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Why (not) philosophy of stand-up comedy?

Sheila Lintott

Stand-up comedy has been largely ignored by analytic philosophers of art, including those interested in comedy and humor. This is somewhat surprising, given the immense popularity of stand-up comedy and the rock star status enjoyed by some comedians today. I suspect that philosophers are just as likely to enjoy stand-up comedy as anyone else; in some cases (i.e. for some philosophers and some comedians), probably more likely. Here I offer some reasons philosophers of art should take the time to consider stand-up comedy and possible explanation for why philosophers of art have paid far less attention to stand-up comedy than to other arts.

Why should philosophers of art bother with stand-up comedy at all? There are two sorts of answers to this question. The first concerns the popularity and place of stand-up comedy in society today. Given the rock star status of many stand-up comedians and the respect afforded them for their insight into human nature and their no-holds-barred ethical critiques, it is a mistake for philosophers to ignore the affect they have on society as well as the insights and critiques they offer. (I return to consider the significance of this fact when I discuss why philosophers of art have neglected the art of stand-up comedy.) The second sort of answer, and the one I focus on here, concerns the philosophical issues raised by stand-up comedy as an art.

Stand-up comedy offers a new context within which philosophers could explore and revisit some of the traditional issues in the philosophy of art, doing so may shed light on both the art of stand-up comedy and on the traditional issues themselves. For example, one traditional topic of philosophical investigation of art concerns theories of interpretation and the role that artistic intention plays in determining the meaning of a work of art. Stand-up comedy is among a small subset of performing arts that are and can't be other than live. Along with improvisation and performance art, stand-up comedy can't really be rehearsed. Memorizing a set for performance and reciting it in practice is quite unlike rehearsing one's lines for a play. Until the stand-up comedian is with and performing for an audience, they know little about the quality of their set. Ask a stand-up comedian how they know when a joke is funny and they'll tell you, "when the audience laughs." This fact about stand-up comedy shows how debates about intention and meaning in stand-up comedy may benefit from closer attention to the nature of the contributions toward meaning and value made by both the artist and the audience.

This relates also to the importance of the audience and the artist's responsibility to their audience in stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedians gear their performances toward their particular audience, which is why we see so many stand-up comedians making reference to local people, places, and events when performing in a given environment. It's not just that they want to connect with the audience, which they do, but also that they're jokes literally will not be funny if the audience doesn't get them. It does a stand-up no good to blame the audience for not appreciating their jokes. Philosophers of art might investigate how this aspect of stand-up comedy is similar or different in other arts. For example, much post-modern visual art appears to be designed in indifference to the audience – sometimes it actually feels like the art was created out of hostility for the audience and with an explicit desire to confound and confuse them. The

philosopher of art might explore what such comparisons tell us about art as communication, the responsibility artists bear to their audience, and about the value of relevance and clarity in art.

The complexity of the artform makes stand-up comedy philosophically intriguing. Metaphysically, how is the art of stand-up comedy identified? What is the best framework to locate and understand the art of stand-up comedy? Are jokes types and their telling instances of tokens of that type? As Noel Carroll argues, this would explain why my telling of a joke about rape can garner a very different audience reaction than when told by a man (2014). However, what consequence is the fact that my telling of the joke in another context may be ethically problematic? Given the importance of the audience in stand-up, is each and every telling of a joke even by the same person a different token of the same type? If each joke varies extensively in various tellings, are they really all tokens of the same type? Another metaphysical distinction that might apply to stand-up comedy is that between *per se* and *per accidens* meaning. Perhaps the meaning and value of a particular joke of a particular stand-up comedian's joke performed in stand-up comedy is determined *per accidens*. That is, jokes may have no *per se* meaning but rather get their meaning *per accidens* relative to variable features in varying audiences and coincidental events of which they are aware (and of which the comedian may or may not be aware).

The complexity of the artform can also be gleaned by considering why a joke on the page may be relatively dead while when shared by a skilled comedian, it is exhilarating. On the other hand, what does a stand-up do to a joke when met with an unexpected chill from the audience? What is the relationship between what is being presented and how it is being presented? This is one of many places where the aesthetics and art of stand-up mirror issues in the aesthetics and art of tragedy. Yet, whereas in tragedy, the audience experiences negative emotion pleurably, in stand-up comedy, often the content is tragic but the audience experiences the positive pleasure humorous amusement. How do form and content relate in these two cases?

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, stand-up comedy provides excellent case studies for investigation into art and ethics and into ethics and humor in particular. Given that the overarching goal of the stand-up comedian is to 'be funny,' it's interesting to consider the familiar debate over whether and when funniness is enhanced or diminished due to ethical content in the realm of stand-up comedy. The stand-up comedian gets more freedom from ethics than we usually grant in everyday life. As Jeannette Bicknell maintains, ethically speaking, there are stark contrasts between everyday and professional joking contexts (2007). These contrasts that don't always lead in the same direction. The expectations of humor and joking in everyday life are quite different from those in a comedy club. Humor in everyday life may be held to higher standards because the audience didn't necessarily seek it out, whereas that is just what the audience of stand-up comedy does, often paying for the experience. Generally, humor is generally afforded a generous range of freedom when it comes to bending the truth, say, through exaggeration, or violating taboos. However, comedy in everyday life has less license to push these boundaries. We expect, on the other hand, stand-up comedians to push further and in more original, hence, more surprising ways. We may be disappointed in a comedian who plays it too safe. It's as if stand-up comedy comes with an implicit "trigger" warning. This does not give the stand-up comedian absolute free-reign, of course. They can offend and even say or do things that violate ethical norms and their jokes, bits, and performances are suitable objects of ethical evaluation.

The contrast between everyday joking and stand-up comedy leads in another direction when we focus on joking in everyday life. As Freud explains, in everyday life, jokes seem to

erupt from nowhere, to happen *to* us as we blurt them out. We don't always know where they came from or what compelled us to share them. Thus the familiar experience of a joke slipping out that reveals too much of what one really thinks of a friend. But in real life, a person can quickly beg-off, insisting that they didn't mean it. It was "just a joke" and we may feel somewhat comforted by that response. But comedians do not find their jokes erupting out of thin air while performing, not usually. Comedians plan, write, revise their jokes extensively, sometimes infinitely. So, it was "just a joke" isn't the same kind of excuse in stand-up comedy as it is in everyday life.

So far I've explored some reasons philosophers of art should consider stand-up comedy as a site of serious philosophical analysis. But why have philosophers thus far basically ignored it? Is stand-up comedy perhaps too low-brow for philosophical investigation, *too* popular, too commonplace, and, therefore, not a "real art." Again, some philosophers likely believe this. And they have a right to their opinion, however arbitrary and elitist it is. But many philosophers today are captivated by popular and mass art and engrossed in the philosophical analysis of it. Plenty of philosophers find popular arts such as comics and graphic novels, rock music, horror films, hip-hop and rap, street art and graffiti, and telenovelas (*The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, etc.) well worth their time and energy as sites of philosophical inquiry. These philosophers recognize, celebrate, and analyze the aesthetic, cultural, and ethical value of a broad range of popular arts. Our understanding and experience of the arts they investigate are all the richer for their efforts. If the reason stand-up comedy has been neglected is due to it being low-brow, we'd see far fewer popular arts being philosophically interrogated. Of course, stand-up comedy also has the issue of vulgarity and obscenity to boot which are admittedly far less prevalent in the other popular arts philosophers study. However, to return to the sex theme, pornography has long been a topic of inquiry for philosophers of art, often times precisely for its vulgarity or obscenity. Thus, it can't be its obscenity or vulgarity that has kept stand-up from being examined by philosophers of art.

Maybe the answer to why philosophers have yet to confront the art of stand-up comedy is not to be found in the art itself, but maybe in the practice of it. Popularity, after all, doesn't always equate to value. On analogy, I've heard that academics have paid relatively less attention to country/folk music in favor of the study of hip-hop and rock because the music is just not that good in country/folk. The idea is that there just isn't much *there* there to keep a philosopher interested, aesthetically *or* philosophically. So, although country/folk music is exceedingly popular, philosophers aren't misled into thinking it's good or interesting just because the masses have been. This is bunk. And so is the same sort of rationale applied to stand-up comedy. First, although I haven't done a scientific study of this, I see no reason to believe that stand-up comedy (or country/folk music) is less popular among philosophers – or even academics in general – than the other arts that are commonly the topic of philosophy. Second, philosophers have actually found bad art to be of great philosophical interest. So, even if we accepted the (patently false) claim that there is no really good stand-up comedy (or country/folk music), this wouldn't explain why philosophers ignore it. The third reason to reject this explanation is the best reason. It is ludicrous to believe that there is not enough artistic, aesthetic, or cultural value in stand-up comedy to interest philosophers. Here I can only say, if you doubt this, you need to watch more stand-up comedy. Email me, I'll give you a viewing list that will include Bob Newhart, George Carlin, Dick Gregory, Janeane Garafalo, Mitch Hedberg, Maria Bamford, and Louis C.K., for starters.

Have philosophers in the analytic tradition neglected stand-up because good stand-up comedians make what they do look so easy, so natural? The more effortful a stand-up

performance looks, generally, the less successful it is. So the apparent ease that goes into performing the art may be part of an explanation of the neglect. But many artforms share this feature. Indeed, it might be that most artforms share this feature, as well as other exhibitions of skill and talent, such as the performances of athletes and intellectuals. For example, within the realm of art, dancers make their complex, graceful, and physically taxing movements look effortless. (This is probably why I feel so clumsy and heavy on my feet after watching an elegant dance performance.) Similarly, you usually just don't see any obvious marks or evidence, other than the performance itself, of the years of training and practice behind a virtuoso piano performance. Most commonly, we've all surely heard the familiar refrain about abstract visual art: "*I could do that.*" (To which the best reply is: Oh, really? Show me.)

Like these other performing arts, excellence in stand-up comedy is haunted by the ghost of romantic notions of genius according to which the artist is a mere medium through which the muse expresses herself. On this way of thinking, artistic excellence largely results from luck, from a being "gifted." The idea that artistic excellence results more from talent, i.e., giftedness, than from hard-work, continues to hold sway today and many artists are complicit with it, despite also wanting credit for their dedication, perseverance, and hard work. Nonetheless, the audience is well aware that they can't simply do what the pianist or dancer does without comparable training and work. But in the case of stand-up comedy, the illusion of effortlessness is more thoroughgoing. Current aesthetic and stylistic norms of the art of stand-up comedy insist on performance feeling as much as possible as natural conversation. The illusion created by the stand-up comedian is that their performance is literally bringing the art into being. People who've never performed stand-up may think that the comedian gets on stage with no preparation and "just talks." There is such an art. It is improvisation, but it is quite distinct from, while interestingly related to, stand-up comedy. (Notably, the stand-up comedy works alone, while the improv artist does not.) The impression that the stand-up comedian is "making this up as she goes along" is one that the comedian wants to give, yet can grow frustrated with. At open mics you'll sometimes see an audience member who decides to give stand-up a try. With no preparation and usually ample liquid courage, they take the stage and ramble. They bomb with the audience and lose the respect of the other comedians. The other comedians take insult at the audacity of a novice who thinks they can excel without work while the comedians spend countless hours, weeks, months, years and corresponding performances honing their presentation of 30 seconds of mirth. It's difficult to believe that philosophers would be duped into missing the artifice in the the artistry of stand-up comedy. Philosophers shouldn't be as easy to fool as the birds who pecked at the grapes Zeuxis' rendered in paint.

Comedians and philosophers both have a close relationship with truth, but their respective relationships are importantly different. Comedians aren't always correct. They don't always speak the truth in their pronouncements, but neither are philosophers. The difference is that philosophers aim first and foremost at the truth; comedians aim first and foremost at the laugh. The first rule of comedy? Be funny. It's true, I'd argue, that both the comedian and the philosopher are concerned with the truth, but the freedom they each enjoy relative to it illustrates an essential difference in their concerns. Philosophers practice in relative freedom from the need to please their audience (although, admittedly, they are hardly free from the desire.) Comedians practice in relative freedom from the need to be right, despite the fact that many may believe they are. Comedians always have the available retort: Lighten up! It's a joke! Whereas no philosopher has ever gotten herself off the hook of a crushing objection by exclaiming, "Lighten up! It's just philosophy." And philosophers are permitted to speak the unvarnished truth. Always

available to the philosopher is the retort: I am not here to entertain you. But no comedian could honestly assert the same.

Philosophers of art shouldn't continue to ignore the art of stand-up comedy. Not only is there no good reason for philosophers of art to continue neglecting stand-up comedy as a philosophical topic, there are good reasons for philosophers to study stand-up. Stand-up comedy as an artform overlaps in intriguing ways with other arts, such as with jazz improv for its freeform, dance for issues concerning the identity of the artwork, tragedy for its emotional power, just to name a few. Thus, studying stand-up comedy may shed light on the philosophy of other arts. Likewise, philosophy of stand-up comedy would confront many of the central issues of philosophy of art today, including philosophical issues related to interpretation, ethics, and emotion. After all, there is nothing stopping stand-up comics from taking philosophers as the object of their comedy, why should philosophers hesitate to reciprocate?

Sources:

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Noel Carroll. (2014) "Ethics and Comic Amusement" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54(2): 241-253.