

Steven Gimbel. *Isn't That Clever: A Philosophical Account of Humor and Comedy.* Routledge 2017. 196 pp. \$140.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138082151).

It is commonly assumed that if something is humorous then it is also funny. Given this assumption, those who turn the cover of Steven Gimbel's book *Isn't That Clever: A Philosophical Account of Humor and Comedy* will likely expect to find a philosophical account of what makes verbal jokes and various sorts of comedic gags funny or, at the very least, delightful in an amusing way. I suspect some folks will also harbor a faint hope that his book – even a philosophy book published by Routledge – will turn out to be genuinely funny.

Such readers are in for a double disappointment. From the start Gimbel makes it clear that, in his view, the 'fundamental flaw that plagues the contemporary discussion in the philosophy of humor is the claim – implicit or explicit – that humor is essentially connected to laughter, mirth, or amusement,' an assumption he means to correct (1). Indeed, he holds that the question 'Why is x funny?' is not a philosophical question but rather something to be investigated by the social sciences (4). And he also gives fair warning that his book is not a joke book but a philosophy book written in the style of contemporary analytic philosophy. As such, he allows, it 'read(s) like the dry, boring philosophy text it is intended to be' (7).

This last sentence might bring a smile and Gimbel's text is sprinkled with similar light jokes, as well as an overly generous amount of wordplay with section headings. In the main, however, he is not kidding around and those wanting something other than a sober analysis of humor will be rewarded in other ways. The eight concise chapters that make up his book go a fair distance toward developing a broad and novel account of the philosophy of humor. Gimbel's views are informed by what has been written before, but they are also grounded and enlightened by practice and discussions with standup comedians. He downplays his own moments at the mic, but his practical experience helps spotlight numerous conceptual and normative issues that arise in the philosophy of humor, especially the practical ethics of comedy. His lucid prose and many (timely) references to contemporary comedy should have appeal beyond academia. Certainly, anyone who performs standup or is otherwise prone to telling jokes would do well to read the chapters late in the book, on morally controversial jokes and the ethics of performance comedy. Habitual jokers are especially advised to observe figure 7.1 for a diagram of 'the deliberative process of determining if a joke is morally acceptable to tell' (153).

Besides distinguishing between the humorous and the funny, Gimbel argues—borrowing a pair of terms from Robert Latta—that a philosophical account of humor must – contra Latta – be framed from the 'stimulus-side' rather than the 'response-side' (5). In other words, when we try to discern the essential nature of humor we must focus on the intended utterance or speech-act from the person attempting to be humorous. Gimbel holds that, unlike the ethics of telling a joke which concerns consequences, jokes and comedic gags must be evaluated with criteria that are 'not audience reaction-based' (94). Rather they must be evaluated solely by 'aesthetic criteria' (133). He is a 'realist' about the aesthetic value of jokes and he holds, with little supporting argument, that the 'aesthetic criteria by which we judge the success of a humor act are objective—the joke is clever or it isn't and that is not a mere matter of taste, it is independent of context' (133-34).

In chapter one, 'The Obligatory Chapter,' Gimbel goes through the motions expected of someone discussing a nascent field of philosophy and he reviews what he calls the five 'traditional' theories of humor, namely: (1) superiority, (2) inferiority, (3) incongruity, (4) relief, and (5) play theories. While he finds some merit in each of these theories, they are either subject to counter-examples (e.g., instances of a person being humorous and not regarding herself as 'superior' to her

audience) or shown to fail because they assume a response-side account of humor. For Gimbel, it is a basic fact about humor that it need not be funny. ‘Dark humor,’ he writes, ‘sick humor, and aggressive insult humor need not generate laughter, while being clear instances of humor’ (15).

Gimbel defends the essentialist position that an ‘act is humorous if and only if it is an intentional, conspicuous act of playful cleverness’ (37). The first criterion, ‘intentional,’ is supposed to separate creative acts from accidental humor, although determining exactly when someone is being humorous (funny or not) would appear problematic since, as Gimbel states, a ‘speaker’s intentions are opaque’ (128). The ‘conspicuous’ criterion means that the humorous act is intended for an audience—it is meant to be ‘got,’ although there is no guarantee this will happen. It is unclear if this implies that a humorous act cannot be something one does and enjoys on one’s own, such as thinking or, if out of earshot, talking aloud and telling old jokes and creating new ones. If self-dialogical humor is possible, it puts pressure on the claim that joke telling is an inherently linguistically ‘cooperative activity’ (66). More controversially, he infers a corollary from the ‘conspicuous’ criterion that ‘the humorous act is self-referential, that is, when you see it, you see *it*.’ For him, since a humorous act is conspicuous it is therefore ‘an aesthetic act, an act whose worth is in part judged intrinsically, whose scope is itself’ (38). Although the ‘playfulness’ criterion might suggest mirth, he stipulates that ‘playful’ means only that ‘I take something—a word, a concept, a prop—and I use it in some way other than that for which it was intended.’ The analogy he offers to capture this meaning of ‘playfulness’ is ‘playing with one’s food’ (41).

The last criterion is the most important for Gimbel. The axis upon which his theory of humor turns is that a joke must be ‘clever,’ by which he means ‘a display of cognitive virtue’; and by ‘cognitive virtue’ he means that the ‘aesthetic act’ of being humorous ‘displays a trait of thought that would be advantageous outside of the play frame’ of joke telling (43). He presents a sample list of these virtues, including ‘Attention to Detail,’ ‘Pattern Recognition,’ ‘Open-Mindedness,’ and ‘Creativity’ (44-45). However, he contends that the list of virtues cannot be exhaustive since ‘there is no limit on what makes something humorous and new ways are being created by artists all the time’ (46). This last claim would seem to be in tension with his earlier appeal to Popper’s thesis that the explanans of a theory cannot be open to unbounded, *ad hoc* modification lest it become part of a ‘degenerate’ research program (15). Gimbel, however, sees no tension here since whatever new instances of cognitive virtue we might come up with, it will be an objective matter of fact whether these mental traits are virtues.

There are a few points in Gimbel’s ‘cleverness’ account of humor that call for further explanation and defense. He claims, for example, that his theory of humor applies to non-funny, non-verbal comedic gags. However, nearly all of the examples of humor he mentions refer to verbal jokes that are clearly intended to be funny. Also, in his treatment of humor ethics, his perplexing notion of a linguistic ‘icon’ that is supposed to *invoke* one or two properties of a stereotyped ethnic group but not *refer* to that group is surely questionable. Like all interesting philosophy, however, Gimbel’s book paves the way for further discussion and debate. And if his predictions about the fate of philosophical areas of inquiry are correct, the philosophy of humor is in the enviable ‘penultimate stage’ of development. Soon we can look forward not only to the odd paper or book about the philosophy of humor, but also to ‘regular panels at professional conferences [and] competing professional associations with tumultuous political battles within and between them’ (7). Perhaps, at some well-heeled university, there will one day even be an endowed Chair of Lexical Semantic Jokes and Non-Verbal Comedic Gags. Now that would be hilarious.

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