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Knock-Knock! Whose Peer? The Epistemic Significance of Humor

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Two philosophers walk into a bar. Jerry, who is new to the department, has come to the bar for dinner with George after both attending a visiting scholar's talk. While discussing the talk, Jerry says "Well, Sam's question certainly raises a big hurdle for the project." To this, George interjects, "Wait, you mean Kevin's question?" Confused, the two each recall the Q&A session to remember who asked the really good question that quickly erupted into discussion. All things considered, Jerry still believes that Sam was the one who asked the question, while George still believes that Kevin was the one who asked the question.

What we have here is a standard example of *epistemic peer disagreement*. That is, simply put, two people who consider the other to be an epistemic peer are disagreeing about something about which they share equal access to the same evidence. In most cases, examples like these are followed by questions of what one ought to do about their beliefs. Should Jerry lower his confidence that he is right? Or should he retain his belief despite the disagreement? Responses to epistemic peer disagreements seek to provide recommendations for what we ought to do when we come across them. Insofar as we want our beliefs to be true, theories about what we ought to do should guide us closer to being correct. These theories are contingent upon the disagreement occurring between two genuine epistemic peers.

Some argue that genuine cases of epistemic peer disagreement never in fact obtain. Louise Antony, when asked by Gary Gutting how she would respond to a particular epistemic peer disagreement, stated that "in the real world, there are no epistemic peers — no matter how similar our experiences and our psychological capacities, no two of us are exactly alike, and any difference in either of these respects

can be rationally relevant to what we believe.”¹ It seems that even trivial differences in experience and attitudes can bias evidential processing in ways that are relevant to our beliefs. Antony’s take on epistemic peerhood centers on one dominating feature of the literature: epistemic peer disagreement is quite idealized disagreement.

For instance, the above example assumes Jerry and George were equally focused and aware during the Q&A session, were equally able to hear the discussion, consider the other as equally likely to be right, and so forth. It is *prima facie* understood that they have access to the same evidence and are equally likely to be correct in their analysis. What seems a realistic epistemic peer disagreement is quickly exposed as another idealized case. This brings us to a dilemma: *Either* epistemic peerhood is impossible, in which case we need not identify epistemic peers, *or* epistemic peers exist, in which case what we should do in the face of disagreement with them hinges on being able to identify that they meet the conditions for peerhood. I argue in favor of the latter option. I find the criticism that the implication of epistemic peer disagreement is highly idealized to be overstated: it’s not that epistemic peer disagreement doesn’t exist, but rather that we can’t properly identify it because *we do not know how to determine our epistemic peers*.

Insofar as we want our view on what to do during disagreement to get us closer to the truth, we should first know that the person with whom we disagree is in fact our epistemic peer.

So, rather than follow up the example with ordinary questions of what Jerry ought to do regarding his belief, I would like to follow up by asking another question: how do we figure out who our epistemic peers are in the first place? Determining what to do in

¹ De Cruz, Helen. "Can People Be Genuine Epistemic Peers?" *New APPS: Art, Politics, Philosophy, Science*.

cases of peer disagreement is irrelevant if we cannot first identify who our epistemic peers are.

Kai Spiekermann addresses a version of the same worry, noting that cases where we are actually interacting with an epistemic peer can be beneficial to us in getting our own beliefs right, but if we are interacting with someone who we falsely believe is our epistemic peer, then it can be damaging to our beliefs as well as a waste of our time. Because we are epistemically dependent on others, finding our true epistemic peers is important. However, this does not make it easy. Spiekermann writes

In practice, identifying one's true peers is tricky. This is for two reasons. First, even if individuals know what their fundamental interests are, they do not reliably know what these fundamental interests entail for the concrete decision at hand. Second, when observing others they cannot (normally) see what their fundamental interests are, they only see their views about the concrete decisions to be made."²

I make no claim to have a robust argument for identifying epistemic peers. Instead, I identify one avenue that helps get us closer, and that is humor.

Humor is an undoubtedly useful social tool in a variety of ways. Yet humor is unique in its ability to bond or bite. It can just as easily be used to damage relationships with others as it can be used to promote social cohesion. For instance, sexist, racist, classist, and stereotype-based humor is common and often offensive to joke targets. Of course, these jokes rely on relevant backgrounds and attitudes, which imply that humor and knowledge are intimately connected. In fact, what we learn about others from what they laugh at offers insight into how they do or do not fit into our category of epistemic peer because their amusement (or lack thereof) provides information about their attitudes. Paying attention to the sense of humor is subsequently important in that it offers a

² Spiekermann, Kai. "Finding Your True Epistemic Peers: Epistemic Solidarity on Dynamic Networks," 5-6. Working paper cited with permission.

platform for understanding evidential processing, which is otherwise inexplicable to epistemic peers.

The aim of this paper is to show that those who share our sense of humor, which I call comic peers, are epistemically significant in regards to how we determine our epistemic peers. I argue that this species of peerhood is analogous to epistemic peerhood, but that comic peerhood ultimately reveals more about others in a way that provides access to more evidence that is epistemically advantageous. Since we are better at recognizing our comic peers, I believe adopting humor as a guide to likewise determine our epistemic peers will alleviate some of the practical problems.

I will divide the paper into five sections. In the first section, I introduce the concepts of comic peer and epistemic peer, and elaborate the practical problems one encounters in efforts to identify epistemic peers. In the second section, I elaborate an analogy between comic peers and epistemic peers. In the third section, I develop the hypothesis that humor and joking provides an important source of evidence regarding the second-order beliefs and attitudes that are relevant to determining who's whose epistemic peer. In the fourth section, I argue that because people are generally unable to manipulate or hide their genuine responses to humor, and because we are all good at recognizing amusement in others, that attention to humor bypasses some of the practical problems that afflict attempts to identify epistemic peers. The overall result is an approach to epistemic peerhood that goes some distance towards ameliorating the worry that approaches to epistemic peer disagreement are necessarily highly idealized, and therefore fail to be action-guiding.

EPISTEMIC AND COMIC PEERHOOD

Since my first goal is to explore an analogy between epistemic peers and comic peers, it is important before moving forward to understand each term. The term *comic peer* generally refers to those who closely and consistently share one's sense of humor in some noticeable way. Two people are comic peers if they share relevant background knowledge, relevant attitudes and values, and a similar taste for what they find funny. Background knowledge is required for much of humor, so being comic peers means sharing significant background knowledge. They share attitudes about what is acceptable joking material, and they may frequently laugh at jokes for the same reasons.

Similarly, they laugh at the same *categories* of funny things, such as others' mishaps, puns, nonsense humor, anti-jokes, and so forth. Just as epistemic peer groups break off based on their relative expertise, comic peer groups can break off based on their tastes for particular kinds of humor. For instance, my friend and I may be comic peers in that we share an affinity for witty comebacks and sarcasm, but not so based on our differing attitudes towards puns or dead baby jokes. Comic peers are fairly easy to identify.

Epistemic peer, on the other hand, is a frequently used term with many distinct conceptions, and this makes them harder to identify. Keep in mind that the nature of the term centers on epistemic peer *disagreement*, which involves considerations on what one ought to do when she discovers that she disagrees with someone she considers an epistemic peer. Here, it is natural to think that a resolution should be sought after, whereas it is not so natural to seek out reasons explaining why two people did not laugh at the same joke.

To start, the most basic notion of epistemic peers emphasizes possessing the same epistemic virtues and having access to the same evidence. Gary Gutting first used the term to identify those who are alike in regards to intelligence, thoroughness, honesty, and other epistemic virtues.³ Thomas Kelly expands on this, stating that two people are epistemic peers with respect to a question if and only if they are equals regarding their familiarity with evidence and arguments which bear on that question.⁴ David Enoch defines an epistemic peer as “someone who is...as likely as you are to get things right (on matters of the relevant kind).” This conception of evidence seems primarily constituted by what one knows, pertaining to shared evidence, and this includes knowing that someone else is equally likely to know.

Now, these conditions for epistemic peerhood may in fact seem sufficient for identifying epistemic peers. After all, over time we learn the trustworthiness and credibility of others, and in some cases, the shared access to evidence is clear. Yet the problem that arises from too minimal a definition is that it puts us in a position to consider too many people to be our epistemic peers. If the primary criteria are shared access and similar judgment, then there would be many instances where we’d have so many epistemic peers that it is no longer epistemically relevant or advantageous. Consider the internet. Anyone who has access to the internet is sharing access to the same things as everyone else with internet access. And even the internet lends itself to narrow epistemic communities. Consider, for example, *The Onion’s* satirical article “*Harry Potter* Books Spark Rise In Satanism Among Children” back in the summer of 2000.⁵

³ Gutting, Gary. "Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism," 83.

⁴ Kelly, Thomas. "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," 174.

⁵ Harry Potter Books Spark Rise In Satanism Among Children." *The Onion - America's Finest News Source*. 2000

This article stirred up much trouble among communities who believed it to be true. While this was before *The Onion* was such a well-known satirical news agency, there are still instances today where people mistakenly believe their stories. In fact, misinterpreting satire as truth seems to be a common epistemic failing among some internet users. As we can see, even given prima facie reason for thinking someone else shares access to the same body of evidence, we are still left with the problem of determining who our epistemic peers are.

While access to the same evidence and shared epistemic virtues are the core features of epistemic peer definitions, another class of the term demands more. This class of definitions relies on evidential processing. This addition amplifies the difficulties in identifying one's peers. Jonathan Matheson emphasizes two types of equality pertinent to accounts of epistemic peers. One is equality in *evidential possession* and the other is equality in *evidential processing*. Simply put, two individuals are in equal terms of *evidential possession* regarding some particular proposition just in case they have equally good evidence pertaining to said proposition, and two individuals are in equal terms of *evidential processing* regarding some particular proposition just in case they are equal in how well they are able to handle evidence related to forming a belief about said proposition.⁶ It does not matter how they handle the information, but rather that they are *equally good* at handling the information and thus equally likely to do so correctly. This type of evidence seems constituted by one's phenomenological state, or how things seem to us based on the shared evidence we process. Yet this merely elicits another question: how is one to judge that others are evidentially processing things in the same way as someone else?

⁶ Matheson, Jonathan. "Disagreement and Epistemic Peers." *Oxford Handbooks Online*.

Axel Gelfert holds that “we demand of epistemic peers not only that they be as reliable and well informed as us, but also that they share, by and large, our commitments as to what it is important to know. Epistemic peers should not only get their facts right, but should also agree on which facts it is important to get right.”⁷ This class of definitions goes a bit above and beyond in that they emphasize the importance of *processing* evidence rather than merely possessing and accessing evidence. This is a reasonable expansion to the basic term, but it drives full force into the practical problem of being unable to identify our epistemic peers. Amidst discussion of a disagreement, we may learn some things about how the other interprets the relevant evidence, but in some instances we don’t even have access to the details of our own evidential processing, so it remains insufficient.

So if the additional condition on epistemic peerhood is processing evidence in the same way, or equally as well, then the primary hurdle is that we lack the ability to understand others’ evidential processing. The only way over this particular hurdle is to figure out a way that helps us understand this about others. I find that our ability to identify comic peers entails some insight into others’ processing, which offers some hope for finding our epistemic peers.

AN ANALOGY

It would be a pretty wild claim to suggest that someone may be an epistemic peer on all accounts. Individuals’ specializations and expertise vary. Consequently, what happens is that our epistemic peers seem to be categorized in certain ways. For example, I have those who I deem an epistemic peer in regards to philosophy, and these are

⁷ Gelfert, Axel. "Who is an Epistemic Peer?" 514.

different people than those I deem epistemic peers in regards to literature, pop culture, sports, and so forth.

While these notions of epistemic peers suggest the breaking into categories, I want to be clear that a comic peer is not merely a category of epistemic peer in the same way that my philosophy epistemic peers are. I believe that comic peers are another species of peer entirely. One central characteristic to epistemic peerhood relies on having equal access to the same evidence, which likewise appears in comic peerhood as physical presence, in-group terminology, awareness of certain attitudes, and so forth. Drawing the analogy with Matheson's terms, it seems that evidential possession would include the knowledge and beliefs required to find something funny. Tracking who frequently shares feelings of mirth within the same in-groups indicates who shares your evidential possession. It seems that we track this in the same manner that we track others' credibility in the epistemic case. As I discuss philosophy with my classmates, I learn that we share access to the same evidence, and thus conclude that they are my epistemic peers concerning philosophy. In the same way, as we joke with others, we learn to what extent we share background knowledge based on the other person's presence in either the in-group or out-group of the joke. If being in the in-group means getting the joke and getting the joke means sharing evidential possession, then, in theory, repeatedly being in the same in-group as someone else implies a consistent shared evidential possession.

It seems then that evidential processing would manifest as the shared feeling of mirth among those who find a joke or bit funny. This would be those who get the joke, and respond in the same manner. Getting the joke shows shared evidential possession, but responding to the joke in the same way implies shared evidential processing – at least to a

certain extent. Responding to jokes necessarily elicits one's attitudes towards the subject. If I get a joke, but do not find it funny, then I am equally as likely to identify sharing a sense of humor to those who also get the joke and do not find it funny. What is important here is that they are processing the evidence of the joke in the same way that I am. In this case, this suggests that they share the same attitudes as me regarding some particular subject. Thus, by joking, we gain access to new evidence, namely the attitudes of others.

In the broader sense of epistemic peer, having equal access to evidence in the case of humor would involve things like hearing the joke, being present for the funny episode, having the background knowledge required, being in the right state of mind, and so forth. Essentially, equal access to evidence regarding funny things is being in the appropriate position to be able to find it funny. And just as the epistemic discussion proceeds into what to do during disagreement or when one simply does not know something, the comic discussion heads down the same path. Let me say more. Imagine that a professor has changed what time the class is meeting for an upcoming class, but I forgot to write it down. I think that instead of starting at 2:00, the class is supposed to start at 2:30, but I do not know for sure. In this case, I will likely ask someone who has access to the evidence I had: someone else in the class.

An analogous case illustrates one way that knowing who shares our sense of humor is valuable. For this, I will observe three categories of jokes that each rely on different levels of understanding. For one example, say I am with a group of friends and some people I am just meeting. Someone makes the following Harry Potter joke:

“The barman says, ‘We don’t serve time-travelers here.’ Hermione walks into The Three Broomsticks with a time-turner.”

Imagine that I've neither read nor watched Harry Potter. I may be confused by the "The Three Broomsticks" and "time-turner," but I can still know that this is a joke.⁸ This sort of inverted joke structure provides enough information for me to laugh along and avoid being outed for not being familiar with Harry Potter.⁹

Not all jokes can be recognized in this way. Some categories of jokes require specific knowledge or the joke will be missed. Puns are an excellent example of this. If I am studying abroad in a foreign country where I don't know the language and someone makes a clever pun, I would not know something clever or funny has happened at all. I am missing the necessary knowledge required for me to recognize that someone made a pun. Another category of joke requires some background knowledge as well as knowledge about attitudes. For example, someone jokes "The thing about German food is that no matter how much you eat, an hour later you're hungry for power."¹⁰ The audience in this case need not endorse or possess the attitude represented to find the joke funny, but they must be aware of the underlying stereotypes. The last category of jokes *does* require the audience to share the attitude of the joke in order to find it funny. For example:

Q: What is easier to pick up the heavier it gets?
A: Women.

These jokes rely on the affective disposition of the audience. Many other sexist and racist jokes work this way.

⁸For those who don't get the Harry Potter terms: a time-turner is an object used by one of the main characters, Hermione, which allows her to travel back in time. The Three Broomsticks is the name of a pub in the fictional village of Hogsmeade. Basically, this is a common inverted joke that has been translated into a fictional world by adopting its language.

⁹To which someone would almost certainly reply: "You don't get my Harry Potter jokes? There must be something RON with you."

¹⁰Cohen, Ted. *Jokes*, 21.

So here's a conundrum: I want to avoid being called out for not understanding the references because I want to fit in, but I also want to make sure that I am not laughing at something that I would not be laughing at should I understand the reference. That is, I want to stay true to my own sense of humor by expressing my true attitudes. What if the joke was somehow offensive, and if I understood it, I would not be laughing? The best thing to do is to quickly defer to our comic peers. I ought to look to someone I know who commonly shares my sense of humor, but also gets this particular reference.¹¹ Similarly, if my comic peer does not laugh, then I may not as well.¹² Sometimes we rely on our peers to flag when something funny has happened, sometimes to explain jokes to us, and sometimes to tell whether or not we share the right attitudes to find the joke funny.

Thus, comic peers are analogous to epistemic peers in that they too carve out communities that share evidence, background knowledge, and even attitudes. Just as our epistemic position determines our epistemic peers, our position within joking situations over time determines our comic peers, who we then may turn to for clarification in ambiguous cases. Additionally, just as our epistemic peers may reinforce our beliefs or knowledge, our comic peers may reinforce our own taste for humor and what we find funny. One thing to consider, of course, is that people find things funny for different reasons. It seems then that the sort of information that we get from sharing jokes is perhaps more valuable diachronically, over a range of joke exchanges and funny episodes, and across a wide variety of contexts. In this way, we gain a better understanding when someone actually does find things funny for the same reason as us.

¹¹ I realize that one may argue in this instance that the person is more analogous to a 'comic superior,' but I don't think this is correct. In fact, this example alludes to where the epistemic peer and comic peer accounts diverge.

¹² Remember: in this example I am looking to someone I know who ordinarily shares my sense of humor *and* who I know gets the reference.

IN-GROUPS AND OUT-GROUPS

Now I will put forth the hypothesis that humor and joking provides an important source of evidence regarding evidential processing that is relevant to determining who's whose epistemic peer. It's obvious that humor plays a large role in bonding with others. What gets neglected, however, is that it accomplishes this while relying on the existence of an out-group; that is, others who are not in on the joke, are somehow excluded, or seen as being targeted. This happens in a variety of ways. In some cases, the out-group is obviously targeted, as seen in sexist, racist, and stereotype humor. In other cases, the out-group may be less obvious, such as jokes about the human condition, jokes about death, or conversational jokes where everyone around may be laughing even if they do not get the joke. Further, there are outlier cases where the target of the joke may find comfort within the in-group despite being targeted by the joke. For an example, just think of a gullible friend; their willingness to trust their friends is often exploited for the entertainment of the group. This problem of trust shows how we may laugh at the same thing for different reasons. The friends are laughing because the gullible friend believes them when they say that "gullible" isn't in the dictionary, while the gullible friend, once made aware, may be laughing at her own fault in believing the others.

I suspect that what is fundamental to each of these aforementioned cases is the way in which we subconsciously determine both who is in on the joke and who is being excluded. I believe this acts as an epistemic tracker that helps situate oneself into the group dynamic, in addition to learning others' sense of humor. Observing where the in-group and out-group are divided over time informs us of our comic peers. With that in mind, this suggests that the in-group and out-group effect of humor is actually an

important epistemic feature. Observance of these groups tells us more than who our comic peers may be; it provides relevant insight into how others process the subjects, which assists in identifying epistemic peers.

I will now turn to this grouping feature in order to illustrate how this happens. To begin, I would like to lay the foundation for understanding what happens within in-groups during a joke or funny episode. There are two types of humor to consider here: situational humor and joking. Situational humor is a sort of play frame adopted by those involved, which relies on a backdrop of in-group knowledge and uses familiar verbal features and non-verbal communication. Best put by Diana Boxer and Florencia Cortés-Conde: “In situational humor ‘being there’ becomes a very important part of ‘getting it.’”¹³ Naturally, this is a core feature as it relies on the context of the situation. Examples of this include teasing or some funny mishap that brings about an inside joke. To be in the in-group of situational humor is to be both present and appropriately situated in the play frame; that is, to adopt a playful attitude which is conducive to humor. Let’s consider some examples. Here’s one that creates an inside joke.

Some friends are walking back from the gym on campus when one woman, Sally, trips and falls rather dramatically. She launches forward before her friends can help prevent her fall. Immediately, her friends start laughing and as she lies on the ground, she exclaims “Ooooooh, I took a *tumble!*” Her friends begin laughing harder alongside her. Then, for the next couple of weeks the joke “Sally took a tumble!” emerges as an inside joke among those who were there.¹⁴

This is a primary example that illustrates the importance of being present during situational humor. All of the people who witnessed Sally fall are in on the joke. Of course, it may be possible to expand the joke to include others, but this does not always

¹³ Boxer, Diana, and Florencia Cortés-Conde. "From Bonding to Biting: Conversational Joking and Identity Display," 277.

¹⁴ Thanks to my friend, Calli Pugh, for taking the tumble that inspired this example.

work. Explaining something funny will most certainly kill the humor, hence the common dismissal expression: “You just had to be there.” Likewise, anyone reading this example likely does not find it very funny. In excluding others, this type of humor further bonds those who are involved. Boxer and Cortés-Corde describe the out-group in these scenarios as “absent others.” Episodes like this bring about special in-group terminology that bonds those involved and unites them against these “absent others.”¹⁵

An example of situational humor that potentially divides those present is teasing. Boxer and Cortés-Corde’s research captures well how friendly teasing ranges from bonding to biting. Certainly everyone has had their feelings hurt by a comment that was intended to be teasing and playful. But what goes wrong that causes genuine teasing to bite? Most likely, it is insufficient or ambiguous play frame. Boxer and Cortés-Corde categorize this phenomenon, writing that:

The need for a clear play frame is as necessary in [situational humor] as in joke telling, but intentional or unintentional ambiguity due to a lack of highly conventionalized means for signaling the ‘play’ frame can be problematic.... not getting it might result in a possible conflict. Misunderstandings and/or misfires are, thus, more likely and imply increased risk beyond the level of loss of face.¹⁶

In the case of teasing-gone-wrong, it seems primarily caused by someone misattributing play frame to someone else. And since the nature of teasing relies on some truth about the person, in the absence of joke-signaling, teasing can be particularly dangerous to relationships with others. For example, I was texting a group of friends from college recently, joking about going back to get different bachelor’s degrees. We each listed another major that we would want, deliberately picking ones that would be “easier.” One friend said to another “don’t change your major...you already did nothing.”

¹⁵ Ibid., 281.

¹⁶ Ibid., 278.

Unfortunately, this was a bite. Rather than feeling in on the joke, the receiving friend was offended. And since I knew she was upset by the comment, it was difficult for me to find it funny too. Thus, those involved were divided by teasing-gone-wrong. If determining our comic peers relies on tracking responses to situational humor, then episodes like these can be dividing. Those hurt or unamused by the teasing comment, for whatever reason, could interpret this as the other misattributing play frame or thinking that she may require less play signals to joke about something. As a result, this could be points against her as a comic peer, especially if it happens regularly.

The next type of humor to consider is joking. When a joke is told, two important things happen among the audience. First, one either gets the joke or does not. Then, those who get the joke either find it funny or do not. When presented this way, the essential element of being part of the in-group is that one gets the joke.¹⁷ Of course, those who get the joke, but find it problematic or harsh or merely not amusing, may dissociate themselves from the in-group. Regardless, there remains underlying information required to get the joke, and this suggests an inseparable relationship between humor and knowledge.

In his book, *Jokes*, Ted Cohen frequently draws attention to these feelings of intimacy and in-groupness that are created by joking. His primary thesis revolves around hearers of jokes importing some form of their own background knowledge, beliefs, or attitudes into the joke. The joke-teller then may exploit this background knowledge for comedic effect. Cohen says that “This fact is a key to understanding the insinuating

¹⁷ There may be some exceptions to this, such as a group of friends teasing their gullible friend. While the gullible friend may not get the joke, her and their shared laughter may still promote feelings of inclusion and in-groupness as opposed to her being excluded in some way. Additionally, heavily targeted jokes, such as racist or sexist ones, are context-dependent on who makes up the in-group.

quality of jokes, a way in which they force their audiences to join in the joke.”¹⁸

According to this account, those who get the joke all share some form of background knowledge without which they could not get the joke. Cohen seems right about this, and he calls these jokes conditional because they are conditional on the audience providing something to either get the joke or find it amusing. When this involves background beliefs or knowledge, Cohen calls the joke hermetic. As a result, strongly hermetic jokes require audiences with substantial knowledge of a subject. Let us examine some jokes.

Consider the following:

Q: Want to hear a feminist joke?

A: - that's not funny!¹⁹

In order to get this joke, one must be familiar with the cultural stereotype of the angry feminist who is unamused by jokes at her expense. If one were unfamiliar with this reputation feminists have for being no-nonsense, then they may merely be confused by the answer to the question. They would not get the joke. While many likely get the joke, not all may find it amusing. This is a great example of how another's attitudes towards the subject are revealed. We may ask what attitudes they possess that prevent them from finding the joke funny. Consider another example:

Q: Why don't snakes bite lawyers?

A: Professional courtesy

This one also relies on a common stereotype. The joker is exploiting the hearers' knowledge about how lawyers are often depicted as cunning and snake-like, deceiving those around them for their own personal gain.

¹⁸ Cohen, Ted. *Jokes*, 3-4.

¹⁹ Thanks to Zach Auwerda for this joke.

These two jokes function in much the same way. For a perhaps more nuanced example, recall Lewis Carroll's famous riddle presented by the Mad-Hatter, who repeatedly asks "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"²⁰ Carroll doesn't provide an answer for us, but many may be amused by the popular response that "Poe wrote on both." This response relies on layers of wordplay, and surely this response makes no sense if one does not know that Edgar Allan Poe was a 19th century author and that one of his most famous poems is titled "The Raven." This particular example highlights well how merely getting the joke is sufficient for admission into the in-group. As this riddle relies on a pun for its answer, some hearers may be little more than amused. Thus, this riddle and response carves out two groups within those who get the joke; those who find puns funny and those who do not.

Contrast the following strong hermetic joke by Cohen with those mentioned above:

One day a paleographer came into his classics department in great excitement. "There has been an earthshaking discovery," he announced. "The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not written by Homer, but by some other Greek with the same name."²¹

This joke requires one to have knowledge about problems of reference in the philosophy of language as well as some information about ancient Greek literature. Without this required knowledge, the hearer does not have the access to find the joke funny. This would be a case where it might be helpful to observe a well-known comic peer who has the epistemic advantage of getting the joke. Of course, forcing laughter to cover gaps in knowledge is harder to do than one may think, but more on that later.

²⁰ Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; And, Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, 57. As an aside, in this version, Kristine Moruzi offers another clever response: "Because it can produce a few notes, though they are very flat; and that it is never put with the wrong end in front!"

²¹ Cohen, Ted. *Jokes*, 16.

While joking, one must have an implicit acknowledgement of this hearer-providing effect, which the speaker can then exploit for the joke. According to Cohen, this is the foundation for intimacy that will develop should their joke succeed as those around join in the shared response. Cohen writes of this in-group intimacy:

It is the shared sense of those in a *community*. The members know that they are in this community, and they know that they are joined there by one another. When the community is focused on a joke, the intimacy has two constituents. The first constituent is a shared set of beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, preferences, et cetera – a shared outlook on the world, or at least part of an outlook. The second constituent is a shared feeling – a shared response to something. The first constituent can be cultivated and realized without jokes. So can the second constituent, but with jokes, the second constituent is amplified by the first, and this is a very curious and wonderful fact about jokes.²²

So Cohen finds characteristic of these fleeting joke communities that they necessarily have a shared outlook about the relevant subject and that this in turn encourages a shared feeling. I will adopt this notion as representative of the in-groups of jokes.

As a quick aside, I want to point out that we learn just as much from those who are not necessarily our comic peers. Those in the out-group provide epistemically relevant features that have nothing to do with one's sense of humor. So what happens when one does not get the joke? There are a few situations to consider here. Theories of laughter emphasize the ways in which we tend to laugh together. One is more likely to laugh with others around than alone. This is why many TV shows rely on laugh tracks to signal laughter among the audience. If a friend tells a strong hermetic joke that all but one person gets, then that person may laugh anyways. They are likely not experiencing any genuine feelings of mirth, but there are a couple explanations for their laughter. They may be laughing awkwardly as a knee-jerk reaction to seeing the others' laughter, or they may choose to laugh in an attempt to avoid being excluded. This is a sort of different case

²² Ibid., 28.

where we are privy to a person's desire to be in on the joke, which reveals a particular attitude they possess.

Because laughter occurs for many reasons other than mirth, identifying the in-group and out-group of jokes and bits is sometimes complicated. However, it is epistemically helpful to identify the out-group of jokes because by not laughing or not getting the joke, one reveals gaps in their own knowledge, beliefs, or background. These gaps and the revealed attitudes that come along with them grant us new evidence to consider about our peers.

SIGNALING AND NEW EVIDENCE

I have argued that sharing attitudes helps evaluate our comic peers. In some cases, people manipulate their response to something funny. One advantage to my view is that, ultimately, we are bad at faking or hiding our genuine responses to humor. In fact, because we are good at recognizing amusement in others, paying attention to humor bypasses some of the practical problems that afflict attempts at identifying epistemic peers. First, I will show when this may occur, and then I will highlight an important difference in facial muscles that assists us in recognizing non-genuine responses.

In their book, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse Engineer the Mind*, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams build a cognitive account of humor, revealing it to share qualities with feelings of insight. Because of their interests in the cognitive processes behind finding things funny, they argue that it is crucial to understand and evaluate laughter both as a genuine response to humorous stimuli, and as a behavioral response to a variety of other things, such as awkward laughter, fake laughter, and laughing because others laugh. Consequently, they shift focus to incorporate the ways we deliberately react to avoid

exclusion from the joke. They write “You may, without knowing it, acquire a habit of laughing when others laugh, just to make them believe that you understand what is going on, even when you have not received the stimulus that evoked their laughter.”²³ Further, they suggest that one may stifle laughter that would reveal limits of “cognitive mastery” and exaggerate laughter to express some mastery that one may not have. One clear example of this is the case of laughing at a strong hermetic joke which one does not have the appropriate understanding to find funny. Fake-laughing at the joke attempts to trick those around to believing that she too gets the joke, thus avoiding being called out, having the joke painfully explained, or being openly excluded from the shared in-group feeling.

Try as we might to fake or stifle our laughter, our faces ultimately give us away. French anatomist, Guillaume Duchenne, studied the expressions of emotions by stimulating facial muscles with electric currents. He found that smiles are different when accompanied by positive emotions and that the difference involves involuntary use of a particular facial muscle. What’s now known as a Duchenne smile (or laughter) involves both the zygomatic major and orbicularis oculi. The zygomatic major is the voluntary muscle involved that raises the corners of the mouth, whereas the orbicularis oculi is an involuntary contraction that raises the cheeks and produces a crow’s feet appearance by the eyes. It is this involuntary contraction that produces the genuine Duchenne smile. Because it is involuntary, any forced or fake smile (as known as a non-Duchenne smile), lacks the use of the orbicularis oculi, instead relying only the zygomatic major. So despite some people’s confident assertions that they are exceptionally good at ‘fake laughing,’ it

²³ Hurley, Matthew M., Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams. *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 268.

seems that we are actually quite good at noticing this difference in others. In fact, studies have shown that babies at just ten months old will offer false smiles to strangers, but Duchenne smiles to their mothers, Duchenne smiles in yearbook photos correlate to general positive emotions, happier marriages, and even longevity many years later, and Duchenne smiles act as signals for cooperation and altruism.²⁴

On the other hand, finding something legitimately funny and laughing as a result of mirth also reveals to others one's underlying knowledge, attitudes, and biases.

Laughing in this way will “*unintentionally* reveal something of strategic interest about your knowledge (and your largely unconscious methods of putting it to use).”²⁵ It is evident that laughing at something reveals information about a person that is unique in this way. What a person laughs at reveals something that others may never have known.

Hurley, Dennett, and Adams capture this best, writing:

Laughter is a hard-to-fake signal of cognitive prowess – and weakness. It is not surprising, then, that humor-detection has come to play a central role in human communication. Aside from fabricated (non-Duchenne) laughter and stifled laughter, our every roar and giggle broadcasts something about our cognitive abilities and knowledge.²⁶

It is our ability to discern fake from genuine laughter that allows us better access to the thoughts, opinions, and attitudes revealed by joking, and it is this notion of what humor reveals that suggests it is a useful approach to identifying epistemic peers.

ALL-ACCESS PASS

I mentioned earlier that comic peers are not merely a type of epistemic peer, but rather another species of peer entirely. The significance of the comic peer is that they

²⁴ Jaffe, Eric. "The Psychological Study of Smiling."

²⁵ Hurley, Matthew M., Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams. *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 265.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

exhibit more than merely knowledge. They provide insight about sources of second-order evidence, namely attitudes, values, and biases. Gaining access to this second-order evidence seems best done in a comic way, especially since getting the joke often relies on knowing the joke-teller's attitudes. Consequently, I think that humor is an invaluable guide because identifying our comic peers puts us in a better position to then evaluate if they too are, in some capacity, our epistemic peers.

One crucial observation to make is that comedy is contextual. The same thing told by one person may be funny, but someone else saying the exact same thing may not be funny at all. Because humor is such a drastic social phenomenon, a joke-teller's social position matters as well as the audience's. Comics are well aware of this. They may alter a set to accommodate different political views, race, class, age, sex, and so forth depending on their audience. This social relevance plays a large role in identifying values in others. Let's consider some examples.

Imagine a woman telling the following joke:

Everyone says the world would be better off if it was run by women. Sure, maybe there wouldn't be violence and territorial conquests fueled by male testosterone, but instead, we'd have a bunch of jealous countries that aren't talking to each other.

Certainly some people find this joke distasteful merely reading it. Told by a woman, however, one may be more likely to find it funny because in telling the joke, the woman is poking fun at the jealous woman trope.²⁷ So, when a woman laughs at this joke, it seems that it is because her attitude matches that of the joke-teller. In fact, based on the woman's delivery of the joke, anyone may laugh by sharing this 'it's funny because it's true' attitude. However, imagine the same joke being told by a man. Suddenly, the vibe

²⁷ Of course, this may not always be the case as women can also exhibit sexist attitudes. However, the point is to show how a woman telling this joke yields different results than a man telling it.

of the joke shifts from a narrative observation of sexism to possible disparagement of women. Much of this relies on existent power structures. Because the man telling the joke is not part of the target of the joke and comes from a privileged position, it is more difficult to find it funny; unless, of course, you share the man's attitude, which is admittedly sexist.

This suggests a highly contextual and sophisticated way of following what others find funny. In addition to observing genuine laughter and amused responses, there are social layers that elicit attitudes towards the topic. Disparagement humor is prevalent, and much research has been done to consider its effects on why people find it amusing. In their work on the literature, Mark A. Ferguson and Thomas E. Ford find that "It appears that such humor is most amusing to those individuals whose personal or social identity is enhanced in the particular social context."²⁸ Perhaps a similar observation could be made about women who make disparaging jokes at their own expense. Perhaps in drawing attention to these real underlying sexist attitudes and problems, women are hoping to expose the negative attitude as ridiculous in an effort to promote positive change. They are, in a way, satirizing sexist attitudes. Tina Fey, for instance, mocked female Hollywood standards in several of her jokes while hosting the Golden Globes. Back to back years, she joked:

"Matthew McConaughey did amazing work this year. For his role in *Dallas Buyers Club*, he lost 45 pounds. Or what actresses call: 'being in a movie.'" and "Steve Carell's *Foxcatcher* look took two hours to put on, including his hair styling and makeup. Just for comparison, it took me three hours today to prepare for my role as *human woman*."

²⁸ Ferguson, Mark A., and Thomas E. Ford. "Disparagement Humor: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Psychoanalytic, Superiority, and Social Identity Theories," 306.

Now, to understand disparaging humor is an entirely different project, and I don't intend to discuss that here. What I want to illustrate is merely that *there are some jokes that require proper attitudes to find funny.*²⁹

Another way that attitudes and values manifest in regards to one's sense of humor is what one is willing to joke or laugh about. To an extent, any time someone makes a joke, they are signaling that something is permissible to joke about. For an example, just think of a friend who finds nothing off-limits for joking material. This would be the friend sitting at the bar when a particularly annoying song comes on who declares "this song makes me want to hang myself." First, this tells everyone else that this is permissible joking material to the speaker. Second, it can be distancing to others whose attitudes or values conflict with the nature of the joke. Even without finding the joke funny, they are learning something important about the friend who told the joke. Similarly, the speaker learns something important about those not laughing. To them, it signals something they find impermissible to joke about. A common example of this is rape jokes. Many people either refuse to or simply don't find them funny in any capacity. This reveals important values to everyone else.

To summarize, I have tried to show that humor reveals background knowledge, attitudes, values, and biases, which are all relevant to identifying our comic peers. While we may share some background knowledge that is required to find something funny, this alone is insufficient for comic peerhood. We must also consistently share the necessary attitudes and values required to find the kinds of things funny that we find funny, and we must share a certain taste in humor. For these reasons, comic peerhood reveals a great deal about the background beliefs and attitudes of others that can be used to identify our

²⁹ Recall the three categories that rely on different degrees of understanding mentioned above.

epistemic peers. We have reason to think that those who are not our comic peers are unlikely to be our epistemic peers, and those who are our comic peers can be more reliably evaluated as potential epistemic peers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have stressed the need to address the real problem of identifying one's epistemic peers in order for debates about what to do in the face of epistemic peer disagreement to progress. I proposed that humor presents a possible solution because we are better able to carve out comic communities and to identify those who share our sense of humor than we are able to identify our epistemic peers. Because of the complexity of in-groups, out-groups, and types of humor, we must learn who our comic peers are over a wide variety of contexts. Yet comic peers are still easier to identify in real life, which implies that humor seems the best avenue for getting us closer to identifying our epistemic peers.

Those who are our comic peers are essentially more likely to be our epistemic peers in some capacity. At least, they are in a better position to be more accurately evaluated epistemically. This doesn't mean that humor is only helpful through identifying comic peers, however. There are extreme cases where humor alone is obviously helpful. Think of the homeless person who seems to be laughing at nothing. It is obvious from this case that one could eliminate him from both categories of peers. In less obvious cases, we can investigate with humor. For instance, if we are unsure that someone could be an epistemic peer in some way, perhaps we ought to make a joke. As shown, this is a quick way to get some indication about a person's background knowledge, attitudes, and values. In fact, we can even manipulate what we learn by what we joke about. If you

suspect someone to be racist, sexist, or homophobic, a good way to find out is to make a joke that would elicit a particular response from someone who is. This uses humor to quickly gain epistemic insight without necessarily knowing whether or not the person is a comic peer.

One may worry that humor can be misleading, and that we in fact get a lot wrong about interpreting others' attitudes and reasons for laughing and so forth. Unfortunately, humor isn't a perfect guide. People do find things funny for a variety of reasons, and they may disagree with others about what makes something funny. And the attitudes and values elicited can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Even successful comedians sometimes worry that some people in their audience have the wrong idea about their attitudes and values. Dave Chappelle, for example, abruptly left comedy for ten years amidst a successful career. One instance that influenced his decision to leave comedy involved a crew member laughing at a sketch in a way Chappelle did not expect. It was a racially-charged sketch, and Chappelle recalled his realization, saying:

“Somebody on set that was white laughed in such a way... I know the difference when people are laughing with me and people are laughing at me, and it was the first time I ever got a laugh that I was uncomfortable with. Not just uncomfortable, but like ‘should I fire this person?’”³⁰

He realized that what he was hoping to convey in the sketch was not what was going to be interpreted by everyone. So, of course, humor cannot capture attitudes and values perfectly. But I see no reason why we ought to dismiss its advantages merely because it sometimes gets things wrong. One problem with the conditions for epistemic peerhood is that we cannot discern who processes evidence similar to us, and humor remains the best avenue for filling this epistemic gap. What it gives us is an approach to epistemic

³⁰ "The Oprah Winfrey Show." February 3, 2006.

peerhood that takes strides to soothe the worry that current approaches to epistemic peer disagreement are highly idealized and therefore fail to be action-guiding.

Recall the opening example of epistemic disagreement. Imagine now that the bartender overhears their discussion of trying to remember who asked the really good question during the Q&A. The bartender hears Jerry say that he thinks it was Sam, and he hears George say that he thinks it was Kevin. The bartender interjects, “Is Sam a man or a woman?” “A woman,” Jerry replies. “Well, then you have your answer.” The bartender chuckles, and George laughs along. Suddenly, Jerry has learned new information about George, namely an underlying gender bias. With this information in hand, it seems sufficient for Jerry to in fact demote George as an epistemic peer in which case the epistemic peer disagreement dissolves. I hope to have shown that this revealing nature of humor gets us closer to answering the question of how we identify our epistemic peers.

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