

**Prejudice, Humor and Alief:  
Comments on Robin Tapley’s  
“Humour, Beliefs, and Prejudice”**

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There are two commonly held views about racist and sexist humor,

*Wrong Telling*: It’s wrong to tell racist or sexist jokes.

and

*Racist/Sexist Laughing*: Only a racist or sexist could ever find racist or sexist humor funny.<sup>1</sup>

In her “Humour, Belief, and Prejudice,” Robin Tapley (2012) draws on the work of Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks (1993) to argue for something like *Racist/Sexist Laughing*. As she puts it in her conclusion:

Racist/racial, sexist/gender humour is funny because we think it’s true. We know the beliefs exist in the laughter, there’s no way to philosophically maneuver around that. (Tapley, 2012, p. 92)

While both Tapley and I believe *Wrong Telling*, I’m unpersuaded by her arguments for *Racist/Sexist Laughing*, and in what follows I’ll be trying to do some philosophical maneuvering of the sort that she thinks hopeless in the quote above.

Tapley contrasts her own view with the much more benign explanation of the person who laughs at a racist or sexist joke. According to the benign explanation, one can find such jokes funny by simply hypothetically holding (or imagining that one holds) the racist or sexist beliefs in question. Tapley argues that given our current understanding about how humor works, hypothetical or imagined belief cannot do the work needed to cause the ‘flickering’ that LaFollette and Shanks take to be characteristic of humor.<sup>2</sup> As they put it:

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The flickering essential for humor can only occur if the listener (or reader or viewer) believes that there is some point to the alternate belief patterns. That is, they must think that those patterns contain or imply some insight or “truth” about the persons, things or events in question. (LaFollette and Shanks, 1993, p. 334)

Since humor requires belief, and imagining that one has a belief isn't like really having one, laughing at a racist joke can't be explained by one's merely imagining the associated racist beliefs. Tapley concludes from this:

Consider now that the joke is a racist or sexist joke and that the joke elicits laughter. I don't think that there is any argument about the laughter sharing the beliefs expounded by the joke. Given what we know about belief and stereotypes as prejudice, it seems that we can conclude that the laughter at the racist or sexist joke share the beliefs of the joke. That much we can decide. There isn't much point then to arguments that suggest we can “hypothetically hold” racist/sexist beliefs for the sake of the joke, or that we can imagine having certain beliefs for the sake of the joke. Such schemes would only allow us to “get” the joke, they would not allow us to find it funny, and laugh. Hypothetically holding beliefs or imagining having beliefs would not meet the condition of a network of first order beliefs that were true in some sense – a condition necessary to a person to be tickled enough to laugh. Hypothetical and imaginary beliefs cannot be true for a person. (Tapley, 2012, p. 91)

I certainly won't be defending the benign hypothetical/imaginatory explanation of racist/sexist humor here. This is largely because I don't think that hypothetical belief is the most plausible alternative to belief when one comes to explaining humor. Rather than appealing to hypothetical or imaginary beliefs, we should be appealing to what Tamar Gendler (2008; 2011) has recently referred to as *aliefs*.<sup>3</sup>

Aliefs are in many ways like beliefs. In particular, they can be assigned content, and in some ways can be used to explain our behavior. However, they are unlike beliefs in that they are not explicitly endorsed, and are not subject to the same degree of rational control as our beliefs are. Indeed, aliefs can often be in conflict with our explicitly held beliefs, and our awareness of this conflict does not lead to either the beliefs being revised or the aliefs going away.

For instance, the movie *Jaws* came out when I was about 10 years

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old, and while after seeing it I certainly didn't *believe* that there was a large Great White Shark in my parent's swimming pool (indeed, I *knew* that there wasn't), there was something in my head that would periodically drive me (very quickly) out of the pool. It wasn't just *imagining* or *entertaining the hypothesis* that there was a shark in the pool, those wouldn't have had nearly the same affect. This state that drove me out is an example of what Gendler calls "alief." If I'd believed that there were a shark in the pool, I simply wouldn't have gone in, but my belief that the pool was shark-free kept me going in, while my alief that there was a shark coming for me kept me hopping out of it.

Aliefs can explain, for instance, why we can enjoy scary movies (we have aliefs associated with the events occurring on screen, while if we actually *believed* any of this was happening, there would be no enjoyment associated with the experience). In much the same way, they explain why we have trouble eating food that is presented in the form associated with something disgusting. For instance, people have trouble eating chocolate putting formed into the shape of a dog turd, and this trouble remains even if they witness the creation of the pudding and try out the pudding before it is put into the offensive form. They definitely *believe* that there is nothing wrong with the pudding, but their aliefs keep them from enjoying it.

I think that aliefs are robust enough to explain the 'flickering' associated humor, since at some level of cognition, there is something that is taking those aliefs to be true. The concept of alief has only come to the forefront of philosophical consciousness in the last few years, so it is unsurprising that LaFollette and Shanks would not have considered it when making up their theory in 1993, but had it been around, they might have taken it on board as well.

This is particularly so because the concept of alief has been applied to explain precisely the sorts of stereotypes that racist and sexist jokes appeal to. The concept of alief is useful in analyzing stereotypes because, contrary to Tapley's claim that "Whatever stereotypes a person might have fit in with the rest of their views" (Tapley, 2012, p. 90),<sup>4</sup> there is fairly extensive evidence that stereotypes remain psychologically very real, and produce very real effects, even in those whose explicit belief directly contradict the stereotypes. Indeed, it seems that mere *awareness of the stereotype* can affect one's behavior, whether one endorses it or not. As Gendler puts it:

knowledge of the stereotype – as measured by the subjects ability and willingness to produce these terms when prompted to specify traits stereotypically associated with (American) blacks

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– did not correlate in any ways with measures of explicit prejudice. Study after study has shown that “high- and low-prejudiced individuals d[o] not differ in theory knowledge of the stereotypes of Blacks but diverge sharply in their endorsement of the stereotype”....

Moreover, *awareness* of the stereotype is sufficient to give rise to the relevant associative chains. The costs with which I will be concerned below are ones that arise simply from *having encoded* the stereotypes, whether or not the subject *endorses* them. (Gendler, 2011, p. 43)

Even among those who are explicitly and sincerely committed to anti-racism, the legacy of having lived in a society structured by hierarchical and hostile racial divisions retains its imprint. So, for example, White participants primed with images of Black faces tend to be faster to identify an ambiguous image as a gun, and more likely to misidentify a (non-gun) tool as a gun. (Gendler, 2011, p. 44)

If this is the case, it may be that merely being aware of a stereotype, whether one believes it or not, could be enough to produce the alief needed to cause the ‘flickering’ needed to find a particular joke funny.

The resultant view isn’t that far, in many respects, from what Tapley defends when she writes: “We know that finding a joke funny rests on flickering between related but different belief sets. The beliefs in these states were formed not by voluntary choice, are considered true in some sense by the believer, and are agglomerated” (Tapley, 2012, p. 90). Aliefs are not formed by voluntary choice, and given their affect on action, there is clearly “some sense” in which they are considered true by the believer (though there is also a very good sense in which they are not considered true). The only real difference is that, unlike belief proper, they do not agglomerate, and agglomeration is not essential to explaining the humor involved. Indeed, the fact that they don’t agglomerate makes them well suited for producing the sorts of inconsistencies required, so while Tapley (2012, p. 85) feels committed to insisting that “We don’t usually laugh at what we think is false or wrong,” the alief-based theory of humor allows that we do often laugh at things we think are false.

Now even if all this gives one reason to reject *Racist/Sexist Laughing*,<sup>5</sup> it gives one even more reason to support *Wrong Telling*. If it is aliefs rather than beliefs that explain why a non-racist could find a racist joke funny, that makes the *telling* of such jokes, if anything, worse. Telling such jokes teaches and re-enforces the stereotypes, and associated negative behavior-

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al traits, associated with them, and they have this effect even on those who don't endorse the stereotypes at all. Socrates argued that the only real way to harm someone was to make their soul less just, and, arguably, telling racist or sexist jokes, by creating and reinforcing these action-generating associations, harms even the non-sexist non-racist listener in just this way.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tapley starts her paper with the claim “The most popular question in the ethics of humor is whether or not laughing at a racist or sexist joke reveals the laughter to be racist or sexist” (Tapley, 2012, p. 85), and the gist of her paper seems to be that the answer to this question is “yes.”

<sup>2</sup> I'll just be taking for granted here that this explanation of humor works. One could, of course, argue against Tapley's conclusions by denying her underlying explanation of how humor works, but I'm more concerned to argue that even if one accepts the LaFollette and Shanks story about how humor works, *Racist/Sexist Laughing* doesn't follow.

<sup>3</sup> Some might wonder whether the types of cases that Gendler lumps under “alief” really form a unified psychological kind, but nothing in the appeal to alief in this paper should rely on that assumption.

<sup>4</sup> LaFollette and Shanks also suggest something like this in a note to the passage from p. 339 quoted above, where they say: “By ‘truth’ here we do not mean external everlasting or context-independent truth. Here we merely mean truth as compatibility with the person's other beliefs. Something is capable of being humorous only if the new redescription is at least somewhat compatible with the listeners's beliefs – even if those beliefs are false” (1993, p. 339).

<sup>5</sup> Of course the denial of *Racist/Sexist Laughing* laughing wouldn't mean that one should think that there was nothing wrong with laughing at a sexist or racist joke. Laughing at such jokes encourages the telling of them, so if telling them is wrong, one shouldn't do things to encourage people who do. Still, while one shouldn't laugh at such jokes if one can help it, if one can't help it, it shouldn't follow that one is a racist or sexist.

### Works Cited

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