

# Humor and Disobedience: Understanding Controversial Humor

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## Abstract

In this article, I analyze controversial humor and argue that the concept of disobedience is of central importance when evaluating, for instance, harsh or potentially hurtful jokes. Following social critic Erich Fromm (1900–1980) I claim that disobedience is a dialectic concept: that is, it includes the possibilities both to affirm and to reject. This observation connects humor to other values, and pivotal is how humor is related to the question of what it means to be a human being. Through this insight, I argue that controversial humor may shock and be offensive, or it can be amusing and even have a cathartic effect. In the end, in evaluating humor it is necessary to analyze the values behind humor, that is, what humor obeys and what it disobeys.

## Introduction

*Chaud Ananas*

*Quenelle*

*Je suis Charlie Coulibaly*

The three humorous<sup>1</sup> but controversial phrases above were invented by French comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala who has been accused of anti-Semitism, among other things. The first phrase, *Chaud Ananas*, is pronounced “shoahnanas”, which refers to the Hebrew word “shoah”, meaning “apocalypse”. In France, the word is used to describe the Jewish holocaust. To test the limits of freedom of speech, M'bala M'bala is known to end his shows with a signature song about pineapples; in this, he makes fun of the Jewish tragedy. The *Quenelle* gesture, on the other hand, is a certain kind of reversed Nazi salute which is spreading in social media. “*Je suis Charlie Coulibaly*” refers to the tragedy of Charlie Hebdo with a murky twist: the name of a terrorist who killed four Jewish people in an attack on a

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<sup>1</sup> I do not claim that M'bala M'bala's ideas are examples of “good humor” (whatever that means) – just that they could be and have been considered humorous.

Kosher store was Amedy Coulibaly. With this “Je suis” statement, the comedian apparently mocks the way people were demonstrating for the freedom of speech after the terrorist attack. Because of the controversial style of his humor, Dieudonné M’bala M’bala’s shows have been cancelled and banned in numerous cities around France.<sup>2</sup>

M’bala M’bala has been convicted in court repeatedly as his humor has been seen as demeaning and anti-Semitic. The comedian himself claims that he mocks the hypocrisy of the French, who do not dare to handle their own colonial history nor the war in Algeria whilst denouncing events and issues occurring elsewhere. M’bala M’bala claims that there are restrictions against the freedom of speech in France, and that his humor is aimed at demonstrating this.

The previous paragraphs raise the question: are there boundaries to humor? Apparently, in a legal setting there are.<sup>3</sup> But then, there is also a general tendency to claim that humor should not be restricted, and that we must be able and free to joke about anything. In this paper, I focus on analyzing the tension between these two poles, and I will offer a novel viewpoint from which to understand the present conflict. To do so, I examine Erich Fromm’s insights about disobedience, and develop them in relation to humor.<sup>4</sup> To understand the cultural phenomenon of controversial humor, I apply philosophical ideas—both historical and recent—to contemporary examples of humor.<sup>5</sup> Previously it has been claimed that one cannot laugh at, say, a racist joke if one is not a racist him- or herself (de Sousa 1987). This view is implausible, as Aaron Smuts (2010) has noted, and he suggests that in the field of ethics of humor one should leave the character examination aside, and focus solely on the consequences of humor. This solution is, however, not satisfying either. As Simon Weaver (2011, 190) points out, it is extremely

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I use British (The Guardian 2015), American (The New York Times 2014; 2015), and Finnish news sources (Helsingin Sanomat 2015; Nyt 2015) to discuss M’bala M’bala’s way of conducting humor.

<sup>3</sup> Many countries have, for instance, laws against blasphemy. However, for the sake of brevity, I will not discuss the legal details about humor.

<sup>4</sup> In *political philosophy*, civil disobedience has been a heated topic recently. However, I handle disobedience as a more general concept from a *social philosophical* perspective. Thus, I do not treat humor, for instance, as a consistent thought strategy against oppression, as, for instance, Majken Jul Sorensen (2008) does. In my analysis, humor is not necessarily a tool for something but, instead, a deeper attitude, a part of character structure.

<sup>5</sup> The examples used in this paper are from Western countries, such as, France, England, Finland, and the United States.

hard to predict and calculate the consequences of humor as a racist joke can produce both racist and non-racist meaning simultaneously. To develop from the previous positions, I argue that if one tries to understand the social and cultural significance of controversial humor, it is necessary to examine the underlying motives of the joker, as well as the values shared by the audience. Simply put, to understand controversial humor it is necessary to understand the social context of this kind of humor. In this article, I offer a theoretical framework to understand humor in the light of Fromm's social critical thinking, and especially in relation to his way of using the concept of disobedience. This is a novel approach, as Fromm's ideas have been basically non-existent among humor research, and on the other hand, the philosophy of humor has not been studied among other Fromm theorists than myself. In addition, in this paper I offer a new constellation of theoretical analysis of humor discussing both classic and contemporary philosophers as well as modern humorists. In this, I respect the Frankfurt School's critical theory and its guiding idea to use philosophical concepts to understand cultural phenomena.

I understand the concept of humor in the lines of incongruity theory, that is, there is a conflict of cultural categorizations at the heart of humor. However, in this paper I will not offer any kind of totalizing theory of humor; it seems a rather hopeless effort to find out a single reason why something is funny. In my reading, the concept of humor is in a sense dynamic, as humor is always bound to concrete contexts. Thus, what is considered to be funny in one historical moment can be, say, tragic or incomprehensible in another. This theoretical position helps to understand why funniness is perceived differently between certain social groups; in a certain social setting a particular joke can be tremendously funny, and for others the very same joke can be just low-minded and not funny at all. This means that the incongruity of humor has to be recognizable and understandable, and the possibility of "getting" a joke is deeply rooted in the cultural context and how language is used within it. For instance, a joke about philosophical concepts can be utter nonsense to people who are not familiar with those concepts.

It should also be noted that if something is labeled as "a joke", it does not mean that this joke could not have any morally significant consequences. To claim that one is "only joking" does not free the joker from moral responsibilities. It is possible that a seemingly innocent joke can be demeaning and racist. I want to stress that this paper is not intended to promote nor to give excuses for, say, distributing anti-Semitic attitudes via

humor. Nevertheless, I am interested in how, for instance, superficially racist humor can be humane and life-affirmative on a deeper level. The rich tradition of Jewish jokes is full of illustrations of this kind of warm and thought-provoking humor, even though they often handle historical horrors like the Holocaust.

First, 1) I will discuss the question of restricting humor. Then, 2) I present an alternative way to understand the question of restricting humor in the light of the concept of disobedience, focusing on how Fromm uses it. The theme of disobedience is then 3) linked to the question of controversial humor and its cultural significance. After that, 4) I discuss how to understand underlying meanings behind offensive joking. Finally, 5) I summarize the article by offering a point of view on how to make distinctions between different kinds of aggressive humor; and how to estimate and evaluate, for instance, M'bala M'bala's humor.

### **1. Should Humor Be Restricted?**

The question about the limits of humor is age-old. Plato claims that in his ideal state there would be laws to restrict humor, and, for example, poets should not have an unlimited freedom to mock people: “A composer of a comedy or of any iambic or lyric song shall be strictly forbidden to ridicule any of the citizens either by word or by mimicry” (Plato, *Laws* 935e). This restriction is connected to the idea that laughter threatens to loosen one's rational self-control (Plato, *Republic* 388e). Epictetus has a similar idea, and claims that one should not laugh much nor thoughtlessly, and that it is important to restrict oneself from triggering laughter in others (Epictetus, *Handbook*, ch. 33), because laughter does not further self-control nor peace of mind. On the other hand, Aristotle sees laughter in an affirmative light, and claims that it has an important role in social life. However, not just any kind of humor is positive, and he calls for socially virtuous humor. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.8., 1128a4—13.) These three philosophers share a critical idea: laughter is not always a positive factor in human life, and they all ask what can be found behind laughter and to where humor leads. Generally, they question the value of humor and laughter.

In modern discussion, however, the basic tone appears to be relatively different. There is a strong opinion among humor theorists, comedians, and a wide group of laymen that humor is good in itself and it should not be restricted (see e.g. Winston 2012, Hall & Branigan 2004); a recent example of this is present in the aftermath of the tragedy of Charlie Hebdo (see Klug

2015).<sup>6</sup> Defenders of humor claim that humor is a high manifestation of freedom of speech, and this freedom should not be limited by any means; thus, humor has to be uncurtailed. Other typical arguments claim that humor is good for your health although the clinical data has not been able to confirm this (see Martin 2008).

As we can see, there is a cultural contradiction between the pronounced ideal of unrestricted mockery and what M'bala M'bala has done in his comic acts. Wide groups of people defend Charlie Hebdo but similarly wide groups decry M'bala M'bala's way of doing humor. If the principle of unrestricted freedom of speech<sup>7</sup> is taken as a grounding premise, it is hard to condemn a comedian who mocks the victims of a terrorist attack. However, there are valid arguments criticizing this kind of humor.<sup>8</sup> To understand, and possibly to solve, the described tension, one has to analyze the nature of humor and its cultural role and significance in a society.

According to the incongruity theory of humor, humor plays with conflicts between cultural categorizations (for a detailed analysis of incongruity theory, see Hurley & al. 2011, 45—53). As a number of philosophers (e.g. Schopenhauer 1910, Kant 1790, Hutcheson 1750) emphasize, humor is based on paradoxes. The clearest formulation is postulated by Søren Kierkegaard: “the comic always lies in a contradiction” (Kierkegaard 1846, 296). The general idea is that humor challenges and breaks what is considered normal. For instance, take typical examples of humorous simile, such as “that man works like a machine,” or “that dog is sitting at the table just like a person!” In these examples, the shared normality of the everyday life is broken in some way.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The terrorist attack in Paris in January 2015 was widely considered as an attack against the freedom of speech, and the murdered cartoonists as champions of free speech. I have analyzed in detail the problematic aspects of these notions elsewhere (Hietalahti & al. 2016), so I will not put the tragedy of Charlie Hebdo under close scrutiny in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> One of the central problems lies in the conceptualization of free speech, which is so often seen as a *negative freedom* (freedom from). That is a naïve way to understand freedom, and we should widen, as Erich Fromm (1941) suggests, the concept of freedom with the notion of *positive freedom* (freedom to).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, as Brian Klug (2015) has noted, the universal declaration of human rights is based on the idea of respecting the other, and not to guarantee everyone a chance to mock everything as they will.

<sup>9</sup> The very roots of humor are said to have arisen in violating norms; comedy was apparently born alongside with worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and ritual madness. In his ritual worshipping, rules were twisted and broken, and accompanied with laughter. (Alho 1988)

The general idea of humor becomes relatively clear: breaking boundaries is fun, and this tendency has been present in cultural ways of living for millennia. For instance, Saint Augustine discusses in his *Confessions* the mirth in breaking others' expectations and the shared morality. Augustine recollects how he, as a young boy, stole piles of pears with a group of youngsters but not to eat the fruits. Instead, they threw the loot away: "It was foul, and I loved it; I loved to perish, I loved mine own fault, not that which I was faulty, but my fault itself. (...) It was the sport, which as it were, tickled our hearts, that we beguiled, those who little thought what we were doing, and much disliked it." (Augustine, *Confessions*, 2.9—16.)

Even though Augustine does not use the term "humor", his and his friends' mischief was clearly funny at least for themselves. There is "tickling of hearts" present, and it can be interpreted that the occasion was humorous for the kids because there was an incongruity between social expectations and their actions. To a certain extent, a similar trait of violating shared morality in the name of humor is present in a number of modern comedies. For example, one of the guiding ideas of the animated comedy series *South Park* (1997-) is that it *laughs at everything*. *South Park* can be labeled as black humor as it aims to break every existing boundary; nothing is too sacred for *South Park* to ridicule. Not too surprisingly, *South Park's* controversial humor has encountered opposition: for instance, the association *Action for Children's Television* has accused *South Park* of being dangerous to democracy (see Fagin 2000).

On a theoretical level, black humor can be located between funny and terrible, or scary; it is a mixture of horror and laughter. In black humor, moral and social values are distorted and safe norms questioned. Black humor reminds us that all commitments are eventually meaningless – and it does not offer any answers nor demand that anyone share its own position (see Winston 1972, 273—274). As black humor is directed against social norms, it is typically socially critical humor. Socially critical black humor, then, questions the sanity of the current world and our commitments in and to it. As James Nagel formulates, the social implication of black humor "is to call into question the prevailing ethical structure of the society" (Nagel 1974, 51).

There are both academics and comedians who believe that challenging the limits of morality is an essential aspect of humor (see e.g. Gray & al 2009, Smith 2005), and it has been claimed that all humor is at bottom black (see O'Neill 1983, 79—80). However, I claim this tendency cannot be the only nor the leading principle of humor. Following the incongruity theory, humor

has to be based on something: the perceived oddity has to be compared to something that is considered normal. Humor, then, is about comparison, and for this reason, humor – by definition – needs boundaries; an object of humor needs a contrast, something that is taken seriously. Therefore, the common claim that we must be able to laugh at everything everywhere at all times is implausible: or at least, it needs clarification. Next, I will clarify the social philosophical importance of the conceptual basis of humor in relation to the concept of disobedience.

### 2. Humor and Disobedience

In the previous pages I have demonstrated how humor can be *disobedient*<sup>10</sup> towards, say, cultural mores or shared morality. To put it another way, humor does not *obey* the normal social codes. Erich Fromm states that disobedience is a dialectic concept, which means that disobedience includes the possibility of obeying. Thus, disobedience is an act of resisting something but at the same moment and in the same act standing up for something else. In Fromm's humanistic framework, disobedience

is an act of affirmation of reason and will. It is not primarily an attitude directed *against* something, but *for* something: for man's capacity to see, to say what he sees, and to refuse to say what he does not see. To do so he does not need to be aggressive or rebellious; he needs to have his eyes open, to be fully awake, and willing to take the responsibility to open the eyes of those who are in danger of perishing because they are half asleep. (Fromm 1981, 48.)<sup>11</sup>

Fromm's idea of disobedience includes both the capability to affirm and to reject, and a disobedient individual is someone who "can say 'no' because he

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that in some contexts disobedience refers to a conscious action between two individuals. For instance, Stanley Milgram (for the purposes of his electric shock experience) defines the act of obeying and disobeying as follows: "If Y follows the command of X we shall say that he has obeyed X; if he fails to carry out the command of X, we shall say that he has disobeyed X." (Milgram 1965, 58.) However, in this article, I follow Fromm's definition of disobedience. It is possible, for example, to obey or disobey certain socially shared general rules, ideas and expectations, so, the obeyed or disobeyed command does not need to come from a certain individual.

<sup>11</sup> Rebellious, Fromm claims, is resistance without any conviction. It is "as blind as its opposite, the conformist obedience which is incapable of saying 'no'." (Fromm 1981, 46.)

can affirm, who can disobey precisely because he can obey his conscience and the principles which he has chosen.” (Fromm 1981, 46.) Here, Fromm links disobedience closely to value systems. In relation to humor, the central questions are, then, which social aspects certain humorists disobey, and what kinds of values they stand for (if any). Fromm emphasizes that often there are motives which may not be clear to the agent himself: “a person, even if he is subjectively sincere, may frequently be driven unconsciously by a motive that is different from the one he believes himself to be driven; that he may use one concept which logically implies a certain meaning and which to him, unconsciously, means something different” (Fromm 1941, 66—67.) The central idea is that different kinds of rationalizations should not necessarily be taken at face value; a humorist may well say that he is defending some high value, such as free speech, but his deeper motivation may be something different.

The idea about underlying motives also works the other way round: if a humorist shares an offensive or controversial joke, he may pursue some other goals than, for example, oppressing certain minorities via shaming and ridiculing. This notion leads to the observation that it is hard to categorize a singular joke to be, say, racist or sexist. However, this technical handicap does not prevent us from interpreting and understanding humor. As referred to in the beginning of this article, Dieudonné M’bala M’bala sings about pineapples, and if perceived just on the simplest technical level, it is relatively silly to condemn someone because he mentions fruits in his music; it is utterly pointless to demand that one should not joke about pineapples. However, it is possible to analyze what pineapples symbolize in certain contexts and the message behind the peel of the fruit. So, we have to be able to analyze the message of the joker, and also be critical towards the possible, for instance, anti-Semitic attitudes behind the jokes. As Fromm remarks, it is hard to evaluate whether the given explanation is a mere rationalization or a profound conviction “by determining the logicity of a person’s statement as such, but we also must take into account the psychological motivations operating in a person. The decisive point is not *what* is thought but *how* it is thought.” (Fromm 1941, 193.) This suggests that even though a humorist could give a logical explanation for his controversial joke (for instance, improving health via laughter), it does not guarantee that he actually aims to promote some universal good. Instead, there can be dismal motives behind the rationalization.

Fromm adds: “However unreasonable or immoral an action may be, man has an insuperable urge to rationalize it, that is, to prove to himself and to others that his action is determined by intelligence, common sense, or at least conventional morality.” (Fromm 1981, 11—12.) So, even though a humorist may personally believe that his humor is good and it offers some kind of redemption from social shackles, humor has to be evaluated from a wider perspective. For example, ridiculing the Jewish genocide is not the best way to develop or further current society. Thus, it is necessary to ponder the ideas and values on which humor is built. If there is hatred towards the other beyond jokes and laughter, or if fun springs from selfishness and is based on a wish to oppress certain minorities, it is possible to claim that this kind of humor is not as revolutionary as advertised. Offensive humor is often said to be critical and *liberating* (see Martin 1998, 41; Mindess 2011, 67—70); however, the claimed liberation needs to be taken under critical scrutiny – liberation from what? As Fromm points out: “we are fascinated by the growth of freedom from powers *outside* ourselves and are blinded to the fact of *inner* restraints, compulsions, and fears, which tend to undermine the meaning of the victories freedom has won against its traditional enemies.” (Fromm 1941, 105). Fromm links the idea of freedom to other human values, and from that combination it should be asked: What are the basic values from which the critical humor stems? What does it advocate? How does it treat humanity in general? What are the goals of humor?

Obviously, the previous questions are not easy to answer, and one cannot conclude from the mere words of a singular joke if it is “good” or “bad”. Humor is a dynamic phenomenon, and one humorous act can mean different things in different contexts. This does not mean, however, that one could not make any kind of analysis of contemporary humor. Instead, we need a deeper understanding of humor; and this understanding is closely related, at least in a Frommian framework, to the question of what it means to be a human being.

There have been some attempts to formulate certain moral principles of humor. For instance, Emily Toth has formulated the first rule of humane humor according to which one should never “make fun of what people cannot change, such as social handicaps, race, sex, or physical appearance” (Toth 1981, 783). These kinds of claims aim, generally, to good. It is possible to carry on this line formulating other rules, like, “Joke about your own gender or ethnic group, but no other”, or, “do not mock other’s sufferings”, or, “there has to be temporal and psychological distance before making fun of a tragedy”. Marie Collins Swabey (1961, 123—125) has argued that there is

plenty of cruel mockery and offensive joking that is far from funny, and according to her, this type of incongruity fails to be humor. Her basic claim is that humor must not invert values too strongly. Swabey defines incongruity in such a manner that different kinds of vulgarities are not considered to be humor, but instead, they belong under some other concept. However, Swabey confuses personal taste of humor with the general concept of sense of humor, and thus, does not respect the dynamic nature of humor. If an audience guffaws at, say, a controversial joke, it is hard to claim that the joke does not belong under the concept of humor.

Despite the possible ethical attitude behind the above mentioned moral principles of humor, they are problematic as they do not take into account the dynamic aspect of humor. I believe that there can be truly humanistic humor that might offend someone and target certain qualities that are quite unchangeable. Also, the most brilliant humorists are able to handle even “forbidden topics” in a humane manner. I propose that aggressive humor can actually be *cathartic* as it can challenge one to ask why one considered, say, a joke offensive. However, it cannot be concluded that offensive humor is always morally good.

### 3. Shock Value of Humor

Obviously, sometimes the very same humor offends one and amuses another, and as seen above, controversial humor is an ongoing topic in media and academic circles. Also, comedians themselves are eager to offer their opinion on the subject matter. For instance, British comedian John Cleese<sup>12</sup> shares in his autobiography a precept he got from David Attenborough: “Use shock sparingly” (Cleese 2014, 388). This is an interesting claim from a humorist who gave the following eulogy at the funeral of his fellow Monty Python member Graham Chapman:

*Graham Chapman, co-author of the ‘Parrot Sketch,’ is no more. He has ceased to be, bereft of life, he rests in peace, he has kicked the bucket, hopped the twig, bit the dust, snuffed it, breathed his last, and gone to meet the Great Head of Light Entertainment in the sky, and I guess that we’re all thinking how sad it is that a man of such talent, such capability and kindness, of such intelligence should now be so suddenly spirited away at the age of only forty-eight, before he’d*

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<sup>12</sup> Cleese is best known as a member of the comedy troupe Monty Python.

*achieved many of the things of which he was capable, and before he'd had enough fun.*

*Well, I feel that I should say, 'Nonsense. Good riddance to him, the freeloading bastard! I hope he fries.'*

*And the reason I think I should say this is, he would never forgive me if I didn't, if I threw away this opportunity to shock you all on his behalf. Anything for him but mindless good taste. (Cleese 1989.)*

In most funerals, a similar kind of eulogy would be considered vulgar. But, presumably in this occasion, Cleese's words were spot on despite the superficially harsh tone of the words. Cleese himself admits that he wanted to shock the people at the funeral. First of all, he gave a tribute to Chapman, whom he calls "the prince of bad taste", but this was not the only reason. Cleese clarifies: "the thing about shock... is not that it upsets some people, I think; I think that it gives others a momentary joy of liberation, as we realized in that instant that the social rules that constrict our lives so terribly are not actually very important." (Cleese 1989.)

Cleese shares here a critical principle of shocking: it is not about attacking particular people and their beliefs, but instead, it is critical towards certain shared ways of living. Still, Attenborough's guideline, to use shock sparingly, is valid. Humor cannot be just about shocking for the sake of shock. Thus, the important question is, why comedians want to shock and what is the genius of their humor. For instance, Cleese himself never grows tired of joking about religions. Of course, it is easy to mock organized religion, and Cleese admits that, but he also asks: "has it occurred to anyone to wonder *why* it's so easy?" (Cleese 2014, 76.) His answer is clear. Religion should be the most intriguing topic of all, as it discusses central problems of life: what happens after death, whether there is a purpose of living, how to love an enemy when it is as easy as levitating, and so forth. However, when a religion appears to focus on repeating empty chants and odd rituals, it is hard to see any connection between the religion and actual life. (Cleese 2014, 76—77.) Thus, Cleese criticizes the absurdity of official religions and how they are organized as well as ways of uncritical worshipping, but not necessarily the message of certain old religions.<sup>13</sup> In terms of obedience and disobedience,

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<sup>13</sup> Fromm has formulated a very similar criticism, and he claims that modern versions of different religions appear to be only empty shells. Though, he does appreciate the meaning of rituals. For instance, the symbolic aspect of the Sabbath is important for him: "On the Sabbath, man ceases completely to be an animal whose main occupation is to fight for survival and to sustain his

Cleese in his humor evidently disobeys many cultural norms and codes. In the 1960s and 1970s, Monty Python's humor triggered many kinds of backlash, and they were repeatedly targeted and reproached by BBC censors (see Cleese 2014, 388; Chapman & al. 2014, 325—326, 427). However, Cleese (2014, 185) points out that the actual objects of the ridicule are stupidity, greed, vengefulness, and other least flattering sides of humanity.

If humor is designed to rattle the cage of morality and hypocrisy, the apparent question is: for what reason? Can there be a genuine productive element in controversial humor? Can shameful humor be cathartic? I suggest that in some – perhaps rare – occasions the answer is affirmative. St. Augustine touches on the topic in an interesting manner. At one point in his *Confessions*, Augustine mentions how shaming others is always a sin – be it by words or physical acts (Augustine, *Confessione*, 3.8—9). However, he also writes about his friend who was drawn to “madness of the Circus”, and this friend happened to hear one of Augustine's lectures, which was “seasoned with biting mockery of those whom that madness had enthralled”. The friend “took it wholly to himself, and thought that I said it simply for his sake. And whence another would have taken occasion of offence with me, that right-minded youth took as a ground of being offended at himself, and loving me more fervently.” (Augustine, *Confessione*, 6.7—13.) For the purposes of this paper, the previous quotations demonstrate that it is possible to realize something about oneself and one's values as well as one's relationship to others via humor. This suggests that humor can, at least potentially, open our eyes. Thus, even offensive humor may have positive effects, though the actual situations that have this kinds of effect might be rare. Shocking humor may make us think.

#### **4. Reacting to a Controversial Joke**

Roughly put, there are two general stances towards offensive humor: 1) laugh and affirm, or 2) take offense and condemn. The first option is based on the idea that humor should be absolutely free, and we should be free to mock whatever we want to. The other stand claims that one cannot joke about, for

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biological life. On the Sabbath, man is fully man, with no task other than to be human.” (Fromm 1966, 217—218.) Fittingly enough, he defines himself as an atheistic Marxist who tries to do God's work with all his power (Fromm 1967).

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example, rape or infanticide.<sup>14</sup> Both of these positions, I suggest, provide a seed for reflecting upon oneself, humor, and the surrounding society. Thus, there is a possibility to take a step (or several) further from the basic positions.

### A CONTROVERSIAL JOKE



	<b>AFFIRM: BE AMUSED</b>	<b>CONDEMN: TAKE OFFENSE</b>
Step 1: reflection of values	I laugh and <i>laughter is good</i> : my amusement should not be judged.	The joke is offensive, and desecrating others is wrong, so belittling via <i>humor is wrong</i> .
Step 2: beyond own reaction	Realization: Others may be <i>profoundly disturbed and upset</i> via humor.	Observation: <i>Many people laugh</i> at seemingly crude jokes.
Step 3: own reaction in relation to others	Is the shocking justified? <i>Is my fun justified</i> alongside the shock?	Learning through the shock: <i>why does offensive humor shock me and amuse others?</i>



*On what is my reaction based?*

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<sup>14</sup> There is, of course, the possibility that one does not consider humor as a matter worthy of reflecting upon. These persons are either not interested in humor, or not interested in reflecting upon their reactions.

The previous table sheds light on the question of humor and morality. It is not rare to hear that if someone does not laugh at, say, some racist jokes, he or she has a high moral sense but a lousy sense of humor. A very similar idea is already present in Plato's texts (humor is against reason), and in a similar spirit Henri Bergson claims that laughter demands certain kind of anesthesia of heart – that is, in the moment of laughter one cannot be sympathetic to the target of laughter: “Laughter cannot offer empathy or it would not fulfill its function” (Bergson 1913, 197). Ronald de Sousa examines the same idea from another viewpoint, and concludes that one cannot laugh at a racist joke if one is not a racist him- or herself (De Sousa 1987, 239–240). In opposition, my emphasis is on the idea that morality and funniness are not opposites but they intertwine.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is fully possible that, for example, a seemingly demeaning joke can also be funny, and have positive consequences.

Let us take an example. Finnish stand-up comedian Matti Patronen, performing for *Suomen lyhytkasvuiset ry.* (Eng. *The Finnish society for short statured people*)<sup>16</sup>, states in the early parts of his routine:

*The lives of short statured people are full of challenges and problems:  
blah-blah-blah, and blah-blah-blah.*

At one point the comedian asks if any of the members of the audience would not be joining the society's autumn trip to Åland, and urges:

*Raise your hand (if you are not going to Åland). [short pause] Shout  
when you have risen your hand.*

On the simplest level of words, the previous quotations can be considered offensive. On that level, Patronen belittles the challenges of short statured people, and mocks their bodily features. Thus, it is understandable how one might think that these remarks are obscene and not funny at all. On the other

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<sup>15</sup> Socrates touches on the same topic when he argues to his drunken and passed out friends that the genius of tragedy and comedy is from the same root (Plato, Symposium, 223d).

<sup>16</sup> Humor is always bound to the context, and unfortunately I am not able to reconstruct the performance perfectly in a written form. The following analysis is based on the performance as seen on television (Yle: Naurun tasapaino, October 2015). However, in our personal correspondence, Patronen agreed with my interpretation, and stated that he has nothing to add to my analysis.

hand, for a different kind of personality, it might be deeply funny that certain minorities are ridiculed and desecrated because of their bodily features. I believe that these points of view are, however, relatively naïve ways to relate to Patronen's performance, and I propose an alternative way to reflect upon the routine.

First of all, Patronen avoids "attacking dwarfs" as well as "patronizing little people". Instead, he sees them as human beings and as a laughing audience who should not be treated in any different way than others – they are equals. The "blah-blah-blah" comment, I propose, points to the way in which so-called normal people so often react to others who are not considered to be normal. If one categorizes a person on the basis of his or her apparent deformity, one makes a prejudicial judgement (despite whether it is based on, say, pity or hatred). Instead, Patronen shows how *the problems of living are problems of human beings*, and not mainly challenges for someone who is different to what is considered normal. Societies are typically built for people of average height, but mere wailing is not the right answer to this social problem; wailing can easily be condescending. Obviously, Patronen is well aware that there are bodily differences between certain groups of people, as the "raise your hand" remark points out. However, this seemingly mocking notion is not directed against short statured people but, instead, it is a biting remark towards those who believe that some bodily differences actually matter when considering how one should treat other human beings. Through his routine Patronen plays with prejudices and, in essence, his humorous performance reflects the utter silliness of many kinds of prejudices. His humor does not mock short statured people for being of short stature, nor does it fall to any kind of condescending patronization.

To sum up, harsh humor is not necessarily "evil", and even if a humorous performance includes aggressive tones, it is not necessarily against, say, humanistic principles and respect for others. Fromm clarifies this aspect when he remarks in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* that aggression can be both *benign* and *malignant*. Thus, aggression in itself is not always bad nor always good; so, neither is aggressive humor. In Fromm's analysis, the concept of benign aggression includes, among others, certain kinds of pseudo-aggression which can be called playful aggression. Malignant aggression, on the other hand, is cruel and destructive. (See Fromm 1973, 210—213, 300.)

So, even though the aforementioned jokes might be offensive and aggressive, simple aggressiveness does not consign them to being morally

wrong. In relation to humor, it is central to try to understand the principles on which humor is eventually based. Obviously, humor can be used to trample upon humanistic ideals, and it can be a tool for oppressing, for example, minorities (see Speier 1998, Lewis 2006). But then, aggressive humor can fight for humanistic ideals. In these cases, humor can be a means to improve life, and to stand against dehumanizing practices and authorities (see Scott 1985, Gouin 2004). Following Fromm, humor should be understood in relation to the prevailing character matrix, and according to Michael Maccoby (2009, 143) Fromm defines sense of humor as an emotional equivalent for the cognitive sense of reality. These notions are important clues if one is to analyze what can be found beyond jokes and laughter. Curiously, Cleese has made a similar observation. He admits in his autobiography that humor and laughter can be unkind and destructive. Humor and laughter cover all the manifestations of human behavior, from love to hate. He states: "The latter produces nasty racial jokes and savage teasing; the former, warm and affectionate banter, and the kind of inclusive humour that says, 'Isn't the human condition absurd, but we're all in the same boat.'" (Cleese 2014, 104.) Cleese emphasizes that it is a delight if humor is absurd, but awfully dreadful if the reality and the whole way of living appear to be insane. The same concern is present in Fromm's works: he points out how twisted common sense appears to be, and furthermore, how this common nonsense has taken over in our culture. (Fromm, 1963, 133.)<sup>17</sup>

## 5. Summary: How to Evaluate Humor?

In this article I have discussed how humor and morality intertwine, and how the concept of disobedience is of central importance if one wants to understand controversial humor. I argue that it is logically and practically possible to be amused by an immoral joke. Also, it has to be admitted that certain kinds of superficially offensive forms of humor do not necessarily violate moral values. Instead, this kind of humor might be critical and revolutionary, and it can make a person open his eyes and examine his own moral stances. However, one cannot conclude that if something appears to be funny according to his or her sense of humor, that something must be good (because "laughter *in itself* is good" is an untenable claim). The basic idea is this: neither amusement in itself nor taking offense in itself are the crucial

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<sup>17</sup> According to Maccoby (2014), Fromm was not surprised why some people lose their minds. Instead, given the conditions of the absurd world, it is odd how anyone can remain sane. For him, the whole Western way of living appears to be quite insane (see Fromm 1955).

matters – instead the decisive factor is the basis on which these reactions are founded. For this, it is necessary to analyze the wider character matrix and the social setting. Thus, different kinds of general rules for humor, such as Toth's, may not be as applicable as one could hope for. For instance, Patronen clearly jokes about the problems of living of short statured people, but this does not automatically make his humor questionable.

It is possible to make critical black humor about, for instance, stupidity, anger, greed, nonsense, narrow-mindedness, overly bureaucratic customs, power, blind religiosity, hypocrisy... the list goes on. The common denominator is that all of these belong to the least flattering side of human life. In this sense, when these attributes are ridiculed – even in a harsh manner – a humorist disapproves them. At the same moment, he or she approves some other values.

So, how should one evaluate, for instance, Dieudonné M'bala M'bala's performances? There are two obvious preliminary observations: 1) There are plenty of people who are amused by his humor, and 2) M'bala M'bala violates basic moral principles (even human rights) with his comedy. On this basic level, one may conclude that he is both funny (even if his humor does not resemble a reader's personal taste of humor) and obscene. The comedian has defended his humor by stating that he fights for freedom of speech by mocking Jewish people. This claim is, however, problematic because the definition of freedom behind the claim is problematic and, in addition, there are probably much more effective and profound ways to progress humane freedom than mockery (see Hietalahti & al. 2016). Even though Dieudonné's defense is relatively weak, he nevertheless makes a valid point: if in France there is as he claims a tendency to fall silent about, for example, the various problems of its own colonial history as well as the war in Algeria, it is clearly problematic. However, it is unconvincing that this problem would be best solved by promoting anti-Semitic attitudes via one's humor. If the claimed morality is a mere hobby horse from which to mistreat certain minorities, we do not have to accept the humorist's argument.

The Frommian genius in relation to understanding controversial humor is to ask what harsh humor disobeys, and at the same moment, what it obeys. Following Fromm, the ultimate goal of humor cannot be the demolishing of all external restrictions on humor. In a Frommian framework, humor is a specific form of disobedience, but it cannot be about rebelling against everything. Instead, humor has to be based on something. For some, humor is founded on the ideal of freedom of speech, but as Fromm mentions: "we have

to gain a new kind of freedom, one which enables us to realize our own individual self, to have faith in this self and in life.” (Fromm 1941, 106.) It has to be understood that both freedom and the self are socially constructed phenomena; so are humor and the freedom of humor.

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