing internalist theories and I take them to support prioritizing laughter in an analysis of humour. While it is nevertheless possible that humour ultimately possesses some unifying internal phenomena, the breadth of actual historical practice still serves as reason for an account of humour to prioritize what people do over what is going on in their body.

## II.II The Account Defended: Defending the Centrality of Laughter to the Practice of Humour

My claim is that, historically, humour practice has sought to evoke laughter from a desired target. The best way to support this claim is to present varied humour practices and show that, while all of them pursued laughter, they otherwise operated according to very different standards. Accordingly, I will present an overview of different historical and

contemporary humour practices. To be clear, these examples are not presented as paradigmatic examples of humour. Rather, these examples are meant to show the breadth of humour practice.

Four examples may be drawn from the anthology *A Cultural History of Humour* (1997).<sup>3</sup> The first two are drawn from ancient Greece. The *gelotopoios* was a vagrant humourist who would be invited to the dinners of rich patrons with the purpose of making the dinner guests laugh (Bremmer 1997, 13-14). Historical record shows that the *gelotopoios* (literally “laughter producer”) had three main tricks for evoking laughter: jokes, mimicry, and flattery (ibid). While jokes and mimicry have presence as modern humour techniques, flattery stands out as something that is quite different from any present day practice. This difference is relevant as, in the context of ancient Greece, these three things — jokes, mimicry, and flattery — were considered part of the same practice: the *gelotopoios* producing the laughter of the dinner guests.

The medieval era provides examples of humour which was importantly mediated by the social position of the participants. Atop the political hierarchy was the concept of the *Rex Facetus* (LeGoff 1997, 44). This idea held that humour was only proper when coming from and being directed by the king (Ibid). The rest of the royal court was required to stay

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<sup>3</sup> Something worth noting about historical cases is that broad examples are very hard to come by. This is for two reasons. The first one, which is widely acknowledged, is that there is simply very little historical work on humour practices. The second one is that, since there is very little recording of humour practices, what has survived tends to be of particular forms which are apt for historical survival. This means that most surviving historical humour is in the form of texts and images, which means that historical examples will tend towards the forms of humour for which texts and images are most apt. This anthology, so far as I can tell, is the only historical work that focuses on what people actually did.

humbled and in control of their emotions, respecting the superiority of king and God (Ibid).<sup>4</sup> At the opposite end of the political hierarchy was the “gab,” the trading of banter and tall stories for the purpose of generating laughter (49). The gab was also hierarchically mediated, but in this case what was important was that the participants were equals. In each case, what is important is that the success or failure of the particular humour practices depended on the hierarchical standing of the participants.

Finally there is the *beffa* from early-modern Italy. The *beffa* was a sort of practical joke where the goal was to make someone vulnerable and exploit them, usually by covering them in bodily fluids (Burke 1997, 67).<sup>5</sup> *Beffe* could also function as a source of competition between people who were equal within civil society, and the goal was to feel schadenfreude at the victim’s suffering (66). This makes the *beffa* an interesting contrast with the medieval humour practices. Both are intertwined with social power, but where the *Rex Facetus* and the gab followed already-existing social lines, *beffe* worked to create power of the joker over the victim.

These four historical examples are diverse. They are variegated both by activity and standards of success. What unites the practices is that they all demonstrate practices which,

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<sup>4</sup> Similar phenomena of hierarchically-defined divisions of humour labour have been found in contemporary studies looking at gender dynamics. A study by Robert Provine (2000) found that men looking for a woman “with a sense of humour” were more often looking for someone to laugh at their jokes, whereas women looking for a man “with a sense of humour” were more often looking for someone to make them laugh (30-33).

<sup>5</sup> Two examples: “In a story told by Sabadino (no.16), a craftsman goes to the barber to be shaved and sees that the barber’s shoes are very large. ‘He felt an urge to piss in them’ (*li venne voglia de urinarli dentro*), and he does so. In a story by Bandello (1.35), Madonna Cassandra has an affair with a friar, the husband discovers, dresses as the friar, takes laxative pills and shits all over her in the bed.” While these are stories, and not accounts, they may be taken as representative of the spirit of the *beffa* even if they may be more extreme than any practical jokes that were actually executed.

at one point or another, involve laughter. It is worth noting that none of these records make a note of exactly what kind of laughter was being pursued. This does not exclude the possibility that different practitioners pursued particular sorts of laughter but it does mean that, from the historical record, one thing that the practices have in common is the pursuit of laughter in general.

A similar prioritization of laughter may also be found in the contemporary practice of humour. For example, take how stand-up comedian Kevin Hart develops his routines. When he performs his sets, he has his friends sit in the audience and record how other audience members are reacting (Hart 2019). After the show, his friends provide him notes on how he did; Hart provides the example “you got a big laugh, try to play with that more” (Ibid). He develops his act through repeated performances and refinements, with the stated goal of presenting the material “in a way where anyone can laugh” (Ibid). While Hart does not explicitly say he is pursuing any particular sort of laughter, he does mention choosing different audience reactions “to hold on to” (Ibid).

What Hart’s account of his own practice brings to the forefront is that laughter is what he uses to refine his material. It is how he judges whether or not he is succeeding, and he alters his act in accordance with whether or not people are laughing. This does not hold only for Hart: since laughter is how the audience shows their appreciation of humour, it is what the humourist has to guide the development of their practice. To the extent that humour is something that people do, laughter is the central part of knowing whether they are doing it right. Since laughter is the response that identifies whether or not the practice has been

performed correctly, the practice should be expected to develop in such a way so as to pursue that affirming response.

### II.III The Account Defended: Reasons to Prefer Foregrounding Practice

I have suggested that an account of humour should be centred on laughter. Now I turn to defending regarding humour as a social practice, rather than something defined by internal phenomena. To achieve this, I turn to examples which underline how humour behaviour is learned. Internalists may appeal to the fact that humour comes easily and naturally as a reason to prefer an internalist account. While humour does come easily, this does not mean that it is fundamentally an internal phenomenon. By analogy, humans have a natural predisposition towards language: we have brain circuitry which allows for language's development, acquisition, and use. However, it is not the case that language just is the product of that circuitry. And humans do not just speak "language" in general, but speak particular languages which they learn and over which they have different levels of mastery. Similarly, even if there is brain circuitry which underlies humour, that does not mean that that brain circuitry determines what humour is. As the following examples show, humour is something that people learn how to do both as humourist and as audience. That humour is something that people have to learn how to do is a good reason to foreground just what people are doing when understanding humour.

Internalists relegate laughter to being a common but unnecessary accompaniment to humour (Hurley et al 2011, 23; Shaw 2010, 113; Morreall 2009, 44-45). On these accounts, laughter is connected to humour by being an expression or result of the humour-defining

internal process. However, the story is not that simple. There is good reason to believe that laughter is a socially-learned behaviour. As the research of Sauter et al (2018) shows, human infants laugh on both the inhale and exhale, and learn to laugh only on the exhale with experience (1840). Sauter et al note this supports not just that laughter develops as part of vocal maturation, but also social learning about when and how to laugh (ibid). We learn how to play the role of audience. And, following research conducted by Gina Mireault et al (2012), not only are activities like laughing, teasing, and clowning fundamental to parent-infant interactions, but these activities are performed in the context of explicit instruction about what is and is not humorous (345). This is all to say that how we laugh does not just come naturally, but is learned. Laughter being a socially-learned behaviour means that it is not simply a straightforward reaction representing some more fundamental humour-defining internal process.

Laughter may also have to be re-learned. Laughter has gendered expectations, and there are cases where people either choose to or are forced to learn to laugh in a more gender-appropriate manner. Consider a blog post made by Christie Block (2014), owner and operator of the New York Speech & Voice Lab, titled “Laughing in a More Feminine or Masculine Way.” The post is written for people who have transitioned either from living as a man to a woman or a woman to a man and now find that their laugh does not match their gender. Block notes that louder, less controlled laughter is considered more masculine, whereas female laughter is expected to be quieter, higher-pitched, and more controlled. As a speech therapist, Block offers services to help people train themselves to laugh in one way or the other. While Block is specifically offering services to people who are transitioning, she did not invent gendered norms of behaviour. As the popular term “unladylike laugh”

suggests, gendered laughter (especially female gendered laughter) has a norm of propriety which connotes having learned some sort of well-mannered behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Altogether, the gendering of laughter shows another case where laughter is a socially-learned behaviour. Learning gender-appropriate laughter is part of learning how to play the role of gender-appropriate humour audience.

Humour is also something that people have to learn to do. As infants, babies learn clowning behaviour from their parents or caregivers, and mimic such behaviour while using laughter and smiling as responses signalling they are doing the right sort of thing. Other research by Mireault et al (2015) shows that this applies not only to positive reinforcement but also negative reinforcement: parental non-responses to clowning behaviour seem to reduce humour reactions in more mature infants (38). I suggest that research such as that done by Mireault et al supports the idea that infants are learning a practice. They are experimenting with different forms of activity, and keeping the ones that garner a positive response while rejecting the ones that do not. A similar point can be extracted from examining jokes written by children. The group Kids Write Jokes collects submissions from adults of children's attempts at writing jokes that do not quite succeed as regular jokes. What is relevant about these submissions is that there are many which demonstrate a familiarity with the form of joking but lack an understanding of the content of joking.<sup>7</sup> Even if the kids do not quite understand just what they are doing, they are still imitating the form of joking. The joke may not make sense, but it still carries the form of, for example, a question and

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<sup>6</sup> One way of understanding Quentin Skinner's argument in "Why Laughing Mattered in the Renaissance" (2001) is that modern theories of humour in fact originated in medicalizing socially-improper laughter.

<sup>7</sup>A typical example: "Why can't Cinderella play football? She is posh."

<https://twitter.com/KidsWriteJokes/status/1248536433851338753>, April 30



answer joke or a knock-knock joke. Altogether, people learn humour by learning to do humour. Ways of understanding, interacting with, and performing humour do not simply issue forth from our biological or psychological nature, but are to at least some degree socially learned. Since humour is inextricably a social activity, an account that understands humour as a social activity should be preferred.

In this section I have defended the social account of humour on the grounds that it appropriately makes laughter central to the practice of humour and that humour behaviour is significantly socially learned. Even if there is a unifying set of internal phenomena, the social account is preferable because it better tracks that humour is something that people do. In the next section, I further this defence by applying the social account to show its explanatory strengths.

### III.I The Account Applied: What Does the Social Account Let You Do?

The first explanatory virtue of the social account of humour is covered in section II.II, which is that the social account is good at engaging questions about humour behaviour. The research of Mireault et al, is based on research by Vasudevi Reddy (2001), which focused on categorizing humour behaviour. Reddy's focus on humour as a fundamentally social behaviour has helped develop research into cognitive development. However, I believe that the social account offers explanatory virtues more bold than simply supplementing or facilitating psychological research.

One subject the social account lends itself well to is the role of humour in society. When internalist accounts bring up the use of humour it is usually in the form of mockery.<sup>8</sup> However, they do so with an eye to the question of whether mocking behaviour can be reduced to an internalist account of what humour is. The social account, on the other hand, provides a rich framework for understanding the role of humour in society, and this framework helps elucidate particular forms of humour like mockery. It is able to accomplish this through the priority given to laughter.

An important tool for the social account of humour is the distinction between “affiliative” and “disaffiliative” laughter (Glenn 2003, 29). Laughter is a social signal, so it may be used to identify and negotiate group memberships and power dynamics (Glenn, 26). Affiliative laughter is laughter that creates or attempts to create an alignment between the laugher and others (Glenn, 29). Disaffiliative laughter either represents or attempts to create group boundaries such that these boundaries fall between the laugher and at least some others (Glenn, 31). This distinction is loosely similar to the colloquial distinction between “laughing with” and “laughing at.” This distinction between affiliative and disaffiliative laughter helps understand not only ways in which humour is used, but also why it is significant.

Understanding humour as a social practice helps to understand the *power* of mockery.

Making fun of someone does not merely manifest a disapproval of whatever is being mocked, the disaffiliative laughter works to actively exclude the person being targeted.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In particular, contemporary internalists will invoke Henri Bergson’s “mechanical account” of humour, which holds that humour developed as a reaction against mechanical, inflexible behaviour, as a valuable datum to be explained.

<sup>9</sup> I note that the exercise of power is part of the humour itself, and not merely an exogenous result of the laughter. Thanks to the editor for suggesting clarification on this point.

Even if the target does not necessarily care about the standards or approval of the laughter, they may still feel the sting of exclusion. This also helps explain not only why the target can reply to mockery by trying to laugh along, but why laughing along can work to defuse the mockery. As Dorte Marie Søndegaard (2018) notes, laughing along performs three tasks simultaneously: it can be an attempt by the target to reestablish some agency, it attempts to ingratiate the target into the laugher's group, and through that attempted ingratiation it can work as a kind of supplication (52). These are all ways of the victim attempting to use laughter defuse the power exercise of the mockery. Indeed, the social account helps understand where mockery crosses the line into bullying. Bullying is not just using humour to hurt people, but rather may be understood as a humour practice unto itself where one of its constitutive elements — part of what makes bullying succeed on its own terms — is an exercise of power (where that exercise of power also meets the comprehensibility and participation conditions). The social account helps understand how the humour and harm of bullying are intertwined on a fundamental level, and how this can lead to the victim being blamed for their own suffering. As Søndegaard (2018) notes, many instances of bullying culminate in the verdict that the victim just does not have a sense of humour (58). That the victim did not find the bullying funny does not matter, because the practice of bullying does not pursue the laughter of the victim. It pursues the bully's enjoyment of the exercise of power. The victim's suffering and humiliation is, if anything, one of the particular practice's success conditions.

Approaching laughter as something that manages group boundaries also helps explain why affiliative laughter can feel alienating. Consider the anecdote told by Peter Kivy at the end of "Jokes Are a Laughing Matter" (2003), where the laughter of the established philosophers at

the American Philosophical Association made him feel “lonely, left out, and, indeed, repulsed” (14). Grant that the remembered philosophers are laughing affiliatively amongst themselves. This affiliative laughter signals not only to the laughers but also to onlookers that they are together as a group. And, to the onlooker like Kivy, it may signal that the onlooker is not part of the group. The onlooker is excluded, and feels that viscerally.

These dynamics of affiliation and disaffiliation, inclusion and exclusion, also help explain why a sense of humour is so cherished. In contemporary Western society, to be good at humour is to be powerful and carry social value. The ability to make people laugh is not just to bring people joy, but the ability to bring together and manage the boundaries of a social group. In this context, a sense of humour is a measure of social power. It is easy to imagine that if humour is how one manages the bonds of one’s closest friendships, then there might be a connection between the quality of one’s humour and the quality of one’s friends.<sup>10</sup> A denigration of one’s sense of humour, then, is easily felt as a condemnation of one’s social group and social value. Along similar lines, the social account can help understand the prominence of the “politically incorrect” canard in both reactionary humour and reactionary violence. This pejorative notion of political correctness covers, among many other things, the belief that humourists’ earned laughter is being denied for political reasons. This denied laughter can be understood as denied affiliation. The threat of political correctness to humour in this sense is that the humourist’s exercise of power, this attempted act of affiliation, is frustrated.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Recall the previously-cited Provine (2000) study on the importance of laughter and making-laugh in dating.

<sup>11</sup> Provine (2000) is relevant here again.

Accusations of political correctness are not the only places that cultural concerns around humour arise. Consider the notion that Donald Trump lacks a sense of humour (Young 2019, 137-139). The social account helps understand part of *why* this claim would be made: if Trump is a poor humourist then affiliating with him is less merited.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the humour of *Saturday Night Live* has become a lodestar for a certain strand of American liberal political opposition. Comedians like Hannah Gadsby and Shane Gillis are either legitimated or delegitimated based on the ethical content of their comedy. I will discuss ethical evaluation shortly. For now it is enough to say that the social account helps understand why we engage Gadsby and Gillis as we do. Putting them in a prominent position involves putting them in positions to manage and define group boundaries.<sup>13</sup>

Altogether, the social account provides a framework that is good at engaging with questions about how humour is used and why it is valued. In particular, the distinction between affiliative and disaffiliative laughter helps the social account make sense of how humour is used to manage boundaries and social relationships. While these explanatory virtues support the social account of humour, they ultimately point towards investigative lines in disciplines beyond philosophy. I want to now turn to two particular philosophical directions the social account makes available.

### III.II The Account Applied: Where Does the Social Account Let You Go?

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<sup>12</sup> The social account also helps explain why this notion is wrong: Trump's role is not to laugh but to tell the joke that makes others laugh. This affirms his hierarchical position; it is for others to affiliate with him.

<sup>13</sup> In this context, the social account of humour helps connect the politics of humour with Lilliana Mason's (2018) research showing that American politics increasingly operates along lines of *affective* polarization.

One philosophical strength of the social account is that, by analyzing humour in terms of roles, it allows for humour to be examined from different perspectives. Philosophical analyses of humour have tended to take on the position of the humourist or audience. Accordingly, humour is understood through positive emotions. Carroll (2014a), for instance, asserts that comic amusement is the paradigmatic emotion of humour and how humour should be understood (4). However, it would be strange to think of comic amusement to be paradigmatic of the experience of a person being laughed at. The social account permits humour as possibly having different paradigmatic emotions, depending on where one stands relative to the humour act.

One possible paradigmatic emotion of humour is that of embarrassment or shame.<sup>14</sup> Embarrassment is connected to a feeling of having done wrong or in some essential way being wrong (Taylor 2002 [1985], 64). It seems to be critically connected to humour in at least two ways. The first is through the tendency of people to describe their own embarrassment as funny, and answering that they might have reacted with amusement had the embarrassment happened to someone else (Crozier 2014, 271). Amusement and embarrassment, in this context, are two sides of the same coin. What merits embarrassment also merits amusement, and whichever response is merited for a particular person depends on which place they occupy within the humour act.

The second way that embarrassment may be connected to humour is through research on gelotophobia, which involves the fear that one is the subject of any laughter that one hears.

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<sup>14</sup> The exact distinction between shame and embarrassment, or even if there is such a distinction, is unclear and contested. The precise boundary between the two is not relevant to this paper, so I use them interchangeably.

Michael Titze (2009) has shown that sufferers of gelotophobia are united by a persistent sense of shame (29). Shame being a paradigmatic emotion of humour would cohere well with Titze's research. If someone overhears laughter and feels shame, then they are both perceiving evidence of a humour act and having an experience paradigmatic of humour. The gelotophobe both hears laughter and is having the experience of being laughed at, so the mistaken belief that she is being laughed at is understandable. This is not to say that shame and embarrassment are definitely paradigmatic emotions of humour, just that this is something the social account makes possible.

Perhaps more philosophically significant is that the social account makes possible a new approach to the ethical evaluation of humour. I now present a brief overview of how such an account might work.

Current philosophical accounts of the ethical evaluation of humour, such as those from Carroll (2014b, 241), Aaron Smuts (2009, 151), and Berys Gaut (1998, 53) all start from a place of internalism. Accordingly, what they are focused on is when humour's ethical content either does or should block an emotional response. The social account offers different possibilities, including options which capture parts of lay discourse which internalist approaches do not. Consider the admonishment "that's not funny," directed to a child or peer that has laughed at a piece of racist humour. The social account could provide a way to understand this admonishment through the participation condition.

Recall that the participation condition holds that for a humour act to succeed it must merit participation, where participation is standardly but not necessarily in the form of laughter.

In standard cases, if it is wrong to laugh at a humour act, then it is wrong to participate in the humour act as audience, and the humour act suffers accordingly. This makes the wrongness of laughing at a racist joke not just an inapt expression of amusement, but an inapt reaction to an unfunny-because-racist joke. Similarly, racist jokes are going to be reliably worse insofar as they are racist to the extent that that racism makes participation inappropriate. In turn, the admonishment “that’s not funny” does not have to be understood as loose speech, reprimanding a child merely for an inappropriate display of amusement. Rather, “that’s not funny” indicates that whatever was being laughed at is indeed not funny.

The social account also allows for a different way of understanding how humour can have ethical content. Recall affiliative and disaffiliative laughter. This laughter not only signals group membership, but can be used to include or exclude people — either audience or laughable — from a group. This means that laughter can be used as an exercise of power. In turn, when a humourist makes a joke targeting someone as the laughable, they may be offering the audience to affiliate with the humourist against the laughable. What the humourist is attempting in some of these cases is to use his and his audience’s laughter to exercise power over the laughable. Indeed, Søndegaard’s (2018) research suggests that a dynamic such as this is fairly typical in bullying (51). Exercises of power are capable of causing harm, and so are ethically evaluable. If an attempted humour act is harmful, then one should not participate as audience. Indeed, the harmfulness of the act ought to repel participation. A humour act that repels participation is worse as a humour act, and is proportionately less funny.



Participation is not only improper if the laughable is present to directly suffer the exclusion of the laughter. Since humour can manage group boundaries, it can determine the nature and dynamics of the group. By determining who is in and who is out, humour helps to contribute to what defines a group's members. As Michael Philips notes in "Racist acts and Racist Humour" (1984) these smaller groups scale up to compose society more broadly (90). To participate in racist humour, then, helps create a racist group which, in its own little way, contributes to composing society more broadly. Since one ought not participate in creating racist groups, racist humour repels participation. Since racist humour repels participation, it is less funny for being racist.<sup>15</sup>

The invocation of bullying suggests another strength of the social account in ethical evaluation. Internalist accounts typically focus on racist and sexist humour, and their accounts of ethical evaluation are built to address concerns surrounding group-based humour. The social account, while adept at dealing with the ethics of group-based humour, is also strong at dealing with the ethical evaluation of humour which does not track identity-defining groups. By fitting well with bullying, the social account is well-situated to address possibly the most common and pervasive form of unethical humour. The social account also helps understand isolated incidents, where we overstep or go too far when joking with friends. Like hitting too hard during roughhousing, the social account helps to understand how playful banter can fail by getting too personal, or cutting too deeply.

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<sup>15</sup> It is possible that many or even most attempts at a humour act will be morally repugnant in a way that repels participation and consequently harms the act aesthetically. This just means that it is very difficult to successfully execute the act in an aesthetically excellent way. Thanks to the editor for suggesting clarification on this point.

This is, ultimately, only a brief overview of what the social account can do with questions of ethical evaluation. It is not a full account, but I believe it is enough to show that it has significant explanatory value. Altogether, then, the social account of humour provides a way of thinking about humour that fits well with lay discourse about humour, helps explain lay discourse about humour, and provides interesting philosophical directions.

#### IV. Conclusion

In this paper I have provided an account of humour as a social practice. It holds that humour is a practice centred on evoking laughter. Humour acts are understood as involving a humourist, an audience, and a laughable. Acts succeed or fail based on whether they are comprehensible, whether they merit participation, and based on any standards which apply to specific humour practices. I have defended this account both on the grounds of foregrounding laughter and foregrounding practice. Foregrounding laughter is justified by appealing to diverse humour practices, and showing that the pursuit of laughter is what unites them. Foregrounding practice is justified by appealing to the fact that both creating and appreciating laughter is something that people learn to do. The social account is ultimately valuable both in what it explains and what it makes possible. The social account provides an account of humour that helps talk about humour as a social phenomenon. It takes humour out of the body and back into the world. This lets the social account of humour help explain not only how humour works, but why it is important. Humour is an essential way that we interact with each other, relate to each other, and value each other. The social account of humour reflects that, and this lets us bring humour from inside the body back into the world.

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