

Understanding obscenity and offensive humour: What’s funny?

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Abstract

Humourisation of the offensive occupies a position of distinctive prominence in our study of how we experience humour. The offensive is often found to be closely linked with obscene expressions and the mind’s response towards them. This correlation between the obscene and the offensive is explored. “Being offended” is treated as a psychological state that comes into being when a sacrosanct mental territory is threatened by external, unsolicited experiences. The function of obscenity in delivering offence is explained through the subversive ability of the obscene in the context of class conflict, anthropomorphisation of obscene words and images and the strengthening of illocutionary acts. The humorous effect of delivered offence is investigated through superiority theory (laughter as dissidence and disobedience), relief theory, Bergson’s mechanical theory and a theory of trivialisation is further proposed.

Keywords: obscenity; offensive humour.

1. Introduction

“Against the assault of humour, nothing can stand.”

Mark Twain

In the early 1960s, Lenny Bruce, renowned American stand-up comedian and social critic, was arrested on multiple occasions, on charges of obscenity; guilty of having communicated ideas of prurient interests in public spaces, ideas devoid of artistic merit or social importance – in violation of Section 311.6 of the Penal Code of State of California. Lenny Bruce had

explicitly explored sexuality, religion and other socio-politically pertinent issues of his time in his characteristic irreverent, blasphemous, subversive fashion. The prosecution found his performance guilty of “cumulatively nauseating word picture interspersed with all the three- and four-lettered words and more acrid ten- and twelve-lettered hyphenated ones, spewed directly at the audience”, and therefore unredeemed of artistry or cogent social criticism (Linder 2003: 3). With time though, his stature evolved to that of a cult figure; an honest, uncompromising satirist about a paradigm shift in the perceived scopes of social commentary. As Hayes (1992) noted, for the *Chicago Tribune*, 25 years after Bruce’s death, Bruce was “a brilliant satirist...the moral conscience...years ahead of his time”.

The juxtaposition of both of these time frames, Lenny Bruce’s fall and rise, raises some questions. How does human cognition regard the obscene? What is so offensive about the obscene? What is so hilarious about the offensive?

To propose effective solutions to these questions, an investigation of the relationship between the obscene and the offensive that subsequently leads to a proposal of exploratory inroads into the evident humorous function they serve, is necessary. This could be arrived at through political, psychological and linguistic investigations into the causes that govern much of our collective and individual mental responses towards the obscene. By positioning offensive humour within the analytical scope of conventional theories of humour, a cursory understanding of what attributes humorous value to the offensive can be arrived at. This effort aims at a more complete, novel, theoretical understanding of offensive humour.

2. The offensive

The psychological state of “being offended” is observed to come into being when a personal, *sacrosanct* mental territory is threatened by an unsolicited experience. This is in semantic synchrony with the legal understanding of the term, which is “an infraction of a moral or a social code”. This state of “being offended” subsequently warrants a response from the offended subject, directed towards the protection of this territory; a territory which is an encapsulation of memories, isolated convictions, situated belief systems, ascribed identities or the likes – in general, any experience to which an amount of sanctity or unquestionable importance is attached by the subject. Under the scope of this contrived definition, the offensive function of the obscene and the humorous function of the offensive are studied.

The presence of obscenity in art, language and other public spaces is widely observed to offend various sections of society. Further, humour is seen to be derived from instances of offensive nature and the various forms of offensive humour are found to be popular in acts of contemporary stand-up comedy. Obscene expressions are observed to be prominent causes, among others, for deliverance of offence. To study the strong correlation between the obscene and the offensive and to understand how exactly they generate an experience of humour, the following questions are posed at the outset:

- i. What is so offensive about the obscene? (cf. Section 3)
- ii. What is so hilarious about the offensive? (cf. Section 4)

3. What is so offensive about the obscene?

3.1. Class conflict... and the subversive function of the obscene

The etymology of the word *vulgar* serves a crucial function in understanding what has come to be perceived as obscene in modern communication. Tracing the trajectory of the change in the ascribed meanings of this word is definitive in understanding how obscenity has come to be understood in our communication. According to *etymonline.com*, an online etymology archive, the etymology of *vulgar* and *vulgarity* are as follows:

vulgar (adj.)

late 14c., "common, ordinary," from Latin *vulgaris*, *volgaris* "of or pertaining to the common people, common, vulgar, low, mean," from *vulgus* "the common people, multitude, crowd, throng," [...] Meaning "coarse, low, ill-bred" is first recorded 1640s, probably from earlier use (with reference to people) with meaning "belonging to the ordinary class" (1530). Related: *Vulgarly*.

vulgarity (n.)

1570s, "the common people," from Middle French *vulgarité* and directly from Late Latin *vulgaritas* "the multitude," from *vulgaris* (see *vulgar*). Meaning "coarseness, crudeness" is recorded from 1774.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the traditional meaning of *vulgar*, now obsolete, is "People belonging to the ordinary of the common class, especially the uneducated or the ignorant" or "A person not belonging to the good society". The origins of *vulgar* are traced to the Latin word *vulgus*, a word which only meant the common people, the working class. Presently, though, *vulgar* is used interchangeably with *obscene*, *uncouth* or *offensive*, and means "making explicit and offensive reference to sex or bodily functions". This transformation of the underlying meaning of the word enables a study of the associations that relate to obscenity and how obscenity is situated in our understanding. The refined, dignified language of those wielding power associated "being uncouth" with the working class. Eco (2007: 135-136) notes this strong association between obscenity and the peasantry, describing how obscenity and ugliness, in their most grotesque forms, were attributed specifically to peasants in satires on the peasantry, prior to the Renaissance. Obscene expressions were understood of as a consequence of being uncouth and not belonging to "good society" – a trait that characterised the unrefined language of the peasant. So, in effect, obscenity, as a characteristic element, came to be distinctively associated with the language of the *vulgaris*. The aforementioned interchangeability of *vulgar* with *offensive* and *obscene* indicates the very strong correlation between these two words – the obscene delivers offence. Now to understand what is so offensive about the obscene, the question that needs to be addressed at the outset is "Who finds the obscene offensive and why?"

The "refined" language of the power-wielding class is a conspicuous display of its systemic distinctions; education, sophistication and eliteness. The ideal, purest, "truest" form of expression within a language is socially accepted as that which is in its most refined, sophisticated form. Thus language can be understood as owned by those in power, the educated, the sophisticated, the elite. As a consequence, the more refined a language is considered, the more empowered is deemed the individual using it. This disjunction created between "the commoner" and "the elite" on the basis of such a "linguistic purity", serves as a

basis for our study of obscenity and offence.

When obscenity is used in expressions, these expressions possess an observable, distinctive and explicit character of the working class – since obscenity is distinctively associated with this class. As proposed, “being offended” comes into existence when the aforementioned mental territory is threatened. The question here now is: “Whom and how does obscenity threaten”? The right to decide what constitutes “true” language and thereby the right to police it has always been reserved by the ecclesiastical and feudal powers. Therefore, if obscenity in expression, a distinctive trait of the “impure language” of the “common people”, delivers offence, it does so to the proponents of the “truest” forms of expression. The mental territory threatened by obscenity here being the right to the “correct” use and exclusive ownership of language. This becomes key when the right to exclusive ownership or mandate over anything is understood as crucial for the sustenance of power. Obscenity in any form of expression, be it art or language, is a process of these exclusive rights being revoked, a facilitation of the recovery of ownership of language from the elite and the powerful. Obscenity is, therefore, directed at subverting the status quo by its complete and absolute denial of reverence for it. In this manner, delivering offence through a public and explicit utilisation of obscene expressions, say, while dealing with socio-political injustice, becomes an effective, powerful tool of protest.



Figure 1. Graffiti artist Banksy's *Kissing Coppers* in Brighton, 2004

3.1.1. Obscenity and trivialisation: A very short digression

Obscenity is the most animalistic expression of an idea. Obscene expressions of complex, emotional issues are expressions of these issues in their most sexual, primal forms. So, the process of trivialisation is not only a dilution of their complexity and vitality, but, often, also a

process of sexualising the issue. This is an irreverent denial of any global pertinence or regard. Such expressions of emotional issues are offensive because the trivialisation that entails them threatens the importance ascribed to these issues.

Coming back to the case of Lenny Bruce, his obscene forms of expression were an immediate threat to the status quo. Lucaites (1979: 13) observed that “His impact was...felt as a serious challenge to the authoritarian structure at which it was aimed”. In America, stand-up comedy as a performing art form was meant to entertain – they were often mere repeated exercises in such conformity. However, the self-styled, obscene and subversive essence of Lenny Bruce and its wide appeal among audiences, effectively negated any ownership over language, morality or decency by the wielders of power, specifically the Catholic Church. By denying it the right to own anything through his characteristic irreverence, Lenny Bruce reclaimed the right to possess language, thought and expression. In this manner, we are led to understand obscenity as analogous to graffiti art, in its power to reclaim. It was this subversive power of the obscene –offensive to those in power– that marked Bruce’s troublesome history with the judiciary, culminating in his suicide. With time though, as mentioned, his stature evolved. He came to be recognised as one of the first people to claim their right to own their language; an uncompromising political satirist who questioned and commented without submitting to authority. Lenny Bruce had by then revolutionised stand-up comedy.

3.2. Anthropomorphy

As in the trials of Lenny Bruce, obscenity is identified commonly as that which caters to “prurient interests”. When words attributed to and associated with sexual organs, sexual processes or faecal matter are directed at people, they are almost always offending. These words –by sheer popularity in terms of usage– become the most compelling form of obscenity. Disconnected from situational contexts, why are lewd words observed to be offensive, even on their own? What experience does an obscene word manufacture?

In popular culture, when someone is asked not to be a *dick* or told not to act like one, he/she is expected to mellow down or be less rigid in his/her demeanour. When someone is referred to as a *dick*, he/she is implied to be an imposing, possibly aggressive, perhaps oppressive and entirely dislikeable figure. These images and references have come to be associated with the male genitalia and their function through reasoning that is rooted in gender roles and stereotypes. In the same regard, the word *pussy* is directed at people exhibiting cowardice, apprehension or indecisiveness. When someone is referred to as a *pussy*, the implications seem to be that the person in question is apprehensive, passive, indecisive or, at the very least, of a rather “soft” demeanour. To the same effect, the attributions to a person by being referred to as an *asshole* are attributions of the rectal opening – the implications being disreputable, repulsive or repugnant. For further argument, the obscene implications of the offensive word *bitch* can be attributed to promiscuity, immorality or adultery, all directed to imply the sexual habits of a female dog.

Discussing anthropomorphism as the attribution of human characteristics to non-human creatures or inanimate objects, Horowitz & Beckoff (2007: 30) argue that inanimate objects are made more familiar through the assigning of personality traits. This act of attribution is, here forth, discussed as anthropomorphisation. Asquith (1984: 38-43) argued that in the ordinary language, metaphors both facilitate and necessitate “semantic link between human action and animal behaviour” and contends that this occurs simply as “a result of our

language, or more specifically, meaning in language”. Kennedy (1992: 26) inferred that our ordinary everyday speech is, by itself, anthropomorphic. To the effect of extending this inference to images, Heidel & Simmel (1944: 252-259) showed that humans tend to consistently anthropomorphise even geometric figures, through certain temporal relationships of movements. Thus, if human interactions through words or images, within specific narrative contexts or otherwise, are always about experiences of the human, then anthropomorphisation of these words or images seems to be a natural process. When words or images, devoid of narrative contexts, are understood, this understanding involves an assignment of human experiences to these words or images.

With this understanding that anthropomorphisation of words and images is a natural mental process, it should also be possible to analyse the offensive implications of obscenity in this very same regard. Despite that most obscene words and images are of the organs or processes of the human body, these organs and processes by themselves possess no human attributes, in a non-physical sense. There is nothing human about them, apart from the fact that they are parts of the physical human body and its physical functions. Therefore, while studying how we derive meaning from these words and images, it is imperative for us to study these natural and spontaneous attributions of human experiences to them. As observed above, implications of the words for the male and female genitalia, seem to result from an attribution of gender stereotypes and gender roles to these organs – aggression to the male sexual organ, fragility to the female sexual organ and so on, distinctively human attributes. Therefore, the anthropomorphisation of words and images both facilitates, and perpetuates negative connotations, and yields the result of delivering the offence.

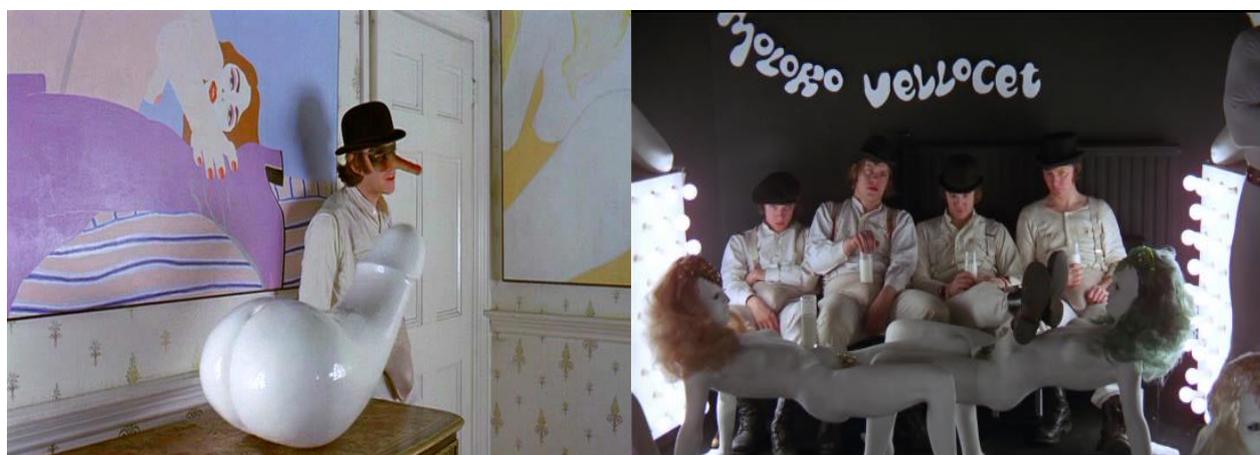


Figure 2. Phallic symbolism: Images from Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)
(Distribution rights: Warner Brothers)¹

3.3. Illocutionary acts

An Illocutionary Act, the term first coined by J. L. Austin (1975: 99), can be loosely understood as an act performed *in* saying something. Performed with a communicative intention, illocutionary acts execute a certain intention as intended by the speaker, such as informing, warning, demanding, undertaking, be they statements, requests, apologies, etc. This intention of the speaker in producing that utterance is called *the illocutionary force* of that utterance – that is to say, the same illocutionary act could be uttered with various

illocutionary forces, depending upon the intention of the speaker.

When obscenity enters statements, the obscene aspect of such statements seems to strongly influence the intentions and purposes of the statements, observably. Understanding how they influence the illocutionary force of statements would help us understand what distinctive effect obscenity brings to our language and how they alter the sense of offence. Searle & Vanderveken (1985: 118-126) defined illocutionary force in terms of seven features. These seven features are variables that determine the nature of the resulting act and decide the illocutionary force (the intention). Out of the seven, the inclusion of obscenity in expression can be seen to affect the following three: degree of strength of the illocutionary point, mode of achievement, and degree of strength of sincerity conditions. The others, i.e. illocutionary point, preparatory conditions, propositional content conditions and sincerity conditions, are largely inert.

a) *Degree of strength of illocutionary point*: Two illocutions can have the exact same point (the intention of the speaker) but vary in the dimension of strength. Say, for example: “You should watch out, Jimmy” and “You should fucking watch out, Jimmy” possess entirely different strengths of the same illocutionary point, the latter being a much stronger illocution – a much more powerful intent of warning. Obscenity strengthens the illocutionary point and enforces the intent of statements, especially when used as adjectives and adverbs. That is, the degree of strength of the illocutionary point of an act is heightened with the addition of the obscene expressions.

b) *Mode of achievement*: This is the mode in which the illocution is achieved. Requests or Insistences (two different modes) may possess the same illocutionary points, but vary in strength. “Would you pass the mustard?” and “Would you fucking pass the mustard?” have self-explanatorily different modes of achievements. The mere addition of the obscene entails an alteration of the mode of achievement from requesting to demanding. It is understood that obscenity often functions to alter the mode of achievement, strengthening the mode of achievement of a statement, increasing the aggressive nature of the mode of achievement.

c) *Degree of strength of sincerity conditions*: Two speech acts could differ along the strength of the sincerity with which they are expressed. As in the above two cases, the effect of obscenity is identical and to the effect of strengthening the statement. Obscenity is very often a characteristic trait of an emotional outburst or a heart-felt, intense expression. The presence of obscenity, therefore, is a heightened expression of sincerity.

However, it has to be remembered that the phenomenon of the overall strengthening of the illocutionary force of statements by obscenity is very much context-specific, and depends on the favourability of the other four features of illocutionary force mentioned by Searle & Vanderveken (1985), say like the preparatory conditions. For example, an obscene expression within marital vows, in the hope of strengthening the expression, might just be a reason to call off the wedding.

According to Seizer (2011: 229-230), “Obscenity in these (stand-up) performances serves to heighten and intensify the expression of the speaker’s perspective, affect, and experience.” and obscene words can potentially be treated as “protean, expansive, and ripe with performative possibility”. As observed, obscene adjectives on their own enforce the illocutionary powers of statements. Offensive obscene statements, racist, paedophilic or sexist comments are very often assertions, conjectures or commands and their objectionability lies in their prurience and irreverence. From obscenely asserting stereotypes of specific communities to addressing a woman as a “bitch” and commanding her to “make him a sandwich”, these slurs are always directed and intended to transgress something within the listener.

The power of obscene illocutions to alter or misrepresent social realities in a very powerful manner is the reason why they easily offend those who piously ascribe to a particular version of social reality. It can be argued that a conjecture or an entirely fictitious expression that offends a recipient does so because the recipient conceives its action to have been performed by the virtue of it being uttered. As discussed, illocutions expressed obscenely possess a much strengthened, urgent force. They are aggressive in this regard and highly committed to the intent. So when assertions that deliver offence are expressed using obscenity, they deliver a greater amount of offence. This is because of the cumulative effect of the strengthened illocutionary force (the obscene form of expression) and the nature of the illocutionary point (the offensive intent). Just as the illocutionary act is performed, the action that it entails is effectively conceived by the recipient.

When obscene utterances perform illocutionary acts, the conception of this performance transgresses and threatens the mental territory of the subject, by conflicting with the accepted standards of morality or decency, delivering offence.

4. What is so hilarious about the offensive?

4.1. Superiority theory and offensive humour

Just as the question “Who finds the obscene offensive and why?” was posed to explore the problem of obscenity and offence, to understand what is so hilarious about the offensive, an analogous question is posed – “Who laughs?”

As mentioned above, the offensive consequence of obscenity is rooted in class conflict. It being so, laughter as a consequence of offence could also be looked at within the same context, obscenity being one of the ways in which offence is delivered. According to Christopher Hitchens (2007: 54), in his provocative article for *Vanity Fair*, the earliest origins of humour that we know about is its role in the mockery of authority. Irony has been called “the glory of slaves”, he recalls. Mocking the authority in private spaces is the most accessible and safest outlet for establishment of superiority. Delivering offence to the authority by deriving humour at its expense is in fact a method of engaging in disobedience. According to Eco (2007: 135), arousing laughter at the expense of the oppressor is a compensatory rebellion. Such humour is a passive, momentary, thoroughly enjoyable conspiracy. Laughter at the expense of authority is a process of disregarding the power, a process of denial of subservience to the authority. When obscene expressions invade the spaces of the power-wielders and deliver offence to them, this transgression is enjoyed by partakers and sympathisers. This laughter is a sense of triumph that is facilitated by a sense of establishment of superiority over the offended. Laughter is therefore a directed political attack on authority and offensive humour is an act of facilitation of such an attack. On its own, it is an act of dissidence and disobedience.

Say, for example, if one of the aristocratic guests at the British Queen’s banquet permits him/herself a very loud, public relief of a flatulent nature, the story of it would stimulate extensive laughter from external quarters. It is doubtful whether the royal family (or indeed, the other guests) themselves would find this occurrence amusing; however, they would most definitely be offended by such an “uncouth” element invading their space, for reasons discussed above. Now, the question is “Who laughs?” The ones who laugh are the ones who are amused by happenstance, the ones who find the offence delivered to the power-wielding class because of an obscene (thereby, peasant-like), subversive expression thoroughly

enjoyable. Laughter, here, is being an explicit act of condonation. So, who condones the momentary superiority established over the elite? Understandably, the ones who possess a lesser amount of power. This is why barely anyone would laugh at a similar occurrence to a handicapped, sweatshop labourer in a desolate workhouse, in some developing country.

Laughter here is a pure expression of enjoyment, reaffirmation and a display of appreciation towards an event, but, more importantly, it is an intricate, complex power-play manoeuvre.



Figure 3. Assault on authority: An anti-clerical cartoon (*L'asino*, 15th January 1899)

It is also to be noted that laughter is also often considered a rather permissible attempt at establishing superiority. In connection to role of humour in anti-authoritative regards, Eco (2007: 135) states that, occasionally, obscene derivations of humour at the expense of authority by plebeians were authorised by the authority, as in Roman Saturnalia, and that this authorised rebellion could be understood as a safety valve for tensions that otherwise would be uncontrollable. This understanding is important in the study of offensive humour. Offending the authority through humour is quite possibly a rather harmless, permissible method of letting out rebellious steam. The permissibility originates in the fact that, at the outset, laughter as a medium of subversion does not seem to possess an immediate physical significance, repercussion or threat. There is, therefore, a wide acceptance and permission for offensive anti-authoritarian humour, and this observed in the fact that the annual White House Correspondent's dinner has a tradition of inviting a stand-up comedian who then goes on to make fun of the President and the Senators of United States of America, very often proceeding to deliver offence in the process.

4.2. Relief theory and offensive humour

Olson (2007: 6-8) suggests that offensive humour should be analysed through a relief theory, citing offensive as that which involves dehumanisation of subject(s). In regard to stereotype-

based offensive jokes, Olson (2007) argues, when there is a denial of one or more intrinsic human characteristics to human subject(s) by an external agent, this dehumanisation causes tension to be built up. Laughter is a response towards such morally problematic, dehumanising conjectures, as an outlet for built-up tension.

Relief theory could indeed satisfy our question, but only regarding the laughter of people who are not emotionally involved in the intentions of the offensive joke; say, a Caucasian with no malicious predispositions towards Africans who laughs at a racist joke. To those individuals who do not have personal, moral or emotional investments in the joke, these stereotype-based statements pose a morally complex question, i.e. that of how to react at the face of a seemingly light-hearted conjecture which is, however, worded with a conspicuously malevolent intent. This moral uncertainty followed by a compulsion to respond results in a release of tension through laughter.



Figure 4: Gino Boccasile, an anti-Semitic post-card by fascist propaganda machinery, 1943-44

But, for a person who condones the offence delivered and appreciates the stereotyped slur, laughter clearly has to work very differently. For them, laughter is a reinforcement – a display of outright appreciation for the sentiments expressed. Disguising the offensive under the guise of humour is a process of circumventing established moral codes without being accountable; it becomes the only consequence-less articulation of an opinion, among other socially reproached articulations of the same opinion. According to Hurley, Dennet & Adams (2011: 354), “The fact that it is involuntary makes laughter a curious variety of communication, since information we broadcast by involuntary behaviour (trembling when afraid, shivering when cold, stumbling when drunk, etc.) is rightly viewed in general as not so much communication as unintended self-betrayal”. In this way, laughter can often condone the act which cannot be justified or condoned otherwise. Understanding laughter as communication of affirmation, therefore, satisfies these cases.

4.3. Bergson’s mechanical theory of humour and offensive humour

Bergson (1911: 18) said that “society will be suspicious of an inelasticity of character”. Hurley, Dennet & Adams (2011: 85) further explain that a body, a mind, or a society that is

inadaptable is given respectively to infirmity, mental deficiency, or misery and crime. In this regard, Bergson suggests that a mechanism that enforces adaptability would be a solution to all of these problems. Rigidity causes humour, humour being the solution to rigidity. In this manner, laughter acts as a “social corrective”. Inelastic behaviour is corrected by laughter from external quarters. Further, Bergson (1911: 9) adds that “The laughable element...consists of a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being”.

Contextualising Bergson’s understanding of laughter as a mechanism for adaptability to a specific case of offence and obscenity, we come across an interesting result. As proposed, when obscenity offends, this offence is felt because of the threat to a sacrosanct mental territory. This threat is experienced because of the mental territory’s inadaptability towards the obscene. Being offended, therefore, can be understood as a consequence of the mind’s rigidity at the face of the obscene. While presented with obscenity, we exhibit this mechanical inelasticity that Bergson speaks of, in our behaviour, say for example the above mentioned self-righteous belief in ownership of “true” language or a similarly rigid supposition. Humour, being a solution to this rigidity, is the corrective response. This inference, drawn from the specific case of obscenity’s role in delivering offence, is now extended to the general question of understanding the humour in offence that is delivered by any means. Offensive humour directed at homophobia, racism or sexism is then understood as an accusatory assault on the intellectual and mental inelasticity of these dogmatic ideas. Laughter, therefore, in general, could be understood as a reminder to the offended party that their behaviour is inelastic.

A slight digression is afforded now from the general question of humour behind the offensive, to study the specific case of humour when it is obscenity that delivers offence, based on Bergson’s (1911: 31) emphasis that “Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person when it is the moral side that is concerned.” He further elucidates this with the following example: “Where lies the comic element in this sentence, taken from a funeral speech and quoted by a German philosopher: ‘He was virtuous and plump’? It lies in the fact that our attention is suddenly recalled from the soul to the body.” No sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself, he says, than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared. This idea is of interest in studying how, specifically, obscenity within offensive humour is humorous. Because of the repressed nature of our discussions of sexuality and our apprehensive approach while talking about it publicly, obscenity is perhaps the strongest stimulant of Bergson’s “anxiety about the body”, especially considering the fact that the least discussed and the most secretive of our bodily components are those of sexual nature. The social repression of sexuality is also reflected in our language that conventionally deals with sexuality minimally and hesitantly, so the unexpected presence of obscene expressions demands a whole lot of attention, as well. So, obscenity does not just induce a profoundly manifested anxiety about the body, but it is also the most effective call of “attention from the soul to the body”. If the same excerpt from the funeral speech was not “He was virtuous and plump” but rather “He was virtuous and kind of a dick”, albeit a lot less subtle, it would presumably be appreciably funnier for a larger audience.

4.4. A theory of trivialisation

Humourisation of the offensive, that is to say the act of deriving humour from offensive situations, is very often a process of mockery of the individuals or community that is offended. But an immediate question that needs to be dealt with arises – What humorous

value does the “offensive” part of “offensive humour” serve? Does offence necessarily need to be expressed humorously to be laughed at, or is the very act of offence in itself humorous? An answer to this question could clarify what is so distinctive about the functioning of offensive humour, if anything at all.

4.4.1. The trolling phenomenon: A short digression

Until recently, the internet was overwhelmed by what has been called “trolling”, where a particular partaker of a public forum called the “troll”, intentionally attempts to disrupt an ongoing discussion by posting inflammatory, often irrelevant, deliberately offensive remarks. The “troll”, consecutively, has a good laugh watching emotional, passionate, extensive reactions to his “bait”. Troll baits are not necessarily funny, but are always posited as intentional, deliberate statements. On serious discussion forums, these troll baits are always trivialisations of the seriousness of the discussions. They are attempts to completely misdirect or redirect the issue being discussed. It could be anything from obvious racist or sexist remarks or remarks that greatly trivialise the validity of the issue posted under the pretension of partaking in the discussion to posting unrelated “memes” that belittle or mock someone’s worth. Such “flame-trolling” are cases where humour is derived solely from the fact that offence is delivered and not from the humorous nature of the offensive statement itself. This is a key point in understanding offensive humour. *Offensive humour need not even be humour. The very fact that offensive is delivered is in itself of humorous value.* The success of inflammatory troll posts depends upon the emotional intensity and the temperament of the reactions they receive. The greater the offence, the more temperamental are the reactions and the funnier it is for the troll. This brings us to the idea that the intentional trivialisation of issues of emotional importance to others, irrespective of the presence of a humorous jacket or not, is humorous given that they are offensive. The laughter derived here has nothing to do with the nature or the purpose of the statement that offended. Rather, it is the end result of offence that is laughed at. By intentionally disregarding the beliefs or convictions of a group of people and thereby offending them, an establishment of superiority takes place over the said people and trivialisation becomes a successful mockery of the veracity, relevance and sanctity of beliefs and convictions. In accordance with Bergson’s theory, the laughter that follows is also a critique on the mental inelasticity of the offended to successfully adapt to the threat. Thus, both superiority theory and Bergson’s mechanical theory pose explanations for the humorous value of offence and here, specifically, understanding how the act of delivering offence becomes hilarious for the trolls and like-minded partakers.

Now, since any offence devoid of humorous intent still clearly serves humour as a function, an applied effort to offend through conventional forms of humour, such as incongruity or ambiguity, would serve a more heightened humorous experience – a sort of additive result. That is, the humour derived from the fact that someone is offended is amplified by the process of humourising the offence. Not only does this make the process of delivering offence amusing for the ones doing so, but this also presents creative ways of attaining the same end.

An important clarification has to be afforded here. Chafe (2007: 75), while discussing the humorous value of profanity, mentions that while profanity itself does not stimulate laughter, it is the situation that warrants the use of profanity that does so. Profanity, by itself, need not necessarily elicit laughter. It is the delivery of offence that elicits laughter, for which obscenity is a tool. As proposed in the discussion on obscenity and the offensive, trivialisation

of complex, emotional issues threatens the unquestionable importance ascribed to these issues, denies them any global regard or scope. Obscenity as mentioned, for example, facilitates this trivialisation through sexual language. This is how trivialisation offends. In fact, any offensive joke or even any non-humorous offensive intent entails a trivialisation of regard – be it sexist, racist, blasphemous, paedophilic, pertaining to death or any other, emotional complexities, apprehensions and ascribed sanctities are always trivialised. But, why should this trivialisation be funny?

Ramachandran (1998: 1858), in fact, explains the descendance of laughter from a “false alarm” signal, suggesting that “the main purpose of laughter might be for the individual to alert others in the social group that the anomaly detected by that individual is of trivial consequence”. Hurley, Dennet & Adams (2011: 262 – wrong page reference in my edition) elucidate this further - some species, including chimpanzees, used this “false alarm” as expression to communicate that an earlier alarm call about an impending danger was a false one and that “there is no issue here”. Say, when early hominids were threatened by a movement in the shrubs, which they attributed to a stalking predator, this panic was relieved by someone else’s enunciation that invalidated the threat. They further trace the evolutionary descendance of laughter, stating that “...[the] original use was to notify a group of relatives that they needn’t be anxious about some topic of current concern; its meaning has been broadened so that now it communicates detection of a resolution to an incongruity” (Hurley, Dennet & Adams 2011: 262).

When something is trivialised the entire seriousness is extracted right out of it. Trivialisation becomes a process of simplifying or relieving strains or tensions imposed by complexities. It can be observed that humorous expressions are by nature such trivialisations. When an issue that has conventionally been dealt with, with a great amount of respect, fear or apprehension is all of a sudden stripped bare into the form of a crude caricature that is devoid of any amount of regard or reverence, this expression threatens the importance ascribed to these issues, by irreverently denying them any global regard. This is how, as proposed, one feels offence. By this expression of irreverence, there is a strong disjunction created in “the way it was supposed to be” and “the way it is”. The presentation of the original issue is not merely an isolated caricature that mocks the original issue, but it also constantly refers to it – offensive humour deals in stereotypic and referential specifics. For example, the most popular jokes involving blasphemy with regard to Christianity draw references to Crucifixion, Immaculate Conception or other specific Christian distinctions. The contrasting juxtaposition between the original issue and the caricature is strengthened by these trivialised references. The more emotional or sacred the issue being trivialised is, the more offensive it is and the stronger the emergence of the caricature in contrast. This juxtaposition of contrasting images produces incongruity and an oxymoronic effect. The laughter is entirely derived from this contrast.

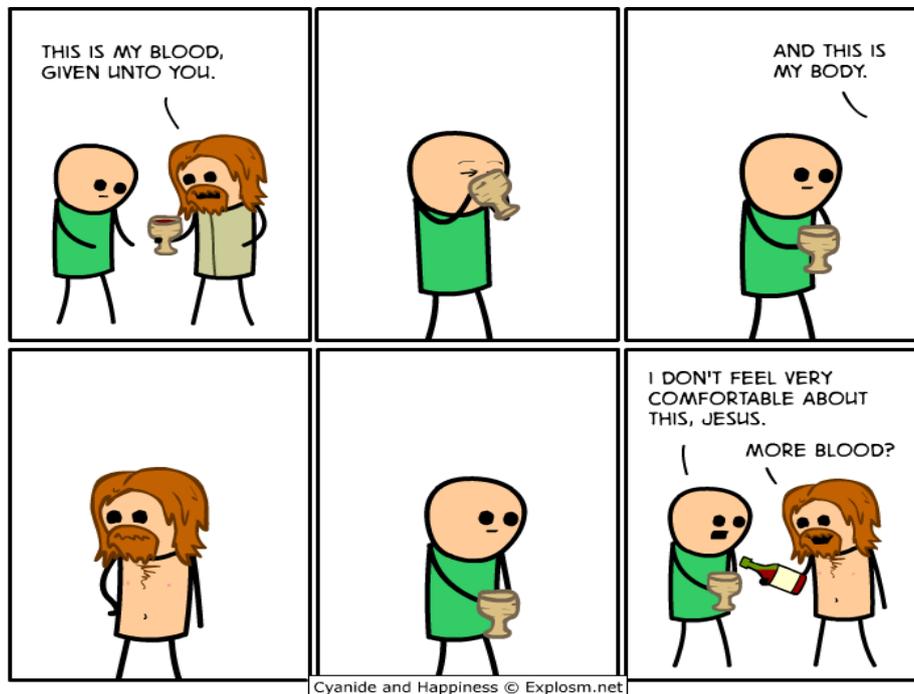


Figure 5. *Cyanide and Happiness* © (explosm.net), a popular web-comic²

Understanding offensive humour as intentional trivialisation retains the more compelling arguments within superiority theory and Bergson's mechanical theory discussed above. Trivialisation is not merely an instrument of emotional irreverence. Consequently, it is also a strongly expressed denial of any regard for the issue in discussion. Mockery of an issue, through its trivialisation, is an establishment of superiority over the advocates of the issue and the issue itself. In accordance with the mechanical theory, the laughter that is derived from the juxtaposition is also directed at the mechanical inelasticity of the ones offended. In this manner, Bergson's understanding of laughter as a social corrective is also found to hold true. Trivialisation through offence and offensive humour could be utilised effectively as an assault on status quo, a sort of reality check on the unexplained, established priorities we attribute to certain issues. As proposed, the act of disguising the offensive under the jacket of humour is an effective method of circumventing moral codes and evading any social accountability. So, it could also be said that by establishing a sort of quasi-loop-hole in moral restrictions imposed on social commentary, offensive humour can potentially exercise great freedom.

5. Points of conclusion

The core questions of this research were posed because of an observed widespread popularity of offensive humour in contemporary stand-up comedy and the consistent presence of obscenity in its expression. "Being offended" is a psychological state claimed to come into being when a personal, sacrosanct mental territory is threatened by an unsolicited experience. The strong correlation between obscenity and offence serves as base for making inroads into the study of the various possibilities in which obscenity delivers offence. The role of

obscenity is explored by understanding offence in terms of who is offended and why. The function of obscenity in delivering offence is discussed in three ways – its subversive powers, effects of anthropomorphisation and illocutionary acts. The following conclusions are drawn:

1. The presence of obscenity in expression, a distinctive trait of the “impure” peasant language, offends the proponents of the purest and “truest” forms of expression – the owners of language. It is proposed that obscenity in any form of expression, be it art or language, is a process of exclusive rights being revoked, a facilitation of the recovery of ownership from the elite and the powerful. In this manner, obscenity functions as a *subversive*, irreverent, politically powerful form of expression.
2. Obscene expressions of complex, emotional issues break these issues down into their most sexual forms. Such expressions of emotional issues are offensive because the simultaneous trivialisation threatens the sanctimonious importance ascribed to these issues.
3. *Anthropomorphisation* of obscene words and images by the mind is responsible for the offence delivered.
4. Illocutions expressed obscenely possess a much strengthened, urgent force – much more aggressive and highly committed to the intent.

Further, the humorous experience behind offensive humour is explored through some of the prevalent theories of humour. A theory of trivialisation is proposed to understand the humorous function of offensive humour. Trivialisation is a simplifying process, relieving of strains or tensions imposed by complexities. When an issue that has conventionally been dealt with, with a great amount of respect, fear or apprehension, is all of a sudden stripped bare into the form of a crude caricature, this expression threatens the sanctimonious importance ascribed to this issue and irreverently denies it any global regard.

1. Laughter is a sense of triumph that is facilitated by a sense of establishment of *superiority* over the offended. Offensive humour is therefore a directed political attack on authority, and laughter, an expression of dissidence and disobedience.
2. Stereotype-based statements pose a morally complex question to the ones who are not emotionally involved or invested in the sentiment of the stereotype. The moral question of how to react leads to the building up of tension. This moral uncertainty followed by a compulsion to respond results in a *release* of tension through laughter.
3. Offensive humour, when directed at homophobia, racism or sexism, is a prominent accusatory assault on the intellectual *mechanical inelasticity* of those minds that sustain these dogmas. Laughter, therefore, is a reminder to the offended party that their behaviour is inelastic.
4. It is proposed that offensive humour need not even be humour and that the very fact that offence is delivered is in itself of humorous value.
5. Delivering offence through conventional forms of humour would serve a more heightened humorous experience, as opposed to the humour derived through merely delivering offence. The use of humorous structures makes the process of delivering offence more amusing and creative.
6. When moral, political, emotional or other such issues, which are personal and held with unquestionable importance by specific subject(s), are trivialised into crude caricatures or humorous conjectures, this sanctity is threatened and offence is delivered. This juxtaposition of these two contrasting images (the actual issue and trivial representation) produces a strong oxymoronic effect. The laughter is entirely derived from this *incongruity*

established by the contrast.

7. Disguising the offensive under the guise of humour can potentially evade accountability while transgressing moral boundaries. So, by establishing a sort of loophole in moral restrictions imposed on social commentary, offensive humour can potentially and possibly exercise a large amount of freedom.

Notes

- [1] Because of the explicit sex and violence in *The Clockwork Orange*, The National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures rated it *C* (“Condemned”), forbidding Roman Catholics from watching the film. Here, the murder weapon designed to represent the male genitalia expresses aggression, oppression and violence, while the adjacent picture depicts the female body as servile, subservient and passive. Such explicit and obscene sexual imagery and symbolisms ubiquitous in the movie, along with graphic scenes of violence and rape, were the reasons for the imposition of various bans on the screening of this film.
- [2] This cartoon can be accessed at <https://www.explosm.net/comics/3292/>

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