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The joke-secret and an ethics of modern individuality: From Freud to Simmel

Abstract: Why has comedy become one of our most abiding ethical preoccupations as well as a dominant mode of political critique? It is suggested that comedy appeals to contemporary persons because it provides an apt social-aesthetic form through which to face up to living with others at a time when it is hard to bear others or otherness. The article outlines an ethics of modern individuality by developing a theory of comedy as more about building social bonds and finding out what could be shared knowledge and experience, than the toppling of dominant modes of thought or repudiating our mutuality with others. Drawing on Georg Simmel's 'The Law of the Individual' the article develops a Simmelian reading of Freud's *Jokes* to argue that comedy is one solution to resolving our mutual un-alikeness by way of forging knotted paths toward recognising how we could be alike.

Introduction

The ethical permissibility of our laughter has become one of our most abiding preoccupations. From past sit-coms, present-day stand-up routines, and presidential tweets, the question "Do you find that funny?" implicitly asks, "*Should* you find that funny?" Comedy has come under considerable ethical scrutiny because it is also one of our primary modes of political critique: in our 'culture war' questions around identity difference and parities of recognition, the validity of individual testimonies and lived experiences are being situated in comic routines or contexts (see Webber, 2018; Rehak & Trnka, 2018; Krefting, 2014). As much as we debate the permissibility of laughter in political and cultural realities,

we are invited to question the permissibility of these realities through the medium of comedy.

But my purpose in this article is not to adjudicate upon the merits of using comedy when addressing the political present (for this see Giamario, 2020). Instead, the aim is to step in-between these divisions and ask why the desire to use comedy to address these problems arises, and what the ethics underlying these investments consist of. In comedy scholarship, whether humour is an effective political strategy to effect changes in points of view remains at an impasse. For Krefting (2014) and Quirk (2018), the rebellious ontology of humour is apposite to effect political resistances, while for others humour remains ambiguously placed to shift from oppositional aesthetics to effective political resistance (Nielsen, 2018; Smith, 2018; Limon, 2009). With this impasse in mind, I re-describe the problem: maybe comedy appeals to contemporary persons because it provides an appropriate social and aesthetic form through which to face up to living with others at a time when it is harder and harder to bear others or otherness. "If humor arises at a moment of intense political rivalry" writes Limon (2009:312), "it arises among parties that have the shared right to consider themselves victims." So, in this state, we invest in an aesthetic object (laughter) which is ethically mercurial precisely because we feel ourselves to be unable to offer solutions to present realities. One of the problems contemporary people encounter is the question: Am I being laughed at or laughed with, and how do I know the difference?

While the political context of contemporary humour is that of a divided society, the theory this article outlines suggests that the problems run much deeper than our present moment. The moral ambiguity of comedy - Are we laughing at or with each other? –

concerns the graver social and cognitive problems that individual's face in modernity: How far are we or can we be mutually understood? What form could our alikeness take under social conditions of plurality? Humour becomes one social form wherein acknowledgement of our possible mutuality of being and knowing each other is being staged and posed, (rather than resolved or answered). And crucially the ethical form humour takes reflects these tensions. If humour appeals to us as its stages our equivocations, the ethical form it puts in place is one where 'you and I' remain uncertain of how to proceed as 'you and I', so we turn to mutual idiocy to do so.

I locate the beginnings of this theory in a rereading of Freud's 'The Joke as a Social Process' (2002) through Simmel's 'law of the individual' (2010). Freud asks: "…why do I not laugh at my own joke? And what is the part played in the process by the other person?" (Freud, 2002:141) The relationality of the joke-work is an auspicious point of entry for rereading Freud through Simmel's philosophy of society and ethics. For Simmel (2010), too, sees modern ethics guided by the daily demand to 'be ourselves' under conditions where the others we are around are indeterminate. While I feel there is much similarity between Freud and Simmel, Simmel is an unusual theorist for an article on comedy. Simmel (1997) is a philosopher of the tragic nature of modern existence, and while he was influenced by and influenced philosophers with a humour theory (Kant, Bergson, Bakhtin), his writing has no sustained theory of comedy (and the exceptions use comedy as a negative referent for tragic experience (Simmel, 2020a/b; Simmel, 2010:183-185)). This notwithstanding, I offer my Simmelian Freud as a counterpoint to prevailing humour theories. For humour theories typically involve the denial of mutuality with others: laughter is sublimated aggression (e.g. Hobbes, 1981), repressed ill-thought (Freud, 2002), laughing at the other's blind-spots in self-perception (Plato, 1981), reminding them of their true humanity (Bergson, 1981), or the

overturning of prevailing modes of thought (Bakhtin, 1984). By contrast, I ask what specific form of self-other relationality arises by way of jokes and laughter, and how they recall the conditions of modern existence?

To do this first I outline Simmel's (2010) ethics in his 'Law of the individual' and suggest that a comic alternative is possible to his tragic original. Second, I situate the comic alternative in the relationship between humour and modernity: for me contemporary humour localises the tensions of fractured experience and social difference modernity establishes, epitomised by the stand-up comedian as a dramatic figure. Through the performances of stand-up comedians, humour becomes a way to navigate modernity's tensions. I ground this in an account by the comedian John Gordillo who see's contemporary humour underlined by a desire for a mutuality of being together and knowing one another in circumstances unfavourable to it. Third I apply Gordillo's account to two features of Simmel's wider sociology, the problem of knowledge of self and other (Simmel, 1910) and the lengthening and shortening of the teleological series of purposes (Simmel, 2011). Fourth, I develop what I am calling the ethics of the 'joke-secret' through a rereading of Freud's 'The Joke as Social Process' (2002) alongside Simmel's sociology of the secret (1950). While I concede comedy has long been perceived to be beyond ethics and politics, the article concludes that the 'joke-secret' may be viewed as a contribution to a vision of cosmopolitanism found in Said (2003) and Kristeva (1991).

Simmel's The Law of the Individual: a comic alternative

Simmel's ethics asks 'Can this act define my entire life?' Simmel places moral obligation in the 'actuality' of the individual. It is not that my life is subject to only my own vision of what is considered good, but rather my ethical obligation (*ought*) to be good arises

from my actuality as a unique person whose life is singular and finite. My life is objective in the sense that no one else is me (i.e. objectivity does not imply supra-individuality) and my ethical goods are duties comprehended in line with a *view from* my entire life (i.e. subjectivity does not lead to solipsism or nihilism). As Nielsen (2002:98) states: "the act defines one's entire life history if one accepts that life is not the sum of several actions but one continuous act." We meet in this ethical relation through mutually constituted difference: we are "complementary with respect to the uniqueness of each." (Nielsen, 2002:98)

In this way Simmel envisages our social relations as orientating *actuality* (the life I am leading) and *ought* (the life I want to lead) in each instance. Each interaction "presumes that each participant manifests some ideal potential of what she could be, her unique and total potential as that individual person." (Lee & Silver, 2012:136) The implication of this is that if my individuality is not exhausted in such encounters (*actuality*), and such interactions are instances of a whole which is never experienced *as* a whole by me (my unique individuality in view of my entire life) nor other persons (as no-one else is able to comprehend my objective uniqueness): *neither self and other are fully present in their relations*. We are both mutually absence in each other's presence. You can never properly know other people or yourself (Kemple, 2018; Fritzi, 2018; Barbour, 2017; Goodstein, 2016; Cánto-Milá, 2016; Pyyhtinen, 2009; Lee & Silver, 2012; Morris-Reich, 2003; Nielsen, 2002).

The ethical implications of this vision of sociability is to appreciate that no-one has a monopoly of knowledge upon who self and other think they are. Consequently, we seek out social forms where approximation of self-knowledge and knowledge of others seemingly fuses. It is through the forms of sociability themselves that 'the Ought' of the individual law

gets its logical coherence: not only have these forms given shape to a form of devotion of an I to you, they also shape the obligation, the person you strive to be. Between life's social forms and their accompanying *Ought*, Simmel locates the biggest stumbling block to his ethics. What he calls the tragedy of culture (Simmel, 1997) inheres in our social-ethical forms: the social forms we produce to express and shape our shared life, once created, become external to life and perceived as obstacles (Simmel, 2010:104f). The tragedy being for Simmel not that the forms, in and of themselves, are inadequate. The forms themselves are all we have got to gain a semblance of knowing ourselves and others in our mutual absences. Instead the tragedy stems from the fact that the form is incapable of sustaining the Ought, that is, realising the unique life of the individual. The *Ought* and the 'I' do not coincide: once life has taken the shape of the *Ought*, it is no longer self-identical with life.

Simmel was not forthcoming with illustrations of social forms capable of capturing the individual law, but Kemple (2018) has offered his 'Theatre and the Dramatic Actor' (Simmel, 2020a). The "inner contradiction" (Simmel, 2020:161) of theatre is how an individual can give form and inner direction to a life through content which is shaped and ordered from beyond them. The actor's genius is not to make 'the script come to life' but to evoke a "third element" between script and actor: "a need for *this* actor …to respond to a role as the law that accrues to this particular personality from the role." (Simmel, 2020a:262, original emphasis) The point being that words and deeds which are external to the subject become not merely alive but perceived as only *this* actor's unique fate and destiny. This is one ingenious solution but, as Kemple (2018:181) acknowledges, "such a realisation is not possible for everyone and may only be within reach for a few." But I think we can overcome the tragedy of individuality if we look for a comic alternative in this vein.

Instead of the dramatic actor, the figure offered here is the stand-up comedian. The comedian shares with the dramatic actor the essential criteria for realising the individual law: the feeling that only *this* comedian can tell *this* joke in *that* way to evoke laughter (see Smith, 2018 for empirical cases). But what distinguishes the theatrical actor and the stand-up comedian is that the comedian's act is not external text turned into inner-life, but their unique inner-life turned into external text (i.e. comic routines). The "inner contradiction" is reversed and with it the fate of the ethical conduct dramatized. When Simmel contends that only '*this* actor' can realise, say, *Hamlet*, through the uniqueness of their personality, he has in mind the form and fate of the tragic. Simmel (2010:184, ¶ 147) treats tragedy as enacting universal moral problems, while the fate of the tragic figure is solely individual. It is because the tragic figure individualises universal moral problems that Simmel will raise them to the epitome of the individual law: tragedy is where external forces coincide with the inner meaning of a singular life. The form and fate of the comedian is the opposite: "In comedy a thoroughly individual fate is enacted by type characters" (2010:184, ¶ 147) Turning their inner-life into comic routines, the comedian becomes cartoon-like. For Simmel this means that a comedian fails to reach the epitome of individuality achieved by the tragic figure: the comedian's fate is not bound up with "the ultimate ground of life and its necessary destiny" (Simmel, 2010:183, ¶ 147).

Simmel formalises this as follows: "In tragedy, outward chance is inward necessity – in comedy, outward necessity is inward chance." (Simmel, 2010:183, ¶ 147) But while Simmel does not value the comic figure, I contend that their sociological fate is more germane to the nature of modernity and its vision of ethical freedom. Crucial to Simmel's (1971) account of modernity is that it is epitomised by type characters (e.g. the stranger) who, while not positively identified with, nevertheless resist exclusion: what or who is

strange is not something we can ignore because acknowledgement of them as odd requires representation and integration into what we take to be normal and orthodox. Simmel's philosophical point with such sociological type characters was that what is normal is, as Symons says (2017:151), "always touched by a 'contingency' that will not be resolved." For our purposes, comedy gains its ethical value from this fact: that there is something about ourselves which is always outward necessity means that we are never as inner-orientated as we appear to be. Acting out inner-life *as if* it were external text, the comic alternative suggests this: the outward necessity to realise individuality in social forms inadequate to our individuality makes that unresolvable inward chance, or contingency, the precondition for individuality as such. I could be me, and you be you, in such a way that this is not the only way for 'you to be you' and 'me to be me'.

Comedy in modernity

I see this ambition at work in contemporary humour, epitomised by the stand-up comedian. For what accounts of humour in modern societies pivot around is a dialectic of repulsion and assimilation: on the one hand modernity involves a pluralisation of life-worlds which makes "everyone …a heretic to someone else" (Cormack et. al., 2017:386; see Berger, 2014; Feltmate, 2013; Billig, 2005; Wickberg, 1998). The personality trait we call our 'sense of humour', underlined by an obligation to 'not take ourselves so seriously' (Wickberg, 1998), reflects a cultural sensibility developed to handle modernity's inconsistences and incongruities of competing life-worlds. A sense of humour is the instrumental ability to compensate for the fault of the social at the level of the individual psyche (Billig, 2005). While, on the other, the consequence of a plurality of life world's gives rise to the need for an economising of experience under conditions of social differentiation. In this state, a

shared sense of humour gives rise to densely nuanced and insular series of in-group sentiments. Knowing what is funny evidences both a high degree of social differentiation but also an inter-personal intelligence of how to be with those like you (Kuipers, 2015; Weaver, 2011; Fine & Soucey, 2005). What we take to be our ability to make ourselves and others laugh, as well as our obligation to laugh at ourselves is a consequence of modernity's fragmentary character of life.

Elsewhere I have offered the stand-up comedian's *comic persona* as the cultural epitome of modernity's fragmentary character of life. A *comic persona* recalls the divisions between a plurality of life worlds and the obligation to live within collective labels in a society premised upon individual uniqueness (Smith, 2019). As humour scholars have demonstrated, a *comic persona* is understood to exist somewhere between their lived identities and an abject comic exaggeration of these identities (Quirk, 2018; Nelsen, 2018; Smith, 2019; Krefting, 2014; Tonder, 2014; Weaver, 2011). Importantly these scholars are all agreed that when acting out their routines the comedian inhabits an abject stereotype: the abject 'millennial' in the new generation of alternative comedians (Quirk, 2018; Smith, 2019); or historic forms minstrelsy that guide the racial humour of Hari Kondabolu (Krefting, 2014), Omid Djailili (Weaver, 2011), David Chappelle (Tonder, 2014). Abject stereotypes stage the tension between being other to every other, a singular individual in conditions of plurality.

Another term for a comic persona could be a caricatured version of their lived identities. Simmel's 'On Caricature' (2020b) defines a caricatured self as one where what is exaggerated – my appearances as a stereotypical millennial, say – is juxtaposed to something that is not exaggerated enough. This over- and under-exaggeration gives rise to

amusement, and herein lies that 'inward chance' for equivocation on 'who we are': We know that the comedians cited are both not stereotypical enough to 'be' their comic caricature, but we also know they are not given the freedom to be 'other' to their stereotyped selves as the stereotype is the source of their comic power. Their abject persona gives them the 'inward chance' to turn outward necessity – their societal identity – into an aesthetic representation that can stage the frustrations of their living sense of self. For "caricature is convincing to us only where the state of affairs is itself already caricature." (Simmel, 2020b:188) The turn to abject stereotypes – which are both done to and done by the comedian's – underlines a societal condition where we continuously feel abject. In caricature we can see "something compensating for certain deficiencies of our knowledge, however partisan it may seem." (Simmel, 2020b:188)

What is deficient in our knowledge is an answer to modernity's problems that the comedian's comic material recalls. As Limon (2000:8) remarks: "at a moment …when abjection is startlingly pervasive…stand-up inherits its highest aspiration." Limon calls this spread of stand-up comedy to life's problems 'the comedification of society': a diversity of people now turn to comedy and find their desires and frustrations voiced in its performers (predominantly through the late-night comedy news show (*The Mash Report; The Daily Show; The Colbert Report*)). But I think there is also a deeper problem of the conditions of a mutuality of being with each other and finding shared knowledge of how the world 'is' at work in contemporary comedy.

Given this I want to further ground this felt experience which underlines the prevailing forms of humour in the words of a comedian who has been able to capture its ethos in a very eloquent way. The words are those of comedian and comedy director John

Gordillo from *The Comedian's Comedian Podcast* (2014), (the empirical source material for Quirk (2018) and Smith (2019)). While Gordillo has worked with some political comedians (e.g. Reginald D. Hunter), here Gordillo speaks of (stand-up) comedy *generally*. In doing so he can outline the shared ethos by which comedy at present is written and performed, giving us a more grounded view of the caricatured sense of self I detect in contemporary humour. I would like to use Gordillo's words as the basis to derive, from a close reading, an ethics of self-other relations which speaks to why comedy is desired by contemporary persons.

This is Gordillo's statement on the ethos underlying contemporary comedy:

> You try and set up what the power of a thing has over you, why it's a problem, and if that connection is authentic, is specific and is yours, then that's half of the battle won. […]
>
> It is about leading the audience to the specific thing that bothers you. It's something …Seinfeld said years ago, 'the kind of comedy that makes me laugh is… the guy who gets wound up by the thing he shouldn't get wound up about. He brings you to the point when he's getting wound up about the stitching in his wallet and how it messes with his life. And that I …find really funny because I never would have thought to find that a problem.'
>
> Of course something else happens when someone gets wound up about their stitching in their wallet, and how they get wound up. At that point, if you're laughing, at some level

> you're laughing *at* them. But there is a massive identification going on, at the meta level, because you're understanding the role those things play. You don't have to have a badly stitched wallet to laugh at it, you have to understand the nature of that frustration […] And how you then navigate that within your bit about your wallet, it becomes an essay on that: on the escape strategies, and the frustrations and the resentments, that we take out over these non-things. And at some level it is healing, because it's a lovely, warm essay in our futility […]
>
> Comedy's brilliant at that, just making us laugh at our true stupidity. […] Because what saner thing to do, in the face of our futile existence, and the inevitable death, and just the meaninglessness of it, than laugh? That makes total sense. But it is the passivity involved in the laughter, there has to be a step after the laughter, because otherwise you would just laugh at stuff and not engage with it, and then horrible things will be done to you in the name of making you laugh (Gordillo, 2014).

In Gordillo's statement there is an implicit ought for 'good comedy': You begin with self-isolation to find togetherness; you lead an audience to how the world impinges upon you in the hope that the world impinges on others in the same way. Gordillo's comic *Ought* advocates a desire for social bonds that is already obscure: to awaken collective sentiments you begin with idiosyncrasy. This involves a double deception: Being laughed at, Gordillo

suggests, is a way to mask a 'massive identification', an identification that is then 'laughed off'. This massive identification renders knowledge of reality problematic. Life's problems appear idiosyncratic. They do so because comedy renders the individual abject. Gordillo's comedian is an idiot. They appear in this way, Gordillo suggests, as comedy is a social form for capturing a mutuality of being between self-other when the paths to self-other knowledge are vague. In the wallet stitching example, a trivial and idiosyncratic foible is an individual problem in search of collective recognition, but the manner of this recognition is rendered opaque.

Self-Other, Self-World: Jokes and the possibility of knowledge of self and world

Unlike the ethics of humour set out by Bergson (1981), where we laugh at people to remind them of their organic ability to act freely and well, the ethics of humour outlined by Gordillo is more open to the possibility that neither party knows what acting well may entail. And unlike Bakhtin's (1984) theory of carnival, the liberation in laughter here is not the toppling of hegemonic thought, but instead trying to find out what shared knowledge of the world is or could consist of. Given this, Gordillo's comedian has discerned how comedy brings to light what Simmel's individual law intimated: our mutual absences in forms of relatedness as well as our thwarted sense of knowing what we want and how to get 'it' in our social forms. These two aspects can be further elaborated through Simmel's 'How is society possible?' (1910) and his discussion of the phenomenal or 'teleological series of purposes' (2011).

A: *Jokes & Self-Other relations*

For Simmel (1910), society is made possible by our mutual recognition of our relationship to one another. However, while our mutual recognition is the very condition of

our being social, Simmel asks us to appreciate that our conceptions of this mutual acknowledgment must necessarily rely upon ways of conceiving of each other which violate our objective uniqueness. As no one else is me, and neither am I fully present with respect to myself, we work within limited forms of comprehension which necessarily orientate the knowledge of our relationship to each other.

Simmel (1910:375-376) spells this out as follows. *You* exist independent of my existence, and thus my conception of you relies upon my building up a sensuous representation of you in the same manner as I do other external objects. However, unlike external objects, my representations of you fails to capture the *independence of you from my representation of you*. The same goes for any representation I proffer of myself; I only ever share part and partial versions of my entire individuality. Capturing the feeling of being a person cannot be gained through any adequate representation. Yet as we *must* forge representations of one another to relate to one another, that "something" (your very individuality) "which cannot be resolved into our representing still becomes the content…" (Simmel, 1910:375) As such, "the product of our representation" – *our conceptions of each other* – becomes the "profoundest" obstacle to knowing and becoming social (Simmel, 1910:275-376). All social relations suffer from degrees of misrepresentation on both sides (see Cánto-Milá, 2016:90-92; Goodstein, 2017:317-318).

Gordillo's comedian has come to an appreciation of this problem of mutual *absence* in our relatedness, and the potential for all social relations to be built around misrepresentation: getting their joke is also getting the measure of them as an individual. But our measure of them is also our measure for knowledge of the world – even if that knowledge may be immensely trivial (i.e. wallet stitching). The problem Gordillo's comedian

has worked out is that acknowledgement of their distinctiveness needs to be a misrepresentation (caricature) of some kind – to see them as idiotic in some sense – in order for that idiocy to go together with an idiosyncrasy of knowledge of the world. Idiocy becomes the means to finding out how knowledge of the world and experience is, ironically, *shared knowledge and experience*. Between shared knowledge of 'how the world appears to us' – in quotidian experiences of, say, the frustrations of wallet stitching – and the impasses faced in sharing this knowledge, there appears the isolated comic individual. An individual rendered here idiosyncratic and idiotic, but only in so far as their idiocy is aimed at figuring out how or in what way shared knowledge of the world is to be attained.

B: *Jokes & Self-World intentionality*

So comic material on wallet stitching could be read – employing Goodstein's (2003:211) reading of Simmel's 'synecdoche' movements from "cultural details" to broader "spiritual-intellectual and historical macrocosms" – as attempts in answering life's questions, all the while knowing that such 'big questions' are beyond comedy's scope of comprehension. Comedy may be understood as being the other side of the distinctive phenomenal experience Simmel (2011:207ff) designated for the money economy, the teleological series of purposes.

The teleological series of purposes captures our inability to comprehend and experience life 'as a whole'. As Goodstein (2017:201) comments, it registers "the practical constraints on thinking experience." For in modernity we are unable to

> absolutely know the final meaning or value of the unfolding arrays of appearances, for we ourselves and our processes of

> reflection belong to the very process in which our concepts are developing historically (Goodstein, 2017:201)

Comedy, I suggest, is remarkably apt to capture an experience where thinking and our conceptualisation of thought are running up and alongside one another.

To elaborate, the teleological sequence of purposes outlines the intellectual processes through which we attempt to try and connect different parts of life into a meaningful, singular whole. Simmel begins by observing that this desire comes, however, from the experience of modern life – epitomised in the money economy – where we feel that what is far-away can be brought within our reach, and much of what is close to us involves roundabout means to 'getting' it (Simmel, 2011:208). This prolongation and shortening of the 'teleological series of purposes' – what we want and how to get it – gives rise to a desire to seek a singular vision of life. We wish for a view 'of the whole' to gain a sense of where our desires come from, and what they are orientated toward. Simmel (2011:223f) works this out as follows. With an end in mind, if I do not know how to get what I want my interest in getting it goes nowhere. We must know what we want to get it; and we must know how to get it to properly know what wanting it entails. However, under modern conditions, our commitments interact with an external world of inordinate complexity, one where the causal sequences which make up the view of our purposes becomes increasingly more difficult to reconstruct. Under such conditions we become more aware of desiring something but not knowing precisely *what it is* or *how best to get it*.

Indeed jokes can be understood as a synecdoche for the modern worldview: with an end in mind - laughter - Gordillo's comedian knows what they want but the psychological possibility of this end is one where the causal relation is made to feel inchoate or

mysterious. (How do you make people laugh? Is there a formula, properly speaking?) Simmel treated money as a psychological object where desire and our being able to consummate it was rendered soluble. By contrast, jokes demonstrate that you may know what you want (laughter as evidence of mutuality of self-other) but there is an indeterminacy involved. Comedy relies upon the response of others in such a way that it makes 'knowing what you're getting and how you're getting it' opaque (so *self-other knowledge* becomes opaque in the process). Comedy provides us with a (pleasurable, half-known) illusion that we have overcome the pitfalls in our intellectual comprehension of our worlds.

Our synecdoche is that an idiosyncratic piece of comic material on 'wallet stitching' is also an experience of being "in stitches" in terms of knowing how to relate to self and world, self and others. Being "in stitches" with laughter seemingly collapses our impasses with self-other, self-world. Jokes can be experienced as the sensuous, incongruous answer to the thwarted wish for a clearer view of the phenomenal series in a world unable to be grasped as a singular totality. In a Simmelian view, Freud's (2002:149) famous claim that "we scarcely ever know what it is we are laughing at in a joke" becomes less asocial or repressed wishes, but instead our short-circuits of knowledge of self and world appearing to momentarily grasp the totality of our conditions of experience and knowledge of others. To develop this further I draw out Freud's account of the motives of joking alongside Simmel's (1950) sociology of the secret.

The Ethics of the Joke Secret

A: *Self-Other relations in the joke-secret*

Gordillo's quotation above begins:

> *You try and set up what the power of a thing has over you, why it's a problem […] It is about leading the audience to the specific thing that bothers you.*

Gordillo describes a journey of self-other meeting in a representation. Gordillo's comedian, the first person, brings *you*, the third-party, together not through mutual recognition of self-other but through recognition of a shared representation, a second party, the humorous object - the stitching in the wallet. However, this representation is a vanishing mediator: it is not stitching in *a* wallet but *his* wallet. The second party, the humorous object, becomes the proxy for the first-person; the comedian as object and agent of ridicule. It is in this representation that an ethical moment of mutual coming together takes place. The mutuality of the self-other occurs through a discovery: "I never would have thought to find that a problem." The discovery of the 'stitched wallet' problem, the perceived fault in comprehending the logical formation by which our worlds add-up, comes to produce another reality beyond our immediate comprehension of everyday experience.

Here the joke-form shares qualities with secrecy as they register human togetherness in an analogous form. "Secrecy", Simmel (1950:462) notes, "offers… the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former." Such is Gordillo's account of the humorousness of the modern comedian: a new world appears alongside the obvious with the newly discovered problem (a secret shared), and the obvious world is rendered humorous to bring together relations of mutuality where previously there would have been no, properly speaking, mutual recognition of this kind. A shared joke suggests the possibility of a second world which owes its existence to the mutual dependency of one person to another. The possibility of this

second world in secrecy (and, here, jokes), Simmel (1950:330, added emphasis) maintains, offers "an immense enlargement of life: *numerous contents of life cannot even emerge in the presence of full publicity.*" Such enlargement of life through secrecy, under modern conditions, occurs through an economy of knowing. In modernity, secrecy tends toward a narrowing of the teleological sequence of purposes by way of making what was once public secret. Here frustrations over wallet stitching are rendered and understood as idiosyncrasies, not common knowledge of the way the world is. We never would have known this to be a problem; we have entered the secret world of the comedian through an abject representation of them. It is in the economising of knowledge that a Freudian theory of jokes, as a social process, and Simmel's sociology of the secret meet for a philosophy of self-other relations.

Freud's (2002:141) intention in 'The joke as social process' is to ask "what is the part played …by the other person" to make me laugh? His conclusion is that as "every joke demands its own audience", then "laughing at the same joke evidences far-reaching psychical conformity." (Freud, 2002:147) But it is in the circuitous process through which jokes bring to light such mutuality between persons that the ethics of self-other reveal their peculiarly modern qualities. Joking partners, what Freud terms the first and third persons (the self and other), bring to light their mutuality also through an economy of knowing. Jokes require, as do secrets, a similar process of bringing to light life's contents outside of 'the presence of full publicity'. And it is in the Freudian theory of the economy of wit - where an extensive thought process collapses and the saved psychic energy is realised in the pleasure of laughter as a physical response - we have, in fact, an account of self-other relations hidden in the language of economy and physiology. Overcoming an inhibition is what the third-party, the Other, has to achieve to laugh at my, the first person ('self')'s, joke.

By doing so Freud will speak of laughter as "some expenditure in energy-change …being lifted and released", and that the third-person "purchases the pleasure of the joke with a very small expenditure of his own. *He is made a present of it, as it were*." (Freud, 2002:145, added emphasis)

From the language of physiology and economics, to the language of giving and receiving. The role this psychic and physiological economy plays in this gift-giving process is a re-orientation of established, normatively ordered, patterns of thought through which we view life's contents. (Wallet stitching being one of them). Freud would emphasise that such a reordering of life's contents is already present in the third-party (the Other); all they needed was my joke to bring it to light. But whereas Freud would stress repression and its relief, here I am stressing the ethical moment whereby *I* am essential to bringing to light *Your* laughter, and *You* are essential to *My* joke telling. This is the *form* of our ethical relation.

Our shared joke recalls the second world alongside the manifest world in secrecy; we have found another way to be together, and in doing so reworked the established ways of thinking in order to create a novel recognition of our togetherness. Jokes, as with secrets, require recognition by third parties to occur. Put this way, Freud's language of a psychic economy is nothing other than the blocks and obstacles of a prolonged teleological series of action being lifted. The secret and the joke shorten the teleological series of purposes. For when Freud (2002:151) finds that the motive for joke telling is, precisely, *because* we cannot laugh at our own jokes in isolation, the result is that the joke, ethically speaking, establishes relations of mutuality between persons who are only partly capable of accounting for the chain of associations which make them mutual persons to begin with. The ethical moment

of the joke occurs when laughter both assures *me* of my humour by giving *you* pleasure, and your pleasure is a "remedy", in Freud's (2002:151) words, to "my loss of pleasure when the joke has ceased to be a novelty." In this the ethics of comedy is an ethics of individuation and its recognition. You make up for my loss of self. I must give to you a representation of me we can mutually "laugh at" in order to retrace our mutuality, and, as we move toward laughter, you make my stupidity your own.

But the point worth stressing here is that to turn idiosyncrasy into identification, a large amount of individuation needs to already be in place. Comedy becomes confessional and revelatory *because* of a high degree of social differentiation and extends such differentiation by offering to present collective neuroses *as* individual foibles. The work of the joke is to extend the work of secrecy from self to Other. Between the first and the third, the comedian's caricature of themselves becomes a consummated representation of a self in-between you and (s)he. What the joke-secret does, between first and third person, is produce a space in which the realisation of individuality occurs through the mutual togetherness without either first or third giving up on their mutual difference and autonomy. This 'inward chance' of the joke is the highest good for an ethics of modern individuality.

B: *Laughing at and with*

But how this good is achieved is problematic.

> *if you're laughing, at some level you're laughing at them, but there is a massive identification going on, at a meta level…*

Plato's *Philebus* (1987) reasoned that laughter at our friends mixes pleasure with malice and therefore cannot be considered an ethical good: malice produces 'a pain of the soul'. Gordillo is aware of this troubling aspect of our laughter, but points to the opposite. To "understand the nature of that frustration", properly speaking, is to go through the process of disavowing our mutuality with another to better laugh with. The ethical problem of our laughter - our laughing *at* - is at once our way of maintaining our individuality and difference *as well as* how we generate our mutuality to others. The comedian's investment in badness in the joke-form has the virtue of making them disown themselves to find commonality with others, while others find commonality with them by repudiating such commonality to begin with. As noted, in between this we have the consummation of the comedian's caricature of themselves: a self which is impossible *without* the mutual dependency of others and where mutual dependency does not dissolve the individuality and difference of each party. Simmel's problem of sociability, (we are always working with misrepresentations of each other), is given new ethical accent when we consider the secret joke-work at play in comedy.

We have found in comedy a mutual, collaborative act of individual and collective deception; we have invented a way to maintain the mutual ignorance we have of each other's interior, inner-worlds through a social form which necessitates that we *both* give each other the obligation to retrace our inner, idiosyncratic patterns of thought *and* disavowal our ownership to such thought processes. The result is an ethics of individuality achieved through collective processes. Comedy gives us a way for the central psychological-epistemological "problem" of (mis-)representation in our sociability to be rendered bearable. Not only do we always choose a partial series of our inner thoughts, (for if we did tell each other everything we thought we would all be sent away (Simmel, 1950:312)). But

Simmel goes further than this: we cannot imagine social bonds without mutual absences on both sides. Simmel's truly radical claim is that it is only because there remains, what Barbour (2017:77) calls, this "silent interiority" in all social bonds, that social bonds become possible. So, what the joke-secret circles around is the uncanny experience on what intimation of a shared silent interiority may be like. The ambivalence of our laughter – am I laughing with you or at you, and therefore at me or with me? – registers the truth that neither of us want to fully share in this.

For what we have been describing is a situation where I must acknowledge the other inside me; I must make my representation of you a representation of me. And I get lost in the process: am I laughing at you or with you? This is the efficacy of the joke-secret: we still need some way to keep ourselves together and apart. One way to preserve ourselves as distinct, to properly appreciate that our caricatures of each other are inadequate, is for the joke-secret to be one where our fantasies of intellectual supremacy gain their full recognition in their being laughed at. We have mutual acknowledgement by mutual disavowal.

In Stitches: beyond the pleasure principle

> *…otherwise you would just laugh at stuff and not engage with it, and then horrible things will be done to you in the name of making you laugh*.

If all that comedy amounted to was pleasurable laughter, no good could come of it. We are beyond the pleasure principle. Gordillo's statement echoes Bernstein's (1997:102) remarks on Kristeva's (1981) *Powers of Horror*: abject comedy "sublimates the death-drive…". To imagine a purely comic world would be to imagine "the possibility of beings who live in a

symbolic universe in which the terms of that symbolic no longer provide the conditions for significant human separateness or connectedness." (Bernstein, 1997:102)

Our desire for comedy comes at a time when our sense of 'separation and connection' – whether we are being laughed at or with – has become our most abiding preoccupation. Even though this essay has traced the trivialities of 'wallet stitching', the point is that the desire to be 'stitched' back together is itself a cover story for the 'bleeding' (violence and aggression) which proceeded it. One of the reasons for the pervasiveness of comedy in the realms of life we take most seriously (and consider 'no laughing matter') is precisely because we feel improper forms of exchange is all we have got. But it is the impermissibility of the desires found in our laughter that concern us the most: we really worry about our ethical status when we either look back on what we found funny in the past (e.g. old sit-coms) or what other people find funny now. So, when it comes to finding something funny, the ethics of the joke-secret is orientated to keeping ourselves together while apart. But what we have found is that the joke-secret is a form of sociability where we experience a strange or even uncanny sense of mutuality with people who, *prima facie*, we feel ourselves to have nothing in common with. By way of conclusion, I want to offer the ethics of comedy discerned here as a contribution to discussions on the politics of cosmopolitanism found in Freud's late writings (Rumble, 2011; Said, 2003; Kristeva, 1991) and Simmel's essay on the stranger (Goodstein, 2017; 2016).

Goodstein's (2017:310ff; 2016:43-49) account of 'The Stranger' (Simmel, 1971), which she places alongside Freud's 'The Uncanny' (1955), argues that what really makes the stranger strange (or 'uncanny' (unhomelike)) is that the commonalities we have with people who are not 'like us' are commonalities that "connect us only because they connect a great

many people." (Simmel, 1971:147) The point is that, like Freud said of sharing a sense of humour, "that which is common to two is perhaps never common *only* to them but belongs to a general conception which includes much else besides, many *possibilities* of similarities." (Simmel, 1971:148, original emphasis) It is this uncanny possibility of connection to unlimited people, beyond our limited (social and cognitive) circle, that terrifies us. Strangeness, Goodstein (2016:49) points out, is not merely the preserve of the other but all of us.

Herein lies a cosmopolitan ethics for a divided present. Kristeva (1991), Said (2003) and Rumble (2011) discern a politics of cosmopolitanism in psychoanalytic accounts of where the boundaries between self and other become indiscernible: the uncanny double, like Simmel's stranger, breaks down the boundaries between myself and others. Such accounts suggest for Said (2003:54) that "identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed…" In this radical, originary break which continues to haunt us, Kristeva (1991:192) sees the 'discovery' of psychoanalysis as offering a politics of cosmopolitanism: our solidarity is to be founded upon "the consciousness of our unconscious." In this Kristeva (1991:192) places us "far removed from a call to brotherhood", and for Said (2003:54) a far cry from an uncritical multiculturalism of 'tolerance and compassion'. By contrast the essence of a cosmopolitanism of uncanny strangeness is founded upon an early stage in our psychic and social development where indiscernible boundaries of self-world, self-other becomes reaffirmed: we must attend to a "troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound." (Said, 2003:54) Bound together in this "shared wound of separation" (Rumble, 2011:169) we must reckon with our shared singularity and finitude. If this politics is not learning to 'tolerate' each other better, it is

learning that the uncanny stranger makes us acknowledge that a point of view is never wholly ours. What you are doing when you laugh at yourself and others (both strangely uncanny, incomplete versions of each other) is properly attending to the desire of comedy at a time of division: facing up to the fact that there is no way back together or forever apart again.

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