

Humour versus dignity in the public sphere

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Abstract

Dignity is an important—perhaps even essential—aspect of a functioning public sphere: one where citizens can meet each other as equals and respectful antagonists in the exchange of different perspectives and reasoned opinions. This potentially poses a problem, however, for those who seek to invoke humour as a productive element of public conversation and deliberation. Even when humour is not explicitly critical, to treat a subject or person in comic terms is potentially to threaten their dignity in ways that could undermine their ability to meaningfully participate in the public sphere.

In this article I argue that there is a need to more fully theorise ‘dignity’ in order to understand how humour circulates and functions in the public sphere. To that end, I first draw upon Axel Honneth’s political theory of recognition as the basis for an expanded conception of dignity that can be understood as the basis for claiming membership of a political community. This model is then tested through a consideration of the physical comedy of ‘pie-ing’ as an example of the elementary conflict between humour and dignity. Finally, the concept of comic indignity is explored as a way to consider which members of a public sphere can afford to suffer slights to their dignity, which cannot, and how this unequal vulnerability to humour might provide the basis for a new model for assessing the politics of humour in the public sphere.

Keywords: dignity, public sphere, recognition, controversy, pie gag.

1. Introduction

Dignity is an important—perhaps even essential—aspect of a functioning public sphere (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 158-64; Misztal, 2012). To acknowledge the dignity of another person is to recognise them as someone capable of participating in public life in a manner that is not just consequential, but which reflects their status as a valued member of a community (Waldron, 2012, pp. 35-36). When someone has dignity, their thoughts and their personage matter and ought to be respected (Scott, 2013, p. 71). In a broadly liberal society dedicated to the political aspiration of reasonable deliberation between equals as a key aspect of democracy, it therefore follows that the value of dignity is difficult to question.

Dignity, however, poses a potential problem for those who would seek to include humour as a productive element of public conversation and deliberation. As is unfortunately but

frequently demonstrated, humour and dignity are often incompatible: a tension on display in events ranging from innumerable everyday infractions and offences (Plester, 2016) to high profile international incidents like the Jyllands-Posten controversy of 2005 (Kuipers, 2011) or the Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015 (Kuipers, 2015). As a potential affront to dignity, humour is often an unwelcome or disruptive presence in meaningfully public conversations: the sound of laughter can indicate situations where the dignity of particular parties or beliefs is being called into question. Indeed, even when humour is not explicitly critical, to treat a subject or person in comic terms is potentially to threaten their dignity in ways that can undermine their ability to meaningfully participate in the public sphere.

Or, to reverse that formulation: dignity can also be a threat to humour in the public sphere. It is a concept that is so seemingly antithetical to humour, that to permit its entry into the conversation is to risk fundamentally undercutting the viability and desirability of humour as a cultural form. Indeed, this is how the concept of dignity appears in the work of Giseline Kuipers, one of the few humour scholars to write directly on the subject, who frames dignity as existing almost exclusively in conflict with humour (2011, 2015). It is likely for this reason that scholars, practitioners, and advocates of humour have struggled to account for dignity and have, instead, often found themselves in the position of opposing it. To entertain dignity is to risk censuring humour (and vice versa). However, I would assert that despite the apparent incompatibility between humour and dignity, it is unsustainable to remain silent on their relationship, not least because of the extent to which dignity continues to be implicated in controversies and conflicts regarding humour. Building on the work of previous thinkers like Kuipers, this article therefore seeks to more fully theorise the concept of ‘dignity’ in relation to humour, in order to account for how the two concepts circulate, function, and collide in the public sphere.

This article thus seeks to account for dignity’s relationship to humour with an emphasis on the mutual circulation and contestation of dignity and humour in public politics. To this end, I draw upon both Steven Pinker’s polemic rejection of dignity as a means to conceptualise opposition to the concept and Axel Honneth’s political theory of recognition as the basis for an expanded conception of dignity understood as the basis for claiming membership of a political community. The implications of this model are then explored through an extended consideration of the physical comedy of ‘pie-ing’—striking a target in the face with a dessert pie to comic effect—which is presented as an example of the elementary conflict between humour and dignity. Finally, the comic indignity of the pie serves as the basis for an expanded discussion that considers why some members of a public sphere can afford to suffer slights to their dignity, why some cannot, and how this unequal vulnerability to humour might provide the basis for a new model for assessing the politics of humour in the public sphere.

2. Reckoning with dignity

Dignity adheres to certain ideas, bodies, voices, and ways of being more than others, and it does so in ways that can shift over time and space (Anker, 2012; Lamont, 2000). On one level, this is the relatively straightforward observation that, as with other forms of socially sanctioned power and privilege, dignity is most readily accessible to those whose embodied attributes and compartments—things such as race, gender and class—align with dominant groups. However, this is also the more complicated suggestion that dignity is not fixed and stable. It can be challenged by the actions (or inactions) of others. It can be placed at risk or drained away in certain situations, especially when one is in an unfamiliar environment or engaging in unfamiliar forms of behaviour. Dignity is thus bound up with not only the ways in which we see ourselves, but also how we imagine others see us and the potential for that perception to be undermined by

the actions and words of those around us. Dignity is dependent on power and perception in ways that are both fundamentally relational and relative.

It is these elements of relationality and relativity that led Steven Pinker to refer to the “stupidity of dignity”: a phrase that serves as the title for a polemical essay in which he opposes attempts by the Bush administration in the US to make ‘dignity’ central to national bioethical policy (2008). Pinker’s argument dismisses dignity as “a squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it” (2008, n.p.) Following a more general trend in bioethical and political philosophy (Rosen, 2012, pp. 4-5.), Pinker scathingly contrasts dignity with the principle of autonomy, and asserts that there are three main grounds on which dignity fails as a bioethical principle.

First, dignity is relative: the idea of what constitutes dignity varies dramatically over space and time. Think for example about how dignity can be tied up with different expectations around topics like clothing and etiquette: to maintain dignity in certain cultural contexts requires the adoption of demure fashion in ways that might be perceived to compromise one’s dignity in other contexts. Pinker’s second objection is that dignity is fungible: it can be, and often is, traded away in the pursuit of goals and desires, such as the airport pat-down or the medical exam, where dignity is willingly sacrificed for other ends. The third objection is that dignity can provide justification for violence and oppression: for example, when slights to the dignity of a community are taken as grounds for that community to enact punishment on individual members. For these reasons, Pinker suggests, dignity cannot and should not inform a meaningful ethical system.

The reason why it is useful to consider Pinker’s objections by way of introduction is because they parallel many of the concerns that are also expressed against the concept of dignity when it comes into opposition with humour. In this opposition, dignity is often positioned as a woolly, idiosyncratic notion: one that is overly-concerned with how people feel, rather than being concerned with what was meant or intended or indeed what simply is. It is perhaps for this reason that dignity has not explicitly featured in many discussions of the social function of humour (with the notable exception of the work of Kuipers discussed above). Instead, dignity’s comic opponents tend to frame the conflict in terms of (over)sensitivity or political correctness, which recasts attempts to limit humour as a form of censorship or oppressive overreach (for example Clements, 2020; Davies, 2002, 2011; Saper, 1995). The evocation of political correctness thus recasts the invocation of dignity as a malicious attempt to exert undue control over the intrinsically benign politics of humour.

Elsewhere, claims to dignity can be dismissed as instances of ultimately subjective differences of opinion: where one party believes a subject is a fair target of humour, while another does not. Though not primarily couched in terms of dignity, debates regarding rape humour can be framed in this way: one party prioritises the threatened dignity of victims of rape, while another argues that to do so is to limit humour in unnecessary or unwarranted ways (Kramer, 2011). To be clear, though, these objections are not here presented as if they constitute some sort of critical blow against dignity as a useful concept. Rather they illustrate the extent to which considerations of dignity—whether explicit or not—are an ongoing aspect of debates around humour, and point towards the relevant criticisms that we ought to bear in mind when seeking to characterise dignity as a useful and meaningful principle.

2.1. Defining dignity

It is in order to more fully characterise dignity in this manner that I now turn to the work of Axel Honneth: one of the few critical scholars to offer a positive account of dignity as a theoretical concept. Indeed, Honneth argues that dignity should be understood as a key aspect of Marx’s social theory and asserts that “For Marx, who followed the working class’s attempts at

organising from the closest distance, it was beyond doubt that the overarching aspirations of the emerging movement could be brought together under the concept of ‘dignity’” (1995, p. 160.). Honneth thus locates dignity as not simply a subject worthy of concern, but a key driver of revolutionary thought and action as the oppressed class seeks to redress collective feelings of unjust treatment. According to this model, revolutionary political action is not only motivated by the proletariat’s structural economic exploitation, but also by that group’s desire for the recognition they feel they ought to be afforded as human beings. The proletariat organise, by Honneth’s account, because they have been denied their dignity.

Dignity thus emerges here as the feeling that an individual or a group is *recognised*: that they are seen by others as a member of a legitimate social and political community, and ought to be treated in ways that accord with that membership. This is dignity imagined as a fundamentally relational quality. It cannot be simply possessed, but instead emerges out of a relationship with others when they recognise one’s capabilities and status (Kuipers, 2015, p.15). To have dignity is to matter in the estimation of others. It is to be recognised as capable by other persons and to be afforded the opportunities and permissions that accompany that capability.

When community is imagined in the broadest sense, dignity can be understood as a fundamentally human quality. This account of dignity aligns with that of political philosopher Joel Feinberg who suggests that it “may simply be the recognizable capacity to assert claims. To respect a person then, or to think of him as possessed of human dignity, simply is to think of him as a potential maker of claims” (Feinberg, 2004, p. 151). However, it is also possible to conceive of dignity in terms of more specific communities, such that an individual is denied or provided access to dignity in particular contexts and at particular times. For example if a person were to arrive at formal social function inappropriately dressed then their contextual dignity would suffer: they would not be recognised as a legitimate participant in that space and would risk attracting the sneers or pity of others. However, it would be incorrect to suggest that their fundamental human dignity was therefore somehow compromised.

As I am defining it here, dignity is less concerned with the recognition of a subject’s fundamental humanity and the accordant rights—what is often referred to as specifically “human dignity” (Habermas, 2010; Kateb, 2011)—but rather is understood as a more modest, but still politically important, personal quality that an individual is afforded when others see them as worthy and capable of acting in specific ways that align with the values of a community in specific contexts. Taking its lead from political theory, this is a concept of dignity as a political and social category, rather than as a metaphysical or theological claim that it can sometimes become in the context of ethical philosophy (Macready, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Defined in this way, dignity is not simply a first-order quality that an individual can possess, like conviction or empathy. Nor is it a second-order quality that is ascribed to an individual by others, such as honour or attractiveness. Instead, dignity here emerges as a socially-complex third-order quality that an individual comes to personally possess as a consequence of the way they are treated by others. This aligns with what John Douglas Macready, in his explication of the concept of dignity in the work of Hannah Arendt, refers to as “conditional dignity” which is “dependent on the assertion of dignity by its bearer and/or the recognition by the political community of which the bearer is a member or from which he/she seeks membership or asylum” (2016, p. 399). To have conditional dignity of this sort is to possess the ability to engage and interact with others as a legitimate and competent interlocutor, because one has been recognised as a subject whose thoughts and feelings matter.

Thus understood, dignity is not an inalienable human quality: if that were the case then it could not be challenged, let alone annulled, by something as ephemeral as a cartoon or a practical joke. Rather, this is dignity understood as something that can be won or lost under certain conditions, but which is essential for those who seek to participate in the public sphere, because it is the basis on which one is seen to be qualified to speak, to make contributions that

matter, and to be an entity that matters in public deliberation and discussion. In terms of the public sphere, to have dignity is to be able to contribute in ways that mean others are required to pay attention to because one is a recognised member of the (or a) community.

2.2. Recognising dignity

When we understand dignity in this way, one of the consequences is that for those whose community membership is not usually in question, dignity can largely be assumed or even ignored. This is because such persons have no need to make regular claims to be recognised or respected as capable agents, or at least not make any claims that have vital stakes. Such persons do not need to make appeals to their human dignity for recognition or protection, because their status as members of a community is not in question. When we feel confident that we belong and that we know what is expected of us, then little thought needs to be given to dignity. This is not simply because a claim to dignity can be assumed in such circumstances, but because dignity is not even necessary for those who do not fear challenges to their standing or who have easy access to other ways of projecting their voice, enacting their will, and otherwise ensuring they are not disadvantaged or oppressed. For example, as a means of securing recognition and access within a community, money can replace dignity under certain conditions, as can social capital or even physical violence. Persons of multiple means are therefore not reliant upon dignity to get through life and, consequently, can suffer slights to their dignity, or trade it away for convenience or security or pleasure, without negative results. If you are rich enough, or connected enough within a community, then you are less like to need to appeal to dignity to secure your membership and recognition within a community.

This does not mean that dignity is insignificant; simply that it is often irrelevant for a particular set of community members. However, it remains an important quality for those who lack power or alternate means of securing life-affirming treatment. Dignity really matters for individuals or populations—such as stateless or incarcerated persons—who are especially vulnerable to debasement and deprivation. When one lacks other means to ensure that one is treated in an equitable manner, dignity becomes extremely important as either the first or last guarantor of one's status as a social and political being who can participate and make claims in social spaces and the public sphere. This is not simply the standard observation that power and privilege are unevenly distributed according to categories such as gender and race, but also the observation that a need for dignity, or an awareness of the vulnerability of our claim to dignity, can surface and recede depending on how we relate to the social environment around us. Even for those who have access to multiple forms of privilege and power, the need for dignity can spring up unexpectedly: for example, in contexts where they are not familiar with social expectations, where they might not be taken seriously, or where they may need to make recourse to the fundamental fact of their human existence to ensure fair treatment.

Consequently, dignity only becomes fully appreciated, indeed fully perceived, when it is threatened or absent. Indeed, Honneth argues that it “can only be ascertained indirectly by determining the forms of personal degradation and injury” (Honneth, 1995, p. 187.). For Honneth, these threats to dignity take three main forms: physical abuse, which undermines self-confidence, personal disrespect which denies certain rights expected in a given society, and degradation which denounces certain ways of life as “inferior or deficient” (1995, p. 134.). For those who experience such treatment, their ability to be recognised as a subject who matters and who can lay meaningful claim to social legitimacy can come under question. They may risk being regarded as no longer a bearer of dignity, and therefore no longer having a legitimate claim to social recognition, or they may no longer perceive themselves to have the right to make those claims. And importantly for the current argument, all three of these threats can be expressed through comic means: social degradation aligns with examples like racist and ethnic

humour (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 2005); disrespect with the ridicule of individuals (Billig, 2005); and physical abuse with particular forms of practical joking (Marsh, 2015) or slapstick, such as receiving a pie to the face.

3. A consideration of pies (and other comic challenges to dignity)

There are few gags as classic—some might say cliché—as the pie in the face. To smash someone in the face with a pie—to watch cream and crust explode across the visage of an unsuspecting victim—is to re-enact one of the primal moments of 20th century humour and to participate in a deep and complex comic tradition. According to Louise Peacock, it was Fatty Arbuckle who received the first recorded custard pie to the face in the silent short *A Noise from the Deep* in 1913 (2014, p. 32), though it seems unbelievable that this was not preceded but other unrecorded assaults by other flavours and variations of pies. In some ways, it seems inconceivable that we as a species have not been hitting each other with pies since time immemorial.

Perhaps, the reason the pie-in-the-face gag feels so elemental is because it is so pure, so simple in its comic mechanism. To strike someone with a pie is comic because it robs them of their dignity, but does so in a way that is apparently harmless and ostensibly unexpected. The humour of the pie is fundamentally predicated on a comic erasure of dignity through physical assault—executed quickly and ideally without bodily harm—but accomplished quite thoroughly on a symbolic level. There are certainly also some elements of incongruity at play here, not least in the choice of weapon, but by the end of the twentieth century, if not earlier, the pie had become so familiar as to rob the bit of any unexpectedness it once had. To see a pie strike a face is the equivalent of the infamous Aristocrats joke (Oring, 2007): there is little surprise as to how the humour will unfold, but it might still succeed despite the predictability provided that its social and psychological content tickles its audiences.

As a result, the pie-face gag now operates as an almost pure assault on the dignity—an attack on the status—of the target smuggled in behind the joke-work of the pie. To draw briefly on a different set of terms, this is an example of humour as almost pure tendentiousness: where the formal comic aspects are so rote and weak as to be barely significant, and the comic outcome of the bit therefore relies almost entirely on its breach of social expectations (Holm, 2016): in this instance, prohibitions regarding the legitimate purpose of food and the physical inviolability of others. Moreover, despite its predictability, the pie structure is still absolutely necessary under most conditions. In most instances, to rob someone of dignity without comic structure is likely to be perceived as simple cruelty, especially if that action is seen to be violent. A thrown brick is much less likely to be seen as comic as a thrown pie, at least outside the realm of comics and cartoons. In contrast the pie is an act of humiliation rather than violence: the presence of the pie functioning to frame the erasure of dignity as a form of comedy rather than harassment.

3.1. That time Bill Gates was hit with a pie

These fundamental premises of the pie gag were on display in one of the more infamous pie incidents of the twentieth century: the 1998 pie-ing of Microsoft chairman Bill Gates, at the time the wealthiest man in the world, by accomplices of Noel Godin, the self-described *l'entarteur* (a portmanteau of the French words for entertainer and tart) who had a track record of pie-ing celebrities and public figures (Valauskas, 1998). The incident occurred during a trip to Brussels, where Gates was scheduled to address Belgian government officials and representatives of the European computer industry. In footage of the incident, Gates is smiling happily and waving to local reporters, before Godin's accomplice leaps out from behind a pillar and, in a surprisingly violent action, slams a cream pie into Gates's face. Visibly shaken and disorientated, Gates staggers backwards. His security detail place their arms around Gates and quickly escort him

inside the building, but are unable to prevent two further pie strikes as more assailants leap out from hiding. Later, Gates would re-appear to speak to media, cream-covered but in seeming good spirits and eager to shrug off the attack. Godin and his accomplices were subsequently arrested, but Gates decided not to press charges.

The Gates-Pie incident is relevant to the current discussion insofar as it captures several important elements of pie assault as a comic form: the status of Gates as a high-profile, high-status target, the shocking suddenness of the assault as captured in the footage, and the satisfying splatter of cream across Gate's business suit in the aftermath. As a result of this confluence of factors, this is an almost archetypal example of a public pie assault, in its purity, its visibility, and indeed in the loss of dignity.

But what did it mean, though, to hit Bill Gates with a pie in 1998? While there are undeniably grounds to interpret this as a politically symbolic act commenting on globalisation or the expanding role of information technology companies, to prioritise that reading would be to overlook the more fundamental human qualities of the pie gag. In itself, a pie in the face is not necessarily a comic act freighted with deeper meaning. The pie-ing of a generic individual—such as a clown—under controlled circumstances does not carry any specific meaning. Before the pie, a clown is a target rather than a character, and their pie-ing speaks to nothing more and nothing less than the loss of dignity to an individual in the abstract. Bill Gates however is obviously not a generic target and to pie him is therefore not to pie just an abstract person. At the very least he is a biographical individual with hopes and dreams and feelings, who likely experienced the pie in the moment with a mix of confusion and fear. When struck by the pie, Gates cannot—at least briefly—be taken seriously. Instead, he becomes a comic figure, and at the same time one whose dignity is threatened or even removed. Any humour and any critical or political meaning that might be attributed to it, needs to start with the loss of dignity to a human subject upon whom other comic meanings can potentially then be grafted.

Godin himself claimed that he had no particular motive or cause when striking Gates; the target was not chosen to make a specific point about technology or globalisation. Rather, in Godin's words, Gates was chosen as an "example of hierarchical power" itself: a motivation that is consistent with Godin's history as a self-styled "comic terrorist" and anarchist (Valauskas, 1998). Gates' international profile meant that the pie strike could be framed as a part of a broader attack on a vague idea of power: an example of how the pie-work of the gag can provide a basis for more complex and potentially consequential forms of humour. To laugh at Gates is potentially not just to take pleasure in the simple humiliation of a man, but begins to approach what could be imagined as some sort of political humour. However, any satirical interpretation needs to bear in mind that the comic core of this humour remains inextricably tied to the assault upon the dignity of Gates the individual. The corporeality of Gates as a human body is essential to the humour of this act: one cannot pie a concept. Therefore any higher level comic meaning taken from the assault is predicated on the fact of a man getting hit in the face with a pie in a way that robs him of his dignity, and the way in which that assault is interpreted as comic. Ultimately, any political or social message of this humour is dependent on the inciting act of the thrown pie which comically transforms the status of Gates from a key figure of international finance to a metaphorical clown: someone who does not need to be taken seriously. This example illustrates not only how humour comes into conflict with dignity, but also how becoming the subject of humour can constitute a threat to a subject's dignity.

3.2. Dignity beyond pies

The public opposition between humour and dignity should not, however, be understood as simply a matter of pies. Rather the broader point here is that the pie gag is representative of a wider conflict between dignity and humour: one that can also apply in more complex and

controversial comic scenarios (Kuipers, 2015). For example, what would it mean to consider the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack—probably the most high-profile and contentious instance of international humour in the past decade—through such a lens? The Hebdo attack was an armed assault by two brothers, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, on the Paris offices of French comic publication, *Charlie Hebdo*. 12 members of staff were killed in the attack and 11 others injured. The brothers were motivated by the publication's perceived comic slights against Islam, which it had frequently portrayed and discussed in terms of humour (Hebdo's comic portrayal of Islam is predominantly discussed in terms of "satire," though the loose usage of that term can make it difficult to determine exactly what such a description means [Holm, 2023]). The attack prompted global outrage and widespread declarations of support for the publication often expressed through the phrase "Je suis Charlie"

Overwhelmingly, both scholarly and popular discussion of the attacks has taken place with reference to ideas of offense, blasphemy and sensitivity (Ervine, 2019; Horsman, 2020; Rolfe, 2021). Such conversations seek to make sense of this violent assault with reference to the *meaning* of the comic material published by Charlie Hebdo: what it could mean, how it was interpreted, and whether it was ethically correct to circulate such provocative forms of humour (let alone the response they instigated). From this perspective, our understanding of Hebdo's comic content and the subsequent attack hinges on the comic material understood as a critique of Islam expressed in jovial terms. This framing presents the humour and the violent response as a conflict over whether Islam is a legitimate target of criticism, and whether violence is ever a correct response to speech acts: it encourages us to understand this humour controversy in terms of high-level discussions about free speech and religion. So framed, the contours of this discussion ensure that the ethical appraisal of potential comic offense, and the political explication of its consequences, take place in terms that emphasise an interpretation of humour as a natural ally of free speech and critical thought.

However, to understand the Hebdo attacks in such terms is not to fully explain them. Instead this is the equivalent of interpreting the Gates-pie incident as a protest against globalisation and capitalism: not incorrect, but failing to appreciate the significance of the more fundamental comic operation at work. In contrast, emphasis on the concept of dignity shifts attention from the purpose or message of the humour to instead address the underlying comic operation: the manner in which humour shifts its subject from a register of reverence to irreverence. From this perspective, it does not matter what is understood as the intention or meaning of any particular comic content of the Charlie Hebdo publication. Instead, what matters is that certain topics were seen as being legitimate subjects of humour and as a consequence they were *not taken seriously*, or at least not as seriously as certain groups would like and that this, in turn, brought the dignity of that group and their beliefs into question.

When understood in terms of dignity, the political meaning of the humour does not depend on whether it is critical or playful in spirit. Rather, it depends upon the experience of those who understand themselves as the subjects of that humour: those whose identity, community, or values were taken as viable and legitimate subjects of humour. Or, to phrase this differently, we might say that in this case the irreverent, comic portrayal of Islam meant that it was not being afforded the dignity that deeply invested parties thought it ought to have been. This approach shifts the emphasis from the question of what comic speech ought to be permitted, to a consideration of how humour might threaten to undermine certain groups' (and their beliefs) claims to legitimacy and respect.

Moreover, such an approach is by no means restricted to Hebdo and the attacks. It can just as readily be applied as way to understand other prominent humour controversies, such as the older Jyllands Posten incident, or, more generally, to what are sometimes called bad taste jokes: those made at the expense of disaster victims or refugees. Even when such forms of humour are

thought to be instances of unrelated play, rather than attempts to make any meaningful statement about their subjects, they can threaten to controvert their subjects' claims to dignity.

3.3. The comedy of suffering

To illustrate how this aspect of the relationship between humour and dignity works in more detail, I will now introduce an example of an editorial cartoon that was the subject of a significant national controversy in New Zealand in 2019. The context for the cartoon is that at the time of its publication, the island nation of Samoa was experiencing a disastrous measles outbreak. Three percent of the country contracted the disease and 83 people died, most of them babies and young children (Craig, Heywood and Worth, 2020). It was that ongoing medical disaster that provided the inspiration for an editorial cartoon published by the *Otago Daily Times* on Tuesday 3 December. In the cartoon, two white women, one middle-aged, one older, are depicted walking out a New Zealand travel agent. Their dialogue is represented in a caption at the bottom of the image that reads "I asked 'What are the least popular spots at the moment?' She said 'The ones people are picking up in Samoa'" (this gag relies upon the knowledge that Samoa is a popular holiday destination for New Zealand travellers). The response in New Zealand was swift and comprehensive. The cartoon was widely denounced as offensive, including by political leaders (Braae, 2019; McNeilly, 2019), and the cartoonist, who had courted controversy for several years, has not since had his work published in any major publication.

Although this example is relatively unknown when compared to major global comic scandals, it is particularly useful for a consideration of dignity because it provides the rare example of a public comic controversy where there is little basis to ascribe critical or political meaning to the humour. This is because the cartoon does not depend on any critical observation, and no political or ethical message about its subject—the measles outbreak—is being offered. Instead, the source of humour here is a punning play on the word 'spot,' which refers to both "a place, a locality, an area" and "a small localized lesion of the skin" (OED, 2023). Consequently, if we were to focus on the 'meaning' of the humour we would be at a loss to explain how and why this was interpreted as offensive, because there is nothing being said in this cartoon about the vulnerable group or the dangerous situation unfolding. Samoa and Samoans as a community in crisis are fundamentally peripheral to the humorous construction of the text: they are little more than the raw material out of which a pun is fashioned. The reaction to the cartoon is therefore manifestly not a debate over any explicit political or social message being expressed through the humour. Instead, insofar as the cartoon can be thought to express any political meaning at all, it is a meaning that emerges out of the decision to take this specific subject as grounds for humour.

It is for this reason, that it makes more sense to understand the politics of this cartoon (and the reaction to it) in terms of dignity rather than satire. This is because, even though nothing in particular is being said about Samoa or Samoans, the way that country and group are being perceived is nonetheless implicated in this humour. This is because by making them the subject of punning humour, their experiences of death and diseases are being removed from the sphere of seriousness and made frivolous. And in this operation—which can be understood as roughly equivalent to the pie gag—what is lost is dignity. In this way, the measles cartoon is akin to pie-ing a nation or, more precisely, pie-ing a nation which is in the grip of a deadly viral outbreak. It is the production of humour through the comic assertion that an apparently serious subject is, in fact, not serious; it is a denial of the seriousness, of the meaningfulness or the urgency of the topic in question in favour of levity and amusement. This is thus an example of how, even when the given topic is not being mocked or ridiculed per se, treating a group, concept, or situation

with levity potentially undermines its claims to dignity. Indeed, that denial of dignity is essential to the creation of humour in such scenarios.

4. Dignity and humour in the public sphere

Humour thus emerges here as a potential challenge to the basic recognition of an individual or group as a legitimate and equal participant in socially and politically meaningful conversations. Or, to phrase this slightly differently, humour can undermine the claim of an individual or group to be a legitimate participant in the public sphere. For some, this is not a substantial concern if their access to the public sphere is not in question, or if they have some other form of capital to draw on to secure access. However, for those whose claim to the public sphere is in doubt, the basic recognition afforded by dignity is an especially important quality; when they are made the subject of humour, their recognition in that context is potentially threatened. This opposition captures why humour and dignity have such difficulty co-existing when considered in terms of the public sphere, because humour can undermine the potentially vital claims of subjects to participate in that sphere.

What are we, then, to do with this opposition? I think previous conflicts over dignity and humour in the public sphere can be instructive here. On the one hand, some might instinctually think that the risk to dignity is so great and dignity so precious that all instances of humour ought to be barred from the public sphere. This position is not too far removed from that of Michael Billig in his work on ridicule, where the anti-social nature of humour is presumed to prohibit any comic contribution to progressive politics (2005). On the other hand, others are so invested in the power of humour to challenge and unsettle that their position suggests that few or no limits ought to be placed upon it. Such a position would follow from those who we might think of as humour fundamentalists: dedicated advocates for humour as an “inherently liberating force” that enacts a fundamentally benign politics (Holm, 2017, p. 60). I want to suggest, though, that neither of these answers is sufficient. While both have the virtue of being relatively straightforward, neither properly accounts for the complex relationship between dignity and humour in the public sphere, and the need to think the two terms together.

One possible response to the conflict between humour and dignity is to seek to reconcile the two terms by way of synthesis: to suggest that true dignity arises from being able to engage with humour in challenging situations and emerge dignified. Such an assertion is relatively commonplace in studies that assess the use of humour in hospital and care facilities (Baillie, 2009; de Casterlé & Vanlaere, 2022; Dean & Major, 2008; Walsh & Kowanko, 2002). However, such studies differ from the current discussion in that they are invariably concerned with the use of humour in intimate and deeply private, rather than public, circumstances.

In contrast, to publicly cultivate dignity with humour would require one to experience being the subject of humour with such self-assurance and self-respect that one emerges with one's dignity intact and perhaps even enhanced. Such a line of reasoning suggests that the political and social consequences of humour are not a function of the source or meaning of the humour, but rather of the attitude and character of the target. For advocates of humour, this argument is potentially attractive insofar as it offers a way to reconcile humour and dignity. However, it does so by freighting the responsibility for this reconciliation onto the subjects of the disruptive levity. But this then raises the question, for whom is it possible to have dignity after the pie? As the Gates-Godin incident suggests, such an outcome is certainly possible, neither Gates' reputation nor that of his company was in any lasting way damaged by images of his cream-splattered face broadcast around the world. However, this should not be understood as a function of Gates' good attitude or even his PR, but needs to be understood as a function of power and privilege.

The ability to suffer the pie, or humour, with dignity is not always or equally available to everyone. As discussed earlier, threats to dignity are not experienced equally by all parties. For many, especially those in positions of relative privilege and power, the maintenance of dignity is not necessary. Indeed, there are conceivable situations for such figures where the trading away of dignity can be advantageous. For example, an authority figure could receive a pie to the face with good grace to demonstrate how they enjoy a joke and do not consider themselves above such antics, as a means to cultivate loyalty and connection. Elsewhere, self-deprecating humour—humour that risks undermining one’s own dignity—can be used to construct collective identity (Ask & Abidin, 2018) or demonstrate humility (Greengross & Miller, 2008). To return to the earlier discussion briefly, such cases are examples of what Pinker decries as the “fungibility” of dignity: they demonstrate how comic challenges to dignity can be endured and even actively embraced to accomplish specific goals.

However, dignity is not so easily disregarded for those who potentially rely upon claims to seriousness as their primary means to secure recognition within a common community: those for whom becoming the subject of levity could potentially compromise their ability to engage with others as equals or make life-sustaining claims to resources. For example, the Samoan Measles outbreak illustrates a situation where solemnity can become particularly important for a group experiencing precarious circumstances, because it serves as a confirmation, on some level, that a plight is recognised and assistance is likely to be offered. In the midst of a deadly outbreak, a group like the Samoan population—whose historical experience of discrimination and exclusion informs expectations that their suffering may be overlooked or not regarded as urgent (Loto et al., 2006; McCarthy, 2022)—experiences the retention of dignity as a matter of literal life and death. Consequently, for those in such a position, dignity can be judged to be too precious or vital a quality to be traded away for anything. Groups or individuals in vulnerable situations (or who believe themselves to be in vulnerable situations) are therefore less likely to abide comic slights to their dignity. This is not because they are too prideful or precious to be able to find humour at their own expense, but because they cannot afford to risk the loss of dignity which is perceived as an assurance of last resort that they will be recognised and afforded respect in the wider global community.

Many of us do not need to have our seriousness and legitimacy to be re-affirmed in order to participate in public discussion as valued participants. Those who are aligned with dominant structures and expectations, who have access to various forms of power in terms of social or symbolic or material resources, do not need to rely upon dignity to secure our recognition in the public sphere. Therefore, they can ‘take a joke.’ However, those who are vulnerable and marginal are more reliant upon dignity to ensure their access to politically and socially meaningful conversation. They are therefore more likely to be especially attentive to potential challenges to that necessary and vital legitimacy: challenges which include humour. As a consequence, members of disadvantaged or excluded social groups are more vulnerable to comic indignities than someone like Gates. Not only does Gates *not* rely upon recognition of his dignity to secure power and influence, but he also has substantial social standing and prestige, which means no single joke or pie is likely to fully undermine his ability to contribute to and indeed dominate and shape public discussion. A powerful figure like Gates can afford to be flexible in relation to his own seriousness: he can afford to laugh at his own loss of dignity without risking becoming vulnerable to further denigration.

This ability to shrug off public challenges to personal dignity also means that those in positions of relative social comfort are also likely to under-estimate its value to others. Everything can seem worthy of a joke when you are in no risk of material hardship or loss of social standing: when you are utterly inured to social threat. This can mean that those in such a position may underestimate what it is like to live in ways that are so profoundly unstable that the sanctity of one’s self or way of life is unlikely to survive contact with a pie or an off-colour

joke. Reintroducing questions of relative power into considerations of the public politics of humour thus suggests that any denial of the political efficacy of humour needs to ultimately be understood as a failure of empathetic imagination. This is not because humour is necessarily cruel or inherently critical, but rather because some subjects cannot survive contact with levity with their dignity intact. And perhaps some people and some things need dignity, especially when they have very little else.

5. Conclusion

Accounting for dignity can offer a new and potentially productive way of making sense of the politics of humour: one that can help better understand how humour is experienced differently in different contexts and communities. However, this theoretical lens is not without its complications and possible fishhooks. To return to the earlier example of the Charlie Hebdo attack, what would it mean to interpret violent responses to humour controversies through the lens of dignity? To consider post-comic violence in these terms is to shift emphasis from the meaning of comic statements to the importance and fragility of the dignity of vulnerable communities and how humour might threaten that dignity. This is not to excuse or defend violent and murderous responses to comic texts, but instead to propose a different way of accounting for how humour can provoke violence out of all proportion to what is imagined by its creators: to offer a fuller explanation of how and why violent reactions to humour occur.

The concept of dignity can also take us beyond the reductive language of punching up and down, which has substantial and persistent currency in both public and scholarly debates about humour. Up and down suggests a metaphor of height that is too one-dimensional to capture the complexity of social and political power. In contrast, rather than assessing the relative validity of comic targets against some inferred objective hierarchy of power that ought to be consulted when joking, ‘dignity’ instead suggests the need to pay more attention to the lived experience of specific targets and the extent to which they regard their recognition in public discussion as being in jeopardy. When assessing the political function of humour, an emphasis on dignity shifts analytic focus from a concern with relative measures of social standing to a focus on how the specific aspects of particular instances of humour might be understood to undermine public claims to dignity. This approach to the politics of humour allows us to recognise that a comic criticism from a disempowered party aimed towards a relatively powerful group or figure may still threaten their dignity, and therefore is not necessarily benign or in service of a democratic politics. From the perspective of dignity, assessing whether a given instance of humour is democratic or progressive is therefore no longer a matter of determining whether a humourist is ‘above’ or ‘below’ their subject on some perceived social hierarchy, but rather becomes a question of the comic subject’s access to dignity, respect, and the public sphere.

Moreover, such an account of the politics of humour is valuable insofar as it provides a better way to account for the experiences and responses of groups and individuals, such as those aligned with the populist and alt-right, who experience ridicule as persecution, even when by most measures their social and political standing is not in any material danger. For those who either misrecognise or refuse to recognise their own position of relative social power—and therefore fear that their ability to make claims and offer opinions could potentially be taken away from them—comic slights to dignity can appear as existential threats even when they are unlikely to have material consequences. For this reason, a theory of comic dignity not only explains the reaction of vulnerable groups to humour, but also the response of, for example, populist politicians like Silvio Berlusconi (Kuipers, 2015, p. 27) or Donald Trump who respond aggressively to comic denigration even when they occupy clear positions of power. This is not

to defend such responses, but to suggest that dignity provides a way to explain and account for them beyond dismissing them as simply misguided or offered in bad faith.

Dignity thus points towards new ways way of conceiving of the politics of humour in the public sphere beyond the familiar language of satire, carnival and transgression. Orientating discussions of humour in the public sphere towards questions of levity and vulnerability can allow us identify new ways in which humour is entangled with power and how it might shape access to, and meaningful engagement with, the public sphere in ways that are not only about what humour means but also alert to how it feels. The incompatibility of dignity with public humour may make dignity difficult and possibly uncomfortable to address in discussions of comic politics, but this incompatibility also speaks to unavoidable implication of dignity in contemporary conversations around the politics of humour.

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