

**Metacomedy**  
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(A Preview of my Senior Thesis, UW-Madison, 2007)

**I. Introduction**

This independent study has been a journey to say the least. To really begin, an accurate understanding of the identity of the artist (myself) is advantageous to the evaluation and appreciation of the art piece (this paper). Art by nature is subjective. It comes from the subjective experience of the artist who says through his/her art, “ ‘*this* is what life means to *me...this* is life as *I* see it’ (Rand, 35).” Thus, a better understanding of a work of art comes with a better understanding of the artist’s paradigm. Therefore, at this time, I would like to establish my identity as an artist and communicate this directly and clearly to my reader. For me, this begins with the act of “coming out”.

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*My name is Jessica,*

*And I am*

*A radical comedian.*

*No, please don’t laugh—*

*I take my comedy very seriously.*

According to sociologist G.E.C. Paton in his essay “The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality”, a radical comedian “protests against current arrangements” in society, as opposed to a conservative comedian who tends to “reinforce the arrangements of society as it stands” (209). With that out of the way, I would like to further come out as *half-Jewish, a little over-weight, and*

*sexually queer (not to mention feminist)*. Thus, the paradigm from which I think and write is quite unique, as the synthesis of those qualities produces an identity that is a particular kind of minority. Yet, what I have learned throughout the process of this independent study is that being a minority within the sphere of comedy is ironically its own kind of privilege. That is not to say that success is reached without barriers. In fact, I face discrimination on a daily basis from comedians who assume two things when they meet me; first, that as a woman I have no experience, and second, that I am not funny. Neither is true. But the privilege that I speak of comes through the minority's particular sense of humor; it is what philosopher Ted Cohen refers to in his book Jokes as "the humor of outsiders" (60). Specifically, Cohen is talking about the relationship between Jews and their sense of humor, but the idea is generalizable. I call it queer humor.

## **II. Queer Humor**

I define queer as anything that deviates from the cultural norm, also known in feminism as the "mythical norm"<sup>1</sup>. In America, you are racially queer if you are anything but white, sexually queer if you are anything but straight; you are queer if you are not thin, Christian, or able-bodied; you are queer if you identify as female or transgender or old. The reason as to why I have found queerness to be a privilege in comedy is grounded in the premise that humor is strongly related to truth. The historic black comedian Richard Pryor once said, "Be truthful-and funny will come." From an existentialist's point of view, our epistemology is grounded in negation; that is, we know what we are through first knowing what we are not. This is the reason that normative persons may not naturally recognize his/her privileges, because they experience them as

normal. It is also the reason that oppressed people tend to know more about their oppressors than vice versa—for the outsider, this kind of knowledge is inevitable, and even necessary for survival. Similarly, a sense of humor can also be necessary for survival. For the queer (of any kind), humor can be the catalyst for truth. This is the attitude from which I see my queerness as a privilege within the sphere of comedy.

Unfortunately, the comedy world is still representative of the rest of the world. I have worked at the local comedy club for over eight months, seen over 128 different standup comedians on our stage, and of those only four were female (one of them being myself); as a feminist I experience this realm of professional comedy as tainted with the sexist and homophobic attitudes that still plague society. What is worse is that comedians naturally have large egos (otherwise we would not get on that stage, nor would we be funny when we did), and larger egos are more easily threatened. So when a queer female comes along with lots of experience and a great sense of humor, rarely is she respected even then, as the large male comedic ego experiences her transgression as a double blow. I digress.

My point is that within the world of professional comedy, there does not exist a 'safe space'. A "safe space", as I have learned after three years of social justice training at UW- Madison, is "A place where anyone can relax and be fully self-expressed, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, age, or physical or mental ability; a place where the rules guard each person's self-respect and dignity and strongly encourage everyone to respect others"<sup>2</sup> The most

significant implication of this lack of safe space on the stage is that it means that there is also a lack of a safe space for the audience—those whom at which the comedy is directed, and in the case of the radical comedian, those who will be our catalysts for societal change.

Scholarship around the idea of a safe space in comedy, or an ethics of comedy, is minimal. Most of the work that does exist centers around the philosophical debate over the potential aesthetic effects of unethical art, for example in comedy, whether or not a piece is less funny when it is offensive. But for my purposes, I consider the loss of aesthetic value to be irrelevant to my search for a universalisable ethics of comedy, as my goal is to create a safe space for its own sake.

### **III. (The Search For) An Ethics of Comedy**

Thus, my objective for this independent study was to analyze the ethics of comedy using a feminist paradigm. Under the privileged advising of Dr. Claudia Card, herself a well-known and respected philosopher and feminist, I began by presenting to the universe a series of questions: First, *is there a relationship between art and comedy, and ethics and art?* And if so, then second, *what is the relationship between the comedian and the audience and how can this relationship be considered ethical? How the does the identity of the comedian relate to the types of jokes he/she can tell?* And, most importantly, *what is the role, and potential role, of the comedian in society, and how does this role relate to ethics?*

The resources for this project were a synthesis of academic research and experiential research, all influenced by my three undergraduate specialties at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. (In fact, I created this independent study as

the capstone course for my certificate in LGBT Studies.) I used a series of philosophical, sociological, and feminist readings, in addition to resources from my other semester courses including Women's Studies, Ethics, and Theatre 420: Queer Performance.

My experiences this semester as a cocktail waitress at the local comedy club, and as a comedian played a significant role in this independent study. Every weekend for three months I witnessed approximately the same show four times within a 48-hour period. I also had the opportunity to converse with the comedians themselves during the ritual trip to the dive bar across the street after the shows. In addition, I incorporated my personal experiences as a queer comedian on campus. This semester my career climbed to new heights as I hosted my first show at The Comedy Club on State, debuted in Chicago's Boystown, earned the support of my family, performed my first ever twenty-minute gig, said farewell after three years as emcee of UW's notorious drag shows, and produced a film worthy of film festivals for my final project in Queer Performance. Throughout the semester I had the unique opportunity of using the stage as a platform for the application of my ideas on the ethics of comedy. As a philosopher and a sociologist, this was a scholarly dream come true.

Lastly, I decided to incorporate a qualitative analysis of two of the most influential female comedians in my life: Robin Tyler, the first lesbian comedian to produce an album in the 1970s ("Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom"), and Margaret Cho, a modern feminist comedian ("Notorious C.H.O."). Both women are sexually queer and both are minorities either racially or ethnically. I was not familiar with Robin Tyler before this independent study, but her original

LP was fatefully given to me as a resource by Professor Card. It was love at first listen. I realized that these two women and I have very similar artistic qualities. Stylistically we are all storytellers; qualitatively we all spread feminist ideals of liberation and prophetic messages of self-love. Most importantly, we may all be considered radical comedians because we use our craft to “illustrate ‘emergent culture’, with [our] continuous creation of ‘new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experience’” (Paton 209).

Ultimately I ended up using my analyses to develop a principle which a comedian may employ to ensure that his/her work is morally praisable. will allow the comedian a framework which allows comedians to work within to apply

#### **IV. The Principle of Subjectivity**

Comedy is an art form. For me comedy has been creatively liberating. After exploring modern artists like Tim Miller and Denise Uyehara in *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*, I now consider stand-up comedy specifically to be a kind of performance art. It is the canvas on which I am able to paint my view of life by using my body and my voice. The sociologist George Paton says that comedy is “deserving of the title ‘work of art’” because it is an “expression of the imagination that is internally coherent and publically negotiable” (208). Nevertheless the relationship between ethics and art is objectionable. The philosophy of aesthetics critically debates the role of morals within art. Can art, or better, should art be limited within an ethical framework? Ted Cohen says “there is no rule . . . it is up to you every time, it is up to you and your own moral sensibility . . .” (70). Therefore being an ethical comic, or rather, practicing comedy ethically, is not necessary, but is a choice to be made

by the comedian; consciously choosing to practice ethically sound comedy is the first moral step in the process. The rest of the process in my philosophy follows from some age-old advice; it turns out that to *write what you know* is not merely fine aesthetic advice, but also the correct moral advice for comedians. I call this idea the Principle of Subjectivity, which states that ethical comedy is best achieved when the comedian's performance is constructed directly from within his/her own personal life experiences or out of his/her particular cultural identity.

This ethical framework for comedy is related to the metaphysical relationship that the comedian has with his/her audience, and also the potential societal effect that the comedian has, and the role that they comedian can play in society. Paton explains, "That the comedian's world is an essentially moral domain is further reinforced not only by the social control function performed by the comedian in the realm of social morality but also the normative constraints placed on him in his role-relationship with his audience in the social setting and 'focused activity' of his joking performance" (210). That is, the expectations of the audience, along with the potentially significant role that the comedian can play in society are elements that shape the ethics of comedy.

The expectations placed on the comedian by his/her audience are important to ethical comedy because it means that a comedian has a responsibility to his/her audience. This expectation is part of what makes the professional comedian a professional. During the introduction to her DVD "Notorious C.H.O.", Margaret Cho talks about the expectation you have and the energy you feel when going to see a performer. She says that this energy is what makes her appreciate her audience so much, and also what makes her hope

that she can always deliver. Further, this expectation has ethical implications because it is a “focused activity” (Paton 210). The audience is allowing the comedian to hold its attention, making it vulnerable, and thus the ethical comedian must learn that respecting this responsibility means intentionally striving not to offend or harm anybody.

This unique relationship that the comedian has to the audience creates remarkable cultural potential for the role of comedian in society. Ethically performed comedy is therefore socially desirable. Paton says that “whilst associated with feelings of liberation, humour is equally to be seen sociologically as constituting a form of tension management, social resistance and social control in human relationships (229)”. Paton says also that the comedian can in this way even be seen as a “disguised moralist” (207). Also, in his dissertation called “Laughing at Art: Humor, Art, and Morality”, UW graduate student Aaron Smuts discusses the varying potential harms of unethical comedy, including the reinforcement of dangerous stereotypes, and the additional harms caused by laughing at harmful jokes (130-196). This potential for strong consequences that a comedian may have within society places a great importance on the need for an ethically sound comedy.

It follows that ethical comedy is morally appraisable in both its intention and its consequences. These are the two major paradigms within the study of ethics itself. In Kantian ethics, the intention of the performer creates either a moral or an immoral character, versus utilitarian theory in which the consequences of an action diagnose the morality. From a moral point of view, comedy done with the purposeful intention to hurt someone is obviously unethical. Therefore to have good intentions with your comedy is more ethical

than the alternative. The reason that intention plays a role in establishing ethical comedy is because frequently we find comedians who are attempting to spread the right messages but are doing it in the wrong way out of ignorance; therefore they should be held less culpable than a malicious comedian.

The potential for a comedian with a morally sound intention to accidentally cause harm through his/her joking is minimized by the application of the Principle of Subjectivity. As previously stated, some comedians may unintentionally spread the right message in the wrong way. Here's an example of a joke from a young, white, male comedian who performed at the Comedy Club over the summer. He was in the middle of ranting about how ridiculous the conservatives are for being homophobic—a seemingly feminist-approved idea. He then went on to add that it is silly for people to be afraid of a “gay agenda” because he once saw a bumper sticker that asked to “Help End Domestic Partner Abuse”, and he said that if that is what we are to consider the gay agenda, then we really have nothing to worry about because “domestic abuse between two men is really just a fight, and domestic abuse between two women is...well that's just *awesome*.” I've seen this joke performed over eight times, and each time a majority of the crows laughs, most likely because of the way that he delivers the line about two women. The problem with this joke is that it trivializes a very real and scary part of human relationships, while perpetuating a homophobic ideal that gay relationships are not real. Further, any person in that room who may have identified with gay domestic abuse would not have found that joke funny, and further we can assume that if that comedian had ever had any real experiences with gay domestic abuse, he probably would not have developed that joke in that way. Thus, an unintentional moral

transgression took place when the comedian stepped outside of his own identity and own experiences when forming his routine.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Mythical Norm”

<b>Axis of Identity</b>	<b>Normative Group (“Mythical Norm”)</b>	<b>Non-Normative/ Marginalized Groups</b>	<b>Oppression</b>
<b>Race</b>	White People	People of Color	Racism
<b>Gender</b>	Men	Women & Transgender People	Sexism
<b>Socioeconomic Class</b>	Middle Class People	Poor People	Classism
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	Heterosexuals	Lesbians/Gays Bisexuals	Heterosexism/ Homophobia
<b>Age</b>	People in 20s and 30s	Very Young & Old People	Ageism
<b>Physical &amp; Mental Ability</b>	Able-Bodied People	People with Disabilities	Ableism
<b>Religion</b>	Christian People	People of Other Religions	Anti-Semitism/ Religious Narrowness
<b>Body Size</b>	Thin People	Fat People	Fatphobia

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/safespace/glossary.htm>