HUMOUR AND

THE APPEARANCE OF AUTHENTICITY

IN LIVE COMEDY

BY

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Contents

Abstract

Comedians often ironically present morally bad ideas solely for comedic effect – views they do not genuinely hold. They also lean into providing a sense of authenticity in their work; essentially an *appearance* of being themselves onstage. While many people know that comedians are performing an exaggerated, or even fictional, version of themselves, many people remain unaware of this. It is possible, then, for an audience member with genuinely held morally bad beliefs to misinterpret those jokes as an assertion of the *comedian's* authentic beliefs. This unfortunate state of affairs is worsened if the audience member further misinterpreted the jokes as an endorsement of their own morally bad behaviour. This thesis provides a framework for avoiding audience misinterpretation of jokes as authentically held beliefs of the comedian in stand-up comedy.

   To provide a solution to this problem, I answer two questions: i) what is comedy? and ii) what does authenticity mean for comedians? Answering these questions takes into account both that aesthetic rules of humour must be observed, and that philosophical notions of authenticity need to be navigated. To focus only on the humour risks misinterpretation; to focus only on authenticity risks losing the funny. In the first chapter I critically assess the three primary philosophical theories of humour (relief, incongruity, and superiority). I then argue that the benign violation theory – a more detailed version of incongruity theory – provides comedians with the parameters they need to write and perform successful, i.e. funny, jokes. In the second chapter, I draw on the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Martin Buber, and their different versions of authenticity (based around the individual, the group, and one-on-one relationships, respectively). I argue that these notions can inform different stages of joke creation, shedding light on how to ethically navigate the appearance of authenticity in stand-up comedy during the joke drafting, editing, and finalisation process. Together, these chapters form a framework for navigating the appearance of authenticity in live comedy by avoiding misinterpretation, *without* reducing joke funniness or the range of joke topics.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Let's say a comedian presents a morally bad idea solely for comedic effect, telling an antisemitic joke ironically in order to expose the moral *wrongness* of antisemitic beliefs. One audience member misinterprets the joke as an assertion of the comedian's genuinely held beliefs. The audience member, who already holds antisemitic views, then incorrectly understands the joke to be a kind of endorsement of their own antisemitic views and behaviour. This scenario was not the intention of the comedian, who, after all, wanted to criticise these morally bad beliefs with their jokes. It also did not come about solely because of the morally bad content of the joke, i.e. the topic and attitude towards antisemitism presented within the material. The issue here is the *appearance* of authenticity – which has allowed the comedian to come across as though they really believe what they are saying.

In audience's terms, authenticity could be considered akin to expressing oneself genuinely. It's not immediately clear what authenticity might mean to comedians, though, who practice an artform based largely in artifice. Material is often structured to resemble a stream of consciousness; a monologue straight from the mind of the performer delivered direct to the audience. Because of this appearance of genuine expression, audiences might assume that the subtext of the joke bears the comedian's genuine underlying attitudes towards marginalised groups – say, religious or racial minorities, or the disabled. Successful jokes tend to surprise the audience with unexpected perspectives, and it's difficult to present surprises while sticking solely to familiar viewpoints and status quo beliefs. It makes sense that comedians often say things they don't genuinely believe, in order to provoke laughter. Comedians then face a problem: how to maintain the appearance of authenticity that helps make their jokes work, while avoiding misinterpretation, or needlessly reducing their range of comedy topics.

To provide a solution, I focus on two questions: i) what is comedy? and ii) what does authenticity mean for comedians? In the first chapter, the aesthetic "rules" for successful comedy are ascertained. This is to ensure they are upheld in the solution. (A solution that bears only ethical concerns in mind, failing to take into account aesthetic rules of viable joke writing, is doomed to fail.) In the second chapter, three existentialist notions of authenticity from Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Martin Buber are used to shed light on different parts of the joke writing process (drafting, editing, and joke finalisation,

respectively). Taken together, these three views inform how a comedian can be maximally authentic, i.e. writing and telling jokes they genuinely find funny, while avoiding misinterpretation as holders of morally bad beliefs. The thesis, then, delivers a framework for navigating the appearance of authenticity, while maintaining funniness, and avoiding misinterpretation.

Lee Mack, British comedian and team captain of the popular panel show, *Would I Lie to You,* sums up the appearance of authenticity nicely: "the difference between an actor and a comedian is that an actor goes onstage and pretends to be someone else, whereas a stand-up comedian gets up onstage and pretends to be himself" (Mack 2012, 132). A comedian *pretending* to be themself can fall into the trap of being taken seriously – despite enjoying the showy trappings of a stage, in a comedy club, under theatrical lighting. It's not as simple as avoiding morally bad ideas, or taboo concepts, however. Sweeping dictates regarding appropriate topics for comedy would undermine comedians' ability to temporarily put aside the seriousness of tragic events and morally bad views and hold the absurdities of these things up for ridicule and laughter.

Clearly, not all jokes about morally bad topics will be mistaken for a call to action. For example, when one-liner comedian Jimmy Carr made a joke about Romani Holocaust victims in his Netflix special, *His Dark Material* (Carr & Chambers 2021, 53:37), he offended many people – but the criticism was largely levelled at his choice of target, a marginalised group. Because of the clear joke structure that echoed earlier jokes in his show, few people seemed to argue that Jimmy Carr was authentically presenting his genuinely held opinion. He just came across as offensive to those audience members. Had an audience member taken Carr's joke as an excuse to attack Romani people, it would be hard for them to argue they thought Carr was serious – everything about his presentation made it obvious he was joking. Not all examples of offensive humour are being analysed in this thesis.

That said, many other comedians present more stream of consciousness style monologues, where the set-up and punchlines of jokes flow so seamlessly that they are not as readily identifiable as individual jokes. It is comedians like Dave Chapelle, Ricky Gervais, and Bill Burr who present versions of themselves that *appear* authentic and who risk being misinterpreted by audiences. This is made even more difficult when taking comedians who present themselves as societal critics into account. The line between material Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Hannah Gadsby, and Bill Hicks delivered purely for comedic value, and what

they delivered with the intention of provoking laughter *and* presenting their genuine beliefs, is particularly difficult to identify.

In one letter to critic John Lahr, Hicks said, "I did what I've always done – performed material in a comedic way which I thought was funny." The exact meaning of this sentence rides on whether or not Hicks was using the word 'material' to mean 'jokes' (as it is most commonly used by comedians). However, most jokes when performed are done so in a 'comedic way' – the clarification Hicks makes suggests 'material' could have also meant his 'thoughts,' i.e. beliefs. This is later hinted at in the same letter where he says, "The artist always plays to himself and I believe the audience seeing that one person can be free to express their thoughts, however strange they may seem, inspires the audience to feel that they too can freely express their innermost thoughts…" (True 2002, 225). However it is interpreted, this is just one example of a comedian being taken seriously due to the appearance of authenticity with which they present their jokes.

The appearance of authenticity is not so much a problem for comics like Carr, who only ever wants to be interpreted as a comedian making jokes he is not serious about. He makes this clear when he says at the beginning of *His Dark Material*, "Tonight's show contains jokes about terrible things. Terrible things that may have affected you and the people that you love. But these are just jokes. They are not the terrible things" (Carr & Chambers 2021, 00:14). Comedians with the clear setup/punchline structure are unlikely to be misinterpreted as seriously holding the morally bad beliefs they joke about in their shows – it's just too obvious that they are joking. Similarly, appearing authentic is not so much a problem for the likes of Hannah Gadsby, who considers herself as authentic and putting across beliefs she genuinely holds within her shows like *Nanette* (Whyte, et. al., 2018). Appearing authentic becomes more of a problem with hybrids of these two types of comics: ones who present morally bad views they do not genuinely hold, solely for comedic effect (like Carr), but who *also* present them in a stream of consciousness monologue where they appear to be presenting their genuinely held beliefs (like Gervais and Chapelle).

Comedians have the strange job of writing and rehearsing set routines, which are then delivered to appear as though they are improvised. It is at times a hugely inauthentic artform that masquerades as the opposite. Jokes are often more successful when they seem natural and true *to the comedian*. This means the audience believes that the words somehow belong to the comedian expressing them, i.e. that those thoughts 'make sense'

coming from that individual. There is not a big jump from acting out an original monologue under your own name to being associated with the kind of personality that might tell those jokes. For example, Michael McIntyre has shows named things like *Showman* (McIntyre, et. al., 2020), and tells observational, largely family-friendly, mainstream jokes. Frankie Boyle, on the other hand, performs caustic one-liners and acerbic political commentary in shows like *Hurt Like You've Never Been Loved* (Klein, 2016). As a result, the former is commonly thought of as a light entertainer and the latter as a much darker personality. If they were to swap jokes, the jokes wouldn't "belong" to the new person saying them. They wouldn't appear authentic.

As comics work towards building maximal laughs, they also work towards a stage persona that best fits them and their material. As they get more famous, they build a fanbase, who enjoy the views comedically expressed by the comedian in their shows. Accordingly, the more popular a comedian gets, the more likely it is they will be viewed by audiences who both i) enjoy the worldview presented in their comedy, and ii) are large enough in number to have a few individuals who might see jokes as statements to be agreed with and acted upon, rather than to be laughed at. This leads back to the concept of authenticity, and what the *appearance* of authenticity means for comedians and their jokes.

The first chapter will be the aesthetic discussion. I will begin with a critical assessment of the three main philosophical theories of humour (relief, superiority, and incongruity). Then, I will outline the benign violation theory in depth and use it to explain what jokes require (and must retain throughout the editing process) in order to be funny. I will also outline what it is about joke writing and performance that might cause audiences to mistake a comedian's controversial jokes for genuinely held opinions – that, in some cases, they feel encouraged to act upon. By the end of the chapter, the aesthetic rules a comedian must bear in mind while navigating the appearance of authenticity will be clear.

Following on from these established aesthetic rules, the second chapter will use existentialist notions of authenticity to inform how comedians can navigate the issue. Having looked at various thinkers, three stood out as dealing with authenticity in distinctly different ways due to their focus on different groups. Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Martin Buber, homed in on the individual, the group, and one-on-one relationships respectively. I use their thinking for my own purposes in this chapter because they can shed light on a more effective comedic process. I argue that i) Nietzsche's thinking suggests

drafting solo would allow for comedians to authentically express their individual sense of humour, ii) Camus's thinking suggests editing in response to group laughter allows the comedian to find which jokes are maximally funny, and iii) that Buber's thinking suggests the finalisation of jokes for solo shows and TV spots should be done with individual audience members in mind in order to minimise the risk of misinterpretation.

1. Chapter One: Aesthetics

This thesis is focussed on live stand-up comedy, i.e. in person joke-telling by a comedian for an audience who has chosen to be there. (From now on, *comedy* will be taken to mean *stand-up comedy*, as opposed to any other form of humorous performance.) Being both a philosopher of comedy and a comedian is a rarity: past philosophical analysis of humour has come largely in the form of entirely theoretical reflection. While there are renowned comedians who have studied philosophy, like Ricky Gervais, Woody Allen, and Steve Martin; there are few philosophers of comedy who have been comedians at any point during their lives. Comedians on occasion use philosophical argumentation to shape their material (like George Carlin and Lenny Bruce), and some philosophers are gifted wordsmiths with admirably comedic turns of phrase (like Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard). However, it is unusual for philosophers to draw from *experience* of comedic performance when reflecting on comedy.

In cases where past thinkers have discussed jokes as case studies, it's unlikely they wrote the jokes themselves. These instead would be what comedians call 'street jokes,' i.e. jokes that are widely shared and have no known author. To be fair to many of philosophy's best-known humour theorists, like Kierkegaard, Immanuel Kant, and Arthur Schopenhauer, stand-up comedy in its present form didn't exist during their lifetimes. It is unreasonable to expect them to draw from experience of writing and performing an artform that they never had knowledge of. The concept of an audience gathering simply to hear someone tell jokes for an hour would have been completely foreign to them – and totally beyond their everyday concept of joke-telling. This means that we need to be careful when applying past philosophical findings on everyday humour to stand-up comedy. Everyday humour and stand-up comedy delivery are very different. These thinkers were not writing about jokes written and performed in the formalised manner of stand-up comedy.

While it is fair to say most of us joke, it is far from fair to say that most of us are comedians. One could paint a picture without claiming to be an artist. A workmanlike ability to remember and tell a joke doesn't equate to artistic proficiency. The standards of professional joke-telling, the stakes, the time committed to writing – all of these bars are raised for comedians. They must appropriately meet the tone of the room they are performing in, they must make most people in that room laugh (ideally all of them), and

they must have a rehearsed routine that ensures maximal likelihood they will pull those tasks off. Comedians, then, are experts in the artform of formalised joke-telling. Having acquired this expert knowledge, comedians are uniquely equipped to critique the work of philosophers of comedy in a specific way: comedians can make warranted claims – or assist in making warranted claims – about whether philosophical solutions to comedic problems can be successfully implemented by comedians.

One key aspect of a successfully implemented solution is that the comedian's jokes must be considered funny. Let's say a philosopher is attempting to offer a solution to the problem of the appearance of authenticity in stand-up comedy. That philosopher has no experience in comedy writing or performance. Having read the main philosophical theories of humour, they decide superiority theory is the best. (Superiority theory holds that laughter shows our feelings of superiority, either at the expense of others, or to a former state of the laugher (Morreall 2009, 6).) That philosopher then works towards a solution, with the assumption that all jokes are based around raising the status of the listener. Having completed their solution, the philosopher then shows it to a good comedian, i.e. a laughter-provoking one, who informs the philosopher that superiority theory fails as a universal theory of humour because it doesn't take into account insult comedy (which *lowers* the status of the listener) or jokes that fail to have an obvious target. Accordingly, the philosopher's solution fails, because it was built on incorrect beliefs about how comedy works. Because the philosopher wasn't referring to comedic experience throughout their work, flaws in the argument failed to be caught early on. This could have been avoided by referring to the comedian's experience sooner in the drafting process.

One might reply that comedians can refer to past comedic experience in their assessment of comedy theories – but non-comedians can too. A regular comedy audience member and fan of the artform has experience around comedy, and might, for example, be able to suggest joke subgenres that the superiority theory fails to explain. This example, however, is only true to a point. Comedy is an artform that requires some expertise in order to be written and performed proficiently. This is the same as other artforms, like music. It's difficult to imagine a music fan who couldn't read music and had no idea how to play the violin, still possessing the musical experience required to suggest in depth critiques of philosophical theories of music. And while we all tell jokes to friends, stand-up is an entirely different and more demanding prospect. A comedy fan with no actual experience is

underequipped to provide *in depth* comedic analysis of philosophical theories of humour. To be clear, philosophers can – and do – provide useful theories of humour. I simply suggest good comedians are the only ones who can assess a theory's *veracity*, because they are the ones with the particular comedic experience required to test it: that of joke writing and performance.

Even bad comedians may have something to offer philosophers of comedy. Where good comedians could spot argumentation that decreases likelihood of joke success, bad comedians are less likely to provide useful critique. However, the best test for a comedy theory presented by a philosopher may well be to explain their theory to a bad comedian, i.e. one who more often than not *fails* to provoke laughter – then have that comedian apply the theory to their material, and see if it improves the hit rate of their jokes. My point here is that non-comedians philosophising about comedy have something to gain by referring to the experience of comedians: it can save time, and prevent the proposal of solutions that might seem philosophically sound but are not comedically workable. It can also be a final test for theories that appear the most promising.

With these thoughts in mind, I will outline various philosophical theories of humour below. Where these theories can be negated by counterexample jokes that disprove them, I will do so, combining philosophical argumentation with my own experience as a comedian. This will ensure as I work through the thesis that the solution found is philosophically sound *and* capable of being implemented comedically. Sheilah Lintott (2017) notes that stand-up comedy specifically is not a widely philosophically studied artform – stating that in skipping over it, we are missing the opportunity to shed light on aesthetic issues of interpretation, ethics, and emotion. Even across humour studies, which takes in sociology, psychology, linguistics, and other academic disciplines, the focus is on the broader topic of *humour*, rather than comedy in performance, i.e. *all* things funny, rather than jokes performed for audiences. The comparatively small philosophical output is reflected in the texts discussed below.

What follows is a review of the prominent philosophical theories of comedy. The focus is on theories that can be used in the philosophical assessment of *stand-up* comedy. In this instance, comedy theory focusses on how comedy works, i.e. I am excluding writing on the *functions* of comedy. Theories of how comedy came into existence, and comedy's purpose, are not relevant. Accordingly, theories like Geoffrey Miller's (2000) Sexual Selection Theory,

or Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams's (2011) Detection of Mistaken Reasoning Theory are not closely examined within this review. Selection of the most accurate comedy theory is vitally important for my research because a working comedy theory explains what is essential for joke writing and performance, and what isn't. This would tell me what must be *retained* in any given joke, in order for it to still provoke laughter after tweaks for ethical purposes (if tweaks are indeed required at all).

My research will offer solutions to the authenticity problem – but in order to be workable, the jokes still need to funny afterwards. This is best managed through working within the framework of an accurate comedy theory. The three best-known philosophical theories of comedy are Relief Theory, Superiority Theory, and Incongruity Theory (Pariera 2017, 326). I will address these first – taking into account that while they were posited in order to explain *all* instances of humour, it is only relevant to the paper at hand whether they explain all instances of joking *within stand-up comedy*. I will begin with an assessment of relief theory.

1.1. Relief theory

Morreal (2009) describes *Relief Theory* as an explanation for laughter: a physiological response to tension release (p. 16). One early pioneer of relief theory was Herbert Spencer (1860) in his essay "On the Physiology of Laughter" (pp. 399-400). A second was Sigmund Freud (1976) in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (pp. 253-254). Relief theory was likely seen as filling a gap that superiority and incongruity theories failed to address: how to explain the "physical phenomenon of laughter" (Morreall 2009, 15). This means that relief theory is less a way to explain how jokes work, than a way to explain what effect they have. These are two different things. Where superiority and incongruity theories both attempt to show how jokes function (by building a feeling of superiority over another, and combining two incongruous ideas, respectively), relief theory instead argues that jokes make us laugh, and explains this laughter as a release of tension.

Spencer's work was based around the physiology of the time – and writing in the mid-1800s, Spencer was working with ideas in human biology that have since been discounted. Rather than focussing on how he argued using the limited medical knowledge of the time – then attempting to refute his work by simply saying science has moved on since then – it

seems more charitable to recognise where the idea has potential to be used and built on medically *now*. Spencer (1860) argued that laughter was a release of nervous tension; drawing on the idea that laughter does not only occur when we have a "sense of the ludicrous," nor when we are experiencing "the various forms of joyous emotion," but also when we are suffering mental distress, being tickled, or are in pain (p.398). Laughter is a response to nervous energy, and has no larger action that follows it. We either laugh, or we laugh harder – rather than, say, laughing acting as a preparation for the more extreme act of crying. Again, to recognise relief theory's potential use *now* requires putting Spencer's physiology to one side. Because relief theory was intended as a general theory of humour, i.e. intended to explain all instances of funniness, or in this case, laughter, the question is whether at least some laughter is explained by the release of nervous energy. There are many situations where we laugh seemingly in this way: when we are embarrassed either for ourselves or someone else, when we laugh unintentionally at someone's injury, when we are at a funeral, when we are so angry or overwhelmed that it escapes us unwillingly. In these situations, it seems there *is* something to Spencer's relief theory.

Freud's version of relief theory is better known. It adds a subconscious element – and in doing so, arguably reduces the effectiveness of Spencer's version. Where Spencer (again, putting his physiology to one side) argued for a physical release of nervous tension, and left it at that, Freud attempted to explain how this nervous tension arises. Morreall (2009) describes Freud as having three laughter types in mind: joking, the comic, and humour (p. 117). (It is worth noting that Freud retains Spencer's desire to explain *laughter*, rather than jokes.)

"Joke-telling" releases the psychic energy used to repress feelings of lust and aggression.

"The comic" releases tension that builds up when we are thinking, and find the extra energy put into that thinking unnecessary. To explain this, Morreall refers to Freud's description of a clown doing an everyday task in a convoluted way. The extra energy we summon to think about the clown's method is rendered unnecessary when we realise the task is simple and would take us comparatively less time and fewer steps – so we vent that extra energy with laughter (Morreall 2009, 18).

"Humour" is the last of the three laughter-inducing scenarios, and the closest to Spencer's: essentially arguing that we laugh to relieve tension we find unnecessary. The tension might build up over the course of a story we expect to evoke sympathy or pity, and

we laugh when at the last moment we find closure is achieved in an unexpectedly funny way (Morreall 2009, 19).

Like Spencer, Freud was dealing with medical knowledge of his time, and things have progressed since then. While physiology of the time can be put to one side to recognise relief theory's overall potential, unnecessary mental steps or arguments should be cut, assuming Occam's razor, meaning I will critique Freud accordingly. (In short, we can charitably keep the physical effects the theory describes, while critiquing the inessential mental aspects.)

While much extreme behaviour can be attributed to lust or aggression – say, violent crime – it seems we are less inclined to believe now that everyone is constantly holding back horrific urges, all of which are sufficiently relieved by laughter. To be blunt, it's difficult to imagine a time where an urge for sex or a fight is going to be stifled by *laughing*. Freud's idea that the energy used to repress these urges (which assumes both i) we have these urges, and ii) it takes energy to repress them) can be relieved without damage seems open to question. If energy is needed to repress sexual and violent urges, and laughter relieves that energy, it seems that those urges would no longer be repressed – and people would then act on them. The supposed order of events suggested doesn't align with the described result: i) we feel urges, ii) we repress them, iii) we relieve the energy of repression thorough laughter (suggesting we would then attack), and iv) the relief presumably allows us to continue to repress those urges. This suggests that during every comedy show, there would be a brawl – assuming the comedy is funny.

In the "comic" stages, the energy supposedly required for extra thinking seems overly complicated, and doesn't match our experiences with laughter. It seems to suggest that we require more energy to think of a more strenuous physical task than we do to think of an easier one (Morreall 2009, 21-22). For example, I can think of running a marathon, and of walking downstairs, without feeling more tired after the former thought than the latter. By complicating relief theory with mental aspects, Freud takes a somewhat promising physical description of how the everyday person might describe laughter, i.e. releasing tension, and then removes it *further* from the truth.

The theory is most convincing under Spencer (or in Freud's "humour" version). Think about the atmosphere built within the room at a bar's open mic night, a comedy club, or in a theatre, just before the show starts. There is the anxious wait at the bar, hoping you won't

miss the start of the show – and possibly worst of all, get addressed by the comedian as you struggle to find your seat. Once in your seat, there's the nervous chatter – will they deliver? What are the opening acts like? Will anyone heckle? The show starts and the MC or opening act takes the stage and maybe takes a while to set up their first joke. The longer it takes, the more the tension builds and the bigger the laughter needs to be to *relieve you of the tension*. Tension here doesn't have to have negative connotations: you might also feel tension when moving in for a first kiss, and this tension may be a part of what makes the punchline or the kiss enjoyable when delivered.

With these things in mind – all the tension building throughout the course of a night of comedy – it initially makes sense to suggest laughter is a physiological release of tension. Even in instances where laughter is provoked by something *unfunny*, like someone laughing due to pain or surprise, the laughter seems to occur to provide some form of relief from that unpleasant situation. Jokes, of course, build up tension too. A favourite technique of comedians like former Saturday Night Live host of Weekend Update, Norm Macdonald, is the 'shaggy dog story,' where a rambling joke that takes forever to deliver is only funny because of how inconsequential it turns out to be (O'Brien 2021, 0:01). Here, the tension builds in line with the listener's curiosity and their frustration at all the irrelevant detail. An absurdist comic like Emo Philips is a master of tension building because of his use of pause in his pull-back-and-reveal jokes, where the punchline reveals the listener's misinterpretation of the set-up. An example of Philips's tension building is here: "I used to think that the brain was the most wonderful organ in my body… then I realised who was telling me this" (Groovy Flicks 2020, 35:30). The tension builds as you wonder what other organ might be considered the most wonderful instead. You expect an alternative option; but you end up getting the reason *why* the brain is supposedly so good. Assuming you laughed, it might seem fair to say you laughed at the sudden release of tension due to the immense pause between the two parts of Philips's joke.

While relief theory appears to explain some instances of joke success, it struggles with others. Both the shaggy dog story and Philips's one-liner with the long pause take one thing: *time*. The shaggy dog story can go on literally as long as the comedian can talk and the audience can be bothered listening. Philips's short joke allows tension to build by taking much longer to connect the two parts of the joke than one would in everyday speech. With that in mind, there is the question of time-use in other jokes. Relief theory – in order to

relieve anything – relies on a build-up of tension. Virtually every short joke takes too little time for tension to be able to build. Take this one: *Catholic jokes make me cross*. There's no run up into tension. The joke starts and finishes almost immediately. There is simply no tension at all. Jokes that are delivered unexpectedly – in the middle of a more serious part of the comedic monologue, for example – can also lack the tension needed. This is because the fact that the punchline is being delivered at all is a *surprise*. For tension to build, there needs to be a sense of foreboding or threat or promise that the premise will be subverted. Jokes are often simply too short – or too unexpected – for this sense of tension to develop.

Going back to the first example of relief theory in action, let's say the night has begun. Tension is undoubtedly in the air as the MC or opening act begins their set, it builds and builds, the punchline hits, and the tension is released through laughter. Maybe another couple of shorter jokes: you laugh, then laugh a third time. At this point, the tension that certainly *had* been building, as I have conceded, has now dissipated. Laughter may have been a physiological response to that tension being released early on; but once that strong initial tension has gone and the audience trusts the comedian to continue being funny, there is simply not enough time for tension to build. Pun-heavy and family-friendly one-liner comics like Tim Vine often speak too fast for tension to build in the way that relief theory posits *every joke does*.

There are also structural issues with relief theory, which suggests that tension is relieved at the end of the joke, provoking a laughter response. Comedian Frankie Boyle uses a counterexample to show that relief theory is too limiting to be widely applicable in the realm of stand-up comedy. He says: "I don't think [my comedy] works like that. Y'know, I think for me, the tension arrives *in the punchline*. 'My uncle said, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life. He did heroin'" (McFarlane & Hart 2020, 30:52). It could be argued that Boyle's joke relieves tension by clarifying exactly what is being discussed – so the listener moves from tension-inducing uncertainty to relieved certainty. This is true. With that said, the tension of uncertainty is not replaced solely with tension-relieving certainty. Instead, the clarification that Boyle has actually been describing a heroin addict the whole time adds a different, heavier tension. During the set-up, the listener was just unsure of the topic. After the punchline, the listener's fears of the worst are confirmed, or even outdone. Replacing one type of tension with another more intense tension is not tension relief. If you had a painful arm, and asked a doctor to relieve you of pain, then they punched you in the

stomach, you'd likely not consider that response a charitable interpretation of your request.

Far from Boyle being an outlier, with jokes about blue, risqué, or taboo topics, it is often the case that the initially edgy set up is made edgier by the punchline which adds more explicit detail, rather than revealing the setup to be harmless. Rodney Dangerfield (1980) was a famous one-liner comic with a downtrodden husband and father stage persona – one of his lines on the first track of his album, *No Respect*, was "What a sex life... the only reason I get any girls at all is because of who I am. A rapist!" (6:55). To paraphrase one of my own jokes: "I hit a possum that didn't die. I went back to check, and it was still breathing. So I picked up a rock and did what I guess most of you would call the decent thing – except I started at the feet." There are many counterexamples that prove Boyle's point that punchlines don't always relieve tension; they can *add* to it.

Finally, a useful theory of comedy would offer a framework for joke improvement. This is because if a joke isn't working due to some shortcoming of the writing, then a theory should be able to point out what is missing (or perhaps what there is an excess of). It is especially important when considering the goal of this thesis: finding a solution to the problem of the appearance of authenticity in comedy. Building a solution around a comedy theory that can't suggest an actionable framework for joke improvement guarantees the solution will fail when comedians try to use it. This is where this theory stumbles. Relief theory can do little more than say *This joke fails to relieve tension, and therefore doesn't provoke laughter.* The problem with this is twofold. As discussed above, many jokes *don't* relieve tension but still provoke laughter, i.e. failure to relieve tension does not necessitate a joke's failure. Also, the kind of suggestions relief theory could offer to a comedian in order to fix a failing joke are limited. It could encourage building up tension through adding time to the setup – but again, not all jokes need this time, and some will certainly be made the worse for it.

In short, relief theory relies on time which isn't always there or needed (and could become a hindrance). It also assumes a writing structure where jokes get lighter (rather than heavier) as they go along. If we are hoping to move forward with a theory of comedy that explains all instances of joking within stand-up comedy and offers a framework for joke improvement, relief theory falls short. With relief theory now assessed, I will examine superiority theory.

1.2. Superiority theory

Superiority Theory is the idea that humour is explained by audiences enjoying their sudden feelings of superiority over the joke target. (These targets can be either other people, or a "former state" of those same audience member/s (Morreall 2009, 6). Part One, Chapter Six of Thomas Hobbes's (1958) *Leviathan* included an early version of superiority theory (p. 57); while René Descartes (1987) was another early thinker making similar claims, in his work, *The Passions of the Soul* (p. 24). Roger Scruton (1987) was a more recent supporter of the theory, as seen in his essay, *Laughter* (pp. 168-169).

Superiority theory, unlike relief theory, aims to explain how jokes work. Hobbes describes laughter as caused by "Sudden glory," i.e. the surprising revelation that the person laughing is superior to the joke's target (Morreall 1987, 19). It requires something of a negative view of both people and laughter – where people are "naturally individualistic and competitive" (Morreall 2009, 6), and laughter occurs when people favour themselves above others. This focus on the laugher's negative response to another's imperfection is based around the idea that jokes have targets. Joke targets are reduced in status compared to the listener, who then laughs as they compare themselves to the joke target who, because of the joke, they view poorly.

Descartes presents something of a more hopeful view – while retaining the idea that laughter is linked to ridicule and scorn. It is difficult to charitably describe his views without mentioning at the outset that his views on when laughter occurs are highly idiosyncratic. Among these, in Article 125 of *The Passions of the Soul*, he says "joy cannot cause [laughter] except when it is moderate" (i.e. the joy is moderate); additionally claiming that experience tells us when we are extraordinarily joyous, "this joy never causes us to burst into laughter" (Descartes 1987, 22). There are many counterexamples to this: people burst into laughter *often* when experiencing great joy, such as at weddings, when graduating, and when a child is born after a long labour. These are some of the most important days in a person's life, joy is at its peak, and we laugh in happiness when these things occur. Descartes's idiosyncratic view of laughter instances does not discount the potential value of his views – it is important to avoid an ad hominem argument. What his views *do* suggest is that he doesn't laugh when other people do. This could lead to a theory that explains laughter instances *for him*, but no-one else.

Across Articles 178 and 179, Descartes's (1987) superiority moves on from the (likely outdated) biology of the 1600s, and moves into philosophical analysis of what provokes laughter; talking about derision or scorn as a "sort of joy mingled with hatred" (p. 24). This joy is presumably moderate, as discussed earlier. We have a "surprise of wonder" which causes laughter when we observe a flaw, or "evil," in another "who is deserving it." By this, Descartes means we laugh when we are surprised at noticing a flaw in others (that we presumably do not share, or believe we do not share, ourselves). He also argues that people with "very obvious [physical] defects" are most prone to mockery of others, in an effort to bring people down as low as themselves (Descartes 1987, 24).

In short, we feel moderate joy when we believe we are better than others, and this provokes laughter. If we cannot feel superior to others, due to our physical flaws, we attempt to undermine others so we can then enjoy a newfound sense of superiority through laughter. This seems to me to be an extremely targeted humour instance – one where status play is important. One might imagine superiority theory is best illustrated when workmates try and undermine each other, or their boss, in an attempt to either literally move up the company hierarchy, or to raise their social status. The German word *schadenfreude*, meaning "taking pleasure in another's pain," suggests there could be something to this humour theory. We've all at some time or another laughed at someone's misfortune: Hobbes and Descartes would argue this is out of a sense of superiority.

Superiority theory appears well-founded when you take into account the layout of the rooms in which comedy is performed. Even in open mics at bar venues, there's a raised stage, lighting to direct the audience's attention to the comedian, and a microphone that ensures the comedian can be heard. In comedy clubs and theatres, the effect is even more pronounced. The comic is the only one lit. The ushers will throw out hecklers who interrupt too much. Everything is tailored to ensure the audience is clear on one thing – the comedian holds the status in that room for the next hour or so. With status comes superiority. The comedian's jokes at the expense of politicians, sports teams, celebrities, and even individuals watching the show demonstrate the comedian's superiority over the joke targets, and invites audiences to join them in that sense of superiority. Superiority here doesn't necessarily carry a sense of smugness or arrogance with it, nor does it imply heightened quality when compared with other theories. Instead, its key focus is status: where the comedian and audience stand above the joke target.

Taking the obvious raised status of the comedian into account, superiority theory could be a tempting view. Even humorous conversations *offstage* often involve a joke target. This isn't to say that the target of the joke is somehow hurt or permanently lowered in the hierarchy by being the subject matter – friends joke at each other's expense all the time. This kind of friendly ribbing can come in the form of funny nicknames for each other, in-jokes based around shared experiences, or making light of individual quirks. Jokes onstage are often readily identifiable as being status-raising for the comic and lowering for the target of the joke. Hosts of late-night comedy shows in the USA used former president Donald Trump as a target of their ridicule for several years (LastWeekTonight 2016, 0:00; Comedy Central UK 2019, 0:00; Colbert 2023, 5:58). Here, their jokes bring down a powerful flawed figure to size. Roast comics like Don Rickles were infamous for their comedic barbs at the expense of other celebrities like Frank Sinatra and politicians like Ronald Reagan. Rickles said onstage, when he first met Sinatra, "Frank, be yourself: stand up and hit somebody," playing on Sinatra's reputation as a hothead (King 2014, 9:20). At an NBC tribute to Reagan, with the president in the audience, Rodney Dangerfield (2018) said: "I'll tell ya, I'm surprised I'm here. I voted for Randolph Scott" (3:37). In the case of Trump, the superiority seems genuinely held, i.e. the comedians view themselves and their behaviour as superior to that of Trump. In the cases of Sinatra and Reagan, the jokes are more affectionate or friendly. These examples show that superiority theory can encapsulate various moods – from genuine disdain through to warmth. This range works in its favour.

Superiority theory explains status-based jokes well. One problem however is that these kinds of jokes all share a common through-line: a relationship. Loosely interpreted, a relationship is a connection between two people. Friends making fun of each other share a close relationship. Rickles and Sinatra didn't know each other when Rickles made the joke about Sinatra hitting people, but Rickles (like the rest of the audience) had a connection with Sinatra in that they recognised his celebrity status and knew of his temper. Reagan was Dangerfield's president when Dangerfield roasted him – just as Trump was Stephen Colbert's, John Oliver's, and Trevor Noah's president when they roasted *him*. However tenuous these relationships are, these jokes are based around connections between people. The problem here is that not all jokes are based around relationships or connections of this kind. In many cases, jokes don't even feature people at all: *Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side.* Do we really want to say that the comedian or audience is

meant to feel superior to a chicken? Although we likely *do* feel superior (on the basis that it is a chicken, not down to the chicken's logical road-crossing motivations), this sense of superiority, if felt, seems a by-product of our pre-existing relationship to chickens, rather than due to any revelation in the joke itself. To take the non-human point further, some jokes don't feature humans, nor do they really reflect on the subject's actions: *What is a bird's favourite vegetable? Asparrowgus.* It starts to get really unclear in wordplay jokes like this one what exactly the listener is meant to feel superior to. Sometimes, jokes just don't feature status or relationships as a key factor in provoking laughter.

Going back to the comedy club context, superiority theory fails to explain the success of jokes where the comedian makes fun of the audience. This is *insult* comedy, rather than roast comedy, i.e. the comedian is making fun of targets within the audience, rather than specific well-known targets who are present specifically to act as the joke target. It's the difference between an MC making fun of an unknown audience member in the front row, and making fun of a celebrity. It's difficult to see how the targeted audience member can claim to feel superior during a joke where they are insulted for being old, or fat, or badly dressed, or for working a boring job, or for "punching above their weight" when it comes to the person they are watching the show with. And it is important to note here that, strange as it may seem, these joke targets *do* laugh at the jokes – and this is not just down to wanting to look like a good sport. Anecdotally, the people most likely to come up to tell me they enjoyed my sets are audience members I've made jokes about. Jeff Ross, of Comedy Central Roasts, has audience members actively volunteer to be roasted by him (Just For Laughs 2018, 1:10). In videos of Rickles's (2023) show, no-one is safe and the audience still produces big laughs (3:48). These jokes *lower* the status of joke listeners. These types of jokes occur so often in stand-up, they simply can't be explained away as a minor exception to the rule. Some comedians, like Don Rickles, Joan Rivers, and Jeff Ross, have all made careers virtually exclusively from making fun of audience members. Despite John Morreall's (2009) assertion that superiority theory could provoke laughter at a *former* state of the listener (p. 6), it's unclear how it could work when the listener-target's state *hasn't changed*.

Similar to relief theory, the shortcomings of superiority theory prevent it from offering a framework for joke improvement. The theory could suggest to comedians who are trying to fix their failing jokes that they should *Increase the sense of superiority felt by the listener*, or *Lower the status of the joke target*, or *Focus more on the parts of the*

relationship/connection that cause the status gap. These pieces of advice would work well for specific genres of comedy, like roasting, but many jokes simply aren't able to have their status or relationship dynamics tweaked because those types of connection are extraneous to the joke. Adding them in could make the joke worse rather than better, and goes against another comedic maxim – that the comedian should generally speaking aim to get to the punchline in as few words as possible.

Simply put, superiority theory is inadequate for explaining the success of much stand-up comedy because far too many jokes don't use relationships as joke fodder, and when they do, the kinds of connections superiority theory relies on don't work in the way the theory assumes they do. It is perhaps better reserved as a theory for clowning, where the audience laughs almost exclusively *at* the clown, rather than outside targets or each other. Because it assumes a relationship-based throughline in all jokes, it also fails to offer a widely applicable framework for joke improvement. Moving on, I will now assess incongruity theory.

1.3. Incongruity theory

Incongruity Theory explains humour as instances where our expectations are subverted by combining concepts in unusual (i.e. incongruous) ways (Morreall 2009, 11). Immanuel Kant was an early proponent of incongruity theory (2009, 161-162), and both Arthur Schopenhauer (1958, 59) and Søren Kierkegaard (1941, 459) also argued for a similar philosophical theory of humour. The theory effectively explains a common layperson perception of joke structure: the set-up lays the groundwork of creating misleading expectations for the audience; while the punchline reveals those initial expectations, and any associated assumptions made on their basis, were incorrect (subverting them by revealing the incongruity at play). Incongruity theory is still popular today. While relief and superiority theories seem to largely be pushed aside – or combined with each other or incongruity, with the aim of producing more nuanced theories – incongruity is more often allowed to stand on its own with comparatively minor tweaks. It is also popular across the various disciplines that make up humour studies, including psychology, sociology, and linguistics. This is a popularity that relief theory and superiority theory certainly don't share. Perhaps most usefully, rather than describing only what jokes *do*, incongruity describes how they *work.* Where relief theory posits the release of tension and superiority theory posits

status-raising of the listener (things that some jokes do), incongruity theory also explains that the unexpected combination of incongruous ideas is *how* jokes are made funny.

Relief theory favours jokes that take the time to build up tension. Superiority theory favours jokes that reflect the raised status of the listener over the joke target. As shown above, this means they struggle to explain jokes of different subgenre or structure. Incongruity theory can comfortably accommodate both tension-heavy and status-focussed jokes of relief and superiority theories, as well as the counterexamples used to disprove them.

Emo Philips's *"I used to think that the brain was the most wonderful organ in my body… then I realised who was telling me this"* switches incongruously from reflections on the body to reflections on the mind. The switch is not in keeping with the expectations created in the setup.

Shaggy dog stories – those long-winded jokes that finish up going nowhere – incongruously combine the expected technique of a good storyteller (brevity and having a point) with those of a terrible storyteller (longwindedness and pointlessness).

Catholic jokes make me cross plays incongruously on the two different meanings of 'cross' as both i) angry and ii) the religious act.

Frankie Boyle's *"My uncle said, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life. He did heroin'"* incongruously combines family and wholesome life mottos with the darker topic of hardcore drugtaking.

Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side plays with our expectations by either i) making an anti-joke by incongruously placing a decidedly obvious and logical answer after what appears to be the setup for a joke, or ii) giving an ordinary chicken metaphysical and religious beliefs about the afterlife.

Rickle's *"Hey Frank, stand up and be yourself: hit somebody,"* at Sinatra's expense is similar to Dangerfield's *"I'll tell ya, I'm surprised I'm here. I voted for Randolph Scott"* at Reagan's: they both incongruously combine a highly respected well-known person with a feigned attitude of disrespect.

In these examples, incongruity theory comfortably accommodates absurdity, shaggy dog stories, religious jokes, family-friendly puns, dark humour, political humour, anti-jokes, and roast comedy. The range of joke types that incongruity theory can explain easily makes it the front-runner so far for most widely applicable comedy theory.

One issue with incongruity theory is that it can incorrectly predict situations to be humorous when they are really anything but. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (2010) use the example of unintentionally killing a loved one to show that an act can incongruously combine concepts like *inflicting harm* and *family members*, while lacking humour (pp. 1141-1142). Taking into account that this theory (like relief and superiority theories) is mean to explain all instances of humour, this is a problem. Unlike the other theories, which are too limited in what they deem potentially funny, incongruity theory can be accused of being too open to what might be funny. The problem is one of specificity: the theory as it stands does little to explain what kind of incongruous ideas might be combined in order to be funny, or how they should be combined in order to provoke laughter.

This shortcoming extends to jokes. Merely discussing a situation where two objects that aren't usually associated with one another interact in some way isn't enough to form a joke. For example, *The computer mouse sat on the chopping board.* There's nothing there to laugh about. You could argue that is an adequate setup and we're just in search of a punchline, but that is the point: if a joke is *just* incongruously combining two ideas, I've already done that. The problem is incongruity theory doesn't sufficiently hint as to what kind of balance or relationship needs to be established between the two concepts incongruously combined in order for the joke to be funny. Unlike relief and superiority theory, whose attempts at specificity stopped them effectively explaining the widest possible range of jokes, incongruity theory faces the opposite problem: its *lack* of specificity means it struggles to offer with sufficient detail an explanation of the ways incongruous ideas can be combined in order to be funny (rather than just nonsensical).

Between relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory, the latter clearly stands above in its ability to explain what jokes do *and* how they work. Relief theory says what jokes *do* is relieve tension – but it doesn't accurately explain *how* that tension is created or how much is considered necessary before it can be relieved. Superiority theory says what jokes do is establish the raised status of the listener above the joke target – but it doesn't say *how* this should be done across various joke subgenres. In comparison, incongruity outlines simultaneously both what jokes do *and* how they work in a single maxim: combine incongruous ideas. What we need in order for this to offer us a framework for the improvement of non-working jokes is *specificity*. We need to know how ideas can be

judiciously combined in incongruous ways in order to provoke that all-important laughter.
This is where the benign violation theory comes in.

1.4. Benign violation theory

Benign violation theory is essentially a revised version of the incongruity theory. It allows for
more specificity when it comes to explaining why certain incongruous combinations are
funny and some are not. The humour theorists behind it, Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren
(2010), say that "benign" means "safe, playful, [or] nonserious," and a "violation" is
something that threatens one's expectations of how things "ought to be." With these
definitions in mind, they argue that humour arises from "benign violations" – where an
event, situation, or combination of concepts is *simultaneously* interpreted as both a
violation and benign (p. 1142)*. In order to create the benign that neutralises violations, they
suggest five different methods of psychological distancing: "temporal, social, spatial,
likelihood, or hypotheticality" (McGraw & Warren 2010, 1146). These techniques create for
the audience a sensation of being a safe distance from violations – allowing them to be
viewed or heard about in a less confrontational way. Here is a Venn diagram:
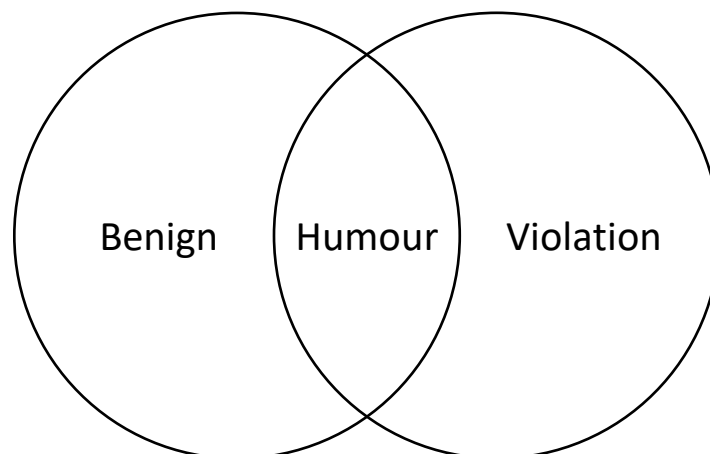
Benign violation theory: humour is a result of violation that can be simultaneously viewed as
benign (McGraw & Warren 2010)

Benign violation theory goes some way towards clarifying incongruity theory, by offering
some guidance as to how concepts need to be incongruously combined in order to provoke

laughter. Tailoring a joke to be more socially acceptable, or benign, is something we do all the time. The way we joke with our friends is often different to the way we joke with people we've just met. Applying this to stand-up comedy, comedians are constantly tailoring their material for the crowd at hand. Edgy comedians who typically play to bar crowds can rarely get away with their usual risqué, blue, or dark material at a corporate gig, for example. Instead, they will pick their least offensive jokes. This is one method of using the benign violation theory. By removing from their set the violations present in certain jokes, they make the overall set sufficiently benign. With that said, the benign violation theory offers another, less used path: choosing a violation and then *lifting the benign to meet it.*

This latter technique – picking strong violations, including jokes based around race, religion, sex, and politics, and leaning into them – was a favourite of Don Rickles. *"Hey Frank, stand up and be yourself: hit somebody,"* Rickle's comedic barb at Sinatra, uses likelihood and spatial distancing to create psychological distance between the audience and the joke target. Again, tension could be built up, rather than dissipated, with this joke. Relief theory then is unsatisfactory. We don't feel a sense of superiority to Sinatra on the basis of the joke hinting at his infamously short temper: and even if we did feel superior in that capacity, it's difficult to really entertain a sense of superiority over someone that rich, famous, and well-loved for any length of time. Instead, we laugh at the incongruous violation of a figure society expects us to respect being treated with such overt *dis*respect. This has been made sufficiently benign through likelihood distancing. We don't think it's *likely* Sinatra will take Rickles up on the offer of violence, so we feel sufficiently safe to laugh at the idea. Further, in a practical sense (taking into account that Sinatra was in the room when the joke was made, so there is no *social* psychological distancing) there was for most audience members *spatial* distancing. Sinatra didn't pose a threat to most people in the room even if he did take the joke seriously, because he was literally distant – too far away – from those audience members to pose a genuine threat. In short, the violation achieved a simultaneously benign/playful/non-serious tone, and provoked laughter as a result.

Had the joke been worded differently, the resulting attempt may have been imbalanced. *"Hey Frank, don't like the jokes? The guy next to you is laughing – why don't you hit him? Wouldn't be anything new for you."* Here, the spatial distancing is removed because the audience doesn't feel like a group of individuals where Sinatra is supposedly comedically considering going for one of them; instead, the joke could be taken as an incitement to

violence aimed at a particular individual. This also reduces the effects of psychological likelihood distancing, where Sinatra seems highly unlikely to hit someone. With more overt disdain hinted at by a benign-imbalanced joke, it seems *more likely* his temper will flare up and he'll respond in a dangerous way. This shows the benign violation theory in action. The violation is Rickles publicly making fun of Sinatra's temper. In the latter, imbalanced version of the joke, the violation came across as too strong. But rather than shying away from this feeling of violation, Rickles leaned into it, but found a way to use spatial and likelihood distancing to sufficiently "benign up" said violation.

Somewhat ironically, Rickles was known as "Mr Warmth." It was a strange fit for an insult comic, but made sense when he reached the end of each performance. Rickles would comedically eviscerate everyone in the audience, regardless of their status, and then raise the benign to meet these intentional social faux pas with a heartfelt thank you and acknowledgement of how great an audience they'd just been. This genuine affection and appreciation for his audience can be seen at celebrity roasts and on his live shows (Starlights 2023, 2:38; Rickles 2023, 53:26). The point here is that rather than making jokes benign by removing violations – which can lead to shapeless, risk-averse comedy – Rickles would instead find a way to lift the benign to meet the violation's challenge. Comedians aware of the theory, and the balance it posits between the two extremes of benign and violation, could use the theory to widen the range of topics they feel comfortable joking about. This is an advantage for comedians seeking to produce original jokes, and great for audiences who will be exposed to a wider range of thought.

Some of McGraw and Warren's suggestions for achieving psychological distance are less effective than others. For example, temporal distancing seems to suggest that jokes about tragedies just get funnier and funnier as more time is added. This isn't the case. In a later paper, they aimed to specify the length of time within which a joke will still work following a tragedy (McGraw, Williams, & Warren 2014, 566). However, their improvements fall short – and actually made temporal distancing *less* effective. Tragedies don't have a window of time within which they can be successfully joked about, and outside of which they can't. Jokes about a tragedy, *during the tragedy*, can be funny – as showcased by Jewish cabaret performers and comedians who would tell jokes to other concentration camp inmates during World War II to keep their spirits up (Herzog 2012, 217-218). There also isn't a cap on the amount of time *passed* since a tragedy beyond which jokes about it are no longer funny.

9/11 jokes, for example, can still be funny. Caustic one-liner comic Jimmy Carr, at the Comedy Central Roast of Rob Lowe, said this about fellow-panellist, Pete Davidson's, dad (a firefighter who died on 9/11): "I'm appalled that people would come here and make jokes about the sacrifice Pete's heroic father made on 9/11. This is not the roast of Pete Davidson's father. That was in 2001" (Comedy Central 2021, 7:37). Regardless of how it comes across on the page, it was a success on the night, with Pete himself laughing and calling the joke "dope," i.e. good (Comedy Central 2021, 7:50). There's certainly no feeling that the joke is any less hard-hitting, funny, or relevant, simply because time has passed. What matters is the benign violation balance of the individual joke.

Jokes can of course be benign *imbalanced*, as was the case for online viewers of Carr's joke about Romani victims of the Holocaust – which was excerpted from the show and shared on social media. Some of those who viewed the joke on social media, outside of its original context within a full show of dark comedy, found the joke too strong a violation, despite the war crime occurring nearly 80 years ago. With the counterexamples from the last paragraph in mind, it is clear that jokes can be funny both during and significantly after a tragedy. What is important is getting the balance of the benign and the violation right *for the given audience*. In the latter Carr example, a joke told for a live audience, and then one that is streaming the entire show from which it is drawn, should not be judged as morally wrong on the basis of its offending *social media* viewers. Context is important. If every joke had to bear social media *and* live audiences into account, it would be impossible to get the benign and the violation balanced. Comedians can only play for one audience at a time.

McGraw and Warren made the mistake of leaning on temporal distancing by psychologically analysing the audience response to a set joke as time passed. Instead, they should have tested various *versions* of the same joke, i.e. different iterations that still rely on the same incongruous ideas and subversion of expectations, in order to see what factors make some jokes successful, where others fail. Rather than claiming it is always a factor of time, it's highly likely that there are other psychological distancing methods that can be used to make jokes work – regardless of the time elapsed since the tragedy occurred. It's not as simple as relying on saying your joke *at the right time* in order for it to be funny. Other factors are at play.

While I have taken issue with the concept of temporal psychological distancing, others have problems with the concept of social psychological distancing, due to the power

imbalance sometimes at play between the joke-teller and audience (Kant & Norman 2019). I also have reservations about social psychological distancing, though for different reasons: its use can make jokes *worse*, rather than better. When a joke is aimed at a person in the room, we can see their response and know that the exchange happened. When we joke about exchanges that happened with people *outside* of the room, we risk hypotheticality or likelihood distancing coming into play. If a comedian describes an exchange with a person who isn't there – aiming to use social psychological distancing to make the joke sufficiently benign – the audience starts to wonder *Did this really happen?* This inability to suspend one's disbelief due to social psychological distancing directly affects the joke's success. In other words, sometimes we *need* to joke about the people in the room, and we make jokes and comedy worse by deliberately avoiding that. Furthermore, joke targets who are in the room can typically be seen, and this can be helpful if audiences are wondering what the person thinks of the jokes told at their expense – typically, when they are in the room and being targeted, they laugh – if the jokes are balanced.

With these critiques in mind, it is fair to say that much of the criticism aimed at facets of the benign violation theory are based around its ambitious aim to explain *all* humour. That aim is beyond the scope of this paper. As a theory to explain how jokes work in stand-up comedy specifically, the benign violation theory is an excellent base from which we can derive a framework for joke-writing and improvement.

1.5. Recap

In the literature review above, I wrote that there are several comedy theories in existence. Relief, superiority, and incongruity theories are the most renowned within philosophy. All of these theories have their shortcomings. Relief theory posits a tension build-up and release that joke-writing and performance does not necessitate. Superiority theory posits a focus on status and connections between the listener and the joke target that aren't always the case. Incongruity theory is more promising, suggesting that jokes are a combination of incongruous ideas, but it doesn't offer thoughts on how this combination works or can be implemented. As a result, the theories at best describe what *some* jokes do, but none of the three theories are detailed enough to offer a framework for joke improvement. This is a problem for comedians looking to rework their material within parameters that maximally

increase the likelihood of its success.

The benign violation theory has the best chance of offering this framework. Other thinkers argue that it is not a universal theory of humour – citing issues with status differentials between joke-teller and listener, or with its own non-specificity. In reply, I have argued that it is well-equipped for theorising specifically about stand-up comedy. We do not require a theory of humour that explains *all* instances of humour; just one that explains instances of humour within stand-up comedy. Benign violation theory fits this specific bill.

Both aesthetics and the ethics of authenticity must be considered together in finding a solution to the problem of the appearance of authenticity in comedy. The aesthetic aspect involves finding a working comedy theory which offers a framework for joke improvement. The solution I will suggest must fit within this working theory, to ensure the solution can be successfully implemented, i.e. the solution needs to help, not impede, laugh-provoking joke-making. The authenticity aspect will determine how the solution can avoid risk of misinterpretation.

Neglecting either aesthetics or ethics would be a mistake. You can't just think of solutions off the top of your head and choose what appears to be the most ethical, without considering the aesthetic, for example. This would fail to accommodate the aesthetic proof that comedy has theoretical parameters it must remain within in order to provoke laughter. Accordingly, effective comedy can't *just* automatically assume the social and ethical mores of the day and move on: it has to take these aesthetic rules into account. Conversely, failing to take ethics into account and arguing comedians should say whatever is most likely to provoke laughter could lead to ethically questionable decision-making regarding the writing and delivery of the jokes – possibly moving towards the most hurtful or shocking material if the situation supposedly calls for it. This is not to say that offensive comedy is automatically morally bad, but in situations where the comedian entertains an audience's worst impulses, like racist or sexist thinking, the comedian needs to consider whether this will be understood as ridiculing those questionable beliefs, or misinterpreted as condoning them.

Having started the aesthetic part of this project in the literature review, I will now continue it by demonstrating how benign violation theory specifically offers a framework for both explanation of jokes *and* improvement of them. We have a handle on what the problem is. Comedians lean into an appearance of authenticity to make their jokes fit their stage persona. When they present morally bad views for comedic effect, some audience

members mistake this as support for those views. In this section, I will expand on the aesthetic work to provide a clear outline of what aesthetic parameters comedians must take into account in order to give their jokes the best chance of success.

Firstly, I will explain the benign violation theory in greater detail. This best describes the way incongruous ideas need to be combined in order for jokes to work in stand-up comedy. I illustrate this with a benign violation spectrum, which jokes can move along as needed to become funnier.

Secondly, I will show how the benign violation theory can be used to illustrate the benign-violation balance of different joke subgenres (using cringe comedy and observational comedy as examples). This will help avoid solutions that consider only the ethical and forget the aesthetic. Violations are unavoidable in comedy – the idea is not to avoid them completely, but how to make them sufficiently benign, *regardless* of their comedic subgenre or content.

Thirdly, I will show how benign violation theory can be used as a framework for the improvement of jokes. Using loud and abrasive comic Gilbert Gottfried's 9/11 joke as a case study will demonstrate practical application of the theory.

Lastly, we need to take a look at how mistaken audience beliefs might arise. I will use the theory to explain how the problem of the *appearance* of authenticity occurs. It is down to pre-existing violation beliefs in the audience accidentally being made benign by the comedian. This makes audiences fall into the trap of mistaking comedic material for the comedian's authentically held opinion.

1.6. Benign violation theory spectrum

Using the benign violation theory of Peter McGraw & Caleb Warren (2010) as a starting point, it is possible to start looking at why some jokes cause more confusion regarding their authenticity than other jokes do. According to the benign violation theory, for a joke to be funny, it must violate our expectations of how the world ought to be, and *simultaneously* be able to be interpreted as safe/playful/nonserious/benign. This, then, gives us some parameters. We have two extremes within which every joke must be balanced. These extremes are *benign* and *violation*. A successful joke cannot be entirely benign, nor entirely a violation – any attempt at joke-making that falls precisely at either of these extreme ends

of the spectrum would not provoke laughter. A joke-attempt that falls squarely on *benign* or *violation* simply becomes one or the other of those things. In the same way that a banal comment about the weather fails to produce laughs, a racial slur yelled repeatedly in the street also fails. This is because the former is all benign, with no violation; the latter is all violation with no benign.

In short, the benign violation theory posits a spectrum that looks like this:

BENIGN >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>><<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<< VIOLATION

Jokes are then subjectively placed along the spectrum according to how they balance the benign with the violation, like so:

BENIGN >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>> JOKE <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<< VIOLATION

This subjectivity is unsurprising. Audience members each have different backgrounds and perspectives. This means they will all react to a given joke subjectively, i.e. with varying degrees of intensity. These varying responses can be illustrated by moving the location of *joke* closer towards one of the two extremes, depending on which one it is more closely aligned with for the individual audience member. Here is a classic one-liner from Fashion Police host and insult comic Joan Rivers: "I hate thin people: 'Oh, does the tampon make me look fat?'" (Dockterman 2014). I recognise the violation in this joke (making light of body shape and accompanying image concerns), but am personally unoffended by it – placing it slightly closer to violation, but still fairly central on the spectrum:

BENIGN >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>> JOKE <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<< VIOLATION

A person who has suffered from anorexia or bulimia may well view the joke differently, placing the joke much closer to the violation end of the spectrum:

BENIGN >> JOKE <<<<<<<< VIOLATION

We may both find the joke funny, while recognising that the content of the joke affects us

differently. This placement is always going to be subjective to some degree, but can still be done with something close to general accuracy. As the audience size grows, rather than focussing on individual responses, we look for averages. Joan Rivers's jokes were found funny by her audiences, who still recognised them as edgy, or violation-heavy. The jokes weren't mere violations (bereft of a balancing benign). They still, on average, provoked laughter. That's why she was able to pull them off. The jokes appropriately balanced the violation with the benign for her audiences.

Let's look at how different types of joke might be illustrated on the spectrum. Puns and wordplay violate our expectation of how words work, in a way that is simultaneously thought of as benign. Because puns are often thought of as relatively innocent (although they can be – and often are – used in blue comedy as well), we tend to look at them as a relatively minor violation. For example, fast-paced silly comedian Tim Vine tells hundreds of jokes per show, using this kind of innocent punning as his primary comedic technique. His material includes jokes like this one: "The advantage of easy origami is twofold" (Vine 2010). This violates our expectation of language-use, giving 'twofold' a double meaning. Jokes like this would be put closer to the benign end of the spectrum, and illustrated like this:

BENIGN >>>>>>>>> JOKE <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<< VIOLATION

Conversely, jokes we think of as blue, risqué, dark, or dealing with potentially uncomfortable subjects like religion, sex, and politics tend to be classed as a stronger violation. Think of the jokes where the laughter is accompanied by a gasp. These are the jokes you wouldn't necessarily start your family dinner with. Here's one from risqué Mock the Week panellist Gary Delaney – a great example of a pun that's not so family-friendly: "I nearly lost my job as a roofer when I was caught masturbating on the first day. Luckily, my boss said I could wipe the slate clean" (Delaney 2018, 3:14). This violates our expectations of language-use, like Vine's origami joke does, by giving us two possible meanings. We could take "wipe the slate" as i) metaphorically start again, and ii) literally clear the slate of semen. Unlike Vine's origami joke, there is clear sexual subject matter. Taking risqué content into account, jokes like this tend to fall closer to the violation end of the spectrum, and are illustrated like this:

BENIGN >>> JOKE <<<<<<<< VIOLATION

While humour is subjective – I may laugh at something that you find unfunny, insensitive, or disgusting; and vice versa – the spectrum can illustrate why a joke isn't working. Assuming that the basic structure of the joke works (e.g. it's not too wordy, it makes sense, etc.), then the joke can be viewed with the audience response in mind. Are they offended, angrily heckling, or walking out mid-show? It may be that the violation seems too strong because the benign factor is not sufficient to balance the joke. Alternatively, are they looking bored and starting to talk to each other, or are they distracted by their food and drink? It may be that the joke is *too* benign; that there is too little violation for the audience to lock into.

Now we have a theory of comedy that shows that jokes are a violation that can simultaneously be seen as benign, safe, playful, or nonserious. This was illustrated with the Venn diagram earlier in this chapter. Once the joke is drafted, it can then be placed on the benign violation *spectrum*, where the joke is observed leaning more strongly towards one or the other extreme. This gives comedians and philosophers an aesthetic illustration of how the joke is being interpreted by audiences. In the next section I will show how the theory can be used to identify comedic subgenres. These subgenres balance the benign and the violation differently – showing that ethical arguments must be more nuanced than "comedians should reduce violations" in order to deal with morally problematic jokes.

1.7. Benign violation spectrum as a tool for comedy subgenre identification

The benign violation theory can also help identify (and *clarify*) comedic subgenres. Some subgenres will be closer to the benign, others closer to the violation. Using the spectrum, we can get hints as to what subgenre certain jokes *might* fit into: the stronger the benign, the more likely to be observational or punny; the stronger the violation, the more likely to be dark, blue, or political.

Some comedic subgenres will present difficulties. Absurdist comedy is highly transgressive in its subversion of audience expectations of how jokes work. It can also vary hugely between whimsically benign topics like stream of consciousness alternative comic Eddie Izzard's (2010) set about whether or not the Death Star in *Star Wars: The Empire*

Strikes Back had a canteen (0:18) – or shocking and violation-heavy performances, like former-preacher-turned-shock-comic Sam Kinison's (2018) ruminations on how women always betray his love, laced with bad language and delivered in high-energy screams right in the audience's face (1:00). That said, most subgenres tend to veer more strongly towards either benign or violation. The spectrum is just one piece of evidence to help categorise individual jokes.

If a joke is intended to work within one subgenre – say, cringe comedy – and isn't getting a response, the spectrum can help work out whether the joke appears out of place because it doesn't fit within the expected benign-violation constraints typical to that subgenre. (This is relevant to the task of finding a solution to the authenticity problem, because it adds further details of what jokes within certain comedic subgenres must retain in order to still provoke laughs after ethical tweaking.)

I'll now compare two different comedic subgenres: cringe comedy, then observational comedy. Using the benign violation spectrum, I will illustrate how different subgenres manage the benign and the violation, in totally different ways.

Cringe comedy is a subgenre that provokes laughter by using second-hand embarrassment in the audience, i.e. embarrassment the audience feels *on behalf* of the stand-up comedian or sitcom/film character. Here, it is useful to think of comedians who really lean into awkwardness – like Emo Philips (Letterman 2022), for example, who sports a Richard III haircut, outlandish clothing, a bizarre breathy and nasally voice, and delivers jokes like this very slowly: "I had quite a laugh today, at the expense of the service station attendant. He was attempting to scrape the bird droppings off my windshield… and I never let on that they were on the *inside*" (0:41). Another example is absurdist performance artist/comedian Andy Kaufman's 1980 appearance on Letterman, where he walked on with snot running into his mouth, coughed disgustingly during his set, then asked the audience for money (Letterman 1980, 0:12, 7:07). You could describe cringe comedy like this:

1. Cringe comedy jokes are illocutionary acts designed to provoke laughter through second-hand embarrassment.

2. These jokes don't always produce the desired perlocutionary effect of laughter – instead, they leave the viewer in a state of discomfort.

3. According to the benign violation theory, this surplus of embarrassment and lack of laughter is due to maximising the violation in the comedy, while adding comparatively little benign.

4. Cringe comedy's funniness is reliant on its *lack* of social psychological distancing. By leaving no room between the viewer and the character, second-hand embarrassment is maximised. The comedy is therefore less benign *and* more polarising as a result.

This breakdown explains why cringe comedy produces a laughter response for some audience members, and a stress response in others. If audiences weakly connect to Andy Kaufman *appearing* to embarrass himself by looking so dishevelled and disgusting on national television, they laugh. For those people, his cringe comedy looks like this:

BENIGN >> JOKE <<<<<<< VIOLATION

The violation is still strong in comparison to other comedic subgenres – but not enough to make the joke so uncomfortable for the audience members that they are unable to enjoy it.

If audiences strongly connect with Kaufman's hopelessness and the derision and laughter he faces, they have a negative emotional response – say, struggling to watch, or wanting to leave the room. For those people, his cringe comedy looks more like this on the spectrum:

BENIGN >>> JOKE << VIOLATION

They may be able to identify the joke-attempt, but the second-hand embarrassment fails to provoke laughter due to being too close to *just* a violation, rather than a joke.

Neither of these responses is right or wrong; it's just how individuals experience cringe comedy. Andy Kaufman and the other comedians working in cringe have little choice as to how polarising their jokes are, because without the strong violation of the second-hand embarrassment that their comedic subgenre trades in, there *is no joke at all*. Accordingly, cringe comedy is less widely enjoyed than other comedic subgenres, because the violation that is a vital part of its creation is too strong for some audience members to look past. This

is a useful comedic subgenre to think of when taking ethical concerns into account. Some subgenres – like cringe comedy – won't be able to reduce the violation in the joke. Instead, comics have to find a way to 'benign it up.'

Observational comedy is a subgenre that provokes laughter by using relatable events from everyday life as comedic subject matter. Because it aims to reinterpret the daily life of everyday people as humorous, it is maximally relatable, and more widely enjoyed than cringe comedy. It is less polarising because it takes fewer risks. Examples include sit-com star Jerry Seinfeld's bit about how absurd the name of the American snack 'doughnut holes' is (Late Show 2016, 1:48), or highly physical arena comic Lee Evans's bit about footballers: "They're like so dim. You know, they say stuff like, 'Well, I'm just gonna go out there and try and score, really.' Well, *yes…* you've suddenly just realised have you? It's a good job you had this *interview*, innit? Otherwise you'd have wandered onto the pitch and gone, *'Now I know I'm 'ere for sumink.'* There's not a lot to remember – they even get little kids to fucking lead 'em onto the pitch" (Evans 2023, 0:04). It's the kind of comedy that makes you reassess the mundane things in life, or nod your head in agreement thinking *Yes, they get that too.* You could break down observational comedy like this:

1. Observational jokes are illocutionary acts designed to provoke laughter through comedic interpretation of highly relatable everyday experiences.

2. These jokes don't always produce the desired perlocutionary effect of laughter – instead leaving the viewer dissatisfied with discussion of banal subjects.

3. According to the benign violation theory, this disinterest and lack of laughter is due to maximising the benign in the comedy, while adding comparatively little violation.

4. Observational comedy's funniness is largely reliant on its *lack* of violation, requiring little psychological distancing before it becomes benign. By inundating the viewer with descriptions of everyday life, the benign is maximised. The comedy is therefore less of a violation *and* more prone to producing boredom or disinterest as a result.

This breakdown explains why observational comedy produces a laughter response for some audience members, and indifference in others. If audiences strongly connect to Seinfeld's thoughts on doughnut holes (say, by recognising the thought, but not in such depth), they laugh at the comedic subversion of their everyday life. For those finding the topic highly relatable and the joke subversive, observational comedy looks like this:

BENIGN >>>>>>> JOKE <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<< VIOLATION

The benign is still strong compared to other comedic subgenres – but not enough to make the joke so banal that audiences fail to see it as funny. If audiences weakly connect, though, seeing in depth thought about everyday life as a turnoff, they have a negative response. This might be because they struggle to see why they should care about the names of snacks, or because they want to watch something further removed from their own life. For those people, observational comedy looks more like this:

BENIGN >> JOKE <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<< VIOLATION

They may be able to identify the joke-attempt, but the observation fails to provoke laughter by almost becoming just a banal statement, rather than a funny joke.

Again, this is not to say audiences are right or wrong in how they perceive these violations of norms. It's just how they experience observational comedy. Observational comics could theoretically observe less family-friendly experiences and bring those observations to their material – but this reduces the maximal relatability the genre seeks. (Everyone relates to the experience of going shopping, but some people don't relate to the experience of a threesome on LSD, for example.) The success of observational comedians like Jerry Seinfeld, Lee Evans, and Michael McIntyre is largely down to their relatability and inoffensiveness. Almost anyone can watch them, adults and children, with minimal problems. The inoffensiveness of observational comedy is therefore an important trait, and one that comedians are unlikely to change without moving inadvertently to a more polarising subgenre, like blue or dark comedy.

Through comparing cringe and observational comedy on the spectrum, it's become clear that each subgenre balances the benign and the violation differently. Accordingly, specific jokes might work better under one subgenre than another. If a joke is proving troublesome in the editing process, working out whether it balances in a similar way to the other jokes in the set can help identify whether it is an appropriate addition, or whether it should be saved for a set in a different subgenre. This categorisation can help comedians work out whether jokes are likely to stand out as too benign or too much of a violation. It is when a joke comes across as purely one extreme, i.e. so benign-violation imbalanced that they aren't recognisable as even a joke *attempt*, that problems of audience misinterpretation start to occur. This could be down to a comedian selecting jokes from the wrong comedic subgenre. It can also happen when a comedian's appearance of authenticity is so convincing that audiences believe that the *comedian* believes what's being said.

I will now use Gilbert Gottfied's 9/11 joke as a case study to explain how the benign violation theory can be used to critically assess the shortcomings of existing material – and then be used to improve it, i.e. make it funnier.

1.8. Benign violation spectrum as a framework for joke improvement

Drawing a spectrum out of McGraw and Warren's theory expands on its utility. It no longer merely explains how jokes work: it offers a basic framework for identifying joke flaws, and then fixing them. Too benign? Up the violation. Too much violation? Up the benign. Just take the comedic subgenre into account when doing it, and the way that specific subgenre balances the benign and the violation. That way, the joke will eventually fit within the set.

Comedians often argue that *anything* can be joked about. Wherever there is a violation that is received too strongly by the audience, the comedian can focus on increasing the benign to make the violation acceptable – this is the superior alternative to watering the violation down. Comedians need violations in order to produce comedy, along with all the benefits we associate with it, like questioning the status quo, examining the logic behind our beliefs, and thinking outside the box. If we exclude certain violations from discussion (say natural disasters, or abortion, or religion), we limit the topics open to comedians. This decreases comedians' ability to critique societal views. The benign violation theory doesn't argue that every joke-attempt about a given violation is automatically acceptable or a

valuable social critique. Instead, it offers a method to sensitively touch on difficult subjects in a balanced and comedic way. With this in mind, anything can be joked about in stand-up comedy – but the more taboo the joke is, the more precise the balance between the benign and the violation needs to be.

A common saying is *Comedy = Tragedy + Time*. The meaning is clear: time provides the psychological distance that jokes about awful events need in order to be received as funny, rather than offensive and unempathetic. As I argued earlier in this chapter, this reliance on the passage of time is a mistaken view. Jokes can draw on tragedies that have just happened – or are *still happening* – for fodder. Those jokes can be funny in the moment. All that is required is for the benign-violation balance to be perfectly executed. The closer to the tragedy the joke is, the harder sticking the landing of the joke will be. But it is possible.

It was one of the first major comedy shows in the city since 9/11: The N.Y. Friars Club Roast of Hugh Hefner. Three weeks after the attack, Gilbert Gottfried attempted to make a joke about the attack. The joke bombed. Gottfried (2016) said he couldn't get a direct flight to California because "they said they have to stop at the Empire State Building first." One of the loudest heckles was "Too Soon." *We haven't had time to process and grieve. Now is not the time to laugh.*

For context, a roast is insult comedy aimed at a celebrity joke target. There is a star of the roast, i.e. a main target, but the comedians roasting the star also target each other. The goal is to affectionately stick it to as many people as possible. However, this environment arguably made successfully joking about 9/11 even more difficult than it already was so soon after the event. This is because there was no room within Gottfried's set to establish an appearance of warmth, sympathy, or pity towards the city that had just been hit. Instead, he had to fit as many insulting jokes as he could into his set. Prioritising that goal didn't give the 9/11 joke the benign it needed to balance the violation.

I argue the same joke could have been delivered in the same way, amongst the same jokes, *at the same moment in time*, if the balance of the benign and violation had been improved. To bring comedy and the ability to laugh back to New Yorkers, the benign safety of laughter needed to be re-established. Gottfried failed to do this. It's impossible to know for sure how the audience might have reacted to an alternative, better balanced version of

the joke. It seems fair to say that an attempt at balancing the benign would have made a difference to how the joke was received by the crowd. Regardless of whether they laughed, they would likely have given Gottfried – and his joke – the benefit of the doubt, had it been better balanced.

To make the necessary adjustments, Gottfried could have cut some of his other jokes, and dedicated more time to pulling off the 9/11 joke successfully. This would have required additional time, because building sufficient benign would take more words in the setup. Had he started with the appearance of understanding and sympathy, he may have won them over – before truly surprising them with the punchline. A successful version of the joke might have looked something like this:

"Before I begin, I want to say thank you for letting me laugh with you, after the tragedy that hit this city three weeks ago. New York City came together that day in a way we rarely see. You all showed the rest of us what New Yorkers are made of.

"It was a day that changed the skyline and the history of this city forever. And it's not just New York. It's changed all our lives in a way we could never have predicted. Look at security. Look at travel. Look at flying. You know, I couldn't get a direct flight here because they said they have to stop at the Empire State Building first."

With the amount of 9/11 jokes that are made even today, we've become desensitised to the shock and horror of what happened. The revised version of the joke above may seem like overkill – and *today*, it would be. Now, that amount of benign build-up isn't necessary. But back then, at a gig three weeks after the attack, those extra few sentences in the setup would have clarified several things. These include Gottfried's understanding of the seriousness of the 9/11 attacks, his recognition of how they had affected New York, and that the joke was an attempt to lift the spirits of those affected. Instead, he kept the joke short, and the violation was too strong. The benign-violation balance was off.

Comedians deal with massive news stories and tragedies all the time. They can be joked about, but the balance is clearly important. Getting it right means at worst the joke attempt is less likely to be interpreted as callous. At best, it means comedians can help audiences laugh in the face of tragedy. There is something to be gained, then, from the joke improvement framework offered by the benign violation theory.

It is worth noting that professional comedians want to make *funny* jokes about challenging topics, rather than wanting to make *specific* jokes about them. Jokes change and

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grow and adapt between performances – and comedians aren't picky as to whether the original wording stays or not. Jimmy Carr (2021) sums this up well in his memoir, *Before and Laughter*: "Sometimes you'll fall in love with a line and the audience doesn't like it … You'll change it, and you'll change it, and you'll change it and eventually, it gets a laugh. And then do you know what you have? A different line" (p. 10).

Comedians change their wording, flow, pace, and delivery all the time. They want their jokes to be laughed at, whatever their final form. If a joke cannot be polished to a satisfactory state (i.e. a laughter-inducing one) then the concept might be retained and reworked into a completely different joke – or the concept may be cut from the act. There is no benefit to keeping a joke that doesn't work without changing it in some way. Consequently, tweaking the benign-violation balance of a joke to acknowledge the seriousness of the topic before making light of it, or working to increase the benign in other ways, should not be viewed as a loss of comedic integrity. It is merely giving the joke the best chance of success.

With all this said, jokes can't please everyone – and this isn't always the fault of the comedian. Almost daily, there is news of some comedian accused of being offensive, or apologising for some offense they've caused. This will often be down to jokes that have been removed from their original context. Instead of being heard by a paying audience at a comedy club, the joke is being shared by tabloids and social media to unsuspecting audiences. Contextless jokes like these are near impossible to make sufficiently benign, because the work that goes into balancing them can be edited out by whoever uploads the clip. In a sense, a clip showing a joke out of context is not really "telling the joke."

With so many complaints about offensiveness, one could be led to believe the problem of the appearance of authenticity lies with the violation. A comedian seems like they genuinely mean the horrible things they joke about, and this offends people. Offending people is a concern, but not the primary one. I will argue instead in the next section that the real ethical issue we should concern ourselves with is the *benign*. The risk of a bad outcome is far greater when a comedian accidentally appears to condone the unethical beliefs of the audience – making benign what should be an obvious violation.

Now that it's clear how benign violation theory can be used to improve jokes, and where different subgenres of jokes might fall on the benign violation spectrum, it's worth considering how audiences understand the benign.

What audience members accept as benign – and therefore morally permissible – is based on their own perspective, not the comedian's. The comedian can't control what the audience understands as a violation and what they understand as benign. This is especially important when attributing ethical culpability for an audience member's morally bad actions.

The danger for the comedian isn't the risk of being offensive. Offensiveness is ultimately just hurting someone's feelings. (This is different from, say, triggering someone's PTSD and causing a panic attack – another possibility that is difficult to avoid without limiting possible topics.)

The danger lies in accidentally bringing to the surface the *pre-existing* morally bad beliefs of their audience members. This happens when the jokes are misinterpreted as a call to morally bad action. (It seems to me there is a higher risk of a comedian's material accidentally exposing an audience member's pre-existing morally bad beliefs, rather than mistakenly inculcating audiences to those beliefs through jokes.)

The Pub Landlord, a staunchly English working class character played by comedian Al Murray, is an example of someone misconstrued as supporting the views they aim to satirise. He jokes about "saving this country," and portrays a nationalistic pride and nostalgia for the British Empire that some have accused of attracting bigoted audiences who don't recognise the joke. Murray says in Chortle, the leading comedy news and review site in the UK, that if that is the case, "I don't care… I'm taking the piss. And you can't depict the crazy, hallucinatory opinions that the Pub Landlord has without showing them" (Chortle 2018). In character, he even stood for election (in real life) against right-wing populist UKIP leader and prominent Brexiteer, Nigel Farage (Logan 2015). Almost always appearing in character, and crossing from the theatrical stage to the political one, has helped Murray gather audiences who could feasibly see themselves in the Pub Landlord. While this hasn't led to violence, it does demonstrate that comedians are capable of attracting – and encouraging – audiences with beliefs that the comedian does not authentically hold, but

might appear to.

A *negative-benign* is a term I've coined to describe the audience member's *pre-existing* morally questionable belief, i.e. a morally questionable view held by the audience member *before* watching the comedian. Imagine an audience member who doesn't laugh at an ironic antisemitic joke. Assuming the joke works structurally, then there are two main reasons the audience member might not have laughed: i) because the violation is too strong:

BENIGN >> JOKE << VIOLATION

or ii) because they see the violation as purely *benign*:

BENIGN/JOKE <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<< VIOLATION

The latter occurs when the joke unintentionally entertains a negative-benign of the audience member. They miss the violation, and instead hear it as a benign statement of support. In this case, the negative-benign has thrown off the intended interpretation of the joke.

This is where the appearance of authenticity becomes important. When the comedian is outwardly critical of the morally questionable view discussed, the audience member might take this *criticism of the view as* the violation, instead of the view itself. In these cases, the audience member is not the target demographic for the comedian's material, so they find it unfunny.

But – if a comedian plays the antisemitic joke deadpan, or uses irony or sarcasm, or appears to genuinely entertain the morally questionable view they are comedically dissecting, then the audience member *won't see the violation*. The joke, to them, is simply benign and becomes a statement to be agreed or disagreed with. And because the joke is understood to express views the audience member agrees with, the audience member misinterprets the comedian as *agreeing with their morally questionable views.* Ironic jokes about morally questionable ideas lack any violation for the audience member with the relevant negative-benign.

Comedians in these situations, then, are not putting these ethically questionable ideas in audience members' minds; somehow converting them to those beliefs, or working to

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inculcate them over time. Instead, they are *unintentionally* backing up negative-benigns. What the comedian, and most of their audience, see as a violation, certain audience members misinterpret as benign. This misunderstanding occurs when the comedian discusses violations with something resembling an air of authenticity – regardless of whether they actually *are* being authentic.

The difficulty for comedians is that you can make a joke that has the same point – *Antisemitism is morally bad* – in two ways. One is overt criticism, the second uses irony. The former is unlikely to persuade antisemites to change their view, *because* it's overt criticism of their beliefs. But the latter can be misinterpreted as genuine support of antisemitism. This is why political comedy is difficult. Either you preach to the choir, or your ironic jokes about morally bad views risk being misinterpreted as authentically held beliefs.

In this chapter, I have outlined the strengths of the benign violation theory as a framework for joke improvement, and for identification of comedic subgenres. The theory shows that joke-attempts fail to provoke laughter – and in some cases to even be recognised as joke-attempts – when they fall precisely on the benign or violation ends of the spectrum. In cases where the joke-attempt falls squarely on violation, it is seen as exactly that: a pure violation, with no benign to balance it. This tends to be seen as an offensive act by audience members. In cases where the joke-attempt falls squarely on the benign, it is seen as banal: so benign that a violation isn't even registered. In cases where an audience member has a negative-benign, i.e. a pre-existing morally bad belief, violations can be misinterpreted as benign, and register as agreement of the comedian with the said negative-benign. This takes place when the comedian carries an air of authenticity in their delivery – *even when they do not intend to be taken seriously*.

Now that the aesthetic rules for joke writing and performance have been settled, my focus will turn to how comedians can deal with this appearance of authenticity, so essential for the successful delivery of comedic material, and the key contributor to the problem of misinterpretation. In the second chapter, I will look at three existentialist notions of authenticity. Having examined the positions held by various thinkers, I have selected Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Martin Buber for critical analysis. This is due to their focus on different groups: the individual, the group, and one-on-one relationships,

respectively. These thinkers are worth this extra attention because they can shed light on different parts of the comedy writing and performing process. I will use their thinking for my own purpose; building a framework comedians can use to navigate authenticity.

2. Chapter Two: Authenticity

The existentialists developed a philosophy based around subjective experience and working towards discovering how one should live one's life. A through-line across existentialism is the concept of *authenticity.* Existentialists disagreed with each other on exactly what constituted authentic living, how authenticity could be achieved, and what it meant for the individual – but theirs was an interest in living an authentic life, perhaps loosely (and overly simplistically) defined as "a life that is true to oneself." Three thinkers play a key part in this section: Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Martin Buber. They each argue for different types of authenticity that focus on different groups of people.

i) Nietzsche's authenticity saw us all as individuals. He used the will to power and questioning of objective moral facts to suggest individuals should strive towards their potential, refusing to thoughtlessly accept the moral status quo (Nietzsche 1998, 22-25, First Essay, Aphorism 10). I will argue that Nietzsche's individual focussed authenticity is best used in the drafting stage of joke-creation, i.e. the writing that happens before the comedian performs in front of an audience. This allows the comedian to get jokes they authentically find funny on the page – without yet worrying how they will be received by audiences. They can do this by writing without thought of the moral status quo, and by constantly working to improve the funniness of their jokes by focussing on making them as tightly written as possible from their own perspective.

ii) Camus's authenticity saw us all as individuals *that are part of a group, or society*. He saw life as "absurd;" a contradiction where individuals expect life to have meaning, but it doesn't (Camus 2005, 4-5). To live with this, he prioritises truth (acceptance of absurdity, as well as blunt communication with each other). Acceptance and his version of truth allows us *all* to live together better in society, which he thought should be our goal. I will argue that Camus's group-based authenticity is best used in the editing process, i.e. when comedians are performing on open mic nights in front of audiences. This allows the comedian to test their original jokes on an audience, who as a group then communicate which jokes are sufficiently benign-violation balanced by laughing. Edits are made according to what helps audiences laugh harder and more often.

iii) Buber's (1996) authenticity saw us all as I-You "word pairs," individuals in a series of one-on-one relationships with each other (pp. 53-54). How we treat and relate to each

other on an individual level (in conversation, rather than as members of the same or different group/s) allows us to "encounter" each other, rather than "use" each other as a means to achieve our ends. I will argue that Buber's I-You authenticity works best in the finalising of jokes. Insofar as jokes are every truly finalised, this authenticity would ensure maximum clarity and minimal chance of misinterpretation by individual audience members. By taking into account how they will come across on an individual level as much as possible, the comedian can avoid situations where a morally false positive has been given at the group-editing process, i.e. where audiences have laughed at jokes that were sufficiently benign for *them*, but might be too strong a violation for others. I will now expand on these thinkers and their approach to authenticity in the order listed above.

2.1. Nietzsche and morality

Nietzschean authenticity prioritises questioning the moral status quo. Because he didn't believe in moral facts, and was the proponent of the will to power, Nietzsche saw Christian morality as particularly self-sabotaging, and in direct combat with humanity's striving towards its potential. According to this view of "authenticity," an authentic comedian would refuse to blindly accept the moral status quo in case it affected their own ability to make the best jokes. This ties in with the common belief that comedians expose societal quirks through funny and blunt commentary – as seen at least as far back as the medieval jester and the fool characters in Shakespeare's plays, and more recently in the form of comedians like Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Bill Hicks.

Nietzsche (1998) outlines his concept of "slave morality," or "herd morality" in the First Essay, Aphorism 7 of *Genealogy of Morals* – describing it as an ethic which gives those who *lack* power (the weak, the poor, those who lack status in the societal or church hierarchy) the ability to redefine these weaknesses as a kind of moral strength (pp. 18-20). He does this firstly by referring to Aphorism 195 from *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he argued that the Jews "achieved that miracle of inversion of values" by combining diverse concepts such as 'rich,' 'godless,' 'evil,' 'violent,' and 'sensual' into one negative concept (Nietzsche 1998, 20; Nietzsche 1990, 118). This began the "slave revolt in morals," where the concept of 'goodness' was corrupted, and over time and through religious influence became something

other than what was originally intended (Nietzsche 1990, 118). Rather than a way of describing power, strength, and control; 'goodness' became slave morality – an ethic where weakness and powerlessness was something that should not be challenged and overcome, but instead accepted, and even celebrated as a moral good. Evidence of weakness being celebrated through Christian morality is clear in verses of the Bible (King James Version, 1769/2023), like Matt 5:5, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Taken to its logical extreme, the opposites of these slave virtues – things like the aforementioned power, strength, and control – come to be seen as bad, or even evil.

While the language is likely deliberately provocative (particularly the use of the word "slave"), there is a clear line from this morality to making a virtue of selflessness, a virtue that undoubtedly makes focussing on oneself and one's own success more difficult. Nietzsche believes that the values we associate with Christian morality prevent us from reaching the heights of individual *and* collective achievement. (Collective achievement here would amount to something like making way for those with the most potential.) Using the Übermensch as an example of what we should strive towards, Nietzsche views morality that denigrates the virtues of that figure as a great stain on humanity – one we can remove, by examining the source of our morality in depth. Moral examination gives us the potential to make an informed decision as to what we want our moral values to be.

In the First Essay, Aphorisms 4 and 5 of *On the Genealogy of* Morals, Nietzsche (1998) uses etymology and philology to look at the Greek, Latin, and German origins of moral terms like 'good' and 'evil,' and finds them originally more associated with individually focussed *power* than the group focussed selflessness we understand them to be now (Nietzsche pp. 14-17). We no longer celebrate power and aristocracy and the qualities associated with these things, like control, strength, and firmness, as good. Instead, we celebrate 'Christian' virtues like patience, pity, and empathy – virtues which assist in the "devaluation of *this* world in favour of the next" (MacIntyre 1967, 223). Regardless of whether we uphold these morals *now* through religious belief or mere tradition, Nietzsche would argue that this later, weaker morality has led to a weaker people. Importantly, those living under slave morality demean themselves and have less freedom to perform important and worthwhile tasks, because they are prioritising the needs of the weak over the wants of the strong (Nietzsche 1998, 67-68, Second Essay Aphorism 18). Applied to comedy, slave morality impedes our ability to reach our comedic potential by pushing comedians to uphold existing moral norms

– exactly the kind of moral norms Nietzsche would argue authentic comedians should be challenging.

Moral questioning means two things for comedians: i) refusing to blindly accept the moral status quo as a limit or parameter on their joke writing, and ii) writing jokes that question the moral status quo. The first is easily done in the drafting stages of comedy. Comedians gather ideas throughout their day for use later in their joke-writing. These ideas range from political perspectives, to observations of everyday living, to more risqué or taboo subject matter, depending on the comedic subgenre in which they work. In the writing process, adopting Nietzsche's moral questioning essentially means writing whatever jokes they think are funny, without imposing any kind of restrictions or self-censorship during the first draft. This is the case in stream of consciousness writing, brainstorming, and other forms of idea collection, right through to actually drafting recognisable jokes. With moral questioning in mind, comics can write jokes that toe the line, go over the line, reflect on various comedic perspectives, and get into act-outs of all sorts of characters (both morally permissible and ethically questionable). This kind of freedom allows for the best ideas to be gathered in the first place, then selected, without fear, for further development into jokes.

Moral questioning has not always been so readily accepted in comedy as it is now. Lenny Bruce was often arrested in the 1960s for his highly politicised material that exposed the racist or antisemitic or sexist views of the population at the time. He was able to write this material in the first place because the moral status quo did not hold sway over him. It's already difficult to take morality into account when joke-writing, but when you accept societal mores as part of an ethical framework, it becomes even harder – it's difficult to choose which moral belief should take precedent over another. While it seems uncontroversial now to say that racist beliefs should be criticised through satire, it could also be argued that it's unethical to make people uncomfortable when they've paid for a night of laughs. While these latter two views may be considered examples of manners rather than morals, some people would say it is morally bad to ignore the manners or social norms of the culture in which you are performing. If that were to be the case, then writing jokes that make audiences question their views, or that risk offending them, could be perceived as unethical in some way. The point here is that competing moral considerations make joke writing a minefield. When Bruce took on a Nietzschean view by refusing to blindly

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accept the traditional morality he had inherited, Bruce was able to be authentic to his own views and sense of humour within his joke writing.

This refusal to unthinkingly follow moral norms is not restricted to highly political comedians like Bruce. When insult comics like Joan Rivers, Jeff Ross, and Don Rickles make fun of their audiences for comedic effect, they are neither following traditional moral rules, nor making a grand political gesture. This shows the breadth of joking Nietzsche's moral questioning permits: it gives comedians room to breathe, innovate, create, joke, and break the moral rules while writing comedy of various subgenres.

2.1.1. Nietzsche's will to power

Schopenhauer (1958), drawing from Kant, was an idealist, as shown by the opening line of *The World as Will and Representation* "The world is my representation…" (p. 3). From there, Schopenhauer constructs a somewhat complicated view that the world is essentially made up of the "will" or "striving." What appears to us in our representations as a collection of objects is *just* will, or striving (Young 2005, 64-65). He argues that pain is unavoidable and trying to prevent it "achieve[s] nothing more than a change in its form" (Schopenhauer 1958, 315). This develops towards a pessimistic outlook as the only way we can overcome the weakness and pain we suffer as a result of our subjection to the will is by denying it and turning to an ascetic lifestyle.

Nietzsche builds on Schopenhauer's concept of the will – moving away from idealism and focussing instead on the importance of our drive towards things like control, sex, and wealth. This turns into a more ambitious and positive outlook: one that embraces life's suffering as necessary to pursuing our potential, thus inverting Schopenhauer's despair into something we can work with, rather than simply despair over. Nietzsche (1990) argues that there is a drive within all of us towards power; he calls this the *will to power* (Nietzsche 66-67, Aphorism 36).

As discussed in the previous section, *good* and *bad* were originally terms used to describe the qualities of the rich and powerful (good), and the poor and weak (bad). A morality using the terms *good* and *bad* as originally intended better accommodates Nietzsche's working towards strength, under the will to power, as a positive thing. For Nietzsche, desiring

strength and power, then pursuing it, was the only way to work towards our potential. If we *all* followed slave morality, there would be no people meeting their potential – and society would lose those people who would otherwise bring their creativity and power to bear on others in a meaningful way. While Nietzsche believed that the important work and vision of human potential was to be achieved by a select few historical (and future) powerhouses, like Napoleon, he also thought that Christian morality inhibited *all* of us from pursuing our own will to power. In the First Essay, Aphorism 12 of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he argues there is a risk of humanity's stagnation if we all become an unthinking member of "the herd" – an outcome which he is working to avoid (Nietzsche 1998, 28).

With no moral foundation or normative framework to appeal to, problems arise for the will to power. It has been used to justify Nazism. If all that is important is the pursuit of power in any given arena, then it might be argued that joke theft is permissible in order to pursue power in the comedy hierarchy. Underhandedness in pursuit of political power – the kind endorsed by Machiavelli in *The Prince* – would also be acceptable. This is a problem. Regardless of what moral framework we each uphold, it is clearly undesirable that people should act however they like – hurting others in the process – in pursuing the will to power. I concede that widespread application of the will to power in all arenas, without a moral framework, becomes very difficult to endorse. However, within the realm of stand-up comedy, I argue that the will to power does not present these kinds of problems. The will to power can be pursued in this particular area because it preserves vitally important comedic ethical beliefs (like "don't steal jokes") *without* referring to a moral framework to do so. It also leads to better work ethic across the board – thereby not merely maintaining the status quo, but raising the bar and improving comedy as a result.

The will to power can be selfish and morally problematic when applied in *some* fields. However, in stand-up comedy, a comedian's pursuit of the will to power benefits all parties involved in comedy performance and viewing. This inability to endorse the will to power across all vocations is not a shortcoming of the theory. Being a comedian is a job, and different jobs have different rules. You'd never say *It's OK to kill as a soldier, therefore it's OK to kill as an ice cream man*. There are some rules, then, that might apply to comedians but not to those with other vocations. *It's OK to follow the will to power and strive to be the best comedian, but not the best murderer* seems like an unproblematic statement as a result. At least in comedy, it seems a form of authenticity that comedians and audiences

both benefit from. It allows comedians to deliver authentic material they might not have otherwise strived towards, or been too scared to deliver. This then ensures comedian inauthenticity doesn't rob audiences of a unique perspective they may benefit from (even if only through the chance to critique it).

Nietzschean authenticity supports striving to reach one's potential. Authentic comedians would strive towards being the best (funniest) comedian they could be. The 'will to power' would encourage comedians to strive to be not just the best comedian they can be, but also the funniest *overall* comedian. This attitude would be a positive thing for the artform in general, because if that perspective were widely adopted, more comedians would be putting in the work required to improve their material. (This last statement is not a judgement, but an observable fact: open mic comedians will often take the same or similar set onstage, gig after gig, for *years*.)

One potential problem with Nietzsche's will to power when applied to comedy is that it fails to recognise that not everyone can be at the top. (For there to *be* a top, there needs to be underlings.) With that said, the inability of all comedians to reach the top through will to power can be remedied somewhat by recognising that the one thing they can all do is *strive* to be the best. If all comedians strive to be the best, they would be following the will to power – and those designated through audience response as the funniest comedians would be the ones coming out on top. All comedians can strive to reach their potential; only some will actually come out on top of the entire comedy scene. This then does not undermine Nietzsche's aspirational view of individuals and the importance of art.

Another issue with the will to power is that it's likely impossible to know when a comedian has reached their potential. If they have reached their potential, they can't get any funnier, nor can their material get any better… but material can always get better, have more punchlines added, have the word count reduced, etc. Comedy isn't like running, where a runner might hit their physical peak at say 23 years of age, record their best time for a run, and never hit that physical peak nor best time again – thereby having reached their potential at 23. (And even then, that may not have been their potential, but simply their best recorded time. You can imagine a runner recording their best time, but being a lazy runner, who hadn't put all their energy into that particular run. In that case, it would be their best recorded time, but not an instance of reaching their potential.) Comedians, unlike athletes, can *always* improve.

Nietzsche talks about life as more than merely a pursuit of happiness, following contentment and the path of least resistance. Instead, happiness should come as a result of our struggle for power. The difficulty here is that comedians cannot know what they are capable of in comedy, and in many cases may never meet their potential. Rather than stopping them, this should be encouraging and exciting. They can always get better. There is no time to rest on their laurels. They should always be striving towards a potential they do not know the limits of. Under the will to power, comedians should keep writing and performing. It is hard and at times demoralising work – but the effort will (hopefully) be rewarded with improvement. There is something to this happiness-through-struggle argument. The struggle is writing and performing an endless array of gigs in pursuit of improvement and reached potential. The happiness comes from incremental improvement and slowly acquired comedic strength. Comedians presumably got into the business because they wanted to make people laugh: the will to power is a motivator that keeps them on the path to achieving that goal. Understood in this way, an unknowable potential is an exciting challenge in life, rather than something to beat comedians down.

 Extrapolating from this healthy competitiveness with themselves and each other, the will to power applied to comedy makes clear that a lot of the moral rules comedians tend to hold would be upheld from this viewpoint – even if they would not be argued for from an ethical perspective. This does not make the will to power in comedy a contradiction to questioning the moral status quo. Comedians might question the received wisdom or tradition of society's moral framework and find that they agree with portions of it, while disagreeing with how it has traditionally been argued.

I will now use the moral rule "don't steal other comedians' material" as a case study – elaborating at some length on the kind of moral rules the will to power can still uphold without resorting to moral argumentation. Comedians currently tend to see joke theft as a moral wrong, an *ethical* shortcoming. If they were to adopt the Nietzschean view of authenticity, instead of dismissing joke theft as a moral wrong, they would dismiss it as an *artistic* shortcoming, a denial of the will to power and will towards comedic superiority. You can't, after all, be the best comedian if you are doing someone else's jokes – that precludes your ability to write funnier jokes than other people, and fundamentally undermines what comedic success looks like.

One could argue the will to power should only be applied to literal power, in a

hierarchical sense. In this case, stealing material, if it helped you climb the comedy hierarchy towards better gigs, would be permissible under Nietzschean authenticity. (It's also permissible due to his lack of moral facts.) However, power is not just about moving up the hierarchy. As I've said, Nietzsche wasn't a latter-day Machiavelli, outlining what individuals need to do to gain and keep power. Instead, he was arguing about the importance of power gained through reaching individual potential, *ideally* over others.

Fighting over ownership of the same jokes doesn't lead to power in the comedy hierarchy, nor to power as an individual comic. Instead, it makes the artform worse by stalling its progress. (With Nietzsche arguing often that art is one of the most important parts of life, he likely would have found this shortcoming severe, had he been around during the birth of stand-up.) Comedians risk stifling themselves, too, because joke theft doesn't allow anyone to reach their potential, distracting them from working their own material and improving.

We fail to be the best when we become an imitation of someone else. It's conceivable that stolen jokes could be performed in a funnier way than the comic who wrote them – but if this is the case, the chances are low that the jokes were taken from the *best* comics. It's difficult to steal from the best comedians because their jokes and styles are highly recognisable. Also, pro comics have experience in both writing *and* performing and know how to tweak jokes as needed on a gig-by-gig basis for maximum success. When comedians steal jokes, they rob themselves of the chance to learn about joke writing and editing – both of which are essential when jokes need to be reworked mid-show. (This could be down to a bit not working, or a bit working so well the crowd wants it to go on for longer.) Joke theft, then, makes comedy *harder* for the thief, rather than easier. They are short-changing *themselves*. The will to power upholds the importance of writing one's own jokes – without appealing to morality to do it.

Digging deeper into this issue, the best jokes are also performed with the *appearance* of authenticity that the best comedians convey in their acts. As I said in chapter one, comics like mainstream observational comedian Michael McIntyre and acerbic taboo-breaker Frankie Boyle couldn't swap jokes because their styles are too different, and it would come across as inauthentic. This is true of all comedians, even those who don't do the stream of consciousness monologues we typically associate with authenticity. One-liner comedians like Gary Delaney, Mitch Hedberg, or Jimmy Carr – who I earlier said doesn't have to worry

about being misinterpreted as presenting his authentically held beliefs, because of his clear joke structure and delivery – present jokes that appear to match their comedic outlook. Their jokes would be difficult to perform *better* than how they perform them because the jokes are written with their stage personas in mind. (Carr may occasionally have people credited for "additional material" on his DVDs, which translates to "writer of extra jokes" – but these writers will still write with Carr's stage persona in mind.)

Carr finds rape jokes and sex jokes and bestiality jokes funny; Delaney finds suggestive wordplay funny; and Hedberg finds absurd scenarios funny. The one thing we see in these people that comes across most strongly as authentic is an awareness of what type and topic of joke they find funny. Stolen jokes are hard to sell, even when they are commercially successful as a result. Look at Dennis Leary stealing from Bill Hicks. Leary is still an actor and comic, and Hicks died decades ago – but Hicks is still the more well-known and respected of the two (True 2002, 156-157, 186). This is because he performed his own material better than Leary could. While the comedian who is stolen from is disadvantaged, the important aspect for the will to power is that joke theft gets in the way of the *thief* as well. This aspect is what moves it away from the morality we are more accustomed to, which focusses on how the victim is wronged. Joke theft's wrongness (i.e. belief in its negative effects, rather than moral wrongness) is upheld by the will to power because it impedes the progress of the thief. For Nietzsche, joke theft gets in the way of two people reaching their potential: the comic stolen from, who might struggle to perform those jokes; and the thief, who cannot improve or develop their own writing skills. This impeded potential is a disastrous outcome – suggesting joke theft isn't worth it.

Taken to its extreme, it's incredibly hard to imagine a comedian building a career based around the will to literal hierarchical power in the comedy scene by stealing material. Let's say they steal from unknown comedians, who happen to be incredible writers that haven't made it in TV and film – so their material isn't widely recognised as stolen. Down the line, as the joke thief gets better gigs, they will need to move to longer sets, more jokes, and better material, to justify the better gigs they are getting. This requires theft on a much larger and more recognisable scale. Finally, when they reach the top of the game and perform material for TV, they will need material in such volume that they can't hope to steal it. It would simply be too much. They would then need to hire joke writers – thereby still focussing on their comedic performance and not their writing; *both* parts of which are essential to be the

best comic, and failing to follow the will to power, or to reach their potential.

Alternatively, out of necessity (or after being spotted as a joke thief) they could start writing their own material, but so late in the game that their lack of experience will be obvious and their career would falter as a result. This happened to joke thief Jordan Paris on the 2011 season of *Australia's Got Talent*. Having been caught for stealing jokes from Lee Mack and Geoff Keith in an earlier round (Waters 2011), Paris tried to remedy it by making light of the theft in his next set. He did this by stealing a Jeff Ross joke from the 2009 Comedy Central Roast of Joan Rivers (Nancarrow 2011). The remaining material was written by Paris, but was badly received. Judge Kyle Sandilands said, "stick to ripping off other people's stuff because your stuff sucks arse" – suggesting that joke thieves can't become good comedians via osmosis. Situations like this suggest that comedians following the will to power *write* good jokes, rather than steal them.

In short, the Nietzschean idea of authenticity for a comedian is maintaining the ability to question moral rules as a free-thinking individual, in the face of a society that seeks to "average everyone out" through slave morality. Nietzsche's views imply that authentic comedians would reflect on the genealogy of their moral beliefs, and then make informed decisions regarding what they choose to write jokes about *individually*. From there, the will to power pushes comedians to write and perform more in the pursuit of comedic excellence, thereby striving to reach their potential, and maximum power within comedy. To do this, comedians will likely decide to uphold artistic integrity (in spite of their being no normative framework to enforce this) on the basis that one cannot be the best comedian while stealing jokes from other comedians. This constant striving towards excellence in the drafting process while removing moral parameters allows comedians to write as authentically as possible, with respect to what they find funny, what they find interesting and entertaining, and (should they choose to) what they genuinely believe.

2.2. Camus and absurdity

Camus's concept of authenticity prioritises acknowledging the meaninglessness of human existence – and accepting it. Because he didn't believe in any god or afterlife, and was a

proponent of truthful expression of oneself to others, i.e. that we should say what we really think, Camus saw failure to accept our meaninglessness and shun clear communication as barriers towards living a worthwhile life. According to this view of "authenticity," an authentic comedian would accept meaninglessness and use it as a motivator to find joy wherever they can (especially in the darkest, most hopeless moments) and turn it into jokes that bring us together as a group. This group focus – on being able to live well *together* – ties in with the common belief that comedians can create community by making us all laugh at the worst aspects of human life: mortality, illness, and so on. This is seen in comedians as diverse as Rodney Dangerfield, Don Rickles, and John Oliver, who targeted himself, others, and political topics respectively. Their willingness to make us laugh at self-doubt, each other, and the world at large could be used as examples of acknowledgment of the meaningless and fragility of human existence, while bringing us together as a group through laughter.

Camus (1967) made clear that he saw his own philosophy, absurdism, as separate from existentialism, saying, "No, I am not an existentialist... the only book of ideas that I have published, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, was directed against the so-called existentialist philosophers" (p. 259). With that said, he aligns with the existentialists in two ways. Firstly, Camus deals with existential problems of human existence and questions of how we should best live. He does this by appealing to individuals and their subjective experience – arguing that if there is individual meaning, then we create it. (Camus (1967) also says that this "relative meaning... would always be in danger" – presumably because it is invented and therefore subject to change – but this attitude is one of his unique additions to existentialist thought, rather than a necessary rejection of it (p. 259). Because of the nature of his philosophical concerns, I am willing to consider his thought alongside other existentialists.

Secondly, Camus aligns with existentialist thinkers by presenting his philosophy in a variety of ways. Kierkegaard wrote pseudonymously, sometimes with many different names appearing in a single work, like 1843's *Either/Or*, in order to portray a variety of perspectives on a single topic. Sartre wrote plays, with 1944's *No Exit*, surviving as one of his most well-known works. Camus didn't feel the need to stick to more traditional means of communicating his ideas either. An entry in *Gazette des lettres* from 15 February 1952 says, "I am not a philosopher and I never claimed to be one" (Camus 2009, xvi). This left him free to write essays, novels, and plays – whatever form of writing best suited the communication

of his thinking. His novels and plays effectively portray many different viewpoints, but are also bereft of philosophical argument: the reader must piece this together from the action and dialogue. This means I will be referring to several characters across various novels and plays in order to assess Camus's absurdist views.

Camus (2005) defined absurdity as living in the knowledge that life lacks meaning, even though we feel that it doesn't (pp. 4-5). Once acknowledged, absurdism cannot be walked back. It is possible to remain ignorant of life's meaninglessness; but once they become aware of it, individuals are faced with the question of what they will do with that knowledge (Camus 2005, 30). In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus (2005) argues that suicide is the "one truly serious philosophical problem" (p. 1). If life had meaning, that meaning would be an answer to the question *Why not kill myself?* If, say, God meant for you to be a comedian, then the answer to *Why not kill myself?* Would be *Because you're meant to be a comedian*. That meaning would be your purpose for existence. If you, like Camus, fall into the atheist camp, then there is no God to refer to. With no all-powerful God to pray for clarity to, humanity is highly unlikely to acquire the kind of answers that would inform our decision-making process. We need to know if there is a God, or some kind of preordained meaning for our existence. We can only put forward our best arguments for his existence or non-existence; we can never know for sure. Camus argues that if our lives *do* have meaning, we will never be able to know what that meaning is. And if your meaning is inaccessible, unknowable, and something you can't intentionally get closer to – then it's arguably similarly to a meaningless existence anyway (Camus 2005, 49). Inaccessible meaning would be subjectively worthless, i.e. the kind of meaning that serves no useful purpose to the person it applied to. In this scenario, the question remains: *Why shouldn't I kill myself?* This knowledge of our absurd situation – feeling sure our lives have meaning, when they don't – is what Camus (2005) calls a "starting point" (p. 1). To make progress, we must begin – and beginning means acknowledging and accepting absurdity.

Once we become aware of it, there are various ways one can react. Caligula, in Camus's play of the same name, takes on a nihilist approach. Early on, Scipio tells Caesonia that Caligula told him "life isn't easy, but has its consolations: religion, art, and the love one inspires in others. He often told me that the only mistake one makes in life is to cause others suffering" (Camus 1968, 36). Caligula falls into an existential despair at the feeling of powerlessness that absurdity gives him following the death of his sister, whom he shared an

incestuous relationship with (Camus 1968, 34). After his sister's death, Caligula tries to find, i.e. *catch*, the moon (Camus 1968, 33). This could be a metaphor for trying to find one's meaning: it may or may not be out there, but one can't hope to find it. Having lost his love, Caligula decides inspiring love in others is no longer important, and that causing others suffering also lacks meaning. This nihilism represents an enormous change in his character. Caligula combats his despair by biting back at an inconsequential world in an effort to regain some semblance of control. He does this by abusing his unlimited power over others – ordering executions like that of Lepidus's youngest son, then forcing Lepidus and other guests to laugh as he recounts the story of the murder (Camus 1968, 50-51). As a Roman emperor, Caligula has the most personal freedom a character could possess – but nonetheless allows absurdity and his fear of meaninglessness to corrupt him. This abrupt change of character shows how the knowledge of absurdity can change us. Ignorance can be bliss, but to be authentic, we need to accept our meaninglessness, and decide how we react to it. Not all reactions to absurdity are positive, however. Nihilism, Camus shows through Caligula's eventual downfall, is not the way to go.

An alternative path is shown by Sisyphus, the absurd hero described in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He is a mythical figure who, after repeatedly disobeying the gods, is made to roll a heavy stone up to the top of a hill. When he arrives, he watches it roll back down again – and his task must be repeated endlessly (Camus 2005, 115-117). Whereas Caligula descends into nihilism when faced with the absurdity of his existence, Sisyphus instead *accepts it.* There are moments in the face of hopelessness that Sisyphus can enjoy, despite the seriousness of his never-ending task. These are the moments when he must walk down, free of the stone, to go and collect it. This walk is a moment of respite. Here, he is able to enjoy his existence. His punishment is only a tragedy *if* he is conscious of its hopelessness (because if he were able to remain hopeful, its seriousness would not be clear to him). In the moments he is walking back down the hill though, he is both conscious of his punishment *and* aware of his ability to find pleasure in it. Camus (2005) says, "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (p. 117). It is only through a loss of hope and true awareness of his absurd situation that Sisyphus can face it head on with the scorn required to laugh in its face and enjoy it anyway. This absurd heroic existence is the best we can aim for: one of acceptance and revolt. We shouldn't give up completely – or kick back at others in anger. Instead, we should work out how we can live a maximally rewarding existence

within the constraints of absurdity. There's no hope, we will all die, but it's in accepting that fact that we can get things done. Putting things off for another time – or another life – deprives us of the one life we can definitely live authentically.

Sisyphus exemplifies Camus's concept of the absurd man: one who "lives without appeal," i.e. a person who lives without recourse to a god and who accepts what he has. An absurd man is also aware of his "temporally limited freedom," the time-limited nature of his revolt against death, and his "mortal consciousness" (Camus 2005, 64). These beliefs best equip one to deal with absurdity and make the most of a hopeless situation. This goes against Caligula's nihilism, which essentially stops at the earlier mentioned "starting point" – accepting absurdity as the end, rather than the beginning. Caligula's violent response to his despair isn't justified. Even moral error theorists don't think all actions are acceptable on the basis that there are no objective moral facts.

Caligula's stance fails to take into account the obvious argument that there are reasons *outside of morality* for refraining from actions we might otherwise classify as morally bad. Actions have consequences. Some of those consequences are negative. Negative consequences include ruining peoples' lives and hampering their ability to live together well. You don't need morality (or God, or hope) to appeal to when assessing whether a descent into nihilistic immoral action is justified. Consequences need to be taken into account – for pragmatic reasons, if for nothing else. For everyday people, i.e. those that are not Roman emperors, there are many pragmatic non-moral reasons for refraining from violence towards others in response to one's own nihilistic despair. They include i) awareness that unrestrained violence across the board would not permit societies which we *all* benefit from to function, ii) one's strength and ability to defend oneself is limited, and less likely to be called on if one treats others with some respect, iii) one might reasonably hope that civil behaviour encourages civil responses, and iv) assuming one hopes to reach old age, one will become gradually more vulnerable – so valuing only those strong enough to defend themselves is not a viable long-term approach. One problem with Camus's presentation here is that Caligula has a highly unusual amount of personal power that may seem to give him more wiggle-room in the nihilistic immoral behaviour department that we might reasonably expect ourselves. This weakness is somewhat justified, because it allows Camus to show how negative unrestrained nihilistic behaviour can be at its *worst*.

In contrast to the unbridled negative approach of Caligula, Sisyphus takes the

consequences of his situation into account – its hopelessness, his inability to escape – and makes the most of it. Similarly, while comedians, like the rest of humanity, are subject to illness, tragedy, and death, they can accept their mortality and find nuggets of humour that make their absurd existence bearable. Their job is then to share this gift with others in the same situation. Nihilism presented for comedic effect, then, would be acceptable for Camus. A genuine nihilism would not (and would also make the comedian's job more difficult.)

Camus's absurdism and his antidote – the attitudes of the absurd man – are the basis of his beliefs regarding the importance of truth, i.e. blunt communication. The absurd man (person, from now on) accepts their situation and moves forward. This is only possible because they face head-on the situation they find themselves in. This requires a bluntness within oneself that allows for the propagation of authentic ideas and beliefs. This bluntness, Camus argues, is also vitally important in our communication with others. We need to speak truthfully to each other – say what we really mean – if we are to be authentic *and* live together well. While accepting absurdity is vital for navigating an authentic life, it is in this blunt communication that comedians stand to benefit the most from Camus's notion of authenticity. I will examine Camus's version of truth in the next section.

2.2.1. Camus and truth

Camus mentions truth across most of his works, and it is an important aspect of his notion of authenticity. It needs to be said early on that when he refers to truth, he is not making epistemological claims. Instead, Camus is talking about truthful, or *honest*, communication between people. If I ask you what you think of my new joke, you might say, *"I think it's interesting"* – and I might then reply, *"Tell me the truth."* (I could just as easily have said *"Be honest."*) This is the kind of truth being discussed and encouraged: an honest and blunt communication of what we think and feel. Accepting absurdity and living in spite of it is what gets the authentic comedian out of bed. Truth, or blunt communication, helps us live together *as a group*. This is where Camus's authenticity really affects comedians and their work.

In Camus's *The Outsider* (1972), Meursault is not necessarily funny like a comedian, but follows in comedian footsteps by refusing to automatically accept the status quo. (Unlike Nietzsche's questioning of the moral status quo, this extends beyond morality, and into an abandonment of some behavioural norms.) This commitment to honest expression of his views make him a man who is often mistaken for cold or heartless. The initial response to his mother's death is one of indifference – at least, that's how the first-person description comes across. The book opens with "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure" (Camus 1972, 13). The uncertainty – and lack of investment in correcting it – immediately comes across as unsettling somehow. This is far from the only time Meursault's way of dealing with his mother's death seems unusual. When he visits the mortuary, the porter tells him they've put the lid on her coffin, but he's been told to unscrew it on his arrival. Meursault tells the porter "not to trouble," an attitude which surprises the porter (Camus 1972, 16). During the wake, friends of his mother arrive, and one of them, an old woman, starts crying. Meursault wants her to stop but doesn't say anything (Camus 1972, 20). When the warden asks him on the day of the funeral if he'd like "a last glimpse of [his] mother," Meursault declines again (Camus 1972, 22) – and during the funeral, he doesn't cry, has no idea how old his mother was when asked, and thinks constantly of the heat (Camus 1972, 25-26). These actions portray a man who is unwilling to perform any action on the basis that 'it's the done thing.' It's an attitude echoed by many comics who feel their duty is to go over the line, rather than toe it.

This apparent coldness continues beyond receiving news of his mother's death and the funeral that soon follows it. When he bumps into Marie, an old colleague he had a crush on, at the pool the next day, she "shrank away a little" when she found out his mother had died within the last few days and he was still out for a swim. (Meursault tells her his mother died "Yesterday," but they are actually swimming the day after the funeral. This is another example of his imprecision regarding the timing of his mother's death (Camus 1972, 28).) After Meursault murders a man at the beach while on holiday with Raymond and Marie, his unusual grieving process was addressed by the prosecution lawyer. The lawyer asks Meursault's mother's friend, Pérez, if he had seen Meursault weep during the trial – to which Pérez replies, "No" (Camus 1972, 92). Later, the lawyer says: "I accuse the prisoner of behaving at his mother's funeral in a way that showed he was already a criminal at heart" (Camus 1972, 97). In short, it is readily apparent to the reader and the other characters that

Meursault is not grieving how we think he should. Like a comedian, Meursault has completely committed to his unique view of the world, and to expressing himself unreservedly. This has led to mixed responses. He has expressed himself authentically, but without finding a way to make that approach likeable (or even acceptable) to others. This would be like a comedian telling the jokes they find funny, without any investment in whether the audience enjoys them too. While there's theoretically nothing wrong with Meursault's approach (and it is undoubtedly a better approach for both the individual and the group than Caligula's nihilism), it makes things unnecessarily harder for him. He could be unreservedly truthful, while finding ways to frame his speech in a less polarising manner. This isn't inauthentic, it's simply a way to make living authentically within a group dynamic easier for everyone. When someone asks how their suit fits, while on a shopping trip with friends, it's the difference between replying, "I think another would suit you better," and "It emphasises your fatness." Both get your point across, but only the former takes group dynamic into account.

Without being asked at any point how he is feeling or what he is thinking, everyone makes assumptions about Meursault based on his 'inappropriate' behaviour. The information almost all the characters in the book are missing – the porter, his mother's friends, the warden, Marie, the prosecuting lawyer – is that Meursault and his mother were not close. He sums up their relationship in conversation with his neighbour, Salamano: "for years she'd never had a word to say to me, and I could see she was moping, with no one to talk to." This is the excuse he gives for putting his mother in a care home after struggling to afford to keep her with him (Camus 1972, 52). This one moment of truthful communication adds vital context to Meursault's apparent lack of whatever his neighbours and acquaintances would deem 'sufficient' grief. He and his mother weren't close – barely communicating, and this lack of communication, he suggests, is down to *her* lack of effort with *him*. Blood ties aren't enough to create closeness when there isn't even minimal interest, or desire to connect. This explains the apparent coldness as something more relatable: numbness. Meursault lived authentically but failed to give this vital context when he might have, and in failing to do so, lost the opportunity to bring others closer to him while being maximally authentic. Instead, communicating his truth without taking into account a group dynamic focus, made everyone misinterpret him. A comedian focussed only on what they find funny themself isn't necessarily wrong, but they will be blind to what

audiences are enjoying or not enjoying. This blindness doesn't serve the comedian or their audience well. Instead of being judged on their effort to be funny, they are judged on their apparent indifference to others. Camus's truth used properly would avoid situations like Meursault's, or the authentic but 'group-blind' comedian's.

I've outlined this portion of *The Outsider* to demonstrate the importance Camus places on blunt communication. Meursault is both unsettling to other characters *and* the reader because he is almost unfailingly authentic to himself. He doesn't feel – or even pragmatically *understand* – the need to fit in with social mores, niceties, or expectations. He doesn't feel close to his mother, so when she dies, it doesn't affect him in the same way as parental death affects people who are more attached to their parents. What seems cold to the reader is actually a response that makes sense, if the reader is willing to think rationally about Meursault's experience, instead of within societal norms.

Rather than focussing on how he will be received, or whether his response will be deemed societally appropriate, Meursault chooses truth. This is arguably a superior choice to just 'going with the flow' because it allows him to be maximally authentic, while weeding out those unwilling to accept Meursault as he really is. Meursault's truthfulness distances him from characters who aren't willing to make an effort with him, like his boss – but importantly, his truth-telling does not distance him from Marie, the former work colleague who becomes his girlfriend. This suggests that Camus's version of truth – with its emphasis on blunt communication – can be lonely at first, but the most important relationships can be developed under it. Truth, then, can attract a listening ear that appreciates uniqueness and a lack of self-censorship. Comedians who align with a strong viewpoint – whether that is politically, in joke subgenre, or some other way – are necessarily less popular than more mainstream comedians. It could be argued that mainstream popularity has its price: everyday individuals and comedians are likely to have more rewarding exchanges with others when they feel able to speak truthfully. Being a mainstream comic, like being an *entirely* group focussed individual, means taking others into account in a way that can be self-limiting. Camus's truth, used correctly, helps balance the interests of the individual and the group.

Blunt communication gets Meursault the results he needs: time off work and avoiding having to see his mother again when he doesn't feel the need to (Camus 1972, 13, 16, 22). In fact, it is only when he goes against his truthfully felt indifference and accepts Raymond's

invitation to be "pals," that Meursault starts along the path to his own demise (Camus 1972, 40). Camus seems to be arguing that many societal norms are inconvenient, out of place, and make things worse for us as individuals – and as a group. Rather than arguing in favour of more egoistic lives, though, he pushes us towards blunt communication. This truth allows us to express ourselves more authentically, and while uncomfortable at first, can lead to positive results for us all as *members of a group.*

Truth allows us to work through the problems we have with each other, avoid unnecessary commitments we all want to avoid, and allows us to have the most worthwhile, unrepressed, and free interactions we can. This allows is to live better as a group. Truth becomes especially important when Camus (1967) says that after establishing absurdity, "I have never believed that we could remain at this point" (p. 267), i.e. one where we allow meaninglessness to push us towards a nihilistic, Caligula-type response. Absurdity, as Camus says, is just the beginning. Once we've begun, we need to have a way to live together well. He argues that truth makes this possible. Presumably, truth gives us escape, it's a method of retaining some control over our lives when, due to absurdity, we feel like we have none. Following social mores, doing what you're told, refusing to say what you really think, was one of the ways the Second World War (a big preoccupation of Camus's thinking) could be said to have come about. One doesn't need to be an antisemite to help Hitler achieve Nazi ends: one only has to fail to truthfully express one's doubts. Comedians don't have to overtly support the status quo: they only have to fail to truthfully express their doubts. In both cases, society is worse off by individuals simply going with the status quo and failing to express themselves truthfully.

Due largely to Camus's form of philosophical presentation (mainly novels and plays), there are noticeable holes that need to be addressed. His truth seems naively hopeful. It is interesting, taking into account his experience in the resistance during the Second World War, that his truth could easily lead to open expression of morally bad ideas. Often people argue that free speech allows questionable ideas to be expressed, and then rebutted. There's not really much in Camus's writing to suggest that truthful expression of one's ideas and feelings will automatically lead to a more well-adjusted and successful individual. Caligula and his nihilism put paid to that idea. Virtually every other character in that play disagrees with Caligula's course of action and freely expresses that view with other characters – on occasion, even with Caligula (Camus 1968, 39, 76) – but the only fix comes

at the end of the play, when the truthful expression between characters leads them to realise that Caligula must be assassinated (Camus 1968, 98). Truth, then, isn't all rosy. It may allow people with morally questionable beliefs to gather and become a more powerful force. It's difficult to imagine the Nazi regime gathering power if they had failed to share their genuinely held antisemitic beliefs with others who also held those beliefs. However, the resistance was able to function on a similar basis: they could, in difficult times, be truthful in expressing their desire to end the occupation. In short, Camus's truth is far from good all the time – but it *is* good when used to question, ridicule, or criticise morally bad ideas.

Camus's truth requires a certain pragmatism of us all, if we are to live authentically. We are all individuals. We want to live authentically. We also live in groups. If we are to live together well, we need to truthfully communicate in a non-polarising way where possible. Being an individual *and* a group member, then, requires us to live authentically by presenting our truth in a way that takes the group response into account. This doesn't mean shying away from sharing uncomfortable thoughts that question the status quo. It just means communicating them in a way that has the best chance of being interpreted favourably by the group. Comedians are individuals who should truthfully express their own sense of humour. They do this for a group, who respond truthfully by laughing or failing to laugh. The comedian who speaks their truth (i.e. communicates jokes they authentically find funny), then takes group response into account, will use comedy techniques and benign violation theory to ensure the jokes are edited to be funnier next time. If they do this, their jokes will continue to grow until they are maximally acceptable to future groups, who will laugh more. It's not about kowtowing to the group: it's about presenting truthful jokes in an enjoyable way.

2.3. Buber and I-You relationships

Buber based his authenticity around relationships, arguing in his 1923 book, *I and Thou*, that the way we interact with each other has an affect on how we live as individuals. Because he

believed our lives could be negatively lived when focussed only on the material goals of the "It-world," pulling us away from the more fruitful and worthwhile relationships we could otherwise share, he saw a lot at stake in the way we treat each other. According to this view of "authenticity," an authentic comedian would be focussed on seeing the audience as clearly as possible. Rather than seeing an audience as merely the means to the end of either laughs or money, comedians would attempt to have the most meaningful dialogue they could with an audience – while maintaining ultimate control of said dialogue as required by the artform. They would need to understand the audience as a collection of individuals that they have a relationship with lasting the length of the performance. They might show this understanding by altering routines to focus on what the crowd enjoys most, avoiding what the crowd is not responding well to, and, at an individual level, making these changes even when low numbers of audience members might want them. It's the most difficult of the three forms of authenticity to pursue, demands the most of the individual, and even Buber (1996) states that no I-You relationship is always constant. On occasion, even close relationships become I-It scenarios (p. 68). This is unavoidable – but similar to Nietzsche's unknowable potential of the individual, the unknowable potential of a relationship can only hope to be realised by pursuing it.

Buber talks about the two basic words we can speak. Buber called these "word pairs." They are "I-You" and "I-It" (Buber 1996, 53). I-You indicates a relationship where I sees You and addresses You by speaking "with one's whole being" (Buber 1996, 54). Rather than "experiencing" another person (seeing as one person cannot be fully knowable to another person, in the way that an object could), when one addresses another in the I-You form, they establish "the world of relation" (Buber 1996, 56). When we talk to each other and address each other fully, speaking with our whole being, and calling each other You, we are addressing each other as individuals that go beyond a collection of qualities that exist in space and time. We do not experience a person as an object, or an It, that we can use for our purposes to achieve some goal. Instead, we see You as "neighborless and seamless," "no thing among things nor … consist[ing] of things" (Buber 1996, 59). In short, an I-You relationship indicates awareness of the other person as the complicated being that they are, rather than the list of qualities they have that might be associated with achieving an end. They are You, rather than It.

On the other hand, an I-It relationship is far more distant, and based on self-interest. I-It

"can never be spoken with one's whole being" because I reduces the other to the status of an object – which shortchanges both the It *and* the I (Buber 1996, 54). Unlike I-You, which Buber (1996) saw as existing outside of space and time because You recognises the constantly changing individual that is before I; I-It is a bundle of qualities that can be experienced, described, compared to other Its, and as such lives in the past, because it is based on what I already knows of It (rather than what I might *come to know* if I had a more meaningful I-You relationship with It in the present) (p. 59). (These qualities may once have somewhat accurately reflected the It in the past, but by focussing on what the I already knows of the It, rather than seeking to continually reacquaint with the It as a You in the moment, the I is placing the It in the past.) Because It is seen as knowable, able to be experienced, and ultimately able to *used*, I-It is part of the "world as experience," and "Experience is remoteness from You" (Buber 1996, 56, 60). I-It is a relationship based on seeing other people as a means to an end, rather than valuable in their own right.

To recap, I-You is a relationship based on acknowledging the other as a separate entity that is constantly changing, exists outside of space and time due to these constant changes, and can only be encountered, rather than experienced. I-It relationships see the other as a collection of qualities existing in space and time that can be used to achieve given ends, and as such, can be experienced. The former is about sharing and encountering. The latter is about taking and experiencing. As a practicing Jew, and writing as both a philosopher and theologian, Buber had a different approach to both Nietzsche and Camus, who were devout atheists. *I and Thou* is a book of three parts, with the third part largely devoted to how his relationship-based philosophy worked when discussing one-on-one relationships between individuals and God. While any discussion of Buber without his theology is incomplete, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to reflect on how the I-You dynamic affects religious belief. In any case, it seems fair to say that the I-It and I-You relationships – and their contribution to Buber's authenticity – are the most influential and relevant of his ideas to the problem of authenticity in stand-up comedy.

These concepts are perhaps clearest when applied to a given social situation – in this case, a stand-up comedy gig. A comedian who drafts jokes with Nietzschean authenticity is I-focussed. Because the jokes are being written to appeal to the comedian's own sense of humour, there isn't a You or It for the jokes to be delivered to. It's an insular activity. In the group editing stage, where the comedian is testing jokes on an audience at open mics, said

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audience is the *means* for assessing the effectiveness of each joke. Because the audience is there, at this stage, to be "used" by the comedian, and the effectiveness of the jokes is being "experienced" through laughter, there is an I-It relationship with the audience. It remains an insular activity, but recognises the role that other people have to play in a joke's success (while failing to acknowledge them as a collection of individuals). Once jokes have been proven to work at the group editing stage, the comedian may have concerns about how certain jokes are being interpreted – or even simply *risk* being interpreted. By discussing these concerns with members of the group targeted in the joke, or by testing the jokes in front of this group, the comedian moves beyond the I-It relationship and closer to an I-You relationship. This is because instead of using the audience to see whether a joke is funny for groups, the comedian is working to understand how the jokes affect individual audience members – and using their feedback to inform how the joke is used (or not) in later performances. This takes comedy and bases it around relating to people, rather than encountering them. It *aims* to be an I-You activity, rather than an I-It one.

It could be argued that the order of the forms of authenticity used are ineffective, or time wasteful. For example, a comedian might think, *Why can't I just ask members of that group what they think of the joke, before testing it in the group-editing stage?* It might seem as though by testing a joke's effectiveness, finding it funny for a group, and then removing it based on individual feedback would be an inefficient way to work – or even unfair, one that gives veto over material to a small percentage of any given crowd. (A philosopher might also ask whether a member of a marginalised group can even effectively represent the entire group in providing feedback on certain jokes.) These problems are best addressed together. The Camus stage of group editing allows comedians to have worked out what has the *possibility* of working, and what jokes groups respond well to, in advance of an I-You discussion or performance for the joke target. This is time *efficient*, ensuring questionable jokes aren't delivered unnecessarily when a second stage joke assessment might have proved the joke didn't work anyway.

Having the group assessment in the back pocket gives comedians more information to work with. If a joke works well for general audiences, but the joke targets in I-You conversation or performance find it ethically questionable, then the comedian can make an informed decision on whether to throw the joke away entirely – *or*, to revise it so that the target is different, or alter the joke so that it hits differently than in the original version. This

helps answer the philosopher's question of whether an individual, or some representatives of a given group, can ever speak on behalf of the whole group. It seems fair to say that they can't – and also fair to assume that the more voices pitching in on targeted jokes, the better. If an honest I-You conversation or performance provokes a surprisingly strong negative reaction (one that seems extreme, or unwarranted), additional I-You conversations with other members of the group can help decide whether the original negative response was an outlier, or a fair representation of the likely response to a misinterpreted joke that the comedian was missing due to not being a member of the joke target group.

One might reply that these "I-You" relationships are developed only to be used to generate joke feedback. If this is correct, then the You is being *used*. Buber's writing suggests that this would be considered an experience; the audience member is simply the means to the end of joke polishing. The relationship then reverts back to I-It. This would be the case, *even if* using the target group member/s was in order to bring about more I-You relationships in the future. This view is correct. Assuming the comedian is solely attempting to bring about I-You relationships in order to calculate the permissibility of given jokes, then those relationships would undoubtedly be I-It relationships. The audience member, or member of the joke target group, is not being seen as an individual, but a make-shift representation of a given group. It is an experience, rather than an encounter. It is an It.

In response to this concern, I draw on my earlier description of I-You relationships, at the end of the first paragraph of section 2.3. Buber's (1996) I-You authenticity is the most difficult of the three forms to adopt – and he admits that even close relationships become I-It relationships, or go back and forth between I-You and I-It over time (pp. 68-69). An authentic comedian at the third and final stage of joke creation wouldn't view audience members as a means to check the jokes are sufficiently polished. They would *ideally* view the audience as a collection of individuals with their own personhood, thoughts, and emotions – all of which are worth taking into account in order to deliver the funniest show possible, because the comedian cares about every individual audience member. A comedian who sees individuals as worthy of entertaining – rather than as a means to get paid – will take joke target responses into account in the third stage, and be maximally authentic for doing so. As Buber's thinking suggests, comedians *will* slip (like all people), and at times fall into using audiences in the third stage merely to check joke permissibility. But as I said earlier: the unknowable potential of a relationship can only hope to be realised by pursuing

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it. Comedians being inauthentic in their pursuit of I-You audience relationships will happen, but imperfection is not a sign of effort wasted. It takes constant effort. It demands a lot, but there is a lot to be gained from adopting this perspective.

Buber said that "The human being to whom I say You I do not *experience*. But I stand in *relation* to him, in the sacred basic word" [italics mine] (Buber 1996, 59-60). In short, asking someone to share their thoughts on a joke that may negatively affect them does not mean you suddenly understand or experience their marginalisation. Instead, it brings you closer to it by forming a relation. Comedians that have I-You conversations with joke targets, or I-You performances where they confirm that joke targets are in the crowd, allows comedians to build a relationship that *includes* through encounters, rather than excludes through experience.

This segmented creation of comedy – where there are three stages of creation (drafting, editing, finalisation) and authenticity (individual, group, I-You) – is supported by Buber's commentary on art. He described art as demanding "the soul's creative power. What is needed is a deed that a man does with his whole being" (Buber 1996, 60). This matches the Nietzschean individualistic authenticity described in an earlier section: "whoever commits himself may not hold back part of himself" reminds us that by forgoing the moral status quo and pursuing the will to power in joke creation, the comedian is utterly committed to the task of getting the best jokes possible onto the page – unimpeded at this early stage by thoughts of others, regardless of whether as I-Yous or I-Its (Buber 1996, 60). Furthermore, Buber (1996) suggests that to be anything *less* than utterly committed to the task at hand is not permissible or even possible: "if I do not serve [the art] properly, it breaks, or it breaks me," i.e. if joke drafting is hampered with concerns of others, and allowed to falter, the joke will fail, or the comedian will fail (p. 61).

In the editing stage, comedians *must* seek joke approval from audiences. This is an unavoidable part of stand-up comedy. While preview performances of opera and theatre are relatively common, these previews do not contribute to the final performance to the same degree. Stand-up shows are constructed over many short public performances, where individual jokes are tested in front of audiences and then combined into bits, before longer sets allow for those bits to be workshopped into a full show. An opera or a play could feasibly be written and performed without this near-constant audience feedback, and still be received well – after all, many operas and plays *do not* receive opportunities to preview

at all. Jokes, though, rely on provoking a response that is too specific to remain untested before being finalised. All this is to say that Buber would clearly take Camus's group editing stage to be an I-It relationship. "No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation… Every means is an obstacle" contains all we need to know: the purpose of group editing is to assess a joke's effectiveness, or more simply, to see whether it makes the audience laugh or not. The "greed and anticipation" is the comedian's desire to see what their jokes get out of an audience – or what the audience *gives the comedian* in return for the joke. The audience is "the means" and this is an obstacle to forming an I-You relationship with them (Buber 1996, 62-63).

In the finalisation stage, the comedian realises that "Relation is reciprocity" (Buber 1996, 67). A maximally effective comedian is able to recognise that they share a relationship with their audiences. There is a give and take that goes beyond the comedian giving and the audience taking jokes, with the audience giving and the comedian receiving laughter in return. There is something more intimate and less openly transactional than that happening. Buber (1996) says "My You acts on me as I act on it," which applied to the I-You finalisation stage of comedy means we learn from each other, even if there is a hierarchy differential (p. 67). This seems at first to be not only vague, but also somewhat difficult to accept. In relationships where one person is superior to another in some respect (say, academically), it seems impossible for there to be true reciprocity. The superior person, in this case the comedian, based on their social standing and importance in the theatre, cannot hope to learn from the audience or receive from the audience in equal measure the knowledge/jokes/entertainment that they are about to impart. The exchange is not equal and therefore hardly reciprocal.

Buber might have responded in two ways to this criticism. Firstly, expecting an audience to give a comedian back in equal measure some kind of experience is reducing them to an I-It relationship. The audience stops being a collection of individuals and becomes a mere group of qualities – and qualities cannot be reciprocal, they can only be experienced. Secondly, he suggests that pursuing reciprocal I-You relationships with people beneath us in the hierarchy is to be encouraged – that "Our students teach us" – even though many I-You relationships "may never unfold into complete mutuality if they are to remain faithful to their nature" (Buber 1996, 67, 178). Buber uses the example of the "genuine educator" and his "pupil." In order for the educator to teach the pupil, the educator must address the pupil

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as I-You; in doing so, the educator ensures he does not know the pupil as "a mere sum of qualities, aspirations, and inhibitions," but "apprehend[s] him, and affirm[s] him, as a whole." In return, in order to learn, the pupil must do the same (Buber 1996, 178). However, the educator must also view the situation *from the pupil's perspective*, as well as his own. Buber calls this empathetic one-way direction of the educator's relation to the student "embracing," drawn from embracing the student's viewpoint. In short, the educator and the pupil do not have an equal relationship. There is a hierarchy; the teacher is on top. Nonetheless, they have a reciprocal I-You relationship – they fully recognise each other's personhood and do not simply view each other as the means to an end. As an additional factor, going one way from the teacher to the student, there is the empathetic embracing of the student's point of view. By adopting this position, the teacher is able to best perform the task of teaching, because they take into account how the student perceives information (Buber 1996, 178). To use Buber's terminology, the relationship remains reciprocal, even if it can never be fully mutual. This means both the student and the teacher *contribute* to the relationship (reciprocate), while only the teacher embraces the student's viewpoint (meaning the embracement, then, is not mutual).

In the context of comedy, a comedian can seek some form of an I-You relationship with their audience, while simultaneously recognising that the relationship can *at best* be reciprocal and that the "relationship is incompatible with complete mutuality" (Buber 1996, 178). So, a comedian can see an audience as a group of individuals to be encountered, rather than a group to be experienced. *If* the audience was to view the comedian as an individual with selfhood to be encountered and to relate to, rather than a joke machine to be experienced, the relationship would be reciprocal. (Reciprocity is not guaranteed, and due to the comedian being unavoidably tied to a literal experience – the comedy show – expecting audiences to reciprocate is likely asking too much. This does not affect the comedian's ability to form a one-way I-You relationship.) The comedian adds the additional layer of "embracing" the audience, i.e. taking into account how they are reacting to given jokes, joke topics, and delivery style, and seek to achieve the shared goal of provoking laughter in the audience – without reducing them to a joke testing machine to be experienced. This recognises a comedian can never truly be below the audience in the hierarchy – no matter how they play with the performance of their status onstage. It also recognises that while there is a power differential, the comedian and the audience can have

a reciprocal relationship by recognising selfhood and working together, rather than viewing each other as the means to an end.

A racist or sexist joke risks making the target an It. By viewing the targets of these jokes as a You, and seeking to form a relationship with them where ideas can be discussed, jokes assessed, and final decisions made, comedians can best position themselves to deliver the jokes they find authentically funny, while reducing the chance of misinterpretation in delivery.

Conclusion

In the first chapter, I analysed the three most prominent philosophical theories of humour: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory. While all three have strengths, in that they reflect what *some* jokes do (relieve tension, create a sense of superiority in the listener, and combine incongruous ideas, respectively), they all fall short of explaining how jokes achieve those ends. This left room for McGraw and Warren's benign violation theory – which takes incongruity, the strongest of the three preceding theories, and adds detail. Being able to describe the way incongruous ideas must be combined in order to produce humour (by combining the concepts of violation and benign *simultaneously*) was the vital step needed to produce a theory that explains what jokes do *and* how they work. From there, I developed a spectrum along which individual jokes can move during the editing process; either towards more benign, or more violation, as needed. This gives comedians aesthetic parameters within which their jokes must fit in order remain successful, i.e. funny. One aspect of successful joke performance is the air of authenticity comedians lend to their material, to create the feeling that the jokes "belong" to them. Because this appearance of authenticity can be misinterpreted, I spent the second chapter explaining how to navigate this issue.

With the benign violation theory locked in as an aesthetic rule, I used the second chapter to address existentialist notions of authenticity. Nietzsche's, Camus's, and Buber's thinking each addressed one of the three factors we have to consider: i) Nietzsche's view of authenticity was used to address individual authenticity in the drafting process, ii) Camus's view of authenticity was used to address aesthetics and the importance of group response in the editing process, and iii) Buber's view of one-on-one relationship-based authenticity was used to address the jokes open to misinterpretation, that had managed to successfully move through both the solo drafting and group-editing stages.

i) While all three thinkers present versions of authenticity, Nietzsche presents the most committed form, i.e. the version that goes furthest in allowing comedians to draft the jokes *they* find most authentically funny and that reflect their individual sense of humour the most. By taking on his approach of will to power (striving to be the best comedian) and questioning the moral status quo (meaning that there are no pre-set limits on joke-writing), comedians are best equipped to write as authentically as possible, with as few parameters

as possible. There is no chance of misinterpretation when the only person reading the comedian's drafts *is* the comedian. This maximal freedom to express oneself in the drafting process increases the chances of the comedian finding their own unique writing style – a vital factor in standing out in the industry, and achieving success onstage in front of an audience. From the uncensored jokes they put on the page, they can then pick the jokes they think most likely to please the crowd in advance of stage two.

ii) Camus's group-focussed authenticity allows comedians to check that they have successfully fulfilled the aesthetic rules of stand-up comedy. They do this by performing the jokes they find authentically funny for an audience, to see if the audience feels the same way. While the comedian's funny bone may be tickled in idiosyncratic ways, in this second stage, they find out if the jokes they find authentically funny have broad appeal. For a comedian to live well as part of a group, as Camus's authenticity suggests they should aim to, their jokes must be funny to *others*, as well as to themselves. The audience's laughter (or lack of laughter) tells the comedian which of their jokes has hit the sweet spot of being both authentically funny for the comedian, *and* sufficiently benign-violation balanced to appeal to audiences. The comedian must take this group response into account when editing their jokes.

Lack of laughter early on in one's comedy career likely indicates structural errors – say, an unclear premise, or the use of too many words. As the comedian writes more and more in the Nietzschean individual drafting stage, they gain joke-writing experience, and joke issues down the line are more likely to be due to a benign-violation imbalance. By taking the group response into account, the comedian can assess whether the joke is too benign or too strong a violation, and edit accordingly. This helps the comedian ensure they are choosing appropriate jokes for each audience, as well as ensuring the jokes are edited over time to be maximally funny – and therefore at their aesthetic peak. They can then make final choices for a solo show or TV spot, based on considerations in the third stage.

iii) Buber's one-on-one I-You relationships allow comedians to spend time with their funniest jokes, and reflect on how open to misinterpretation they are, based on the likelihood of their being seen as an endorsement of morally bad beliefs or acts. It's conceivable that a comedian at stage two finds their funniest jokes are the ones that discuss racist views. These could be the funniest because they satirise bigoted views, or they could be funny because the views represented are funny to bigots. Worst case scenario, they are

funny to *some* bigots, and accepted as authentically held views of the comedian by other bigots.

In this third stage, the comedian avoids a cop-out "It's just a joke" excuse, as well as excuses like that of Al Murray, The Pub Landlord, who earlier claimed that to make fun of bigoted views, you need to portray them. While there is something to be said for Murray's view, if one is regularly misinterpreted as an endorser of bigoted views, then Buber's one-on-one reflection would catch these jokes before they go on tour or on TV. Once a collection of jokes is being considered for "finalisation" in recorded or touring form, they can be Buber tested. Comedians can do this by carefully combing their material for potential misinterpretation, and asking themselves how they think various *individuals* would interpret the material. (And even better, if there are really serious concerns about a joke, based on its content, they can get feedback from the marginalised group. If a joke could be deemed questionable, but it makes members of the marginalised group laugh, it may not be as questionable as first thought. Buber would likely suggest here that making ironic antisemitic jokes to ridicule antisemitic beliefs is morally permissible – but using Jewish people as a joke target without taking into account how individual Jewish people might feel about the specific joke is reducing them from a person to a means to an end. His version of authenticity involves seeing others and encountering them, rather than experiencing them. The more people that aim for this ideal, the more likely we are all going to be seen as people worthy of consideration before being the subject of jokes open to misinterpretation.)

This avoids simply going for the biggest laughs, while forgetting ethical considerations. A single joke may be funny to a white person, unfunny to a brown person, and funny *or* serious to a bigot. It's not enough to say that because that comic performs for almost exclusively white audiences, and the joke gets a laugh, that it is an ethical joke that bears no risk of misinterpretation. How the joke will play to different *individual* audience members, then, is the last important consideration before a set is finalised. If the findings are unsatisfactory, like the ones just mentioned, then despite getting the laughs, the joke should go back to stage one for reworking and then stage two for editing. If need be, it could be replaced with another joke – and the concept revisited later.

Comedians ideally will present the funniest jokes, with minimal risk of misinterpretation. They have the best chance of doing this by thinking differently about their relationship with

the audience at each of the three stages of joke creation. Using Nietzsche's, Camus's, and Buber's versions of authenticity is a useful way to conceptualise the relationship. If a comedian writes a joke in stage one, that passes the group edit process in stage two, they will catch misinterpretations still at risk of happening during stage three – where a close examination of potentially misleading jokes is undertaken. These steps allow comedians to write jokes that are maximally authentic, i.e. that the comedian genuinely finds funny themselves, and to perform these jokes with as little risk of misinterpretation as possible. This poses a solution to the appearance of authenticity in comedy by combining the aesthetic rules for joke creation from Chapter One, with the various forms of authenticity from Chapter Two, to produce the clearest, most widely enjoyable, and least ethically questionable comedy.

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