

BOOK REVIEW

Wilk, Thomas and Steve Gimbel. *In On the Joke: The Ethics of Humor and Comedy* (Berlin: Volume 4 of *De Gruyter Studies in Philosophy of Humor*. Ed. Lydia Amir). De Gruyter, 2024. Pp. 144.

Giorgio Baruchello¹

This excellent book commands remarkable rhetorical aptness, stemming from eight “seemingly contrasting pre-theoretical intuitions” (4–8) that function *qua* basic premises which are unlikely to sound controversial to the intended audience, i.e., primarily a collection of university-educated, middle-class liberals such as the author of the present review and, in all likelihood, many if not most of its readers. These intuitions, *de facto* and *ab initio*, erase many others that can be presented as well, e.g., that people claiming to be harmed by jokes are snowflakes, for scathing words alone are never real slights: No blood ever gets spilled.² By way of their “seeming[-] contrast[-],” these eight “pre-theoretical intuitions” implicitly suggest that we are being shown all the sensible controversies and plausible debates surrounding joking as such, but we are not.

The analogy around which this book orbits, i.e., the accountancy-like construction of joking, is an astute conceptual concertina, which stretches to cover all the issues that the authors want duly covered, but can also be compressed in order to avoid the issues that could cause too much trouble; and an analogous criticism can be made with respect to their flexible, generic, all-purpose qualifier “kinda-sorta” (9 *et passim*).

The repeated utilization of linguistic expressions such as “ethical calculus” (19 and 100), “calculation” (22 *et passim*), “equal quantity” (55) and cognates thereof intentionally evoke a bookkeeper’s double-entry accounting system of assets and liabilities whereby one can assess the moral im-/permissibility of a joke. Regrettably, joking’s moral sphere altogether lacks the seemingly neutral, *de-facto* universal, *de-jure* agreed-upon quantifiability of the commonplace price system that is in daily use in the world’s monetary economies. One thing is to render a

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² Cf. Ayer, A.J. (1987). “Sources of Intolerance.” In Mendus, S. & Edwards, D. (Eds.), *On Toleration*, 83–100. Oxford: Clarendon.

moral judgment *ex post*, whenever a joke has played out in a specific setting before a specific audience.

Another is to perform the same sort of ethical assessment *ex ante*, i.e., to decide whether to dare to make a certain joke. The book, as far as the author of the present short review was able to determine, conflates these two very different aspects of joking qua interpersonal and often public act by a specific individual under specific circumstances and, above all, largely tacit and painfully opaque sets and standards of communication, while providing a valuable plethora of clever insights into the presuppositions of today's American polite society vis-à-vis the un/expected and un/accepted uses of humor.

The authors also claim to offer an ethics of joking, but where are the compelling roots of the moral normativity that they employ in their book's six chapters? Were we to grant the possible existence and hypothetical legitimacy of alternative moral intuitions (e.g., the conservative Christian's, the communist revolutionary's, the Nietzschean superman's), whom could they effectively, rationally convince?