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Comic objectification

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ABSTRACT

Is finding someone funny a way of treating them as an object? And if so, does that make it immoral? In this paper, I argue that seeing someone as comic involves failing to take into account their subjectivity, which makes it a form of objectification. As for the morality of this 'comic objectification', I argue that regarding someone with a comically objectifying attitude is wrongful when such an attitude plays a role in legitimating the oppression of members of their social group.

"We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing."
Henri Bergson, *Laughter*

"I built a career out of self-deprecating humour … I don't want to do that anymore. Because, do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation."
Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*

Is being amused by someone a way of treating them as an object? And if so, does that make it immoral? In his seminal essay on laughter, Henri Bergson suggests that there is indeed an essential connection between the comic and seeing people as objects, claiming that "we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing" (1911, 58). Far from being immoral, however, Bergson sees this laughter as having a useful social function. In his view, people invite laughter when they fail to exercise their agency and slip into "a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being" (10, emphasis in original). Laughter in such cases acts as a "corrective … a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events" (87–8). We laugh to punish people for failing to exercise their agency, with the intention of correcting their behavior in future, and keeping them in line.

Bergson is probably right that, sometimes, laughing at someone because you see them as comically "thing-like" can have a positive social function. But the link he draws between amusement and seeing someone as an object also has more sinister implications. The feminist literature on objectification suggests that seeing people as objects can play a crucial role in oppression. In particular, it has been argued that *women* are systematically represented as *sexual* objects—in pornography, advertising, and even high art—and these objectifying representations invite us to ignore the agency and subjectivity of women, thereby making the unjust treatment of women appear natural and acceptable. So might it be that comedy is doing to some social groups what pornography has long been recognized to be doing to women?

In this article, I argue that seeing someone as comical does involve treating them as an object. Moreover, this can make comedy objectionable, when it contributes to sustaining what Patricia Hill Collins has called a "controlling image" of a particular social group, which is used to justify oppressive treatment of them. I start, in section I, by sketching an account of comic objectification, taking my cue from Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton's accounts of sexual objectification. Then, in section II, I begin to consider the morality of comic objectification, outlining two existing approaches to morally critiquing humor, and their shortcomings. Finally, in the remaining three sections, I outline my alternative proposal: that some social groups are systematically comically objectified, meaning that comedic representations that invite us to see them as objects play a role in justifying the oppression of those groups. This puts me in a position to argue that comic objectification can be wrongful when it violates a person's right to just treatment.

I. HOW TO TREAT SOMEONE AS A COMIC OBJECT

In the introduction, I suggested, following Bergson, that amusement can result from seeing people as objects. In this section, I want to draw on feminist work on sexual objectification to develop this Bergsonian thought into a detailed account of what I call "comic objectification," whereby we treat people as comic objects. This then puts me in a good position to discuss the *morality* of comic objectification in the following sections.

Before I begin, however, it is worth getting clear on a point of divergence between my discussion and Bergson's. Bergson is primarily interested in laughter, whereas I am interested in "seeing as comical," or, put more colloquially, finding funny. Of course, there is a strong correlation between the two: finding something funny often leads to laughter, and laughter is often caused by finding something funny. But insofar as the two come apart, my discussion here is about finding funny or seeing as comical, and I will henceforth eschew talk of laughter to avoid confusion.

So what is it to see someone as a comical? Simply equating it with being amused by someone will not do, because one could be amused by someone in virtue of a joke they have told, or a humorous performance they have given, in which case it is the content or structure of the joke or performance which is the object of one's amusement. Rather, to see someone as a comical in my sense is to be amused by the person themself: we are amused by the way someone looks, or sounds, or by something that has happened to them, rather than by something else that they have got us to think about through their words or actions.

Now, there is an obvious sense in which seeing someone as comical is a way of treating them as a comic object: they are the object of one's amusement. But the more interesting question that I want to answer in this section is whether it involves treating them as an object in the sense discussed in the literature on sexual objectification, which contrasts treating someone as an *object* with treating them as a *person*.

So what is it to treat someone as an object in this more interesting sense? As feminist philosophers have noted, the notion of "treating as an object" could refer to a great variety of ways of interacting with someone, and it is important to disambiguate—especially if one is interested in ascertaining the *morality* of treating people as objects, as we are here.

First of all, Rae Langton has pointed out that there is an ambiguity in the notion of "treating" someone as an object: "it may be a matter of attitude or act: it may be a matter of how one depicts or represents someone, or a matter of what one more actively does to someone" (2009, 231). "Treating" someone as an object might simply be a matter of *viewing* them in such a way that one notices their thing-like traits and ignores their personhood-related traits, or it might be a matter of *behaving* towards them as if they are an object.

Given that my interest in this article is primarily in the morality of *seeing* someone as comical, the notion of "treating" as an object that will be most applicable is treating someone as an object *in attitude*. Whilst one could act on this attitude, the morality of doing so will be a separate question from the morality of having the attitude in the first place, and it is the attitude that I wish to focus on here. Some readers may be reluctant to think of this purely attitudinal behavior as a way of "treating" someone as an object, preferring to reserve "treating" for actions. In using this term, I am following usage in discussions of sexual objectification, but averse readers may substitute "treating" for "seeing as."

This disambiguates the notion of "treating" in my discussion of "treating as a comic object," but what do I mean by treating "as a comic object"? In their discussions of sexual objectification, Nussbaum and Langton identify ten different ways of treating someone "as an object" rather than a person. Of these, a number seem relevant to comic amusement, including:

> *Fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
> (Nussbaum 1995, 251)
> *Reduction to body*: one treats the object as identified with its body, or body parts.
> (Langton 2009, 228–9)
> *Reduction to appearance*: one treats the object primarily in terms of how it looks, or how it appears to the senses.
> (Langton 2009, 228–9)

Each of these, it seems to me, can clearly be involved in seeing someone as comical. For instance, seeing someone as comical because of a physical trait such as their big ears, large body, or long neck seems often to involve regarding them primarily in terms of how they look, as identified with their body parts, and as interchangeable with other people who share those traits.

That said, the manner of treating "as an object" that I want to argue is most central in the comic case is:

> *Denial of subjectivity*: treating someone as if their experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.
> (Nussbaum 1995, 251)

Here, I again take my cue from Bergson, who famously claims that "the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart" (1911, 5). In other words, in the instant of seeing someone as comical, we cannot simultaneously empathize with them. Though we may in general feel warmth or sympathy towards this person, "we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity" (4). Another way of putting this, it seems to me, is that when finding someone comical, we cannot attend to their subjective feelings and experiences, for this will obstruct our amusement.

So just how plausible is this Bergsonian suggestion that finding someone comical requires a denial of their subjectivity? First of all, it is worth noting that this proposal fits well with various folk intuitions about humor. It is widely thought that using humor is an effective way of coping with painful situations. This suggests that seeing the funny side of a topic involves a perspectival shift away from focusing on painful experiences and feelings involved in that topic. In a similar vein, it is often said that "comedy equals tragedy plus time," the implication being that amusement at a difficult topic requires one to have a certain amount of psychic distance from that topic and that jokes made "too soon" after a tragic event will fail to amuse because the pain of the event is too salient to hearers. Both of these intuitions indicate a kind of incompatibility between seeing something or someone as comical and taking into account subjective experiences and feelings involved in that topic, at least insofar as those subjective experiences and feelings are painful and evoke pity.

What is more, there is empirical data to support the connection between seeing someone as comical and a lack of empathy for them. A 2016 experiment conducted by Peter Bui and others asked participants to rate the funniness of two video clips of children experiencing mild misfortune (being hit with a stick, falling off a bike into a mud pit, rolling off a bike, or experiencing a failed trust fall), then got them to read an empathy-inducing story, and then asked them to rate the funniness of another two video clips (from the previously described set). The researchers found that after reading the empathy-inducing story, participants rated the funniness of the second two clips significantly lower than the two clips watched before reading the story, whereas a control group who read a neutral story in between had no significant difference in their ratings before and after (Bui et al. 2016). These findings indicate that feelings of empathy inhibit the ability to see someone as comical, suggesting that to see someone as comical, one cannot take into account the subjective experiences and feelings of that person.

This experiment was in turn influenced by a 2010 study by Michael Hampes on the relationship between humor styles and empathy, which found a strong negative correlation between a disposition to prefer humor relating to teasing, ridicule, and derision and a disposition for *empathic concern*—"the extent to which a person feels warmth, compassion, and concern towards others who are having negative experiences" (Hampes 2010, 35)—and *perspective-taking empathy*—"being able to take the perspective of other individuals" (35). Again, this points towards the thought that seeing someone as comical in the manner I have described is at odds with taking into account their subjective experiences and feelings. A similar relationship between empathy and teasing and ridiculing humor was found in a study on humor styles and empathy in junior school children (Halfpenny and James 2020), and in a study on class-based differences in humor styles (Navarro-Carrillo et al. 2020).

Finally, we might wonder whether there is data to support a causal link between humor and empathy that runs in the other direction from Bui's study: is there any evidence that seeing a certain person as comical can make one less empathetic towards them? To my knowledge, this question has not been studied directly. However, one study that indirectly supports this possibility is a 2008 experiment investigating the effects of sexist humor on behavior. Thomas E. Ford and other researchers found that for those with pre-existing sexist attitudes, priming with sexist humor uniquely increased participants' sexist behavior (unwillingness to donate to a women's organization; willingness to cut the budget of a women's organization) as compared with priming with nonsexist humor and nonhumorous sexism (Ford *et al.,* 2008). This suggests that at least for those with pre-existing implicit biases towards a particular social group, coming to see a member of that social group as comical makes them more likely to act on those implicit biases, which would be consistent with decreased empathy for members of that social group. I discuss this study further when I come to consider the question of the morality of comic objectification.

For now, I hope to have shown the plausibility of the claim that seeing someone as comical in the manner I am interested in here is at odds with taking their subjectivity seriously—and thus that seeing someone as comical means treating them as an object, in the sense of viewing them in a manner that fails to take into account their subjective experiences and feelings.

That being said, it is worth making clear the scope of the claim. Seeing someone as comical involves failing to take their subjectivity into account *in that moment*, but this need not having a lasting effect. Often, comedians will get an audience to see someone—frequently, the comedian themselves—as comical before then getting them to adopt a different perspective, which may draw their attention back to the subjectivity of the person in question. Intuitively, the moral status of such comedy is rather different from comedy that does not subvert or challenge the comically objectifying perspective, and this will need to be taken into account in the discussion of the remaining sections.

II. TWO APPROACHES TO THE ETHICS OF COMIC OBJECTIFICATION

So far, I have argued that seeing someone as comical, in the sense of being amused by the person themselves, means treating that person as an object, in the sense of regarding them in a manner that fails to take into account their subjective experiences and feelings. However, it is not typically thought that all forms of objectification are morally objectionable. In particular, it may sound odd to suggest that merely *regarding* someone in an objectifying manner, without *behaving* towards them as if they are an object, could be morally objectionable. So when, if at all, is it immoral to treat someone as a comic object in this attitudinal subjectivity-denying sense?

In order to answer this question, it will be helpful to start by considering existing moral critiques of comedy, which, as Luvell Anderson notes, can be divided into two broad categories. First is the "agent-centered" approach (Anderson 2015, 504), which holds that humor can be objectionable because of what it reveals about the attitudes of the amused party. This approach to morally critiquing humor is taken by Merrie Bergmann, who argues that in the case of sexist humor, "sexist beliefs, attitudes, and/or norms either must be held in order to perceive an incongruity or are used to add to the fun effect of the incongruity" (Bergmann 1986, 70). The idea, then, is that there are some kinds of humor that are only funny to people with morally objectionable attitudes. Could this ground a critique of comic objectification?

The trouble with this approach is that it is not clear that actually *endorsing* certain attitudes really is ever required in order to find humor funny. As Robert C. Roberts argues, to be amused by sexist humor, it seems sufficient merely to *entertain* the relevant bigoted perspective, "much in the way you may entertain an interpretation of a text that you do not believe to be the correct interpretation" (Roberts 1988, 137). The truth of this claim is supported by thinking about emotional responses to immoral art more generally: surely feeling disappointed when the protagonists of *The Sopranos* get caught does not mean that one actually endorses the activities of the mob—one is merely entertaining the perspective of a mobster. So if we want to show that it can be morally objectionable to see someone as comical, the agent-centered approach does not look like a promising way to go.

The other approach for morally critiquing humor is the "harm-based" approach (Anderson 2015, 503), which, unsurprisingly, seeks to show that humor is objectionable because it causes harm. On the face of it, it is difficult to imagine how merely comically objectifying *in attitude* could be harmful, if one does not act on this perception in any way. As Aaron Smuts says, "if we do not think that merely entertaining thought can cause harm, we must conclude that experiencing humorous amusement cannot cause any direct harm to others" (Smuts 2010, 344). Merely entertaining a thought, after all, makes no experiential difference to the person that thought is about, so it does not look as though it can harm them.

However, David Benatar suggests that there is a way to harm someone without making an experiential difference to them: "if I believe negative rumors about somebody, that person is harmed by my having the belief even if I fail to act on it. … His reputation is damaged" (Benatar 1999, 193). This is because "we have interests not only in being *treated* with regard, but also in *being well regarded*" (193). Thus, the lesson we can take from Benatar for our purposes is that seeing someone as comical might harm them by damaging their reputation, even if they never experience any effects of this damage.

The trouble with this argument, as Anderson points out, is that it is not clear that this interest in being well-regarded is one "we can rightfully claim others have an obligation or responsibility to uphold" (Anderson 2015, 504). Put differently, Benatar at most shows that seeing someone as comical could harm them, in the sense of setting back their interests (Feinberg 1987). But he does not show that this harm is *wrongful*, and it is only this that would make it morally objectionable. Arresting a criminal would set back their interests, but this alone does not make doing so immoral. Rather, for harm to be morally objectionable, it must violate a right that someone has. And, as Anderson points out, it does not look as though people have a right to be well-regarded. So this approach too looks unpromising.

The prospect of morally critiquing comic objectification, then, looks dim. Might there be another way of showing that merely viewing someone as comical could be wrongful? In the next section, I suggest that there is: by zooming out and considering the role played by comic objectification in systematic injustice. This strategy is closest to Benatar's proposal, but defends the wrongfulness of comic objectification not by appeal to a right to be well regarded, but by appeal to a right of a different kind.

III. SYSTEMATIC COMIC OBJECTIFICATION AND CONTROLLING IMAGES

So far, I have been focusing on comic objectification as it occurs at the interpersonal level. However, feminist philosophers take the phenomenon of objectification to be most significant when studied as a systematic political phenomenon, whereby certain social groups are regularly represented in objectifying ways, which affects how people think about and treat real-life members of those social groups. Work on sexual objectification has of course focused on women as a group that is systematically objectified—as Catharine MacKinnon puts it, "all women live in sexual objectification like fish live in water" (MacKinnon 1989, 340). But have any groups been systematically *comically* objectified in an analogous fashion?

I want to argue that systematic comic objectification does indeed exist, though it targets a different set of social groups from sexual objectification. Moreover, this systematic comic objectification plays a crucial role in the oppression of those social groups, by habituating us to think about their members in a subjectivity-denying manner that appears to justify their ill-treatment, and by disposing us to take pleasure—in the form of amusement—in this way of thinking, so that we find it valuable and worth preserving.

In this section, I sketch the mechanism I am proposing, whereby systematic comic objectification legitimates the ill-treatment of certain social groups.[1] In section IV, I then discuss two case studies of social groups that I believe are or have been targeted by this mechanism: black men, and fat people. Finally, in section V, I discuss the implications of this picture for the morality of comic objectification.

My proposal is that certain social groups are systematically comically objectified in representations and that this can play an important role in the oppression of said groups, by appearing to justify the unjust treatment of these groups. But what does representing someone as a comic object, even systematically, have to do with oppressing them? The answer can be found in the work of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins.

It is well documented that oppression occurs both at the institutional level, whereby institutions such as law enforcement, medicine, and education treat people differently based on factors such as their race, class, and gender, and at the interpersonal level, between individuals. As Collins points out, however, "intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence" (Collins 1990, 69): there must be some societally shared beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes that result in us seeing this differential treatment as justified, in order for it to continue happening.

Collins argues that one key aspect of this is what she calls "controlling images": stereotypes of people from certain social groups that are "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (69). For instance, Collins discusses the "mammy" stereotype of a black woman who is a "faithful, obedient domestic servant" who "lov[es] … nurtur[es] … and car[es] … for her White children and "family" better than her own," which was "[c]reated to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves" (72).

My proposal is that comic objectification plays a crucial role in creating and sustaining certain controlling images, and thus in the oppression of some social groups. By systematically comically objectifying certain social groups in representations, and thus inviting people to frequently ignore the subjective feelings and experiences of members of those groups in their thinking about them, comedy maintains and strengthens the presence of subjectivity-denying controlling images of those groups in the shared social understanding, which justifies in people's minds the ill-treatment of those groups. The exact details of the controlling images and comic objectification's role in sustaining them will differ depending on the social group in question. But underlying them all is the denial of subjectivity that is both an essential part of this form of amusement and crucial in making injustices appear justified.

So far, what I have said takes a similar line to that of Robin Zheng and Nils-Hennes Stear in their discussion of imagining in oppressive contexts. Zheng and Stear likewise argue that what is wrong with imaginings such as blackface is their connection to Collins's controlling images, and the role they play in the oppression of certain social groups. In particular, they argue that when imaginings instantiate controlling images, they "realize … systems of oppression" (Zheng and Stear 2023, 396), by contributing to the "ideological glue of 'common sense ideas'" that justifies the systematic unjust treatment of certain social groups (397).

I agree with Zheng and Stear that imaginings can realize and normalize oppression via their connection with controlling images. However, I believe that my emphasis on comedy and comic objectification allows me to bring out two aspects of this process that Zheng and Stear do not, both of which are connected to the nature of amusement in particular. First is the aforementioned point about the denial of subjectivity. Amusement of this sort, as we have seen, involves a "momentary anesthesia of the heart," and is at odds with empathy. Finding someone comical is explicitly at odds with considering how they are feeling, putting ourselves in their shoes, and thinking that if we would not want to be treated a certain way, then neither should they. Thus, comically objectifying a certain group is a particularly effective way to block critique of their ill-treatment: if we are amused, we cannot, in that moment, be empathetic, and if we try to critique the comedy, we spoil the fun, and risk being branded a killjoy.

What is more, amusement is pleasurable, and this too is important in sustaining controlling images. Plausibly, one reason why sexually objectifying representations of women are so pervasive is that this way of seeing women brings pleasure to its audience. Likewise, it is enjoyable to see people as comical, which supplies a motivation for continuing to represent them that way.

Does this suggestion that pervasive comic representations might play a role in justifying the ill-treatment of marginalized groups have any empirical support? It is here that it will be helpful to return to the study on sexist humor mentioned in section I. There, we saw that a 2008 study showed that for participants with pre-existing sexist biases, priming with sexist humor uniquely increased the likelihood of sexist behavior, as compared to priming with nonsexist humor and nonhumorus sexism. This suggests that humor can indeed play a significant role in strengthening hearers' commitments to pre-existing implicit biases towards marginalized social groups—and that it can do so more effectively than nonhumorus attempts to achieve the same effect. Of course, this study is not measuring exactly what I am proposing, and only focuses on the short-term effects of one instance of priming. However, if such priming were widespread, it would be natural to expect these bias-activating effects to be common as well.

This, then, is the picture I am proposing. But which social groups are or have been systematically comically objectified in the manner suggested in this section? Let us now consider two different case studies that I believe are instances of systematic comic objectification that maintain and strengthen our commitment to a controlling image.

IV. TWO CASE STUDIES

IV.A. Case Study 1: Sambo and Racist Comic Objectification

My first case study is a historical one, though traces of it can still be found in our current thinking. This is the controlling image of the "Sambo": a stereotype of a black man who is "childish and comical, given to outlandish gestures, physical gyrations and funny clothes" (Boskin 1987, 252–3). This stereotype, which historian Joseph Boskin conjectures was "in all probability … conceived in Europe … with the early colonization efforts of the seventeenth century" (Boskin 1988, 7), "flourished … for more than three centuries" in the United States (1987, 252), before being "lowered into the culture grave" at some point in the 1950s–1960s (1988, 1), perhaps due to various changes in race relations that occurred in the US at that time (1).

During those centuries, structural racism towards black men was at its absolute height, with deeply racist practices in effect throughout, from slavery to Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation. So what controlling images of black men were circulating in the popular imagination to justify these unjust institutions? In Boskin's view, the Sambo stereotype had a key role to play:

> Sambo was an extraordinary type of social control, at once extremely subtle, devious, and encompassing … To make the black male into an object of laughter, and, conversely, to force him to devise laughter, was to strip him of masculinity, dignity, and self-possession. Sambo was, then, an illustration of humor as a device of oppression, and one of the most potent in American popular culture. (Boskin 1988, 13–4)

Boskin suggests here that making the black man into a comic object was a crucial tool of oppression, because it "stripped him of masculinity, dignity and self-possession." I take it that this worked because to recognize the injustice of the oppression of black men, one must recognize their humanity: their dignity, self-possession, agency and subjectivity. Comic representations that encouraged people to view the black man as a comic object, however, concealed his humanity, inviting people to ignore his subjectivity and agency—as was necessary to see him as comical—and to take pleasure in doing so.

For this to work, of course, representations of the Sambo stereotype would have to be extremely pervasive to profoundly impact the shared social imagination. Boskin's research suggests this was the case:

> Sambo was found everywhere, in every nook and cranny of the popular culture. In journals, weeklies, newspapers, magazines, travel reports, diaries, brochures, and broadsides … in novels, short stories, children's tales, dime novels, essays, pamphlets, and leaflets … on sheet music covers, postcards, wooden pegboards, in illustrations, paintings, cartoons, comic strips, children's games, on postage stamps, in advertisements, on magazine covers, playing cards … On stages, in skits, marches, musicals, in street theatre, circuses, plays, radio shows (Boskin, 1988, 11)

Putting these points together, it looks as though the Sambo stereotype was a case of systematic comic objectification, whereby black men were systematically represented as comic objects, with the effect of justifying racist institutions and practices. Thankfully, that stereotype is no longer in wide circulation, though that is not to say that it has no lingering effects on shared understandings of black men.

IV.B. Case Study 2: Fat Suits and Fatphobic Comic Objectification

Whilst the Sambo stereotype is largely historical, my second case study of systematic comic objectification is one that I believe is unfortunately very much alive and well in the present day: the systematic comic objectification of fat people.

As fatphobia is less widely recognized than racism as a form of structural injustice, I will start by saying a little to justify this part of my argument, informed by discussions of fatphobia by Anne Eaton (2016) and Kate Manne (2024). In the sphere of education, Manne points to studies indicating that "educators frequently express negative weight-based stereotypes about their larger pupils, assuming they will perform worse in reasoning tasks, struggle more with physical education, and have poorer social skills" (18, referencing Puhl and King 2013), whilst Eaton notes that "fat children are more likely to be teased and bullied" (2016, 40, referencing Rimm 2004; see Weinstock and Krehbiel 2009).

In the workplace, "research indicates that applicants with a higher BMI are less likely to be hired, compared with … [their] thinner counterparts with the same profile and qualifications" (Manne 2024; 20, referencing Giel et al. 2010), and it has been shown that "fat white females earn 11.2 percent less than their non-fat counterparts" (Eaton 2016, 40, referencing Cawley 2004).

In healthcare, fat people are less likely to receive appropriate medical treatment than thin people, due to "a lack of appropriately sized medical equipment (gowns, cuffs, stretchers, imaging equipment, etc.)" (Eaton 2016, referencing Puhl and Heuer 2009), and healthcare professionals' perceptions of them "as lazy, undisciplined, weak-willed, and less likely to adhere to treatment or self-care recommendations" (Manne 2024, referencing Phelan et al. 2015).

What is more, the widely held beliefs that fatness is (1) unhealthy, and (2) the result of poor lifestyle choices, the truth of which is sometimes taken (erroneously) to justify some of this systematic differential treatment, are both highly controversial. A landmark 2005 study undermined the supposed positive correlation between high BMI and high mortality risk (Flegal et al. 2005), whilst a meta-analysis of thirty-one long-term diet studies suggested that the likelihood of sustained weight loss as a result of dieting is extremely low (Mann et al. 2007).

I take it then that there is good support for the claim that fatphobia is a form of structural injustice, that pervades education, employment, and healthcare. But if this is so, then we might ask what controlling images of fat people there are in the shared social understanding that implicitly justify this unjust treatment, and how comic objectification might play a role in sustaining them. I think it is undeniable that various controlling images of fat people do exist, and are perpetuated through fictional representations. The website "TV Tropes" records many such stereotypes, including those that associate fatness with stupidity (characters such as Homer Simpson from *The Simpsons* or Peter Griffin from *Family Guy*), with slovenliness (characters such as Jabba the Hutt from *Star Wars* or Jackson Lamb from *Slow Horses*), and with meanness (characters such as Vernon Dursley from *Harry Potter*, or a number of Disney villains). All of these tropes serve to implicitly justify the ill-treatment of fat people in education, employment, and healthcare, by associating fatness with these various negative traits. Cheryl Frazier, in her discussion of responsible artistic agency, discusses recurring negative stereotypes like these in film and television and anticipates my worry that "seeing the same narrow set of stories told about fatness … influences how we think about fatness more generally" (Frazier 2024, 87), especially when they echo a "preexisting narrative web … [of] anti-fat narratives which harm a variety of fat communities" (88).

But how significant is the role of comedy specifically in perpetuating and sustaining controlling images of fat people? A 2003 analysis of portrayals of overweight and obese individuals on commercial television found that "characters in situation comedies were … larger than characters in dramas" (Greenberg et al. 2003, 1344), or in other words, that representations of fat characters are more likely to appear in comedic than serious contexts. As for how fat characters fare comedically as compared with thinner characters, "larger females were almost twice as often the objects of humor as females in the middle or thinner group" (1345). On the flip side, larger characters "consistently had fewer

interactions with friends or romantic partners and were involved in fewer behaviorally oriented tasks … were less likely to help with tasks, to demonstrate physical affection, to date, and to have sex" (1347). In other words, whilst fat characters were more likely to be objects of humor, they were less likely to engage in agential activities such as relationships and tasks. This, it seems to me, fits well with the suggestion that comedy frequently encourages us to fail to take into account the subjectivity of fat characters: we are encouraged to view the fat character not as a whole person, with subjective experiences, feelings, desires, and goals, but simply as an object of amusement.

The denial of subjectivity accorded to fat characters in comedy is made especially apparent by the pervasive use of fat suits to make thin actors appear fat. Examples of this trope abound, but some famous instances include those worn by Courtney Cox when playing a younger version of Monica Gellar in *Friends*, by Max Greenfield when playing a younger version of Schmidt in *New Girl*, by Eddie Murphy when playing various characters in *The Nutty Professor*, and by Matt Lucas and David Walliams when playing Bubbles and Desiree DeVere in *Little Britain*. In creating fat characters by simply adding padding to a thin actor, it is easy for creators to ignore or misrepresent the subjective experience of navigating the world as a fat person, especially if there is no genuinely fat person involved in the creation of the character at all. The use of fat suits often seems to betray a lack of interest in creating complex and well-developed fat characters, which is perhaps unsurprising given that, if I am right, empathy with these characters would inhibit viewers' amusement at their expense.

Representations of fatness, then, seem to appear more often in comedic than serious contexts and seem typically to encourage audiences to ignore the subjective experiences and feelings of fat characters and to instead view them as comical. This, I contend, plays an important role in justifying societal unjust treatment of fat people, by disposing us to focus on their bodies and ignore their subjectivity.

V. THE MORAL UPSHOT

So far, I have proposed that certain social groups are systematically comically objectified and that this plays a role in appearing to justify the unjust treatment of members of those social groups. What are the implications of this picture for the moral permissibility of comic objectification?

In section II, I discussed David Benatar's proposal that a piece of comedy could be morally objectionable if it harmed its targets by damaging their reputation. The problem was that damaging a person's reputation in this way, even if harmful, does not seem to be wrongful, as people do not have a right to be well-regarded.

Based on the discussion of the previous two sections, I want to argue that treating someone as a comic object in attitude can be a way of wronging them when such an attitude is part of a controlling image used to legitimate the unjust treatment of a particular social group. Regarding a fat person in such a way as to attend primarily to their body and ignore their subjectivity, and taking pleasure in regarding them in this way, does not merely set back their interest in being well regarded, but in so doing, sets back the interest of all fat people in being treated justly, by sustaining the controlling image. Whilst I do not want to claim that one has a right to be well regarded, I do claim that one has a right to just treatment, and disregarding someone's subjectivity in a manner that strengthens a controlling image, and plays a role in justifying oppression, violates that right. Thus, in such cases, comically objectifying in attitude is wrong.

That said, there will be some complications to this simple picture. First of all, I noted in section I that, sometimes, the momentary denial of subjectivity afforded by comedy is not the end of the story, and audiences are subsequently encouraged to reflect on this denial of subjectivity, and/or to ultimately empathize with the person whose subjectivity they had denied. Intuitively, this kind of case is very morally different from the case where the denial of subjectivity is left unsubverted. Indeed, this is the result that would be delivered by my account. When the controlling image is subverted or otherwise challenged, the comic objectification in question does not contribute to justifying the unjust treatment of the social group in question. Thus, it violates no right and commits no wrong.

Second, we might wonder about the moral status of comic objectification when a person wants to comically objectify themselves. A real-life example that illustrates this problem can be found in Michael Rosen's discussion of the concept of dignity, in which he discusses the legal case of one Manuel Wackenheim, a dwarf who wanted to participate in a dwarf-tossing competition in a French

commune (Rosen 2012, ch. 2). The mayor of the commune banned the event, on the grounds that it would violate Wackenheim's dignity, and despite Wackenheim's best efforts to get this decision overturned, it was upheld by the courts. Clearly, Wackenheim believed it was in his interest for the competition to go ahead, although the mayor and the courts disagreed. Rosen, for his part, "can't help thinking that M. Wackenheim got a pretty raw deal" (68), though it is worth noting that Rosen's interest is primarily in what should be illegal, rather than what is immoral.

In his discussion, Rosen mentions that the organization Little People of America criticized Wackenheim on the grounds that dwarf-tossing "tears down the structure and the esteem that little people are trying to gain" (Rosen 2012, 69). Their point, I take it, is that comically objectifying one-self when one is a member of an oppressed social group makes things worse for that social group, by contributing to a controlling image used to justify their oppression. This is what I have tried to demonstrate in my discussion in the past few sections.

Rosen is unsympathetic to this argument, replying that those who lose esteem due to another's actions "just have to put up with it" (70). Insofar as he is making a claim about legality, I make no comment. However, insofar as this is a moral claim, I think Rosen's dismissal fails to do justice to the objection. The lowering of esteem that is at play in the relevant cases cannot be viewed in isolation; rather, we must notice the role it plays in a wider picture of justifying oppressive practices. A marginalized person's consent to being comically objectified does not necessarily render it acceptable because said comic objectification may be harming others in their social group, by contributing to the maintenance of a controlling image.

In the epigraph of this article, I quoted the comedian Hannah Gadsby, who declared in her stand-up special *Nanette* that she "built a career out of self-deprecating humor," but has now realized that "when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins … It's not humility. It's humiliation" (Gadsby 2018). As I understand it, Gadsby's realization here is that whilst comically objectifying herself as a queer and gender-nonconforming woman may have seemed to benefit her in advancing her career, it was in another more significant way thwarting her well-being, by playing into certain controlling images of queer people that ultimately made things worse for people in those groups, by justifying their oppressive treatment.

Finally, it is worth spelling out how my proposed picture will generalize from the cases I have discussed. My mentions of Manuel Wackenheim and Hannah Gadsby have hinted that morally objectionable comic objectification may extend beyond the racist and fatphobic case studies I discuss, to include homophobic or ableist comedy. So how far does the argument go? The key point to reiterate is that what makes comic objectification in attitude wrongful is when that attitude is part of a controlling image used to legitimize the unjust treatment of a particular social group. If a social group is not systematically treated unjustly, then the comic objectification of that group is not wrongful. An appealing feature of this picture is that it fits well with the folk intuition that comedy that "punches up" and targets the powerful is more acceptable than comedy that "punches down" and targets the marginalized. On my account, it is only the latter that can be wrongful for the reasons explored here—and the latter will always be wrongful insofar as it invites audiences to adopt a comically objectifying attitude that plays a role in seeming to justify the unjust treatment of a particular social group.

Of course, it may happen that a member of a systematically comically objectified social group is comically objectified, but not *qua* member of that social group—a fat person, say, may be seen as comical for their bad haircut. Assuming that fatness is not represented as explanatorily relevant to the haircut, this is not wrongful in principle, because the feature of the person that is salient in the subjectivity-denying image is not associated with any form of structural injustice. However, it may in practice be difficult to ensure that one is not unwittingly playing into a damaging trope about members of that social group. Thus, members of systematically comically objectified social groups may sometimes be permissibly comically objectified, but such humor ought to be approached with caution.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have developed an account of comic objectification, whereby people are treated as objects for the purpose of others' amusement. I have argued that one way to treat someone as an object is to regard them in a manner that fails to take into account their subjectivity, and that seeing someone as comical means treating them as an object in this way. As for the morality of this form of

objectification, I have argued that it is wrongful when it plays a part in justifying the oppression of a particular social group by contributing to the maintenance of a controlling image of that group, even when someone from such a group *wants* to be comically objectified. When morally assessing some particular instance of comedy, we cannot consider it in isolation, but must recognize how it interacts with wider structures of injustice.[2]

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END NOTES

1 Throughout this section, I often talk of the role comic objectification plays in 'legitimating' or 'justifying' the unjust treatment of certain social groups. To be clear, I mean here that this unjust treatment is subjectively made to *appear* legitimate or justified, and not that it is objectively legitimate or justified: appearances are, in this case, deceiving.

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