

## Comedic Hermeneutical Injustice

**Abstract:** The concept of *comedic hermeneutical injustice* – a type of hermeneutical injustice that disadvantages members of marginalized groups in the arena of humor-sharing – is posited and explored. This paper first explains the concept of comedic hermeneutical injustice: that agents who are hermeneutically marginalized are less able to successfully participate in the sharing of humor. It then suggests that, to prove the existence of such an injustice, two things need to be shown: firstly, that hermeneutically marginalized groups *do* suffer some disadvantage in how well their attempts at humor are received; and, secondly, that this disadvantage amounts to a significant harm.

In proving the existence of a comedic disadvantage, this paper notes that all jokes require some epistemic content to be shared between joke-teller and joke-hearer. Thus, since being hermeneutically marginalized obstructs one from sharing knowledge with proximate speakers, hermeneutical inequalities can lead to inequalities in the sharing of humor. To show that this constitutes a significant disadvantage, the paper observes the various ways that sharing humor successfully can serve agents' social interests. It concludes by noting some idiosyncrasies of comedic hermeneutical injustice, relative to other forms of epistemic injustice, and situating it within the wider framework of humor's general social-ethical influence.

## I: The Concept of Comedic Hermeneutical Injustice

Herein I consider the possibility of *comedic hermeneutical injustice*: hermeneutical injustice that manifests itself in disadvantages, experienced by members of hermeneutically marginalized groups, in successfully sharing humor and being considered funny by others. Comedic hermeneutical injustice occurs when a person is rendered less able to speak (or write, perform etc.) humorously and have people find what they say amusing because the concepts they are appealing to are not well understood by others, where the reason for that failure to understand is that the experiences of a social group the speaker belongs to are afforded restricted opportunities for expression within the wider culture of the speaker's audience. This form of hermeneutical injustice will occur, for instance, when a joke that makes reference to the details of one's cultural celebrations goes over the head of one's audience, whereas a similar joke about a hermeneutically dominant group's celebrations would have been understood and appreciated. It will occur when a stand-up comic's observation about the experience of being a member of an ethnic minority is poorly received by her ethnic majority audience, as a result of a disproportionate lack of visibility of members of her ethnic group within popular culture. And it will occur when a member of a workplace is perceived as boring or humorless by her colleagues because she is unable to make jokes that are understandable from their hermeneutically dominant point of view.

In sections II and III of this paper I outline the features of humor that make comedic hermeneutical injustice possible, and offer real-life examples that the concept can help make sense of – including the limited room for comic expression sometimes reported by South Asian American comedians in the United States, and the numerous marginalized social groups to which stereotypes of humorlessness have been assigned. Comedic hermeneutical injustice is an idiosyncratic form of epistemic injustice, and in section IV and section VII I note some respects in which it differs from classic examples of the concept: namely, that it typically involves only *some* relevant parties lacking a concept; and that the conversational failures that result from it can be unusually difficult to put right, since a joke tends to get only one chance to land

properly. Since we can perhaps empathize with an impulse to attribute *all* of one's comedic failures to external conditions – and to imagine that those conditions are unjust – rather than accept that we are not (always) funny, I dedicate section V to drawing out the distinction between failures to elicit comic amusement that have to do with comedic hermeneutical injustice, and failures to elicit comic amusement that do not. Section VI involves the case for taking disadvantages in humor-sharing seriously: given that trustworthiness, competence and likeability are traits we tend to assign to those we consider funny, the facts of who gets to be considered humorous have far-reaching implications for social status and human welfare. Finally, I conclude by situating comedic hermeneutical injustice within the wider framework of comedy's interactions with social justice. Comedy can be a means by which to build understanding across social demographics, as evidenced by the performances of Reginald D. Hunter in the UK, and Joe Wong in China and the USA. But instances of humor can also have a deleterious effect on social justice, and I end with a consideration of the ways in which popular comedy might trivialize issues like sexual harassment in the workplace.

Throughout this paper I will mirror the terminology employed by Miranda Fricker in her discussion of standard cases of epistemic injustice (2007, p.17) by referring to the extent to which one is perceived as funny – as capable of producing, replicating and appreciating good comedy – as the level of *comedic credibility* one is afforded by others. Those who are unfairly perceived as unfunny as an upshot of hermeneutical injustice will, accordingly, be considered to suffer from a comedic credibility deficit. This terminology can appropriately cover the experience of being found unfunny at the moment at which an agent fails to elicit comic amusement from her audience – “this joke, currently being told, is not funny” – but also refer to the forward-facing harm of being considered unfunny over a longer period of time (including moments in which one is not actively trying to amuse) – “you are not a funny person”.

## II: The Influence of Hermeneutical Marginalization on the Sharing of Humor

To show that comedic hermeneutical injustice can take place, I will need to show a) that members of hermeneutically marginalized groups will at least sometimes be made less able to speak or act humorously, or have their humorous speech or action meet the intended reaction, by virtue of their hermeneutical marginalization, and b) that this constitutes some substantial disadvantage to them. In order to demonstrate, first, that hermeneutical marginalization can render people unable to share humor and have it be found humorous, it is necessary to briefly consider some philosophical definitions of ‘the comic’.

The most popular modern philosophical accounts identify the presence of incongruity as the feature common to all instances of humor (Carroll 1991, 2016; Morreall 2009, p.9). Other prominent views associate humor at its essence with playfulness, or cleverness – although these theories tend to be complementary to, rather than rivals of, the idea that finding something comically amusing necessarily involves perceiving some incongruity (Gimbel 2018; Morreall 2009, p.33). Regardless of which account of humor we are convinced by, then, it is clear that comedy typically plays on our expectations regarding what the world is like. So, of course, for you and I to enjoy humor together, we will need to share some such expectations. In order to jointly perceive an occurrence as going against the way things normally are, and, accordingly, finding it funny together, we will need to agree, to some extent, about how things normally are.

In his book *Jokes*, Ted Cohen refers to the epistemic conditions teller and hearer must share, in order to enjoy a particular joke together, as the ‘condition’ of that joke. Cohen writes that “[a] conditional joke is one that can work only with certain audiences, and typically is meant only for those audiences. The audience must supply something in order either to get the joke or to be amused by it. That something is the condition on which the success of the joke depends” (p.13). Cohen contrasts this type of joke with a

'pure' joke, which would be accessible to everyone – but concludes that no pure jokes actually exist, since “at the very least, the audience will have to understand the language of the joke, and probably much more” (p.13). Cohen is correct that most jokes require a great deal of additional background understanding. There are, of course, 'in-jokes', where what is required might be membership of a very specific group of friends, or a particular profession, say. But close consideration of the jokes we tell and enjoy will reveal that even much more accessible humor also requires substantial shared understandings of the world – be it the existence of a stereotype about a social group, the nature of the professions of actor and bishop, or (in the case of meta-jokes) popular tropes within humor itself.

When one's experiences are not expressed or shared widely amongst other members of one's society, one's experiences will not contribute in a significant way to the collective pool of references that accessible instances of humor in that society can be based on. That is to say: features of one's experience, tending not to be represented in the art, media or academia that most people consume, will make for jokes that are not understood by most people. Hermeneutical marginalization leaves its victims at the margins of popular culture, unable to significantly influence the ways in which the people around them understand the world and express themselves. And – since jokes unavoidably make reference, directly or indirectly, to knowledge, understandings, or attitudes that (in successful cases) are shared between tellers and audiences – suffering from this disadvantage leaves one at an additional disadvantage when it comes to crafting humor: one's own experiences become obscure, and therefore less valuable as a reference point for joke-telling. To state the obvious: if the condition of getting a joke is understanding what it is like to be me, and you have not been made familiar with what it is like to be me, you will not get the joke.

Think, now, of the ways in which the dominant hermeneutical perspective of a particular time and place can influence how agents in that environment make sense of the world. In *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker makes reference to Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*, and considers how the protagonist's homophobic surroundings deny him the opportunity to make sense of himself straightforwardly as a gay

man (pp.163-165). It is difficult for him to recognize homosexual desire for what it is, even as he experiences it – and this is in part because the stigma surrounding queer identity gives him prudential reasons not to identify as gay, but also because the lived experience of gay men is not visible to him. Now, for present purposes, it is not necessary to consider the fact that gaps in collective hermeneutical resources may hinder a person in understanding *their own* identity. The mere existence of collective hermeneutical resources, and the fact that the resources required to understand one person’s experience of the world can be more commonly accessible than the resources required to understand another person’s, gets the present account of comedic hermeneutical injustice off the ground. (I will return to the fact that cases of comedic hermeneutical injustice diverge from most of the cases cited by Fricker, by virtue of the fact that an agent who is a victim of comedic hermeneutical injustice will not lack any relevant knowledge herself, in section IV.)

The experiences of some groups are reflected back at us so often that they become familiar, even to people who are not members of those groups. It is partially because of the ways in which whiteness, for example, imposes itself upon the epistemic sets of members of other racial groups that W. E. B. Du Bois famously wrote, “Of [white people] I am singularly clairvoyant” (2012, p.73): knowledgeable about the privileged group in a way that is not broadly reciprocated. In her book *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Laura Mulvey considers the frequency with which women must put themselves in the shoes of male protagonists when consuming film, and notes that “the woman spectator in the cinema can make use of an age-old cultural tradition adapting her to this convention, which eases a transition out of her own sex into another” (p.32). The requirement for empathy with male heroes is so ubiquitous, for cinema-goers of any gender, that imaginatively perceiving the world from the perspective of a man becomes familiar territory for women. And the likelihood that agents from all social groups will have extensive second-hand experience of the perspectives of white people, or of men, increases the general human propensity for understanding a joke, when it is made by a white person and/or a man.

So we can see that members of some social groups will tend to have knowledge and experiences that are comparatively 'mainstream', in that they are better understood by their society, taken as a whole, while members of other groups will have knowledge and experiences that are relatively 'niche', meaning that fewer participants in their society will be familiar with their points of reference. This lack of shared knowledge will allow them fewer opportunities than their better-understood counterparts to make jokes that most people will get, which can, in turn, lead to members of hermeneutically marginalized groups receiving unfairly low comedic credibility ratings. Faced with a conversational partner who makes jokes that we do not find funny (or, perhaps, even recognize as jokes), some of us may be self-reflective enough to understand that our own ignorance could be contributing to the failure of the jokes to land; and, furthermore, we may be charitable enough to believe that the person we are speaking with *would* make us laugh, if we understood their experience of the world more fully. In this case, comedic hermeneutical injustice can still occur, since the value of sharing humor lies not only in being perceived by others as funny, but also in the pleasure we can find in *actually* bringing about comic amusement in others. However, on occasions in which we are less charitable and self-reflective, the injustice can be worse. Another conclusion we might come to, when we do not find someone's jokes funny, is that they are simply *not funny* – not talented when it comes to sharing humor. In this case, a hermeneutically marginalized agent is subject to an unfairly negative judgement about their attributes as a person – a further injustice on top of the disadvantage they are at when they share humor with a general audience in the first instance. Since both deny victims some of the benefits of humor-sharing, and both result from unequally distributed hermeneutical resources, the deficit in one's chances of amusing one's audience *and* the unfairly low comedic credibility rating are both individually sufficient for comedic hermeneutical injustice to obtain.

This, then, is the answer to the challenge of demonstrating that disadvantages in hermeneutical resources can lead to disadvantages in sharing humor. The conditionality of jokes – the requirement for a

joke-hearer to understand something in common with a joke-teller – means that any factor that limits the likelihood that one will share knowledge with the majority of other people within one’s society will, at the same time, limit one’s opportunities for the successful sharing of humor with other people. Furthermore, where those limitations have their roots in unjust social structures, the limitations themselves will count as unjust for that reason. And, of course, hermeneutical marginalization has exactly this kind of limiting effect, since it takes the power to influence how people perceive and understand the world away from members of particular social groups.

### **III: Comedic Hermeneutical Injustice in Practice**

Now: in any specific example in which an instance of humor fails to cause amusement, the source of that failure will be over-determined. Humorous speech is issued, and enjoyed, for reasons that are multiply ambiguous in comparison with non-humorous forms of speech (see Butterfield 2020, p.13) – and this makes it difficult to say definitively, of any particular joke, that it failed as a result of hermeneutical marginalization and hermeneutical marginalization alone. In what follows, however, I will address two real-life scenarios in which there is good reason to believe that comedic hermeneutical injustice has worked against a joke-teller or -tellers.

In the Hari Kondabolu-produced documentary *The Problem with Apu*, comedian and actor Aasif Mandvi discusses the limited and stereotype-heavy cultural representation of Indian-Americans within the USA. Mandvi notes, in particular, that regressive and one-dimensional characters like *The Simpsons’* Apu have a freezing effect on the ability of South Asian American comic entertainers to express themselves. Because *The Simpsons* debuted at a time when there were few South Asian American characters in popular fiction, Apu’s particularities had an outsized effect on how South Asian people came to be perceived in the United States. And because Apu is a comedy character specifically, he cast a long



shadow over the ways in which American audiences were willing to perceive South Asian performers as humorous. Mandvi observes that the character of Apu “lives in a systemic culture of, how are South Asians represented? If we’re funny just because of an accent, and if that’s the only version of us that’s seen...the audience will only accept one version of South Asians. They won’t accept something that’s nuanced or too complicated” (2017). Were South Asian people more thoroughly represented, as a group, within the culture of the United States, South Asian American comedians and comic actors would have a greater set of options available to them when it came to setting up jokes – and, perhaps, would also enjoy a greater willingness, on the part of their audiences, to entertain the states of mind required to enjoy their jokes.

Elsewhere, comic performers who face the prospect of comedic misfires as a result of hermeneutical injustice may alter their performances to avoid them. In a 2016 analysis of the material of comedian Julie Goldman, Corrine Seals compares a series of Goldman’s jokes on the television show *The Big Gay Sketch Show*, which is performed live in front of an audience and involves improvisation, with similar content from some of her stand-up performances. Notably, the television show could count on an audience that included a large number of members of the LGBTQ community, and people interested in topics related to LGBTQ identity; in contrast, Goldman’s performances in comedy clubs took place in front of more general audiences, who were not reliably so interested and who did not necessarily know that they were going to see a performance by a lesbian comedian (p.99). Seals describes a number of divergences between what happens in the two contexts that can likely be attributed to the second group of audiences’ lack of familiarity with LGBTQ tropes and references. First, she notes that Goldman “explicitly spells out her identity for the general audience, recognizing through double consciousness that this audience may not pick up on subtle aspects of her identity presentation,” by “refer[ring] to herself as a “butch lez” multiple times, something she never once does for the LGBT audience” (p.103). Seals then identifies the audience as missing a joke when Goldman goes on to describe butch lesbians as ‘shy’ and ‘sensitive’, suggesting that an audience consisting primarily of members of the LGBTQ community would

recognize that, in saying this, she is disclosing what is perceived to be a profound and compromising secret. Finally, when Goldman relays an anecdote about a (presumed straight) store assistant viewing her as sexual or romantic competition, Seals writes that the general audience fails to pick on the satirical nod to heteronormativity in the story – and, accordingly, they “do not laugh through this entire set of lines, whereas this would likely be material at which her LGBT audience would laugh heartily” (p.104).

Thinking about Seals’ comparison cases with hermeneutical justice in mind, we are able to say that Goldman’s job as a comedian is made more difficult as a result of hermeneutical marginalization. Had Goldman’s sexuality placed her in a social group that was not hermeneutically marginalized – were she, for example, a straight man – she would not need to alter her performances to make aspects of her identity salient, and she would be less likely to miss out on audience reactions as a result of a loss of understanding when moving from an audience of people like her to one with a non-specific demographic.

With all that we have observed about the link between success in humor and hermeneutical privilege in mind, it is unsurprising that myths about marginalized groups being humorless abound in popular discourse. Feminist scholars have noted the pernicious staying power of the idea that women just ‘aren’t funny’ – and, in particular, that politically engaged, feminist women are incapable of detecting or enjoying humor (Douglas 2010, p.662; Willett and Willett 2019, p.21). In her analysis of Goldman’s work, Seals also opens up her focus to reflect upon the stereotype of lesbians as lacking a sense of humor (2016, p.97). Meanwhile, British Muslim humorists have reported feeling out of place in the country’s prevailing comedic culture (Glubb 2019; Khan 2007; Syed 2019): Muslim stand-up comic Jeff Mizra, for example, describes a prevailing perception, amongst those who first hear about his religious identity and occupation, that the two are in some kind of logical tension (Khan 2007). There is evidence that similar ideas are present in many parts of the world in which Muslims are a minority population (Amarasingam 2010, pp.473-474; Zimbardo 2014, p.60). Presumably the sense of contradiction that Mizra brings to light stems from an association of Muslims primarily with non-humorous modes of cognition and

communication – and it seems likely that the popularity of this view is exacerbated by an under-representation of Muslim voices, in places where other religious identities are demographically predominant, amongst the hermeneutical sources from which comedy can draw its references.

Granted, I cannot presently survey the extent to which every hermeneutically marginalized group is popularly regarded as funny or unfunny – and, additionally, the stereotypes I mention here will no doubt also have sources in unrelated prejudices. As Mizra mentions, the perception of Muslims as not given to humorous talk is wrapped up with broader preconceptions that characterize Islam as an uncommonly strict form of religious affiliation (Khan 2007). Elsewhere, the prevalence of misogynistic humor, and the attendant need for feminist writers to analyze comedic output with a critical eye, is clearly part of the genesis of the ‘women-don’t-like-a-joke’ trope. Evidently, though, what a worldview that makes reference to comedic hermeneutical injustice would predict about assignments of comedic credibility is borne out by real-world observation: audiences *are* routinely surprised by, and dismissive of, comedy that comes from members of groups that are afforded limited opportunity to contribute to the collective pool of hermeneutical resources.

#### **IV: Asymmetrical Hermeneutical Resource Access in Cases of Comedic Hermeneutical Injustice**

Charlie Crerar (2016) credits Fricker’s concept of ‘hermeneutical resources’ with a certain virtuous vagueness, noting that the fact that the notion isn’t weighed down with specificity “is one of the reasons the theory [of hermeneutical injustice] has such exciting theoretical potential” (p.198). In practice, though, Crerar establishes, through observations of Fricker’s chosen examples, a sense that she primarily has in mind cases in which there is a society-wide failure to understand a concept relevant to the experience of the hermeneutically marginalized party – where that lack of understanding applies to both the victim herself, and the (non-marginalized) agents she interacts with in her day-to-day life. Crerar wants to expand

the concept of hermeneutical resources beyond Fricker's chosen paradigmatic cases, because "many of the defining features of hermeneutical injustice can be present in social experiences even when there are well defined and widely disseminated concepts that capture, for the hermeneutically marginalized, the nature of the experience in question" (p.199). Crerar goes on to discuss taboos, making the case that they can lead to cases of hermeneutical injustice in which "[t]he relevant concepts are present" in society, but, because open discussion involving those concepts is stigmatized, "they cannot be put to good hermeneutical effect" (p.203). He is interested, particularly, in the epistemic harm done to women as a result of taboos surrounding menstruation: both directly, through societal shaming, and indirectly, due to (for example) a resultant lack of sophistication in the development of menstrual products.

Like Crerar, I am interested in a class of cases that does not involve universal ignorance of the concepts necessary for the experiences of the hermeneutically marginalized to be understood. But cases of comedic hermeneutical injustice diverge both from Fricker's central examples, and from cases involving taboos, in that comedic hermeneutical injustice involves *asymmetrical* comprehension of the relevant concepts. Our cases require that the joke-teller *does* grasp the condition of her joke – in order to tell it in the first place – but that, in the main, her audience does not. It is not, then, that *nobody* in earshot of the joke understands what needs to be understood in order to appreciate it; nor is it the case, as with taboos, that everybody present has access to the required hermeneutical resources, but is reticent to acknowledge that they do. Victims of comedic hermeneutical injustice instead suffer harms where there is – and because there is – a gap between what they know and what their audience knows.

This kind of scenario is certainly consistent with the broad concept of hermeneutical injustice. Crerar is correct that the examples Fricker uses to demonstrate this sort of injustice tend to be cases, like the *A Boy's Own Story* example, in which the victim and the agents around her *both* lack the hermeneutical resources necessary to understand some important aspect of her experience. But in work published since *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker has flagged the possibility of hermeneutical injustice occurring in

circumstances in which the concepts necessary for an agent's experience to be properly understood *are* available in the place and time in which the agent experiences injustice (Fricker 2013, p.1319). Hermeneutical injustice can occur here when, and because, even though the victim of the injustice comprehends the relevant concept, the people around her do not: a hermeneutical gap in the popular imagination means that the agent's experience is not understood by other people, or not understood by members of communities other than her own. It is *this* sort of experience of hermeneutical marginalization – of understanding one's own experience perfectly, but finding that agents outside of one's social community or culture do not – that is relevant to discussions about comedic hermeneutical injustice.

#### **V: What's the Difference between Comedic Hermeneutical Injustice and Just Being Too Arch?**

Of course, it should be possible for a person to fail to be funny, and for that failure to be unrelated to any form of injustice. Thus far I have focused on the experience of having one's jokes not be appreciated by one's audience, because one's points of reference are specific to groups whose perspectives are not well understood, as a potential example of comedic hermeneutical injustice. A concern might arise, when we think of examples like this, regarding how to delineate such cases from cases in which a joker is just not very funny.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the harm that a victim of comedic hermeneutical injustice suffers is the harm of not being found funny (along with the denial of some attendant goods, such as having others enjoy being in one's company, that I will consider in the following section). But nobody simply has a right to be found funny even when they lack a talent for comic expression, and it would be a problem if my account ended up declaring (almost) any case in which a speaker tries and fails to comically amuse her audience as a case

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous *Hypatia* reviewer for bringing to my attention the need for such a distinction, and thereby motivating the content of this section.

of wrongful harm. So what is the difference between a scenario in which Agent *A* tells a joke, fails to elicit amusement from the people around her, and is thought to be a dullard as a result of comedic hermeneutical injustice, and one in which Agent *B* goes through the same experience, but is not thereby a victim of any injustice?

Before I offer an answer to this question, let us further blur the lines between the two scenarios by stipulating that the reason *B* doesn't make her audience laugh is because its members lacked some knowledge that was crucial to one's enjoying the joke. *B* made a quip about professional wrestling, let's say, and it was tremendously witty – but to get it, you really needed to know your full nelsons from your overhead wristlocks, and *B*'s audience did not. In contrast, if *B* had dropped a similar line about a comparatively mainstream sport, she would have brought the house down. In such a case, we could certainly say that *B* belongs to a group – wrestling fans – whose experiences are too niche to penetrate the popular consciousness, and we could attribute her lack of success in joke-telling to that nicheness. So how are we to maintain that comedic hermeneutical injustice obtains in some cases, without overstepping the line and saying that anyone who, like *B*, trades in too-obscure reference humor is a victim of it?

We do so by requiring hermeneutical marginalization to be part of the causal story of any case of comedic hermeneutical injustice. This requirement mirrors a distinction that Fricker notes, in *Epistemic Injustice*, between cases that do and do not count as examples of hermeneutical injustice generally. In that text, Fricker offers a handful of cases that are intended to be illustrative of hermeneutical injustice. We have already considered the case of *A Boy's Own Story*, in which the homophobia of the protagonist's surroundings force him to view homosexuality pejoratively, even as he experiences homosexual desire. In that case, he comes to variously identify himself as not gay, or as merely 'going through a phase' on his way to ultimately being straight, or as gay and therefore suffering from a kind of moral sickness. The bigoted view of sexuality that prevails in the time and place of his upbringing create a warped and

confused self-perception, showing the ability of dominant hermeneutical narratives to prevent us from being able to understand even ourselves.

A second case cited by Fricker involves a woman named Wendy Sandford, who suffered from post-natal depression in the 1960s but, thanks in part to a poor societal understanding of women's reproductive health, could not recognize herself as a sufferer of that condition. Sandford only came to think of her experience as one of 'post-natal depression' after attending a feminist consciousness-raising event at MIT. Says Fricker of Sandford's story:

*Here is a story of revelation concerning an experience of female depression, previously ill-understood by the subject herself, because collectively ill-understood. No doubt there is a range of historical-cultural factors that might help explain this particular lack of understanding...but in so far as significant among these explanatory factors is some sort of social unfairness, such as a structural inequality of power between men and women, then Wendy Sanford's moment of truth seems to be not simply a hermeneutical breakthrough for her and for the other women present, but also a moment in which some kind of epistemic injustice is overcome. (2007, p.149)*

One further case found in *Epistemic Injustice* is the harm caused to Carmita Wood by virtue of a lack of a popularly understood term for sexual harassment at a time at which she was a victim of it (pp.149-151). Wood suffers harm that is additional to the harassment when, for example, she seeks unemployment benefits but is unable to properly articulate the experiences that led to her leaving her job. Turning her attention to why Wood suffers from hermeneutical injustice in this case, but her harasser does not, Fricker locates the difference in the fact that the harasser's inability to comprehend the idea of sexual harassment "is not a significant disadvantage to him", while, clearly, it is a significant disadvantage to her (p.151).

What is important to note, for current purposes, is that all three of these cases concern victims of injustice who are made worse off, ultimately, as a result of uneven social power dynamics and marginalization. Each victim can point to unjust social conditions experienced by members of some demographic to which they belong, as part of the causal story of their failure to make themselves understood, either to other people with whom they have an interest in communicating, or to themselves. They are not, then, merely victims of bad luck, whose lived experience just so happens to be inaccessible at the time and place in which they are alive; that inaccessibility is, instead, a consequence of the structural oppression or marginalization of people like them. Fricker contrasts these cases with one in which a person has a medical condition that is poorly understood during her lifetime, and who endures prolonged and intense ill health as a result (p.152). We may have great sympathy for the agent in this example, but, since the harm she suffers is a result of happenstance rather than inequities in the social structures to which she is subject, we cannot properly attribute hermeneutical injustice in this case.<sup>2</sup>

The answer to the question of how to distinguish victims of comedic hermeneutical injustice from the merely unfunny involves an appeal to the same requirement. Comedic hermeneutical injustice piggybacks on what Robin Tapley, in humor ethics-related discussion, refers to as “social disparity” (2005, p.185). A joker whose humorous speech goes unappreciated because her group culture is marginalized or ‘othered’ suffers from it; but one who merely has niche interests, so that her points of reference fail to achieve significant uptake while serving as conditions of her jokes, does not. And, once again, we might feel bad for this second kind of joker: she may play two observations about stamp collecting off against each other very skillfully, and it may be a pity that nobody in earshot could appreciate her wit. We can even believe that the world would be a better place if people generally were more well-versed in the topic

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, we can imagine a scenario in which a person may suffer harms of the sort just described, except that that harm *does* obtain because of the fact that she belongs to a social group whose members tend to lack power and recognition, relative to other, comparable groups. But Fricker’s description of the case in question certainly does not *require* any such detail.



about which she jokes, as when the joke in question is about some edifying philosophical topic; but when one talks about comedic hermeneutical injustice, one is talking about quite a specific type of phenomenon – and it is one that requires uneven power structures as part of the causal explanation for a lack of comic amusement on the part of an agent’s audience.

It is worth emphasizing the need for *hermeneutical* marginalization, specifically, to be present in a case in which comedic hermeneutical injustice obtains. A race or gender of people may face a number of obstructions on the path to comic success, but those obstructions may be the consequences of (e.g.) explicit bigotry, and not the fact that the experiences of their members are poorly represented. An East Asian American comedian may not be booked by the promoter of a comedy club, on the basis of a belief on the part of the promoter that Asian entertainers are not marketable. Or she may be heckled or ignored by a hateful crowd who are openly hostile towards her, on the basis of explicit and consciously-held bigotry. In both cases the comedian suffers racial injustice, and the injustice manifests itself (amongst other ways) in an inability to meet with success in the sharing of humor, where a comedian with a different racial identity would succeed. But neither case involves comedic hermeneutical injustice, because each case results from directly discriminatory beliefs and behavior, as opposed to a lack of hermeneutical resources on the part of the marginalized group in question.

## **VI: The Seriousness of Comedic Hermeneutical Injustice**

I am now left with the second point to prove in order to demonstrate that comedic hermeneutical injustice is a genuine form of epistemic injustice: that being less able to share humor successfully amounts to suffering from a genuine and substantial disadvantage. How harmful is it to experience a comedic credibility deficit?

There is a case to be made for the idea that the typical agent who suffers from a comedic credibility deficit endures something less distressing than the typical agent who suffers a credibility deficit in her capacity as a knower. This is because, for example, one's perceived competence as a knower may strike us as a trait more closely linked to career progression, at least in most professions, than humorousness. Likewise, it is probably more unusual to hear someone's friend or partner describe them as stupid than as unamusing. For current purposes, I do not need – nor do I intend – to argue that the median comedic credibility deficit is as harmful (or more so) than its counterpart for non-comedic credibility deficits.

I do hold, however, that comedic credibility deficits are not trivial. Even if it is not as closely linked to our respect for others as knowledge, humor is still one of the means by which we judge our compatibility with other people: think, for example, of the propensity for profiles on dating websites to list a 'good sense of humor' as a major desirable trait in a romantic or sexual partner; or of the high proportion of people who *would* list being funny amongst their friends or partners' positive qualities. Think, also, of how successful use of humor correlates with our perceptions of figures in the public eye as likeable and trustworthy; and, conversely, how a perceived lack of sensitivity to comedy can make one appear out-of-touch or lacking in character. Evidence of this can be seen in the way that Barack Obama was praised, during his time as U.S. President, for using humor to deliver political messages to a wide and general audience; and, in the UK, in the way former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was criticized by political analysts for coming across as humorless (Heil 2016; Sinclair 2015). Analyses of politicians' credentials as comedic orators are common because humor is an important factor in how we relate to, and identify with, other people, and how effectively they can communicate their ideas with us. The fact that politicians are liable to be criticized for lacking a sense of humor indicates that the ability to tell and appreciate jokes is seen as an indicator of one's competence in other important areas of life. An agent who receives a low comedic credibility rating will, therefore, be judged to be lacking across a range of attributes that are valued socially.

However, even if it wasn't the case that being perceived as unfunny can bleed into other negative assessments of one's character – such as that one is untrustworthy, boring or unintelligent – it would still be a damaging perception on its own. Given the value that most of us place on interacting with other people who can make us laugh, most situations in which developing positive relationships with those around us is in our interests will be situations in which it is good for us to come across as funny. In some cases being liked by others is an instrumental good, such as when acquaintances are in a position to facilitate progression in our career; but developing positive relationships with others is a good in itself, which is conducive to leading a flourishing life. And finally, at the most basic level, it is simply a nice thing to be thought of as funny. It is pleasant to make people laugh, and it's pleasant to have a reputation for making people laugh. Not experiencing that pleasure is, on its own, hardly a disaster, but it is nevertheless a disadvantage in its own right.

It is also worth noting, not as an additional example of the benefits accrued from amusing others comically and being thought of as funny, but as a consideration which emphasizes the sheer range of situations to which the benefits mentioned in this section apply, just how prevalent comedy is in our everyday interactions with one another. As Hurley et al. (2011, p.1) note, humans are inclined to attempt to amuse each other comically “whenever possible”. Humor is almost ubiquitous where people communicate with one another: polite morning small talk between co-workers often hangs upon some mildly amusing disclosure; businesses advertise their wares with funny quips or one-liners; and entertainment of all forms – comedic or otherwise – will frequently employ a character or plot point for the purposes of ‘comic relief’. If we are asked whether an acquaintance is funny or not, we are rarely unable to answer due to a lack of data: if we know a person, we almost always have some experience of her attempts at humor, and, accordingly, can offer some assessment of her comic acumen. Very little human interaction takes place without some jokes or funny stories being shared. So putting aside, for a moment, the question of how intensely hermeneutically marginalized individuals are disadvantaged in

the arena of comic discourse, we can safely say that, given the prevalence of such discourse, they are disadvantaged *frequently*, and *across a wide range of interactions*.

### **VII: A Unique Feature of Comedic Hermeneutical Injustice Amongst Forms of Hermeneutical Injustice**

So we have good all-things-considered reasons to believe that comedic hermeneutical injustice takes place, and that it can constitute a significant harm to those who suffer it. Further to this, though, there is one sense in which the stakes are actually *higher*, in cases of hermeneutical injustice regarding humorous speech, than in cases of hermeneutical injustice regarding non-humorous speech. That sense is this: in the case of humorous speech, misunderstandings that are based upon a lack of shared hermeneutical resources cannot fully be put right. To see why this is, consider the following: when I make a sincere proposition which makes reference to some fact or feature of my experience that you are unaware of, it is open to me simply to explain what it is that you fail to understand. Then, once I have shared the relevant information, you will be in a position to assent to the claim that you previously could not assent to (provided that I am correct, or at least convincing, in my claim). For example, imagine that you tell me that a friend of yours is a big New York City FC fan, and in response I say “Ah, she’ll be happy after this weekend, then”. If you do not understand what I’m getting at by making this statement, it is entirely open to me to tell you that New York City FC defeated their rivals, the New York Red Bulls, in a hard-fought match on Saturday. Having been given this information, you can then fully understand and agree with me: “Oh, yes, I imagine she’ll be delighted.” My proposition was previously unsuccessful – you were not in a position to accept what I was saying as true – but now it is entirely successful – you have everything you need to accept what I was saying as true. And accepting what I am saying as true is the full requirement for the success of my speech.

By way of contrast, consider a similar situation in which I say something (that is intended to be) humorous, instead. So, perhaps you tell me that your friend is a New York City FC fan, and I say: “Sorry, a ‘fan’? Do you mean a low-level investor in the exciting fiscal opportunities that come with sporting success in the upwardly-mobile Northeastern soccer market?” Let’s suppose that this zinger goes over your head, and you do not understand what I am getting at. Certainly, it is open to me to explain what it is that, had you known it previously, you would laugh at my joke (granting – and please bear with me here – that in such a situation you would have found it funny at all): that New York City FC are a recently-incorporated soccer team that sprang up out of a perceived business opportunity rather than coming about ‘organically’ through accumulated amateur success; that the team’s press releases tend to refer to business models more than on-pitch tactics; and that this way of conducting itself has caused some resentment amongst fans of other teams in the United States and around the world. Now you are in a position to fully understand what my joke was about; what facts about the world it made reference to. But, *because you did not understand it at the first opportunity*, my joke will not be able to meet with success in the way that I had initially hoped. It will not be as funny as it would otherwise have been, but for the fact that I had to explain it. Explanation is, other things being equal, the death of comedy.

For this reason, a lack of shared reference points can rob me, when I speak humorously, of something I can never get back: the opportunity to have a joke land and be fully appreciated by my audience. In this limited sense, hermeneutical injustice poses a bigger threat to those who wish to be understood in the pursuit of comic amusement than to those who wish to be understood in the pursuit of sincere agreement. This disparity will not always actually come to pass, of course, since it will not always be possible for someone who is misunderstood due to hermeneutical injustice to explain themselves and be understood at a later date anyway. When I do not understand a claim you make, it is not always the case that you can then clarify what you mean and have me understand you perfectly. Perhaps I am willfully ignorant of what you mean, or perhaps I don’t care to invest much effort in understanding you. Perhaps it is dangerous for

you to tell me that I have not properly understood you. Perhaps our experiences of the world are so alien to one another that it will never be possible for me to understand what you are saying, or only possible after an amount of explanation, on your part, that is prohibitively onerous.<sup>3</sup> So I am certainly not claiming that, in actual cases, it is always worse to be misunderstood as a result of hermeneutical injustice when one is being humorous than when one is not. Instead, I am pointing out just one way in which hermeneutical injustice poses a greater risk to us when we joke: the sense that we cannot, even in principle, fully recover jokes once they have failed to be understood due to confusion arising from unequally shared hermeneutical resources, while we can, at least on many occasions, recover non-humorous speech from that state.

### **VIII: Other Ways in Which Humor Can Interact with Social Injustice**

Of course, the relationship between humor and social-ethical issues is not exhausted by the existence of comedic hermeneutical injustice. Humor can also be a tool both for perpetuating, and for overcoming, the unequal distribution of hermeneutical resources. In some cases it can be difficult to bring attention to the ways in which social dynamics privilege some parties in the information economy, while disadvantaging others, with a straight face, but theorists have long noted that humorous modes of communication allow us to 'get away with' speaking important truths that we otherwise could not (Benatar 2014, p.34; Willett and Willett 2019, pp.39-40). Comedy can give voice to under-acknowledged perspectives, and – thanks to its role as a participatory form, where audiences are invited 'on a journey' with performers, and amusement is linked to some shared experience or understanding – it can make a

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, this is really why this kind of hermeneutical injustice is a significant form of injustice at all: if every time hermeneutical injustice caused one to be misunderstood one could simply inform one's interlocutor of what she was missing, it would be unlikely to constitute a serious setback to anyone's interests.

skeptical audience sympathize with a poorly-understood joker. Using the kind of comedy Rebecca Krefting has referred to as “charged humor” (2014, p.2) – humor that challenges inequality – jokers can force their audiences to reckon with strata of social privilege they would otherwise ignore.

Reginald D. Hunter is a black American stand-up comedian who is based in the United Kingdom, and whose comedy focuses on, amongst other things, his experiences as a black person in Britain and his relationship with the British white majority. A recurring theme in his televised stand-up performances, and in his frequent appearances on the comedy panel shows that are popular in the country, is the patronizing tone adopted by white Britons in their interactions with him. He relays anecdotes of pretending to be unfamiliar with popular cultural artifacts, because ‘white people get so excited when they think they’re telling you something you don’t know’. Asked by white comic Bill Bailey if a certain idiom ‘is racist’, he pointedly draws attention to the idea that he may be called upon to be the arbiter of racial issues for the rest of the panelists (later ‘asking himself’ if something he says about white people is racist or not). One can imagine that these ideas might not be appreciated by a white British audience, and that Hunter might not be such a popular figure in British pop culture, if they were delivered in the form of stern lectures. In relaying his thoughts and experiences in well-crafted comic monologues, however, Hunter gets his audience to laugh at the way he is treated in the country in which he lives, and, in so doing, to see that the particular type of ‘othering’ experienced by black Americans in the United Kingdom is a ridiculous phenomenon.

But comedy can counter hermeneutical injustice without being ‘charged’, in the sense of being intended to critique marginalization explicitly. As we have seen, much of the force of comedic hermeneutical injustice rests upon the relative obscurity of marginalized peoples’ accounts of the world, and humorous speech can itself undercut this obscurity when it is issued by marginalized speakers. As Chris Kramer (2020b, p.28) notes, hearing others speak humorously or playfully will often “render concrete [their] lived experience” to us. This is certainly true of the work of Joe Wong, a comedian who

has spent alternate periods of his career in New York and Beijing. Wong's routines in China frequently focus on his experiences of living in the United States, with a countervailing emphasis in his American performances. He is thereby well-placed to exploit the differences between the two countries for comic effect – but also to introduce his audiences in either location to sets of cultural expectations they might not otherwise be familiar with. Wong has felt the process get easier as people familiar with his work begin to understand more about where he is coming from. Reflecting on the process of turning his experiences into comedy, Wong reports: “[Previously] I just felt like whatever I’ve gone through was understood by so few people, because there are very few people who do stand-up comedy in America, and then do it again in China. I came to China and I was like, ‘Oh, this is a bad decision – why do I put myself through this?’ But I see the value of going between the US and China now, just because there’s so little real communication. And I think that comedians are the best people to introduce one culture to another” (Dzidzovic and Zhou 2018).

Equally, though, it is easy to imagine instances of comedy that might act in opposition to efforts to raise consciousness and reduce imbalances in hermeneutical contribution. Let us return to Carmita Wood's experience of hermeneutical injustice, and note that what she and others were initially unable to adequately articulate was a campaign of harassment from an influential colleague, who, amongst other forms of abuse, would “jiggle his crotch when he stood near her desk and looked at his mail, or...deliberately brush against her breasts while reaching for some papers” (Brownmiller 1999, p.523). Compare this to the 2004 comedy film *Anchorman*, in which the character of Veronica Corningstone, played by Christina Applegate, is the victim of serial sexual harassment from her colleagues at the network news channel she has recently joined – including a scene in which another character brushes against her breasts as he reaches for some office equipment. The film – set, but not created, in the same decade as Wood's ordeal – does not portray Corningstone's abusers as paragons of virtue, but it certainly plays their harassment for laughs. Their groping and catcalling is presented as if it is an amusing quirk of



Corningstone's experience at her new job. And one can see how jokes and comedy might, through a process that involves comic scenes like these, render a concept such as sexual harassment, whose seriousness in the popular imagination is hard-won, incoherent or ignorable once again. It is possible that repeated comic trivialization could repopularize the idea that unwanted sexual advances in the workplace are merely 'a bit of a laugh'.

Evidence from psychological and sociological analyses add weight to these fears. In her article 'Not A Laughing Matter', Beth Montemurro reflects on Catharine Mackinnon's condemnation, decades earlier, of popular fiction that downplayed the seriousness of male characters' lecherous overtures towards their female friends and colleagues (Montemurro 2003, p.433). Mackinnon had found that "[t]rivialization of sexual harassment has been a major means through which its invisibility has been enforced," and that "humor...has been a major form of that trivialization" (Mackinnon 1979, p.52; cited in Montemurro 2003, p.433). Montemurro believes that humor still plays that role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with network sitcoms primarily presenting gender and sexual harassment as if it is a minor office nuisance, or failing to recognize it as a notable occurrence at all (p.443).

Elsewhere, the ability of movies, television and print media to affect audiences' willingness to tolerate sexual harassment of women is explored in Eileen Zurbriggen's report of the American Psychological Association's taskforce on the sexualization of girls (2007), and summarized in Susan J. Douglas' *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism* (2010, p.406). Zurbriggen, in surveying a number of studies concerning the link between sexist attitudes and sexualized media (including, but not limited to, situation comedies on television), concludes that the body of research overall "suggest[s] that boys exposed to sexualiz[ed] portrayals of girls may be more likely to commit sexual harassment," and that "women and men exposed to sexually objectifying images of women from mainstream media...were found to be significantly more accepting of rape myths, sexual harassment, sex role stereotypes, interpersonal violence, and adversarial sexual beliefs about relationships" (p.33). The report's findings do not offer

empirical evidence specifically about the possibility of harassment jokes rendering sexual harassment newly unintelligible as a form of abuse, but, in demonstrating that media can influence agents' attitudes towards gendered violence, it certainly shows that Montemurro and Mackinnon's predictions are in keeping with real-life observations.

So humor is a tool that can both uncover and obscure the hermeneutical resources necessary to undo social and epistemic injustice. The fact that humorous speech can act in either direction highlights the imperative for jokers to be conscious of what their jokes *say* about the world. It exemplifies a point made by Cynthia and Julie Willett (2019, p.12), and, elsewhere, by Kramer (2020a), that comic speakers who touch upon stereotypes or pejorative beliefs about marginalized groups should take care to ensure that they are really *subverting* these ideas, undermining them by drawing attention to the fact that they are ludicrous, rather than restating or, worse, endorsing them.

Now, since this article is not an overview of the many ways in which humorous speech can interact with social-ethical issues, I will leave this section gestural. I do not intend, here, to entirely summarize the role humor may play in spreading prejudice, or, conversely, how a person might ensure that their comic output always 'punches up' against targets that deserve ridicule. Instead, I am merely acknowledging that jokes have a complicated and multi-faceted relationship with epistemic injustice, and that comedic hermeneutical injustice represents only one aspect of this dynamic. But I also intend for the examples of this section to stand as further evidence against the claim, made frequently in everyday discussion and occasionally in academic writing (Davies 1998, p.6; 2011, p.266; Morreall 2009 also entertains this idea, without ultimately endorsing it), that comedy is an intrinsically frivolous mode of communication, and that, accordingly, ethical concerns about joke-telling are always misplaced. While it is true that humor is non-serious in its tone, and usually in its content, this gives us no reason not to take it seriously as a social phenomenon. The consequences of humor, and the factors that influence comic amusement, are

decidedly non-trivial – and they deserve the kind of serious academic consideration that recognizes this fact.

### **IX: Comedic Hermeneutical Injustice as a Substantial Aspect of Epistemic Injustice**

We have seen, then, that unequally distributed hermeneutical resources within a society will help to determine which members of society can successfully partake in the sharing of humor. We have also seen that this is a significant enough form of inequality to amount to an injustice. The conditionality of many forms of humorous interaction means that those whose life experiences tend to be well-understood by a general audience will have a greater spectrum of references on which to base broadly popular observations and jokes; and this will have a knock-on effect on who gets to be considered talented or virtuous when it comes to sharing humor. This is significant, because humor is both an enjoyable pursuit in its own right, and a social tool that can be used to gain advantages in other aspects of one's life. Comedic hermeneutical injustice is unusual among forms of hermeneutical injustice, given that it requires an imbalance between the knowledge and uptake of the victim of injustice and her audience, and because humor is typically not recoverable after the required uptake does not obtain in the first instance. It also sits within a larger context of humor's relationship with matters of social justice, in which it can be seen that comedy can act as an input, as well as an output, of hermeneutical inequality. In sum, a detriment in the arena of humor-sharing is among the disadvantages experienced by hermeneutically marginalized persons, and, given the prevalence of humor in popular culture and interpersonal communication, it should be reckoned with as a substantial aspect of epistemic injustice.

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