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Humour and Equal Respect

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Outline

'Equal respect' is owed to all human beings as possessing equal and supreme value or dignity as persons, whatever their other differences. It includes equal respect for oneself (self-respect) as well as for others. Humour - amusement at others - is a possible threat to respect and self-respect. When we are amused by someone's action, character or situation, we see it as an incongruity or lapse which in some sense does not matter - we do not take it seriously. (Amusement is usually incompatible with great misfortunes and misdemeanours, which prompt compassion or disapproval instead.) But humour need not involve a lack of respect for human dignity. People tend not to like being laughed at. But if they remember that everyone suffers from such lapses they can 'see the funny side', and may seek to be laughed at if they realise that being funny is endearing. However, humour is sometimes dangerous to equal respect. For example, individuals sometimes become an automatic target of humour, never taken seriously, and may then show lack of self-respect in accepting or even seeking this situation. Respect for good people and good causes, including the cause of equal respect itself, can be undermined by persistent jokes. There can be racist, sexist, misogynist, etc. jokes (though defining these is difficult) which express and foster contempt for members of a particular group. On the positive side, humour can be an important moral weapon, undermining unwarranted deference. It can also be a way of asserting self-respect, as is shown by those who meet an unjust death with humour.

1. Equal Respect

The notion of equal respect is the moral belief that all human beings, no matter what their race, status, sex, age, religion and so on, are equal in being owed, simply as human beings, an attitude of respect and a standard of treatment appropriate to their intrinsic worth or dignity as human beings. There are difficulties even about this vague general claim. If we think equal respect is due to all human beings, it is natural to assume that it is due to them in virtue of some valuable elements characteristic of all humans: for example, reason and the capacity for morality. If so, there are problems about how to regard babies and young children, who have not yet developed these capacities, and the mentally handicapped, who to varying degrees lack them. There may also be problems about drawing a sharp distinction between human beings and very highly developed animals, given that nature seems to have drawn no such sharp distinction. I shall however ignore these demarcation problems for present purposes, and assume in what follows that we are concerned only with 'normal adults'.

I suggest that a large part of what we think worthy of respect in all human beings is the capacity which normal adults have to 'have a life': that is, the capacity to have a

conception of the kind of life they aim to live, not only in moral terms but also in terms of many other goals, standards and enthusiasms, and to try to live that life as closely as they can. This idea is beautifully expressed in the words of Thomas Rainborowe, a follower of Oliver Cromwell, the seventeenth-century English anti-monarchist and egalitarian:

The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he. (29th October 1647)

(By 'he' Rainborowe means 'man', of course. We would now say 'he *or she*'; but it was 1647, after all.)

What I like is Rainborowe's idea that equality is about everyone's *having a life to live*, with all that that implies. Equal respect is largely about respecting everyone's right to make their own decisions about how to live: to choose their religion if any, their partner, their work, their way of life, their values and allegiances, regardless of their race, sex, place in society or anything else. There does not seem to be a single word, in English at least, for the virtue possessed by those who are good at showing this respect: a sense of justice, consideration, tolerance, humanity, are all relevant. In practice there will of course be conflicts between one person's choices and another's, and various compromises will need to be worked out, especially if one person's allegiance involves opposition to another's; equal respect requires that everyone has a say in the compromises too. And of course people will not stay alive at all unless they are kept safe from various perils, man-made and otherwise. Ensuring their safety may require further compromises, but too much stress on safety runs the risk of destroying some of the very things it is supposed to protect, as is often said.

I have stressed respect as chiefly concerning reason, values and capacity for choice. But there is also an element in it which one might call a sense of propriety. This consists of a concern to respect minimum standards of human rather than animal-like behaviour with regard to the *body* and its functions. (What the standards consist of is of course culture-relative, but every normal adult has a sense of them.) Treating people with equal respect includes care in maintaining these standards, as doctors, nurses and those who care for the very elderly realise. Mistreatment of prisoners sometimes consists of failure in this aspect of equal respect.

2. Self-Respect

If this kind of respect is due to *every* human being, each individual ought to show it not only to others but also to himself or herself. In other words, people 'owe it to themselves', as we say, to value and defend the right to make their own choices and to express and defend their own views. Complete self-respect - sense of self-worth as a human being - involves accepting those aspects of oneself which one cannot change, such as one's sex, race, physical and mental assets and limitations, as aspects of that self which has human worth or dignity. It also involves what I called a sense of propriety.

We may speak of self-respect not only as the *process* of sticking up for oneself but also as the admirable quality possessed by those who are good at doing this.. For example, a person who speaks out in a discussion in which most people have

expressed a view strongly opposed to his might say afterwards: 'I have a right to my own opinion and I felt I owed it to myself to speak out.' People hearing this might say approvingly that he has a lot of self-respect. Similarly, a person who resists the attempts of others to run his life for him - on the ground that it's *his* life - is said to have self-respect.

Just as respect for others involves respecting their views and values, self-respect includes a concern to maintain one's own standards, moral and non-moral. I can say, 'Out of self-respect I finally threw out some of my worn-out clothes', meaning roughly that I acted out of respect for my own standards of dress. More interestingly, I can say, 'I could never respect myself again if I did x'. The implication of this seems to be that at present I do (usually) respect myself. What kind of respect is this? Is it my sense of self-worth as a human being, or is it something different which we might call 'self-acceptance', an assessment of myself as being 'more or less all right'? I think it may be either. One can lose self-acceptance without losing basic self-respect. Thus someone can say, 'I realise I'm not worth much, I've done some frightful things. But I'm still a human being - you can't just push me around and make me do things.'. However, perhaps people sometimes also lose their sense of basic self-worth (cease, as it were, to think of themselves as part of the human race) if they do something sufficiently frightful - or if they have sufficiently frightful things (dehumanising things, as they are sometimes called) done to them.

3. Humour

I shall argue that one potential threat to equal respect, including self-respect, is humour: seeing things as comic or creating comic things. (I shall henceforward usually use the phrase 'the comic' rather than the word 'humour', which is ambiguous in English, meaning also a person's mood, good or bad.) To show why the comic is a threat to equal respect, I need first to explain what it is to find something comic, and this is no easy matter; philosophers from Plato onwards have wrestled with the problem of the nature of humour. I first linked respect with the comic as a result of reading *Reflections Upon Laughter*, three essays written in 1725 by the Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson. Despite his title, Hutcheson's topic is really 'the comic' rather than laughter. The relationship between the phenomenon of laughter and the comic is in fact rather complex. Though usually associated with what is comic, laughter does not always mean that the laugher sees something as comic: people can laugh for joy, for example, or in play, or because they want to *pretend* to find something comic. Nor does seeing something as comic necessarily produce laughter. People can see something as comic without being struck intensely or suddenly enough for laughter (they may instead make a joke about the comic thing, thereby making others laugh). Or they can want to laugh but suppress their laughter, for any one of a number of reasons.

Hutcheson analyses the quality of comicalness, to coin a word, in terms of an incongruity between 'the dignified' and 'the mean', and he mentions both the human form and man as a rational creature as things which have dignity. This suggestion is probably too narrow to cover all aspects of the comic. It would be safer to say that the comic involves an incongruous but in some way unimportant departure from some kind of norm, one important kind of norm being 'what befits the dignity of humanity'. Hutcheson speaks of silly mistakes, 'unworthy of the dignity of man as a rational

creature', as comic. Presumably he means such things as mixing up one's words, or putting one's pen in the keyhole instead of the key. But we do not need to invoke the dignity of man in order to find such mistakes funny; they are just unimportant departures from the rules for language - or for keyholes. Moreover, the incongruity need not be a mistake; people may deliberately play with the rules of language, or put their pen in the keyhole, for comic effect. (The word 'funny' in English is ambiguous in a relevant way: it can mean either 'comic' or 'incongruous'.)

Incongruities cease to be comic if they are too important. Thus if an orator suddenly begins to speak unintelligibly, because of a brain haemorrhage or the like, the hearers are distressed rather than amused. Hence my mention of the *unimportance* of a departure from the norm as a necessary condition of being amused. The ambiguity of the word 'serious' in English is relevant here: 'serious' may mean either 'not comic' or 'important, not trivial' as when one speaks of *serious* illness. (I mention these double meanings, which may resemble some in other languages, to indicate the elusiveness of the subject of humour.)

Another of Hutcheson's examples of a comic departure from what befits the dignity of humanity is what he calls a little accident, such as 'a glimpse of the natural functions which we study to conceal from sight'. Here the norm in question, of course, is what I earlier called 'propriety'. We certainly feel like laughing at lapses from propriety if the accident is an unimportant one, particularly if the person is rather 'prim and proper' and the incongruity therefore all the greater. But, as before, if the mishap is grave - for example, if the film star's revealing dress does not merely slip a little but actually falls off - it tends to produce not laughter but embarrassment and compassion. We sometimes seem to have a *choice* about how to regard such potentially comic incidents. The sufferer may say 'I didn't know whether to laugh or cry', and onlookers may say 'I didn't know whether to laugh or be sorry for the man'

A particularly interesting example - Hutcheson's own - of the contrast between the dignified and the mean - or, as I would say, of a departure from some norm - concerns misplaced strong emotions. Strong emotions, Hutcheson says, 'strike an onlooker with gravity' (that is, they seem to have importance or seriousness) but he says we laugh if they are directed at too trivial an object or based on a mistake, either natural or produced by jokers. I agree about the gravity of strong emotions. Although talk of the dignity of man tends in general to stress reason rather than emotion, what we feel when we see someone in the grip of a strong emotion is something like this: 'Here is the weight and force, the heart of this individual person, what he or she really cares about'. But we do want to laugh if we think the strength of the emotion is out of proportion to the triviality of its object: for example, if the film star flies into a rage because the car sent to fetch her is slightly smaller than that for a rival. And precisely because strong emotions are the heart of an individual we can be seen as laughing at *her* when we laugh at her misplaced rage.

A related category of things we laugh at is what I shall call personal quirks. These are not important enough to be either vices, which incur disapproval, dislike or fear rather than amusement, or virtues which arouse approval and admiration; they are simply incongruous but unimportant tendencies in behaviour. Examples of quirks are: petty inquisitiveness, petty meanness - as when certain people seem never to have any money when it's their turn to buy drinks - and proneness to suffer petty mishaps; and

also more likeable quirks, such as a passion for collecting paperclips, or an inability to say no to people asking for help, however bizarre or unreasonable their requests. When we hear of such behaviour in people we know, we say 'Isn't that just like him or her?' and laugh. I am not altogether clear why such quirks are funny, but I think that the predictability of the quirkish behaviour is part of what is funny. There is something incongruous about the combination of odd behaviour and predictability; we sometimes feel that such people are behaving as they do almost by mistake, as though in the grip of some compulsion. This is another area in which the apparent ability to choose whether to be amused may be relevant. I might say to a friend, 'Isn't it comic that X never has any money when it's her turn to pay for the drinks?' The friend might reply, 'I don't think it's comic at all, I think it's most unfair'. And I might then say, 'Oh, lighten up' – 'don't take it so seriously' – seeming to imply that in this case my friend can *decide* to be amused rather than disapproving.

4. The Pleasure of Humour

Why do we enjoy what is comic? If humour concerns an unimportant breach of some norm, perhaps what we enjoy about it is a sense of play, of release from the burden of things mattering. The 'after-dinner' type of joke, which links some amusing word-play or misunderstanding with a slight breach of propriety, is a good example of this kind of release. We also find some people funny 'in themselves', as I have said; perhaps laughing at people's oddities may be a kind of holiday from the feeling that we ought to respect the dignity of human nature.

We may compare this account of the pleasure of the comic, in terms of play, with the account of Roger Scruton in his paper 'Laughter,' *PAS Supplementary Volume 56* (1982). Scruton says that amusement at a person is a kind of 'attentive demolition' or 'devaluing' of him or her. This 'attentive demolition' is a 'mode of reflection' or way of thinking of the 'object' – the person found amusing. I suggest that this 'demolition' is one possible result of seeing someone, who may of course be oneself, as in some sense 'undignified', apt to depart incongruously in small ways from 'proper', rational, human behaviour: prone to embarrassing accidents, full of minor flaws, liable to petty mistakes and misplaced passions, and so on. Sometimes we may find this vision irritating or depressing. At other times what Scruton calls 'demolition' takes place. We cease to regard the person in question completely seriously. We realise, perhaps quite suddenly, that they (or we) are not only human beings worthy of respect as such, but also fallible beings in various little ways, and we enjoy the incongruity; we see them or ourselves as funny. However, I think that Scruton's word 'demolition' is inappropriate. Admittedly, coming to realise that someone of whom we have been in awe can also be seen as funny is a shift in perception which once made cannot be reversed. But 'minor undermining' might be more appropriate than 'demolition', since seeing others or ourselves as potentially comic need not make us lose our respect for them or ourselves as human beings.

Scruton suggests that one reason why we enjoy 'demolition' is that it 'reconciles us to our own condition'. I assume he means that 'demolition' enables us to see that others are just as liable as we are to the kinds of mini-chaos that are comic; as he says, we can feel kinship with the object of our laughter as a result. However, this idea needs to be distinguished from the well-known theory, found for example in Hobbes, that the pleasure of laughing at someone is the pleasure of feeling *superior* to them. The

superiority theory certainly will not do as an account of what it is for something to be seen as funny, if only because it would make it impossible to laugh at oneself, as thankfully people can do. But there is a kind of continuum from laughter with sympathy, in which the laughers recognise that the person laughed at is at bottom like themselves, through amusement combined with an enjoyable (though probably misplaced) sense of superiority, to a contemptuous mockery which is not genuine amusement at all, though it may outwardly imitate amusement and be accompanied by a kind of deliberate laughter.

5. Humour as a Danger to Equal Respect (i)

At first I am inclined to say that laughing at people does not show lack of respect for them as human beings, because the things which make people laughable do not show that they are incapable of 'living a life', in the sense expounded earlier. As we saw, finding some people funny may constitute a partial suspension of any awe or deference we also feel for them. But even while we giggle at people's self-deception about their greed or their obsession with paperclips, we can see them as worthy not only of equal respect but also in some cases of admiration and awe.

However, this may be too simple. As Scruton says, people tend not to like being laughed at, or 'demolished', as he calls it. Although laughing at people need not show a lack of respect for them as human beings, victims tend to see being laughed at as some kind of indirect attack. The laugher (call him or her X) might say that straightforward criticism is also an attack, and a more severe one, and yet we think it is sometimes permissible to criticise people. The person being laughed at (Y) might reply that a direct criticism can be understood, discussed, replied to, accepted, modified, perhaps rebutted; in other words, it treats its subject as a rational being. Laughter cannot be seen in this way; in effect, it treats those laughed at as though they were animals at the zoo with amusing antics.

How then can we defend laughing at people? First we can say that people and their foibles just *are* very often seen as funny, and whereas we can choose to try to hide our amusement if it causes distress, we cannot choose to stop finding people amusing. Secondly, we can say in response to Y that the kinds of feature found funny in others are not necessarily amenable to the rational criticism Y says he would prefer; as I said earlier, people who are funny sometimes behave as though in the grip of some compulsion. Thirdly, we can say that whereas seeing someone as funny is a way of suspending taking them seriously – seeing them *as though* they did not possess the whole weight of humanhood - they need not feel 'demolished' by this, because it is perfectly compatible with seeing them at the same time as fully worthy of respect. (We often see people in two lights at once in this way. For example, we can see small children performing a Nativity play, or an ill-educated person reading an inept poem at a funeral, as comic and moving at the same time.) Finally, as Scruton suggests, we can point out that in fact people may have reason to welcome being laughed at or even to invite it, because one can't love people so perfect that they can't be laughed at. Being able to share laughter at oneself – not only put up with it, but actually come to 'see the funny side' of oneself and let others see it – is *endearing*, as well as showing honesty and humility.

6. Humour as a Danger to Equal Respect (ii)

Despite this defence of laughing at people, I also want to claim that there are various ways in which humour can be a danger to equal respect. Indeed, the first way is implicit in my defence: one sometimes comes across people who are so keen to create bonds with others by showing their funny side and inviting others to laugh that we feel that they lack self-respect; they are turning themselves into mere butts for others' laughter who are never taken seriously as people. Such butts can also be created unthinkingly by others: sometimes one person in a group of associates somehow becomes a kind of automatic target for jokes. He is not truly seen as a person with 'a life to live', as becomes clear if he announces he is getting married or talks about his future plans; everyone is astonished, as though they had hitherto thought that he was not quite human.

A similar kind of danger to equal respect is the humour that tends to be constantly directed at those people who have some minor blemish or some unusual feature which they cannot change: sticking-out ears, a silly name, unusual tallness, very striking good looks. At first sight such humour may not seem particularly disrespectful, particularly if the feature in itself is a desirable one, but victims may feel that they are treated not as individuals in their own right, as it were, but as a mere means to others' humour. (And the jokes are always the same....)

Another way of using people as a means to humour is the practical joke in which people are manipulated into an undignified situation, or tricked into showing strong emotion on a mistaken basis. This kind of humour seems to me to be a clear case of lack of respect, because it is treating the victims as a mere means, not as ends-in-themselves, as Kant would say. It is difficult for victims to object, because they are then accused of having no sense of humour. But they should reply is that it is one thing to be naturally seen as funny because of one's actual foibles and quirks, quite another to be artificially manipulated into displaying laughable features.

7. Humour as a Danger to Equal Respect (iii)

I shall now say a little about the threat to equal respect that can arise from humour in more public situations. One danger faced by the cause of equal respect is that, like any other good cause, it is a target for jokes. These need not be hostile in intent, but they may weaken the impact of the cause by making it difficult to talk about it seriously. For example, any attempt to discuss the use of gender-neutral language is apt to be greeted by people saying things like: 'Do we have to say 'herstory' instead of 'history'?', and then it can be difficult to have a serious discussion about the importance (or otherwise) of gender-neutral language to the cause of equal respect. Similarly, the *people* who campaign for aspects of equal treatment for all, as for any cause, can deliberately or accidentally be turned into figures of fun who need not be taken seriously. I do not simply mean that they may be seen as funny. As I said earlier, I think that finding someone funny in some respects is perfectly compatible with taking them seriously, though the audience need to retain due respect alongside their amusement if they are to do the campaigners' message justice. Rather I am thinking of the situation in which campaigners are thought of as merely an automatic target for jokes, and neither they or their views are taken seriously

However, the main danger to equal respect in the public domain seems to be humour which can be seen as an expression of contempt for one group: that is, which is racist, sexist, misogynist, homophobic, etc. But there is a problem here. It doesn't seem to be

true that all humour which is about one group is unacceptable, but some clearly is. What makes a joke racist, sexist, etc., as opposed to simply being *about* race, etc.? One suggestion might be that if a joke is based on a stereotype attributing some characteristic to members of a group (Jews are avaricious, Irish are illogical, etc.), it is lacking in equal respect for members of that group, because the joke treats them as lacking normal human individuality. But this condemnation may be too sweeping; jokes of this kind are often traditional performances which are not seen as claiming to be an accurate description of members of a group, and they are often made and enjoyed by members of the groups in question. (I heard a nice example of this last phenomenon recently. Jerry Sadowitz, a Jewish-Glaswegian comedian playing on the traditional reputation of Jews for meanness and Glaswegians for drunkenness, was heard to say: 'It's very difficult being a Glaswegian Jew; the Glaswegian part of me wants to go out every night and get drunk, and the Jewish part is too mean to pay for it'.)

The familiar phenomenon of members of a group enjoying jokes based on a stereotype of their own group suggests another test for unacceptable jokes about members of a group: perhaps a joke is racist/sexist/homophobic, etc. if no member of the group in question can find it funny. But two difficulties with this suggestion come to mind. One difficulty is that such a test does not really tell us what characteristics of a joke should make all the members of a target group object to it. One possible characteristic is that the so-called joke seems to have no real point other than to mention alleged disagreeable characteristics of the target group. In other words, its aim seems to be to attack others rather than to produce laughter, though those employing it may simulate amusement and accuse their victims of having no sense of humour if they object to it. The other difficulty is that some members of a group may have 'internalised' the contempt which some outsiders feel for them, and therefore may be happy to accept contemptuous jokes or even make them. Such people show lack of respect for other members of their group. They also, of course, have insufficient self-respect or sense of self-worth. As I said earlier, self-worth includes regarding those aspects of oneself which one cannot change, such as one's race, and one's basic allegiances such as one's religion, as aspects of that self which possesses human dignity.

Given the problem of those who internalise the contempt of others, what we need instead is the test suggested by Ted Cohen: 'A joke is racist/sexist/homophobic if no *completely self-respecting* member of the group in question can find it funny.' This is better; but problems remain, because members of a group can differ about what a self-respecting member of it should be like. Consider for example a joke about how women fuss endlessly about what to wear on some formal occasion. A 'new woman' will see the joke as contemptuous and therefore misogynistic, because she thinks that no self-respecting woman can accept this view of women. But a traditional woman may well recognise something of herself in the caricature and find the joke funny. (She will also stoutly resist the idea that her attitudes show a lack of self-respect.)

A somewhat similar problem exists about jokes directed at a particular religion. Some devotees are quite happy to have aspects of their religion mocked by non-believers, and can even enjoy the joke, as if to say: 'I can temporarily adopt the point of view of someone who doesn't actually believe in this stuff, and if I do I can see it as pretty comic myself'. Others think that any sort of joke with a religious reference is not only

blasphemy but also an expression of contempt for those of that faith, and therefore a case of unequal respect. This is an example of the kind of situation I mentioned at the beginning, where compromises between various values have to be worked out and equal respect requires that everyone has a say in the compromises. For example, those of a targeted religion may need to see that the right to laugh at any religion may itself be regarded as an article of faith by others. There is clearly much more to be said here.

8. Humour as a Protector of Equal Respect

Humour is a two-edged weapon, as Hutcheson himself pointed out. We have said that in the wrong hands it can express and foster contempt for members of a particular group, whether sexual, racial or religious. But it may also be useful. For example, it can help to undermine the tendency to worship the powerful by portraying them and their actions as not grand but ridiculous, as in many political cartoons. This ‘undermining’ of rulers does not make it impossible to respect them, as we saw earlier. But it makes it more likely that the respect will be thoughtful rather than automatic, and therefore less likely that the rulers will be able to carry out tyrannical, unrespecting policies unopposed.

I should like to end with a brief mention of a striking way of using humour as a demonstration of self-respect. This is the use sometimes made by those who believe they are being put to death unjustly, and who demonstrate their self-respect by making *jokes* about their fate, as if to say to their enemies: ‘Your punishment has not caused me to lose my self-respect; and since this is intact, I take my fate so lightly that I can joke about it.’ In this spirit, Sir Thomas More, when he mounted the scaffold to his execution, said to the official, ‘I pray you, master Lieutenant, see me safe up, and my coming down let me shift for myself.’ And Sir Walter Raleigh, feeling the edge of the axe before his execution, said ‘’Tis a sharp remedy, but a sure one for all ills’. Socrates is probably the best-known example. In the *Phaedo*, Plato depicts Socrates, just before his execution, expounding his belief that the soul is immortal and escapes from the body at death. Near the end of the dialogue, his disciple Crito asks him how he would like to be buried. Socrates replies, in effect, ‘You’ll have to catch me first!’.

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