

Don't You Get My Joke? Sensus Communis in Joke Reception

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I am addressing an issue in the philosophy of humour which concerns the reception of joke performances, i.e., the reciting and receiving of short fictional narratives of verbal humour. I analyse what understanding a joke implies for the participants involved in its performance and critically assess the question whether there is such a thing as the correct understanding of a joke and if so, how it is justified. Cohen proposes an account which argues that the understanding of a joke depends on respective background conditions on behalf of the recipient, however, to get the joke principally implies understanding the teller of the joke; the common laughter then implies a shared feeling of “intimacy”. (1999, 28f.) The main motivation for joke telling, according to Cohen, is the desire to reach others, to verify that others understand us, and, in successful cases, to enter into a shared feeling with others. I accept that understanding a joke performance involves both a cognitive and an affective response but have three points of doubt about Cohen’s account:

(i) The joke teller and the recipient(s) do not react to the joke at the same moment and are therefore not in a position to share the same (spontaneous) response. The joke teller knows the joke she is telling, she has already responded to it. Now she acts as a mediator who ideally performs the joke well. In that sense the recipients’ laughter may partly be a form of applause; however, they still laugh about the content of the performance. It has been pointed out by various authors (e.g., Hurley, Dennett and Adams, 2011) that laughter is not necessary for humour. Laughter in Cohen’s account seems to serve as a confirmation of the shared feeling. I instead claim that laughter in joke performances expresses the recognition of the “funny” element. I am sympathetic with Levinson who refers to the response of laughter in order to explain the humorous or funny. He argues that “something is funny if it in itself pleases appropriate people through being grasped, where the pleasure is of the sort that leads, though not inevitably, to laughter.” (2005, 415)

(ii) Cohen addresses the question of whether there is a correct understanding of jokes with a twofold claim. Certain background conditions, such as knowledge, belief, dispositions, etc., must be met in order to allow the understanding of a joke. And the correct understanding of a joke implies an actual shared response between the participants involved in its performance. Cohen therefore demands both

a cognitive and an affective response to the joke. Paragraph 20 of Kant's Critique of Judgement explains the difference between judgements of taste and judgements of cognition. The former do not have a specific objective principle like cognitive judgements, however they do have a subjective principle, "which determines what pleases or displeases only by feeling and not by concepts, but nevertheless in a generally valid way". (cf. 2009 [1790], § 20/p. 95) Such a principle is the *sensus communis*. Kant claims that a judgement of taste can only be made under the premise of *sensus communis*, and that it must be universally communicable, otherwise it has no correspondence with the object to which the judgement refers. (cf. 2009 [1790], § 21/p. 96) However, and that is an important point, the judgement already assumes that in principle everyone else should agree with it, independently of the expression of an actual agreement. Kant does not consider jokes among the realm of the beautiful, but the agreeable, and therefore excludes them from corresponding judgements with the principle of *sensus communis*. Jokes for him mainly elicit a physical stimulus. I instead am convinced that Kant's considerations can be applied to the question of understanding a joke. The interesting thing is that indeed a joke can be "understood correctly" to a certain extent. I argue that the absurd or incoherent aspects displayed in a joke can be recognized as "funny" and those who do so may laugh about them, but one has not thereby corrected an error or solved a problem. We become aware that aesthetic perception also plays a role, and our self-reflective laughter can be an expression of pleasure in this challenge. A successful joke performance is possible if a recipient responds to it with comprehensive understanding which is justified in the sense of *sensus communis*, but independent from an actual shared response by others.

(iii) With the description of his concept of intimacy, Cohen shifts the focus away from the joke as performative content to the participants and their desires. I instead assume that the recipients' main aim is to understand *the joke* and recognize the "funny" element it displays. The universal communicability in Kant's elaboration may be related to Cohen's account. If Cohen assumes that we tell jokes primarily to find out whether others share our taste, he advocates verifying the basic principle of *sensus communis* in individual cases. For him, then, it is not an underlying ideal principle, but manifests itself in the individual's desire to be confirmed in their judgements of taste by others. Yet, I argue that the reception of a joke performance exemplifies just what Kant is describing. In the successful case of correct understanding, laughing at a joke implies the comprehensive recognition of the "funny" element of the joke. It involves a cognitive understanding of the logical and linguistic content of the joke story, but also appreciation for the form of the joke, its crafting, composition, structure, as well as pleasure or enjoyment in the performance of the joke. Laughter, then, *is* both an aesthetic and cognitive judgement and expresses a subjective necessity.

References

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