

Book Review

David Shoemaker. 2024. *Wisecracks: Humor and Morality in Everyday Life*. pp. 204. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 9780226832982. \$25.00.

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This book makes an important contribution both to the philosophy of humor and to moral philosophy. Its clarity, repetition of main points, and summarizing Introduction and Conclusion make it easy to read, and the informal style and self-deprecating examples mirror the friendly conversations it discusses.

Unlike most publications on the morality of humor, *Wisecracks* skips lightly over the telling of anonymous jokes and focuses on spontaneous humor created by people within conversations about topics in those conversations. As Shoemaker points out, when we engage in humor with family and friends, most of the time it is not by telling canned jokes, but by making off-the-cuff quips about something that has come up in our conversation. Instead of interrupting the conversation to perform an anonymous script, we keep it going in a way that delights the others and invites them to add their own comments.

Analyzing such interpersonal, context-dependent humor is more difficult than analyzing canned jokes, of course, but spontaneous conversational humor is far more important to most people than telling jokes. Among my oldest friends, humor is treasured but I cannot remember any of them telling a joke.

In this book, *wisecrack* has a narrower meaning than dictionary definitions such as *Oxford's* “a clever remark or joke.” Under such definitions, Oscar Wilde’s “Work is the curse of the drinking classes” qualifies, as does Dorothy Parker’s quip on hearing that President Calvin Coolidge had died – “How can they tell?” But as Shoemaker uses *wisecrack*, the funny comment has to be about someone in the conversation, and those in the conversation have to care about each other (2–4). Those restrictions do not apply to the more general term *quip* as defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: “a witty or funny observation or response usually made on the spur of the moment.” Most of Shoemaker’s examples of wisecracks fall under the category of *kidding* – gently criticizing or teasing someone in a friendly or good-humored way (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

In considering the morality of “wisecracks,” Shoemaker admits that making such interpersonal comments is dangerous because of the harm it can do. Wisecracks can be cruel. They can be exclusionary, creating or reinforcing a boundary with an outgroup. They can strengthen power differentials, as when bosses poke fun at

employees but don't allow the reverse. They can be misunderstood in a way that fractures relationships.

But wisecracks often have benefits as well. Among them are the bonding power of shared amusement, especially over shared problems; the boost in the wisecracker's psychological well-being fostered by self-deprecating stories; the rapport those stories create with listeners; and the way good wisecracks can bring quarrels to an end.

The difference between people with good and bad senses of wisecracking humor, Shoemaker says, is the amount of *empathy* they have. Insufficient empathy can lead to callous or cruel wisecracks that hurt and divide people, evoking moral anger rather than amusement. But too much empathy causes overly sensitive people to miss out on the benefits of interpersonal humor, by avoiding that humor lest anyone's feelings get hurt. In line with Aristotle's distinction between buffoons and prigs (often translated as *boors* in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4, 10), Shoemaker says that the ideal is to be sensitive to your listeners and the situation, while at the same time playfully breaking the rules of serious conversation to create amusement. Here he appeals to two of the four humor styles described by Rod Martin – the affiliative style and the self-enhancing style. A third humor style, the aggressive style, is characteristic of what Shoemaker, using a term coined by Delroy Paulhus and Kevin Williams (2002) calls the Dark Triad – narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths – all of whom lack empathy and so have either bad senses of humor, or none at all.

Empathy is key not only to interpersonal humor but to morality. "It's one of the most important elements for success in both our moral dealings and our wisecracking with each other" (85). "Impairments in empathy thus predict that one will have both a flawed sense of humor and a flawed sense of morality" (165).

Shoemaker's analyses and arguments are well grounded in the philosophy of humor, from Aristotle to Noël Carroll and John Morreall. But he wears his scholarship lightly, using lots of personal anecdotes, examples from popular culture, and colloquial expressions. He asks probing questions and offers reasonable answers, and presents objections to the various positions discussed.

To make his case for the value of wisecracking, Shoemaker has three chapters on the objections that it often involves deception, mockery, and stereotyping people. With each, he acknowledges the dangers but shows possible benefits. Mockery, for example, can be cruel, but can also promote social bonding, as in the celebrity "roasts" of decades ago. It can also, as Francis Hutcheson and Henri Bergson said, correct bad behavior. One of the most intriguing discussions is about Donald Trump's mocking of a reporter who had a disabling motor neuron disease. Shoemaker discusses a defense of Trump, following the arguments claiming that his mean sense of humor springs from his own disability – Narcissistic Personality Disorder (120–122).

Wisecracking humor based on racial and gender stereotypes has also been widely criticized. Shoemaker admits that such humor can be racist or sexist. But “playing with stereotyping humor can be subversive, in a positive way. It can help to remind us of the idiocy of racism and sexism – by exposing and caricaturing what dumb or bad people occasionally believe about their fellows – and so keep us vigilant ourselves in not buying into those stereotypes” (144–145).

Chapter 7 gets its title from the Eric Idle song in the crucifixion scene at the end of *Monty Python's Life of Brian*: “Always Look on the Bright Side of Death: How and Why to Find the Funny in Pain and Tragedy.” Here Shoemaker goes beyond wisecracks to the benefits of what I call the Comic Vision of Life (Morreall 2014). He begins with Thomas Nagel's reflections on absurdity in life – the “conspicuous disparity between pretension or aspiration and reality” (Nagel 1979, 13). Most of the time we embrace certain values and pursue projects that we consider important: we have the “engaged perspective” typical of emotions like fear, anger, and sadness. But we can also step back in self-consciousness and “look at our lives from the perspective of the universe, as it were, to see that we are embedded in a very specific and local time and place, with highly contingent features.” In this disengaged perspective, we see our values and projects as “fragile, dubious, possibly without any true foundation at all” (Shoemaker, 171).

In response to the absurdity here, we could bemoan our fate, as in tragedy, or adopt a rebellious stance by pursuing our goals anyway, as in the works of Albert Camus. But Nagel offered an alternative to tragic and heroic stances: we may “simply approach our absurd lives with irony” (Nagel 1979, 23). Instead of being engaged and emotional, we may experience what Henri Bergson called “the momentary anesthesia of the heart” and laugh. Whereas emotions typically treat things and situations as mattering, amusement treats them as not mattering.

Obviously, it would be suicidal to adopt a disengaged comic perspective toward everything, but in many situations the comic response has benefits. The most often discussed is as a coping mechanism. Here Shoemaker cites the dark humor of paramedics and other first responders, linking it to the self-enhancing humor style. Such humor reduces the psychological and physical harm of stress, increases pain tolerance, and enables the cognitive reappraisal of crises, for more effective responses. Similar benefits have been documented with humor in dealing with illness, rape, and even the Holocaust (see Lipman 1993). Three friends captive in Auschwitz, for example, met each day in the open yard, but Ben did not show up several days in a row. “Where's Ben?” one friend asked the other. Pointing to the smoke coming out of a chimney, the other said, “There he goes.”

The ability to make wisecracks in conversation, then, evinces a more general ability to engage in psychological shifts for the pleasure of it. Aristotle spoke of the wisecracker as *eutrapelos*, which is Greek for “one who turns well” (in Morreall 2009, 23). Thomas

Aquinas even argued that a good sense of humor is a moral virtue. The *eutrapelos*, he said, is “a pleasant person with a happy cast of mind who gives his words and deeds a cheerful turn” (in Morreall 2009, 24). Shoemaker is in good company.

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