Racist Humor
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Abstract
In this brief essay, I will lay out the philosophical landscape concerning theories of racist humor. First, I mention some preliminary issues that bear on the question of what makes a joke racist. Next, I briefly survey some of the views philosophers have offered on racist humor, and on a view of sexist humor that is relevant for this discussion. I then suggest the debates could benefit from moving beyond the racist/non-racist binary most views presuppose. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for further research.

There has been some attention paid to the topic of humor in philosophy but very little in comparison to other subjects. Philosophers seem to be even less concerned with cases of racist (and sexist, homophobic, transphobic, etc.) humor. Given the weight of the consequences of being charged with making a racist joke and the possible harmful effects on the audience of racist jokes, it is a bit puzzling that more attention has not been given to this issue.

That racist humor is an important subject should be obvious. In this brief essay, I will lay out the philosophical landscape concerning theories of racist humor. In Section 2, I mention some preliminary issues that bear on the question of what makes a joke racist. In Section 3, I briefly survey some of the views philosophers have offered of racist humor, and also a view of sexist humor that is relevant to this discussion. I then suggest, in Section 6, that the debates could benefit from moving beyond the racist/non-racist binary that most views presuppose. Finally, I conclude in Section 7 with suggestions for further research.

1. Preliminary Issues

The subject of racist humor lies at the intersection of two queries: (1) what is humor, and (2) what is racism?

First, there are a number of things that fit under the banner humor: gags or practical jokes, witticisms, word play, puns, impersonations, and jokes to name a few. This essay focuses on verbal forms of humor, especially jokes, witticisms, and word play. There are also several theories about what makes something humorous: there are, for instance, superiority, incongruity, relief, and play theories of humor. It is reasonable to think that the way we theorize racist humor depends on what kind of humor we have in view; however, endorsing and defending a particular theory of humor is outside the scope of this essay.

There are also several ways of construing racism. Various theorists characterize racism in terms of agent intentions and/or attitudes (Garcia 1999); belief (Appiah 1990); ideology (Mills 2003; Shelby 2003); bad faith (Gordon 1995); social power or institutional explanations (Ture and Hamilton 1992); discourse (Goldberg 1993); and disrespect (Glasgow 2009). Additionally, Lawrence Blum (2002) argues that we need to broaden our vocabulary to include other categories besides ‘racist’ and ‘non-racist.’ Blum thinks the term ‘racist’ is in danger of being overused and thus losing its ability to shame. Later, I will suggest that Blum’s view provides an avenue for a more nuanced view of racist humor.
Additionally, the relevance of moral values to aesthetic appreciation and evaluation, discussed primarily by philosophers of art, is significant for any account of racist humor. Assuming that racism in a joke counts as a moral defect, one wants to know whether this counts in favor of or against, or is neutral with respect to, the joke’s funniness. Berys Gaut (1998) presents a version of comic moralism (i.e., ethicism), which claims that if a speaker employs ethically bad attitudes in a joke token, this diminishes the joke’s funniness. In contrast, Ted Nannicelli (2014) argues for a moderate version of comic immoralism in which a joke can be funny because, in part, of its moral defect. Finally, Ted Cohen (1999) presents what some might refer to as comic autonomism, i.e., the view ‘that moral flaws do not have any impact on amusement’ (Smuts 2009, 152).

Lastly, much racial humor depends on the inclusion of racial stereotypes. I mean to distinguish racial from racist humor. The former is a broad category that refers to humor about race, while the latter, a narrower category, refers to racial humor that violates norms concerning the treatment of people based on their perceived race. Defining ‘stereotype’ is a contentious matter. Some definitions, such as Lawrence Blum’s (2004), build in notions of negative evaluation, while others remain neutral. For example, Jerry Kang (2009) characterizes stereotypes as ‘traits that we associate with a category’. David Schneider (2003) claims that current social cognition researchers tend to view stereotypes as simple generalizations on a par with other mechanisms of our ordinary cognition. Regardless of which definition is adopted, the inclusion of stereotypes in humor raises questions about its effects on both hearers and speakers. The literature on stereotypes and implicit bias is relevant for this discussion. For example, psychologists Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji (1995) explore an implicit operation of stereotypes, while philosopher Lawrence Blum (2004) examines moral issues connected to the use of stereotypes. Also, social psychologists have been investigating the effect of disparagement humor on both speakers and audiences.

I do not pretend to have resolved any of the concerns mentioned in this section but, rather, to highlight the issues that should inform any comprehensive discussion on the topic of racist humor. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on one aspect of theories of racist humor, namely the racist/non-racist binary.

2. Theories of Racist Humor

Not everyone believes an account of racist humor can be given. Cohen (1999) reflects upon jokes that are often viewed as problematic or objectionable in a certain respect. An example of such a joke is the following: ‘How did a passerby stop a group of black men from committing a gang rape? He threw them a basketball.’

Cohen wonders whether his dislike of jokes like these is ‘personal’, that is, a matter of taste that others may, but need not, share. He writes that in order to offer a ‘resounding moral condemnation of this joke, no doubt I would have to invoke some “moral theory,” and then show that an implication of the theory is that this joke is bad… I think it can’t be done’ (Cohen 1999, 81). If ‘moral–theoretical’ reasons cannot be given for why a joke is bad, then it seems to follow that our hands are tied from saying much about humor of this sort generally.

Cohen’s aim is not to examine what makes a piece of humor racist, but if charging humor with being racist is a moral condemnation, his view seems to have implications for our current discussion. According to Cohen, one can use moral language to condemn humor one finds racist, but no theoretical justification for that claim is available. In fact, no justification is needed. In order to do justice to Cohen’s concern, one has to give an account of what makes racism bad. Providing such an account is, however, beyond the scope of this article.
Although Cohen is skeptical about moral–theoretical reasons for explaining the badness of racist humor, that should not stop us from trying to give an account of when humor is racist. One candidate for such a view is found in Michael Philips (1984). Philips presents a general view of racism and applies it to the case of ethnic humor. He writes, “‘racist’ is used in its logically primary sense when it is used of Basic Racist Acts’ (Philips 1984, 77). Presumably, he means that racism is, first and foremost, characterized by actions. He describes a basic racist act as follows:

P performs a Basic Racist Act by doing A when: (a) P does A in order to harm Q because Q is a member of a certain ethnic group; or (b) (regardless of P’s intentions or purposes) P’s doing A can reasonably be expected to mistreat Q as a consequence of Q’s being a member of a certain ethnic group (Philips 1984, 77).

It is worth pointing out that Philips refers to ‘ethnic’ groups rather than races in his account. While many theorists believe ethnic groups are distinct from racial groups, I believe we can easily substitute ‘race’ for ‘ethnic’ in Philips’ formulation to adequately capture racism.

Philips’ view of racism emphasizes the harm or expected harm suffered by the victim. In addition, intentions, though relevant in some instances, are not a necessary feature of racism. This view is attractive because it allows us to account for unintentional racist humor. Based on his definition of a basic racist act, Philips presents his view of racist humor:

[A] bit of ethnic humor is racist if: (1) it is a Basic Racist Act, or (2) it can reasonably be expected to promote an atmosphere in which Basic Racist Acts are more likely to occur, or (3) it is intended to promote such an atmosphere (Philips 1984, 87).

On this view, a joke can be racist regardless of the speaker’s beliefs or other attitudes, a feature which captures something intuitively important.

Richter Reed (1986) asks us to engage in a thought experiment in order to point out a serious problem with Philips’ view. Reed describes a situation in which all of the racists are rounded up and banished to their own private island where they can cause no more mischief in the world. As a result, there is no longer any reasonable expectation of mistreatment of a person in virtue of their racial identity. Given this, it is still coherent to describe, e.g., Mexican jokes as told by an inhabitant of this island as ‘racist’. But Philips’ view does not count this as a coherent description, which seems like the wrong result. The seeming wrongness of this result comes from the fact that many of us care about things other than consequences. For instance, it is wrong to show a lack of proper regard for someone simply because they belong to a different racial group. And it is wrong even when there is no one around to be mistreated.

David Benatar (1999), who presents a view very similar to Philips’, addresses two questions: (1) When is a piece of humor racist or sexist? (2) Are jokes that embody negative racial or gender stereotypes necessarily racist or sexist? He thinks that an answer to the first goes a long way toward providing one to the second. Before giving his view about what makes a piece of racist humor racist, Benatar first discusses what makes humor immoral. On his account, humor is immoral when (i) it is intended to harm, or (ii) it can be reasonably expected to harm, and (iii) the harm is wrongfully inflicted (Benatar 1999, 191). Further, Benatar expands Joel Feinberg’s (1984) notion of ‘harm’ to include things like hurts, offenses, and beliefs, and other disliked mental states. Racist beliefs are harmful because they negatively affect people’s interest to be well regarded. Thus, Benatar presents what can be described as a harm-based view of racist humor.

How do racist beliefs and humor connect? According to Benatar, expressing a racist belief is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for a joke to be racist. Additionally, jokes can be racist...
when they ‘inculcate and spread racist views’ (Benatar 1999, 195–196). Thus, the joke-teller need not have or express racist beliefs in order for the joke to be racist.

One might object that jokes can be racist even if they do not inflict harm or are not reasonably expected to inflict harm. For instance, we can imagine a racial joke shared among three friends about some other racial group. Suppose the joke stays between the three of them. Benatar claims that racist mental states are harmful because they can damage ‘interests in being regarded as beings worthy of respect’, and that the person thought of in this negative way is ‘harmed in an important way’ (Benatar 1999, 193). But is this really an interest we can rightfully claim others have an obligation to uphold? Being respected by others would be a nice thing, but it isn’t clear if it is something owed to us, especially when it has no material bearing on our lives. Whether instances like the one described above are legitimate harms is at least an open question. It isn’t obvious they should count.

2.2. AGENT-CENTERED VIEWS

A different account can be found in Merrie Bergmann’s (1986) paper on sexist humor. Bergmann writes, ‘Sexist humor is humor in which sexist beliefs, attitudes, and/or norms either must be held in order to perceive an incongruity or are used to add to the fun effect of the incongruity’ (Bergmann 1986, 70). Bergmann’s view represents what Philips refers to as an agent-centered account. According to Bergmann, humor is sexist when sexist beliefs, attitudes, and/or norms are required to perceive an incongruity or make sense of an incongruity, or when the humor confirms sexist stereotypes or beliefs. She is careful to point out, however, that it isn’t merely the presence of a sexist belief that makes a piece of humor sexist, but it is the role the belief plays in bringing about the humor that makes it sexist: ‘sexist humor presupposes sexist beliefs on the part of the audience’ (Bergmann 1986, 74). Bergmann’s account of sexist humor can be extended to racist humor. On this extension, racist humor is humor in which racist beliefs, attitudes, and/or norms either must be held in order to perceive an incongruity or are used to add to the fun effect of the incongruity.

Though intriguing, we might wonder whether Bergmann’s view adequately accounts for either phenomenon (racist or sexist humor). Bergmann adopts an incongruity thesis as explanation for what makes something humorous, namely that we come to expect an orderly world and that we find certain disruptions of that expectation humorous.9 Yet, there are some instances of humor that do not rely on incongruity for their humor. Think of the Saturday Night Live skit with Amy Poehler and Tina Fey in which they basically re-enact an interview between Katie Couric and Sarah Palin. The humor in the skit does not rely on an incongruity, but it emerges from how accurately it reflects the real interview. Presumably, there are also similar instances involving racial humor. Perhaps, some impersonations of racial others might fall into this category. Given that incongruity is not required for humor, Bergmann’s account risks leaving out purportedly racist jokes that do not rely on incongruity for their humor.

Even if we accept the incongruity thesis, however, one still might object that racist beliefs, attitudes, and/or norms must be held in order to perceive an incongruity. If holding means endorsing, then that claim seems too strong. Surely, one can perceive an incongruity without actually endorsing beliefs or attitudes. And it is at least plausible that one could find something humorous without endorsing any racist beliefs that may be necessary to perceive an incongruity. Bergmann of course anticipates this objection and responds that ‘being aware of a [racist] belief is not the same as holding it’ (Bergmann 1986, 74). She intimates that being aware of the belief is only enough to see why some would find something funny, not enough to actually find it funny oneself. Her claim presumes that one enjoys (or finds funny) humor primarily because of its content. However, there are other aspects of, e.g., a joke that can explain why
someone finds it funny. For instance, one may find a joke-telling funny because of the way the speaker delivers it. In this case, enjoyment of the joke does not rely on believing anything at all. It seems simply understanding the relevant background beliefs is sufficient for finding it funny. For this reason, I don’t yet find Bergmann’s response convincing.

Another possibility for determining when humor is racist emerges from an appeal to a volitional account of racism. The standard for this type of account can be found in Jorge Garcia’s seminal essay ‘The Heart of Racism’ (1996):

In its central and most vicious form, [racism] is a hatred, ill will, directed against a person or persons on account of their assigned race. In a derivative form, one is a racist when one either does not care at all or does not care enough (i.e. as much as morality requires) or does not care in the right ways about people assigned to a certain racial group, where this disregard is based on racial classification (Garcia 1996, 6).

On Garcia’s view, something counts as racist just in case a person acts from a vicious attitude. Using his volitional view of racism, we might characterize racist joke utterances in the following way: ‘a racial joke is racist just in case the speaker has a vicious attitude, attitude of ill will towards, or an attitude of careless disregard for members of the racial group targeted by the joke.’ A speaker tells a racist joke against, for example, Asians if he hates them, wishes ill of them, or doesn’t care enough to treat them like fully human beings.

However, I do not think this view of racist humor will work either because it focuses solely on speaker attitude and thereby ignores the effects of the act on the target, which is an egregious oversight. We can imagine, for example, someone who has just moved to the U.S. from South Korea and finds herself trying to fit in at her new job. She decides to try her hand at humor using the only jokes she knows – black jokes she’s picked up from TV broadcasts in her home country. Suppose she lacks any attitude of ill will or careless disregard. Are we willing to say her joking utterances are not racist simply because she lacks a vicious attitude? Admittedly, intuitions about this example will vary. Garcia, I suspect, would just accept this as a consequence of his view. But, various people have argued that we should be able to say more, though space does not allow us to take them up here.10

3. Expanding Categories

A constraining feature of the views introduced thus far is that all of them adhere to the simple binary that a piece of humor is either racist or not racist. I believe this is a mistake. Theorizing about racial humor against the backdrop of this assumption forces us to fit every instance of humor into one or the other of the two categories. But it is not always clear a particular humorous incident fits neatly into either. For instance, consider the example of the South Korean immigrant who tries to fit in by telling black jokes she has learned from TV. Perhaps one could argue that she is not guilty of making a racist utterance given her understandable ignorance of the U.S. racial landscape, but neither is her attempt at humor entirely innocent.

As I mentioned in Section 3, Lawrence Blum argues that we are in need of a richer moral vocabulary when discussing racism. If we adopt Blum’s contention, then the categories we employ for classifying racial humor can be expanded beyond the racist/non-racist binary. In contrast to only being racist or not racist, a piece of humor might also be racially insensitive. Racially insensitive humor is not innocent in the way humor that isn’t tainted along racial lines is, and it also isn’t as morally bad as racist humor. There is a continuum of moral badness spread over a range of values. Sorting out these categories requires more work than I am able to do within the scope of this article, but in what follows, I will attempt to outline the contours of a more nuanced view.
We might begin by distinguishing between those instances of humor that incorporate racial stereotypes in some crucial fashion (either by expressing stereotypes or requiring their knowledge for a joke’s success) and those instances that do not. Some instances of humor depend on racial stereotypes for their humor, whether explicitly expressed by the speaker or via background assumptions required for uptake of the punch line by the hearer. In contrast, other instances of humor do not depend crucially for their humor on the explicit expression or required assumption of racial stereotypes.

Defining ‘stereotype’ is a contentious matter. Some definitions, such as Lawrence Blum’s (2004), build in notions of negative evaluation, while others remain neutral. For example, Jerry Kang (2009) characterizes stereotypes as ‘traits that we associate with a category’ (Kang 2009, 1). David Schneider (2003) claims that current social cognition researchers tend to view stereotypes as simple generalizations on a par with other mechanisms of our ordinary cognition. If this is correct, then it raises an important question: What is so bad about racial stereotypes, especially of the kind we are concerned with in humor? In order for the view proposed below to work, an account of the badness of racial stereotypes must be given. Blum’s article mentioned above is one place to start, but I cannot sufficiently engage with this question here. What follows is an adumbration of a view that, with more space, will have to fill in many more details.

The alternative view I have in mind introduces a middle category between what I’ll call merely racial and racist, namely racially insensitive. On this view, an instance of racial stereotype humor is merely racial just in case (i) the speaker has an aim to subvert the stereotype associated with the target group and (ii) the audience can reasonably be expected to recognize this aim. A racial joke is racially insensitive if the speaker (i) lacks an aim to subvert the associated stereotype or (ii) has a subverting aim but cannot reasonably expect audience uptake of that aim. And finally, racial humor is racist if either (i) it wrongly harms the target in virtue of that person’s membership in a particular racial group or (ii) the speaker is motivated by a malevolent attitude or one of disregard.

Admittedly, how much access we have to our own motives may be a question. To the extent that it is a question, it will be difficult for the speaker to guarantee he or she is guided by subversive motivation. Further, the introduction of audience expectation presupposes sensitivity to background information against which judgments of reasonable expectation must be made. What counts as a reasonable expectation is not static and will vary from one sociocultural situation to the next.

Some may wonder whether an aim as strong as subversion is needed to tell a merely racial joke. Couldn’t it be that some jokes about race do not have subversive aims and yet are still not racist? Aren’t at least some instances of racial humor neutral without requiring any subversive motives? I believe this depends on the target of the humor and the sociocultural context in which the humor appears. For members of certain socially marked groups, the context may be so racially charged, or negative cultural stereotypes about the group so ingrained, that subversion is required so as not to reinforce that negative atmosphere or negative stereotypes. But in other cases, the environment may not be so charged as to require subversion. The suggestion leaves open the question of whether a subversive aim is required for telling a merely racial joke about non-marginalized groups. How this question is answered depends on one’s understanding of racism. For example, a volitional account of racism might admit of racism and thus racist humor against White people, whereas an institutional view would not.

4. Concluding Thoughts

There is much work to be done on the subject of offensive humor in general, and on racist (and sexist, homophobic, etc.) humor in particular. In addition to asking what makes humor racist, it
is important to ask how we determine the content of a piece of humor. For example, how do we know what a particular joke (or joking utterance) is about? Are there special interpretative methods for interpreting humor in contrast to assertions and other types of speech acts? One might also ask if the inclusion of racial slurs in humor automatically makes it less funny or unfunny. There is a steadily growing literature on slurs that addresses questions about the nature of their offense (L. Anderson and Lepore 2013; Camp 2013; Hom 2008; Hornsby 2001; Jeshion 2013; Tirrell 1999). One could undoubtedly draw upon this literature for an enriched discussion.

Another question to be explored is whether we are subject to negative moral evaluation for finding racist or racially insensitive humor funny. As we saw with Merrie Bergmann’s view, some believe that finding a joke funny requires endorsing the stereotypes it expresses. The implication is that one who finds humor that employs racist stereotypes funny is subject to criticism. This question has been taken up by people like Smuts (2010), de Sousa (1987), and Roberts (1988). Interesting work may lie in the intersection of these works with research being done on pretense and imagination (Liao and Gendler 2011). The latter work, which is being done by philosophers and psychologists, might inform our views of what happens cognitively when we understand some bit of humor.

One final avenue of further research I want to mention connects with the literature on epistemic injustice (E. Anderson 2012; Dotson 2011; Fricker 2007; Medina 2012). One form of epistemic injustice relevant for this discussion is testimonial injustice, which is a denial of credibility to a speaker due to a hearer’s prejudices. We can see this kind of injustice being committed in an example given by Bergmann where she says charges of humor as sexist are often met with responses like ‘feminists are too sensitive’ or ‘where’s your sense of humor?’ (Bergmann 1986, 75). The disserter is denied credibility as a judge of when a joke is sexist or not. This often happens when the one dissenting is a part of the targeted group.

All of these are questions worthy of further reflection. Given the prevalence of racial humor and the real world consequences that result from engaging in humor, philosophers should be keen on developing views that answer these questions.

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Short Biography

Luvell Anderson is currently Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Memphis. He has published articles on slurs and epithets in Nous and Analytic Philosophy. His current research is focused on the semantics, pragmatics, and ethics of racial language. He also has interests in African–American philosophy and the philosophy of race.

Notes

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1 For example, see Carroll (2001); Cohen (1999); Hurley et al. (2011); Kant (2000); Morreall (2012); and Shaw (2010).

2 See Hurley et al. (2011); Morreall (2012); and Shaw (2010). For discussion of the idea that humor serves a social function and that any theory of humor must be understood within its wider social context, see Billig (2005).
For a broad overview of a variety of views, see Garcia (1997).

In addition, Headley (2006) and Taylor (2003) have suggested that it may not be possible to describe racism with a monistic definition.

See also Carroll (2014) and Smuts (2009).

For more on immoralism, see Jacobson (1997) and Eaton (2012).

For a sample of articles that take up these issues, see Ford and Ferguson (2004); Ford et al. (2014); Maio et al. (1997); and Olson et al. (1999).

For instance, see Alcoff (2006).

For a more in-depth discussion, see Morreall (1982).

For a sense of the exchange between Garcia and his interlocutors, see Garcia (1999); Garcia (2011); Mills (2003); and Faucher and Machery (2009).

**Works Cited**


