

**No Seriously, That's not Funny:
A Defense of Sentimentalism about Humor**

**Andrew Jordan, University of Washington
Stephanie Patridge, Otterbein College**

Introduction

In the face of putatively immoral jokes we find ourselves given to seemingly inconsistent responses. In some cases, we might find a joke's immorality colors its humor, so that we remonstrate the joker with claims like "Hey, that's not funny!" In other cases, we might find ourselves amused by an immoral joke, and in the face of a moralist remonstrator retort "Come on! I was only joking!" In a series of papers, Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson have argued that any view that endorses responses of the first kind, so-called moralist responses to humor, is guilty of committing what they call the moralistic fallacy.¹ According to D'Arms and Jacobson, sentimentalist accounts of humor commit the moralistic fallacy because they conflate the fittingness conditions of certain evaluative properties—e.g., whether or not a joke is funny—with the appropriateness conditions of related attitudinal responses—e.g., whether or not we should be amused by said joke. Moreover, they argue that while moral considerations bear on judgments about what is appropriate to feel—e.g., whether or not we should be amused—they never bear on property ascription—e.g., whether or not the joke is funny. If they are right, then the moralist remonstrator who claims "Hey, that's not funny!" is guilty of a logical confusion. At best, such a remonstrator is licensed to claim "Hey, you shouldn't be amused by that joke!"

In this paper, we argue that D'Arms and Jacobson are right to claim that a strong moralizing of humor is wrongheaded, and that jokes can be quite funny even in cases where we

¹ Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "Sentiment and Value," *Ethics* 110 (2000): 722-748; Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. 61:1 (2000), pp. 65-90; and Daniel Jacobson, "In Praise of Immoral Art," *Philosophical Topics*. 25:1 (1997) p. 20.

have a moral reason to not be amused. However, D'Arms and Jacobson's observations about morality and humor do not license them to infer the stronger claim that moral considerations are never relevant for property ascription when it comes to humor, and that they are wrong on this point. Moral considerations are, in some contexts, relevant for determinations of the funny. On our view, in order for a joke to be funny, a virtuous agent must take herself to have a reason to be amused.

Causal Theories of Humor

One way to sidestep the debate over the ethics of humor is to endorse a causal theory of humor. For example, one might maintain that jokes are funny if and only if they make us laugh. The causal-laughter theory of humor has something going for it. It takes seriously our intuition that the funniness of a joke must have some connection to facts about human agents. However, the connection that it draws is not quite right. Certainly we all have found ourselves laughing at jokes that we do not find funny. Job candidates, for example, find themselves in this position quite often. So, if laughter—a behavior—is not relevant to a joke's funniness, perhaps amusement—an emotive state—is. Like the causal-laughter theory of humor, the causal-amusement theory takes seriously the connection between the funniness of a joke and facts about human agents. Minimally, it seems right to claim that a joke that no one is amused by simply is not funny. So, it is at least a necessary condition on a joke being funny that at least *someone* finds it funny—even if no one laughs out loud. It also makes assessments of humor a relatively straightforward affair. If you want to know if a joke is funny or not, you need do no more than figure out if folks are amused. But, this implies that determining whether or not a joke is funny is a matter for sociology, and not for philosophy. Yet, the practice of joke telling relies at least to

some extent on the practice of giving and taking of reasons. Consider a joke that you find very funny, though your friend does not. Rather than shrugging her shoulders, your friend might ask you to explain exactly what it is that amuses you. In such a case, she is not asking you for a causal explanation of your amusement, she is asking you to point out the relevant features that you think makes amusement appropriate. While, ironically, telling your friend what is funny about the joke often undermines her ability to be amused—it is hard to be amused at a joke on the strength of someone else pointing out what is funny about it—nevertheless, it can lead to her to see what is funny about it even if she fails to be amused. Moreover, she may refine her sense of humor in light of conversations like these. Our practice of joke telling suggests that humor is a normative affair, and so it is the proper subject of philosophy. Hence, causal theories of humor are inadequate.

The Moralistic Fallacy

That an adequate theory of humor must respect the normativity of 'funny' does not say anything about the kinds of considerations that are generally relevant for determining if a joke is funny. In particular, we want to know if moral considerations are relevant. In a series of papers, D'Arms and Jacobson argue that some, though not all, evaluative properties lack a moral shape; the funny being one such property. So, jokes are not more or less funny in light of moral considerations. In the face of our tendency to make claims like “Hey that's not funny!” when confronted with a putatively immoral joke, one might worry that D'Arms and Jacobson's view is wildly counter-intuitive. However, what is particularly intriguing about their view is that on the face of it it seems to reasonably accommodate such claims.

To this end, D'Arms and Jacobson draw a distinction between reasons that are relevant

for property ascription, and reasons that are relevant for related attitudinal responses. On their view, despite the fact that moral reasons are never relevant for determining if a joke is funny, they are relevant for determining if we ought to be amused.² So, while the remonstrator who claims “Hey that’s not funny!” is wrong to hold that jokes can be rendered less funny in light of moral reasons, she might still be right to claim that all-things-considered we ought not to be amused. Where the moralist goes wrong is in inferring from the fact that it would be inappropriate to be amused by a joke to the claim that the joke is not funny. Such an inference, D’Arms and Jacobson charge, is fallacious, and those who make such inferences are guilty of committing the moralistic fallacy.

The fallaciousness of such inferences, they argue, is evidenced by the fact that there are plenty of cases where amusement is not appropriate, but that amusement still “fits its object.”³ Consider an all too familiar scenario that Jacobson presents in an early paper “In Praise of Immoral Art:” You are at job talk where the candidate clearly is quite nervous. During the talk, one of your colleagues leans over and writes an admittedly funny comment on your notes.⁴ In a case like this, Jacobson points out, your amusement would be inappropriate. Here, the reasons that you have for not being amused are that under these conditions amusement will likely lead to laughter, and laughing during a job talk will most certainly cause undue stress to an already overstressed job applicant. However, from the fact that amusement is inappropriate, Jacobson cautions, it would be a mistake to infer that your friend’s comment was not funny. In fact, it might seem that the funnier the joke is, the greater your reason is for not being amused. While amusement may fit the comment—it is funny—you should not risk a laugh, and so should not be amused.

² D’Arms and Jacobson, “The Moralistic Fallacy,” pp. 65-90.

³ *ibid.* pp 75-76.

⁴ Jacobson, *ibid.*, p. 20.

It is on the basis of examples like this one that D'Arms and Jacobson support their contention that moral reasons may be relevant for determining whether or not amusement is appropriate, but that they are never relevant for determining if a joke is funny. That is, moral judgments do not correctly bear on ascriptions of 'the funny.' If D'Arms and Jacobson are right, then jokes are not more or less funny because they are moral or immoral, though we might have moral reasons not to be amused by a funny joke. That is, while claims like "Hey, that's not funny!" are strictly speaking false, claims like "Hey, you shouldn't be amused by that!" are perfectly legitimate.

As we said at the outset, if D'Arms and Jacobson are right, then those who endorse sentimental theories of evaluative concepts necessarily commit the moralistic fallacy. In their paper, *Sentiment and Value* they raise just this worry against all extant neo-sentimentalist accounts, and here they include not only cognitivists like McDowell and Wiggins, but also non-cognitivists like Gibbard and Blackburn. According to D'Arms and Jacobson, what unites these neo-sentimentalist accounts is their acceptance of the response dependency thesis:

RDT: to think that x has some evaluative property f , is to think it appropriate to feel f in response to x .⁵

The response dependency thesis inter-identifies the reasons that we have for property ascription, with the reasons that we have for related attitudinal responses. So that, for example, identifying something as funny is just a matter of seeing the reasons that one would have for being amused, and seeing the reasons that one has for being amused is just a matter of seeing that something is funny. On this analysis of sentimentalism, it appears that sentimentalists commit the moralistic fallacy. The job-talk example clearly supports this point.

⁵ Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "Sentiment and Value," p. 729.

Modest Sentimentalism Defended

What is especially appealing about D'Arms and Jacobson's analysis of humor is its ability to accommodate our seemingly incongruous responses to jokes in light of moral considerations. First, it can accommodate our tendency to resist being amused by jokes for moral reasons. Second, it can accommodate our intuitions in cases where it seems that moral considerations do not weigh in on the funniness of a joke. Third, the analysis that they provide here, dependent as it is on examples, is on the face of it quite compelling. Morally unsavory jokes can be quite funny, even when we would not dare be amused.

But, notice that D'Arms and Jacobson infer a much stronger thesis than the one we have endorsed here. They claim that any identification of the funny that makes reference to moral considerations necessarily commits the moralistic fallacy. We are happy to endorse the weaker claim: that the reasons we have for experiencing a related sentiment do not always bear on the fitness conditions of the relevant evaluative property. Further, we are happy to concede that versions of sentimentalism that cannot accommodate this fact are liable to commit a conflation error of the sort identified by D'Arms and Jacobson. Still, we do not think that D'Arms and Jacobson's argument licenses the stronger thesis, nor do we think that we should follow them in accepting such a thesis.

We think that D'Arms and Jacobson's insistence on the stronger thesis, and subsequent rejection of sentimentalism, is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of the considerations that are at play in such judgments. Again, they insist that moral reasons may be relevant for determining whether or not amusement is appropriate, but that they are never relevant for determining if a joke is funny. This much seems clear. However, as we see it, the problem does not arise because of sentimentalism's reliance on the response of virtuous agents. That is, it is not

the sentimentalism itself that is to blame. Instead, we think that the problem is the notion of ‘appropriate’ that is packed into the response dependency thesis as it is articulated by D’Arms and Jacobson. ‘Appropriate’ is a verdictive notion. As such, it has an all-things-considered connotation. Depending on how one cashes it out, to say that a response, like amusement, is appropriate, is to say either that all-things-considered it is permissible to feel or that it is all-things-considered the right thing to feel (and since we disagree about how to parse this, we won’t take sides here). On this analysis, the response dependency thesis should be read as following:

RDT: to think that x has some evaluative property f , is to think it is all-things-considered permissible or right to feel f in response to x .

And if this were the only way to understand the commitments of sentimentalism, then we would agree that D’Arms and Jacobson’s objection is compelling: one cannot give an analysis of the funny in terms of what one should feel all-things-considered. Again, the job talk example clearly proves this. While all-things-considered we ought to not be amused, the joke is still funny. But, we think that there is another way to understand the notion of response dependency that is open to the sentimentalist. Instead of parsing RDT in verdictive or all-things-considered terms, the sentimentalist might parse it in terms of what Jonathan Dancy calls *contributory reasons*.⁶

We agree with D’Arms and Jacobson that the mere fact that all-things-considered the virtuous agent would not be amused does not tell us whether or not the joke is funny. Moreover, we agree that if RDT were properly understood in verdictive or all-things-considered terms, then the job talk example would provide a compelling rejection of sentimentalism. But, we think that the sentimentalist need not, and should not endorse RDT as articulated by D’Arms and Jacobson. Instead, it is our view that a joke cannot be funny if a virtuous agent would not take herself to have a reason to be amused at all. That is, a necessary condition on a joke’s being funny is that a

⁶Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 38–45.

virtuous agent would see herself as having a *contributory* reason to be amused. In a case like the job talk example, that the joke contains a surprising juxtaposition might be a contributory reason for amusement—we are not told the details of the joke—though it is outweighed by more weighty concerns. We think that shifting the focus from talk of appropriateness to talk about contributory reasons offers us a more promising direction for sentimentalism. Consider the following recasting of RDT in light of the distinction that we have just drawn:

RDT*: x has some evaluative property f , only if a virtuous agent has a contributory reason feel f in response to x

Notice that this version of RDT, RDT*, does not fall prey to D'Arms and Jacobson's critique of sentimentalism. In the job talk example the necessary condition on a joke's being funny is met, one has a reason to be amused, it is just that this reason is outweighed by other conditions on appropriateness. It would only be from the fact that the virtuous agent lacks a reason to be amused whatsoever, that we could infer that the joke is not funny. So, the mistake that D'Arms and Jacobson make is to assume that the response dependency thesis is a thesis about what is appropriate to feel, instead of a thesis about what we have a contributory reason to feel.

We think this fits well with the phenomenological aspects of our experiences.

Still, none of this settles the issue of the relevancy of moral considerations. Does a sentimentalist that endorses RDT* still commit the *moralistic* fallacy? We think not, and though we think that moral considerations can play a role in determination of what D'Arms and Jacobson call property ascription, the role that they play may not be as straightforward one might presume. It is our view that whether or not a moral consideration figures as salient in determining if the virtuous agent has a contributory reason to be amused will be contingent on features of the joke-telling context.

Still, it would be a mistake to think that a virtuous will never take herself to have a reason to be amused at a morally unsavory joke. She might. She might even find that in the right circumstances her amusement is appropriate. Talking in terms of virtuous agency can lead to confusion about the priority of the moral. However, a commitment to a virtue theoretic account of evaluative judgments need not carry the further implication that moral virtues ought to take any priority whatsoever in our judgments. If what we are concerned about is judging rightly case by case, then judging rightly will involve countenancing considerations of all kinds—prudential and aesthetic, as well as moral. That is, practical wisdom is not an obsession with the moral, and so moral reasons are not always verdictive.

Another mistake that is often made is to think that morally salient considerations can only figure in deliberation as *reasons*, that is, as considerations that count for or against beliefs, attitudes, or actions. On this model, call it the competing reasons model, one just cites all of the considerations that figure as salient, treats them as reason giving, and weighs them against one another. So, if the fact that a joke is immoral figures at all in a determination of a joke's funniness, then it can only figure as a contributory reason for (or against, in the case of comic immoralism) a joke's being funny. On the competing reasons model, if a joke is unfunny in light of moral considerations, it can only be because the moral considerations are themselves reasons that outweigh any reasons that pull in the opposite direction. The key here, though, is that the immorality of a joke is understood as a reason against thinking it funny, that is, as something that stands in a disfavoring relation to the joke's humor. However, we think that the competing reasons model of practical deliberation provides far too constrained an account of the ways in which morally salient considerations might figure in practical deliberation and judgment. All considerations that might be practically relevant should not be thought of as playing the same

role. Some features of a context play the role of contributory reasons, some features enable what might otherwise fail to be a contributory reason, and some features disable what might otherwise be a contributory reason. As a consequence reasons function holistically, so that whether or not some consideration actually counts as a reason is dependent on other attendant features of the context. A relevant consideration might be a reason, or it might be an enabling or disabling condition. If it is in fact a reason, then it favors or disfavors an action, belief or attitude. If it is an enabling or disabling condition then it enables or disables a candidate reason. That is, enabling/disabling conditions stand in relation to candidates reasons, while reasons stand in relation to actions, beliefs, or attitudes. To help illustrate the distinction between contributory reasons and favoring/disfavoring conditions, consider the following two examples:

Example 1: You have plans to meet a friend for a movie, but your brother calls to say that he really needs your help because his car has been stolen.

You might think that you should break your plans with your friend. However, this does not mean that your promise does not provide you a contributory reason to go to the movie. You still have a reason to go to the movie. But, in this context the contributory reason that you have for going to the movie is outweighed by a new contributory reason that pulls in the opposite direction. All-things-considered you should break your plans with your friend, even though your promise still provides you with a reason however weighty to go.

Example 2: You have plans to meet a friend for a movie, but on the way you are shot.

In this case, you might think that you no longer have any reason to keep your plans with your friend at all. The fact that you promised to meet your friend at the movies simply is not relevant in most contexts where you have been shot. In a case like this, other features of the context do

not outweigh a putative contributory reason, instead they disable it altogether. The fact that you've been shot disables your promise from providing you a reason to go to the movie: You no longer have a reason to meet your friend at the movie, whatsoever.

While the competing reasons model has no difficulty accounting for the first example, it runs into difficulty in the second. Since the competing reasons model treats all considerations as reason giving, on this model your promise in the second example must count as a reason to go to the movie, while your being shot counts as a weightier reason to not go to the movie. But we think that it makes more sense to see your being shot as a consideration that stands in a disabling relation to a candidate reason, your having made a promise. And, while doubtless your being shot stands in a reason giving relation to many other actions, beliefs or attitudes, say calling an ambulance, it renders your promise to your friend no longer a reason at all.

What does all this have to do with jokes? We think that sometimes, though not always, a moral consideration operates in the same way that your being shot operated in the second example, as a condition that disables candidate reasons. Just as in the example above where in light of being shot, you no longer have a reason to go to the movies, in the case of the telling of a joke a virtuous agent might find that she lacks a reason altogether to find a joke funny in light of the morally salient features of the joke-telling context. In a case like this, features that are intrinsic to a joke, and would count as reasons in favor of its being funny in some contexts, will not count as reasons to think the same joke is funny in another context. So, in some contexts we might have moral reason that speaks against our being amused at a funny joke; and sometimes the moral reason will be sufficiently weighty to make amusement inappropriate. The job talk example is one such case. But, in other contexts we think that a moral consideration might be relevant even though it does not play the role of being a reason. That is, there are cases where

what might otherwise be cited as a reason to be amused does not get outweighed by competing reason, but are instead disabled by a moral consideration. We think that this point is best made by considering a few examples, examples where we think that moral features of the context do not count as reasons against being amused, instead they operate to disable whatever reasons one might otherwise have for being amused altogether. And, in light of the fact that moral considerations operate to disable any reason one might have to see the joke as funny in another context, the joke simply is not funny. If we are right, then moral considerations can play a role in determinations of property ascription of the funny. In order to illustrate this point, consider Bill Clinton in any of the following situations:

Situation 1: Bill Clinton straightforwardly tells a dumb blonde joke at a meeting of the United Nation's Commission on the Status of Women.

Situation 2: Bill Clinton tells a dead baby joke at the United Nation's Special Session on Children.

Situation 3: Bill Clinton performs one of Chris Rock's routine at a meeting of the NAACP.

In each of these cases, we think that it is reasonable to assume that the virtuous agent will find herself without a reason to find the relevant joke funny. Moreover, we think that the explanation for this is that in each case Bill Clinton's jokes fail to be appropriately morally sensitive to features of the joke-telling context; features that disable any reasons that would otherwise count in favor of the joke's being funny. Dead baby jokes, while funny in many contexts, when told before the United Nation's Special Session on children are simply not funny, they are horrifying. We should caution, however, that there is difference between our telling you about a scenario, and that scenario actually occurring. These too are very different contexts. While you might be tempted to be amused by the idea of Bill Clinton engaging in any of these examples of joke telling, actually witnessing him do so is an entirely different matter.

We think that this account has added virtue of being better able to capture the diverse phenomenology of joke telling events. Sometimes we think that a morally unsavory joke is funny, and would remain unmoved by those who claim that we should not be amused for moral reasons. In other cases, we quash our amusement because it would be inappropriate to laugh. But, in other cases we are not tempted to be amused at all, but horrified by the joke.

Still, one worry remains. Since, in our three examples moral considerations are not reasons, that our examples do not undermine D'Arms and Jacobson's claim that some evaluative properties, like the funny, lack a moral shape. If what they mean by claiming that some evaluative properties, like the funny, lack a moral shape is that moral *reasons* are never relevant for property ascription we admit that we have not shown this thesis to be false. In fact, we suspect that they are right about this, though we will not argue for that here. However, if what they mean by claiming that the funny lacks a moral shape is that moral *considerations* are never relevant for property ascription, then we think that we have shown this thesis to be false. Moreover, if we are right, then sentimental accounts of evaluative properties—accounts that make sense of the fitness conditions of evaluative properties in terms of reasons for related attitudinal responses—do not necessarily commit the moralistic fallacy. On our view, if a virtuous agent lacks a reason to be amused by a joke, then it is unfunny. Sometimes a virtuous agent will lack such a reason in light of moral considerations. Further, as we have argued, a proper understanding of what it means to be a virtuous agent ensures that a pernicious moralizing of evaluative properties need not follow: even a virtuous agent might find a joke with morally unsavory content quite funny.

One might also worry that we have failed to rescue sentimentalism against D'Arms and Jacobson's critique because RDT* only gets us partway to a full-blown sentimentalism.

Sentimentalism, after all, is typically thought to provide an analysis of evaluative concepts in terms of related attitudes, like the attitudes of a virtuous agent. Here we have articulated only a necessary condition for evaluative property attribution, but not a sufficient one. Hence, we have not offered a full analysis of the evaluative. While it is true that here we have failed to rescue a full blooded sentimentalism, we think that the considerations that we have raised here are a useful starting point for developing an adequate sentimentalist analysis of evaluative properties that avoids the kind of conflation error identified by D'Arms and Jacobson, and captures some basic intuitions about the role that moral considerations play in attributions of evaluative properties, even those without an explicitly moral shape, like the funny.

One consequence of the distinction between verdictive or all-things-considered judgments, and contributory reasons is that we should be careful to avoid giving an analysis of verdictive concepts in terms of having a contributory reason for an attendant pro-attitude. That is, we should avoid saying, for instance, that something is funny if and only if one has a reason to be amused. We suspect that any attempt to cash out the sufficiency condition for the proper application of a concept in terms of having a contributory reason for a related pro-attitude will most likely be a failure. To see this just consider that even in a bad comedy routine I may nevertheless find myself with many reasons for amusement, despite the fact that those reasons are not sufficient to render the comedy routine funny. Evaluative concepts are verdictive threshold concepts and hence they are pitched at the all-things-considered level. When, for instance, I judge something to be funny, I am claiming that it has surpassed a certain threshold as regards the reasons for so judging it. If we are sentimentalists, of course we will claim that the reasons for so judging it can be reduced to the reasons for having an associated attitude of amusement. Our point here is that if we have a verdictive concept on one side of our reductive

analysis, we'd better have a verdictive concept on the other, so any sentimentalist analysis of the funny has the added burden of explaining the relevant threshold conditions which the reasons for amusement must meet. In any case, we call the view we have here defended a kind of sentimentalism because the sentiments still provide a constraint on the appropriateness of the application of an evaluative concept. Our only aim in this paper is to defend the intuition that moral considerations can in some contexts bear on a joke's funniness via a detour through the sentiments. We think that we have done that.

In conclusion, we think that contra D'Arms and Jacobson we ought not rule out any kinds of consideration *a priori*— be they moral, aesthetic, or prudential—as weighing in on a judgment of a value within a context. Similarly, we ought not rule in any kind of consideration *a priori*. It is a mistake, from the armchair both to rule out the relevance of moral considerations and to rule them in when answering the question of whether or not some evaluative concept is properly applied. Likewise, we suspect that this relationship might run in a parallel fashion for aesthetic, moral, or prudential evaluative concepts. Aesthetic considerations, for instance, might play a disabling role in relation to the proper application of moral evaluative concept. We won't be arguing for this here, however.