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Winning Over the Audience: Trust and Humor in Stand-Up Comedy

ABSTRACT

This article advances a novel way of understanding humor and stand-up comedy. I propose that the relationship between the comedian and her audience is understood by way of trust, where the comedian requires the trust of her audience for her humor to succeed. The comedian may hold (or fail to hold) the trust of the audience in two domains. She may be trusted as to the form of the humor, such as whether she is joking. She may also be trusted as to the content of the joke. This approach has two distinct virtues. The first is that it makes sense of partial successes. These are cases where the humor neither completely succeeds nor fails because the audience does not fully trust the comedian. The second is that it explains intuitions about ethically dubious humor and why certain classes of humor, especially those dealing in racialized and gendered identities, are more readily (but not necessarily) accepted from humorists of those identities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy involves, among other things, a relationship between the comedian and the audience. The comedian is often not just trying to get the audience to laugh but to laugh along with the comedian, or to laugh together at the comedian. This imbues stand-up comedy with a social dynamic where the personage of the comedian is important. Sometimes the comedian's personage is a created character like with Al Murray the Pub Landlord, who was created as a satire of British conservative populism. It can be that a comedian's personage is in question owing to their unethical behavior, as was the case with Louis C.K. and Shane Gillis. Other times, the comedian's personage is the focus of their act, as with Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*. The various ways in which a comedian's personage is important shows that an integral part of stand-up comedy is the relationship between the comedian and the audience.

My focus in this article is on one aspect of this relationship: the audience's trust of the

comedian. Specifically, I seek to show that the language of trust can be applied to comedy, and that this has significant explanatory virtue. Not only does an analysis of trust elucidate how comedy works in a social context, but it also allows for a deeper understanding of the evaluation of humor. I discuss this mainly through talking about trust and humor, since stand-up comedy is mainly an art of humor.

The first half of this article—Sections ii through iv—establishes how I am talking about humor, how I am talking about trust, and how the two are combined. In the second half of the article—Sections v through viii—I run through what I consider to be the most significant implications of looking at comedy through the lens of trust. I begin by establishing a level of indeterminacy in humor owing to the fact that trust is often partially but not totally merited. I expand this to establish the category of ethically dubious humor: humor that is ethically valanced and may be suspected of being ethically vicious without definitely being ethically vicious. In the final section I draw to the ultimate implication,

which is that one of the tasks of the comedian is making themselves clearly trustworthy to the audience. This is the ultimate domain of skill in stand-up comedy: getting the audience to trust and accept the comedian.

II. HOW I AM TALKING ABOUT HUMOR

In this article, I discuss humor as a social practice, which is different from how humor is usually discussed in analytic philosophy. Humor is standardly presented as an emotion or something emotion-like, where it is defined by a certain sort of cognitive reaction and attendant phenomenology.¹ Such an account is not useful for discussing trust and humor, so I instead use what I call a social account of humor. By this account, humor is understood as a social practice centered around evoking laughter. The unit of humor is the humor act (such as a joke, a gag, or a prank) and comprises up to three roles: that of the humorist, the audience, and the target of the humor (what is being “laughed at”). The roles are nonexclusive, so one person may play two or even all three roles. All three roles are also not necessarily present in all cases. For example, humor centered around puns or other wordplay does not necessarily feature anything being laughed at. There is also “found humor,” which is humor without a humorist. An example of this could be seeing someone on the street slip, fall down, and have their novelty-sized ice cream land squarely on their head.

One important distinction that I use is that between “affiliative” and “disaffiliative” laughter (Glenn 2003, 29–31). This is the distinction that is colloquially understood as being between “laughing with” and “laughing at.” Since laughter is a social signal, it can be used to exercise power in a group by either including or excluding individuals or groups. People who are being invited to laugh affiliatively are either being invited into a group or affirmed as a member of the group doing the laughing. People who are being targeted with disaffiliative laughter, who are being laughed at, are being excluded from the group that includes the laughers. Since humor trades in laughter, and laughter may be affiliative or disaffiliative, I refer to affiliative and disaffiliative humor based on whether the laughter the humor pursues is primarily affiliative or disaffiliative.

For a humor act to succeed, two things are necessary. The first criterion is that it must be sufficiently comprehensible to the audience. If it is not clear what the point of an attempted joke is, or if it is not clear that it is a joke at all, then the joke will suffer and possibly fail completely. The second criterion is that it must engender participation. Participation standardly means getting the audience to laugh, though there are humor practices that have developed to pursue other reactions like groaning or disgust.² When a humor act is being evaluated, the audience is being thought of as a normative audience, whether the audience actually exists. This means that the question is not “is there a real group of people who would laugh at this?” but rather “does this humor merit laughter?”

Using participation as the standard of success is also particularly apt for stand-up comedy. This is because that while stand-up standardly pursues the laughter of the audience, it does not do so exclusively. This is not only because there is stand-up that pursues other sorts of humor reactions, like the previously mentioned groaning and disgust reactions, but there is also stand-up that pursues reactions that are nonhumorous altogether. Think of all the times a comedian insults a local politician, to the riotous applause of the audience. While I discuss comedy as pursuing humor, I believe that much of what I write applies to comedy in general. By using the language of participation, what I write may be easily applied to stand-up as a whole, including that which pursues nonhumorous aims.

III. THE BASICS OF TRUST

If I am going to be talking about the role of trust in the success of stand-up comedy, then I must provide an account of trust. What follows is an attempt to give a basic account of trust, which is to say an account that is copacetic with the most prominent accounts of trust without forcing a choice between them.

Trust is standardly understood as being in terms of “places.” This is to say that there is one-place trust (where person A is generally trusting), two-place trust (where person A trusts person B), and three-place trust (where person A trusts person B in some domain P) (Faulkner 2015, 424). Since I must show that an analysis

of trust can be applied to humor, my discussion tends toward the three-place analysis; it is by the third place that it can be established that comedy uses trust.

Trust generally comprises two distinct parts. First there is reliance, where A relies on B. “Reliance” is used in a technical sense here; as Katherine Hawley writes, “to rely on someone to *x* is to act on the supposition that she will *x*” (2014, 3). This is somewhat different from the colloquial use of “reliance,” which often has a connotation of some power dynamic, and to say that A relies on B is to say that A is at the mercy of B, and A requires B to perform some task for A that A cannot for herself. Importantly, Hawley (2014, 3) notes, under this technical sense of reliance, relying on someone to *x* does not mean believing that she will *x*. Reliance is about acting, not believing; A could act on the supposition that B will do some *x* that A believes B is very unlikely to do, although that would be either foolish or desperate.

Different philosophers delineate the “reliance” part of trust in different ways. For example, Karen Jones writes that the way A relies on B in trust is that she has an “attitude of optimism” toward the “goodwill and competence” of B (1996, 4). She explains this to mean that A anticipates that B will have and display competence and goodwill in their interactions. Hawley, instead of focusing on goodwill and optimism, writes that reliance resides in A’s belief that B has a commitment to doing something or acting in some way (2014, 10). Commitments, to Hawley, are normative expectations that most often (but not necessarily) arise from a combination of convention and mutual expectation. Zac Cogley provides a different approach to Jones’s understanding of reliance, and writes that in trust A believes that B will act with goodwill and competence (2012, 35). Where Jones stresses optimism, Cogley stresses belief. This means that to Jones, trust is an affective attitude, whereas to Cogley, trust is a sort of belief. This distinction, between affective attitude and belief, is the main point of contention in defining trust, but it is not relevant to what I argue in this article, and I am confident that nothing that I propose cannot be accepted by a proponent of any one of these approaches.

The second part of trust is largely agreed upon: however the first piece of trust is understood, that first piece will be a direct and com-

elling but not indefeasible reason for B acting in accordance with A’s attitude or belief. I call this part the reflexivity condition. The exact form this part takes depends on how the first part is formulated. So, to Jones, B is “directly and favourably moved by the thought that [we] are counting on her” (1996, 8). In contrast, for Hawley, B will take having a relevant commitment to be a reason to fulfill that commitment. The main role of the reflexivity condition is to separate trust from mere reliance, and this is often justified with a comparison to relying on a machine. While one may rely on a machine for many things (for example, I am relying on one right now, to write this article), the machine does not respond to this reliance. It is neither motivated nor affected. The same analysis goes for other things or processes that are not agents—the ebb and flow of the tides, the sun coming up in the morning, and so on. While we may talk about trusting in a computer, that is considered to be colloquial talk with no relevance to this discussion.

IV. MAPPING TRUST

Trust may affect how a humor act succeeds (or suffers) with respect to both that act’s comprehensibility and its ability to bring about participation. I begin by focusing on trust and comprehension, where a humor act’s comprehensibility may be affected by trust in two ways. The first way is that the audience must trust that what the would-be humorist is doing is in fact an attempt at humor. For example, when my uncle leans across the table to me and asks, “how do you sell a deaf man a banana?” I am trusting him that he is beginning a joke and not earnestly asking me how to sell a deaf man a banana. The reliance condition is met because I am acting—listening, interpreting, understanding—on the supposition that my uncle is joking. I am playing the role of audience to the joke. The reflexivity condition is met by my uncle taking my acting as audience to tell the joke with me as audience.³ How much the would-be humorist is trusted depends substantially on how well the audience knows them, and what the audience thinks of them. I know my uncle quite well, I know the sorts of things he talks about, and I know the sorts of jokes he likes to make, so it is easy for me to trust that

he is joking when he asks me, “how do you sell a deaf man a banana?” Were I asked the same question, in the same tone of voice, by a stranger on the bus, I would be much less likely to trust that they were joking. The stranger would have to do something to build that trust, like ask, “would you like to hear a joke?” For the joke to be comprehended, the audience must trust that the would-be humorist is joking.

Just as it can be unclear whether a putative humorist is actually joking, it can also be clear that the humorist is joking but unclear what the joke is about. Consider an example where my uncle is making fun of someone for how they dress, with me as his audience. His target is a woman wearing an extremely large and oddly colored designer hat. The content of the joke depends on whether my uncle is trusted to know that the hat is specifically a designer hat. If my uncle does not know that it is a designer hat, then the joke may just turn on its odd size and color. If he does know, however, then the joke may instead turn on any number of things, from the hat’s high price to the reputation of the designer. The reliance and reflexivity conditions are met in this example in the same way that they were in the previous one: I listen, interpret, and understand my uncle’s joke on the supposition that he has some knowledge about fashion designers, and my uncle takes me as his audience because I make that supposition. Something worth drawing out is that how much I trust my uncle in this regard will depend on what sort of person I consider him to be. I may not know precisely just what he knows about fashion, but I may consider him to be the sort of person who knows something about fashion. This sort of judgment about what sort of person the humorist may be thought to be will be important when discussing ethically dubious humor.

These examples suggest two domains in which the humorist is trusted: competence and intent. Competence just means the would-be humorist’s ability to construct and enact the humor act. Intent has to do with what the humorist means, and what she is attempting to convey. For the sake of this article, I talk about meaning in the sense of Gricean reflexive intentions (for A to mean something is to say that A intends for B to understand what A means by way of B recognizing that A intends for B to understand what A means) since that offers a clear way of talking

about meaning, but I do not believe that anything I write substantively depends on adopting the Gricean approach to reflexive intentions (Grice [1957] 1989, 219).

It is important to recognize that trust is not absolute. I can trust my uncle more or less with respect to both his competence and his intent. Since humans have a lot of experience with basic forms of humor—jokes and mocking being prime examples—it is rare for people to be totally incompetent in humor. Most people can construct a joke where it is reasonably clear that they are joking, and it is reasonably clear what they mean. At the same time, very few people are expert enough to be perfectly competent and clear in intent all the time. Accordingly, with respect to humor, there will often be some trust of the humorist, but not total trust. Similarly, one of the goals of the humorist is often to build the trust of the audience. In a casual setting, this could be as simple as the earlier example of “would you like to hear a joke?”

V. TRUST, INTENTIONS, AND EXAMPLES FROM THE STAGE

Focusing on intentions through the lens of trust brings forward an important fact about humor: what is important is not just what the humorist intends, but what the audience understands the humorist to intend. In turn, what the audience can understand the humorist to intend is limited by what they believe the humorist to be capable of intending. It is at this point that the stand-up comedian begins to be evaluated substantially differently than the average stranger or acquaintance trying to tell a joke, albeit only in degree. The stand-up comedian will, by default, have more trust with respect to whether they are joking. This is because the comedian’s performance takes place in the context of a show, which is an institutionalized performance. “Would you like to hear a joke?” has been implied by the advertising, the stage, the microphone, and the introduction.

Even though the comedian is more readily accepted as trying to be joking, there are still further questions about what they intend, and what they might be trusted to intend. There is not just whether the comedian intends to tell a joke, but whether he intends to treat that joke’s

target affiliatively or disaffiliatively, and also how he conceives of his target. These issues are most readily brought out in the case of jokes that use marginalized groups. Consider the work of Russell Peters, an Indo-Canadian stand-up comedian who deals in ethnic humor. He makes jokes concerning the behavior of ethnic minorities, immigrants, and people of color. (These groups are often coextensive in his comedy.) Peters is also extremely popular with people of color. For example, in his shows he will ask if there are any Mexicans in the audience (Peters 2006). He will then single out the respondents and make jokes concerning Mexican stereotypes and affect a stereotypical Mexican accent. This sort of humor could easily be considered unacceptably racist, but it is accepted and specifically accepted by members of the target communities. Peters succeeds, I suggest, because he often focuses on his own upbringing as a racialized immigrant and how that sets him apart in Canadian society. His most famous line concerns his heavily accented father threatening to beat him, often in relation to Peters trying to follow the lead of a white friend. Peters gains the audience's trust by showing deep familiarity with the experience of being marginalized for being a racialized immigrant. He is not only trusted to be joking affiliatively about Mexican immigrants, but he is also trusted to have a positive conception of Mexicanness.

While the Peters example highlights the sort of humor that is usually ethically evaluated, the dynamics of trust hold in more basic cases of stand-up too. The comedian has to gain the trust of the audience with respect to her competence and her character. If the comedian is trying to joke affiliatively, then the audience has to be willing to be part of the group of the comedian, and that means the comedian demonstrating that they are trustworthy: that they have good intentions, and that they are capable of having good intentions. I want to turn now to two examples that show how stand-up comedians manage the trust of the audience.

v.A. *Example 1*

Kevin Hart, *Laugh at My Pain*—The centerpiece joke of this set is about Kevin Hart making excuses for not having enough money (Hart 2011). He recurs it several times through the set, and

returns to it for the closing line. In 2011, Kevin Hart was not short of money. Even though he had yet to have his own starring role in a major movie, he was already famous and a millionaire several times over from sales of his previous comedy sets. A joke about being short of money could easily come across as condescending from a millionaire. The majority of the audience of the show, even for the particular recorded show in Los Angeles, will never have as much money as Hart had even then. In this context, what is interesting about *Laugh at My Pain* is that it begins with a fifteen-minute video introduction of Hart leading a tour through the working-class North Philadelphia neighborhood where he grew up. He intones “come home with me” as the camera shows not just images of Philadelphia, but his Philadelphia: running shoes hung over a telephone wire, and a bookstore advertising that it ships to prisons. He identifies the corner he would be dropped off for school, across from a boarded up and presumably abandoned house. He sits on the steps to where he used to live and talks about his mom kicking his dad out of the house. All of this is intercut with Hart's childhood friends talking about how he had to learn to be honest, tough, and embrace who he was. All of this works, I contend, to garner the audience's trust for when Hart talks about being short of money. It not only shows that he is joking affiliatively, but that he conceives of being short of money in a way that they can accept. He knows what it is like to be poor. They can trust him.

v.B. *Example 2*

Mo'Nique, *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate*—The set is delivered to the people imprisoned in Ohio Reformatory for Women (Mo'Nique 2007). Some of the humor succeeds strongly, especially when Mo'Nique displays familiarity with the dynamics of prison life—for one bit she looks for the “baddest bitch here” and playfully dismisses one woman for not being a maximum security concern—or talks about common experiences like masturbation and trying to find sexual pleasure without a partner. Some of the humor also fails completely. When Mo'Nique tries to offer life advice—on how to act morally and how to succeed—the audience grows quiet and there is

even a slight feeling of hostility. The spot highlights Mo'Nique's position as highly successful comedian and actress, and so set her against the audience. The humor alienates the audience. That they, prisoners and performer, share some background may even make the alienation more acute as the humor, far from encouraging the audience, underlines to them that their lot in life is determined as much by luck as just desserts. The audience has not been won over, and so the humor fails.

VI. IMPLICATIONS: INDETERMINACY

I believe that looking at humor through the lens of trust has a number of implications. I begin with indeterminacy, which I believe is the most important result of this approach, before moving on to discuss ethically dubious humor and the importance of clarity.

Two of the points I have presented in this article are that humor may succeed or fail based on whether the audience trusts the comedian, and that trust is not necessarily absolute. If you put these two points together, you get the result that there is a level of indeterminacy in engaging with humor: the audience may not have sufficient knowledge of the comedian's knowledge, competence, or intentions to completely trust her. There is also the fact that, as I have argued, comedy uses trust in multiple domains. A comedian may be trustworthy in some domains, but not others. A comedian whose competence is trustworthy might be untrustworthy in her intent, and vice versa. If trust is often partial, and the success of humor depends on that trust, then the success of a comedian's humor will often be partial. The audience will react as desired, usually by laughing, but the reaction will not be completely wholehearted and unrestrained.

If acts of humor are often partial successes, then this allows approaches to evaluating humor to be finessed. Standardly, humor is evaluated to be either funny or not funny. Either it merits participation, or it does not. The qualified or reticent participation that trust suggests points to the fact that humor will most often succeed in degrees. Rather than simply funny or unfunny, humor is best evaluated along a gradation of more or less funny. While this result sounds obvious, and almost platitudinous, it would sug-

gest a revision to most analytic philosophical literature on humor. Standard accounts of humor, such as those given by Carroll (2013) or Morreall (2009), focus on spelling out what humor is. Consequently, they provide for an evaluation that something either is or is not funny; an object either is or is not a proper object for amusement. The approach of trust allows for a second way of evaluating humor, and one that I suspect is more fruitful since it fits more readily with evaluations not only of something being more or less funny, but with the evaluator being unsure of how to react. One area where the evaluation of humor gets more detailed attention is the ethical evaluation of humor, and I turn to that presently.

VII. IMPLICATIONS: ETHICALLY DUBIOUS HUMOR

One of the most prominent debates within the philosophy of humor is over the ethical evaluation of humor, where the question is usually taken to be something like the lines of "can the funniness of a joke be affected by the ethical dimensions of its content?" Authors such as Carroll (2014a, 2014b), Smuts (2007, 2009, 2010), and Gaut (1998) present arguments over whether humor can be ethically meritorious or ethically vicious. The argument I have provided suggests another ethical category for humor, which is humor that is ethically dubious. To say that humor is ethically dubious is to say that the ethical dimensions of its content, however that content may be understood, are suspect. There is a level of ambiguity or indeterminacy as to that joke's ethicality.

Given my argument that trust is rarely absolute, most ethically valenced humor will be dubious to some degree. A comedian's intentions, and how she conceives of the groups she is joking about, will often be to some degree opaque to the audience. What is inside her head is still inside her head, no matter how good she is at externalizing her thinking. The point about how a group is conceived of is particularly relevant: while a comedian can insist that her intentions are positive (or at least aim toward affiliative or disaffiliative humor as appropriate), making clear how she perceives of a group is more difficult.⁴ Consider the Peters example given above: I can easily imagine a reader of this article accepting it but still harboring a

little bit of doubt. The sort of doubt that says, "I accept what is being said, but nevertheless."

VIII. IMPLICATIONS: CLARITY AND DIFFICULTY

The persistent dubiety of ethically valenced humor points to a particular value of good comedy, which I call clarity. Clarity is not simply straightforwardly saying what one means, but rather constructing and executing a set in such a way that the comedian's intentions are as clear as they can be. As clear as can be with respect to what is the target of a joke, as clear as can be with respect to whether a joke is meant affiliatively or disaffiliatively, and as clear as can be with respect to how the comedian conceives of the various parties within the joke. With stand-up comedy this can be accomplished a few ways beyond the scope of the show itself, such as advertising, themed shows, or a comedian's reputed approach. All else equal, a woman performing the same set about gender roles on a special show for women in comedy will be more readily trusted than if she performed that same set in a nonspecialized context. A comedian advertised as "a Jewish comedian" will be more readily trusted to have a positive conception of Jewishness. The Peters example suggests that his reputation at the very least gives him leeway to make fun of Mexican stereotypes. Often, however, the comedian has to build trust within her set. She has to convince her audience to come along with her, believe her, and, critically, participate by laughing along as appropriate. Presumably this is how someone like Peters got started: before he was trusted to make ethnic jokes about all and sundry, he had to earn that trust. He earned it in various ways, notably using his own sets to focus on his experience as a racialized immigrant, and how that set him apart from mainstream Canadian society. In joking about his own experiences, he allows the audience to trust that when he jokes about the racialization of other ethnic groups, he is joking affiliatively, because he has had those experiences himself. The audience can trust his conception of other ethnic groups because they trust that Peters conceives of distance from the Canadian mainstream in a nonpejorative way.

The contrast between the reception of how Peters talks about his own experiences and those

of others can be further instructive. When he talks about his own experiences as an Indo-Canadian he is afforded a default level of trust because he has the experiential expertise of being an Indo-Canadian. When he talks about the experiences of Mexican Canadians (or Mexican Americans), that default level of trust is lower because, while he has the expertise of being racialized, he does not have the experiential expertise of being racialized *as Mexican*. He has to further earn the trust of the audience through his sets. Earning the trust of the audience takes skill. The more the audience's trust needs to be earned, the more skill is required of the comedian. I suspect that many hold some version of this point intuitively: particular comedians like Peters (or Dave Chappelle or Jon Stewart) gain praise for being able to make jokes about difficult material. Consider this evidence of an explanatory virtue of the account I have given of the role of trust in comedy (and humor more broadly): trust explains not just why ethically complicated topics are more difficult to joke about but also why nevertheless there are skilled comedians who can reliably do so.

This point about difficulty suggests but does not confirm a further point about the topics of humor: that the issue with humor about certain ethically valenced topics like race and gender is not that these topics are out of bounds for humor but that they are simply more difficult. The comedian must do more work to prove herself trustworthy. I should note that this means that topics are not necessarily precluded to anyone, so a man could succeed in making fun of feminine stereotypes, or a white person could succeed in making fun of racialized blackness, but the degree of difficulty would be very high. I say this point is suggested but not confirmed because there could be further reasons that mean the degree of difficulty could simply never be met. However, at least in principle any person may succeed in joking about any topic if they are sufficiently skilled at earning the audience's trust.

A virtue of this point is that it makes sense of two data points concerning group-related humor. The first is that in the sort of group-related humor that is usually considered in some way proprietary for the in-group, there are members of the in-group who would not be well received telling such jokes. So, for example, there are jokes about Jewish conspiracism or kvetchiness

that I would accept from my family but not from Stephen Miller. Miller may be Jewish, but owing to his role in implementing racist violence backed by an antisemitic logic, I do not trust him to have a nonpejorative conception of Jewishness. Similarly, as the Peters case shows, there are people who are readily accepted in making the sorts of jokes that are normally reserved for members of an in-group. Peters, Indo-Canadian, is accepted in making jokes about Mexicanness. My account of trust makes sense not only of both cases, but why we hold the intuitions that make these cases noteworthy. Experiential expertise of group members creates a basic level of trust, and this trust is necessary for the joke to succeed. It is necessary to trust that the comedian has appropriately affiliative or disaffiliative intentions, and conceives of the relevant groups in acceptable terms. Trust, however, may be earned or lost. Miller, through his evil, loses trust. Peters, through his skill, earns it.

The Peters and Miller examples show the importance of power dynamics in cultivating trustworthiness. Specifically, their respective social positions affect the difficulties they face in meriting the audience's trust. When Peters talks about his upbringing as a racialized immigrant, he evinces his particular, marginalized status within Canadian society. This marginalized status helps the audience trust that he understands what it is like to be marginalized, and in turn that he has an appropriate conception of being marginalized. An equivalent comedian telling an equivalent joke, but who held a privileged rather than marginalized status within Canadian society, would face a higher degree of difficulty in building their trustworthiness because they would not be able to appeal to Peters' personal history as a racialized immigrant to make clear that they had an appropriate conception of being a racialized immigrant within Canadian society. So, a Canadian who would standardly be racialized as white would not be prohibited from making the same jokes that Peters does, but they would face a higher standard of difficulty.

Understanding the relation between social position and trust also helps further appreciate the Hart and Mo'Nique examples. The worry that Hart could come across as condescending is informed by his being rich. His empowered social position puts distance between him and the audience. Similarly, Mo'Nique has an empowered

social position relative to her audience not just by virtue of her own success but also by her audience's status as prisoners. This distance creates an elevated level of difficulty, as both Hart and Mo'Nique need to have the audience accept their affiliative intentions. In Hart's case, the prologue to *Laugh at My Pain* can be understood as helping Hart make his intentions clear. Foregrounding his life experiences help show the life experiences that inform his intentions. Similarly, when she discusses common experiences, part of what Mo'Nique is doing is making clear to the audience that she conceives of them not just as prisoners, but as people who are still women. Altogether, both Hart and Mo'Nique face the difficulty of the social distance between them and their audience, and overcome that difficulty by focusing on what they have in common with their audience, and through focusing on those commonalities making clear that they are capable of having the appropriate sorts of intentions.

IX. CONCLUSION AND CODA: AUTHENTICITY, BUT NOT

I have given an account of how humor and comedy depend on building a trusting relationship between comedian and audience, and I have elaborated on the account's implications. Comedy depends on building a relationship between comedian and audience, and the best comedians are the best at building this relationship. They demonstrate not only their competence in joke crafting, but in getting the audience to trust that they have the right sort of intentions, and that they are capable of having the right sort of intentions. What comedy demands, then, is the presentation not just of jokes but of a joke teller, a human being to which the audience can relate, and with whom they can participate.

This conclusion suggests a further conclusion, but one which I want to deflate. If a comedian goes up on stage to garner the trust of the audience then, it follows, the comedian should be themselves. Be authentic. In the introduction to *Laugh at My Pain*, one of Hart's childhood teachers recalls giving Hart this advice (Hart 2011). Comedian Andrew Schultz offers similar advice in a TED Talk (Schultz 2019). If the comedian is to be trusted by the audience, she has to be herself, put herself out there so the

audience can trust her. This is, however, inaccurate. As Yasmin Nair points out in her broadside against Hannah Gadsby's stand-up show *Nanette*, audiences have expectations for what counts as authentic (Nair 2019). In the case of being a lesbian, Nair notes, that means being traumatized. If the audience understands the essential experience of being a lesbian as being traumatized—as Nair makes the case—then earning the audience's trust requires incorporating that trauma into your show, authentic or not. Even authentic trauma has to be given an elevated place, so that it can define the comedian. The audience has a say in the trusting relationship, and their expectations determine how the comedian has to respond to earn that trust. The comedian must be seen as authentic, but that is not the same as being authentic. This can leave the comedian in a precarious position: either their authentic self just so happens to line up with what the audience expects, or she is caught having to fabricate an inauthentic stage persona just to be accepted as authentic.

The question of authenticity in comedy is a large topic and deserves its own treatment, but discussing trust helps frame one dilemma clearly. For the purposes of this article it is too much to solve this dilemma; rather, I present its framing as an explanatory virtue of engaging comedy through the lens of trust. The comedian, for her set to succeed to its fullest, must be trusted by the audience. To be trusted by the audience requires being seen as authentic. However, to be seen as authentic can mean meeting the audience's preconceptions, and those preconceptions deviate from the comedian's authentic self. Accordingly, the comedian must act inauthentically to be perceived as authentic.

Perhaps there is a rejoinder here: in the first section I wrote that I was considering humor normatively. It could be countered that the real audience, with their prejudices, is not giving a normatively sound reaction. For real comedians in real contexts, authenticity is not enough. But for the analysis of humor and comedy, the normatively superior set is the one where the comedian gets up on stage and is themselves. I am willing to accept this point, but I think that Nair's analysis still holds and is the proper end point for this article. Stand-up comedy is not just a practice but an industry, too. The industrial pressures on comedy—to be popular, to be

successful, to be marketable—are understood by both comedian and audience. Such that they are understood by the audience, they are another challenge for the comedian to overcome in proving herself trustworthy: to give the impression that the audience is seeing the comedian's authentic self rather than a conspicuously false stage persona. The variables multiply but the comedian's challenge remains the same: to win over the audience.⁵

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1. There are two general internalist approaches. Either humor is defined directly as having cognitive and phenomenological components, or it is defined by way of amusement where amusement is defined by cognitive and phenomenological components (Morreall 2009; Carroll 2013, 2014a; Hurley, Dennett, and Adams 2011; Roberts 2019).

2. There is a level of finesse to be added here to do with humor that is not meant to be consumed in social settings, like the humor in novels. While the humor is meant to be enjoyed as humor, the reader is not expected to openly laugh. This is because laughter is, at its root, a social signal and so occurs much less often in nonsocial situations.

3. Trust is also considered to entail risk. In this case, I take on the risk that my uncle is not actually joking, and is genuinely asking me how to sell a deaf man a banana.

4. It is also hard to imagine a comedy set being better for a comedian stopping a show and carefully explaining how she understands Mexicanness or Jewishness.

5. Special thanks are owed to everyone who took the time to talk about the inner workings of comedy, especially Ariel Kagan, Emery Bowden, Andy White, Charlie Duncan Saffrey, Poppy Collier, Robin Ince, and Sully O'Sullivan.

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