

we have the value of the original, untreated condition. How the matter will resolve depends upon the particulars. Suppose the original condition were a generally recognized disease, such as Huntington's chorea. Since there is presumably little if any value to be attached to such conditions, the interests of the child would be decisive. However, in cases where we hold that it is important not to treat the value of the original condition as second-rate, such as in the case of sex or racial selection, the interests of the child, unfortunately real though they may be in our society, may not be decisive. We do not want to treat those conditions as being of little value, as if they were diseases. The coherence of our values might not tolerate it.

Old Eugenics vs. New Eugenics

Despite the differences, the new eugenics involves the same kind of conflict that underlay the old eugenics, but with the positions reversed. The old eugenics pitted an alleged state interest in the quality of the genetic composition of the community (the gene pool) against individual rights and liberties over reproduction, i.e., the value of improving the gene pool versus the value of individual reproductive autonomy. The case for the old eugenics foundered on false empirical assumptions. Wild claims were made regarding what sort of conditions are inheritable, among which were "nomadism," "shiftlessness," and "thalassophilia" (love of the sea). In addition, false claims were made regarding how much gene frequencies are affected by selective breeding. A standard calculation from population genetics shows that reducing the frequency of a

recessive gene from 5 percent to 2.5 percent, even with a vigorous eugenics program, would take over 200 generations! I wish I could say that the violation of individual rights was decisive in the downfall of the old eugenics, but neither history nor the courts support that view. When the public health is at stake, individual rights are seen as luxuries. Exposing the false empirical assumptions contributed to the view that the quality of the gene pool is not a public health problem, and so contributed to the repudiation of the old eugenics.

In contrast, the new eugenics pits the alleged interests of an individual against the value the state would find in not having certain human conditions manipulated—against a concern for the stability and harmony of the community. Admittedly, the ways in which a particular case of eugenics could constitute a threat to that concern will not always be entirely clear. Indeed, when the genetic condition to be altered is unquestionably defective, the state's interest will coincide with the child's interest since reducing the frequency of such genes is in the interest of public health. There is a danger here, however. If genetic diseases are once again held to constitute a public health problem, modern eugenics could very well share the moral collapse of the old eugenics.

—Robert Wachbroit

This article is adapted and condensed from "Designing the Goods," a talk prepared for a workshop on Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy, sponsored by the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, held at The Catholic University of America, June 24–26, 1987.

Racist and Sexist Jokes: How Bad Are They (Really)?

In 1976 Earl Butz, President Ford's popular secretary of agriculture, fell from grace with almost unprecedented abruptness. On a flight to California after the Republican National Convention, he committed an offense so unforgivable that the public outcry drove him from office less than seventy-two hours after the story broke. The offense: telling a racist joke. Two administrations later, James Watt, the embattled secretary of the interior whom critics had unsuccessfully tried to unseat over a host of environmental issues, finally made his fatal misstep: he remarked jocularly that his coal advisory commission boasted the impeccably balanced mixture of "a black, a woman, two Jews, and a cripple." The joke precipitated Watt's forced resignation.

What did Butz and Watt do that was so terrible? How

can two prominent officials lose their jobs over *jokes*? Doesn't that seem a kind of joke itself, laying bare our national oversensitivity and humorlessness? Millions of us tell racist, sexist, heterosexist, or ethnic jokes; millions of us are offended by their telling—especially if the joke hits too close to home. And when members of the target group take offense, the question comes: What's the matter? Can't you take a joke? Where's your sense of humor?

"It's Only a Joke"

Few presumably would defend racist, ethnic, and (hetero)sexist jokes as cultural treasures, but many of the jokes are cleverly constructed, such as the infinite variations on "How many so-and-so's does it take to

10

in shouting obscenities without a prior shared recognition of what counts as obscene.

Make Jokes, Not War

One might defend racist and sexist jokes by arguing that while the jokes may express racist or sexist attitudes, in humor these are given a harmless outlet. Konrad Lorenz, in *On Aggression*, characterizes humor as aggressive behavior held in check by reason. Laughter, according to Lorenz, "is never in danger of regressing and causing the primal aggressive behavior to break through. . . . Barking dogs may occasionally bite, but laughing men hardly ever shoot." If racist and sexist jokes are not harmful, we may welcome them as an escape valve for aggressive energies that might otherwise erupt in less socially acceptable ways.

The trouble is that racist and sexist jokes are in themselves harmful. They reinforce and give social legitimacy to the racial and sexist beliefs they presuppose. Joseph Boskin, writing on the enduring comic Sambo stereotype of blacks, blames it for helping whites "in their attempt to preserve a social distance between themselves and blacks, to maintain a sense of racial superiority, and to prolong the class structure." Richard Mohr, a philosopher at the University of Illinois, charges that anti-gay jokes are similarly pernicious: "When people know few or no gays and have fag jokes as their earliest and main source of information about gays, the stereotypes which fag jokes endorse and perpetrate, by portraying and belittling gays as dizzy, flighty, unreliable, self-indulgent, sex-crazed, and plague-bearing, are especially likely to have unfortunate effects on prospective employers and on any public policy decisions affecting gays. In this way, fag jokes harm gays."

Racist and sexist jokes are vehicles not only of injury, but of insult as well. Bergmann likens the person who finds fun in sexist humor to a person who enjoys the

Much non-racist and non-sexist humor is undeniably malicious (else why would we laugh when the fat man slips on a banana peel?); it might be said that the offense given by a joke is a mark not of its immorality but of its success!

spectacle of watching a passer-by slip on a banana peel—after having first placed the banana peel on the sidewalk: "both contribute to the stage-setting for the fun." For without the contribution of the requisite sexist beliefs, there is no fun in sexist humor. The insult of finding fun in sexist humor "is the insult of finding fun in an episode when part of the stage-setting that we have contributed to the episode, and that is necessary to the fun, hurts someone." It is an insult, Mohr

explains, "for it fails to take others' pains into account as one would expect one's own pains to be taken into account by others."

Is this a special failing of racist and sexist jokes, however? Much non-racist and non-sexist humor is undeniably malicious (else why *would* we laugh when the fat man slips on a banana peel?); it might be said that the offense given by a joke is a mark not of its immorality but of its success! The distinctive wrong of racist and sexist jokes is that the stereotypes they evoke and help to maintain are so deeply implicated in our

The distinctive wrong of racist and sexist jokes is that the stereotypes they evoke and help to maintain are so deeply implicated in our society's long history of injustice to disadvantaged groups.

society's long history of injustice to certain disadvantaged groups. The injury and insult they cause is not an isolated or fleeting phenomenon; it is part of a pattern of systematic harms and humiliations directed by the empowered against the powerless.

Can't You Take a Joke?

A final strategy for defending racist and sexist jokes is to take the offensive against members of the target groups offended by them (a strategy used more often with sexism than racism). An analogy is drawn to the attitude we expect an individual to have when a joke is told on him personally. It is considered a sign of good nature to be able to laugh at oneself, to appreciate a joke told at one's own expense. Those who can't are seen as stuffy, pompous, self-righteous. If how one tells a joke shows character, how one takes a joke shows character as well.

Even in the individual case, however, we draw a distinction between laughing *with* someone and laughing *at* someone, where the one grows out of affection, the other out of derision. Dignified silence, not shared laughter, is the appropriate response to being laughed *at*. And there is a crucial difference between laughter focused on an individual and laughter focused on a group. One can relish a joke on oneself if it is truly a joke on *oneself*, if it calls amused attention to one's own distinctive traits and foibles, as cartoon caricatures do. There is a pleasure in being observed carefully enough by others that teasing is possible, as long, once again, as the teasing is affectionate.

The victim of a racist joke, however, is expected to laugh at a joke allegedly about himself that he doesn't perceive as a joke about *himself* at all. The whole idea of a *racist* joke is that nothing distinctive about the individual person himself is involved. As Mohr observes

about heterosexist humor: "The individual as distinctive is erased, dissolved into a prejudged type which determines in society's eyes all of his or her significant characteristics. The jokes... presume that a gay person is nothing but his sexual orientation and its efflorescences." The woman expected to laugh at a sexist joke, packaged as a joke about herself, wants to protest, "But this isn't a joke about *me*." Even this reaction is parodied in the joke where the husband says to the wife, "Women always take everything so personally," and the wife replies indignantly, "I don't."

How are we to react, then, when a racial or ethnic joke is told by a member of that race or ethnic group? How can racist or ethnic jokes be so terrible if individuals are willing to tell these on themselves? Ethnic jokes are told on oneself in a variety of contexts. Sometimes one plugs one's own ethnic group into an all-purpose ethnic joke to be able to "get away with" telling it, without giving offense. In such cases the joke itself appeals to no distinctive stereotype of the group chosen—it satirizes, say, garden-variety stupidity—and so the punchline carries no sting. Occasionally ethnic jokes told by ethnic-group members may provide genuine examples of affectionate self-directed humor, where the joke teasingly plays on some ethnic trait the group itself recognizes, half-affectionately, half-ruefully, as its own. But too often self-told ethnic jokes show only self-directed ethnic hatred. Boskin points to cases in which blacks themselves have adopted the Sambo

stereotype as self-image: "Entrapped within the illusion, the stereotyped person runs the risk of succumbing to it." That a negative stereotype, repeated and reinforced in countless ethnic jokes, can become so culturally dominant that members of the despised group at last come to internalize it is one of the most egregious wrongs that such jokes perpetrate.

Conclusion

Returning now to Mr. Butz and Mr. Watt, exiled from public service for jokes that took only a moment in the telling: did their punishment fit or exceed their crime? If racist and sexist jokes are evidence of a racist and sexist character, cause pain and harm to blacks and women, and insult and affront the dignity of blacks and women as individuals, it would seem that public administration can do without the services of those who cannot refrain from telling them.

—Claudia Mills

The sources quoted in this article are: Ronald de Sousa, "When Is It Wrong to Laugh?" in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Merrie Bergmann, "How Many Feminists Does It Take to Make a Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong with It," *Hypatia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1986); Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963); Joseph Boskin, "The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo," in Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*; and Richard Mohr, "Fag-ends and Jokes' Butts," from *Gays and Equal Protection*, unpublished manuscript.

Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy

The Menace of Moral Relativism

Every college teacher whose classes require some discussion of values or morality has a common frustration: students who are moral relativists. Despairing professors want to know how to respond to moral relativism, how to deal with it, how to defeat it.

"Moral relativism" is not just something some of our students believe in. It is now also the fashionable explanation for our cultural distempers. Allan Bloom's new book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, identifies moral relativism as the main culprit behind the decline of American intellectual life. President Reagan and Education Secretary Bennett likewise see our social problems stemming from a baneful relativism and values-neutrality in our schools. Relativism is the legacy of 1960s liberalism, of the abandonment of standards, of bad educational theories, of intellectual loss of nerve, of secular humanism: these and other sources are offered as explanations for the current reign of relativism.

In the following comments, I want to suggest several

theses, for which I can offer no more support than twenty years' experience of trying to teach philosophy to a broad range of college students. The first thesis is that our students' relativism isn't an artifact of the 1960s or 1970s and not the product of "values clarification" and other bad educational theories in our schools. (Not that there aren't bad educational theories in our schools.) The second thesis is that our students' relativism is an irritant to us but not a menace to society. This is because they aren't really relativists and their moral instincts are generally sound.

Students didn't first become relativists in the 60s and 70s. (In fact, most of mine became Maoists and Moonies; and in the 80s they became Christians and Republicans.) Relativist students abounded in the 50s and before, and their proportion probably remains more or less constant over time, not many more now, proportionately, than forty years ago. The reason this is so is because relativism grows out of the common