

Book Review: Wilk, Thomas and Gimbel, Steven: *In on the Joke: The Ethics of Humor and Comedy*. De Gruyter, 2024, 144 pp.

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Thomas Wilk's and Steven Gimbel's *In on the Joke: The Ethics of Humor and Comedy*, takes on a gargantuan task in less than 140 pages; although, to offer my first nitpick, the font is quite small. Too small, really. The stated objective is to provide a theoretical basis for ethical decisions regarding humor and comedy from everyday situations among non-comedians and non-philosophers to sold-out venues by well-known comedians, and likely, non-philosophers. One thing that makes the endeavor audacious is that ethics has a long history, and some quite recent as evidenced by so many first-year students in philosophy classes, of being tossed into the realm of extreme relativism and/or pure subjectivism, as if our moral sense were no different from our sense of taste. On top of this, comedy, humor in general, is often thought to be wholly subjective, and, since it is a matter of individual tastes, and there's no accounting for taste, it follows that Wilk and Gimbel are engaged in the hapless task of trying to account for pure opinion using an entirely subjective tool. I find that funny. Perhaps others do as well, but who's to say? Well, Wilk and Gimbel, for two.

But, to compound the difficulties, humor is not an "ordinary" speech act with conventional rules of the sort outlined by H.P. Grice and his "Cooperative Principle", where one can be "corrected" for flaunting the conversational regulations of clarity, precision, and truth, for example. So, it is not obvious that our "ordinary" ethical assumptions can (or should at all) apply to humorous speech or performance. Yet, humor is employed everyday, likely by everyone in some fashion to some degree. We are ensconced in humor, almost as much as we are in language as such, and because of this, we might fail to recognize the moral implications of our attempts at humor. Or, if we do think about them, especially the putatively humorous acts of others that are composed of content about which we disagree, we proclaim that such acts constitute a moral harm, and we're outraged enough to jump on the hashtag-cancel-bandwagon. Or, if we happen to be superfans of the comedian in potential moral peril, we proclaim that it was "just a joke", and so it would be silly to invoke censure of any kind, much less moral. Sometimes our reactions in either case might be justified. But when and why?

All the moral dilemmas in everyday conversations can be found here, but with the additional burden of dealing with a unique form of communication that thrives off ambiguity, vagueness, hyperbole, incongruity, absurdity, and, to borrow from Gimbel (2017), cleverness, in the construction of the joke. In some cases, the joke-attempt might be *too clever by half*, making us fully befuddled. How might we handle these kinds of issues such that we become less fuddled?

Wilk and Gimbel begin by justifying their project, arguing for "The need of a better account of joke ethics." The predominant theories are either too narrow, ruling out "what

many would deem to be perfectly legitimate humor” (p. 1), or too broad in that they permit way too many instances of joking as permissible that intuitively seem morally problematic. The authors seek a golden mean, borrowing from the philosopher of porridge, Goldilocks. This requires more subtlety and complexity than what is found in most theories that overly rely on the punch-up vs. punch-down dichotomy (it’s always acceptable to joke from a marginalized position *at* those in power, but never vice versa). Wilk and Gimbel argue that the ethical acceptability of a joke depends on four key factors — its content, the teller’s identity, the audience, and the context — emphasizing that humor’s ethical implications require nuanced, situational consideration. Included in the context is an analysis of the relationships between and/or among the audience and humorist. These complications can quickly induce befuddlement.

The concept of “joke capital” is central to their argument. They use the analogy of capital to suggest that, just as an individual accumulates social, economic, or cultural capital that influences how others perceive their actions or authority, they also accumulate joke capital, or fail to, based on their identity, experiences, and relationship to the subject matter of their humor. Essentially, joke capital refers to the moral credibility a person has when making jokes, which can affect how a joke is perceived in terms of its appropriateness and impact. The more capital they possess, either from “inheritance” (p. 40) or through “earning” it (p. 43), or through “reparations” (p. 44),¹ the more likely they can tell a tendentious joke and get a “moral pass”, or at the least, be granted the benefit of the doubt that their intentions were merely playful and thus non-malicious. All these elements are easier to assess when the interlocutors know each other. In the same way we can tell when my kids are play-fighting without the intent to do actual harm to one another, or when I am tickling them and they laugh heartily, it is clear it is all for fun — there’s a reason one does not tickle strangers, even if one laughs while doing it — especially then. What this capital does is strengthen the play frame within which a comedian or wit can justifiably assert “It was just a joke” and evade moral censure, up to a point, as the audience has a reasonable ground for interpreting the wits’ goals as purely for fun.

For instance, a Jewish person may have more “joke capital” when telling jokes about Jewish culture, religion, or history than someone with no connection to those experiences. Likewise, someone who has been part of a marginalized group or who has worked within certain communities on their behalf might be seen as more ethically justified in making jokes related to those groups; they have *earned* capital in this context, and thus should be granted extra leeway, but this is never absolute. Also, there is the important caveat that recent converts into that community need to be careful that their *conversion* is viewed as authentic and not just as an excuse to tell Jewish jokes (see p. 41 for an excellent analysis of the Seinfeld episode in which a Catholic dentist converts to Judaism — for the jokes. When Jerry complains about this dentist’s malfeasance, Kramer labels Jerry an “Anti-Dentite”).

Wilk and Gimbel argue that the ethics of humor depend on context, as the same joke can be perceived differently based on the teller’s background and intentions as well as the audience. All of this, though more complex than the punching up/down dichotomy, is intuitive. The work of the text lies in the philosophical theory which grounds those

¹ I’m a little uncomfortable with the use of the term “reparations” to describe one of the forms of joke capital. It has the feel of “We may not have offered money or land or adequately ameliorated systemic injustices at any major institution from health care to education to the justice department, but how about the freedom to joke at the expense of those within the hegemonic center, on occasion and in the right way?”

assumptions. Their concept of joke capital challenges the idea that a joke's acceptability is based solely on content, emphasizing the importance of identity, power dynamics, and context. But even if one has amassed enormous joke capital, say, the equivalent of Elon Musk's financial capital, that by itself does not grant them completely free reign to say *anything* in a joke. Not coincidentally, Musk's absurdly astronomical wealth has *not* contributed to his joke capital. Indeed, perhaps the opposite is the case, when he displays his out-of-touch attempts at humor on X, almost exclusively at the expense of those on the margins of society who lack financial and/or socio-political capital. Employing one aspect of Wilk and Gimbel's approach, Musk has not given audiences sufficient reason to interpret his humor solely within a play frame, and thus, intended only for fun or pleasure. Well, it seems his jokes are meant to increase pleasure, but only for himself and his followers.

This takes us to what I think is the crux of the book: the overlap of joke capital with presumption of playfulness, and the benefits to society at large of allowing greater leniency for those who push social, political, and ethical boundaries through the often piercing and tendentious use of humor.

First, why should extra leeway be offered to comedians and jokesters in general? Wilk and Gimbel appear to err on the side of freedom with humor: "Ideally, we would each grant to others the right to make jokes, even if those jokes might occasionally sting, because we would recognize that allowing this freedom (even when we are sometimes the butt of the joke) generates a greater good for all" (p. 2). The argument in favor of the freedom to use humor is not unlike arguments for free speech in general; society at large benefits from the free exchange of ideas, even those that might at first sight appear controversial or offensive. Here they borrow from Emile Durkheim on the need for social critique (pp. 85-6). Excessive conformity stifles moral imagination and individual originality — blocking both visionary transformation and necessary subversive critique — so that without a balance of idealistic dreams and rebellious dissent, neither society nor the individual can truly flourish.

For Wilk and Gimbel, humor and humorists should be permitted significant freedom so that they can provide a social good that might not otherwise be forthcoming: "If we do not allow them to push at the boundaries, we risk our social norms calcifying into a stultifying edifice that causes harm to many, and we may begin to take ourselves far too seriously and think ourselves far more powerful than we truly are. In pointing toward figures like Sam Kinison, Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Bill Hicks, [Roseanne] Barr was mustering evidence for this claim of social value" (p. 89). They stop short of full agreement with the perspective of Barr and other comedians that *nothing* should be off limits for comedy, especially when performed at comedy clubs, but they do, correctly I believe, provide strong grounds for the intuition that comedians, tricksters, and gadflies, should be permitted considerable latitude while in their play frame, temporarily suspending seriousness.

The morally interesting issues arise when the cost of the joke and the capital possessed by the jokester are opaque. Among the various conditions that could lead an audience to reasonably conclude they are within a play frame, it is the perceived level of aesthetic performance that is the most unique:

It is a violation of the standard rules of joke telling, according to which one should only tell jokes the audience is likely to find funny. Violation of this leads us to wonder about the conversational function of the bad tendentious joke and to the reasonable

explicature² of problematic views held by the speaker. The seemingly non-bona fide speech act was actually a thinly disguised bona fide speech act which gives rise to presuppositions the teller expects me to share or wants me to share. (p. 37)

A lot rests on this intuitive assessment regarding cleverness and recognized quality of the joke and performance, but they do temper it somewhat: it is not “that high-quality jokes have no moral cost, but it is true that low quality jacks up the moral price” (p. 37). An analogy they use is acting: “We see a similar situation with other artistic acts, say, an actor speaking lines in a play. Are jokes not in some way like that too? ... We have no problem separating Anthony Hopkins from Hannibal Lector. (In a sense, the character of Hannibal Lector was just wearing Anthony Hopkins’ face.)” (pp. 2, 14). This is nice and subtle.

If we take the analogy a bit further, and we accept that a joker’s play bubble is buffered by a high-quality performance that encourages audiences to accept it as a non-bona fide act, we ought to do something similar regarding an actor playing an immoral character. However, that could lead to something like the following: Christoph Waltz was so terrible in the film *Inglorious Basterds*, that he has given us a reasonable basis for thinking he is a bona fide Nazi. If only his acting, ironically, were better, which in this case would mean, more convincing to us that he might *really be* a Nazi, then we would be justified in concluding that he is probably *not really* a Nazi! That is kind of funny, even if not a truly damning critique of Wilk and Gimbel.

Interestingly, and a trifle more damnatory, we see here an instrumental value of humor, its potential for providing a social good without necessarily intending to, but by being *intrinsically* valuable, that is, by *not* presuming any other goals than pure enjoyment and fun. Afterall, on the Wilk-Gimbel hypothesis, advocating for serious social-ethical change is to break from the play-frame, and in doing so, bleed into the real-world of practically engaged seriousness: “When a play frame is securely in place, the audience for a joke ought not to draw the inferences that would follow if the joking speech had been bona fide. The joke, in this idealized case, loses its bite. It fails to be dangerous because it is detached from the broader inferential machinery. It is a bomb that has been defused” (p. 17). This is perplexing, bordering on befuddlement.

Consider a potential source of puzzlement. The moment we take the sting out of morally tendentious jokes that could be interpreted as being directed at a minority group, for instance, by viewing the humor as wholly ensconced within a play frame, we ought to, on the other end of the spectrum, remove any teeth from the bite of presumably subversive humor performed in the vein of Durkheimian social critique:

The comedians listed [above] were explicitly and intentionally transgressive of cultural norms. They said things in their acts, on stage at comedy clubs, that would be disallowed in many other social contexts. They pointed out the flaws and moral foibles of our society, speaking truth to the power of the dominant culture, and did so *with the aim of improving it*. (p. 89, my italics)

Apparently, these comedians, the ones who ought to be granted some special dispensation *because* audiences can (and should) interpret them as just playing, are in fact NOT just playing. The very reason we should see their humor as a boon to society, their “aim of

² H.P. Grice’s concept of “implicature” refers to the inferences listeners draw from violations of conversational norms; similarly, when a play frame collapses, listeners infer, justifiably, presuppositions about the speaker’s worldview, which continue to shape future interpretations of their speech. Wilk and Gimbel call these inferences “explicatures” — biases, such as racism, that become explicit once the pseudo-joke is treated as a sincere, though non-literal, utterance.

improving it", would seem to be disqualifying on the joke capital account to grant them moral latitude — we are explicitly *not* taking them as just playing/joking, otherwise, why would we take seriously Wilk and Gimbel's assertion that these comedians' "transgressions illuminated the

moral failings of the culture from which they emerged" (p. 89)? No, they didn't! They were just joking. If Wilk and Gimbel are correct that moral sanction is unwarranted when we have good reason to believe a comic is in a play frame, because, "For jokes to cause actual harm, they have to escape the playful confines of their telling" (p. 30), then moral praise ought not to be offered for those on the subversive end of the spectrum using humor via non-bona fide speech. But this is intuitively unappealing, and not a little befuddling.

I think there are avenues available to Wilk and Gimbel to defuse our bemusement, given a charitable reading of their text, but it would take another short book (with infinitesimally minute font) to adequately explore. This book does what good social philosophy should do — buttress our intuitions with theoretical grounding. In so many of the examples I found myself muttering aloud, "of course, that is what a normal person would say!" This is not meant to imply the book only offers obvious moral platitudes; on the contrary, where there might be intuitively plausible explanations, we get the sound theoretical work to demonstrate *why* they are in fact plausible. But we also have more difficult, less initially plausible, hypotheses that are well supported by argument and example, and most often, accessible analogies.

Humor is more than a mere means to instill laughter and mirth, even when humorists insist that is all they intended. It can harm, heal, unite, and divide, or just elicit a giggle. Something so powerful and virtually ubiquitous, found in gigantic arenas and in the simple daily activities among friends and colleagues, calls out for moral analysis. This text offers that ethics of the quotidian, providing an avenue to assess the morality of humor without completely baffling readers. And if you have amazing eyesight or a substantial magnifying glass, you will be able to read it.

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References:

- Grice, H.P.: "Logic and Conversation.", in Cole et al. (eds.): *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Arts*, Elsevier 1975: 41-58.