Temembe and Sven: The Ethics of Racist Mirth

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Temembe and Sven: The Ethics of Racist Mirth

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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December 2020
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Abstract

You walk past a crowd of people at a bar, grouped around one person. He’s in the middle of telling a joke, the kind you wouldn’t tell your parents but is often told in the amenable company of close friends. You realize that the butt of the joke, the punchline, assumes that people of color are lazy and entitled. This is not an assumption you agree with, but you find yourself with a feeling of mirth while scoffing at the comedian. His timing is well executed, and the turn of phrase is witty. The joke was racist, and yet emotionally you found it funny. You did not laugh, but you felt mirth. One way a person may respond to such a joke, and such an emotion, is by exclaiming that it is not funny. This response may be thought to commit the moralistic fallacy, for example, it might be thought to conflate the question of whether mirth is a fitting emotional response to a joke with the question of whether it reflects badly on one’s character, whether it is immoral.

In this project there are a pair of responses to the situation detailed above, a pair of thoughts that might be held in response to it. First, that because the joke is morally objectionable, it is not funny; and second, that because the feeling of mirth is not under your immediate control, you cannot be morally responsible for it. I will argue against both claims. It seems obvious to us that telling a racist joke is harmful, and therefore unethical. We usually chastise or refuse to patronize comedians who use racism as the crux of their comedy, or rather, it is generally uncontroversial when we do this in circles where racism itself is considered abhorrent. Certainly, it is true that many people do still support racist comedians knowing full well their views. It is less apparent that you are committing a moral wrong simply by feeling the emotion of mirth at a racist joke. I argue that you are morally criticizable for the manifestation of the vice of racism in this feeling of mirth which takes as its object a racist joke, but it is only appropriate for others to hold you morally responsible once you fail to acknowledge that the feeling is immoral and respond to it using a counteractive emotion, such as shame. Essentially, a feeling
of mirth can be immoral but not necessarily blameworthy. I show this by describing two distinct types of harm associated with racist comedy. There is one type, which is direct, and another which is more like vice, in that it is internal and creates a positive reinforcement of racism within oneself, which is indirect.

The telling of a racist joke might introduce or reinforce racist ideology in the audience. Even when in the sole company of other racist people, the joke is directly supporting their ideology, which causes direct harm to others. However, when we reinscribe the vice of racism in ourselves, through feelings of mirth which take as their object racist humor, while we are directly harming our character, we are also indirectly, or diffusely, contributing to systemic racism.

In my final analysis, I note two things; (i) it is noble of us to lie to ourselves about the fittingness of a joke to mirth if it means mitigating the indirect and diffuse harms of racism, and (ii) if we refuse to acknowledge and counteract racist mirth with other habituated emotions, it would be appropriate for others to hold us morally responsible for our racism.
Introduction
Humor is an essential aspect of culture, our personalities, and our interpersonal relationships. Much of that humor is created by crossing lines, subverting norms, and defying conventional expectations. Some humor plays into stereotypes and is motivated by a shared belief in the truth of a stereotype. Racist humor tends to lean on these building blocks, using racial stereotypes to motivate its twists and punchlines, though it can exist as a subversion of norms, or as the crossing of a line for its own sake. Many ironic jokes with race as a subject work in this way, such as Louis CK using racial slurs on stage for comedic effect. In either case, many people are often amused by racist humor. However, while it seems fairly obvious that it is morally wrong to tell the joke, and morally wrong to show an outward expression of approval in the telling of a racist joke, as through laughter, it is less apparent that it is morally wrong to feel mirth which takes as its object a racist joke. It is less obvious, and I think more interesting, because it does not endorse the racism and it does not seem to overtly harm anyone. However, it still seems intuitively wrong. To determine whether it is wrong I think we must fully understand what racist mirth is, whether it is criticizable, and gain a better understanding of mirth as a criticizable vice.

I will argue that it is morally criticizable to take a racist joke as the object of one’s mirth whether we have control over it, nor which framework of emotion we employ. Additionally, we can and ought to train ourselves to feel emotions which are antithetical to mirth when confronted with racist humor, even if this act of addressing the humor instills false beliefs within us.

To begin, while it may be argued that the conflation of morality and aesthetics may lead to a Moralistic Fallacy, as described by D’Arms and Jacobson, I will argue that their work supports mine rather than refuting it. I find that they are correct in assessing emotions’ fittingness as being detached from their moral value. I am not concerned in this project with assessing whether racist jokes are fitting objects of mirth, I am instead assessing whether it is morally criticizable to feel mirth directed at a racist joke.
Fittingness is an appropriate framework to apply to mirth and humor, but I will argue that it is morally required of us to instill false beliefs in ourselves regarding the fittingness of racist humor with mirth. Where D’Arms and Jacobson are concerned with assessing the fittingness qua fittingness of the object of emotions, I am concerned with the morality of them. The consequence of this may be that while it is wrong to feel mirth directed at a racist joke, it is still perhaps fitting to feel mirth at said joke. However, I think there are ways we can prepare ourselves for hearing racist jokes such that even if they are fitting objects of mirth, we do not take them as such, and thus prevent ourselves from committing moral wrongs.

Following this, I will clarify a useful definition of harm which involves leaving someone worse off than they otherwise would have been, which I think is generally applicable to most normative ethical systems. I will draw a distinction between moral culpability and moral criticizability using harm and vice as the primary difference between the two ideas. I will then apply it to experiencing mirth directed at a racist joke. Finally, I will apply these parts to an ascending understanding of moral criticizability to culpability. I will incorporate a sort of virtue ethical framework to provide an explanation of how to ameliorate and prevent these types of morally culpable actions by addressing criticizable actions, it may also be possible to apply these theories to other ethical frameworks, though that expands beyond the scope of my project.
Section 1 – Assumptions and Definitions

There are a few concepts that I will not be defending with an inordinate amount of time in this project, and some assumptions that I will be making in order not to overstretch my project or myself. I would like to briefly discuss them prior to the greater portions of this project. Namely, racism and theories of emotion.

I am not going to define race or racism in this paper lest it drag on for far too long. Instead I will be using Wellman’s definition from *Portraits of White Racism*. “Racism is a structural relationship based on the subordination of one racial group by another”. Later, more concisely he calls it a “system of advantage based on race”. (Wellman 1977) Beverly Tatum notes the usefulness of this definition in that “it allows us to see that racism, like other forms of oppression is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals.” (Tatum 1997) The actions of the subjects of the cases I am discussing, Jack for example, are these sorts of actions which contribute to a broad system, which leaves people of color worse off than they would be if the system were dismantled.

For more on race and racism, I will rely on the voices of many people of color and others who have done this work. See *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* by W.E.B. DuBois, *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Tatum, *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins, *Racial Formations* by Omi and Winant, *White Supremacy and Racism in Post-Civil Rights Era* by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *A Global Critical Race and Racism Framework* by Michelle Christian and *Portraits of White Racism* by David Wellman for a cursory, but more robust understanding of race, racism, systemic oppression, intersectionality, the global project of racism, and the perpetuity of white supremacy. All of these will support the idea that racism is harmful, which is the pertinent aspect of racism to this paper. I
would be remiss, considering my conclusion, if I didn’t include the tools needed to further examine this
yourself.

Secondly, I will be using a definition of emotion as evaluative perception. That is that emotions
help to make important things in our environment salient for us, as they capture our attention. By having
an emotional response to an object, we are interacting with, we shine a perceptual light on that object,
 focusing on it at the expense of our focus on other things around it. This is incredibly useful, as it turns a
daunting task of evaluating our entire perception constantly for threats and important objects into a
simple reflexive and perceptual task. Additionally, we tend to notice that which is important to us at the
time. For example, Brady notes that the parents of a newborn notice hazards for that newborn when they
bring it to a new place for the first time because their fear captures their attention and directs their
perception to the objects of that fear, sharp table corners, unprotected stairs, and dangerous chemicals
for example. They may even fail to notice other things which could provoke emotional responses in others.
An attractive person at the party might provoke a feeling of apprehension or timidity in someone who is
looking for a partner, and not currently caring for a newborn. These are emotions that direct the attention
of this person to the pretty girl, rather than the sharp corner of a table.

This is important to my project here, because as we will see we must be able to pick out the faults
in humor or the faults in our mirth by understanding what object is capturing our attention and causing
the mirth. More simply, we need to be able to understand what makes us feel racist mirth so that we can
address it and ameliorate it. Brady also notes this as a useful aspect of this attention capturing aspect of
emotion when he gives an example of a morally dubious aspect of oneself that emotions can draw
attention to. “My pride upon hearing about English football hooligans rampaging through a European city
informs me that I have dubious nationalistic commitments.” (Brady 2013) Likewise, my mirth upon hearing
a joke which disparages people of color by using harmful stereotypes as its foundation informs me that I
have worrisome implicit biases. Brady also notes that “[i]t is not simply that emotion focuses attention on some object or event. Emotion can make salient ways of dealing with some object or event, or direct attention to coping strategies: fear or shame can make salient ways of escaping the emotional object, guilt can focus attention on suitable reparation for one’s behavior, and so on.” (Brady 2013)

Brady suggests here the sort of response to undesirable emotional responses that I will later suggest in dealing with racist mirth, namely applying shame to discover suitable reparations for ill behavior. It also leads very nicely into the next practical function of emotion. That is that emotions facilitate appropriate behavioral responses. Once our attention is drawn to an object, we can deal with it appropriately, depending on what our emotion is. Again, this is a reflexive reaction to the object, rather than a laborious and considered approach, which is useful in that it does not tax our cognitive resources. Brady notes that because we are able to determine important things in our environment via emotions, it must be the case that emotions have some sort of evaluative power, and that they “involve representation[s] of the way[s] in which something is important to us or matters for us.” (Brady 2013)

So not only do emotions represent the objects or events that constitute their targets, they also represent that such things have certain evaluative properties or features. These are the ways in which something is important to us. When we fear a snake in the garden, we do not simply take the snake as the object of our fear, we take it as the object of our fear because we think it might jump up and bite us. When you feel mirth at a racist joke, you are not simply taking the racist joke as the object of your mirth, you are taking it as the object of your mirth because you think it is incongruous in a humorous way. Perhaps you believe there to be some truth to the stereotype being used, which may indicate within you a harmful implicit bias you harbor or a fallacy of generalization you reflexively commit.

Emotions are invaluable for assessing certain characteristics of ourselves which we can then use to ameliorate harms we might cause to others through both the predisposition to do certain things or
even the behaviors we are motivated to do by the emotions. So now, let us turn to different accounts of the nature of this evaluative appraisal. I will use Brady’s very thorough work here while incorporating the idea that each of these different assessments of the nature of emotion could be directly applicable to my project in that they all allow for amelioration and redressal of certain emotions, which I require later in this paper to counteract or prevent harms.
Section 2 – The Moralistic Fallacy

One thing that we need to address before diving into the project is the distinction between the moral content of a joke and its funniness, or whatever quality it is that causes mirth within us. It is a dangerous precedent to set to claim that the moral content of a joke makes it unfunny in and of itself. I claim the opposite. The moral content of a joke is completely divorced from the funniness of that joke. A joke can be both hilarious and appallingly offensive, theoretically. This assertion is precisely why my argument does not fall into what D’Arms and Jacobson call the moralistic fallacy.

My arguments do not commit a moralistic fallacy. I will do this first by explicating what exactly the fallacy is and then by drawing a distinction between what I am trying to do and what D’Arms and Jacobson are calling a moralistic fallacy. It should be noted that I agree with D’Arms and Jacobson, in that I believe it is often the case that something is a fitting object of an emotion even though having that emotion is wrong.

In The Moralistic Fallacy Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson describe a problem with the field of philosophy of emotion. I agree with them in this assessment, though I believe we might have some different takeaways from my own problem that I will discuss. They argue that philosophers of emotion often suffer from moralism. That is, they try to adjust their definitions of which objects it is correct to take as the objects of certain emotions based on their moral value alone. This is a mistake and a major fault in the field, according to D’Arms and Jacobson. It is not that they are unwilling to consider the moral ramifications of certain emotions, they simply argue that morality does not determine what they refer to as the fit of an emotion to its object.

One of the reasons I find it useful to use a definition of emotion as involving evaluative perceptions is because it is a rather common understanding of emotions and is used throughout the literature, except when discussing the specific nature of emotions in contradiction with such a theory. As such, D’Arms and
Jacobson employ de Sousa, Greenspan, and Solomon here to establish that they too will use this theory of emotion in their assessment and argument.\textsuperscript{1} So, when talking about emotion here, D’Arms and Jacobson are referring to something that involves an evaluative presentation of the circumstances of one’s environment.

The primary thing D’Arms and Jacobson are concerned with is what they call fittingness. Fittingness is the measure of correctness in presentation of an emotion’s evaluative features. D’Arms and Jacobson often use envy to describe different aspects of their theory, I will use them here and relate them to humor. Consider an example of a case of envy that has a problem with fit:

Example 1 – Phone Envy

*If Andrew were to feel envy for Bhargav’s iPhone X when he himself has a Pixel 3XL. These are comparatively similar phones, and envy is generally associated with wanting to possess something another person possesses which is better than that which you possess. Since both individuals possess similar items, what Bhargav has is not necessarily better than what Andrew has, and so envy does not seem the appropriate emotion here.*

Similarly, consider this example of mirth which has a problem with fit:

Example 2 – Hilarity in Oratory

*If one were to laugh uproariously to express their mirth regarding a recitation of the Emancipation Proclamation by a noted orator in a theater filled with somber patriots, this would be a fit issue regarding mirth because there are no hallmarks of the funny\textsuperscript{2} to be found in the situation. In fact, it is quite unfunny.*\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1} See D’Arms & Jacobson (2000)
\textsuperscript{2} When I say ‘hallmarks of the funny’ I am referring to ironic twists, unconventional circumstances, subversions of expectations, incongruity with reality, and other things that often indicate that something is categorically funny. These can obviously differ greatly from one person to the next, but it is generally agreed upon that objects of mirth share certain qualities, and those qualities are what I’m referring to here.
\textsuperscript{3} There is also no notable lack of hallmarks of the funny where one might expect them, as is often the case in anti-comedy. A case where this is the state of things might be an appropriate object of the funny.
There are two qualities of fit that D’Arms and Jacobson refer to here, giving a structural component to emotions, a metaphor which I appreciate for its utility. Those two qualities are size and shape. These are structural characteristics of an emotion intended to elucidate exactly the type of fittingness issue an emotion has with a particular object because there seem to be two distinct issues here. The first, and more interesting, of these is shape. The shape of an emotion refers to its actual possession of the qualities most commonly attributed to the appropriate objects of that emotion. Something that is feared is often dangerous, someone that is envied often possesses certain qualities and goods you do not yourself possess, something that is funny is often incongruous with our expectation of reality. Of course, these are not rigorous definitions of the objects of these emotions, but simply cursory examples of the types of things that might determine the correct shape of the emotion.

Let us return to Example 2 as I had mentioned previously. If one were to double over in fits of laughter upon hearing a recitation of the Emancipation Proclamation by a respected orator in a theater filled with somber patriots, one would be suffering from an inappropriate emotion which is ill fitted due to a shape issue. That is, the situation contains none of the hallmarks of what is categorically funny. In this case the emotion of mirth that one is feeling in inappropriate insofar as its fit is the wrong shape. The situation possesses none of the qualities most commonly attributed to the appropriate objects of mirth. It also does not intentionally omit these qualities for comedic effect, as much of anti-comedy does. It is neutral to the emotion of mirth, and thus its shape is inappropriate to the emotion.

The size of an emotion has more to do with magnitude of the emotion and whether it is commensurate with the situation in which it is felt. For an example having to do with mirth, consider the chicken crossing the road joke. Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side. This is a joke that is almost universally known in the United States and is not particularly funny if only because of its

4 Except by possibly very loose and debatable standards, perhaps
ubiquity. It would be an inappropriateness of size if, upon hearing this for the hundredth time, I was to laugh uproariously at it. The magnitude of my mirth does not fit the situation.

Now let us turn to a few examples regarding mirth and how some philosophers discussing mirth might fall into the moralistic fallacy. I will then note the substantial differences between those cases and my own by way of two examples, *A Joke at a Funeral* and *My Favorite Norwegians Joke*.

**Example 3 – A Joke at a Funeral**

*Tristan is at a funeral for his friend Sam’s father, and he decides that in order to lighten the mood he should tell a joke about old age and incontinence. He evokes a laugh from a few people he’s telling it to, but the somber mood of the funeral serves as a poor stage for elderly fart jokes.*

Now in this case it might be argued that Tristan has committed a morally questionable action, and certainly it is true that it is rather uncouth of him at the very least to tell such a joke in polite company, and even more so over the body of his friend’s father. One might fall prey to the moralistic fallacy however, if they were to claim that the joke about old men farting was unfunny, when in fact it did elicit laughter. It would be wrong to say that the joke was an inappropriate or unfitting object for mirth, when in fact it was very fitting an object of mirth. It was perhaps an inappropriate time to tell a joke, and maybe the telling of a joke in such a setting is immoral. This seems dubious, but it could be argued. This sort of argument would not fall into a moralistic fallacy, as it avoids conflating the moral content of the joke with its fittingness for humor. So, let us move to our second example so that we can discuss the difference between this sort of situation and situations of racist mirth.

**Example 4 – Arvid Says the N-word**

*Consider Arvid, a Norwegian person who does open mics on the weekend as a standup comedian. Arvid watches a lot of American media and has some understanding of stereotypes in the United States and
makes a joke about censoring the N-word on television. He delivers it with the deftness of Louis CK, and it is witty. He even uses the word in his set as parody. Nobody in the audience laughs.

This is an example of a situation in which the content of the joke, told by a white Norwegian, is qualitatively prejudiced, but because racism does not have the same systemically oppressive quality in Norway as it does in the United States the joke does not land. This may be a fitting object of humor, Louis CK tells similar jokes to uproarious laughter in his specials. However, it does not fit in this situation because it lacks the racist context upon which the joke hinges. Its moral content and fittingness are divorced from one another. It works in one situation and does not in another, but in both situations, it is morally wrong to tell the joke.

It is both like and unlike the prior example. In both cases a joke is told in a poor context, though both jokes are fitting objects of mirth. One is mildly received, the other not at all. However, in Example 4 the context that is required for the joke to land is a network of harms and oppression that make up systemic racism. A system of advantages and disadvantages based on race that Louis CK himself benefits from, as is apparent in his current underground success despite being a serial sexual predator. Arvid does not benefit from this, or at least not as strongly, and the people of Norway are not as aware of the hyper disparity between whites and people of color in the United States.5

Turning to the Norwegians again I would like to give one more example, this time of a funny joke wherein if the subject of the joke alone is changed, it becomes racist. Consider the following joke:

Example 5 – Sven and Ole

Ole was out in his boat, fishing on the lake in June. Sven comes by on shore and hollers out, “Hey, Ole you caught any fish?”

5 This is not to imply that racism is not a global project. It is just to say that racism between white people and black people in America is radically more pronounced than it is in Norway.
“Yah, sure,” says Ole.

“If I guess how many fish you got, can I have dem?” says Sven.

“Ya sure,” says Ole, “If you guess how many I got you can have both of dem.”

This is surely an example of a joke with good fit for mirth, it made me chuckle, at least internally when I read it, and while I may not be able to assert objective claims about aesthetics, the incongruity between Sven’s response and our expectation is fitting of most theories of humor. With only a few changes to names and dialect, but without changing the essential structure of the joke, you could substitute any of a number of different disenfranchised groups or individuals representing those groups, rather than Sven and Ole the Norwegians, and the joke would be potentially quite racist. For many of us, our reaction to a racist version of this joke may be to say it is not funny anymore, but if the only thing that has changed is the racial component I think it may be more appropriate to simply say that while it is funny, it is racist and therefore you take issue to it. Many of us have already cultivated a very effective shame response to mirth directed at things like this. It cannot be denied, however, that an audience exists which does not have that response and finds the joke funny in both cases. If you can counteract the racist humor of the joke with shame or other rationalization, this is exactly what I would hope anybody could do. But that does not mean the joke is less fitting of mirth, and this is the crux of my point regarding the separation of moral content from aesthetic content.

It is important to address fit in this paper about the moral content of mirth because of two interconnected reasons. First, that it is not relevant to the moral content I am discussing. That is, I am not concerned with the fit of humor to racist jokes. I am comfortable conceding one of two things. One, that racist jokes appropriately fit mirth. After all, racist jokes often do possess many of the qualities most commonly attributed to the appropriate objects of mirth. Or two, that racist jokes do not fit mirth, but it is still the case that people often take them as the objects of mirth, so it is still worthy of discussion.
Additionally, that it is entirely relevant to the moral content that I am discussing because it is entirely possible, and I think likely, that we may take as appropriate objects of mirth morally reprehensible objects and that in doing so we are morally culpable. It is difficult to reconcile the fact that many things for which we are morally culpable are also appropriate and fitting objects of mirth, like a racist iteration of a Sven and Ole joke. However, I do not want to commit the moralistic fallacy, as D’Arms and Jacobson call it, by conflating the morality of the object of mirth with its appropriateness. I agree that they are entirely separate, and in fact find fittingness to be a hugely useful term to help describe the separation between the moral and aesthetic content of humor. I also believe it is possible to habituate one’s actions in such a way as to prevent oneself from feeling morally reprehensible mirth, and that this is what we ought to do. Perhaps it will still be appropriate, perhaps some appropriate objects of mirth are wrong. I am, in fact, inclined to believe that we are morally responsible for instilling within ourselves false beliefs about the fittingness of mirth to racist jokes to avoid morally criticizable states of mind.

So, I am concerned not with the fittingness of a joke to a feeling of mirth, as my paper can apply to both fitting and inappropriate objects. I am concerned with the moral content of the mirth, and specifically the moral content of mirth which takes as its object racist speech. Racist mirth causes harms not because it is not funny, but because it is racist. And so, to address the moralistic fallacy, I am not trying to change the shape of mirth to better fit morality, I am trying to adjust our experience of mirth to overlap partially with shame in order to make us better people. Perhaps the consequence of this is that the shape of mirth will change over time to better reflect morality. One would hope that it does. Even if that should not be the goal of studying emotion, as D’Arms and Jacobson suggest, it is hard to imagine they would object to the ideal of all emotions fitting neatly into moral categories if they could. They just believe it isn’t the case, and to force them that way would be moralism.
I find the fit metaphor to be quite useful. While my moral assessment of humor is not a fit problem, if we are to conceptualize emotion in this way, we might understand the shape of humor and shame to overlap in a morally beneficial way. This changes the shape of neither, it simply helps us approach morality.

I have established that I am not committing a moralistic fallacy, or at least that I am not concerned exclusively with the fittingness of a joke, but rather with the moral characteristics of both fitting and inappropriate objects, it is best we move on to the nature of emotion more generally, if briefly.
Section 3 – Two Types of Harms Regarding Racism

There are two ways in which racism can be harmful regarding mirth and humor. One is overt, as through actions both vicious or acratic, that is by telling a racist joke or laughing at one we are contributing overtly to a network of harms which manifest as systemic racism. The other is a harm akin to vice, this is internal, as with feelings or emotions that are vicious or acratic. It reinforces racist ideals and indicate moral failings in oneself. In this section I will offer a twofold account of harm that is maximally neutral among normative ethical systems and apply this account of harm to racist mirth. I will draw on both Parfit and Mill to provide this multifaceted account. Following this I will establish a framework of moral criticizability and moral culpability regarding the harms one causes via racist mirth. Specifically, I will draw a distinction between the two in which vice such as racist mirth is considered morally criticizable, while a harm such as telling a racist joke are taken as moral wrongs for which one is culpable. Finally, I will suggest a solution to these moral criticisms which incorporate reflections on one’s character and the mirth one feels.

The reason that I start with harm, and not some specific normative ethical system is harm seems to be considered wrong neutral to any framework. I believe the strongest solution to the morally criticizable issues of racist mirth would be something resembling virtue ethics, but I want to maintain as broad a scope as possible in order to accommodate most potential normative ethical systems that might reasonably be applied to this issue. However, it seems that if I can show that racist mirth causes harms, it would be a fairly simple step in any normative ethical framework to say that one who experiences the vice of racist mirth is morally criticizable at the very least, and possibly culpable. I would suggest that a harm principle like Mill’s, and a definition of harm like Parfit’s, can be applied universally among normative ethical systems.
Parfit succinctly describes harm in *Reasons and Persons* in a way that I find compelling in its simplicity. When describing the non-identity problem, he defines harm as doing something that leaves a person worse off than they otherwise would have been. We do not need to go into the non-identity issue here, though it may have some tangentially interesting implications on how racism harms future generations. I will leave this line of inquiry to another project and concern myself with the ways in which it harms current persons, due to current actions. What is important here is that this definition of harm is generally applicable to normative ethical systems. That is, by doing something that leaves a person worse off than they otherwise would have been is to harm, and to harm is to commit a morally criticizable action.

Consider this case:

**Tory and Sam**

*Tory punches Sam in the face. It seems intuitive to say that Tory harmed Sam because had Tory not committed the action of punching Sam than Sam would have been better off. He would not be hurt, suffering from a broken nose, or feel the betrayal of an assault. Tory has harmed Sam because he has left Sam worse off than he otherwise would have been.*

This is an uncontroversial case, so let us consider two more interesting cases.

Consider the following:

**Jack’s contribution**

*Consider Jack, a white man who tells the work boots joke, a common archetypical example of a racist joke which uses the stereotype of a lazy black man who cannot find something because it is hidden under his work boots. Usually the object is also racially motivated, food stamps for example. It is a joke which uses*
many false generalizations and harmful stereotypes to create a mild incongruity which leads to laughter. He is telling this joke to an audience of sympathetic listeners, who all laugh at Jack’s joke.

The aspects of this joke that leave others worse off than they otherwise would have been include, but are not limited to, the overt expression of racist beliefs, the distribution of those beliefs to others, and the continued support of a system of white supremacy via those expressed beliefs. In short, it contributes to the larger network of systemic racism in small, but notable, ways. They could be characterized as a diffusion of racist aesthetics which promote and endorse systemic racism. Furthermore, this endorsement of systemic racism by Jack and others is a major contributing factor to its continued existence. I would consider Jack’s contribution to be a vicious action, one which knowingly contributes to systemic racism through vicious speech that actively harms those subjects of the joke which may be listening and actively undermines the moral integrity of its audience. This joke asserts that people of color are lazy, which contributes to the misperception that they deserve less than those who are not lazy, i.e. white people. It also pokes fun at people of color by suggesting their laziness might and perhaps should lead to their starvation. It also implies stupidity. Of course, when said in jest, these ideas may not be explicitly condoned. However, the stereotypes that the joke teller leans on to support the joke, and the jovial reaction toward it both contribute to the continued misperception. When asked to explain why the joke was funny, Jack’s response would have to include that there is an unspoken endorsement of laziness as a defining characteristic of people of color, an explicitly racist idea.

Racism is harmful. As I said, I am not going to define race or racism in this paper, lest it drag on for far too long. Instead I remind you of Wellman’s definition from Portraits of White Racism. “Racism is a structural relationship based on the subordination of one racial group by another”. Later, more concisely he calls it a “system of advantage based on race”. (Wellman 1977)
By contributing this joke to his milieu Jack and the others who tell this and similar jokes are harming people of color. I want to emphasize the network, or systemic, characteristic of the harm. It is a vicious action because it is overt. While Jack is only one thread in a large net that ensnares and harms people of color daily, personally, continually, and generationally, he is still very much an active participant in it. For example, Jack is part of the network that perpetuates the myth that people of color have less cumulative wealth than white people because they are lazy, rather than because of the effects of redlining, urban migration, white flight, over policing, and systemic oppression. This joke perpetuates that myth and supports the system, which in turn further harms people of color by leaving them worse off than they otherwise would have been without these institutions and this systemic oppression. By telling the joke Jack is doing harm, and by laughing at the joke his audience is contributing to the harmful system as well, and thus they are doing harm. It seems uncontroversial that vicious actions are harmful. So, let us narrow our perspective with another case:

Example 6 - Tyler’s mirth

Consider Tyler, who hears the joke while passing Jack’s group and does not laugh but only feels mirth upon hearing the joke. This is a far more complicated issue. For the sake of creating the most difficult, ironclad case to show that Tyler is harming, let us consider mirth in this case to not be a deliberate judgement or an evaluation at all, but simply a reactive feeling, completely instinctual to Tyler. Though intuitively this seems not to be the case, it does present the most difficult challenge in arguing that Tyler is doing harm. Recall that I had previously claimed my argument to be independent of any specific framework for emotion. The severity and the specificity of this case should be sufficient to reinforce that claim.

Tyler passes by, happens to hear the joke, and reacts by feeling mirth. He does not laugh, never tells the joke after hearing it, he simply feels an emotion to which he does not react physically. I argue
that it is still a harm to both Tyler and people of color through the perpetuity of a system of racism. This is because mirth is a positive feeling, generally. As such, it creates a positive reinforcement of whatever its object is. If its object is racist speech, then the mirth one feels positively reinforces hearing racist speech. As we established in Jack’s contribution, racist speech is harmful. So, it follows that a positive association with racist speech and thus a predisposition to seek it out and hear it, is harmful. It promotes the existence of cases like Jack’s contribution. Not only this, but it causes Tyler to be the type of person who likes to hear racist jokes. It predisposes Tyler to seek out and experience the harming of others. Not only is this a promotion of harm to others, it is a harm to Tyler. It would be better for Tyler to be predisposed to better things, and thus his seeking out of racist speech leaves him worse off than he otherwise would have been. More precisely, his mirth toward the racist joke leaves him worse off than he otherwise would have been because he is now more inclined to seek out racist speech. I would characterize Tyler’s harms here as being those of acratic feelings. Against his better judgement, Tyler has had a feeling of mirth which reinforces internal prejudices and actively harms him ideologically. It may not be quite as much harm as if he passed the joke to a friend and spread it around. That would constitute an acratic action. If he were to deliberately spread it and endorse it by telling it at parties or incorporating it into his standup act, we would be back to Jack’s vicious action again. For the sake of rounding out the terminology, if Tyler were to tell no jokes of his own, but seek out cases of racist humor because he thoroughly enjoys them, this would be a case of having vicious feelings. This seems the least common to exist in isolation of the others, but is still quite harmful to Tyler personally, and indirectly to others as he continues to contribute to systemic racism as a side effect of a compromised and harmed ideological system in which racist ideas are reinforced by mirth.

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6 There may be cases of mirth that are not positive. Torture by tickling could be an example. However, these seem few and far in between.
So, it is here that I would like to draw a distinction in the character of these different types of harm. I believe there to be harms of two different sizes and shapes here, to borrow a previously mentioned analogy. I think a conventional understanding of harm a la Parfit is useful in considering Jack’s contribution. This is an overt contribution to a systemically oppressive set of institutions and values. In Tyler’s mirth however, I would call the internal harms and reinforcements something more of a vice. It is characteristically akratic, and it is a temptation caused by the positive reinforcement of something that is self harming. I have referred to vice a few times in this paper, and Tyler’s Mirth is the example that I think best exemplifies vice as I am using it. The predisposition to enjoy racist humor is inarguably a vice. This distinction is important to draw because of the ascending prescriptive framework I will explicate shortly. For now, we can consider them both varieties of harm.

In both cases, Jack’s contribution and Tyler’s mirth, racist speech and racist mirth are harmful. The harms are indirect prima facie, but by Parfit’s definition they are just as much a harm as punching someone in the face, though obviously they are characteristically different than physical violence. They do however leave people worse off than they otherwise would have been had the racist speech, or the mirth which takes it as its object, not occurred. There is a difference in magnitude and of individual orientation, as racist speech and mirth harms in a cumulative and diffuse way which contributes to a larger system of advantage and disadvantage based on race and punching someone in the face occurs immediately and intimately. However, these are harms and as such most normative ethical systems would suggest that they ought to be addressed or reprimanded in some way. So, to maintain neutrality I turn to Mill to find an appropriate principle to apply to these harms.

There are a few commitments that must come along with Mill’s principle concerning the restriction of liberties that Mill concerns himself with. In my use here, these restrictions are also important because they will later inform my prescriptive framework for addressing racist mirth in oneself. But before
we work out which type of prescriptive principle against harm we ought to commit to in this case, let us first discuss regulation. Mill suggests in *On Liberty* that he is taking a *pro tanto* approach to the justification of restricting liberties on those that harm. To express this, I would say that Mill thinks that harms are a non-negligible justification for the restriction of liberties. (Mill 1859) I take this to be the case due to the numerous caveats that Mill places on restricting liberties regarding certain harms, most specifically those related to the freedom of trade. It seems clear to me that this completely unrestricted freedom of trade would lead to many direct or indirect harms, and yet Mill is reluctant to invoke regulation on them due to this. In light of this, I will be expanding Mill’s definition a bit regarding harms to individuals and harms to groups via systemic oppression due to the perpetuity of racism, as I have discussed in the two cases I presented. But to start with a base we will use what I believe Mill intended with his harm principle.

Mill notes that the only justification for the restrictions of an individual’s liberties is when they have harmed someone, or when you are preventing a harm to someone. Mill suggests that those who harm ought to be restricted or regulated. More broadly, that we ought to both not harm as well as prevent harm. Preventing harm and not harming may not be as direct as putting those that harm in prison or physically preventing them from doing certain things, especially when the harms that are caused by such things as implicit action, speech, and performance. In fact, while I advocate the freedom of speech and press and the abolition of prisons, I do believe that we ought to curtail speech and press that causes harm and there seem to be two clear ways in which to approach this mitigation. As a note, I am focusing on racist speech, rather than racist mirth here because it is easier to elucidate. However, I believe racist mirth can and ought to be curtailed internally in much the same way, as I will explain in the following section.

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7 Slavery, for example, is the result of a completely unrestricted freedom of trade. Slavery is harmful and worthy of regulation (i.e. cessation).
The first way to mitigate racist speech is to exercise vocal and active criticism of others who commit these harms. Vocal criticism should be loud and pervasive, and it should be directly connected to concerns of morality.\(^8\) When one harms an individual in speech or in the active perpetuation of systems of oppression, they ought to be chastised and castigated for doing so. I will not commit to the idea that we ought to outright disrupt and prevent such acts of speech, but I do find that compelling. The degree of criticism should be commensurate to the amount of harm being done.

The second way, which may be less dependable, but keeps oneself accountable to these sorts of issues, is by reflecting on one’s own actions that cause harms and redressing them. You might see how this will segue nicely into a virtue ethical framework of self-reflection and habituation. It also fits nicely with theories of emotion as evaluative presentations but is not necessarily bound to that. This reflection is self-critical, and the level of self-criticism should be commensurate with the degree of harm being done. These are the types of restrictions of liberties I will be considering in addressing the harms of racist mirth. I do not believe racist comics should be imprisoned, but I do think they should be shouted down from the stage with vigor, as many already are. Likewise, I do not believe that feeling mirth when hearing a racist joke makes a person irredeemably immoral, but I do believe they ought to commit to serious self-criticism and address these emotions with oppositional emotions such as shame.

This vocal criticism of others and self-criticism roughly parallel the \textit{harm-prevention principle} and the \textit{anti-harm principle} respectively. These are not perfect analogues, nor are they meant to be. They are meant to serve the purpose of understanding the difference between \textit{moral criticizability} and \textit{moral culpability}, the distinction which I had previously mentioned to be important here. I will continue by illustrating how one transitions from one to the other. Following that I will suggest a pragmatic approach

\(^8\) As opposed to concerns of appropriateness
to addressing both moral criticizability and culpability in these cases. In the final analysis of the paper I seek to both have explained the harms and character of racist mirth, which I have done, as well as give a prescriptive framework on how to address it, providing examples on how to do so.
Section 4 – An Ascending Understanding of Moral Culpability

Moral criticizability is a very brief state that one can be in, in that it prompts the sort of moral consideration that can make a person culpable. This is the basis for my ensuing argument concerning the difference between the two and how we might address each. The first step to determining criticizability is to ascertain if a person is causing a harm. If we determine that they are causing harms but find that they are unaware of the harm, then they should be considered morally criticizable. I will not suggest this is universal, there may be cases in which people are culpable for harms they are unaware of committing, but I do think this applies to racist mirth. The reason I think this applies to racist mirth, and possible immoral emotions in general if there are others, is that it does not seem that we ought to hold someone morally culpable for something which they immediately work to rectify after doing the morally culpable thing for the first time based on instinct. We can further understand this issue by stepping back from mirth and examining a more clear-cut case of someone engaging in morally criticizable vice while perhaps lacking culpability. Consider the following:

Example 7 - Jan’s Cowardice

*Jan listens to her friend Jack tell a racist joke and laughs along with the rest of the crowd despite not finding the joke funny. One might argue, as I have, that they are obligated to speak up and shame Jack for telling the abhorrent joke. However, they do not, fearing retaliation from her friend group, alienation from her peers, or simply does not want to make Jack look or feel bad around his friends. This cowardice is a response many people might have to confronting racism in their everyday life.*

Jan’s cowardice is understandable, and she might not realize the internal harms that are caused by her refusal to speak up, much less the external harms caused by her laughter. And while the laughter may be morally reprehensible, it is less clear that the cowardice is. However, in much the same way that I claim
mirth which takes as its object racist jokes is a vice which causes internal harm. It may be even more severe, as she could have actively prevented future harms from occurring. Think of the more cut and dry example of Tory and Sam from earlier. If Jan was there to intervene in the fight between the two, stopping Tory from punching Sam, then it might be the case that no harm was done. However, if Jan expressed cowardice for fear of physical retaliation, or social retribution, we might criticize her for doing so.

So when applied to mirth specifically, if someone hears their first racist joke, feels mirth, immediately feels shame and self-criticizes for the emotion, they ought to be criticized for their emotion and for engaging in the vice of racist mirth, but not be held morally accountable for it. To say they are not criticizable would be to say they do not warrant self-criticism, which they do. But to say that they are not morally culpable is to say that they do not warrant restrictions of liberties or reprisal as I sought to express via Mill, which they do not necessarily.

Another reason that I hesitate to jump immediately to culpability is because of a litany of issues concerning our responsibility to others to inform them of their moral ineptitudes. This concerns an entire branch of epistemology which regards epistemic oppression, responsibility, and privilege. (See Fricker 2007, Dotson 2012, and Berenstain 2016). I will not make any strong commitments here regarding this epistemic responsibility but let us suppose that we are responsible for informing them of the harms they are causing, if only to satisfy some principle of harm prevention. It is at this point that one risks culpability.9

You can see what emerges to be an ascending understanding of moral wrong which begin as an internal vice and emerges into external harms. We begin morally neutral, having not experienced vice in

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9 If we suppose that we are not responsible, then it may be the case that they are responsible for seeking out the information. If they are not responsible for seeking out the information, then it may be the case that they are never merely criticizable, but simply culpable. In any case, they are certainly culpable once they are aware of the harms of their actions and fail to address them. Criticizability helps us articulate this addressal.
the form of racist mirth. When we hear the joke and feel mirth, we are then morally criticizable for the vice, because of the internal harms that it fosters within us, as well as for what it indicates about our harmful predispositions and proclivities. If we then laugh, or retell the joke, or otherwise reinforce the harms of systemic oppression we are causing harm, which is a moral wrong for which we would be culpable.

All of this lends itself well, both conveniently and by design, to my prescriptive framework for addressing criticizable mirth. And so, I will move on to incorporate the understanding we have established regarding harm, mirth, and this bottom up approach to moral culpability I have just briefly outlined to first provide a clear connection between mirth and morality as well as detail that prescriptive framework. So far, we have established several things which are critical to understanding this framework.

We have established via Jack’s contribution and Tyler’s mirth that mirth can be racist, and that racist mirth is a harm. We have also established that harms are at least criticizable, if not objects of moral culpability. I have used a version of Mill’s harm principle paired with Parfit’s definition of harm and applied that congruence to racist mirth. I do not immediately call people who harm morally culpable in order to prevent a potential pitfall regarding epistemic responsibilities we might have, as well as to provide a way to articulate how we ought to address racist mirth in ourselves. Thus, I have established an ascending understanding of moral culpability which draws a distinction between harms and vices in that harms are external, and vices are internal.

Additionally, we have briefly established that we have some sort of control over our emotions. This seems almost universal to theories of emotions, as I had previously mentioned, but is most easily articulated using a theory of emotions as evaluative presentations, as D’Arms and Jacobson do. So, the basis of the prescriptive framework of dealing with emotions for which we are morally culpable will be
one which considers emotions to be reflexive evaluative presentations which can be addressed with habitual self-criticism leading to counteractive emotions which replace the harmful vices with harm prevention practices. Before continuing I think it is worth reiterating that this framework can be changed and applied to most theories of emotion and likely to most normative ethical theories. I use the theory of evaluative presentations and a virtue ethics framework because I believe it to be both pragmatic and effective, based on my own experiences. Since the harms caused by the situations and vices, I am describing are immediate, pervasive, and part of the current zeitgeist, I think it is of paramount importance to provide case examples of how to prevent these harms in applicable situations. This is what I seek to do now.
Section 5 – Self Criticism as Mitigation

In this section I plan to incorporate the understanding that we have come to regarding racist mirth and the ascending understanding of moral culpability involving harms and vices in order to first provide a clear connection between mirth feeling and morality, as well as offer a prescriptive framework for addressing criticizable mirth. So far, we have established number of things that are critical to our understanding of this framework.

First, by elucidating a definition of racism using Wellman and Tatum, that racism is a system of advantage based on race, we have established that mirth can be racist as it draws on those benefits and reinforces them by endorsing the systemic project of racism and white supremacy. I have shown this by establishing a connection between the types of racism involved in racist speech and the type of racism involved in racist mirth. Secondly, we have established that racist mirth is a harm. This was shown in a similar fashion as the previous claim, by connecting the harms of racist mirth to similar types of harms caused by racist speech.

We have also established that harms, at least once one is made aware of them, are at least criticizable, in our examples I called these vices. We have done this using a combination of both Mill’s and Parfit’s definitions of harm. I did not immediately call harms something for which we are always morally culpable in order to avoid the potential pitfall regarding the types of epistemic responsibilities we might have to address these harms in ourselves and others. It is possible that we may not be culpable if we do not have the information regarding the harms for which we are culpable, or why they are harms, especially if that information is inaccessible to us or exceptionally burdensome in attaining. However, it seems that at the very least those that
harm are criticizable for those harms and bringing up these harms may even alleviate the burden of attaining that information, and so ought to be criticized so that the harmer can remedy their actions.

It seems then, regardless of considerations for epistemic responsibility, once we have been criticized for harms that we cause, if we fail to work actively to ameliorate these harms, we are morally culpable for them. In this case we have the information through the criticism of our harms and can use that information to habituate new types of responses to stimuli, and more specifically more appropriate judgements to propositions or objects of perception.

In addition to these things, and in support of some of these conclusions, we have established that we have some sort of control over our emotions. This is universal to theories of emotion, to a degree, though the level of control seems most robust in the D’Arms and Jacobson evaluative presentation theory of emotions. That said, even though this is the theory I tend to endorse, it seems that the basis for a prescriptive framework of dealing with emotions for which we are morally culpable must start with an understanding that we have some sort of control over our emotions, and that can be meshed with any of the major camps in the philosophy of emotions. Whatever emotions are, in other words, whether they are feelings or judgements, we have an ability to exert some sort of control over them. This also seems intuitively true.

So, what form does this control take? This is where my purview narrows slightly into a framework reminiscent of virtue ethics. It seems that we can address evaluations and reflect on them to mitigate and alleviate those evaluations which are bad or inappropriate or, more
importantly, criticizable. Evaluations of mirth which are causing harms internally are vices, which are criticizable, as has been discussed.

This type of control is applicable over time, and this sentiment is expressed by Aristotle, Nussbaum, and Anscombe among others. Let us call this sort of control a conglomeration of something between wittiness, modesty, and temperance. Mostly, however, mirth seems to fall in the sphere of action in conversation, since it is generally a response to some type of conversation, whether that be verbal or visual. We of course do not have perfect virtue at birth, we habituate it over time, and in the same way we use that type of control that we have over emotion to slowly teach ourselves not to be provoked into certain emotions by certain things through the act of self-reflection, self-criticism, and contemplation regarding the harms caused by our actions.

For example, we might be prone to violence, striking out at a sibling in anger when they do not share their toys with you. However, we learn from our parents, and our trusted institutions, that we ought to quell this emotion with temperance. Eventually it is the hope that we can synthesize this theory with new information to adapt temperance to other situations.

So, consider the following joke from Amy Schumer’s *Mostly Sex Stuff*, in which she says, “I love joking about race, it’s like my favorite. I was talking about this the other day; I was hanging out with literally all my black friends. **Laugh pause.** And... and uh, and I remember, I was like, ‘Temembe’, or whatever, **laugh pause** I was like, ‘Tapestry’ **laugh pause**, it’s something wild... you know? And what was she sayin’? She was like, ‘Girl’ (in an imitated voice stereotyping women of color)... and I won’t do some racist impression,
so don’t worry, but she was like, ‘Girrrrrrl’ (mimes exaggerated movements and continues to imitate a voice stereotyping women of color). **Laugh Pause** I mean we were like mid double dutch and I was like “Stop yelling, we’re not at the movies.’ **Laugh pause**

(Amy Schumer 2012)

When presented with this joke, a person ought to do a few things. First, they should acknowledge that the speech itself was racist, using Wellman’s definition or some other modern definition of race that do not simply equate race to prejudiced action. In this joke Amy uses stereotypes involving black names and affectations to provoke laughter. It is overtly and harmfully racist in that it reinforces and endorses the idea that a name like ‘Temembe’ or ‘Tapestry’ is an absurd and laughable name. It is in fact the case that this very disposition contributes to people of color being looked over for job interviews, casting calls, and more because they have what Amy might consider a non-normative name. Additionally, for fun, Amy throws in a stereotype of people of color being typically loud at movie theaters. She has given us a lot to work with here. You can also see in her special there are many pauses for laughter. This is intended to provoke mirth.

Once it is established that the joke is racist, the next step is to address the evaluation the listener made about the joke, and the feelings associated with it, acknowledging that the associated mirth is racist. Racist mirth is harmful as a vice in itself, and the harm is independent of Amy’s recitation. Next, they should feel shame in this self-criticism. Finally, having made this counteractive evaluation in response to Schumer’s joke, they ought to reflect on their future actions regarding such things. I imagine this all taking place in the span of a few seconds. You feel the mirth, you may even chuckle or snort to express the mirth, then you realize the joke is racist,
feel a bit of disgust at your reaction to it, and remind yourself about the harms caused by both that type of speech and that emotion and move on with your life with those things in mind.

That feeling of disgust is an evaluation, and an emotion, namely shame. This is an appropriate evaluation to feel when you are redressing your causing of harm. It is precisely this sort of remedial evaluation that is required to address your inappropriate feeling of mirth. This is exactly the type of method that Solomon describes in different terms in *What is an Emotion?* when he discusses the mechanism of control associated with emotions and judgments. And this is the sort of habituated method by which we can address our morally criticizable emotions, in this case racist mirth, over time to remedy them.

Over time then, we should be able to, like many other virtuous activities, train ourselves to become more virtuous. At the very least, I think it can be claimed that we can habituate ourselves to reflexively address bad judgments. This seems to be the bare minimum needed to avoid moral culpability for the types of actions, emotions, and evaluations here. If we can consistently and reflexively address bad evaluations in every case in which we have a criticizable judgment, and we do so, then we avoid moral culpability. We must be earnestly trying to achieve a state in which we no longer experience the emotions of mirth that are associated with racist humor, but it is not necessary that we achieve this state in order to be free from moral culpability in these cases. It is simply the act of repeated and earnest redressal of these feelings that is enough for our remaining non-culpable.

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10 See Solomon *What is an Emotion*, 2003
However, the moment that one makes a bad evaluation, or a harmful evaluation, and fails to address that bad evaluation with an opposing correct evaluation like shame accompanied with a feeling of disgust, then they are immediately morally culpable for that evaluation. This is because they have control, in the form of being able to address judgments and reflect on them to mitigate and alleviate bad judgments. They can also, over time, reflexively address bad judgments. They have failed to do this and so, they know it is morally wrong because it causes harm, they understand why it is wrong, and they persist in the action regardless. This seems to indicate that they are morally culpable for that action.

A bold claim follows from this, which I endorse. There are often fitting and appropriate objects of mirth which we must evaluate to be unfitting and inappropriate objects of mirth. In fact, in this case of evaluations of aesthetics which lead to morally compromising feelings of mirth, it is imperative for us to instill certain false beliefs in ourselves such that we falsely believe certain jokes or archetypes of jokes to be unfunny, even if they are in fact funny. In other words, burn this paper after reading and commit to the instillation of false beliefs in yourself in order to fight racist aesthetics internally. This may seem fanatical, but its precedent goes as far back as Plato’s Noble Lie, and it does not seem absurd to divorce the morality of aesthetic content from its aesthetic qualities.

This prescription utilizes a virtue ethical framework, but I am convinced that a commitment to virtue ethics is not necessary to address racist mirth and it is possible to use the same sort of prescription in its redressal. So, I will briefly describe three other instances in which this could potentially fit. Namely, a Kantian one, a Rawlsian one, and a Utilitarian one. I do not
intend to dive into all the commitments, metaphysics, branches, and considerations involved with each of these ethical approaches, I merely wish to show cursorily that by applying some of the generally agreed about constituents of each theory to emotions as judgments we can mitigate harm and control our emotions.

For example, we can certainly come up with a set of maxims associated with the feeling of mirth which point out many different aspects of the objects of mirth which would cause the mirth to be racist. It would not be difficult for a Kantian to say that there should be a set of maxims which point out ways in which we ought to act to avoid the harms associated with racism. Likewise, they would be able to say that there are ways that we ought to act to address certain judgments within us, and when we make judgments that defy certain maxims or principles, then it is wrong to do so. A theory like this might be much stricter than the virtue ethics theory I had originally proposed, and I do not necessarily disagree that it ought to be, if one were to adhere to the principles associated with a Kantian system of ethics. It seems to be the case that moral criticizability might be skipped altogether and one might be culpable and have to remedy this culpability each time they came to experience racist mirth, rather than preventing their culpability through the act of remediation and amelioration of those improper judgments. Certainly, it can be said that a prescription of constant reflexive oppositional evaluations to combat the types of evaluations one is making about racist humor is a prescriptive exercise that aligns with a Kantian ethical framework. It might need some slight adjustments to the ascending understanding of culpability I was exploring, but it is not by any means a great stretch to apply this prescription to this theory.
Similarly, it can be said that if we are to approach justice from the original position, as a contract theorist or a Rawlsian might, we can approach this very directly by looking at harms caused. This might be a better method by which to approach this prescriptive theory, but I think that the virtue ethics framework fits more clearly and concisely with my prescription. Ideally, we can dissociate ourselves from our societal position and approach each case of racist humor by considering the way in which it might affect us if we were positioned differently in society. Overall, it seems that the conclusion we would come to, and this aligns with what I discussed previously regarding the harms of racism, is that when we experience racist mirth we are not benefitting ourselves in any case and actually harming both ourselves and others by feeling racist mirth. So, in an ideal, fair, and just world, we would not experience racist mirth. Therefore, a prescription in which we constantly address and reflexively redress our judgments, which we control, would be an appropriate one if we were to take this sort of ethical approach to the issue of racist mirth feeling.

Finally, let us consider a utilitarian approach to ethics and how my prescriptive framework might be applicable to it. If we take a calculated approach to pain, moderation, and pleasure we will actually find that it looks a bit like the contract theorist’s approach, in that we will acknowledge that there is a minimal amount of pleasure gained considering the monolith of systemic racism that racist mirth contributes to. If we consider the whole system, which I think we ought to, we recognize that the reason for its existence, and thus the reason for the pain caused by it, is the massive accumulation of small supporting mechanisms for it, which then turn into white supremacist institutions of support, which result in the system itself. So, these small
slights which take the form of laughing at a joke or feeling mirth have, as I have previously described, a cascading effect that leads to the monolith of white supremacy and systemic racism. The small amount of physical pleasure derived from the feeling of mirth associated with the experience of the emotion of mirth is almost negligible compared to the monumental amount of harm caused by systemic racism in the past, present, and the likely future. The method by which we address these small harms is not of critical importance, it just needs to be addressed. Therefore, the prescriptive method that I describe should suffice for a utilitarian framework.

Overall, it seems that most systems of normative ethics would agree with and could reasonably comply or minimally adjust to the type of prescriptive framework I am describing in this section. There is still the question that one might pose regarding how we restrict the liberties of those who are morally culpable for mirth feeling. However, I wish to leave that question to those that are more fluent than I in remedial action and justice. But, as I suggested previously in this paper, a good way to start would be to be very vocally critical of those who are criticizable. This will hopefully lead them to further their understanding of the harm they cause through their emotions, and prompt them to adopt something like the prescriptive framework that I have suggested here. In addition to this, as I have suggested, we should turn this lens on ourselves and commit to being self-critical in cases of moral criticizability. Often, we are the only ones who have access to our emotions, and that is certainly the case when we do not express them physically. Addressing and redressing these emotions in ourselves is an important step in the process to eliminating those types of reactions altogether.
In the final section of this paper I will apply this prescriptive framework to a few practical examples, as well as discuss a few of the certainly numerous complications associated with a theory that has this many moving parts. I will briefly reiterate the universalizability of this framework. I will discuss whether we should seek out entertainment that uses racist humor, and whether that changes if the humor is made by the marginalized people that it is racist against. I will also discuss whether people of those marginalized groups can be racist. In addition, I will consider the implications of audience, irony, and mockery, and how those things complicate this issue. I will assess a situation in which the teller of the joke is not racist, but the listener is. I will address a difficult question regarding whether feelings of shame are themselves feelings of moral responsibility. Finally, I will briefly discuss the types of people that might be excluded from concerns of culpability in these cases.
Section 6 – Fringe Cases, Rebuttals, and Responses

There are some natural rebuttals one might have to this case, the first set of rebuttals that come to mind for me, which I thought to address earlier in the paper to anticipate arguments against my point are those which seek to fundamentally undermine the project by citing too narrow a set of parameters that I am working in. I have been consistent in using a theory of emotion as evaluative perception because I find it to be the easiest to work with and it is descriptively useful for the context of this paper. It allows me to frame racist humor and the mirth that might fit it as a sort of passive but participatory action wherein the listener makes some sort of judgement about their perception, that judgment being that a racist joke is funny. One might then argue that if emotion were not evaluative perception and perhaps some other sort of less involved or less participatory phenomena, then perhaps there would be less concern regarding experiencing mirth where it fits.

I argue that many theories of emotion could be applied in this paper, and while they might be more confusing or less straightforward in their efficacy in describing this issue, the conclusion would remain the same. Especially when it comes to mirth and wit, these are complex emotions and they will always involve some judgement, even if you are using a feeling based theory of emotion, which seems the most antithetical to the assertion I am making, like those proposed by James in “What is an emotion?” and Prinz in “Embodied emotions”, you would still be forming judgments alongside those reactions to bodily changes. Similarly, a theory of emotion as desire like that asserted by Anscombe in Intention and Davidson in Intending still contains within it an allowance for evaluative content, as desire must come from a judgement of want for something.
The easiest of the predominant theories of emotion to resolve is of course the judgmentalist theory of emotion, as discussed by Solomon in *The Passions* and Nussbaum in *Upheavals of Thought*. This seems to be self-explanatory, but their assertion that emotions inform us of the evaluative world because they consist, in part, of evaluative beliefs or judgements is only a short hop from being an evaluative perception theory itself.

In these brief touches on other theories you can see that the quality, which is pertinent to this paper, the evaluative aspect of evaluative perception, is consistent throughout the popular theories of emotion in the discourse. You might guess that this is not as much the case when it comes to popular theories of ethics in the discourse, so I will address that briefly as well.

I use a framework akin to virtue ethics as it is a practical and practicable framework to work with these theories in. It seems intuitive to apply virtue ethics here when it comes to addressing harmful aspects of our personality via habituation. However, I do think that this framework could be refitted to just about any normative ethical theory. It may necessitate some legwork, but I am convinced it is possible. You could delve further into the harms I have discussed and come up with a vaguely utilitarian theory or even take a more extreme approach to culpability through a Kantian approach. Perhaps it could be said that any feeling of mirth toward a racist joke is morally blameworthy. It certainly exacerbates the harms we all cause ourselves internally through internal bias. If anything, that approach might quicken the pace at which we improve ourselves or call for stricter punishments on those who do not. It may also alienate people who are trying to change in the face of new information. I think that the virtue ethics approach is practical, in that it is easy to understand and disseminate, and practicable, in that it
is easy to apply it to your life. These are two qualities I value in a theory where I intend to prescribe an action to all people. Therefore, I favor virtue ethics in this case, because it is pragmatic and intuitive. But I believe, again, that the theory is universalizable across normative theories of ethics.

Another concern I foresee coming up is whether we ought to seek out racist humor if it is made by individuals of that race. There is a question we must consider first before we can look at this, however. Can individuals of the race in question be racist in their speech? My intuition is that they cannot, and I think Wellman would agree. Black men do not benefit from a system of advantages and disadvantages based on race. They are affected by that system, of course, but systemic racism disadvantages them rather than providing a benefit. They can be classist, ableist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic. Dave Chapelle’s recent specials can attest to that. They cannot be racist, however. So, when Tyler Perry uses the image of the “mad black woman” in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* as the intended object of mirth in the film, he is not being racist. However, he *is* using sexism as the intended object of mirth, on its intersection with racism. He is normalizing the image of the sassy and brash woman of color and this harms women of color specifically through the monolith of systemic racism and its intersection with systemic sexism. And so, in these cases it is useful to reconsider the type of harm occurring, and imperative to understand the complex experiences of individuals who experience intersectional oppression.

So now let me assert a pair of ideas in relation to this example specifically. First, that it is rarely the case that a person will say something purely racist regarding their own race, and it is almost always utilizing some other system of oppression if it is racist at all. Tyler Perry’s sexism
here for example, or the disparaging remarks regarding trans persons made by Chapelle in *Sticks & Stones*. Second, it remains problematic in the ways I have described in this paper for white people to seek this out.

By seeking out this type of humor we are deliberately putting ourselves in a morally criticizable and compromising situation. We are also economically encouraging the continued production of harmful media. Even if the authors of that media cannot themselves be racist, it seems that the result of their work can be harmful in a racist way. And even though this warrants additional consideration it seems to fit in the framework of the past five sections of this paper, so it is at the very least, unadmirable and criticizable for white people to seek out this entertainment. The case is even stronger if you reduce the argument in the way that I did, wherein purely racist humor is exceptionally rare in the communities it harms. If you consider the sexism of Perry or the transphobia of Chapelle, it becomes much clearer that this ought to be avoided and chastised.

We’ve discussed many cases in which the listener of the joke is not overtly racist, and the teller is. But consider a case which flips these roles. Perhaps the teller of the joke simply refers to a dumb comment or a characteristic of a dunce in a joke where race is not invoked, but the listener *infers* a racial context to this joke. They assume that the joke is calling out people of color. Of course, this ought to be addressed with shame, and if the joke is not ableist or not relying on some other systemic oppression for its humor, then the teller is not morally culpable for the false assumptions the listener is making regarding their joke. This is further evidence that the mirth is a manifestation of the vice of racism, rather than a vice itself. There may be some considerations
to explore about our responsibility to assert anti-racist sentiments when we go about our conversations to ensure that implicature is not misconstrued and that we are not inadvertently supporting racist ideologies. I invite that discussion in response to this paper.

Another edge case occurs to me as well in considering these issues. Specifically, how we handle the mockery of the systems themselves through the use of racist humor. Consider the following case:

Example 8 - Mocking the Racist

Corinne and Rebecca are friends, Corinne is white, and Rebecca is a black woman. Corinne makes a casual comment to Rebecca. She warns against saying too many radical things while eating at a local soul food restaurant lest that person be arrested by the FBI. Both laugh.

The assumption in this case is that a person of color is more likely to be spied on or arrested than a white person, especially by an institution which benefits from white supremacy, like the FBI. While Corinne is in a position of advantage over Rebecca, they both laugh at the joke and both understand the mockery and irony of the comment. I would tentatively contend that this joke is not actually racist and is in fact a meta-judgement made by both individuals with disdain for the system of racism. Both are laughing, however grimly that laughter may be, at the state and the system of oppression. The incongruity lies in the absurdity and injustice of systemic racism. So, as the object of mirth in cases like this is mockery of racism, rather than racism itself, it seems that it serves to prevent future harms, rather than causing them. The extent to which the mockery could go, or the content of the jokes which are acceptable mockery, is dependent on the relationship of the individuals engaged in the conversation and their understanding of the
material and the elements of the humor. Tone of voice also matters, sarcasm being more conducive to mockery. I invite a full discussion and examination of this interpersonal dynamic as response to this paper. As with most things, moderation in this mockery is advised, lest the jovial nature of the mockery is lost.

One final concern that I have is the conflation between my prescription of counteractive emotions in response to internally harmful emotions like racist mirth. It could be argued, for example, that shame simply is a feeling of moral responsibility and therefore what I am asking is that a person feel morally responsible for morally criticizable emotions to address and ameliorate them. This is an odd way to express this I think, but it may be true. However, shame is a description of an internal phenomena that is occurring as a reflexive response, and I think it is a useful way to mitigate racism. I do not believe it is paradoxical, in that understanding the potential moral culpability of the action and addressing it is exactly how one should habituate better action. In this theory of emotion that happens to manifest itself very nicely as shame. We have a convenient tool at our disposal then for diminishing the internal harms we’re causing in the form of an easily accessible emotion.
Conclusion

When you walk past a crowd at a bar and overhear a person telling a racist joke with wit and good timing, perhaps you will feel shame when you think back on reading this paper. Hopefully this is the first in a long road to improving the way that you view the world and mitigate harm not just within yourself, but by eliminating overt harms as well. In this project I argued for a pair of claims: first that mirth at racist jokes may be fitting in the sense of reacting to something that is genuinely funny, but that even in such cases, having a fitting response of mirth may be morally blameworthy. This does not turn out to be a moralistic fallacy I find, wherein one conflates morality with the fittingness of emotion, but is in fact supported by the fittingness argument made by D’Arms and Jacobson. Secondly, I claimed that we can be morally responsible for feelings of mirth at racist jokes. It seems obvious that telling a racist joke is harmful, and therefore unethical. In fact, we usually chastise or refuse to patronize comedians who use racism as the crux of their comedy. This is not always the case, and these jokes still have an audience, but it seems uncontroversial in this context to say it is bad. It is less apparent that someone is committing a moral wrong by simply feeling mirth at a racist joke. I have shown that they are morally criticizable for the manifestation of the vice of racism in this feeling of mirth at a racist joke but are only morally responsible once they fail to acknowledge that the feeling is immoral and respond to it using a counteractive emotion, such as shame. Essentially a feeling of mirth can be immoral but not necessarily blameworthy. I did this by showing that there are two distinct types of harm associated with racism and racist humor. There is one type, which is overt through
actions both vicious and acratic, and another which is more like vice, and is internal and positively reinforces racism within oneself.

Finally, I prescribe a practical way to address errant feelings of racist mirth. First, we must lie to ourselves regarding the fittingness of racist humor to mirth to mitigate the harms of racist humor. Second, we must address racist mirth with shame. It is through these two methods that we come to change our own behavior over time and habituate a new and less racist understanding of humor which does not actively harm ourselves or others.
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Vita

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He is currently working in admissions for SIUE and has plans to work for university administration and with scholars programs or non-profits that focus on public education and racial equity. Otherwise, he hopes to find himself working for a non-profit or labor organization making significant changes in the class, race, and gender power structures in the United States.