

## NOËL CARROLL: CRUELTY AND HUMOUR

Valery Vino

Philosophical discussions about humour go back to ancient aesthetics, to laughing Democritus and the aporia of Socratic self-irony, to Diogenes the Dog performing tricks on the streets of Athens, and to the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Dramatized in texts and the arts, the comic emerges not only in popular literature and public events, like Dionysia and Saturnalia, but also in the lives of eminent philosophers in antiquity, the Renaissance, and today. Recently, humour has seen a resurgence in aesthetics, in part owing to the titanic efforts of Noël Carroll. Desiring to learn first-hand about the risky aspects of philosophical wit, Valery Vino invited Noël to engage with a series of remarks and anecdotes borrowed from dead authors, led by Michel de Montaigne, about the nexus between humour and cruelty. In what follows, we consider why humans laugh (sometimes at themselves), what social function cruel humour plays, why a callous sense of humour may be of benefit in the face of life's horrors, and whether we can hold each other morally culpable for vicious jokes.

*Valery Vino: Our dear guest is Noël Carroll, and we are discussing cruelty and humour.*

Noël Carroll: Thank you for the invitation. I feel honoured.

*V: We begin by paying homage to the tradition of humour in philosophy. Michel de Montaigne created *Essays* (1965 [1580-1592]) while the Renaissance had already been out of shape, in a time of early colonialism and capitalism, the wars of religion, plagues, and famine. In the essay "Of Democritus and Heraclitus", Montaigne (1965, 303) entertains the philos-*

*opher's appropriate attitude to our ordeals and folly:*

*Democritus and Heraclitus were two philosophers, of whom the first, finding the condition of man vain and ridiculous, never went out in public, but with a mocking and laughing countenance. Heraclitus, having pity and compassion on this same condition of ours, appeared always with*

*a sorrowful look, his eyes  
full of tears.<sup>1</sup>*

*I am wondering if you feel an  
affinity with Democritus, Noël, or  
perhaps Heraclitus, or both, or  
neither?*

N: A very interesting question. Well, one thing that Montaigne seems to be getting at is that humour is a coping mechanism (Carroll, 2016), a naturally endowed capacity to enable us to endure the hardships that existence bequeaths us – what Hamlet calls, the slings and arrows that flesh is heir to. We can see that confirmed in our everyday life; think of the jokes told regularly by people confronted with desperate situations – emergency workers, ambulance drivers, the police, firemen, soldiers, doctors, especially surgeons – people who use humour to dehumanize the people they are helping because they need to short-circuit empathy in order to get the job done. If they are going to cut a patient open with a knife, empathy is apt to get in the way. So, they try to detach themselves from the situation and benumb their humane feelings with laughter.

*V: I must add politicians to the*

*list—for example, Alexey Navalny's  
prison tweets.*

N: Humour is a kind of emotional armour—'functional callousness' you could call it—and in that sense, it is or involves a kind of cruelty. Human cruelty against nature's cruelty. Of course, Aristotle says that we not only naturally laugh, but nature has made it such that we are creatures to be laughed at (1999, 65; 2004, 69). And this observation acknowledges the complexity of the situation. The cruelty that human existence entails is not only a product of nature, but also of other humans; the cruelty of humour itself is an ineliminable feature of the nature of humour.

In Aristotle's theory of comedy, for example, the objects of comedy are people who fail to live up to the norm—comic butts who are not as smart, not as graceful, and not as strong as they think they are (*Poetics*, §5). In this context, ridicule, laughter, or cruel humour serve as a corrective, a social means of getting people to abide by the norm. To avoid abusive laughter, we strive to conform.

This idea in Aristotle, and also in Plato (e.g., in *Philebus*, 1906, 156),

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1 Translations of Montaigne are Valery's.

is the origin of what is sometimes called *superiority theories of humour*: theories that argue that humour is about applauding ourselves for being superior to others. We abide by the norm while others fall below it, thereby becoming the objects of ridicule. Hobbes (1914 [1651], 27), maybe most succinctly, states that all laughter is a matter of the sudden glory that we feel when we compare ourselves to others, or even to ourselves at an earlier date. Sometimes, we laugh at the dumb things we have done from the perspective of the present, where we think of our current selves as superior to our fallible past selves.

This idea is recurrent through comic theory. For example, Bergson (1914, 5) talks about humour as a corrective, one whose application requires a certain anaesthesia of the heart. Again, this brings us back to the notion that humour requires neutralizing ordinary empathy or sympathy. Think of slapstick comedy, where we laugh when someone slips on a banana peel as a result of not paying attention to what he is doing. We laugh at him for the embarrassing situation that he has gotten himself into by not looking where he is going, as the enshrined cliché recommends.

Again, this laughter, for Bergson,

has a social function; it is a behavioural corrective. What does that mean? Well, many of the mistakes—the objects of our laughter—are comic butts who, as a matter of their absentmindedness, inattentiveness, or inelasticity of thought, get themselves in absurd situations. For example, they get stuck in their routines. This gets them into trouble. Think of the unobservant ditch digger who automatically continues to shovel dirt over his shoulder into a wheelbarrow that is no longer there. We greet him with cruel laughter rather than sympathy because it is his own fault. Our mirth, at his expense, is designed to make him behave in the attentive, elastic, and context-sensitive way that human nature demands.

V: *In the words of Bergson himself:*

*Doubtless a fall is always a fall. But it is one thing to tumble into a well, because you were looking anywhere, but in front of you, and it is another thing to fall into it, because you were intent upon a star. It was certainly a star that Don Quixote was gazing. (1914, 13)*

N: That sort of absentmindedness is what Bergson thinks humour corrects. So, there is a way that cruelty operates in terms of ridicule—in terms of laughing-at—that is an element or ingredient of an essential feature of humour and amusement.

These superiority theories apply to a lot of cases, but as is typical of philosophical theories, they are not as general as they would like to be. A lot of humour does not seem to be about superiority. Many comedians specialize in humour at their own expense. And much humour is harmless, such as the puns that we make that do not appear to show us to be lording our superiority over other people.

Nevertheless, maybe there is a grain of truth in these superiority theories. Maybe that grain of truth is exemplified by ordinary jokes. Ordinary jokes are like practical jokes (Carroll, 2021).

To see what I mean, let me tell a joke.

There's a line up to the podium, St. Peter's podium in heaven—it's a long line. And there's a doctor way back in the line. He runs up to St. Peter and says, "Look, I'm a doctor, I was an important person, I should be given an advanced place in this line." St. Peter says,

"No, no, no. Heaven is democratic; you have to take the place back in line." Half an hour later, a big black car pulls up, and a man gets out holding one of those black bags that doctors carry. He walks up to the podium, winks at St. Peter, St. Peter winks back at him, and the man from the black car walks through the pearly gates. The doctor, way back in the line, sees this, runs forward, and says to Peter, "Hey, I'm a doctor, too! You let that doctor in; let me in." But St. Peter says, "That was not a doctor. That's God, He just thinks he's a doctor."

V: ... *It's like a rendering of "Julius Excluded from Heaven" by Erasmus.*

N: Notice that the joke made a kind of sense, but it is really nonsense. You, the listener, have been tricked into accepting as an explanation of the situation something that is utterly absurd. In this way, the listener is always the butt of a joke. And that may be the grain of truth in the superiority theory, supplying some evidence that a kind of calculated trick—a kind of cold-heartedness—at the expense of the listener is a regular or recurring feature of everyday humour.

V: *Now, if you don't mind, we return to Montaigne. On closer in-*

spection, the figures of Democritus and Heraclitus represent different worldviews, the comic and the tragic, intimately linked through our contradictory history. Let me assume that many may find the laughing countenance of Democritus to be counterintuitive, and yet Montaigne is taken by it:

*I prefer the first temperament [of Democritus] not because it is more pleasant to laugh than to weep, but because it is more disdainful, and condemns us more than the other. And it seems to me that we can never be sufficiently despised according to our true merit. Pity and compassion are mingled with some esteem and value for the thing we bemoan. The things that are laughed at, are considered to be of no worth.*  
(1965, 303)

To be sure, the world of the ancient Greeks, of Montaigne and Bergson—our world is home to much futile suffering that philos-

ophers, traditionally, are to alleviate. Hence, any thinker who is in a position to take this bizarre, bittersweet pleasure in global misery may come across as cruel or callous, as you have it. One contemporary example of this attitude is George Carlin:

*I see it from a distance,  
I give myself a divorce.  
George, emotionally, you  
have no stake in this. You  
don't care one way or  
another – have fun.*

*You know what, I say it  
this way, when you're born  
in this world, you're given  
a ticket to the freak show.  
When you are born in  
America, you're given a  
front row seat.<sup>2</sup>*

And if there is a grain of truth in this punchline, then, here in Australia, we get to see the show on a balcony.

N: It is true that Montaigne is advocating a position which, even if we don't call it cruel, we can call it callous or defensively callous. We

2 In a pre-mortem interview: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkTeZLiNCoM&ab\\_channel=ZiLBERLaND](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkTeZLiNCoM&ab_channel=ZiLBERLaND)

can see that there is a necessary place for that in life. If we were to contemplate all of the potential trouble—all of the possible sources of sorrow in the world—it would be impossible to move. If we were totally open to not only the misery in our neighbourhood and country but in every country in the world, we would be paralysed. No one would be capable of taking in all of it. Anyone who tried would be completely so overwhelmed that they would not be able to do anything helpful in assuaging it. In order to go on, you need a comic attitude; you need a kind of callousness in order to armour yourself, if only to be able to sympathise with some of those people who have been laid low by suffering. In order to be a person who has compassion, maybe a certain degree of callousness—oddly enough—is required.

You can think of Montaigne as an eminently reasonable, realistic person who is trying to propose the truism that some degree of compassion calls forth a proportionate measure of callousness.

Of course, there is a place for the recognition of tragedy in life. Think of an end of *Oedipus Rex*, which says, "Call no man happy, until he is dead." We all have to realize that fate can cut us down at any

moment. That's a terrifying fact of life. Though we forget it during our everyday activities, we need to be reminded of it by things like tragedy. But to get through the day, we need comedy, however callous, to help hold the terror of existence at bay.

*V: It is the German language that has a special word to designate that biting pleasure, Schadenfreude, taking delight in the misfortunes of people or the world.*

N: There is a wonderful Slavic joke that exemplifies this. A genie appears to a peasant farmer and says, "I'll give you whatever you wish for, but I should tell you now, whatever I give you, I'm going to give your neighbour twice over." The man thinks for a second and says, "Blind me in one eye."

*V: ... The social and ontological roots of laughter are central to our conversation, and it seems respectful to give voice to Friedrich Nietzsche. In *The Will to Power* (1975, 56), the author of golden laughter returns to Aristotle:*

*Perhaps I know best why a human being alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply, that he had to invent laughter. The*

*unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as fitting, the most cheerful.*

N: Nietzsche was initially very influenced by Schopenhauer, who thought that all human existence was a matter of pain and suffering. Schopenhauer recommended several ways to deal with the pain of life. One was to become an ascetic, which is really beyond most of us. So, he advocated that we pursue aesthetic experience, which would at least give us momentary relief or escape from the troubles of life. Arguably, Nietzsche may have construed humour as a kind of aesthetic experience.

V: *Confronted with pessimism and nihilism, Nietzsche would naturally try to correct one of his masters.*

N: Upon reflection, he thought, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that tragedy should not be appraised as a way of escaping from the pain of life but should be something that emboldens us to confront life head-on. Nietzsche divides a tragedy into two elements. The Dionysian, which is the aspect that acknowledges primordial dissolution, and the Apollonian, the form-giving aspect, an illusion that we need, he believes, because it is life-affirming. And that, I think, is what

he is getting at in this quotation: we invent laughter as a way to go on, as a way to survive the pain and terror of life. Humour is not an escape from human existence; it is a way of empowering human existence—and, returning to discussion of Montaigne and Democritus, I think they, too, are getting at something like that as well.

V: *I have an apt anecdote about Sigmund Freud. In 1938, a year before dying, while fleeing from Vienna to London, the Jewish doctor was stuck at customs, requested to sign a form stating that he had not been mistreated by the Nazi regime. Reportedly, Freud wrote down: "I can thoroughly recommend the Gestapo."*

N: That is a very good example. Humour can be a means of fighting back, while also being able to feel a little superior—here, that you have gotten off one at the expense of the Gestapo without them realising what you have done.

V: *One's sense of humour reflects their moral standing and milieu. In any society, there are things that we cannot communicate directly, for fear of violating a chain of normative barriers. In the arena of humour, however, jests commonly draw from prejudice, taboos,*

*and fears, which thereby become laughable and thinkable. In this context, I cannot resist quoting America's previous and, possibly, future president, Mr. Trump: "They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists, and some, I assume, are good people." The humorous contradiction aside, what we are left with is racist reasoning. This is a dangerous dimension of laughter, since a cruel judgement, particularly one enjoying influence, can incite destructive thoughts and passions toward beings that are not exactly like us.*

N: It is a very complicated issue. On the one hand, as represented by another comic theory, the incongruity theory, humour requires that the teller of the joke and the listener share some norms; and humour will be based in breaking those norms. For example, a silly joke is: "Why did the moron stay up all night?" The answer is: "He was studying for his blood test." Well, you do study for tests, but you don't study for blood tests. That is a violation of common sense or rationality. Many jokes rely on violating moral norms. That is why it makes sense to say that you can see, among other things, the morality, etiquette, standards of hygiene, and intelligence of a society reflected in its humour,

because for the humour to proceed, there must be shared norms of these sorts that are violated and transgressed.

That is one aspect. But it is complicated by the fact that what is said in humour is not usually considered to be an assertion of one's belief. If I say, "The Earth orbits around the Sun", I believe it, and I want you to believe it. But when I say, "Do you know the joke, or I'm going to tell a joke", you know that it is going to be nonsense. Like the joke that I told earlier—the one where God believes he is a doctor. I am not asserting that; I am just kidding. In fact, in ordinary life, when, say, our partner in life or friend gets angry at something we said, the first move we make is to say, "Oh, I was just joking", (thereby trying to absolve myself from the charge that I am asserting something). But now you begin to see the layer of complexities involved here. Framing something as a joke is an attempt to absolve ourselves from responsibility, from what we call seriousness—that is, from the realm of assertion. Joking is the realm of silliness, not seriousness, and supposedly we should not be held accountable for that.

But we are pulled into two directions. On the one hand, are



people culpable for their jokes? Well, since they seem not to be asserting, they do not seem to be culpable. And yet, we do think that some jokes and other comic remarks can be vehicles for things like homophobia. But how, on the one hand, can it be the case that jokes are non-assertive, and, at the same time, that people can be culpable for them?

Perhaps this way. Think of how many jokes depend on the notion of hyperbole, or exaggeration. Let's take an example, a joke I can make because I am of Irish descent.

"How do you know that an Irish man has been using your personal computer? There's a white-out on the screen." Of course, no Irishman is so stupid that they would make corrections in their emails with white-out—at a certain point, you would not be able to see what is on the screen. So, it is hyperbolic, an exaggeration, but it is a way of getting across an assertion without making an assertion. It is a way of saying, well, Irishmen are not really that stupid, but they are very, very stupid.

*V: ... So, despite the fact that a joke is not making an assertion, nonetheless, it suggests the en-*

*dorsement of a belief.*

*N: Yes, exactly—by asking you by way of your laughter to join in endorsing that belief. And to return back to your general claim, it is not only the case that humour will rely on the righteous morality of a culture. Humour will also reveal—because it will presuppose agreement—vicious views that are alive and abroad in your culture.*

*V: Truly. It is worth touching here on aesthetic education as a cultural matter. Concerning the rules of comical discourse, we take it that another person is getting our joke—understands us—so far as they laugh. Ultimately, it is through smile and laughter (or suspension of these somaesthetic responses) that we engage with humour philosophically. As a global community, alas, we pay little attention to aesthetic praxis. With respect to our topic, I feel shy to laugh on public transport on my own, not to mention that when it is vital to weep, out of nature, it is hard to find an innocuous space. It is not an exaggeration that, in Australia, the public is more likely to associate aesthetics with the art of plastic surgery, than with the philosophy of art, with the cosmetic, rather than cosmic aspects of*

*human beings.*

N: I do not know how things stand in Australia. In the United States now, at least with respect to humour, there is more scrutiny being paid. Think of criticisms of comics like Amy Schumer for making jokes about Mexicans as rapists, or Dave Chappelle remarking negatively about transgender people. In the USA, there is now more scrutiny being paid to the sources of legitimate and illegitimate humour, to what humour may imply. There is scrutiny about the possible differences that have to be respected. Many people do not think that Amy Schumer has racial prejudices against Mexicans, that it was not meant in the same way as when Trump said that Mexicans were rapists. Debate and discussion have arisen: are there ways that violate moral norms that are not to be taken “seriously” versus ones that are saturated with vicious or harmful intent? There are some people who say, look, comedy is a free-zone or, to steal a saying: what happens in comedy, stays in comedy. I am pointing out that, at least in the United States, there is a kind of lively discussion about this issue, and some other issues in aesthetics that are becoming a matter of public discussion.

By the way, I think that this is an

opportunity for philosophers to join the public discussion, and, if not leading it, at least contributing to it by drawing from centuries of discussion from Plato to Danto.

*V: Hard to disagree with you. In the first year of the pandemic, under severe lockdown restrictions, including a curfew, I was fortunate to deliver a semester-long course, “Wit and Laughter”, at the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy.*

N: We should bring these discussions into our classes. You should not think: “Oh, Spinoza wasn’t talking about jokes, so should I be talking about jokes?” These are things that will engage our students, that they will have opinions about, opinions that they can sharpen by being in discussion with fellow students. We should take aesthetics out of the domain of intellectual journals and bring these kinds of issues that people care about to our seminars—that is, things they would discuss after they went to a comic performance in a club, for example, with their friends over a beer. We should bring these conversations into the format that most of us have, which is the classroom. It will make for better classes, classes that students care about because it

touches their lives, and it is something that they have a view about. In his biography of Wittgenstein, Norman Malcolm (2001, 28) says that Wittgenstein once said to him that you could conduct philosophy solely in terms of jokes. We should try that out in our teaching.

*V: Let's outline our discussion so far. Owing to Aristotle and Bergson, we have identified the corrective function of cruel humour, and thanks to Montaigne and Nietzsche, we have found a special place for callous laughter in our lives. With respect to contemporary debates in aesthetics, we have ascertained the relation between pejorative jokes and one's moral standing, and also, appealing to your telescopic knowledge, Noël, alluded to the need for teaching classes inspired by philosophies of humour.*

*In closing, could you help me understand the comical dimension of a line once heard on the grapevine? I love it, and do not understand why: "Denis Diderot died in the summer of 1784, over lunch, reaching for a serving of cherry compote."*

N: I suppose the first thing we need to think about is: why is it incongruous? Think of the deaths

of other philosophers we know of. Wittgenstein: tell them I had a good life. Hume: the same. You know, those are the send-offs we usually like to quote because there is something edifying about them. Someone reaching for the dessert—that breaks the pattern, that breaks the formula. One thing to think about here is that in the expected context of edification, a cherry compote brings any pretence of lofty sentiment down to earth.

*V: Yes, to a taste of cherry.*

N: Or go to the next step. Diderot died reaching for the dessert and, then, imagine that his brother asked, "What happened to the compote?"

*V: ...*

N: That was what he cared about! Here we have staged a clash between the absolutely trivial with one of the greatest moments in life, especially for philosophers, supposedly a summary moment, and what issue comes up: who got the compote?

*V: ... Do you think that this response brings us full circle to Democritus and Heraclitus?*

N: Yes, that is one way to armour us against the overwhelming

horror of the end of all things,  
to reduce it to a matter of what  
happened to the cherry compote.

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