

Boring Philosophy Professors, Streetwalkers, and the Joy of Sex

Karl Pfeifer

University of Saskatchewan and Monash University

A True Apocryphal Story

“I had a terrible education. I attended a school for emotionally disturbed teachers.”
— Woody Allen

When I was a master’s student in philosophy there was a story circulating about a professor who shall remain nameless, namely a certain Professor John Doe, who was due to retire at the end of the academic year. It was Professor Doe’s practice to stand at the lectern, turn off his hearing aid, and without looking up, read in a monotonous drone from his crumpled and yellowed thirty-year-old notes. Much funniness resided in the absurdity of the situation. But there’s also a punchline: one day even he succumbed to his own boringness and fell asleep while standing at the lectern, momentarily slumping over his notes. This was indeed an epitome of humor in teaching, but it did not serve the aims of education very well.

“Is it life, I ask, is it even prudence,
To bore thyself and bore the students?”
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A Might-Have-Been Version

What if Professor Doe had had a dynamic, engaging delivery, a strong vibrant voice to keep the students alert and attentive, a lecture interspersed with asides of levity in the form of humor or at least of amusing quips and puns, or maybe even just ostentatiously doing up his fly, which he pretended to only just notice was undone? Appealing and captivating as all such might be, the problem is still with the *content* of those thirty-year-old notes. Enlivening the delivery isn’t the same as enlivening the content of the delivery. The goal should be to make the content itself memorable, and presumably injecting humor, or its weaker cousin amusement, into the content is one way of achieving that.

And here my difficulty begins. While I’ve had my share of success in humorous or at least amusing delivery in the form of extraneous and irrelevant interpolations or asides, as well as accidental puns, it’s been rather hit and miss as far as injecting levity into the content itself is concerned. Sprucing up the picture frame doesn’t spruce up what’s pictured inside. Still, there are certain types of humor that, if injectable, seem to have perennial appeal to students.

The Joy of Sex

“I find the three major administrative problems on a campus are sex for the students, athletics for the alumni, and parking for the faculty.”
— Clark Kerr, former University of California President (*Time*, 17 November 1958)

Clearly President Kerr put his finger onto something that resonates with students. Translating that insight into teaching, it's that sexing up content can make it more memorable for students. In what follows, I will describe several humorous sexings-up of content that enhanced my students' attention and retention. I will also add one type that should be avoided.

Evolutionary Misbehavior in Philosophy of Mind

In discussing the mind as an evolutionary adaptation in my philosophy of mind classes, one of the ideas covered is that of basic primal drives, instincts, or motivations that explain fitness, survival, and a species' typical patterns of behavior. There are said to be four basic drives: fighting, fleeing, feeding, and reproduction. I wrote these in a column on the board; then, at the top of the list, I wrote the heading "The 4 Fs". Student uptake was not immediate. The first reaction was "hey, there's only 3 Fs" but then, after a momentary pause, as it dawned on them, "oh..." Amused chuckles ensued. Needless to say those students never forgot what the four drives were. (I don't claim originality for this joke; one rumor has it that it originated with graduate students at MIT.)

Another example from philosophy of mind concerns the idea that some mental states have to *feel* a certain kind of way to be the kind of mental states that they are. Consciously entertaining a belief doesn't have to feel a particular way. Your conscious belief that P is the case is compatible with many quite different experiential states. You can feel joy, ennui, or fear while conscious of your belief. Yet the experience of an affective state like fear has to feel a particular way for it to be the kind of state that it is and for it to have the role that it plays in motivating behavior. This idea can of course be illustrated with numerous examples.

But here's how the sexing-up came in. I asked the class to imagine what it might be like for someone if fear felt like lust and lust felt like fear. If someone's feelings in the presence of a potential mate had the experiential qualities we associate with fear instead of lust, they would flee and therefore never reproduce, whereas if in the face of danger they felt what we associate with lust rather than fear, they would fail to flee and therefore not survive. In the discussion that followed, students were clearly amused by such possibilities ("hey, I know someone just like that") and the point was driven home and made memorable.

Programmable Misbehavior in Philosophy of Mind

Another key question in philosophy of mind is whether the brain is like a computer and whether human behavior can be given a "software" explanation, i.e. whether the brain is just running a program that has behavior among its outputs. One common argument found in a number of textbooks employs the example of a 1950s-style mechanical Coke-machine whose workings (viz. accepting nickels and dimes, giving change, ejecting a Coke) can be described by means of a simple program specifiable by a so-called machine table:

Machine table for Coke machine:

	State 1	State 2
Insert nickel	Eject no Coke, go into State 2	Eject a Coke, go into State 1
Insert dime	Eject a Coke, stay in State 1	Eject a Coke & a nickel, go into State 1

The machine starts out in State 1, awaiting customers. Cokes cost 10¢, so if you initially insert a nickel, you don't get a Coke but the machine goes into a new state, namely State 2. If you then insert another nickel while in that state, you get a Coke and the machine goes back into State 1 to await the next customer; if on the other hand you find you don't have another nickel but only a dime, when you insert that, you get a coke and a nickel in change. If you insert a dime when the machine is in State 1, you immediately get a Coke, and the machine stays in State 1, awaiting the next customer. The internal states of the machine causally mediate between inputs (nickels and dimes) and outputs (Cokes). Similarly, proponents of the brain-as-computer theory maintain, the brain follows a program by means of which mental states causally mediate between environmental inputs and behavioral outputs.

Students are of course generally amused by the very idea that there was a time when you could get a Coke for only 10¢. However, some students have trouble seeing (or are predisposed to resist seeing) the behavior of a machine as in any way convincingly analogous to human behavior. Here I was inspired by an idea from a classic paper on “the problem of maximizing the long-run average return in a single server traffic reward system in which the customer's offer, a joint distribution of reward and of service time required to earn this reward, is independent of the renewal process which governs customer arrivals”—*phew!!* The authors continue: “In describing the model, we find it enlightening to introduce the necessary notation and terminology in the context of a problem which we refer to as ‘the streetwalker's dilemma’” [Steven A. Lippman and Sheldon M. Ross, “The Streetwalker's Dilemma: A Job Shop Model”, *SIAM Journal on Applied Mathematics* 20.3 (1971) 336–342].

Here's how my adaptation of Lippman and Ross worked in showing the analogy between Coke-machine behavior and human behavior. For simplicity's sake I assumed an honest hundred-dollar Las Vegas streetwalker working in an economy that uses only fifty-dollar and hundred-dollar poker chips as currency.

Machine table for hundred-dollar Las Vegas streetwalker:

	State 1 (wanting \$100)	State 2 (wanting \$50)
Receive \$50-chip	Stay on sidewalk, go into State 2	Spend ½ hour with client, then stay on sidewalk (reenter State 1)
Receive \$100-chip	Spend ½ hour with client, then stay on sidewalk (reenter State 1)	Spend ½ hour with client & refund \$50, then stay on sidewalk (reenter State 1)

The streetwalker starts out in State 1, awaiting customers. A trick costs \$100, so if you initially hand over a \$50-chip, you don't get satisfaction but the streetwalker goes into a new state, namely State 2 or wanting another \$50. If you then pay another \$50 while the streetwalker is in that state, you get satisfaction and the streetwalker goes back into State 1, waiting for, and wanting \$100 from, the next client; if on the other hand you find you don't have another \$50-chip but only a \$100-chip, when you pay that, you get satisfaction and, because the streetwalker is honest, a \$50-chip in change. If you pay with a \$100-chip when the machine is in State 1, you are immediately taken away to receive your satisfaction, after which the streetwalker returns again to State 1, awaiting the next customer. The internal mental states of the streetwalker (wanting \$50 or wanting \$100) mediate between inputs (\$50-chips and \$100-chips) and outputs (sex).

(Although this is not a case of the streetwalker's dilemma as it stands, if the matrix is further complicated with the inclusion of bargaining and probabilistic inputs and outputs, dilemmas can arise when the streetwalker must choose between holding out for the full fare and risking no sale vs. risking loss of a full-fare opportunity while occupied with a bargain-fare client.)

Here, even if not all students were able to recall the analogy in exact detail, this amusing sexed-up example achieved its purpose. Students gave its elucidation their full attention and came away with a better appreciation of the force of the brain-as-computer theory even if they did not agree with it. (PS. I don't either.)

The Unforgettable Counterexample to Behaviorism

Behaviorism is a theory in psychology and philosophy of mind that claims that human behavior can be adequately explained entirely in terms of observable behavior and past and present environmental antecedents without invoking inner mental states. In an extreme variant of behaviorism, it has even been claimed that talk about mental states must reduce to talk about behavior. But then there's that old joke about two behaviorists having sex: one exclaims to the other, "Wow! That was great for you! How was it for me?"

Ethics and Sitcom Sexual Silliness

There is a moral category that deals with matters of desert, where judgements typically have the explicit or implicit form "A deserves x on account of y"; the "x" may stand for praise, blame, rewards, punishments, happiness, justice, and the like, i.e. things that A might find desirable or undesirable, or might want to have or avoid. So someone might deserve punishment on account of wrongdoing, praise for doing one's duty, or (controversially) even a reward for actions above and beyond the call of duty. Certain suffixes can indicate that a term belongs to this category, e.g. "-worthy" as in "praiseworthy" meaning "deserving praise" or "blameworthy" meaning "deserving blame".

Sometimes discussing moral categories on a sleepy afternoon can be a dry and dull affair and students' attentiveness may wane. For me, *Seinfeld* came to the rescue with the "Sponge" episode, wherein the character Elaine Benes realizes that her preferred method

of birth control, the contraceptive sponge, is being discontinued. There's a mad dash as she tries to locate a source of the sponges in order to stock up before they become unavailable. Elaine finally finds a drugstore that has some of these sponges and buys them all. Elaine now becomes very choosy about whom she finds worthy of having sex with. She uses the term "spongeworthy" to describe those guys who rate high enough for her to use up a sponge on: the character Billy deserves to have a sponge expended on him on account of measuring up to Elaine's requirements. Not exactly a full-fledged moral example, but one already familiar to many students and close enough to get various points across, and sexy enough to keep the students alive to the discussion.

A Cautionary Note

"Don't look at me in that tone of voice."

— Dorothy Parker

Notwithstanding the foregoing examples, resorting to sexual examples and allusions in the classroom is of its nature a risqué and risky business. In deploying the machine table for a streetwalker, I was careful to avoid gender pronouns and explicitly left unspecified where on the spectrum a streetwalker might fall so that no one of whatever gender broadly construed (or of whatever sex, to use the older term) could feel singled out. I also believe that sex workers should be treated as professionals governed by their own professional bodies and subject to their own professional standards. Not all students are comfortable with that idea, whereas my inclination is to say live and let live. However, there are forms of sexual humor and allusion that unequivocally transgress into the unacceptable. Let me wrap up with an example.

"I'm not totally useless. I can be used as a bad example."

— Victor Hugo

I once chose a commonly used textbook for my undergraduate philosophy class in symbolic logic. I had been vaguely familiar with the author's formal system and since the book was already widely in use, I hadn't bothered with a close examination prior to placing my order with the campus bookstore. The book, like most books of its genre, included exercises for translation of English sentences into symbolic notation and for proving logical relations. To my surprise one exercise asked for translations of sentences such as these:

Janet is featherbrained
 Some women are featherbrained
 All women are featherbrained
 Only women are featherbrained
 No man is featherbrained
 Some men are not featherbrained
 John is not featherbrained

Another exercise asked these questions:

- (i) Which sequents proved in the text show the interderivability of the proposition that all women are fickle with the proposition that there are not women who are not fickle?
- (ii) Which sequents proved [previously] show the interderivability of the proposition that no men are fickle with the proposition that there are not men who are fickle?

Clearly these were gratuitous and blatantly sexist attempts at humor that are pathetic rather than funny; they are misogynistic, demeaning to women, and have no place in the classroom (or anywhere). Mercifully, the subsequent edition of the book replaced all offensive exercises with innocuous ones. I myself dealt with the situation by discussing the issue with the class and then replacing the disrespectful exercises with handouts containing similar exercises about absentminded professors and their shortcomings. That got a few laughs.

A Golden Rule for Humor in Teaching?

“Now, remember, Pinocchio, be a good boy. And always let your conscience be your guide.”

— The Blue Fairy

Ordinarily one would expect common sense to prevail, but if there’s any worry about whether an amusing or humorous example is acceptable in the classroom (or elsewhere), one should pose the question “What would Jiminy Cricket do?” But on its own the advice to always let your conscience be your guide is too succinct and, without the benefit of a cricket’s elaborations, doesn’t take us very far. What *criterion* might the guidance of conscience exemplify? In particular we might ask, what principle could we apply to the examples I have discussed? I would suggest that when a humorously intended example involves mention of a group or member of a group, one should first ask oneself, if *I* were a member of that group, would I find the example deployed in my class offensive to me personally? Allied to this question is whether there are justifiable grounds for taking personal offence, since some people take personal offence at things that aren’t directed at any person or group, e.g. people who are offended by foul language. Answering such questions isn’t always easy, but despite the very real possibility of borderline or unresolvable cases, I believe that such considerations provide a useful rule of thumb for avoiding harmful humor. And if in doubt, don’t.

Disclosure Statement

I used to be a teacher but I have no class now.