

Book review

Gini, AI (2017). *The Importance of Being Funny: Why We Need More Jokes in Our Lives*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield. 141 pp.

Gini's text is a highly accessible introduction to philosophical thinking about humour. The thesis is straightforward; Gini argues that humour is an attitude through which we defend ourselves against the pain of life. While not specified as an existential theory, Gini describes how humour and joke telling "act as both a sword and a shield to defend and protect us against life" (p. xiii), and that humour is so important that it is "critically necessary to have a sense of humour, to be funny, to tell or be responsive to jokes in our lives" (p. xix). He argues that these qualities are important for psychological survival in a world of anxiety and torment, expanding on Freud's Relief Theory of humour with influence from Nietzsche and interviews with comedians themselves (p. 50).

In his opening Chapter, "A brief, highly selective, and somewhat fallacious history of humour and joke telling", Gini delivers on his title, and gives short, quick summaries of the top three theories of humour: Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief. There is, of course, a bias toward Relief that comes through, and Incongruity, which is the most accepted by contemporary philosophers, is too easily dismissed. While the tone of the text does not lend itself to nuanced theorising, the rejection of Incongruity is misguided as Gini's argument for the importance of humour relies on its incongruous response to the horrors of life. Indeed, Chapter 3 serves as support for this very thesis. Titled "Comedy and coping with reality", Gini explains that jokes present us with "a novel, distorted, unusual, comedically skewed take on reality that will result in pleasure, delight, surprise, and/or laughter" (p. 38). This description is in line with most, if not all, versions of the incongruity theory, from Kant (1790/2000) to Noël Carroll's (2014). Oversight or intentional, failing to acknowledge this connection is frustrating for any reader familiar with, let alone sympathetic to, the Incongruity Theory to see the dismissal of the theory at the beginning of a chapter and the explicit use of the theory (down to its particular vocabulary) at the end: "For me, the essence of humour is the ability to laugh both with and at life. It is the ability to appreciate the whimsical, the silly, as well as the absolutely ludicrous and absurdly incongruous aspects of life. It is the ability to step back and be amused, delighted or surprised by life" (pp. 50-51).

The strongest part of this Chapter is a highly informative history of joke telling, from Egyptian hieroglyphics to biblical joke telling all the way to Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan, Joan Rivers, and Louis CK. In showing the power of humour, from the influence of the court jester to the public opinion of presidents to the existential coping of comedians, Gini makes a strong, convincing, and well-supported case for the benefits of comedy. Here the reader is also introduced to a second element of Gini's understanding of humour, which is sprinkled throughout the remainder of the book and is particularly utilised in Chapters 4 and 5: humour as a way of connecting with others. A joke is a way of reaching out to others, "an expression of care" (p. 100). The former Chapter is concerned exclusively with a history and defence of the use of dirty, ethnic, and tasteless jokes. Gini claims that he does not want to give such jokes a "moral pass" in this Chapter, although Chapter 4 does argue the virtue of ethnic jokes

to serve as a means of creating solidarity between immigrants and other ethnic groups that desire to preserve their individuality while assimilating into a new or different culture.

It is unclear, however, how the author understands jokes told by one group at the expense of another. While Chapter 5 insists that jokes meant to harm individuals and groups are morally wrong, it is ambiguous what qualifies as a humanising ethnic joke and what qualifies as a dehumanising one. Gini does not specify the teller of the joke as a factor, nor a purely consequentialist criterion. Rather, Gini specifies intention of the teller and reception of the audience; a dividing line that is thin and hard to identify without “being in the room”. While this conclusion is not an unfamiliar one, it is the inclusion of example jokes alongside the claim that all ethnic jokes appeal to universal understandings of the human condition which complicate the matter. For example, in Chapter 4 Gini argues that “a Jewish joke, an Italian joke, or a Greek joke about a mother is really a story about all mothers everywhere and probably applies to many, but not necessarily all, ethnic groups” (p. 81). What follows is a list of jokes with the ethnicity of the subject removed, offering a blank for the reader to fill in with whatever ethnicity they wish. He then argues:

Whatever the joke, whatever the topic, whatever the level of depravity, whatever the level of lewd, lecherous, sexual raunchiness, whatever the ethnic or racial vitriol of a joke, and no matter how decadent or déclassé, someone, some audience, might relate to it, might take some comfort in it, and might think it funny (p. 83).

The contradiction here is an obvious one: if what makes a joke morally acceptable is that it is relatable and comforting to some audience somewhere, then there is no reason to condemn, for example, dehumanising racist jokes which, after all, are relatable and comforting to the racists who tell and enjoy them.

When the ethical questions are taken up in Chapter 5, Gini defers to colleague, friend, and ethicist Ron Green. In the following interview, Gini and Green offer that, given the premise that humour is about communication (that is, bringing people together for the purpose of dealing with the absurdity and horrors of life), jokes which prevent communication or togetherness are unethical. But again, since every joke can be relatable and comforting to someone, this criterion is unsupported. The conclusion, while perhaps obviously true, does not easily lend itself to practical application. The reader new to ethics and comedy will have a vague sense of how to make a moral judgment; it also implies that a joke is only immoral if the one who hears it is not its intended audience.

The final Chapter is a departure from the rest of the text, as the ideal reader seems to shift from the new student of philosophy of humour to the college-level university instructor. Here Gini talks of his inspiration for and experience with using humour in the classroom. He argues that the alternative point of view given through joke telling primes the mind for philosophical learning: “Humour and joke telling can serve as a narrative playlet to metaphorically illuminate a complex philosophical concept” (p. 102). Here the final argument for the importance of being funny is made: humour encourages the *reflective thought* necessary for dealing with difficult truths. Both a strategy guide for the philosophy instructor and an argument for philosophy itself, the final chapter wraps up the text in a fine display of practical application.

In all, the text is somewhat unremarkable in its philosophical content but wide in its use of example jokes. The author follows the trend of many contemporary philosophers of humour in opening his text by announcing his awareness of humour as antithetical to rigor, and thus defends his non-rigorous approach to the topics at hand. Of disappointment to this reader was the frequent apologies for and undermining of philosophers and philosophy itself:

Please allow me to apologise in advance, because, in order to do this, we need to start by examining, ever so briefly, three classic theories that philosophers (Lord, save us!) have come up with to explain why we find humour in and laugh at jokes (p. 20).

Unfortunately, the only thing that these theories prove is that theories on humour are definitely not humorous... As Bob Mankoff [...] succinctly points out, “Although humour is a fascinating topic, academics being academics can take the fun out of it and make it boring” (p. 22).

This strategy is well intentioned: Gini wants to meet his readers “where they are”, showing that he also understands that philosophy and critique are boring and uncool, and promising that he will not lose or bore them. He keeps his language grounded, repeats his conclusions often, and does a thorough job of defending scholarly content to quotes from known and respected comedians. For this reader, this strategy is misguided. Writing about humour is an opportunity to give a performative example of the joy and fun that philosophy can be. As philosophers, we ought to take advantage of this occasion – we ought to show readers how philosophy addresses our practical concerns, and how philosophy can help us understand those concerns in new and reflective ways.

While this text cannot be recommended to philosophers of humour, it serves as a succinct primer which connects philosophy to comedy and pop culture, as well as a reference for a variety of classic jokes. As a gateway text, it piques the interest of curious comedy fans that can inspire further investigation, or at least offer an intelligent defence of one’s love of joking.

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References

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Kant, I. (1790/2000). *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited by Paul Guyer. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. New York: Cambridge University Press.