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## SENSES OF HUMOR AS POLITICAL VIRTUES

PHILLIP DEEN

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**Abstract:** This article discusses whether a sense of humor is a political virtue. It argues that a sense of humor is conducive to the central political virtues. We must first, however, delineate different types of humor (benevolent or malicious) and the different political virtues (sociability, prudence, and justice) to which they correspond. Generally speaking, a sense of humor is politically virtuous when it encourages good will toward fellow citizens, an awareness of the limits of power, and a tendency not to take oneself too seriously or when it condemns moral or intellectual vice. An analysis of President Donald Trump's deeply flawed sense of humor is used to ground this account.

Keywords: humor, sense of humor, virtue ethics, political virtue, Donald Trump.

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### 1. Introduction

While a sense of humor is praised in others, it is not often thought of as a moral or intellectual virtue, much less a political one. Among the central political virtues are sociability, prudence, and justice. A well-ordered community, its citizens, and its leaders must all be able to get along with one another, exercise good judgment, and ensure that people get what they deserve. It's not clear that a sense of humor would help with any of these. Humor can divide, it often mocks the social order, and comedians are virtually the opposite of prudent persons, as evidenced by the fact that they decided to disappoint their parents and commit to a career where they try to amuse drunks in exchange for half-price nightclub chicken wings. Others have highlighted the dangers of comedy in the public square. As the famed 1960s British satirist Peter Cook remarked, we are "in danger of sinking giggling into the sea," while, as Ben Schwartz put it recently, political humor has been "satirized for your consumption," and citizens and politicians alike have become a nation of class clowns (Schwartz 2015).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> No, not the Ben Schwartz who played Jean-Ralphio Saperstein on TV's *Parks and Recreation*.

In what follows, I argue that a sense of humor is a secondary virtue conducive to the cardinal political virtues of sociability, prudence, and justice. I survey the recent debate over a sense of humor as a type of excellence, including the finding from recent psychological research suggesting that different forms of humor are associated with different virtues. Extending that idea, I argue that prudence and sociability are served by benevolent humor that (a) cultivates an awareness of the limits of politics and of the need to overcome our self-serious attempt to bend reality to our ideology and (b) promotes connections and sympathy between citizens. Whereas benevolent forms of humor lead to prudence and sociability, more cutting forms of humor such as satire are conducive to the virtue of justice. Satire exposes and condemns the intellectual and moral vices of hypocrisy, ignorance, and pride, particularly among the powerful. While citizens generally should be gentle in their treatment of each other, they must not be afraid to use pointed humor to condemn vice and the abuse of political power. To make this more concrete, I use the case study of the current absurd joke by the United States on itself and the world: Donald Trump.

One clarification: I do not make the claim that it is impossible to live an excellent life without a sense of humor. Though personally I am tempted to believe that a life without a sense of humor is less than fully excellent and, therefore, that a sense of humor is essential to a good life, I do not attempt to make the case here. Rather, for present purposes, I have set the bar lower. I argue that a sense of humor is *instrumental* to already acknowledged political virtues, not that it is a political virtue *in itself*.

## 2. Sense(s) of Humor as Virtuous

If you were to ask people what they want in a friend or a lover, it is very likely they would include a sense of humor. “Funny” is often right at the top of the list with “caring” and “honest.” We want those close to us to be not only reliable and supportive but also delightful to be around, able to handle life’s troubles, and willing to “get over themselves.” And virtually all of us want to believe that we have a good sense of humor. Franklin Moore Colby observed wryly, “Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth, or a wig. How many will own up to a lack of humor?” (1926, 1). A 1986 study found that 94 percent of people believe that their sense of humor is better than average, which necessarily entails that at least 44 percent of people are in a state of denial (Lefcourt and Martin 1986). Indisputably, not everyone has a good sense of humor, but the fact that almost everyone would claim to indicates the importance we place on it. A person

without humor is widely believed to be deficient in some way, though it is not clear whether that deficiency is moral.

Our easy judgment that it is better to have a sense of humor is complicated by the fact that a sense of humor is difficult to define, as it may mean a general temperament of cheerfulness or bemused distance, a set of skills or talents such as joke telling, an activity such as laughter or a passive capacity to appreciate others' humor, and so on (Ruch 2008, 20–54). There is, however, a cluster of ideas and tests to categorize and measure it. A person with a sense of humor habitually: (a) comprehends jokes, (b) expresses humor and mirth, (c) creates humorous content, (d) appreciates humor, and/or (e) uses humor to cope, among other things (Martin 1998, 16). Thankfully, for the present argument it is not necessary to reach a high level of precision; this cluster of concepts joined to an everyday understanding is sufficient.

Contrary to Colby's claim, a sense of humor has historically been condemned in Western philosophy and religion, so perhaps there have been a number of scolds throughout history who have happily denied having a sense of humor. For millennia, humor has been accused of being hostile, immoderate, idle, hedonistic, irrational, insincere, and anarchic. It is said that humorists delight in vice and the suffering of others, while failing to control their base emotions (Morreall 2009a, 90–110). There is some support for the belief that humor arises from a dark place. The clown who is secretly crying on the inside is a well-known cliché, but it is perhaps one with a measure of truth. The comedian Chris Rock has said that comedy is the blues for people who can't sing. One study of seventh graders found that children who were more likely to joke around and to be found funnier by their peers tended to have lower self-esteem. Being funny was perhaps a way of getting affirmation (cited in Martin 1998, 28). Humor can also clearly be a form of aggression. We laugh more easily and heartily when it denigrates those of whom we have a negative opinion. Comedians have even been found to have higher degrees of psychotic tendencies (Ando, Claridge, and Clark 2014).

A sense of humor has, however, had its defenders. It is associated with being humble, exposing vice, and providing comfort to those who are suffering. Particularly regarding the last, humor is strongly correlated with the ability to transcend life's troubles. It enhances feelings of self-esteem and confidence in the face of threats and allows people to cope when faced with social limitations, such as the demand to conform to others' expectations or the sheer absurdity of existence. As the psychologist of humor Rod Martin notes, "Individuals with a sense of humor, as compared to their more serious counterparts, tend to be more nonconformist and iconoclastic, taking a more playfully rebellious approach to the most serious and sacred aspects of life, while continuing to embrace life despite its injustice, hypocrisy, and

foolishness” (1998, 41). People with a sense of humor are less anxious and less likely to feel helpless in stressful situations, resulting in greater job success and marital stability. A sense of humor correlates with a person’s general satisfaction with life (Ruch 2008, 47).<sup>2</sup> If this is true, then a sense of humor is perhaps either virtuous in itself or conducive to virtue.

A divide between vicious and virtuous forms of humor was delineated among increasingly egalitarian seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britons as they turned against the prevailing belief that humor reflects the amusement felt at one’s superiority over others. The malicious glee at putting others down, of ridiculing them, was distinguished from pro-social forms of humor. Hence, they elaborated a distinction between (Continental) wit, which was vicious and not properly amusing, and (British) humor (Schmidt-Hidding 1963).<sup>3</sup> One’s sense of humor, then, was virtuous insofar as it found pleasure in pro-social comedy and vicious insofar as it was cutting. But this is too simple.

Perhaps the reason it is so difficult to determine whether a sense of humor is virtuous is that we have oversimplified both halves of the equation. Taking a clue from Beermann and Ruch’s work on everyday perceptions of the virtue or viciousness of humor and its uses, we might be better off rejecting the notion that there a unified Sense of Humor that is or is not a unified Virtue. Rather, each is plural, and certain senses of humor correspond to certain virtues (Beermann and Ruch 2009 and 2008). Put another way, a sense of humor is not necessarily vicious if witty, and not necessarily virtuous if humorous. Rather, each form of comedy is virtuous in its own way and depending upon its context.

Drawing from Peterson and Seligman’s classification of virtues, which lays out the six major areas of virtue—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence—Beerman and Ruch asked what sorts of humor and uses of humor correlated with these various virtues. They found that a sense of humor was most closely associated with wisdom, humanity, and transcendence—that is, with (a) using knowledge for good purposes, creativity, curiosity, judgment, and perspective, (b) empathy, kindness, and social understanding, and (c) hope, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, and a sense of one’s place in a larger whole. They also found that people are more likely to use humor in cases that call for the expression of humanity and wisdom.

<sup>2</sup> A survey of studies regarding the correlations between humor and stable self-conception, self-evaluation without dysfunction, optimism, and stress moderation found, however, that the strength of correlation varied widely. The link was found to be strong in cases of autonomy, optimism, and environmental mastery, and weak in cases self-esteem, negative affect, and fear of being negatively evaluated (Kuiper and Martin 1998).

<sup>3</sup> For an artistic expression of this split within the French prerevolutionary court, see the film *Ridicule*.

As a result, while seen to have a connection to sociability and transcendence, a sense of humor was not typically associated with the central political virtue of justice, which deals with fairness and the qualities that sustain the community. Justice is less about love and acceptance than it is about ensuring that people get what they deserve, either through the distribution of rights and goods or through retribution for their wrongdoing. The benevolent, “virtuous” humor would then seem to miss out on the core political virtue of justice. But that is not the only type of humor there is. Beerman and Ruch found that justice was linked most closely to malevolent or derisive humor. Following Schmidt-Hidding, they note that malevolent humor in the form of satire “aims to decry the bad and foolish, and at the general ‘betterment of the world’” (Beermann and Ruch 2009, 399). Even humor that is sarcastic, derisive, and cutting is seen as virtuous if targeted correctly. Significantly, among those surveyed, justice was described as the most important virtue, along with humanity, whereas the humor associated with it was seen as the most suspect.

I find this quite interesting, and relevant to the question of whether a sense of humor is a political virtue. Rather than asking this singular question of the connection between humor and political virtue, we should be asking many questions. What senses of humor are politically virtuous, with the understanding that there are many political virtues?

### **3. Political Virtues of a Sense of Humor**

John Morreall has discussed the virtues and vices of humor generally and political humor specifically (2009a, 90–124; 2009b). He focuses on two facets. First, he draws attention to humor’s capacity to decommit speakers from what they say. Comedy, like other art forms, is not bound by rigorous requirements of truth and morality. Comedians are not necessarily asserting truths or moral beliefs as they slacken their everyday commitments for the sake of aesthetic amusement. It is sometimes immoral, however, to slacken those commitments. Morreall’s general moral principle is that “we should not laugh at someone’s problem when compassion is called for” (2009b, 71). This concern is heightened when we turn to Morreall’s second facet when analyzing political humor: who has the power. Politicians have enormous power and responsibility. Accordingly, we must be vigilant that they do not laugh in the presence of their constituents’ suffering or make light of serious matters of public concern in order to escape criticism and maintain power. Morreall then seems to come very close to saying that a sense of humor is virtuous when it is found among the citizens but not among the politicians, which would be an error.

I would like to constructively critique Morreall's analysis by adding further complexity. As noted above, we may divide humor roughly into two types, benevolent humor and malicious wit, with each corresponding to different political virtues of sociability, prudence, and justice. Humor aligns with the political virtues of sociability and prudence, while wit serves justice. The questions of whether humor is appropriate, or in the right hands, then depend on the type of humor being used and in service of what end.

### 3.1 *Trump as Anti-Exemplar*

Perhaps the best way to understand when a sense of humor is a political virtue is to examine the living embodiment of when it is vicious: the current U.S. president, Donald Trump. Since his campaign began, a robust conversation has arisen concerning the relation between Trump and comedy. Jimmy Fallon tousled candidate Trump's hair on the *Tonight Show*, and *Saturday Night Live* had Trump on as a host, raising the concern that comedians were complicit in the normalization of a white nationalist, incompetent, and proudly sexually assaulting demagogue. In the immediate wake of his election, a number of comedians openly asked if their social role had changed, demanding they all be satirists (while also asking whether satire even had the capacity to provoke political resistance). In this section, I focus on three other questions: Does Trump have a sense of humor? If so, of what sort? What does it matter if he does?

Some have charged that the president has no sense of humor, implying that there is something profoundly wrong with him, either psychologically or morally. Former senator Al Franken, who entered public life as a writer and performer on *Saturday Night Live*, observed Trump's performance at the Al Smith dinner, when politicians typically engage in a roast of sorts, and noted that "Donald Trump never laughs. . . . He smiled, but didn't laugh. I don't know what it is" (Leibovich 2016).<sup>4</sup> Franken is not the only one to observe this. Chuck Todd, who has interviewed Trump many times on NBC, says the same. In the *Nation* and the *Atlantic* we find articles entitled "Have You Ever Seen Donald Trump Laugh?" (Savan 2016) and "Does Trump Know How to Laugh?" (Wagner 2016; on the other hand, see Gray 2016). The *Huffington Post's* behind-the-scenes account of Comedy Central's *Roast of Donald Trump* provides further evidence. While most would imagine

<sup>4</sup> Franken resigned from the Senate because of a history of unwanted sexual advances. In one of these, he "jokingly" pretended to grope the breasts of a sleeping woman. He admitted that it was a failed attempt at humor, which is no justification. In his autobiography published soon before this, *Giant of the Senate*, he ironically discusses his hard-learned lesson that what strikes him as funny does not always make for good politics.

that participating in a roast, in which friends and comedians lovingly mock the guest of honor, is proof of Trump's sense of humor. Those involved, however, claim that he seemed to lack a sense of what is funny. "He would poll the people around him if they thought it was funny. He never really seemed to have a grasp on what was funny and why it was funny. He was always looking at others to validate if it was funny" (Libit 2016). To be fair, any nonprofessional would be nervous about how his or her performance were playing, but the problem seems deeper. Trump failed to understand the basic workings of jokes, such as the notion of a punchline and its importance. When reviewing the proposed jokes, he would think that some jokes were made funnier by removing the punchline itself. And when he was being roasted and one would typically laugh along in a self-deprecating manner, he did not. Instead, he grimaced or presented a tight-lipped smile that lacked the mirth found in the "Duchenne face" when a person is spontaneously and genuinely amused.

Of course, there have been those who have claimed he has a great sense of humor, but such claims are suspect. In the most notable example, Hope Hicks, White House spokesperson and eventual communications director (who subsequently stepped down), issued a statement asserting that the current president has a great sense of humor. In itself, this is already an extremely odd thing for the White House spokesperson to assert. Further, this is the statement of an employee about her employer, and therefore it lacks credibility. But the most damning material surrounds it: "President Trump has a magnetic personality and exudes positive energy, which is infectious to those around him. He has an unparalleled ability to communicate with people, whether he is speaking to a room of three or an arena of 30,000. He has built great relationships throughout his life and treats everyone with respect. He is brilliant with a great sense of humor ... and an amazing ability to make people feel special and aspire to be more than even they thought possible" (Borchers 2017). *Prima facie* false in many ways, this statement resembles the praise heaped by functionaries upon their Glorious Leader. One expects Hicks to continue by claiming that Trump eats the sun and drinks the sky. Others have claimed that, in less formal settings, Trump is quite charming and funny, but they have not provided any examples or other concrete evidence.

It is not true, however, to say Trump has no sense of humor. It is more accurate to say that he has a type of sense of humor that is particularly troubling for those in power. He did veto jokes at the Comedy Central roast. He insisted that there be no jokes about his bankruptcies, his level of wealth, or his hair—sources of personal pride, or at least insecurity. He is not willing to laugh at himself. According to observers, his primary concern is his self-aggrandizement. He needs to be the center of attention, not the butt of a joke. Recall his abiding



fear that Mexico and China, among others, are laughing at us. This gelatophobia both motivates his foreign policy and allows Trump to appeal to the justified sense of social dismissal among his rural and working-class voters and unjustified sense of the same among white voters. Some have speculated that it was his revulsion at being laughed at by President Obama and the audience at the 2011 White House Correspondents Dinner that compelled him to run for president and regain his pride. (Trump denies this, however.)

Though Trump may fear others' laughter, he has no problem with being the one who mocks. His humor consistently comes from ridiculing others, crafting simple yet effective insults like Little Marco Rubio, Little Adam Schiff, Little Bob Corker, Crooked Hillary, Pocahontas (Elizabeth Warren), Rocket Man (Kim Jong Un), and Lyin' Ted Cruz. When he did pitch jokes for his roast, they were crass and aggressive, more direct insults than jokes exhibiting any craft or conceptual incongruity. The one confirmable case of his genuinely laughing in the past two years—and yes, people have searched—was when, at a campaign rally, a dog barked and someone in the crowd joked that it was Hillary Clinton. Trump does not laugh as an expression of the humility and sociability that is the mark of benevolent humor. His is only the scathing wit—or “wit,” in this case—targeting women, the socially marginal, and those who criticize him. This sort of humor is quite dangerous in the hands of the powerful. But it does appeal to those who share his grievances and target the same marginal people.

There is another point regarding the current president's sense of humor that is important for the present argument. Humor allows for decommitment. By making something into a joke, we distance ourselves from what is being said. Jokes are not assertions of the truth, nor do they necessarily present the moral beliefs of the joker. This may be laudable, as it clears out a space solely for aesthetic pleasure not burdened by serious commitments or provides temporary distance from life's troubles. But this may be used to protect the ego of the joker. When jokers receive criticism or rejection, they can always say, “I was just joking.” This tactic has been used frequently by the Trump administration in the face of criticism. To survey only some of the times that Trump has used this strategy during his first year in office, we find “jokes” that: Obama was the literal founder of ISIS (while explicitly stating that he was not joking), the Russian government should hack the Clinton campaign (which happened), U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley was easily replaceable, Health Secretary Tom Price would be fired if repeal of Obamacare failed (which happened), intelligence agencies leaking information was comparable to the situation in Nazi Germany, mocking a physically disabled reporter at a campaign rally, we need a “Second Amendment solution to Hillary Clinton,” power allows men to grab women by their genitals without consequences,

Putin had done the United States a favor by expelling our diplomatic officials, the police should rough up subjects when taking them into custody, and Democratic congressmen who did not applaud his State of the Union speech were committing treason (Graham 2017; Merica 2017a and 2017b; Merica and Acosta 2018). After receiving warranted criticism regarding the truthfulness or moral rightness of the claim, the president or his representatives walked it back with a “just joking” explanation or an assertion that it was just “locker room talk.”<sup>5</sup> A particularly blunt example is when, after reportedly being called a “fucking moron,” Trump challenged Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to a test of IQs. Despite the fact that there was no indication of humor, and a documented history of Trump both touting his purportedly high IQ and of seriously challenging people to IQ contests, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders claimed that it was just a joke and chastised reporters, saying they “should get a sense of humor” (Shuham 2017).

In each case, the offered explanation provides an escape hatch through which those in power can avoid accountability to those they govern (Bump 2017). As nicely put by Dahlia Lithwick (2017), “‘It was only a joke’ has become the GOP and Donald Trump’s equivalent of ‘the dog ate my homework,’ a catch-all defense for genuine gaffes and even for potential criminal obstruction of justice.” Trump’s administration, then, readily commits the sin that John Morreall warned us about: using (the claim of) humor to decommit the powerful from their own assertions in order to avoid criticism.

Such decommitment is particularly vicious when it conceals an underlying, ongoing, and shameful sincerity. Consider only one of the list of supposed jokes: Trump’s speech to law-enforcement officers at Suffolk County Community College in which he said, “Like when you put somebody in a car and you’re protecting their head, you know, the way you put their hand over? Like, don’t hit their head and they’ve just killed somebody—don’t hit their head. I said, you can take your hand away, okay?” (Merica 2017b). Taken literally, the head of state is encouraging police to engage in illegal brutality against untried suspects. This signals that police officers are not bound by the law. Of course, his spokespeople claimed that Trump was merely joking and should not be taken literally, but the administration’s weakening of restrictions on law-enforcement officers, such as consent decrees, and a general rejection of established laws and norms belie the

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps inspired by the president’s “locker room talk,” a politician in Greenwich, Connecticut, named Chris von Keyserling allegedly crowed that in this new world he no longer had to be politically correct, pinched a town employee in her groin, and informed her that no one would take her word over his. Once caught, he told a detective that he regretted his actions. He also, however, claimed that it was all just a joke and didn’t understand why she would be offended (MacEachern 2017).

administration's claim of joking. It is a serious initiative wrapped in the decommitting appearance of a joke (Cobb 2017).

When the powerful play this game, it undercuts the notion that there are intersubjectively valid truths that ground politics. Consider yet another example. After touting unemployment figures early in the Trump administration at a March 10, 2017, press conference, Press Secretary Sean Spicer was asked how this fit with Trump's frequent dismissal of unemployment figures as "fake" when they spoke well of the Obama administration. How was it possible to know if Trump's assertions were true or sincere? Could the president be trusted? Spicer replied that the figures were no longer "phony" and that the president could always be trusted "if he's not joking, of course" (Graham 2017). Those in power cannot be trusted if they can unilaterally revoke anything they say after the fact by claiming they were joking, despite the fact that it is abundantly obvious that they never were. The problem, it was said of candidate Trump, was that the press (and other critics) were "taking him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, not literally" (Zito 2016). Perversely, assuming the literal truth of a presidential candidate's statements had become a political liability and a sign of naiveté. This strategy is particularly powerful because those who express outrage or demand that truth be the foundation of social life are dismissed as humorless prigs. This is described as a "finger trap" that holds tighter the more one struggles against it. The only winning move then is not to play (Nussbaum 2017).

Having provided an example of when a sense of humor is politically vicious, let me now try to derive some general propositions about when it is politically virtuous.

### 3.2 *Sociability and Humor*

One of the distinguishing markers of a politically vicious sense of humor, then, is ridiculing fellow citizens and the socially marginal. Building social bonds, however, is one of the central functions of humor, understood in the narrow eighteenth-century British sense. This humor is affiliative humor. The sharing of a laugh makes people feel part of a shared activity. It produces a feeling of acceptance and equality. Consider the many times in life when laughing with others weakens social barriers and cultivates a sense that we are engaged in a common social life or common struggles. Affiliative humor nurtures a sense that we are laughing *with* rather than laughing *at*, and this is essential to social bonding. The capacity for certain styles of humor to promote such sociability is politically virtuous.

Aristotle dedicated sections of both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* to friendship (*philia*), a broad term ranging from application to

those engaged in a common project to the more robust idea of those who genuinely delight in the virtue of a second self. One of the central questions of Aristotle's virtue ethics is whether it is possible to live an excellent life without friends, and he concludes that it is not. We are social beings who can exhibit virtue only in a robust community and with others who exhibit similar virtue. Interestingly, Aristotle asserts in one passage that friendship is a precondition of justice. We cannot discuss the just distribution of power and honor if the people are not first bound together in a community. And Aristotle further identifies the virtue of wittiness (*eutrapelia*), your ability to make others feel well without either compromising your dignity or being so attached to your dignity that you are unable to attend to others. He identifies the specific capacity of entertaining and kind words to serve sociability. Wittiness is conducive to friendship (which is a precondition for justice).

It is no coincidence that the delineation of humor from wit, and elevation of the former, arose during a period of rising egalitarianism. A pro-social bonhomie was seen as better suited to a time when political virtue included shared participation and mutual respect. Such humor is opposed to the hierarchy and competition believed to be present in the more cutting, and European, wit. As we still live in a liberal democracy, humor that supports liberal virtues of toleration and sociability are, then, of great value. It does not identify and vilify the other but shows us as fundamentally "in it together." In a time of stark political opposition among the citizenry and political elites (abetted by the mass media), in which bipartisanship or mutual respect is sorely lacking, the idea of laughing together has great appeal.

Though sociable humor is generally virtuous, it depends on the situation at hand. It can also be the foundation of perverse communities, as on sub-Reddits in which aggrieved or simply bored and angry young men mock fellow citizens just "for the lulz." This sort of humor is akin to a middle schooler who thinks it is funny to hold the finger near another's eye and repeatedly say "I'm not touching you" for the sole purpose of irritating the other. "Ironic" Nazis claim to reside in the country of "Kekistan" and engage in "shitposting" in which they harass people and derail conversations supposedly just for the joy of mocking established decencies. When met with resistance they ask, "U mad bro?" and claim to be surrounded by a world full of people with no sense of humor. This humor is affiliative, but in a way that ridicules and mocks anyone outside their community.

Therefore, one way that a sense of humor may be virtuous is when it cultivates a sense of equality and mutual affection among the citizenry. It is vicious when it establishes hierarchies and other artificial distinctions that undercut an environment of common purpose and mutual toleration. While this is particularly vicious when done by those in power, as it has greater effect, it is vicious between lay people as

well. A Trumpian sense of humor that is harsh, divisive, and disingenuous is vicious, even when it is expressed in everyday interactions between citizens.

### 3.3 *Prudence and Humor*

While the central liberal political virtue is toleration, the central conservative one is prudence. Edmund Burke, the founder of modern conservatism, celebrated prudence in the wake of the Terror following the French Revolution. In his diagnosis, the Terror was the triumph of ideology over prudence—the practical wisdom that comes of a respect for both the limits of human reason and the historically proven institutions that would restrain and shape our fallen nature. We are ambitious by nature and need the “cloak of culture” to keep us from inflicting horror. Prudence is demanded particularly of political elites, who must see themselves as caretakers of an intergenerational trust.

Humor, admittedly, is not often seen as prudent. It is taken to be inherently foolish or disrespectful of the past and of established institutions and elites. It is more likely to be celebrated as a means of undercutting the powerful, not respecting them. It may, however, still be conducive to prudence as a political virtue. As highlighted above, humor (in the narrow sense) is closely associated with the virtue of transcendence. It allows us to cope with the struggles and indignities of life. It gives us a sense of perspective, a recognition that “this too shall pass” or “it could have been worse.” A sense of humor also allows one to have a sense of perspective about oneself, to understand the limits of one’s own power and the frequent foolishness of one’s desires. Aided by the affiliative, social aspect of humor, we are able to see that we are not alone in our struggles and that others have survived. Humor has a critical role to play in self-transcendence, in “getting over ourselves.” It is a form of humility.<sup>6</sup>

This awareness is conducive to prudence. Ideologues are not able to distance themselves from their own worldview, to see it wryly. If Burke is correct, politicians who would describe denying tens of millions access to health care as a celebration of freedom need to recognize both their underlying ambition and the limits of their own understanding (concealed as an ideological commitment to liberty). Of course, citizens and elites alike should fight for what they believe to be true, but they must also be able to have perspective—to acknowledge a world larger than their own ideology and to respect the ways that others and historical experience push back. Classical conservatism is then an anti-

<sup>6</sup> For more on a sense of humor and the virtue of self-transcendence, see Roberts 1988 and Lippitt 2005.

ideology, a recognition of concrete realities against philosophical abstractions.

Even those who are deeply committed to the truth of their beliefs must have the capacity to laugh at themselves, to overcome a dangerous self-seriousness. True political leaders understand that they are the custodians of an ongoing intergenerational covenant and their job is both to preserve and to incrementally change the fragile web of culture that reins in human ambition. Contrast this humility and prudence with the humor of the current U.S. president, whose sense of humor has no room for self-mockery.

Insofar as one's sense of humor leads one to disrespect established constitutional norms such as the separation of powers and universal suffrage, or democratic norms such as mutual respect and a commitment to moderate debate oriented toward truth, they have cast off Burke's cloak of culture that holds our democracy together. People who lack the capacity to laugh at themselves do not recognize their own limits; nor do people who cannot laugh at life's struggles. Therefore, a sense of humor that expresses the virtues of humility and transcendence is then politically virtuous insofar as it is conducive to prudence. If one's sense of humor is contemptuous of established norms, or if one lacks the ability to laugh at oneself, one will not be a good citizen or shepherd of the political community. This virtue is particularly important for someone in power.

### *3.4 Justice and Wit*

The claim that pro-social humor is instrumental to political virtue is less controversial than the one that cutting, malicious, or dark forms of humor are. If humor promotes social bonds and respect for established institutions and the limits of one's desires and beliefs, wit and sarcasm do not. As I noted above, however, malicious humor can be turned to just ends in the form of satire, the form of humor that targets vice, typically in the form of ignorance or hypocrisy. While it is generally politically vicious to show malice toward fellow democratic citizens, institutions, and norms, it is sometimes essential if we are to protect them or force citizens and politicians to nurture them.

Unlike humor (narrowly defined), satire targets, excludes, and condemns in the interest of rooting out vice and improving the political community. While we would want citizens to be able to get over themselves, there are limits. We would not want them to shake their heads in bemusement when facing injustice. We want those in power to be held to account and citizens who have threatened the body politic to receive justice. Cutting humor has the critical role of enforcing social boundaries and calling rightful attention to wrongs. While we should

not take excessive pleasure in punishing the vicious, cutting wit has a critical role to play in securing the essential political virtue of justice: ensuring that people get what they deserve. When political elites use humor, or claim that they were just joking, perhaps the most effective countermeasure is a wit that demands accountability. In the wake of Trump's election, the comedians have asked themselves what is demanded of them when political elites act without respect for democratic norms, or when they are unwilling to question themselves. It is no coincidence that there has been an explosion of viewership for satirical programs. In addition to the stalwart *Daily Show*, there are the unofficial spin-offs *Full Frontal* with Samantha Bee and *This Week Tonight* with John Oliver. The *Late Show with Stephen Colbert's* ratings have spiked as Colbert has returned to the territory of the *Colbert Report*. Seth Meyer's "A Closer Look" segments on the *Tonight Show* target the current administration and have gone viral. Meanwhile, anodyne late-night hosts like Jimmy Fallon and James Corden have fallen behind. Satire has a vital role to play in ensuring that those who exhibit moral and intellectual vices like ignorance and hypocrisy, particularly those who would misuse humor to avoid accountability to citizens, must be called out (though satire is often misunderstood in a way that protects its targets from its sting, as when *Colbert Report* viewers were found to believe that Colbert was actually on their side, despite all evidence to the contrary).

This is not only the case for citizens speaking truth to power. The virtue of sociability or collegiality may lead to a welcome bipartisanship, but we also need former comedian and senator Al Franken's dedication of a chapter of his *Giant of the Senate* to his abiding hatred of his fellow senator Ted Cruz. We would want elites to use scathing humor in the defense of the marginal, as we see in the hilarious but caustic debates in the British Parliament. This bile, however, is kept in check by a sense of sociability and respect for long British tradition.

Wit, then, is not necessarily vicious. Even humor infused with anger or a desire to humiliate is politically virtuous when it has the right target. When it targets the innocent, particularly those on the margins of society, it is corrosive; but to expose and punish those who truly deserve to be is conducive to the primary political virtue of justice. Justice is often violent, but it is permissible so long as it is fair. A tendency of character to use humor in the appropriate way is then virtuous.

#### 4. Conclusion

Humor, then, is conducive to political virtue in contrary ways, making it impossible to claim summarily that humor is or is not virtuous. Rather, there are various styles of humor that may be

instrumental to certain political virtues under certain circumstances. Wit must not aggrandize the powerful and further marginalize the powerless. If a political elite uses cutting humor to mock a disabled reporter, it is not virtuous, as the target is undeserving of mockery, but it may be virtuous if turned on Ted Cruz. The capacity of affiliative humor to build social bonds is virtuous when it builds a tolerant political community, but not when it binds together alt-right Redditors and “ironic” Nazis. Humor is valuable when it allows us to recognize our own limits and to refrain from forcing others to submit to our ideological commitments, but not when it leads us to ignore injustice. In short, as with all discussions of virtue ethics, it comes down to practical wisdom—the ability to learn from experience and to judge the concrete situation at hand in its particularity. As Aristotle noted, the politically virtuous mean—where one’s sense of humor genuinely is sociable, prudent, or just—is set by the context and the people at hand. Unless we are talking about Ted Cruz—then have at it.

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