Humour in a World of Humans, Heroes and Monsters

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Introduction to *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*

Benjamin Nickl & Mark Rolfe

Throughout recorded history, humans have grappled with the profound challenge of finding meaning in our existence beyond merely satisfying material and psychic needs. This quest for meaning has often been reflected in tales of heroes and monsters, serving as poignant narratives that exemplify the broad spectrum of human behaviour and ranging from the virtuous to the malevolent. These stories, diverse and rich in complexity, effectively capture the nuances of the human condition and hold to some extent a universal appeal.

Amidst these complexities, humour with its moral dimensions emerges as a recurring coping mechanism. As a lens through which to encounter human morality, it acts as a tool to navigate the challenges and intricacies inherent in our daily interactions with the world. The incorporation of humour into the narratives of monsters and heroes transforms them into dramatic and stimulating forms, offering a unique perspective through which we can interpret and make sense of the multifaceted aspects of our existence. In this way, humour becomes an essential means by which individuals deal with the profound questions and uncertainties that accompany the human experience, creating a dynamic interplay between storytelling, morality, and the intricacies of everyday life.

Within the constraints of a specified historical timeframe from the 16th century to the present day, the essays we offer here therefore comprise an interdisciplinary investigation of diverse cultural, geographical, and temporal contexts. They aim to consider the profound ways in which humour shapes our moral landscapes, offering solace and insight into the complex journey of navigating a world of monsters and heroes through comedy, laughter, wit, the funny, the absurd, the ridiculous, the silly,

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and the delightfully bizarre. In this view, humour is not some sugar coating to make the medicine of ethical complexity easier to digest, Mary Poppins-style. Rather, on these but not all occasions, humour is intrinsic to the ethical claims and contests, a lively means to thrash out arguments over morality.

The origin of this book was a panel discussion on humour, gods, and monsters at the 2020 Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN) conference in Brisbane, Australia. The panel included scholars from various disciplines such as literature, drama, art history, sociology, politics, linguistics, and media studies who analysed the role of humour in our understanding of morality. Their lively deliberations inspired this volume, where they could delve deeper into the subject and include but look beyond conventional interpretations of humour as social commentary.

Humour can serve as a powerful platform for challenging societal norms and boundaries, questioning established beliefs, and provoking critical reflection, thus revealing the absurdities and inconsistencies of daily life. Humour can thereby help individuals see the world from different perspectives, break away from daily routines, and broaden their point of view. Such dynamics are evident in Chapter II. Robert Phiddian and Ron Stewart examine the role of mass-mediated satire in print-press publications that critique societal norms and inconsistencies with visual mockeries of political players and state leaders of note, exposing and criticising people's alleged stupidity or vices in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues. In doing so, the duo reveals the power of satire as a tool for social commentary and change.

However, as Jessica Milner Davis details in Chapter I, there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to humour. Every context requires a contextualised appraisal. Davis's essay delves into the nuances of humour, examining how it varies across different cultures, communities, and contexts. She explores how humour can both challenge and reinforce societal norms, and how it can serve as a form of resistance or a tool for perpetuating stereotypes. Davis also investigates the role of humour in identity formation and group dynamics, discussing how humour can create a sense of belonging or exclusion. Her analysis underscores the importance of understanding the environment in which humour is used and the potential implications it can have on individuals and society. In just these two chapters, we quickly discover that no satirical creation or comedic stereotype ever manifests the same kind of 'funny' in exactly the same way.

The capacities of humour to either reinforce or denigrate different moral stances are evident in Chapter VIII. M.W Shores elaborates on this within the context of Japanese culture and history folk tales that often endow monstrous evils and fauna deities with a unique ability to express humour and cunning wit. This serves as a form of social control, punishing deviant behaviour and rewarding conformity. Jokes can either mock certain behaviours or attitudes, which can discourage individuals from exhibiting them, or they can applaud certain values, which can encourage people to adopt them.

The morality of humour becomes a subject of debate in and of itself, raising contentious questions about who benefits from it and whom it derides, or where the boundary lies between what is morally good and bad. What makes a joke morally acceptable or unacceptable? Is it the intention of the person telling the joke, the reaction of the audience, or the content of the joke itself? Do we require spooks and spectres to teach us about the right way of scaring, or of teaching, humans with a joke so they do right by each other and by nature, and its animate and inanimate objects? These are complex questions that defy simple answers. They compel us to consider a multitude of factors, including the context in which a humorous agenda is applied, the power dynamics between the person making fun and the audience, and the potential damage that the intention to amuse might cause.

Our contributors are very aware that humour is a complex phenomenon that can be involved in the moral choices that we daily make and can include contradictions, complexities, and some very contentious claims. For instance, Mark Rolfe in Chapter III explores how humour as a hotbed for political counteractions and indeed rebellious social uprisings has been used to critique and challenge political figures, and how this has evolved in the age of television broadcast and online mass media. He discusses the role of American late-night comedy talk shows such as Steven Colbert's Late Night Show and popular online memes in shaping political discourse, and the ethical implications of their involvement in the grand tradition of American presidential politics.

Many humourists loathe Donald Trump as a monster, but there are also humourists on the right who cast him as a hero who is taking on the evils caused by the left. While we do not have to agree with these fans who absurdly cast this man as another Churchill, Superman or Rambo, or indeed God's own creation, we do need to note how humour is involved in advancing conflicting ethical and political positions that can be the means for many people to navigate our moral universe. That means we must consider the role of the audience in interpreting and responding to humour. Some authors in this book acknowledge for that reason that the impact of humour is not solely determined by the intentions of those producing, creating, or performing it, but also by the interpretations and reactions of individual or group consumers who might interpret the same joke in different ways and reach different ethical conclusions.

Of particular concern are therefore cyberspace and consumer and user-technology interactions, the rise of artificial intelligence, the emergence of alt-right and niche media, and the formation of micro-publics in echo-chambered filter bubbles of the internet. In Chapter IV, to illustrate what we mean by this, Lucien Leon explores the role of humour in the digital age, examining how it is shaped by and shapes these new technological and social contexts. He sifts through the world of internet memes and viral content, discussing how they serve as platforms for social commentary and critique. Leon also discusses the ethical implications of online humour, particularly concerning issues of privacy, consent, and the potential for harm.

The point here is that the chapters in this book encourage readers to reflect on the ethical implications of humorous statements rather than simply enjoying or rejecting them. This contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of humour in our society and the responsibilities of both consumers as well as creators in understanding what is right and what is wrong and what separates the two sides.

In Chapter VII, Anna-Sophie Jürgens, Anastasiya Fiadotava, and David C. Tscharke investigate further the intricate depths of these complexities. The trio embarks on a detailed examination of the cartoon character of the Joker, a notorious animation and entertainment figure whose chaotic humour and moral ambiguity have made him an iconic presence in popular culture. They approach the Joker through the lens of the discursive repertoire associated with an infectious disease, drawing a compelling parallel between the spread of humour and the transmission of contagious disease and thus offering an innovative perspective on the moral dimensions of viral humour. The authors demonstrate how the contagious nature of humour can have either positive effects that foster social bonds, promote psychological well-being, and facilitate social critique, or negative effects that typecast and ostracise certain groups, and exacerbate social tensions.

It is a question that is not restricted solely to matters of the organic. In Chapter VI, Ben Nickl examines the rise of synthetic laughter with the invention of the "laugh box". He explores how humour and laughter, with the latter being a highly valued and commercialised form of the physical expression of humour, are being replicated and programmed into mediation technologies. The use of canned laughter to create artificial emotions raises ethical questions, especially regarding the creation of mass entertainment content such as sitcoms and comedy shows for billions of viewers and extending today to generative AI interfaces. The dynamics of humour production and consumption have changed since the introduction of canned laughter in the United States in the 1950s. Nickl discusses these changes in detail, focusing on the moral implications of synthetic laughter then and today.

As we move further into the third decade of the 21st century, saturated with virtual apps and online spaces, the role of humour in shaping and engaging moral perceptions becomes even more critical. From newspaper cartoonists and paid political pundits on terrestrial broadcast television to popular creators of viral memes and online streaming channels featuring late-night comedy talk show hosts, the mediators and knowledge vectors of humour are changing. This makes it even more imperative to critically assess the moral implications of humour. The crucial point is that the transition from traditional institutions and forms of media consumption has dramatically altered our interactions with humour. We now see a more diverse range of comedic content that is marked as "funny" with laugh tracks, TV hosts or other cues, as Nickl and Rolfe make clear, that guide us on when to laugh, whom to laugh at, and what to laugh about. The moral dimensions of such cues are not always obvious to us, but they are often there. This shift means we must encourage a wider spectrum

of critical thinking about humour that reflects the myriad of voices and perspectives existing in our society.

Essentially, this book argues for a wide rather than narrow scope for understanding humour. At its intellectual core, it highlights the significance of contexts of time, culture, and society as well as intention and interpretation in determining the moral dimensions of humour. It encompasses an expansive range of issues such as the moral and social impact of technological progress, digital media, cultural conflicts, and environmental concerns. This collection is thus not confined to a single era or culture. It spans centuries and continents, cultures, languages, and communities and thereby reflects the widespread appeal and significance of a social phenomenon that we now call humour. But this collection also recognises that global issues are interconnected and can have a significant impact on individuals, communities, and other species.

We do not wish to institute here the notion of a monolithic form of discourse when talking about humour and morality. In fact, the very composition of this book's chapters aims to counter reductive essentialism by placing visual and at times adult-themed satire from Southeast Asia in dialogue with the Golden Age of Hollywood's stars of comedy performance in North America. In Chapter V, Will Visconti details how a celebrated actress of the theatre stage and the big screen, Mae West, sex-bombed her way through the gendered glass ceilings of her time by refusing to be constrained by the corset of male rules that governed female propriety at that time. Visconti's chapter emphasises the myriad ways that humour and morality interact and that ethical judgements can change with time and context. Once upon a time, the lead protagonists of West's plays were considered sexual and gender monsters, but they nevertheless drew fascinated, if hypocritical crowds. Now in the twenty-first century, those same characters can be viewed as heroic figures ahead of their time.

Accordingly, the terms heroes and monsters in the book's sub-title serve as the central metaphors in our exploration of human ethics that are navigated through humour. They underscore the complexity and diversity of our moral experiences, presenting a vivid portrayal of the dichotomous moral forces that shape our societies and cultures. Each term holds a unique meaning to every author that we worked with, reflecting a point on the moral continuum that is as diverse as our human experiences. We are all capable of moral judgment and reasoning while navigating the complexities of right and wrong, good and evil. Yet our interpretations of ethical norms can vary greatly.

'Heroes' in this context signify the aspirational aspects of our moral selves. They embody the ideals of benevolence, justice, and the greater good that we strive to achieve. These are the highest standards of moral behaviour, reflecting virtues such as empathy, altruism, fairness, and integrity and suggesting a level of moral excellence that transcends ordinary human capabilities. Yet, this is not merely a portrayal of an idealised moral state but also of the challenges we face when aspiring to these lofty ideals. That can include the social structures that facilitate or hinder our moral growth. Exploring the heroic human through humour is an affirmation of our potential

to strive for goodness, and seek it out against all odds, even in a world fraught with ethical ambiguities. The term encourages us to reflect on the nature of these ethical aspirations: What does it mean to excel morally? How can individuals and societies cultivate what they deem heroic virtues? And how can we reconcile our aspirational moral selves with the realities of our flawed human nature? Should we really admire all those people who are declared heroes? No, say those who revile Donald Trump or some of the grand statues that dot our public landscapes.

Placed at the other end of the spectrum, the 'Monster' represents the darker, more ominous side of human nature. It signifies the actions and behaviours that societies consider reprehensible, unacceptable, or even abhorrent. This can encompass a broad range of actions from violence, discrimination, and deception to the betrayal of trust and the abuse of power. The monster is a metaphor that allows us to think about the complicated questions of moral failings and what drives individuals to act in ways that are denounced as morally repugnant. It also allows the intellectual pursuit of the motivations, the contextual factors, and the societal implications that accompany such alleged transgressions. We should consider the social and cultural factors that contribute to these moral shortcomings and that could be resolved to foster a more just and ethical society. But we should also sometimes treat allegations of monsters with scepticism, as Rolfe and Visconti make clear. Should we necessarily believe that some people are as monstrous as others claim?

Viewed together, the metaphors of heroes and monsters in this book present a comprehensive, although not all-encompassing, view of the moral spectrum. They serve as pungent but also ambiguous and contested reminders of the vast range and complexity of our ethical settings in relation to humour. This point, too, is reflected in existing academic research. Mehrdad Bidgoli argues that effective comedy and humour are rooted in an ethical sensibility, particularly the concept of "hospitality" as a precursor to experiences of something as funny[1]. This view suggests that humour, at its best, is an act of welcoming, of creating a space where laughter can foster connection and understanding.

Robert C. Roberts further explores the ethical dimensions of humour, identifying incongruity, perspectivity, dissociation, enjoyment, and freshness as key elements. He suggests that ethical amusement requires a sense of humour that is aligned with virtues such as compassion and hope[2]. This aligns with our exploration of humorous morality or moral humour, which examines humour's capacity to both bring together and separate, to shed light on truths and yet to sometimes also veil them. Meanwhile, Philip Percival delves into the concept of "comic moralism", which posits that certain moral properties can detract from the humour of a joke or comedic item[3]. This viewpoint underscores the ethical intricacies of humour, mirroring our exploration's emphasis on the ethical ambiguity and moral uncertainty that define our modern world. Berys

[1] Bidgoli, *Comedy and Humour*, 82–84.

[2] Roberts, *Humour and the Virtues*, 127–129.

[3] Percival, *Comic Normativity*, 100–102.

Nigel Gaut has also discussed the ethics and aesthetics of humour, emphasising the role of humour in interpersonal relationships and its connection to the art of comedy[4].

Among scholars of humour studies, there has been a tendency to treat humour as comprised of incontrovertibly good things and the strongest academic expression of this has appeared in Benign Violation Theory (BVT).[5] Additionally, a "sunny-side-up psychology" has morphed into self-help books and management tomes that tout the benefits of positive humour[6] but have difficulty comprehending the pleasures of humour that are neither benign nor positive. That is most evident with some philosophers of humour such as Simon Critchley. He avoids the complexity of morality in humour with his view that "true humour does not wound a specific victim and always contains self-mockery". Real humour for him does not attack any one person with "sheer malice" but instead lashes "vices which are general and not personal".[7] Thus, Critchley avoids any need to contemplate the ethics of justice and desert entailed in satirically targeting a person for some reprehensible folly. By his reasoning, no humorous barbs should have been levelled at Richard Nixon for Watergate or Donald Trump for his attempt on 6 January 2021 to overturn election results. In other words, it eliminates much that we call satire.

Yet humour is not without its darker side. Michael Billig put this succinctly when he wrote that humour "lies at the core of social life" because it "ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu". Billig was aware of the complexity of humour but was particularly focused on the role of corrective humour in social life as a contrast to those who insist on a 'sunny side up' approach and to those who depict humour as necessarily rebellious. In fact, rebellious humour is dependent on the setting of social rules and the castigation of their contraventions. That is, humour can and may on occasion have a "disciplinary function"[8], reinforcing social values and punishing those who are judged to have transgressed boundaries.

This is humour in the form of ridicule without which social behaviour could be "impossibly rigid" as Henri Bergson so vividly described in the mechanics of laughter.[9] He argued that humour contains an element of cruelty, suggesting that laughter can often arise from the discomfort or misfortune of others[10]. Sigmund Freud then proposed that we sometimes deceive ourselves about the true nature of our laughter, using humour as a form of psychological defence to cope with uncomfortable truths[11].

To conclude this short introduction surrounded by all these varied perspectives and possible approaches to humour, *Moral Dimensions of Humour* uses the topic of

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4 Gaut, *Just Joking*, 51–52.

5 Derrin, "Comic Character and Counter-Violation", 146–147.

6 Billig. *Laughter and Ridicule*, 39 and chapter 2.

7 Critchley, *On Humour*, 14–15.

8 Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 7 and chapter 9.

9 Bergson, *Le Rire*.

10 Bergson, *Laughter*, see chapter 1 "The Comic in General".

11 Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. See Chapter VI, "The Relation of Jokes to Dreams and to the Unconscious", and see Chapter VII, "Jokes and the Species of the Comic".

humour as a conceptual tool and an underexplored academic arena to illuminate the ethical complexities of society. The book features the role of humour in challenging societal norms, denigrating the wicked, and praising the noble. Humour can be a transformative force, a fount of knowledge, and a means to clearly communicate complex moral issues. It has the power to foster empathy, spark dialogue, and denounce injustice. But humour can also be used for regulation and control, to maintain social order, as well as to deceive, insult, and lead astray. In short, humour is involved in a range of ethical claims that should not be taken at face value but should be treated as suasive claims on our moral sensibilities.

At the end of this book, the authors present their findings in an audio recording produced, mixed, and edited after the completion of the manuscript's written components. This conversational revisiting of their thoughts provides additional insights into the topics discussed in various case studies. We hope this further enhances the reader's understanding by offering alternative channels of communication, not only for keen eyes but also eager ears. Our intention is to engage not only academics but also a broader audience interested in the intersection of humour, morality, and societal transformation.

However, to stress once more the limits that apply to this collection, our book does not purport to provide a universal definition of humour or morality. The paradigms used in the essays and in this brief introductory summary are not exhaustive and are rooted in specific discursive traditions. The specifics that apply to each chapter reflect the inherent complexity of the concepts and the perspectives of the contributors. We acknowledge that humour and morality are multifaceted phenomena that can be interpreted and experienced in many ways. Therefore, we invite you, the reader of this book or the listener of the recorded conclusion, to join us on this ongoing odyssey of morality and humour: to engage with the ideas presented, to question your own assumptions, and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about humour and morality in a modern world that engages each and every one of us on each and every day.

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