

Commentary piece

Reflexive humour and satire: a critical review

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Abstract

Because most theories of humour emphasize its intersubjective and/or semantic nature, they fail to fully appreciate and explain self-directed humour. Through a critical exploration of the implications of different theories of humour and satire, this paper argues that the spectrum of reflexive humour and satire can be categorized according to the figure of the satirist and the target of satire, both of whom can feature individual or collective social selves. Depending on the satirist and the scope of satire, the functions of reflexive humour may range from securing psychological homeostasis to dealing with more impersonal, social and philosophical concerns.

Keywords: reflexive humour and satire, superiority theories of humour, relief theories of humour.

1. Introduction

Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth. (Umberto Eco, *Name of the Rose*)

Frequently, satirists have assumed a transcendent position from which they can observe and evaluate their societies morally, ethically and intellectually. A major theory of humour also argues for the superiority of satirist over the target of humour. Yet, when the satirist and target are the same person, the relationship between the superior laughing at the inferior will be a bipolar relationship of one laughing at oneself. This is true in the case of reflexive humour¹ that constitutes amusing others at one's own cost by making light of oneself.

¹ See Test (1991), Zekavat (2014), and Zekavat (2017) for the relationship between satire and humour. My discussion in this article largely applies to both humour and satire; as most theories are identified with humour, though, I will stick to the widely known labels. Reflexive humour and satire have also been described as self-directed, self-disparaging, self-defeating, self-referent, self-derogatory, and self-deprecating. Other terms include

Many theories, including the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH), General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), and Ontological Semantic Theory of Humour (OSTH), focus on the semantic aspects of humour; therefore, they cannot fully account for self-referential humour. Even more recent theories that depart from semantic models fail to appreciate this kind of humour. Boyd (2004), for instance, in his adaptationist explanation of humour, does not account for laughing at oneself. Some assertions even seem to block the possibility of reflexive humour. Bogel (2001) writes, “[s]atirist and the satiric object are unambiguously polarized” (50), which is simply not true in the case of self-referential satire. This is despite the intriguing presence of reflexive humour and satire since early conceptualizations of satire in Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly*, where the title character directs humour and satire against herself (see also Condren 2012; Chaudhury 2014). Elsewhere, I have argued in detail that because satire and humour frequently depend on opposition, they can contribute to the construction of social subjects’ identities as they also rely on otherness (Zekavat 2017, Zekavat and Pourgiv 2015). This otherness can be internal and psychological at an individual level in reflexive humour, and, at a social level, “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms” (Ricoeur 1994: 3).

Reflexive humour and satire actually happen at least at two levels: first, when one satirizes oneself; second, when members of a group direct humour at the community with which they (used to) identify. This paper intends to pave the way for a fuller understanding of self-referential humour and satire by analytically exploring the implications of different theories on this topic and proposing a taxonomy for reflexive humour. Relief and superiority theories, among others, briefly discuss reflexive humour, and some theorists’ discussions also have certain implications for explaining it. It will be argued that reflexive humour occurs on a spectrum whose extremes feature an individual mocking himself/herself and a group poking fun at the (imagined) community with which it identifies. The mechanisms of different kinds of self-referential humour can be explained by resorting to different reasons and incentives.

2. Theoretical speculations

In his philosophical investigation of humour, Simon Critchley (2002) attempts to understand reflexive humour by explaining it in Cartesian terms. In his book, *On Humour*, Critchley underlines the societal aspects of humour and the opposition of self versus other, where he considers humour to be “a form of *sensus communis*” (79; see also 88, 90) or something which is socially reasonable. It necessarily originates from a break between self and other, nature and culture, or between being and having a body. “Humour is precisely the exploration of the break between nature and culture”, he avers, “which reveals the human to be not so much a category by itself as a negotiation between categories” (29).

self-mockery, self-laughter, self-satire, self-debasement, self-defeat, self-degradation, self-deprecation, self-abasement, self-ridicule, self-criticism, self-derogation, self-derision, self-mockery, self-denunciation, self-disparagement, self-depreciation, self-hatred and even masochism. This article is not concerned with any specific type of self-referential humour and satire; rather, it surveys the spectrum between the tendentious and non-tendentious extremes of humour and satire that totally or partially take their creator(s) as their target(s) for a variety of reasons. Therefore, I will stick to the adjectives *reflexive* and *self-referential* as umbrella terms to describe the general concept as they are rather neutral.

Martin et al (2003) define self-defeating or self-disparaging humour as an attempt “to ingratiate oneself or gain the approval of others by doing or saying funny things at one’s own expense. This also involves the use of humour as a form of defensive denial, or engaging in humorous behaviour as a means of repressing one’s underlying feelings, in order to maintain the acceptance of others (Kubie, 1971). Self-defeating humour is seen as potentially detrimental to well-being when used excessively, since it involves denigration of the self and repression of one’s own emotional needs” (52).

Although he ignores them, his conceptualization of the body-and-soul dialectic has certain implications for understanding reflexive humour. Critchley starts from the premise that there is a difference between having and being bodies, and maintains that we inevitably have to appreciate that we are entangled in the materialistic dimensions of our being while we can still look down upon our corporeality. Accordingly, he argues that humour originates in the gap between these two very aspects, that is to say, between being bodies and having them, between the physical and spiritual dimensions of existence (42-45). I argue that this very fissure at the internal level can explain self-referential humour. One only needs to think how the body is the object of satire in such works as François Rabelais's *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and "A Modest Proposal", where the corporeal aspect of existence is looked down upon from a transcendental perspective. Of course, the mind can also be the object of humour, with the body proving the more reliable assessor of reality. Yet, as humour is firmly grounded in societal, political, historical, and cultural contexts, merely relying on the body-and-soul dialectic cannot suffice to fully explain it. The case of a woman directing humour at women, for instance, can hardly be explained by the disparity between the corporeal and meta-physical dimensions of existence.

The workings of reflexive humour can also be inferred from the origin Critchley postulates for humour in general. In line with his argument, according to which humour does not merely originate in the opposition between self and other but can be the result of an internal incongruity, he claims, "the feeling that accompanies laughter is not simply pleasure, but rather uncanniness. We often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it somehow frightens us" (56-57). He insists that laughter presumes a sense of uncanniness due to its origins in an internal opposition; in other words, one tends to laugh at things that seem peculiar on the surface and yet, are strangely familiar, as they are deeply rooted in one's psyche. Therefore, reflexive humour is basically founded upon uncanniness where, contrary to my expectations, I discover the traits residing in my personality that would have appalled me to see in other people. Similar to the body-and-soul dialectic, however, presuming an unspecified uncanny and psychological origin for humour fails to fully explain its contextual determinants.

Moreover, the latter understanding of humour seems to contradict an alternative one Critchley offers later on. He forgets the uncanny nature of humour and its rootedness in the self by declaring that "humour lets us take up a disinterested, theoretical attitude toward the world, but it does this in an eminently practical and interesting way" (87-88). In other words, instead of internal retrospections, humour facilitates a practical integration within the world through breaching a distance between the subject and his/her world. Although his latter explanation similarly cannot do full justice to understanding the diversity of humour including tendentious jokes, this distancing function is still useful in understanding reflexive humour. As it provides a disinterested standpoint, reflexive humour can clear a space for self-evaluation. It facilitates a neutral and disengaged outlook toward ourselves so that we can disinterestedly understand and judge our words, behaviours, and motives at some distance. Although Critchley seems to vacillate between the personal and public senses of humour, these can both suggest partial ways for understanding reflexive humour at individual and social levels.

Bogel (2001) agrees with Critchley in that he assumes satire to arise from the detection of an uncanny experience. He believes that, instead of merely reflecting the opposition between the satirist and his target, satire – in an overtly rhetorical fashion – strives to create an opposition between them because they seem too similar. In other words, noticing his intimate relationship with his target, and perceiving the close rapport between the self and the other while reflecting on the frailties of the self, the satirist attempts to project these frailties on the other by making it

as different from the self as possible.² This relationship also exists in the case of reflexive satire where the satirist and his target are inseparably related and one tries to exonerate oneself from one's weaknesses by projecting them onto the other, i.e. another aspect of oneself in this case. In other words, one attempts to persuade oneself and others that, despite one's shortcomings, one is still essentially good and respectable overall; only certain aspects of one's personality might occasionally let one down. The self-satirist is a respectable Dr Jekyll who suffers from the presence of Mr Hyde and strives to save himself from the latter. Many jokes that poke fun at the lethargy of people from Shiraz in Iran, told by themselves, can be understood in this way. The shortcomings of this approach for understanding self-directed humour and satire are evident in understanding more philosophical works, like the use of reflexive humour in existential writings. Besides, this explanation (of self-referential humour) can hardly account for the humour and satire poked at a minority group by its members because they have failed to assimilate into the mainstream.

The superiority theory of humour, however, allows for a more socially oriented approach to understanding reflexive humour. Adopting this theory, Billig (2001, 2005) attempts to defy the general consensus that the prime function of humour is the amendment of (social) vices and insists that humour mainly intends to ridicule. But if its primary function is to ridicule, how can it be self-referential, and why? He appeals to Hobbes to solve this seeming contradiction. Hobbes believes that self-referential laughter is the result of a relative superiority over oneself. As we laugh at others over whom we feel superior, we also laugh at our *former* selves. Hobbes (1987) concludes that, "the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly" (20). Accordingly, Billig (2005) argues that, "[w]e tend to laugh at our former infirmities, comparing these with our present superiority. We do not laugh at our present selves in the way that others might laugh at us, because 'men take heinously to be laughed at or derided'" (52).

Veatch (1998) also explains reflexive humour by a similar account whereby a moral violation results in the presumption of the superiority of one party over the other. Only, in self-referential humour, he assumes, there are "two selves, one of which is responsible for the violation, the other of which is superior to the first. . ." (188). Similarly, although a psychologist, Martin (2007) also appeals to Gruner in order to explain reflexive humour through the superiority theory. Gruner follows Hobbes in arguing that in laughing at ourselves, we are actually laughing at our former vices. Yet, he also adds that even synchronically, one side of our personality can laugh at another. As "[w]e all have multiple roles, mood states, and conflicting personality characteristics, and a sense of humour is what keeps these many varied aspects of ourselves in balance", all these will cause a healthier mental state (Martin 2007: 47). Yet, providing personal, psychological equilibrium is not the only function of reflexive humour. Martin notes that it can also "demonstrate modesty, . . . put the listener at ease, or . . . ingratiate oneself with the listener" (13). Therefore, not only does self-referential humour contribute to psychological composure, but it can also lubricate intersubjective relationships. This, however, is not entirely consistent with the postulations of the Humour Styles Questionnaire.

Despite the permeable nature of humour, Martin et al (2003) propose two binaries to map humour functions: personal versus intersubjective, and tendentious versus non-tendentious enhancements (they use "benign and benevolent" versus "potentially detrimental or injurious") (51-52). Subsequently, they hypothesize that affiliative and self-enhancing uses of humour are healthy and adaptive, while its aggressive and self-defeating uses are unhealthy and detrimental (see also Martin 2007: 211). For them,

² One *EJHR* anonymous reviewer remarked that "The German notion of Humour in the nineteenth century – which was not the same as wit or jokes (*der Witz*) – depended on the notion of a general human folly in which all took part."

self-defeating humour involves the use of excessively self-disparaging humour, attempts to amuse others by doing or saying funny things at one's own expense, and laughing along with others when being ridiculed or disparaged Thus, it deals with the use of humour to ingratiate oneself with others. . . . It also involves the use of humour as a form of defensive denial, to hide one's underlying negative feelings or avoid dealing constructively with problems. This style of humour is seen as an attempt to gain the attention and approval of others at one's own expense.

(Martin 2007: 211)

Self-defeating humour is reduced to an inevitably negative style. To be fair, they have delimited their focus to "self-defeating" humour (see also Marin et al 2003: 53); nonetheless, they do not consider the fact that self-directed humour does not necessarily "enhance relationships at the expense of self" (48; see also 54, 71). Reflexive humour can enhance relationships at no expense, like when a person in a higher position employs reflexive humour to create and/or reinforce bonding with people below her. This can eventually turn out to reinforce her higher position in the hierarchy. In fact, Martin et al tend to categorize the extreme and arbitrarily isolated instances of humour rather than treating the complex spectrum as a whole.

John Morreall also explains reflexive humour by employing the superiority theory. According to him, superiority is still present in this kind of humour, where one is actually laughing at one's own image in a specific situation. The superiority theory "views laughter as expressing our feelings of superiority over someone else, or over a former state of ourselves" (Morreall 2005: 65). Although he maintains that reflexive laughter constitutes the ultimate stage of humour development, he is quick to note that self-referential humour necessarily implies an inward fissure in the human subject. In other words, one becomes dissociated from (a part of) oneself in the case of self-disparaging humour (Morreall 1983: 8). This is very similar to the internal bipolarity that Critchley has also postulated. Moreover, like Critchley, Morreall insists that disengagement is necessary for humour (Morreall 1983: 109). In this light, it can be argued that reflexive humour creates an internal distance through suspending practical concerns.

In addition to their reduction of humour to the mere superiority of one party over another, superiority theories pose other problems in understanding reflexive humour. Their insistence on the diachronic disparity of laughing at one's *former* self does not always apply to self-referential humour; moreover, it is difficult to explain how self-referential humour can encourage equity in social standing as one of its primary functions by appealing to *superiority* (for more on this see below). Besides the superiority theories, some psychological theories of humour also discuss reflexive humour or have certain implications for expounding it. Similar limitations, however, impair its full appreciation through the lens of these theories. In their humour-elicitation theory, Wyer and Collins (1992) briefly attempt to reconcile self-enhancement and self-presentation objectives with reflexive humour. They maintain that it is the disparity between the past and present behaviour of subjects, "between one's behaviour and the implications of previous self knowledge" that causes them to laugh at themselves. In other words, when one cannot easily reconcile and understand one's past behaviour in terms of one's present attitudes, one is prone to laugh at oneself (686).

Ungar's discussion of this topic is more comprehensive. He starts with the premise that self-presentation aims at self-enhancement and that this is seemingly the opposite of what happens in reflexive humour. Yet, Ungar (1984) argues, "self-mockery, if conducted appropriately, serves to increase positive sentiments among individuals and to augment emotional solidarity and personal identification with others" (126). People are inclined to use self-referential humour in the situations that demand a conduct that does not suit their social standing or capabilities. That is to say, if they are expected to act in a too dignified or too demeaning fashion, they might resort to this kind of humour. Two reasons might explain this strategy. First, reflexive humour facilitates the expression of issues that are otherwise unspeakable. One might playfully talk about one's own shortcomings without the fear of losing face in such a humorous self-

disclosure. Second, it can remove social distances and encourage equity in standing among people who enjoy different statuses in social hierarchies (126-127). Therefore, self-referential humour can function as an “ice-breaker” in intersubjective relationships (127). It can also alleviate fears and anxieties in others (129). Suppose while walking together, your friend slips on something on the sidewalk. Your anecdotes about similar personal misfortunes after this incident might reduce her tension. A third function of reflexive humour is to “diffuse anticipated responses to stigmatized identities” (129). Hoping to dissuade their deprecation, Jewish people might direct humour at themselves before others could get a chance to mock them.³ Finally, Ungar contends that “ridiculing the self cannot only help save face for the offended and indeed the offender, but can effectively display the more painful or serious aspects of untoward actions and yet minimize feelings of indignation or irritation” (130).

Nevertheless, this should not imply that reflexive humour can rectify all situations. In case of serious offences that demand compensation, for instance, this kind of humour might be interpreted as resulting from the irresponsibility of the offender/humourist, instead. Similarly, this strategy is less likely to work if it is used too frequently (Ungar 131). Moreover, reflexive humour cannot be effective unless the audience is well-informed about the merits of the performer, or else the detection of humour might be impeded by another perlocutionary effect, namely straightforward disparagement. It does not achieve its intended effect as a status altering tactic if the audience, for example, knows only about the defects of the performer. Accordingly, self-mockery is more likely to happen after enough time has lapsed to secure thorough familiarization between people who resort to it (131).

Therefore, Ungar considers self-referential humour as a conscious strategy used by people to facilitate positive intersubjective emotions and interactions. It might be used to compensate for a lack in self-confidence or to promote equal standing among people. Oring (1992) also discusses nine factors to convey that reflexive humour is potentially positive. Psychological disorders rooted in our childhood memories and at the unconscious level can explain the use of self-referential humour to enhance social interactions. A child might resort to self-referential humour to avoid embarrassment or parental rage. This might happen as a conscious strategy, but if negative and discouraging reactions persist, the child’s psyche might transform this conscious strategy into an unconscious defence mechanism. Later on, she may retain it in her adulthood and unconsciously resort to self-referential humour in her interactions, in order to compensate for her lack of self-confidence, to appease her peers, to ingratiate herself with people who hold power over her (as she did in her childhood with her father), to justify her faults, and to avoid embarrassment. A serious drawback of this approach to reflexive humour, however, is that it ignores the fact that the satirist and/or the satirized can be collective rather than individual selves. Furthermore, it hardly allows the appreciation of calculated, rather than spontaneous, and written forms of humour.

We saw that according to many trends and thinkers who seek to explain reflexive humour by employing the superiority theory, a split in one’s personality is the source of incongruity, hence humour. A similar internal split explains self-referential humour in some relief theories of humour. Reflexive humour can be partly explained by appealing to Freud’s tripartite model of self. Humour is meaningful in terms of opposition, but this time an internal one. In other words, self-referential humour can be interpreted as the result of an opposition between superego and ego. The superego suppresses some libidinal energy, which is safely vented through jokes and laughter (see also Critchley 2002: 94). Freud believes that laughing at oneself is the discovery of the child in oneself (Freud 1964: 226, 227-228; Freud 2010b: 4543; see also Critchley 2002: 95-96).

³ Another *EJHR* anonymous reviewer remarked that the joke cycle about people from the town of Chelm is an example of an almost “institutionalized” use of reflexive humour.

One can also argue that reflexive humour might originate in a contrast between the ideal ego and the actual one (Freud 2010c), but Freud offers a third explanation for this type of humour. He opens his essay on “Humour” by categorizing it into self-directed or directed at others. Both the onlooker as well as the satirist/target take pleasure in humour due to the economic expenditure of superfluous feelings. Here, Freud attributes humour to the triumph of the pleasure principle and maintains that the triumph of humour “lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability” (Freud 2010b: 4543). Akin to defence mechanisms, reflexive humour functions to “ward off possible suffering” (4544). In other words, humour facilitates resignation rather than rebellion in this case. For Freud, then, reflexive humour can function as self-criticism or as a defence mechanism for maintaining mental balance and against suffering. Ignoring the collective self and denying the plethora of contingent contextual influences on the emergence of humour are, again, the major downsides of this approach to self-referential humour.

Like Freud, Lefcourt (2001) also sticks to the hostile and non-hostile dichotomy of humour. The latter “reflects a retreat from seriousness and the assumption of a perspective that affords relief from negative emotions” (72). In other words, he follows Freud in suggesting that reflexive humour is a mechanism which offers relief from negative emotions that would otherwise disturb our mental equanimity. He continues to review other functions that can explain this kind of humour, including self-management, distancing effect, and protection from stressful experiences. For him, the main function of hostile humour is to foreground the opposition between us and them, while “self-directed perspective-taking humour helps us remain embedded in our social groups, encouraging others to approach and remain with us” (73). His understanding of this kind of humour shares the shortcomings of Ungar’s and Freud’s.

Jewish humour has been commonly known as an instance of prevalent self-referential humour. However, Davies (1991) notes the prevalence of reflexive humour among all minorities but does not agree that they are all self-derogatory. Indeed, as this kind of humour is a source of identity, he contends, it cannot be at one’s own cost (194). Minorities have two disparate sets of values and lifestyles to conform to – that of the dominant majority and that of their own community – so they can laugh at both. Minorities can deviate from norms in two ways. First, they might fail to conform to the public expectations of the mainstream; second, they might be so thoroughly assimilated that they seem to have forgotten or neglected their ancestral background (191). In any case, self-referential humour does not necessarily deprecate its object. For instance, politicians frequently resort to this kind of humour “to dispel specific accusations made against them. . . . Self-deprecatory jokes denied or rendered harmless a negative political image of them as individuals” (194). The same story holds true with regard to Jewish self-referential humour. Davies argues that some reflexive Jewish humour is actually self-congratulatory rather than self-disparaging (197). This kind of humour originates in a paradox between “(a) the legitimate pride that Jews have taken in their distinctive and learned religious and ethical tradition and in the remarkable intellectual eminence and entrepreneurial and professional achievement of individual members of their community and (b) the anti-Semitic abuse and denigration from hostile outsiders whose malice was fueled by Jewish autonomy and achievements.” Jewish reflexive humour, therefore, both arises from this paradox and is a way of living with it; it helps the members of this minority strike a sense of balance in their lives (203). Ben-Amos (1973:129; see also 123) also concurs that Jewish humour is not self-deprecatory, but he explains it in a very different way. For him,

joking in Jewish society does not involve mocking of self either directly or indirectly. Rather, invariably the object of ridicule is a group with which the raconteur disassociates himself. Joke-telling is a verbal expression which manifests social differentiation. The fact that Jews tell jokes about each other demonstrates not so much self-hatred as perhaps the internal segmentation of their society.

So, in an argument similar to that of Billig, the diversity of Jewish community renders their humour as directed by one sector against another to underscore their differences, but this also means Jewish humour is no longer reflexive. Yet, it does not seem justified to generally argue that reflexive humour by minorities is always self-congratulatory and never self-deprecating.

3. Taxonomy of reflexive humour

So far, we have seen that reflexive humour can serve different functions. It can facilitate coming to terms with one's dichotomous nature and existence, and/or encountering the uncanny and latent content of one's unconscious in a safe way. It can establish psychological homeostasis at both personal and intersubjective levels, thus leading to mental composure, self-management, and protection in stressful experiences. In addition to these, reflexive humour facilitates distance and detachment necessary for self-assessment with both personal and societal evaluative scales.



The diversity of explanations and postulated functions shows that reflexive humour is not a single, homogenous category, and that is why various theories can be employed to expound on its different varieties. Five major positions can be noticed on the spectrum of reflexive humour that can extend from sheer bipolar disorder as a psychological complication at one extreme, to a thorough grasp of the variety of dimensions of human life and existence at the other.

First, reflexive humour might originate in individual internal contradictions. The opposition between the latent content of the unconscious and consciousness, between ego and superego, between ideal ego and actual ego, between the yearning to succumb to the desires that the pleasure principle dictates and the demands of superego at the individual level can make one poke fun at oneself. Several jokes with sexual content belong to this category. Laughing at forbidden sexual desires is mainly a psychological defence mechanism, as it can release psychic energy and improve mental health. Of course, the unqualified endorsement of this position is rather naive. It actually presupposes a circular pattern: the self/psyche dictates a desire which it itself bans. Yet, sexual taboos are not genetically prohibited but, rather, forbidden by social norms; that is to say, there seems to be a social aspect to humour even at its most personal and individual level.

Sometimes, however, reflexive humour can manifest more of social determinants. It might arise from the opposition between the individual self as located within a society, on the one hand, and larger social and/or ethical demands of her community, on the other. In this case, reflexive humour can facilitate the distance and detachment necessary for self-evaluation. Eugène Ionesco depicts a horrific picture of absolute and unchallenged conformism by metamorphosing all but one of his characters in *Rhinoceros*. This kind of reflexive satire can also be detected in Gulliver's conversation with the king of Brobdingnag in the second book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, where Gulliver proudly boasts of human 'achievements', including weapons, yet the king is appalled at these descriptions and thinks of human beings as "the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth" (Swift 2005: 121). A subcategory within this type occurs when an individual satirizes the collective self through projection. The satirist sees different vices in her society, while all

other people are so deeply immersed in these frailties that they fail to even notice their depravities. As her fellow people are absorbed in their corrupt lifestyle, the satirist projects their frailties onto others and attempts to stir her fellow people's sound judgments through breaching this distance afterwards. Montesquieu, for instance, satirizes the French through projecting their negative attributes onto Iranians in his *Persian Letters*.

Though not always distinct from the second type, the third kind of reflexive humour can be detected when the self/other bipolarity at work in most kinds of humour is actually reversed. Instead of feeling superior over others, the self discerns its inferiority, and hence, deprecates itself. This is when the other is more successful, lives up to ethical demands, and is more virtuous, while the self fails to act in accordance with these standards. Instead of projecting the negative features of the self onto others, the satirist realistically encounters and probes them in order to come up with solutions. In this way, the satirist promotes social, ethical, and political reforms. In psychological terms, then, reflexive humour can originate in an inferiority complex but this time, not merely at psychic and individual levels. The main difference between this and the former type is that in the latter, it is the collective self, rather than the individual one, that employs reflexive humour. The reversal of the self/other binary can happen in religious humour "[w]hen people make fun of their own values, when religious people tell religious jokes;" in this case "they are in a playful manner conscious of the frailty of their values" (van Herck 2011: 201). Sometimes, religions insist on their absolute validity by denying the righteousness of others, but when believers notice how their creed does not measure up to its promises and the followers of other faiths are in one way or another superior to them, they might poke fun at their own values in a reversed binary opposition.

Reflexive, disparaging humour can also be the result of blind socialization or absolute assimilation at both individual and social levels. People of colour/certain races or colonial subjects might deprecate themselves and their communities because they have internalized and neutralized the values of the mainstream culture that discriminates against them.⁴ And women satirize themselves because they judge females through patriarchal perspectives. A good example is the Persian translation of *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* by James Justinian Morier (3 vols., London, 1824). The original work is an openly biased, orientalist novel that offers a mythical representation of different aspects of Iranian culture and scathingly satirizes them. Mirzā Ḥabīb, the Persian translator, endorses the original censures in a turn to sarcastic reflexive satire. As Amanat (2006) also notes, "the Persian translation of *Hajji Baba* was seen as a critical depiction of Persia's backwardness and moral decadence, a self-image that begged for Westernizing remedies" (n.p.). Mirzā Ḥabīb was so fascinated with western civilization that not only was he blind to the biases of Morier, but also insisted that the situation in Iran is to be amended by following western models. However, this kind of reflexive humour can also be self-mocking rather than self-degrading.⁵ In this case, it can be used to redefine an identity through revising the (negative) stereotypes that commonly characterize some communities (see also Oring 1992). In the case of reflexive lesbian humour in a heterosexist society, Bing and Heller (2003) contend that this kind of humour "may reinterpret negative stereotypes of lesbians in a positive way" (166). Through poking fun at the stereotypical self, reflexive humour can also mock the binary opposition of self versus other by foregrounding it. Lesbians satirize not the

⁴ An *EJHR* anonymous reviewer suggested blackface comedy performed by African Americans like Bert Williams as examples of this type.

⁵ According to Oring (1992), "[s]elf-mockery . . . signif[ies] speech or behaviour deliberately designed to characterize some aspect of the self as ridiculous. These behaviours are conscious, deliberate, and communicative. They suggest an attempt to provoke some type of laughter from an audience that is directed at the identity of the speaker-actor", while, "[s]elf-degradation . . . impl[ies] the belittling or lowering of the self in value. Degradation is a sociomoral consequence of action. Self-degradation thus necessitates a display before an audience in which communal values are wilfully relinquished through action or the marked failure to act" (123).

genuine lesbian identity but its misrepresented stereotype, in order to reject its validity and attempt to revise and replace it with an authentic and multidimensional lesbian identity in the public discourse. This can be also illustrated by reflexive feminist jokes that rely on man/woman binary opposition in order to subvert the same bipolarity by showing its irrationality. This is also true in the case of some Jewish jokes that, although based on stereotypes about its believers, are actually targeting the stereotypes rather than what they describe.

In this sense, then, reflexive humour and satire are not so much directed at the “self” but rather at that performative⁶ notion that uses the “self” as a medium of social participation. Humour and satire are directed by the social discourses of an episteme at the performative self that emerges merely as a site to impose uniformity on the wide diversity of desires, behaviours, actions, feelings, emotions, and thoughts in a single site, namely the ego.⁷ In the case of revisionary attempts, humour is directed against these discourses in hopes of modifying the identity they have constructed. This has important (political) ramifications for all kinds of satires that target various groups marginalized based on their gender, ethnicity, age, religion, political affiliation, and region of the country. Actually, it is quite ironic that, frequently in works featuring humour, the more marginalized a character is, the more significant his/her role.

The last type of reflexive humour does not feature any egoistic self or even a delimited collective self. This type of self-referential humour pokes fun at human beings and their existence in general. Existential and absurd humour speculates about the meaninglessness of human life. Existentialist writings and the theatre of the absurd offer several examples of this kind of reflexive humour. Most characters in Samuel Beckett’s plays direct humour at themselves not because of their faults, but because of human beings’ essentially absurd existence. This kind of grim humour is also prominent in Khayyam (ca. 1048-1123), a frequently misunderstood Persian scholar and poet. Although *carpe diem* is among his themes, his works cannot be reduced to mere pleasure seeking and corporeal gratification in any way. His deep philosophical insights frequently lead him to sneer at the vanity and absurdity of human life (see Hedayat 1977 for an alternative appreciation of Khayyam).

Thus, reflexive humour can happen on a purely individualistic basis (at least in theory) or tend toward more social dimensions. Also, it can be directed against the individual self or the collective self. Far from being merely unhealthy and detrimental, reflexive humour can perform several functions ranging from securing psychological homeostasis to dealing with more impersonal, social, and philosophical concerns, depending on the satirist and his target. I also tried to imply that attempts to come up with a single general theory of humour that can account for all instances of humorous discourses have not yet succeeded; therefore, it does not seem wise to prematurely refute certain theories outright, as that would mean depriving critical endeavours of some of their explanatory instruments, although these might only be partially effective. While the study of the ambivalent nature of reflexive humour and satire as uncanny and narcissistic expressions can provide insights into the psychology of individuals, investigating how they can facilitate a deeper appreciation of socially marginalized groups can reveal their social and political functions. Besides, their implications for gallows humour, parody, and social bonding can be further investigated.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous *EJHR* reviewers for their helpful and constructive suggestions, Professor Pourgiv for reading the final draft of the manuscript, and Professor Władysław Chłopicki for his kindness, patience and support. Completing this research

⁶ For the notion of performativity see Judith Butler, especially in her *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender*.

⁷ Compare Michel Foucault’s notion of author-function.

would have not been possible without the generous support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

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