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Racist Acts and Racist Humor

Phillips contrasts two models for understanding racist humor: the agent-centered model and the act-centered model. According to the former model, in order for an action such as telling a joke to be racist, the actor must be a racist whose action is motivated by racist beliefs or feelings. Phillips raises a number of objections to the agent-centered model and goes on to defend the act-centered model according to which what makes a joke racist is that it involves a basic racist act. A basic racist act is one in which either (1) the actor performs the action in order to harm someone else (the target of the joke) because the target is a member of a certain ethnic group, or (2) regardless of the actor's intentions, the act can be expected to mistreat the target. In cases in which ethnic humor meets either of these two conditions, it is racist and thus *prima facie* wrong.

Although Phillips does not explicitly appeal to Ross's ethic of *prima facie* duties in defending his act-centered approach to the racist humor, his approach, with its emphasis on the *prima facie* wrongness of racist humor, can be understood from within Ross's moral theory. *Recommended Reading:* ethics of *prima facie* duty, chap. 1, sec. 2E.

I

Racist jokes are often funny. And part of this has to do with their racism. Many Polish jokes, for example, may easily be converted into moron jokes but are not at all funny when delivered as such. Consider two answers to "What has an I.Q. of 100?": (a) a nation of morons; or (b) Poland. Similarly, jokes portraying Jews as cheap, Italians as cowards, and Greeks as dishonest may be told as jokes about how skin-flints, cowards, or dishonest people get on in the world. But they are less funny as such (at least if one is not Jewish, Greek, or Italian). As this suggests, racist humor is "put down" humor. We laugh, in part, because we find put-downs funny; sometimes even if they are about us. In many contexts, this tendency is relatively harmless; indeed, within reason, it may be

therapeutic to join others in a good laugh at oneself. Why, then, all the commotion about racist humor?

"Racist" is a moral pejorative. To say that an act is racist is to say that it is *prima facie* wrong. Our problem, then, is to determine the range of cases that deserve this description. That is, we are trying to decide what forms of race-related behavior to discourage by means of this moral pejorative. In relation to humor, we face a nest of problems. Much racist humor, for example, attributes an unflattering characteristic to its target group. What if members of that group really have or tend statistically to have that characteristic? Surely we are allowed to notice this and to communicate this information to one another. Is truth a defense against the charge of racism? Also, what of the good-natured interplay between friends of different ethnic groups in which such jokes may play an important part? And what of exchanges of

such jokes between members of ethnic groups about whom they are told? This paper will present an account of racist humor in relation to which we can answer these and related questions. What is said here about racist humor will also apply to sexist humor and to humor about national groups.

II

Not all humor that takes an ethnic group as its subject matter is racist. Some such humor is morally unobjectionable. Our first task, then, is to distinguish this sort of humor from racist humor. In other words, we need to determine why some humor about ethnic groups is morally unobjectionable while other humor is not.

Let me begin with a popular theory: or, in any case, a theory that is presupposed by a very common defense against the charge of having made a racist joke. This defense denies, in effect that jolting remarks are racist so long as they are made by persons whose souls are pure. According to this view, a racist act presupposes a racist actor, and a racist actor is a person who acts from racist beliefs and/or racist feelings. I call this the Agent-Centered Account. Although a complete account of this view requires an account of the nature of racist beliefs and feelings, my purposes do not require this here. For now, suffice it to say that on this account one may innocently entertain one's fellow Rotarians with jokes like "After shaking hands with a Greek, count your fingers," so long as one harbors no racist beliefs or feelings about Greeks. If one's soul is pure, such jokes are all in good fun and ought to be accepted as such.

Before attacking this theory, I want to contrast it with my own account. The term "racist" is used of books, attitudes, societies, epithets, actions, persons, feelings, policies, laws, etc., as well as of humor. Any account of "racist" will explain some of these uses in relation to others. The Agent-Centered Theory explains racist humor in relation to racist persons, and racist persons in relation to racist beliefs and attitudes. And, to the extent that it can be generalized,

moreover it explains all other uses of "racist" in this way as well. On my own view, "racist" is used in its logically primary sense when it is attributed to actions. All other uses of "racist," I believe, must be understood directly or indirectly in relation to this one. Accordingly, racist beliefs are (roughly) beliefs about an ethnic group used to "justify" racist acts, racist feelings are feelings about an ethnic group that typically give rise to such acts, and racist epithets are the stings and arrows by means of which certain such acts are carried out. Books and films are said to be racist, on the other hand, if they perpetuate and stimulate racist beliefs or feelings (which are in turn understood in relation to racist acts).

More precisely, on my view, "racist" is used in its logically primary sense when it is used of what I shall call Basic Racist Acts. Roughly, P performs a Basic Racist Act by doing A when: (a) P does A in order to harm Q because Q is a member of a certain ethnic group; or (b) (regardless of P's intentions or purposes) P's doing A can reasonably be expected to mistreat Q as a consequence of Q's being a member of a certain ethnic group.¹ Note that, on this account, P's motives, beliefs, feelings, or intentions need not be taken into account in determining that P performed a racist act. If you refer to someone as "a stinking little kike" in my company, I am harmed by your action because I am Jewish, whether you intended this result or not. If this harm counts as mistreatment, then, in my account, your remark is racist. And I shall argue, this is so even if you have nothing at all against Jews, e.g., you are merely attempting to discredit a competitor in the eyes of an anti-Semitic. I call my view the Act-Centered Theory.

Before arguing for the superiority of this view to the Agent-Centered view, two observations are in order. To begin with, condition (a), in effect, acknowledges an element of truth in the Agent-Centered Theory. For if P does A in order to harm Q simply because Q is Hispanic, P must have racist beliefs or feelings against Hispanics. And it follows from this that P's acting on such beliefs or feelings—i.e., P's acting as a racist by doing A—is a sufficient condition of A's being a racist act. Nonetheless, it is mistaken to focus on P's beliefs or feelings in our account of why P's act is wrong. Rather, we ought focus on what P's act means for its

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victims. For roughly, it is not the fact that racists act on mistaken beliefs or irrational feelings that make their actions wrong, i.e., it is not the state of mind of the actor that corrupts the act. Rather, it is the meaning of the act for the victims that makes us condemn both the act and the state of mind that prompted it. Indeed, if condition (b) is correct, P's being a racist—or even acting as a racist on some particular occasion—is not a necessary condition of P's act being a racist act. It is sufficient that his act can reasonably be expected to mistreat in the appropriate way. This is not, of course, to say that an act must succeed in mistreating someone in order to be racist. Were this the case, condition (a) would be unnecessary. But, in general, because we are entitled to assume a certain competence on the part of wrong-doers, it makes sense for us morally to condemn acts that would mistreat or victimize were their intention realized. Accordingly, we condemn lies that fail to deceive, assaults that fail to harm, and robberies that yield no stolen goods. We do not condemn these acts because they spring from some intention or state of mind that can be identified as morally corrupt independently of its likelihood of giving rise to some form of mistreatment. On the contrary, it is precisely in virtue of this likelihood that we condemn the intention.

In the second place, it is worth pointing out that the Act-Centered Theory and the Agent-Centered Theory each reflect a certain point of view. Roughly, the Agent-Centered Theory reflects the perspective of the morally troubled member of a persecuting group. Such persons are loathe to acknowledge their contributions to what they agree to be a morally indefensible system. The Agent-Centered Account permits them to escape unblemished so long as they are able to purge themselves of racist beliefs and feelings. Once purged, they may do what is "necessary" to get on in a racist society without fear of moral censure. For example, they may prohibit their daughter to date a Black classmate on the grounds that this will jeopardize her future; or they may ask her not to invite her Black friends to her wedding on the grounds that this will be unsettling to old family friends. On the Agent-Centered Theory, if these are in fact their motives, they needn't think of themselves as racist, and they needn't think of themselves as complicit in a racist system. Indeed, this permits them to feel morally superior to those who discriminate out of feeling or conviction.

The Act-Centered conception, on the other hand, adopts the perspective of the victim, the accuser. The victim experiences racism as so many forms of mistreatment. If she is not invited to a friend's wedding because she is Black, she takes this to be a racist act. Since racist acts are wrong only *prima facie*, this does not necessarily mean that she condemns the act as wrong, or even that she considers her friend a racist (the relationship between racist acts and racist persons is more complex than this). Still, she is deprived of an invitation to which she is entitled as a friend because of her ethnicity. Accordingly, even if the act is justified, *she* is wronged. And since this is so, the act is racist.

As this suggests, the term "racism" marks a contested concept. Established English use places outside limits on what counts as an acceptable definition ("racist" can not be defined as ice cream) but there is plenty of room for disagreement within these parameters. Established English use does not and should not determine how we are to decide between the alternatives. When we choose between competing patterns of use we are deciding what forms of race-related behavior it is important for us as a society morally to disparage. In effect, then, a defense of an "analysis" of this concept is a defense of a moral standard (or set of related standards). My defense of an act-centered account, then, is really a defense of the claim that that account yields the sorts of moral judgments we should be making in relation to race-related conduct. More specifically, I am arguing that this pattern of use better serves the purposes of combating racial injustice than its alternatives.²

III

To begin with, the Agent-Centered Theory has difficulty making sense of certain important uses of "racist." Consider racial epithets ("nigger," "kike," "wop," etc.). On the Agent-Centered Theory, use of such epithets to insult or to assert undeserved power are racist *only if* the users have racist beliefs or feelings. But suppose that a white man calls a Black travelling companion "nigger" to remind him of his social status, e.g., as

an insult or as a power move ("Look nigger, if push comes to shove, nobody's going to take your side here"). In determining whether this use is racist, do we need to consider what the White man believes or feels about Blacks in general? Suppose that he harbors no beliefs or feelings to the effect that Blacks are inferior or deserve inferior treatment, and that he is "putting his companion in his place" *merely* to have his own way. Still, he has used this epithet unfairly to threaten, insult, or assume unwarranted power over another person, and, obviously, his act has this consequence because of his companion's race. Accordingly, I believe, we would call such acts "racist." In any case, we should speak this way. For we want morally to condemn forms of victimization that are made possible by the victims' ethnic identity and this seems an unobjectionable way to do so.

The Agent-Centered Theory, moreover, prevents us from saying that certain paradigm cases of racist acts are racist. Consider the German soldier who volunteers to march Jewish victims to the gas ovens *out of simple patriotism*, or the Klashman who ties nooses at lynchings for *business reasons*. Each may (in principle) act with heart and mind uncorrupted by racist beliefs or feelings (though obviously this is unlikely). Does this mean that they have not acted in a racist manner? Suppose that all the German soldiers at Dachau acted out of patriotism and all the Klashmen at the lynching were there for business reasons. Would this mean that none of those who participated in such events were guilty of racist acts?

Note that I am not arguing that participants in such events are racists; only that they act in a racist manner. Indeed, there may be good reason to deny they are racist since we want to distinguish those who participate in victimization out of patriotism or self-interest from those participate in victimization out of race hate or authentic conviction. Still, it is the victimization, not the persons, we are primarily concerned to condemn and eliminate, and if we refuse to condemn acts of victimization as racist, it is unclear what moral category we could invoke to this end.

Racist societies encourage racist victimization by a system of rewards and punishments. Sometimes these are formal and explicit (e.g., apartheid laws), sometimes they are informal and subtle (e.g., subtle forms of social exclusion). In any case, this system

creates a set of prudential reasons for *all* members of the victimizing race to participate in victimization, i.e., to be complicit in the mistreatment of the victimized group. By calling these forms of complicity "racist," we make them a matter of moral concern whatever their motivation, i.e., whether they are motivated by race hate or by prudence. It is important that we do this. Were we morally to condemn only those forms of victimization motivated by race hate or racist beliefs, we would leave equally important forms of victimization outside the realm of moral concern; at best, subject to moral evaluation only on utilitarian grounds. Suppose, for example, that Alice excludes a Black friend from her wedding list in order to not to upset one of Daddy's business associates. And suppose that this action produces just a little more happiness than unhappiness. If we do not describe this sort of complicity in the general pattern of victimization of Blacks as *prima facie* wrong, in itself, her action will be immune from moral criticism. Moreover, to the extent that we discount utilitarian considerations in our ethics such acts of complicity will be regarded simply as questions of prudence. . . .

IV

Before applying my account to the question of racist humor, I would like to anticipate one further objection, viz., that on my account too many actions which seem entirely unobjectionable turn out to be racist. The objector recognizes that on my account racist acts are wrong *prima facie*, and that there may be occasions on which one is morally justified in acting in a racist manner. His concern is that in other cases of *prima facie* wrongs it is *typically* wrong to act in the proscribed manner, but that this does not appear to be so in the case of racism. For once we begin to think about it, it is clear that there are myriad ways we may contribute to the victimization of members of victimized groups without doing anything wrong. Consider, for example, cases of distrust. You are walking down a dark street in a poor Black neighborhood at night. A large Black man approaches you from the opposite direction. You cross the street to avoid contact. You

recognize that the odds are slim that this particular man will attack you (25 to 1?). But the consequences of being attacked are so great that you would be foolish to take the risk. By so acting, however, you exhibit distrust of a *particular* person. Moreover, chances are excellent that this person has been treated with fear and distrust by Whites throughout his adolescence and adulthood simply in virtue of his size and race. To be treated in such a way is to be victimized, and by crossing the street you are contributing to this victimization. Examples of this sort of distrust are commonplace. And in many cases at least, this distrustful attitude—though unfair to the overwhelming majority who pose no threat—is nonetheless rational. For, though the odds against any particular attack may be much in one's favor—e.g., 25 to 1—if one is not distrustful in this way and one lives in an urban environment, it is likely that one will be attacked sooner or later. And again, the consequences of an attack are so severe that it is foolish to take the risk in any case. According to the objection, acts of this sort are not typically wrong. And if they are not typically wrong, the victimization they involve ought not be regarded as *prima facie* wrong either.

This objection is not a strong one. It is interesting, however, in that it brings into relief an important fact about moral relations in racist societies. The fact is that in any society in which racism is pervasive there will be a social chasm between the races that forces most members of every ethnic group to relate to members of other groups through racial stereotypes, at least most of the time. There is too little opportunity for most people to get to know members of other groups well enough to permit anything else. Moreover, as the present example suggests, there may be good reason to act on stereotypes, even where it is recognized that a stereotype applies to only a small number of persons within a group. Now where the treatment dictated by the stereotype is negative, most persons in the victimized group (e.g., twenty-four or twenty-five) will be treated unfairly as a *matter of course* by most members of the victimizing group. The fact that this treatment is unfair, however, makes it *prima facie* wrong. The objector makes an obvious mistake in denying that victimization is *prima facie* wrong merely because it may typically

be justified by overriding considerations. But he is correct in emphasizing the high price—perhaps even the impossibility—of avoiding complicity in this victimization. If we are members of a victimizing race, it is virtually certain that we will be complicit. It is the genius of a racist society to arrange that this is so. This does not mean that we are all racists. Nor does it mean that we are moral monsters. Again, there are times that even the best intentioned of us have no real choice. But in this case, what we have no choice about is whether to commit a racist act. This is the tragedy of living in a racist society for the morally sensitive members of the victimizing race.

V

... Agent-Centered theories tend to direct our attention to the cognitive aspect of racist acts. In relation to humor, they incline us to focus on content. Accordingly, they direct our attention primarily to one form of humor—humor based on racist stereotypes and they incline us to consider such humor in a certain way, viz., in relation to the beliefs it may promote or express. Thus, if we adopt such an account, we are likely to consider the problem of characterizing racist humor as the problem of describing the sorts of beliefs such humor portrays or expresses. Accordingly, we shall probably begin by characterizing racist humor as humor which expresses false and unflattering beliefs about an ethnic group. And this beginning leads us inevitably to questions of truthfulness. For we must now decide how to characterize humor based on stereotypes which have some foundation in truth. For example, if it is statistically true that Blacks are significantly less literate than Whites, we will be inclined to ask whether it is racist to make jokes about problems created by Black illiteracy. It is likely, moreover, that we see in this question a conflict between truth, on the one hand, and social justice, on the other. By freeing us from focusing narrowly on content, the Act-Centered Theory frees us from focusing on questions of truth. Moreover, in many cases, at least, it enables us to avoid formulating the

question of the morality of certain jokes as questions that involve deciding in favor of truth, on the one hand, or of social justice, on the other.

Roughly speaking, then, the Act-Centered Theory holds that ethnic humor is racist: (a) when it is used with the intent to victimize a member of an ethnic group in virtue of her ethnicity; and (b) when it in fact promotes such victimization or can reasonably be expected to promote it (e.g., by contributing to an atmosphere in which it is more likely to occur).

To be more precise, let us use the expression "a bit of humor" for a particular occurrence of humor, e.g., the telling of a joke, the mimicking of an accent, the appearance of a cartoon in a particular time and place. On my account, a bit of ethnic humor is racist if: (1) it is a Basic Racist Act, or (2) it can reasonably be expected to promote an atmosphere in which Basic Racist Acts are more likely to occur, or (3) it is intended to promote such an atmosphere. Of course, we also speak of jokes, books, films, etc. as racist "in themselves," i.e., apart from their particular occurrences. But if I am correct, this way of speaking is parasitic on the other. Roughly, we say that a joke "itself" is racist because a typical act of telling it will be racist in at least one of the ways described, and analogous points hold for films, books, laws, etc. (though, of course, we may need to express these points somewhat differently). A consequence of this view is that a joke which embodies a discarded and forgotten racist stereotype—e.g., a scheming Phoenician—is not now racist. Indeed, where stereotypes have been forgotten, stereotyped characters in jokes (books and movies) will not be identified as such; their actions will be construed as the acts of individuals rather than as representative of ethnic groups. Upon discovering that these characters were stereotypes, we may decide to call the work in question "racist." But here we mean only that the work was racist *in its time*. This use of "racist" does not have the same moral significance as our ordinary use. We do not mean to suggest by this, for example, that there is anything wrong with exhibiting or distributing this material now.

As suggested at the outset of this paper, at least much racist humor is "put down" humor. Racial "put downs," of course, are at least often Basic Racist Acts. In any case, it is clear that they are when they

are used to insult, humiliate, ridicule, or otherwise assault someone in consequence of his ethnic identity. Such bits of humor need not make use of ethnic stereotypes. It is sometimes enough merely to humiliate a member of a victimized group in some manner thought to be funny (e.g., in the American West, to cut the "Chinaman's" pigtail). Such humor is often extremely cruel. Moreover, even where stereotypes are incorporated in ridicule or humiliation, use of these stereotypes is not racist merely because they promote racist beliefs. Indeed, their chief use may be to identify the form of insult or humiliation thought appropriate to the member of the victimized group. This form of humiliation, moreover, may be rather far removed from any racist belief that "justifies" mistreatment. Thus, though Jews were not *mistrusted* on the ground that they were believed (or said) to have large noses, some think it quite amusing to make jokes about "Jewish noses." Note that insults, ridicule, and humiliation do not, *in general*, require justification—or even a sham of justification—to do their work. All that is required is an attitude of derision on the part of the victimizer toward some characteristic that the victim is said to have (however insincere the attribution). Again, some stereotypes do not function so much to promote beliefs but to ridicule or humiliate in just this way. The main point of portraying Jews with enormous noses and Blacks with huge lips is not to perpetuate the belief that Jews or Blacks tend to look *that* way. Rather, it is to promote an *attitude* about looking that way, and to *take the position* that Jews and Blacks look that way as a way of insulting Jews and Blacks. What goes on here is similar to what goes on in the school yard when a group of children decide to humiliate another child by taunting him with accusations that are insulting merely in virtue of the attitudes expressed toward him. Again, almost any characteristic will do here and it doesn't really matter to anyone whether or not the victim is that way. In fact, it may be more effective if he is not. Then, in addition to insult, he suffers a further miscarriage of justice. The difference between school yard tauntings and the caricatures of Jews and Blacks in question is that the tone of school yard tauntings is often deadly earnest while the caricatures in question taunt through comic ridicule.

Moreover, jokes and cartoons which on some occasions create or reinforce racist stereotypes may be racist in contexts where they do not serve this end. For they may be used *simply* to insult, humiliate, or ridicule. The most obvious example is that of a stereotyping joke told with gleeful hostility to a member of a victimized group. If the victim and the victimizer are alone, there may be no question of spreading or perpetrating racist beliefs here. What is racist about expressing such stereotypes is their use to insult or to humiliate. Where such jokes are told before "mixed audiences," they may be racist both because they insult and because they help to reinforce racist beliefs.

It is important to notice, moreover, that bits of humor that insult by the use of stereotypes may do so *however* close or far that stereotype is from a relevant statistical truth. As suggested, ridicule, insult, and humiliation are what they are whether or not the victims are as they are said to be; and, indeed, whether or not there is in fact something deficient about being as the victim is said to be. Note that children and insensitive adults may ridicule or humiliate retarded persons and spastics by imitating them *accurately*. In general, it may be insulting merely to point out some truth about a person that someone with respect for the feelings and well-being of others would pass over in silence.

Precisely what determines the conditions under which a person is humiliated, insulted, or ridiculed—as opposed to merely feeling that way—is a complex question that I cannot hope to answer here. It is clear, however, that context is extremely important. And here, two points are worthy of comment.

First, although it may occasionally be possible to exchange what would ordinarily be considered racial insults in an atmosphere of good will and camaraderie, good will does not preclude the possibility of insults. One may insult or humiliate another with the purest of hearts and the best of intentions, so long as one is sufficiently stupid or insensitive (consider the high school principal who introduces a Japanese commencement speaker by "assuaging" the audience that he "expresses the feelings of his fellow immigrants").

Secondly, one may insult without saying or doing anything that is "objectively insulting." Sometimes it

is enough simply to probe what ought to be recognized as a sensitive area. Typically, if we know that a friend is very touchy about, e.g., some characteristic, we avoid referring to it, even in jest. Indeed, unless there is some strong countervailing reason to refer to it, we insult him by so doing. And it does not matter whether or not we believe that our friend's sensitivity is rational, i.e., whether such remarks *ought* to be considered insulting or humiliating. If it is no great burden to respect his sensitivity, to fail to do so is insulting. And what holds for friends in this regard ought also to hold for acquaintances or even strangers. Typically, if we know that members of a victimized group are insulted by certain jokes made about them, we ought not to make such jokes in their presence (unless, e.g., we do this for therapeutic purpose). This standard, however, is too restrictive to govern communications before mass audiences, e.g., television. But even here we ought not require that sensitivities be perfectly rational in order to be respected. If a substantial number of the victimized group—say, a majority—is known to be offended by certain ways of portraying them, then it may be insulting to them to portray them in these ways simply because we ignore their sensitivities by so doing. If there is no overriding reason for portraying them in this way, we ought not to do so. Moreover, we ought to give special weight to the opinion of the victimized group that such portrayals *are* insulting in and of themselves. For it requires more empathy on the part of an outsider fully to appreciate the position of a victimized group than many of us have a right to claim. Consider, for example, the glee that the most educated among us take in telling Polish jokes.

But it is not only the immediate impact of racist humor on victimized groups that makes it racist. The impact on victimizers and potential victimizers is also important. Typically, discussion of this impact focuses on the cognitive side, i.e., on how racist humor spreads and reinforces racist beliefs. At least as important, I think, are the affective consequences. For, insofar as racist humor constitutes an assault on members of an ethnic group, it joins together those who participate—both performers and audience—in a community of feeling against that group. By appreciating such humor together, we take common joy in

putting *them* down, e.g., in turning them into objects of scorn or contempt or into beings not to be taken seriously (witty jokes). Our mutual participation in this through shared laughter legitimizes this way of feeling about them. Those among us who fail to laugh—or who object to laughter—are immediately outsiders, perhaps even traitors. In general, the price of objecting is a small exile. By participating, however, one accepts membership in a racist association (albeit a temporary one). The seriousness of so doing, of course, is far less than, e.g., the seriousness of joining an official white supremacist organization. But notice that the difference in seriousness diminishes the greater one's participation in such informal communities of feeling.

It is important to note that this creation of a community of feeling is not contingent on the creation of a community of belief. Many people who entertain one another with Polish jokes do not thereby implicitly accept Polish slovenliness or stupidity as a fact. What they share is the pleasure of ridiculing Poles and they legitimize this pleasure by sharing it with one another. Typically, because they are innocent of racist beliefs and of hatred against Poles, they take this pleasure to be innocent (an Agent-Centered understanding). But one wonders how the Poles think of it. How do American philosophers of Polish descent feel knowing that their colleagues entertain themselves in this "innocent" way? (Imagine a Black philosopher in a department of Whites who told Sambo and Rastus jokes.) . . .

Most racist jokes do not persuade by *argument* that a certain stereotype is true of a certain ethnic group. Rather, they promote such stereotypes by repeated assertion. At least part of what gives such assertions their power to establish and to reinforce belief is that they are invested with the authority of those who make them. Roughly, one promotes racist beliefs by means of racist humor when one lends one's authority to a joke that embodies some racist stereotype. One may do this simply by telling such a joke in the way jokes are ordinarily told (as one may lend one's authority to what one asserts merely by asserting it). However, if one's audience has antecedent reason to believe that one does not hold such beliefs, or if one provides it with such reasons, this relationship will not hold. In

this case, one may tell a joke that embodies some such stereotype without committing a racist act. Whether one lends one's authority to a stereotype by telling a joke (or displaying a cartoon) depends in part on the context. Typically, for example, one does not lend one's authority to such stereotypes by telling such jokes where the context is scholarly, e.g., where the purpose is to examine the means by which racist beliefs are perpetuated (though it is *possible* to lend one's authority even here by telling such jokes with obvious glee and approval).

It is worth pointing out, moreover, that we cannot determine by an abstract or acontextual analysis of content whether a joke could reasonably be expected to promote a racist stereotype.

Consider the following Polish joke:

Q: How do you tell the groom at a Polish wedding?

A: He's the one in the clean bowling shirt.

To an audience familiar with the current American Polish stereotype, this joke will be understood to assert that Poles are deficient in the categories of style and hygiene. An audience unfamiliar with this stereotype—e.g., an audience that believes that Poles are reputed to be elegant and cultured—cannot be expected to understand these sentences in this way. Indeed, such an audience would be at a loss to see any joke here at all. Many jokes are like this. Still other jokes can reasonably be expected to be understood differently depending on who tells them, to whom they are told, in what spirit they are told, and under what circumstances. Consider:

White Foreman: Washington, what the hell are you doing lying down on the job again? When I hired you, you said you never get tired.

Black Worker: That's how I do it, sir.

White Foreman: Don't talk in riddles, boy.

Black Worker: I ain't. You see, the reason I never gets tired is as soon as I begins to get tired I jes lies down and takes myself a rest.

Depending on who tells this joke to whom and on how it is told, it may reasonably be expected to be understood as a joke about Blacks in general, a joke about Black laborers, or a joke about a particular

Black man named Washington. Moreover, the joke may be understood to mean that Blacks are lazy, sly, or shiftless; or it may be understood to show how a clever Black worker can talk his way out of a tough spot; or, if Washington is an established character, it may be understood as another illustration of how Washington gets on in the world.³ If we focus narrowly on content—if we focus on what is presupposed by “the joke itself”—it is easy to miss the importance of context here. . . .

VI

Let me conclude by summarizing my position and by applying it to the question of truth raised in the introductory section of this paper. To begin with, then, bits of humor may be racist in three ways: (1) They may insult (or be intended to insult), humiliate, or ridicule members of victimized groups in relation to their ethnic identity; (2) They may create (or be intended to create) a community of feelings against such a group; and (3) They may promote (or be intended to promote) beliefs that are used to “justify” the mistreatment of such a group.

Whether a particular bit of humor is racist in one or more of these ways depends on a variety of contextual features. On this view, when we describe a joke or cartoon as racist “in itself” we mean that a typical use of it will be racist in our culture. In making this judgment we presuppose a background of contextual features so familiar in our culture that they need not be specified. Given the history of racist cartoon caricatures of Blacks, a political cartoon that portrayed a prominent Black American with huge lips and bug eyes is a racist insult, despite the fact that he may have rather large lips and somewhat bulging eyes. Were it not for this history, however, such a caricature would be no more racist than any political cartoon that exaggerated the unusual anatomical features of its subject. And since it would not insult, it would not help to perpetuate a community of feeling against Blacks as well. Our judgment that any such cartoon is racist “in itself” presupposes this history. As we have seen, moreover,

a corresponding point holds in relation to the promotion of racist beliefs. Polish jokes cannot reasonably be expected to perpetuate or reinforce racist beliefs against Poles where the audience is familiar with a much different Polish stereotype (e.g., Poles as cultured and intelligent). In general, how an audience can reasonably be expected to understand such jokes will depend on what the audience already believes about the group in question.

Compare:

Question: What has an I.Q. of 100?

Answer 1: Poland

Answer 2: Israel

In general, to determine whether a bit of humor is racist in virtue of being insulting to a member of the relevant group may require a good deal of intelligence and sensitivity to feelings and to social dynamics. And the same may be said in relation to the creation of communities of feeling. For the formation of social alliances—and the use of humor to form them—may be very obvious or very subtle. Again, it may take a good deal of sensitivity to detect it.

Applying these findings to the questions raised in the introduction to this paper, it should be clear by now that truth is not a sufficient defense against the charge of racism. To begin with, racist victimization in a society may be supported by an ideology that consists—in part—of statistically true beliefs. For example, Blacks are statistically less literate than Whites. Such statistical truths, however, are abused in racist ideologies in two ways. First, they are used to support factual inferences that would not follow from them were all the evidence in (e.g., Blacks are genetically less capable of literacy than Whites); and secondly, they are used as premises in moral arguments for conclusions that do not follow from them (e.g., Blacks should have fewer rights than Whites). Most of us agree that it is racist to help to promote this ideology. Accordingly, we would judge ourselves amiss were we to mention the rate of Black literacy to someone who might come to be influenced by this ideology *and also* fail to give him an explanation of this fact. But this is just what we do when we tell such a person a joke in which Blacks are portrayed as illiterates. Even jokes that are grounded in statistically

true stereotypes, then, may be racist in virtue of promoting racist ideology. Whether such jokes are racist for this reason, of course, is dependent on the audience to whom they are addressed. Where there is no question that the audience will be influenced in the direction of this racist ideology—e.g., where the audience consists of Black sociologists—the telling of such jokes need not be racist at all. Indeed, they could be used as a way of portraying just how bad things are (e.g., how Blacks have been deprived of educational opportunities).

As we saw, moreover, one can use the truth to insult, humiliate, or ridicule members of a victimized group, whether or not the truth ought to be considered shameful. Thus, Blacks are ridiculed for having big lips, Jews for having big noses, etc. It does not matter here whether or not this is true. Again, what is insulting here is the attitude of derision adopted toward the trait. Once members of a group are made to feel ashamed of being certain ways, it is insulting and humiliating to “remind” them that they are—whether they are or not or whether the trait is shameful or not. Moreover, it is clear that a community of feeling against a group is created when members of another group adopt an attitude of derision toward some trait alleged in the first, whether or not this allegation is true. Accordingly, bits of humor may be racist in all three ways despite the fact that they are grounded in some truth.

READING QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between the agent-centered and act-centered views of racist humor according to Phillips.
2. What is a Basic Racist Act according to Phillips?
3. What problems does Phillips raise for the Agent-Centered theory of racist humor?
4. How does Phillips respond to the possible objections he considers against the Act-Centered view?
5. What is a “bit of humor” and what are the three ways in which a “bit of humor” may be racist?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is Phillips right to dismiss the Agent-Centered account of the morality of racist humor in its entirety? Is there a way to incorporate beliefs and feelings into the Act-Centered account that he proposes?
2. To what extent do you think that racist humor or bits of racist humor are perceived as insulting or harmful when told by members of the ethnic group in question to either audiences that consist of only that particular ethnic group or mixed audiences?

NOTES

1. I am using “mistreatment” in (b) to include any morally objectionable injury to someone’s interests. Note that “harm” is not sufficient here. Affirmative Action, for example, may harm White males in virtue of their race, but is not “reverse racism” unless it can be established that it mistreats them. I use “harm” instead of “mistreatment” in condition (a) to avoid counterexamples in which A acts within his rights by harming B, but would not harm B were B’s race different (e.g., White landlord A evicts Black tenant B for delinquency, in paying the rent, but would not do so were B White). Although I would argue that this constitutes mistreatment, I do not want my criteria to depend on the arguable point that one may mistreat someone by choosing to exercise one’s rights.
2. For an account of how moral standards are properly defended and criticized see chapters 4–6 of my book *Between Universalism and Skepticism*, Oxford University Press, 1994.
3. Of course, Washington could be an established character who, in effect, represented a Black “type” or Blacks in general. Were this the case, the joke in question might be racist. Whether or not it is would depend, e.g., on what else is true of Washington as a character, and perhaps, on where the joke appears (e.g., whether in a predominantly Black or a predominantly White publication). Note that members of a victimized group are far less likely to mistake a survival strategy for a character trait than members of a victimizing group.