

# On Jokes

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Hamilton College Think Tank  
September 26, 2008

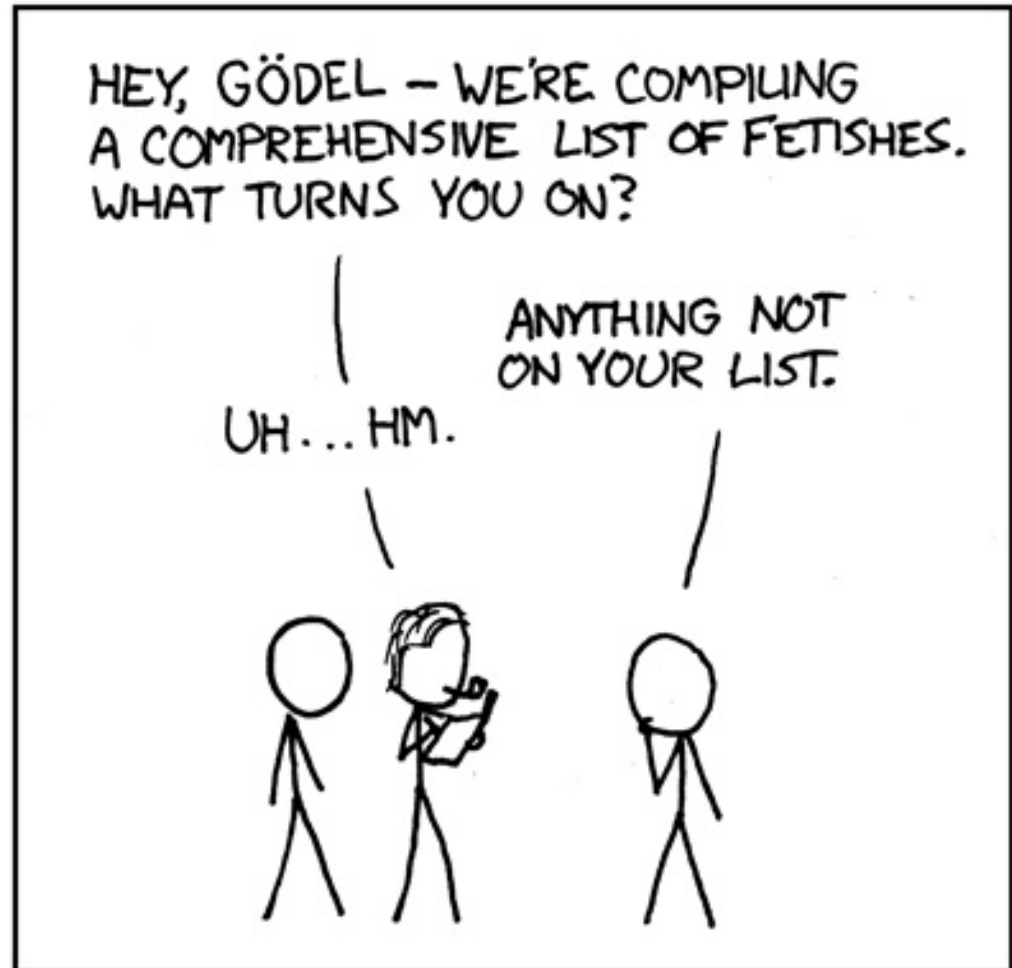
# Connect three thoughts:

1. The nature of humor and what makes some jokes not funny.
2. Some observations about asymmetries in power.
3. Some related observations about what it means to be a Jew in America.

# Here's a funny joke:

AUTHOR KATHARINE GATES RECENTLY ATTEMPTED TO MAKE A CHART OF ALL SEXUAL FETISHES.

LITTLE DID SHE KNOW THAT RUSSELL AND WHITEHEAD HAD ALREADY FAILED AT THIS SAME TASK.



# The Pope and the Jews

# **This joke is not funny**

Have you heard about the Jewish sports car?  
It stops on a dime, then picks it up

# The Ponikvar Hypothesis

All jokes are, at their core, based on mocking some one.  
Or they are puns.

# Even Jokes Based on Language Can Mock Someone

“Ending a sentence in a preposition is something up with which I shall not put.” -not Winston Churchill

“[Rewriting all my sentences so that none of them end in prepositions] is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put.” -plausibly Winston Churchill

There was a sign on the lawn at a drug re-hab center that said 'Keep off the Grass' -from punoftheday.com

What do Irish people put on their lawns?

# The Onion

Pornography-Desensitized Public Demands New Orifice to Look At

MySpace Outage Leaves Millions Friendless

Palin Unveils 9/11 Firefighter Cousin, Reformed Lesbian Niece,  
Naturalized Mexican Half Brother

Word 'Presumptive' Prepares For Another 4-Year Hibernation

Economists Warn Anti-Bush Merchandise Market Close To Collapse

Pre-Game Coin Toss Makes Jacksonville Jaguars Realize  
Randomness Of Life

U.S. Advises Allies Not To Border Russia

Sabra Hummus: Cedar's Hummus Lacks Experience Necessary To  
Become America's No. 1 Hummus



# One of these is funny

Local Girlfriend Always Wants to Do Stuff  
Nation's Girlfriends Call for More Quality  
Time

# The Ponikvar Hypothesis and the Marcus Lemma

PH: All jokes are, at their core, based on mocking some one; or they are puns.

ML: It is not funny to mock the poor, sick, or otherwise disempowered.

Logical Truth: Puns are not funny.

Conclusion: All funny jokes mock people who are clearly in positions of power.

# So, jokes about sexual assault may not be funny

To the [*Spectator*] Editor:

We write in response to last week's "Thumbs up, Thumbs Down, Who Cares?" column. Under "thumbs down," Steve Allinger and Anthony DelConte wrote: "The new Hill Cards don't allow access to buildings after 11 o'clock...but most freshman girls aren't unconscious before then!"

Sexual assault is NOT funny. As a society we are not in a position to joke about such a serious matter, especially one that has such a lasting impact on a significant portion of the population.

The argument that it is "just a joke" adds insult to injury. "Jokes" like these trivialize the seriousness of sexual assault and make mockery of an experience that could forever change the life of a young woman. Think about what message this sends to any freshman girls who may have been sexually assaulted since their time at Hamilton. It tells them that their experience won't be taken seriously, and that it's all just a joke. Be a little more considerate before publishing such "jokes."

Sincerely,

Wai Yee Poon and Amy Tannenbaum

Womyn's Center Co-Chairs

# Telling jokes in class

The Pope and the Jews  
An Ethics joke

# But, should we lose our senses of humor, altogether?

Q: How many radical feminists does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: That's not funny.

# A Test for Unfunniness

Would you tell the joke to a person in that group?

Jokes about the Holocaust

# An asymmetrical rule

Even in a society committed to equality, there are individuals and groups in positions of power, and individuals and groups who are dis-empowered.

Nozick

People in positions of power may not mock those without power.

But, people without power may mock those in power.

This basic inequity can lead to charges of reverse discrimination.

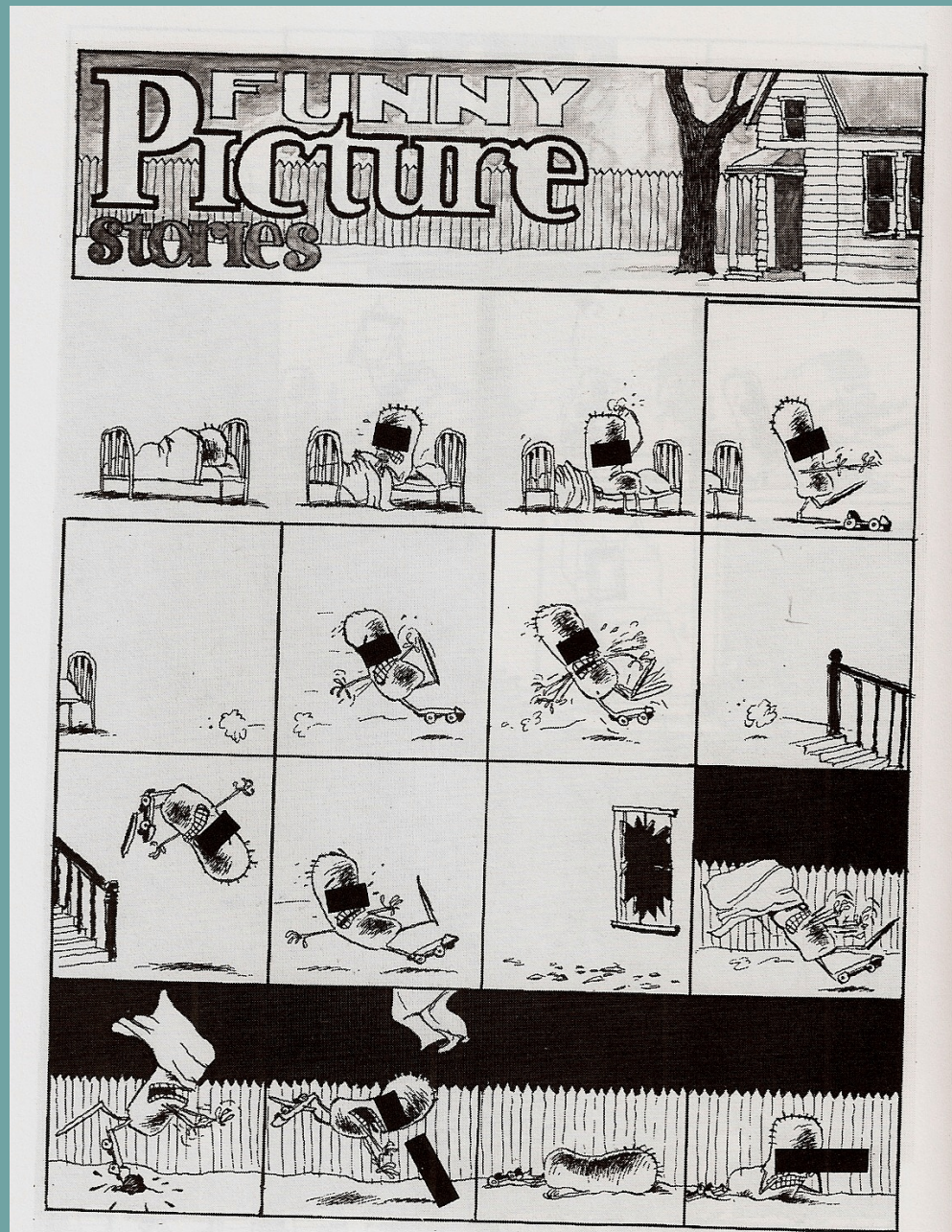
“Whaddaya mean you can joke about me, but I can’t joke about you?”

(Compare to permissible and impermissible uses of the N word.)

“Wanna get naked?”

# An Exception to the Ponkvar/ Marcus Argument?

The stupidity of the  
American people.





# The Fallacy of Projection

My experience is thus and so; therefore your experience should be thus and so.

We do not perceive the advantages we have,  
the power we have.

Compare to the Fallacy of Hasty Generalization

Or, to the Fallacy of the Biased Sample

Or, the Giuliani Fallacy

# Examples of Projection

My small-town values serve me well, therefore they should serve you well.

I never got an abortion, therefore you should never get an abortion.

I never needed assistance from the state, therefore people should not need assistance from the state.

I (or, my family) learned English, therefore you should learn English.

# Connections

The fallacy of projection is explained by the same asymmetry that we saw in the rule about jokes.

Our experiences are asymmetrical.

So, our policies must be:

- ▶ Tolerant
- ▶ Inclusive
- ▶ Liberal

**My  
daughter  
drew this**



# A last example of the asymmetry

Jews may feel disenfranchised by Christmas, Easter, etc.  
But Christians can not feel disenfranchised by Hanukkah.

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