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Comedy is Manipulative and I Can Prove It: Laugh, Now!

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COMEDY IS MANIPULATIVE AND I CAN PROVE IT: LAUGH, NOW!

by

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INTRODUCTION

Laughter is an involuntary response. So how can I get you to laugh?

Think about it: have you ever been convinced to laugh? Did anyone ever say to you, "Please laugh now, pretty please"? If they did, I bet you didn't laugh. That is because there is one way to laugh: when you think something is funny. Sure, you can force a fake laugh, but that's different. There is something special about that feeling: it almost seems to come from nowhere, suddenly appearing from somewhere deep in your gut and rising up, all the way through you. How did it get there? Probably, someone told you a joke. And they probably told you that joke on purpose, because they wanted you to laugh. They wanted you to influence you in a very particular way, so they said something very specific in order to bring about that response. And your response, your laugh, was an involuntary physical reaction. You did not purposefully intend to laugh, you just did, because what they said was funny. You cannot control when you laugh. But someone else can. Uh oh!

How could another person, just with their words, control me? That is completely insane to me. That very special relationship between the joke-maker, the words they use, and the joke-hearer sounds manipulative. It makes me think that comedy itself is manipulative—as an attempt to influence another person into doing something they cannot control, it certainly seems like it is. And before you say that you can, in fact, control laughter by stifling it—sure, yes, you can do that—but someone else still put that laughter there for you to stifle. You still got controlled.

But manipulation is bad, right? Are jokes immoral? Gee, I sure hope not. They're so fun! I love to make them, and I also love to hear them! So is comedy manipulative? And if it is, is it still okay to tell jokes? Oh boy, here we go.

<u>**CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS MANIPULATION?**</u>

What is manipulation anyway? It is something we seem to grasp inherently–some kind of deceitful, coercive influence over others that is probably not a very nice thing to do–but to define it more specifically gets tricky. What kind of influence is deceitful? Why is the manipulator exerting this influence in the first place; does that have something to do with why we call it manipulation? How would a manipulator even go about wielding this kind of influence–do they do it on purpose? It is challenging to find an account that captures every element of our intuitive understanding of manipulation, and which is wide enough to include the many different kinds of things that might be considered manipulative, yet narrow enough to exclude its less nefarious cousin, "persuasion." It is challenging to find an account of manipulation that matches our intuitions about its character (some kind of mischievous, sneaky influence, with intentions that are not altogether pure) that is also logically justifiable. What does it mean to influence someone in a "sneaky" way? I will attempt to do so here.

1.1 Noggle: It's trickery!

The first account of manipulation I find compelling is Robert Noggle's, in his paper, "Manipulative Actions: A Conceptual and Moral Analysis." I like it for its straightforward, mechanical conceptualization of manipulation. Before advancing his definition of manipulation, Noggle gives several examples of manipulation to give us an idea of the kind of behavior we are talking about before trying to define it. I will also begin with the examples, to give us an idea of the kind of behavior we are talking about before trying to define it. Here are Noggle's most helpful and relevant examples:

1. A swindler claims to be a police officer trying to catch a dishonest bank teller. He asks his target to withdraw her life savings, then takes the money and flees (Noggle 2).

2. A charity scam collects money for a good cause but does not mention that a high percentage of donations go towards paying large salaries for the administrators and fund-raisers (Noggle 2).

3. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, villain Iago tries to convince Othello that Othello's wife, Desdemona, is cheating on him. Iago fills Othello's mind with supposed evidence of Desdemona's infidelity, which Othello believes, even though Iago knows all of this "evidence" consists of red herrings, details he either gave out of context, exaggerated, or planted (Noggle 2).

4. Jack and Jill are in a relationship. Jill is anxious that her employer might be considering layoffs. Jack and Jill discuss something unrelated to her employment, like whose family they will spend the holidays with. During the discussion, Jack reminds Jill of her employment situation to make her anxious so that he can bully her into agreeing to visit his family (Noggle 9).

5. An advertiser tries to create the impression, without outright lying, that owning the car he is selling will enhance the buyer's youth and sex appeal (Noggle 2).

6. An adult starts sulking when he does not get his way. His friend already knew he was upset, but because of the sulking now gives in and gives him what he wants (Noggle 2).

After giving these examples, Noggle points out that while these actions are all different in kind, they all seem manipulative. Moreover, while the first example is outright deception in the form of lying, the rest do not seem directly deceptive in this same way—somewhat tricky or misleading as opposed to outright false information (Noggle 3). Given the diversity of the cases, Noggle begins to define manipulation by finding what each of these manipulative-seeming actions have in common. He says in each case, the manipulator tries to lead the target astray in

some way (Noggle 3), and does so by adjusting one or more of the target's "psychological levers" of belief, desire, and emotion. The manipulator "adjusts" these levers away from whatever the manipulator perceives to be the target's ideal belief, desire, or emotion for the situation. Affecting these levers has the effect of inducing in the target a "faulty mental state," caused by the manipulatively induced belief, desire, or emotion (Noggle 4). Noggle then categorizes the types of manipulative actions as ways of adjusting those specific levers. And once again, in the interest of relevance to manipulation in comedy, I will be excluding some of Noggle's examples. The forms of manipulation Noggle categorizes under the "desire lever" are not present elements of comedy (psychological conditioning and temptation are not very helpful techniques for making a joke), so we can leave those out of the analysis. With that said, here are Noggle's remaining categorizations of manipulative actions within the framework of levers:

The manipulator can adjust the belief lever using:

- Lying

- Red herrings

- Misleading insinuations

The manipulator can adjust the emotions lever by:

- Overemphasizing one's own emotions to make them more salient than the target's own

- Playing on the target's emotions so that something irrelevant to their decision becomes highly salient

A manipulator uses these levers to induce a "faulty" mental state. Noggle then points out that there is no way to set an objective standard for a "non-faulty" mental state, whatever the target's original mental state should be such that they are led astray from this. Since "faulty" cannot be defined in objective terms, he defines it instead in terms of the manipulator's

perspective of the situation, since they are the primary actor in the manipulative interaction (Noggle 11-12). Prior to a manipulative action, a manipulator has some conception of what the target's ideal mental state would be (whatever the manipulator believes the target would most want for themselves) and an alternative mental state that the manipulator themselves wants the target to have. Noggle categorizes this alternative mental state as "faulty" because it is deliberately and artificially induced by the manipulator with a goal in mind, and it is different from what the target would have ideally wanted for themselves. A manipulator attempts to lead their target astray of the target's ideal mental state (or, at least, the manipulator's assumption of their ideal mental state) and instead towards this new, manipulated mental state, which is less ideal for the target. Moreover, Noggle uses this term, leading the target *"astray"* (Noggle 3). Coupled with the underhanded nature of the manipulative actions Noggle describes, this term helps us to differentiate manipulation from persuasion. Where persuasion openly attempts to lead the target away from their initial viewpoint, manipulation rather uses underhanded methods to lead the target astray and induce a faulty mental state which the target is not aware they have taken on. It is due to the presumed undesirable nature of the faulty mental state that the manipulator must resort to such underhanded methods to get their way.

Because the manipulator enters the manipulative interaction with this intent to lead the target astray, this gives us our first important characteristic in defining a manipulative action: according to Noggle, A manipulates B if and only if A *intends* to manipulate B. And Noggle defends this definition because it a) allows us to place all the otherwise varied instances of manipulation within one category because in each case the manipulator acted with the intent to mislead their target (Noggle 12); b) in making manipulation necessarily an instance of purposeful hoodwinking, it captures the seemingly crucial identifier of a manipulative action:

that it is done with an insincere, conniving intention (Noggle 12); and c) allows us to distinguish manipulative and non-manipulative actions in a way that matches our intuitions and practices, as in both intuition and practice we distinguish sharply between sincere appeals to empathy and playing on the emotions (Noggle 16). There are sincere appeals to emotion as well as insincere ones, and they are distinguishable not by the actual appeal itself (words used, emotions appealed to, etc.) but purely by the actor's intention—that is what separates the sincere from the insincere. And manipulation is insincere. Essentially, defining manipulation in terms of the manipulator's own duplicitous intent works well because the manipulator's intent is something we can concretely point to in order to characterize it as an action, and it also seems sufficiently nefarious to match the intuitive understanding of manipulation. It is not just regular persuasion because the manipulator knows it is not.

1.2 Klenk: Noggle, you simpleton!

I think Noggle's account is a great starting point because intent clearly gives us a first step in the manipulative interaction: the manipulator wants something, has intent to get it in order to achieve their own ends, and will happily trick the target so that they may get it. Noggle seems to characterize that intent and the methods used to achieve the goal as necessarily connected to the definition of manipulation; for A to manipulate B, A must intend to manipulate B using these specific, knowingly manipulative tactics in order to achieve some goal.

Michael Klenk, however, disputes this account in his paper, "Interpersonal Manipulation." Klenk responds directly to Noggle's paper, objecting to the idea that manipulation is an intentionally characterized action. He says Noggle defines manipulation in terms of what a manipulator *intends* to do—which is to induce a faulty mental state (Klenk 12).

Klenk refers to the idea of inducing a faulty mental state as "violating norms," where the norm is a standard of behavior in interpersonal communication and interaction. There is a general standard of care that we uphold as the norm in interaction, and the manipulator is willing to violate that norm to get what they want (Klenk 4). In the case of inducing a faulty mental state, the manipulator violates the norm by leading the target away from that mental state, in order to the faulty one (Klenk 11). However, Klenk argues that Noggle's characterization of manipulation as "intentional" unduly focuses on the manipulator's intent to induce a specific faulty mental state, when really the definition ought to be about the manipulator's failure to uphold standards of care for interaction. In terms of norms, Klenk says that Noggle's definition focuses on the norms the manipulator gets the target to violate (having the ideal mental state) when it should focus on the norms of interaction that the manipulator themselves disregards because they do not care whether they violate norms or not (Klenk 12). Different from Noggle, who sees manipulation as a necessarily *intentional violation* of the norms, Klenk sees manipulation rather as a *negligent disregard* of the norms. He justifies this critique of Noggle by offering several examples of actions that seem manipulative, but do not require the manipulator to induce any faulty mental state, and therefore could not be explained by Noggle's trickery account (Klenk 6). These examples—which I will explain below—do, however, require the manipulator themselves to violate a norm of acceptable, reasonable ways to convince someone to do something, and are therefore manipulative (Klenk 12). Klenk proposes to offer a definition that will still account for manipulation via trickery, while also expanding to include the forms of manipulative influence that do not require trickery. He argues for reframing how Noggle defines manipulation, basing it not on the manipulator's *intent* but rather on the manipulator's *negligence*—specifically, being negligent of reasonable means of influencing someone (Klenk 17).

The discussion of reasonable influence comes from considering manipulation in relation to persuasion (Klenk 16), which is something Noggle does not do. Though Noggle repeatedly describes manipulation as non-rational persuasion, he never provides a definition of rational persuasion. In offering an explicit definition of persuasion, Klenk's account differentiates manipulation more clearly from persuasion and thus offers some additional clarity on the complete nature of manipulation. According to Klenk, persuasion—legitimate influence—is aimed at reasonable change; change grounded in the target's appreciation of reasons. Persuasion is the norm, and to uphold it means to offer good reasons to one's target when attempting influence. The manipulator is negligent of this norm by not caring whether they give their target good reasons to do something or not, so long as they get the target to do what they want (Klenk 17). So instead of defining manipulation in terms of what a manipulator intends to do, Klenk says we should define it in terms of what a manipulator *fails* to do—which is respect those norms of legitimate influence (Klenk 12). With that overview of Klenk's argument, let's continue with a more detailed summary of his account and specific examples.

Klenk's account proceeds as follows: he first sums up Noggle's definition of manipulation as saying that, "manipulative action is the attempt to get someone's beliefs, emotions, or desire to fall short of the ideals that in the view of the influencer govern the target's beliefs, emotions, or desires." He refers to this definition of manipulation as the "trickery view," seeing this intentional effort to mislead the target into falling short of ideals as requiring some form of trickery, as in all the examples Noggle lists as methods of adjusting the levers (Klenk 3). The manipulator is intentionally trying to trick their target. Klenk is not so sure about this definition because he argues that the manipulator is not motivated by a desire to specifically trick their target, but rather by the desire to get what they want, which does not satisfactorily

differentiate the manipulator from the persuader. Therefore, what makes their action manipulative is not their intent, but instead their particular disregard for legitimate means of getting it (Klenk 15). He accepts that intent-based trickery is certainly a form of manipulation, but that there seem to be cases of manipulation that do not involve trickery, so giving reason to expand the definition. First, he offers the case of pressuring:

Case 1: Pressuring

Mark is a terrible cook but also does not take rejection lightly. His wife Carola does not want to eat the lunch he made because he is a bad cook, and Mark responds, "Eat the food I cooked for you, or I will hurt myself" (Klenk 5).

Now, like persuasion, certainly Mark's argument is grounded in logical reasoning—he is not tricking his wife into eating the lunch he made. As Klenk says, it is not obvious which norms Mark is intending to violate (Klenk 5). Mark is, however, forcing Carola's hand in a pretty unfair way that makes it different from persuasion. It is this unfairness—introducing forced stakes of harm—that indicate Mark's negligence of other norms, those which govern legitimate means of persuasion. Here, Mark fails to respect due process of giving good reasons to do things and thus manipulates.

Case 2: Hijacking

Klenk also offers the example of a manipulative politician, a case which he calls "hijacking." Unlike Noggle's cases where the manipulator tricks their target into a faulty mental state that causes them to reason irrationally, the manipulator actually appeals to their target's sense of reason—hijacking it–and uses it to reach manipulative ends (Klenk 6).

A politician makes sexist comments. He does so with the intent of making the opposition (his opponent and their supporters) angry, presuming that their anticipated intense emotional response will make them look bad. As he intended, the opposition is angry, and his existing voter base and undecided voters are dismayed by the opposition's intense emotional response. This helps the politician's cause (Klenk 7).

The politician does not trick anyone, yet this seems manipulative. It is rational to react to sexist comments with anger, and the politician used his opponents' rational response against them to build unity amongst his supporters and further his campaign. It is not deception because the voters have not been led to believe anything incorrect. The politician has not lied or used any means of trickery to falsely lead voters to believe anything untrue about him, his beliefs, or otherwise induce any kind of false reality. As Klenk explains, "it is false that the manipulator aim[s] to make the [targets] fall short of the ideals that govern their emotions or beliefs, respectively," because it is reasonable to react with anger to sexist comments (Klenk 7). So the way that the politician influences these voters is not trickery, and therefore does not fit within Noggle's definition of manipulative influence. However, the politician does not make these sexist comments with the intent to *convince* anyone of the truth of his sexist claims; he does it to antagonize his opponents in a way that will benefit his campaign. Their rational reaction backfires, as the politician knew it would. If persuasion is appealing to a target's rational faculties to lead to a reasonable conclusion or result, the politician abuses their expected rational response for his own gain, leading to a result that his opponents did not expect. He disregards the standard of care in persuasion, giving people good reasons to vote for him. In fact, he has given them nothing but bad reasons to vote for him—he's sexist! But by making the opposition look like an angry mob, he looks like the comparatively better choice, so it works. He influences the

voter population in such a way that subverts expectations for rational persuasion, disregarding standards of care—he manipulates the voters.

In these cases, the manipulator chooses what their method of influence not because they intend to mislead, but because of how they know it will be an effective method of getting what they want. And in these cases, that chosen method fails to uphold a standard of care for legitimate influence. The manipulator does not care about the standards of care, pays them no heed, and therefore fails to uphold them. This is where we get the diversion from Noggle's case, where Klenk argues that instead of focusing on what the manipulator intends to do, we should focus on what the manipulator fails to do (Klenk 12). Klenk writes specifically that in all cases of manipulation, "the manipulator is negligent in that he or she does not care whether or not her chosen means of manipulation help her victim to adequately assess her situation." He continues, saying that there is a norm of 'care' in interpersonal interaction, and it is this norm that manipulators violate by choosing methods of influence that demonstrate disregard for respect of care. As he says, "the manipulator does not care whether her chosen means of influence reveals reasons to the manipulate" (Klenk 15). Essentially, to uphold a standard of 'care' in influence is to care about giving good, reasonable reasons to do something, and manipulators do not care about that. They do not care if their means of influence are wrong, unfair, or otherwise harmful. By acting with the goal of merely getting what they want, not caring if the methods are grounded in giving the targets good reasons with which to adequately assess their options, they fail to respect the norms of proper influence. Because of manipulators' failure to respect such norms of care in interpersonal interaction, Klenk thinks manipulation is a negligent influence (Klenk 15). At long last, Klenk defines manipulation, and does so by laying out the two norms of which the manipulator is negligent:

Negligence I: Had a method of influence not revealed reasons for doing x to subject S, then S's influencer would have chosen a different method (Klenk 15).

So the first norm, or standard of care, is to reveal reasons to do something. If S's influencer is a persuader, and a method of influence does not give S good reasons to do something, then S's influencer would not choose that method. But if S's influencer is a manipulator, then they do not care about this norm, and so they will happily choose that method if it is effective in getting them what they want. That is the first way of being negligent as a manipulator.

Negligence II: Had the influencer chosen a method of influence M, M would have revealed reasons to subject S (Klenk 17).

The second norm is about giving *good* reasons to do something. It pertains to cases like pressuring and hijacking, which appeal to the target's sense of reason, but misuse this sense of reason in ways that fail to uphold norms about standards of care—threatening violence if the target does not comply or using a target's rational response against them. If the influencer is a persuader, they will choose method M that reveals reasons to the target in a way that does not neglect these standards of care. But if the influencer is a manipulator, they will choose method of influence M, revealing reasons, but ones that in some way undermine the typical function of reasonable persuasion. In doing so, they neglect the norm of persuasion via good reasoning.

Klenk then gives his definition of manipulation as follows: **M intends to manipulate S if and only if M violates Negligence I or Negligence II** (Klenk 17). I would like to clarify: while

Klenk specifically uses the phrasing "violating negligences," this kind of language is not only confusing, but also does not really align with the argument he actually makes. Klenk makes a point that to be *negligent*, you simply ignore the norm. There is a norm, and you flout it by ignoring it. This does not always mean the norm is violated—if you are ignoring a set of rules, sometimes you accidentally obey them, and sometimes you accidentally break them. Here's an example: I am driving, and I ignore traffic lights. It's not that I am specifically disobeying traffic lights; *I literally ignore them*. If I am coming to an intersection, I will just go right on through. Maybe the light was red and I disobeyed it; maybe the light was green and I accidentally obeyed it. As the negligent driver, I have no idea, I am too busy being negligent. Clearly there is something awry in this situation. If I happen to not cause harm in the instances of my negligence when I run a green light, there is still a fundamental problem in the fact that I am paying no attention to the rules of the road. So in the case of manipulation, sometimes the manipulation may actually cause harm, and other times it may not. But the fact remains that you are ignoring the rules, and that in itself is a failure to uphold a standard of care. In the case of manipulation, that is a failure to uphold the standard of care in rational persuasion. So really a manipulator is not "violating negligences," they are ignoring norms, and in doing so are Negligent Type I or Negligent Type II. Klenk does not make this distinction explicitly, but that is my interpretation of his argument in context.

Manipulators do not specifically care about inducing a faulty mental state, as Noggle claims; they will do so if that will work best to get them what they want, but mostly they care about getting what they want, and will ignore norms of acceptable ways of getting it. This is

what makes them manipulative, not the mental state they induce. This is how Klenk characterizes manipulation as a negligent influence.

I am generally persuaded by Klenk's argument because it does seem possible to manipulate while still appealing to reason—he captures the idea of the manipulator having an ulterior motive, this being the driving force and primary deception in the manipulative interaction, which seems like a good way to unite the many diverse forms of manipulation. However, I think the notion of a manipulator "doing whatever works best" to achieve their goal is a little broad, because that sounds like it would include physical violence. Physical violence would certainly fall under the category of ignoring norms of proper influence. But clearly manipulation excludes physical violence. That is not manipulating someone, that is forcing someone. I doubt Klenk would say that physical violence would count as manipulation, but technically it seems to fit within his conditions–if I tell you to give me your lunch money, and I punch you until you hand it over, arguably I am appealing to your sense of reason. "Manipulation" seems to me to be a very specific mental game, which necessarily involves some kind of deception or un-revealed strategy or goal on the part of the manipulator; physical violence pretty much puts all goals and intentions out on the table. Additionally, I think a manipulative influence can be both negligent and intentional—the manipulator can be negligent in terms of violating standards of behavior, but the decision to manipulate was nevertheless still intentional.

That said, I still think Klenk's idea of defining manipulation based on the manipulator's intent to get what they want, and doing whatever works best regardless of meeting standards of care for legitimate influence, gets at the heart of the conniving character of manipulation, which I

want to preserve. So I offer a third perspective from Mills which I think helps to find a nice balance between the two so far.

1.3 Mills: That's enough from you two

In Mills' paper, "Politics and Manipulation," she discusses manipulation from the perspective of politicians' actions in an attempt to influence a voter base. She starts by pointing out that there is nothing inherently manipulative about wanting to "change minds and win hearts," and so what matters is how this influence is done (Mills 99). She compares manipulation to regular persuasion. Persuasion, she says, is when A says to B (either explicitly or implicitly), "There are good reasons for you to do x." In order to properly persuade, the persuader must offer good reasons for you to believe, desire, or act in a certain way. That being the case, she calls manipulation a kind of persuasion in lack, an internally directed non-physical influence that deliberately falls short of the persuasive ideal by failing to give good reasons to do x (Mills 100). She says then, perhaps manipulation *pretends* to be offering good reasons, but in fact it does not. Mills gives the example of a politician on the campaign trail, convincing voters to reelect her. Supposedly giving voters a good reason to reelect her, the politician boasts about how she signed an important bill into law. Conveniently, she does not mention how she lobbied relentlessly against the bill, and signed it into law only after overwhelming public pressure (Mills 109). It *seems* like she's giving you a good reason to vote for her—but she isn't really.

Then Mill officially defines manipulation, saying that "a manipulator tries to change another's beliefs and desires by offering her bad reasons, disguised as good, or faulty arguments, disguised as sound–where the manipulator himself knows these to be bad reasons and faulty arguments" Moreover, the manipulator chooses their (bad) reasons and arguments not on quality,

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but on efficacy, because they are interested in giving their target a reason to do something not as a logical justifier, but as a "causal lever" (Mills 101). Here Mills succinctly ties together the main points of both Noggle and Klenk's arguments into one very clear way of understanding manipulation. Finally she adds one more detail, saying that for a manipulator, reasons act as tools, and a bad reason can work just as well–or better than–a good one (Mills 101). This nicely captures Klenk's point about a manipulator ignoring standards to get what they want. In the case of Politician 1, voting for him only because the opposition seems angry and irrational (because of Politician 1's own doing) seems like a pretty bad reason to vote for him; in the case of Politician 2, her proposed support of protecting the environment seems like a pretty good reason to vote for her. But in each case, the Politician's method of persuasion was not chosen because it was a good reason to vote in their favor, but rather because this particular reason was *the most effective causal lever* for influencing their respective voter bases. I think that satisfactorily preserves the advantages of both Noggle and Klenk's casesachieves a satisfactory, uniting Noggle's levers view with Klenk's efficacy view in order to preserve both the intentionality of Noggle's account and what I would call the greediness of the manipulator (just the sheer desire to get what they want so badly that they will do whatever works, now within the restraints of Noggle's intentionality) of Klenk's account.

With all of that in mind, I will adopt Mills' definition of manipulation:

__Manipulation is__ an attempt to change another's beliefs and desires by offering them bad reasons, disguised as good, or faulty arguments, disguised as sound—where the manipulator themselves knows these to be bad reasons and faulty arguments.

Her account addresses the main sticking points of the efforts to define manipulation, while still being clean and easy to understand. She does not need to venture into "faulty mental

states," defining what that is and how one would go about inducing one. We know what a reason is, and we can reasonably imagine how to frame a bad reason as a good one. It is easy to understand just by reading Mills' definition what manipulation is and how it works. Mills' definition does not demand trickery, which satisfies Klenk's objections. However, it still captures the underhanded character of trickery through the manipulator's knowing neglect of the expectation to give good reasons to do something, so we get the nefariousness that Noggle wants manipulation to have. And finally, there is a clear link to persuasion as a foil. We know what persuasion is, and Mills account both acknowledges how persuasion is supposed to work, and how manipulation specifically subverts that standard (and such that the manipulator knowingly, negligently, does so). Now that we know that, are jokes manipulative? To answer that question, first we have to figure out what a joke is.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS COMEDY?

2.1 The definition

What is comedy, anyways? What is a joke? It's usually pretty obvious when you hear one. The joke-maker will say something, perhaps with some sort of speech cadence to indicate that it is different from a regular thing to say and usually, if it's a good joke, you'll laugh. But it would be quite difficult to come up with one unified way of describing what a knock-knock joke, deadpan humor, and the Three Stooges do that is the same. But luckily for me, a few people have tried. As everyone knows, the best way to appreciate how funny a joke is, is to explain what's funny about it. So by the end of this, you will find comedy so much funnier than before, and for that you are welcome.

In his book *Only a Joke Can Save Us*, Todd McGowan begins with a broad account of the varied attempts to define or explain comedy, acknowledging that the accounts given are inevitably too wide or too narrow. However, he says that despite our seeming inability to nail down what it is, when talking about comedy, we seem to operate using a single definition, *even if it remains completely implicit* (McGowan 2017, 4). That is a remarkable observation: that despite not being able to explain something or how it works, we still seem to understand it and are able to use it to influence one another. Such a technique, being able to cause an emotional response in someone without their understanding how you did so, seems ripe for manipulation, but we'll get to that a little later. McGowan finds that nearly every theory of comedy includes (this is important), *"an acknowledgment of a confrontation occurring between disparate elements."* In a joke, two things that seem unrelated, even contradictory to each other, become necessarily connected through the structure of the joke. The forcing-together of these contrasting ideas is what makes something funny, as we are forced to acknowledge absurdity.

"What's the deal with airplane food?" Airplane food is bad, and yet we all still eat it–that is absurd. Thank you, Mr. Jerry Seinfeld, for drawing all of our attentions to that. Here is a joke I found by googling "knock-knock jokes," the comic structure of which I will now analyze in my undergraduate thesis. "Knock knock – Who's there? – Tank. – Tank who? – You're welcome!" You have just been tricked, by the structure of the joke, into saying something you did not mean to say ('thank you'). It points out silly flaws in our language, putting together two unrelated things (the nonsensical series of words 'tank who' and the common phrase 'thank you') by pointing out how similar they sound. If I just said to you, "Did you ever notice how the words 'tank who' sounds a lot like 'thank you,'" that would not be funny. No one has ever used the phrase 'tank who' because it makes no sense. Why would I care if it sounds like the phrase 'thank you'? However, by subscribing to the premise of the joke format, wherein the joke-askee must say '___ who?' in response to whatever word the joke-asker just said, you are tricked into a situation where someone *does* use the phrase tank who–you! You idiot! You are made silly by the joke itself, which then allows the joke to reveal its point about odd homonyms in the English language, or perhaps just how easy it is to trick someone into saying something they did not mean to say. Either way, it is absurd. Also, not really that funny. Knock knock jokes never are. And in the case of the Three Stooges, that is simply one punchline over and over again: bonk! It is funny because it is absurd for three grown adults to behave this way, and especially because it seems generally unlikely that after repeated blows to the head by heavy physical objects (not to mention getting poked in both eyes) that the victim of this violence would be okay. But they are, so it's funny. That said, I will not address slapstick comedy any further here. My primary interest is assessing the tricks of language that comedians use to manipulate, and so of course there is not much of that to assess in slapstick. However, I did want to briefly address how it also fits within

this framework of a definition of comedy to demonstrate the cohesiveness of the theory. Following McGowan's assessment of contrast and absurdity, I will note, it seems to me that for every comedy theorist McGowan lists, the entire premise of their theory necessarily turns on the notion that absurdity is inherently funny. Neither McGowan nor any philosopher in the book attempts to justify this implicit claim, or even explain why this is. That is because it is inherently funny, obviously. Everyone knows that if something is funny, you don't have to explain why it is. However, I will now attempt to explain why absurdity is funny.

<div align="center">BAH!</div>

Get it? Here is the real explanation: the reason that none of the philosophers attempt to explain why absurdity is funny is because their goal is not to explain *why* comedy is funny. The philosophers in McGowan's book use theory and examples to explain what *causes* comedy (McGowan 5), and McGowan's book finds consistencies across these theories, with the goal to *define* comedy (McGowan 5)—not explain it. We can read these theories and experience jokes, and notice that absurdity seems to be a consistent, and therefore probably necessary component of the comedy experience. But unfortunately, the explanatory project runs dry there: even science's attempts to explain comedy result not in reasons for why we find absurdism funny, but simply social and evolutionary reasons for why we laugh (Sabato) (Hunt) (Laurence) (Volpe) (Scott). Logical attempts to explain why absurdism is funny get circular: oh, because absurdism is ridiculous (a synonym for both funny and absurd)! Oh, because absurdism is silly (a synonym for both funny and absurd)! Alas, there is currently no answer to why, exactly, absurdism is funny. Luckily, we do not need to know why it is funny to know that it is funny—you've laughed at a joke before!—and that is all we need to analyze what comedy is or how it works. Comedy is absurd! So how do we create absurdity in jokes?

McGowan continues, naming several philosophers' specific theories, of which I am most compelled by Freud's. His account is clinical, and ambitiously attempts to find an overarching explanation for all kinds of comedy–which is very helpful when attempting to define how comedy as a genre of interaction is manipulative. As McGowan broadly sums up his account, Freud thinks jokes connect two ideas we usually keep distinct in the psyche, creating excess psychic energy that we expel through laughter (McGowan 2017, 5). Here is a more detailed account of Freud's theory of comedy–which is a hilarious phrase, by the way, thanks to the contrast between "Freud" and "theory of comedy."

In his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud lays out his psychic assessment of the comic phenomenon in his book. His account is cleanly summed up by the following claim he makes at the start of the book. Freud defines comedy as follows:

"*A joke is the arbitrary connecting or linking, usually by a means of verbal association, of two ideas which in some way contrast with each other" (Freud 1989, 8).*

This sounds a lot like McGowan's catchall definition, so that's good. Freud's theory is consistent with the generally agreed-upon idea of how comedy works, so we are on the right track with this idea of contrast and absurdity. Freud's definition offers something special though, which is this specific mention of verbal association. The verbal association is of course the joke itself, whose structure forces the association in some form or another, depending on the kind of joke. It does not matter right now what kind of verbal association a joke uses to make the connection between the contrasting ideas, because that depends on the individual joke. Merely, Freud's acknowledgment that there *is* this sort of verbal association in use specifically gives the comedian something to use–cynics might say manipulate. The comedian's tools are verbal associations, and so to see how they manipulate, we will want to look at how they structure their

words to create those associations. One other important aspect of Freud's definition is that he says the linking of the two ideas is arbitrary. Once again, that reinforces the notion that it is the comedian who must perform verbal acrobatics in such a way in order to *force* these ideas together. Freud's characterization of comedy, at least as it applies to joke-making, is that comedy is a very intentional act. Someone is trying to get you to laugh. Cynics might say, why?

Freud expands on his initial claim about contrast, explaining the psychological process of how a joke functions. In every instance of a joke, he says, the comic feeling rests on the immediate transition from attaching meaning to the meaningless (Freud 1989, 9). What he means by 'attaching meaning to the meaningless' is once again the idea that the two (or more) ideas that become linked in the structure of a joke are not necessarily connected. To put the two ideas together not in a joke form would have no meaning (Freud 1989, 9). As I said before in the example of the "tank who" knock-knock joke, to say the phrase "tank who" by itself is meaningless. But in the structure of the joke, suddenly this nonsensical connection of words gains meaning (the word "thank you") and makes a point about arbitrary phonetic similarity in the English language, gaining further meaning that way. Freud argues here that the comic moment happens precisely at that transition from meaningless to having meaning. Whatever it is about our psyches that is tickled by absurdity, the exact moment when we are forced to confront that absurdity–that something meaningless can gain meaning–we laugh. This idea that comedy happens in that brief moment of transition sounds a lot like that famous phrase, something about brevity and the soul of wit.

Freud cites that famous quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, that "brevity is the soul of wit" (Freud 10). He thinks Shakespeare is right, and he can prove it: he quotes philosopher Lipps, who thought that, "'A joke says what it has to say, not always in few words, but in *too*

few words–that is, in words that are insufficient by strict logic or by common modes of thought and speech. It may even actually say what it has to say by not saying it" (Freud 1989, 11). A joke must be short because it cannot say outright what it says by implication. There is a *point* a joke makes, and this is different from what the joke literally says. There is something absurd about that, realizing a meaning that was not actually said, as the joke's literal words and the other meaning they contain confront each other in your mind. You know the moment when you "get" a joke? You can hear the actual joke and not "get" it for a second (or a minute) or two. Then suddenly you understand what that particular arrangement of somewhat absurd words is *actually* saying, and you laugh. There is something in the lack, the searching for meaning, that forces you to arrive at the real meaning–then laugh. That is what Freud is talking about when he describes the transitional moment from absurdity to meaning. And it is through the method of brevity– saying too few words, or not actually saying what they have to say–that the joke-maker can arrange words in such a way to lead you to laughter. But: Freud notes that the brevity must be of a particular kind, because "brevity itself does not constitute a joke" (Freud 1989, 29). The brevity is a necessary ingredient to creating the comic effect but is not itself comedic. Therefore in order to be funny, a joke must be constructed in a way that leads the joke-listener to the confrontation of some kind of absurdity, and it must be done *efficiently* so that the absurdity is as clear as possible. You must arrange the words just right.

2.2 Applying the definition, with Freud's joke

That was all very theoretical. You're probably wondering now, *how* does a joke-maker arrange words like that? What is the "way" that words are arranged that can cause laughter? What kind of brevity is funny? Freud embarks on an admirable endeavor to describe every kind

of joke. He dissects them to show how they work linguistically and analyzes what each of them have in common structurally, so that he can get to the bottom of what makes jokes funny. After 104 pages, he concludes that it is not possible to describe every kind of joke (Freud 104). For that reason, we will not recap every joke he analyzes. Instead, I will give one example he uses to provide a sense of his method for understanding how jokes function. Then we will apply his general strategy to jokes made by real comedians, because their jokes are funnier than most of Freud's examples.

In Freud's first joke example, he describes a line from a book wherein poor lottery-agent Hirsch-Hyacinth is boasting about how the wealthy Baron Rothschild had treated him well. Hirsch-Hyacinth says, "'And as true as God shall grant me all good things, Doctor, I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal–quite famillionairely'" (Freud 14). Now, clearly, being treated *famillionairely* is not the same as being treated familiarly–and would generally indicate that the Baron actually did not treat the poor lottery-agent as his equal, as this poor fellow claims. Freud asks, "What is it that makes Hirsch-Hyacinth's remark into a joke?" Why is this funny? He says that there are only two possible answers: 1) the thought expressed in the sentence possesses in itself the character of being a joke or 2) the joke resides in the expression which the thought has been given in the sentence (Freud 14-15). These are the two options because those are the only two elements present in this joke: the words written, and the idea they express. Either the thought itself is funny, or the way of phrasing the thought makes it funny, and so those are the two avenues to examine to figure out what makes it funny.

First Freud examines option 1, that the thought itself is funny. To assess whether this is the case, he rephrases the thought expressed in Hirsch-Hyacinth's remark: "'Rothschild treated me quite as his equal, quite familiarly–that is, so far as a millionaire can… A rich man's

condescension always involves something not quite pleasant for whoever experiences it.'" Freud concludes that there is nothing funny about this thought. (Freud 15). So Freud turns to option 2, saying, "if what makes our example a joke is not anything that resides in its thought, we must look for it in the form, in the wording in which it is expressed." He explains that we can understand the verbal technique of this joke by studying the "peculiarity of its form of expression," Such expression is fundamentally connected to the essence of what makes it funny, because if we phrase it a different way, the joke disappears (Freud 16). This observation is crucial to understanding the function of jokes, seeing as the joke ceases to function without its very specific verbal structure. Before moving on to his analysis of the joke, Freud makes one more observation: "'It is in the first place its sheer *form* that makes a judgment into a joke, and we are reminded of a saying of Jean-Paul's… 'Such is the victorious power of sheer position, whether among warriors or words'" (Freud 16). All of Freud's observations make similar remarks here, all meant to say: it is important very where you put the words otherwise because it will mess up punchline the. Pay attention to how verbal structure works.

On to Freud's analysis of option 2, analyzing the technique of how the thought has been expressed, the phrasing of the joke. Once again, here is the phrase we are looking at:

The Baron treated me quite as his equal–quite famillionairely.

Implying, of course, that the Baron did not treat the speaker (poor lottery-agent Hirsch-Hyacinth) as his equal, because he did not treat him *familiarly*, he treated him *famillionairely*. What happened to the unfunny thought in order to make it a joke? First, Freud says, an *abbreviation* has occurred (Freud 16). The sentiment expressed in this thought is:

The Baron treated me quite as his equal, quite familiarly. That is, so far as a millionaire can.

The joke abbreviates the sentiment by leaving off the last sentence. But "not quite without leaving a *substitute* [emphasis added] from which we can reconstruct it" (Freud 16). The speaker combines the operative words from the first and second sentence into the word "famillionairely," giving you, the listener, the information you need to understand the thought expressed, thanks to wordplay. To spell out explicitly what you already understood by understanding the joke: the word "familiar" and the word "millionaire" have been combined here. You hear the word "familiar" in the first part of the word and the word "millionaire" in the second part of the word, so you think the word is going to mean one thing, but then there is this other implication in the second half of the word. That splicing of the word "millionaire" serves as a substitute for the whole second sentence–you know from the word "famillionairely" that the Baron is acting familiar "so far as a millionaire can" (Freud 16). Following his analysis, Freud describes this joke technique as "condensation accompanied by the formation of a substitute," where in this case the substitute is a composite word that is unintelligible by itself, but is immediately understood in context with the rest of the joke, making it funny (Freud 19).

I also offer some of my own analysis of this joke, relating it to what we learned earlier about what creates comedy (absurdism and contradiction). There is a contradiction made in the very joke-making word itself. When Hirsch-Hyacinth says, "The Baron treated me quite as his equal–quite ___" right where that blank goes, in the structure of the sentence, he is about to offer evidence as to how he was treated as an equal. You think the word is going to be "familiarly," because the word starts off sounding that way. It is the load-bearing word, where Hirsch-Hyacinth means to prove his point–and instead he contradicts that very point. It subverts your expectations after you hear the words "treated as an equal." No he was not treated as an equal! It is contradictory, and therefore absurd in the context of trying to justify the kindness of the Baron.

Closing out his analysis of "famillionairely," Freud notes that while we now understand the joke technique, the reason that we laugh at something like that is not any clearer (Freud 19). Like I mentioned earlier, the scientific reason for laughter eludes humankind (Sabato). However, that is not an issue: all you and I need to know is *how* jokes work, not *why* they work. I can drive a car without knowing what a piston is. That's all anyone needs to make a joke–or use it to their manipulative advantage.

We know that comedy is hard to nail down precisely. However, Freud's definition gives us a good practical assessment of the elements at play in things that are funny—contradiction and absurdism, where the forcing of contradiction via the arrangement of words creates or reveals the absurdism. Let's look at some other jokes. If we can apply Freud's definition, if we are able to see consistent elements of wordplay that create contradiction and absurdism, then we know we have a strong definition of comedy and understanding of how it works. If we succeed in applying Freud's definition here, we can reasonably take it and apply it to more jokes to help us assess whether they are manipulative. While it is impossible to precisely define something as subjective as comedy, I think once you recognize the elements of comedy that Freud identifies, you will have a hard time not seeing them in, I am convinced, any given joke.

Now, onto the jokes! It will not be as long and grueling as the Freud explanation, because now you know the ropes. Before we begin, after Freud analyzes a lot of different jokes, he provides this summary of all the joke techniques he has seen used. As he acknowledges, this list is not comprehensive, but it offers a helpful toolkit for the kinds of things to look for when analyzing how a comedian makes something funny. These strategies and ones like them are what I will be looking for when I analyze jokes in this next section. I like the idea of this thesis being a little bit interactive—so when you read the jokes, see if you can beat me to what's funny about

them, before you read my analysis. With that, a comedian might use any of the following

strategies (Freud 46):

I.   Condensation:

    a. With formation of composite word

    b. With modification

II.   Multiple use of the same material:

    a. As a whole and in parts

    b. In a different order

    c. With slight modification of the same words full and empty

III.   Double meaning:

    a. Meaning as a name and as a thing

    b. Metaphorical and literal meanings

    c. Double meaning proper (play upon words)

    d. Double entendre

    e. Double meaning with an allusion

One last note–did you notice how the "famillionairely" joke wasn't very funny? If we

imagined someone making the "famillionairely" joke out loud, I feel like the best it would get is

sort of a stuffy "Ho ho, good show." It's remarkable, really: most of the joke examples Freud

uses are not funny, which is a big reason we will be primarily analyzing other jokes. Isn't it

interesting that a joke can be not funny and we still recognize it as a joke? Arguably–and in fact I

am arguing this–because we recognize the rearranged structure in the language, even if the

attempt at influence (laughter) was not successful. If you did not already believe me or Freud

about how language structures create jokes, perhaps that piece of anecdotal evidence will further sway you. Now let's ruin some jokes by explaining them.

2.3 Applying the definition, with funny jokes

In this section, we will look at jokes from satirical news publications. As a comedy format, satirical news mimics real news headlines and articles. Since a news headline must tell you exactly what is going on in the news story they are about to tell, similarly a satirical headline must put the full context of the joke they are making in one brief headline. For that reason, satirical news headlines are very short, sharp jokes. The setup and punchline, premise and contradiction, must happen in short verbal succession, which makes analyzing what is funny about them very clear. This will be like comedic principles workshop! Then we can apply the strategies we use here to analyzing longer, more complicated jokes.

Here is the first headline:

Study Finds Most Effective Food Safety Technique Just Eating It And Seeing What Happens

(The Onion)

This joke is funny because of direct contradiction. "Food safety techniques" are usually methods to help people figure out if their food is safe to eat *before* eating it. But the joke makes a good point, which is that just eating the food technically is the most effective way to find out if it's safe or not. Of course, if it's not safe it'll be a little late for you by then, thus creating the contradiction between "food safety" and "just eating it and seeing what happens." There is an additional collision between disparate elements in this joke, between the normative first half of the sentence placed right next to the silly second half. The headline draws you in because it starts

out sounding like a real headline: "Study Finds Most Effective Food Safety Technique…" However, the joke disrupts its own logical flow by immediately following up a serious-sounding headline with the quite informal and absurd suggestion of "Just Eating It And Seeing What Happens." The normative half baits you, then the silly half surprises you, and so you laugh. You've been tricked! Wait, that sounds familiar…

Here is another headline:

Is That Even Allowed? This Wizard Has A Pistol

(Clickhole)

This one is just dumb–but it is clever in the way it goes about being dumb, which is an important tactic in comedy. The joke is funny because it is just completely absurd. Here is what makes it absurd: First, even though it conforms much less to the normative structure of a news headline than the last one, it is still a fake headline. Which means as the reader, you still come in expecting something that resembles a headline, and so wherever the headline diverges from that structure becomes funny. In this case, the headline begins diverging immediately because "Is That Even Allowed?" is so informal that you would never see that in a real headline; it's absurd. The words "even" and "allowed" make it sound petulant and whiny, and yet it has been published as a serious news headline–which is contradictory to the format it imitates. "Allowed" is especially funny because it refers to no authority whatsoever; "legal," for example, would have been a less funny word to use there. "Allowed" is funnier because it is so unspecific and silly. However, "Is That Even Allowed" also expresses the core sentiment of many real headlines: shock and outrage at the distressing events being reported. In that way, there is a raw honesty to the phrase "Is That Even Allowed?" that makes fun of real news headlines that must force formality even when reporting catastrophe. By saying the thing that everyone wishes they could

say when there is terrible news (but cannot because we have to be adults about it), the headline points out how absurd it is that we must forsake emotional responses when we most need them, and how challenging it is to reconcile instinctive reactions to challenging news with rational responses that can address the problem. But then you get to the second half of the headline, you discover the newsworthy event that prompted such a response, and it's ridiculous: "This Wizard Has A Pistol." Instantly we leave any semblance of reality because now we're talking about a wizard. But even though we're talking about things that are not real, the headline plays with our concept of make-believe by pointing out that even pretend things that we invented have rules to them: this wizard has a pistol, despite the fact that wizards are only supposed to have magic wands and other similarly mystical, pretend items. How did this wizard get a pistol? Why would he need or want a pistol when he already, presumably, has a magic wand? We come back to "Allowed" again here, because it would seem that *some* sort of rule, maybe even just a logical rule, should disallow a wizard's ability to get a pistol; but also the entire premise is completely made-up and stupid, which is funny because it is in the context of being a news headline. And then the sentiment of "Is That Even Allowed?" gains meaning, because it's just super unfair that a wizard gets to have both a magic wand AND a gun. It is absurd for a wizard to have a pistol; it is absurd for that to be a news headline.

Here is one more headline. For important context, this one was reporting on OJ Simpson's recent death.

Obituary Really Focusing On The Negatives

(Bragdon, The Golden Antlers)

This joke is funny because it reframes a real event in a way that points out what is absurd about the situation, and it does so by creating contradiction in its phrasing. Obituaries are usually

not a place to talk about the negative aspects of a person's character; "obituary" and "focusing on the negatives" contrast here. But if that person is alleged murderer O.J. Simpson, it does make sense in this case that the obituaries would focus on those aspects of his life. Unfortunately, when your murder trial becomes a nationally televised public event, your football accomplishments are suddenly less relevant to the memory of your character. The headline points out that obituaries tend to be charitable to their subjects, so it takes a lot for a subject to no longer merit that treatment. But the way it makes that point is especially funny because it reads like a defense of Simpson, implying that he deserves better, and yet the point of the joke is to make it clear that he does not. The phrasing is whiny; the word "really" does not normally appear in headlines because it is informal and sounds like a kid complaining. In this case, the word does a lot of work in the joke to give the speaker a particular voice–that of someone we should not believe. It almost sounds like O.J. Simpson himself is annoyed by his obituary coverage, coming to us from beyond the grave with a petty complaint. Of course, Simpson is famously a terrible reference of his own character, which makes the idea of listening to him, of listening to this headline, absurd. Because we are familiar with O.J. Simpson's actions, we understand why his obituary would be focusing on the negatives; this headline reads like an absurd defense of someone who does not deserve it. In doing so, it points out just how much Simpson does not deserve to get off easy this time. This joke exemplifies the purpose of satire, a comedy form invented to mock the real world by pretending to be like it: it makes fun of something by describing it. You have to describe it in *just* the right way, with the exact right words, to put the contradictory elements right next to each other, so that the joke is as clear, and therefore as funny, as possible.

That is all the headlines. Each headline used the same fundamental strategy to make a joke: make contradictions to create absurdism. They did so *through the specific arrangement of the words*. That is key. The way the joke was able to make you laugh was because of the way it phrased its message. To prove my point, here are versions of the same headlines, but less funny.

Study Finds That If You Eat It And Just See What Happens, That Is The Most Effective Food Safety Technique

Less funny because the funny part came first. We lose the subversion of expectation that comes from initially impersonating a real headline, then subverting the expectation with contrast. This headline is also poorly written; it's convoluted, you have to think about it too hard. You don't get the context of what we're talking about—food safety techniques—until the end, and you already knew the punchline when it came. You're thinking about what it means instead of knowing exactly what it means and being able to laugh.

That Doesn't Seem Right: This Wizard Has A Pistol

I changed less in this one because I want to make a point about how important it is to get *just* the right words. This headline is still pretty funny—it does a lot of things right! It puts the funny part last, it's still short and snappy, there is still contradiction with wizard and pistol, the sentiment of the setup is still the same. This is a good headline, and it would still make people laugh—but it is still *less funny* than the first one. That is because "That Doesn't Seem Right" is not as funny as "Is That Even Allowed?" It seems like such an arbitrary difference; in fact, "That Doesn't Seem Right" has fewer syllables that "Is That Even Allowed," so if we're going by the rules of brevity, it ought to be funnier! But it's just not. There's something about "Is That Even Allowed?" – it's whiny, it has personality, it's just somehow funnier. Sometimes it's hard to pinpoint exactly why

one thing is funnier than another, but luckily I don't have to. We see here that there is a comedic

difference between two different verbal arrangements, saying essentially the same thing. The

person writing the joke can determine the funniest way to make their joke. The exact words, the

exact order they are in, matters.

Obituary Really Focusing On The Murder Allegations

Less funny! The phrase "The Negatives" gives a direct reference to its opposite, "The Positives,"

therefore making it clear to the reader what else the speaker would like O.J. Simpson's obituary

to focus on: the (relatively much fewer) positives. Saying "The Negatives" makes it more clear

that this is an absurd ask. Whereas with "The Murder Allegations," it's too specific and you're

left wondering what else, exactly, there is to say about O.J. Simpson in the obituary. You know

exactly what "The Negatives" are, and so saying it is redundant. It's funnier as a vague,

desperate plea to talk about "The Positives" when it's clearly undeserved.

Exact words matter. The right words have the power to get you to laugh really hard; the

wrong words make you laugh less, or not at all. The words that make up a joke must make the

contradiction as clear as possible, to render the absurdism as vividly as possible. Comedy is the

act of constructing absurdity; a comedian does that by putting specific words in a specific order.

In that case, it sounds like we have found good evidence to suggest that Freud's theory of

comedy is accurate:

*"**A joke is** the arbitrary connecting or linking, usually by a means of verbal association, of two*

ideas which in some way contrast with each other" (Freud 1989, 8).

Great! We know what comedy is now. Now the big question: is it manipulative?

CHAPTER 3: IS COMEDY MANIPULATIVE?

3.1 Yes (argument)

Finally, we answer: comedy manipulative? I say yes.

You may remember that manipulation is:

an attempt to change another's beliefs and desires by offering them bad reasons, disguised as good, or faulty arguments, disguised as sound—where the manipulator themselves knows these to be bad reasons and faulty arguments.

We also know a joke is:

the arbitrary connecting or linking, usually by a means of verbal association, of two ideas which in some way contrast with each other.

Now, how is a joke is constructed again? The comedian must put their words in a particular order, with the goal of getting you to laugh. In the same way that manipulation is intentionally done, how norms of communication are ignored in pursuit of the manipulator's goal, a comedian must intentionally arrange their words in a very specific way and ignore normal methods of communication in order to make you laugh. *Make* you laugh. Not ask you to laugh, or persuade you to laugh. They make you laugh. We could get into the argument that they are not literally forcing you to laugh, and this is true. You can resist a joke; if you know someone is about to make a joke, and you decide in advance that you don't want to laugh, you can stifle it. But a) we've all had moments where we didn't want to laugh, but the joke was so funny that we couldn't stop ourselves and b) even if you do successfully stifle a laugh, there was still something you had to stifle, some innate, *physical* reaction you were fighting against. *And someone else prompted that reaction in you*. Surely such a tricky act of puppeteering would require manipulation.

What we are looking for in comedy, to determine if it is manipulative, are the following

elements:

- An attempt to change another's belief or desires

- By offering bad reasons or arguments, disguised as good reasons or arguments

- The manipulator knows their arguments are bad

Okay, great. Looking at the definition of a joke, we already see some of this: the linking

of ideas in a joke is arbitrary, they are not brought together because they make sense together or

logically follow from one another, but because the comedian put them together—that is not a

good reason for two ideas to be put together. It is, by its definition, arbitrary. A joke must be

arbitrary, it must bring together two conflicting things that are only brought together by the

structure of the joke, otherwise how is the comedian going to make contradiction or absurdism?

If a joke was a normal, rational point about two ideas that naturally go well together, it wouldn't

be a joke. The comedian has not offered you good reasons why these two ideas should be

together—they just put them together in order to make you laugh at the absurdity they contrived.

And the result of forcibly bringing those words together is making you laugh, a physical

response you did not control. While causing someone to laugh is not really changing their beliefs

or desires, it is a way in which you have influenced their mental and physical state, just by your

words (or maybe your actions, perhaps you used a silly voice or engaged in some prop

comedy—the principle remains the same—but I am primarily focusing on manipulation of words

here). Your chosen form of influence elicited a response from your target that changed their

overall physical state—going from laughing to not laughing—without the use of rational

persuasion at all. You did not list good reasons why they should laugh; you just skipped directly

to your goal and made them laugh. Already, that is manipulative. But I think comedy still goes

further than that, aligns even closer with the definition of manipulation, through the presence of arguments in jokes.

The presence of arguments is fundamental to manipulation. The manipulator must give you reasons to do something, they must convince you via argumentation—but the reasons and arguments are bad, which is why it is manipulation. **A joke is an argument.** A joke always has a point. It's the thing you "get" when you laugh, what the joke is saying, the point it's making. Some jokes have stupid points: that wizards would never have a gun. Other jokes have heavier points: that food safety techniques are never going to be 100% foolproof because you never know until you eat it, or that O.J. Simpson's memory doesn't deserve mercy. The way that the joke makes this argument is by saying something else, and I would bet that when you hear a joke, you're not usually thinking about what it's actually saying. If I asked you, "Why did you laugh at that O.J. Simpson obituary joke?" you would have to think about it a little. You were so busy laughing at the absurdity of suggesting Simpson's obituary not focus on the negatives, that you weren't really reflecting on why that's absurd—because obituaries usually focus on the positives, but in this case the negatives so vastly outweigh the positives that not even death merits basic respect for this man (allegedly). Eesh, dark point! If I said it that way, it wouldn't be funny. And you also might not agree with it so quickly because it's objectively a heavy thing to agree to. But the reason you laugh is because you understand this point implicitly, without the joke having to say it explicitly. So why do you laugh when it's phrased this way? This phrasing shows absurdity very clearly in something that is also true. Absurdity and reality together feels contradictory because we want reality to be logical, to make sense. That is why when absurd things happen, we call them absurd—something that is so insane, illogical, irrational, unbelievable as to be ridiculous. It is a word that means beyond normal expectations. But we live

in a world where things often are absurd. Crazy things happen! So reality and absurdity frequently do confront one another. Perhaps we do not always realize what or when, exactly, something is absurd. A joke, by phrasing something in a particular way, can put those contradictory elements right next to each other, where you can see them plain—and laugh. A joke reveals absurdity in real life (or might craft it for a made-up situation, like a wizard with a pistol—which, if it were true, would be funny, and the joke operates under the presumption of its truth in the context of this joke). A comedian points out what is weird about something, what is off about this? They make the intrinsic absurdity plain through their jokes, so that you see it too, and laugh.

Okay okay, so what does all this have to do with manipulation? When you laugh at a joke, you are laughing at the confrontation of absurdity and truth, thereby realizing the argument the joke makes, that the two contradictory things confront one another. A joke's argument *is* that there exists this confrontation that is inherently funny due to its contradictory nature. If you laugh at a joke, that means you see the contradiction, you think it's funny, and therefore agree with the argument that this funny contradiction exists. By laughing, you have agreed with the argument. Did the comedian give you good reasons to agree with their argument? No they did not. The comedian did not say "you should believe that O.J. Simpson does not deserve a merciful obituary because of reasons a, b, and c." That would be rational persuasion. Instead the comedian structured their words in a way that makes you laugh, and in that moment you see their argument and agree with it, without any chance for you to critically evaluate your beliefs on the subject. Uh oh!

A comedian:

- Attempts to make an argument (which affects your beliefs or desires)

- Structures their words in a way that makes you see their point via contrived laughter (which is not a rational, good reason to see a point)

- And they did that on purpose by making the joke in the first place (they knew their arguments were bad).

The process of making a joke sounds a lot like the definition of manipulation. But listen, I'm not here to say every comedian is running around with nefarious ulterior motives to trick you into believing things you don't believe. That is not what is going on. Rather, a comedian uses arguments to make you laugh, they make a point that is funny, and I do think that you agree to things they're saying without reflecting on it because you're laughing. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, but it is manipulative. Comedians themselves also think it's manipulative.

In the documentary *Dying Laughing*, a wide array of standup comics tell stories about their experience in the industry. These stories are all, of course, very funny. Consistent bastards. Reflecting on the challenge of getting a room full of strangers to laugh, Jerry Seinfeld remarks, "It's beyond art. It's a magic trick" (Toogood and Stanton, 01:03). Paul Provenza says, "We're asking a room full of people to have an involuntary response, simultaneously. It's fucking weird" (Toogood and Stanton, 01:12). And perhaps most incriminating, Sam Tripoli says, "Comedians, in my opinion, are jedis. They play mind tricks on people. And the best comedians put an entire crowd in a kind of trance. So the entire group is thinking as one, and thinking in that comic's mind thought process" (Toogood and Stanton, 19:35). A trick, an involuntary response, a trance– these are not words that describe a logical appeal to reason. How, then, does a comedian pull off a scam like that? With a lot of jokes in a row. They keep you laughing, moving from one joke to

the next as quickly as possible because *they want you to laugh, that is what they are there to do*. And when you're busy laughing, you're not critically reflecting on why what you're laughing at is funny, or what it's arguing that is so hilarious. As McGowan says, "Comedy does not provoke reflection" (McGowan 3). Then while you are not reflecting, what arguments is a comedian making? What do they trick you into believing, even just for that moment? Because remember: brevity is the soul of wit. Jokes are fast, comedy is fleeting. A comedian might convince you of an argument, but that is no guarantee that you have been permanently convinced forevermore of whatever their argument was. You weren't even reflecting on it, how could you meaningfully adopt it as a belief? But in that moment of laughter, they had you. That was manipulation.

I want to look at standup comedy as the primary site for comedy as manipulation, for the reasons that the standup comics themselves listed: a standup comic puts you in a trance. They're playing a long, extended mind trick on you (allegedly), which makes audience members at a standup show much more vulnerable to manipulation than someone reading a short satire headline. Standup comedy is just pure comedy, one person with a microphone making jokes, trying to verbally manipulate an audience to laugh. How much manipulation can a comic cram into an hour? What do they convince you of? Why do we care?

3.2 Yes (proof)

Let's take a look at some specific jokes from standup comedians. Using our Freudian joke analysis skills, we can figure out what they're saying—and therefore what they're tricking us into believing in that moment.

Starting with a bit from one of the all-time greats, this is a joke from Richard Pryor's standup set, "Live on the Sunset Strip." Coming off an extended joke describing his experience

with cocaine addiction, a bit that involved him speaking as his pipe talking to him, Pryor talks about how he eventually ended up in the hospital. The reason that he ended up in the hospital was because he had gotten so high that he did not notice when he literally caught on fire. Here is an excerpt from Richard Pryor's joke about going to the hospital because he set himself on fire:

> *You know something I found out? When you're on fire and running down the street… people will get out of your way. Except for one old drunk. He's going. "Can I get a light? How about it? Just a little off the sleeve. Okay?" You can tell you fucked up when you get to the hospital and the doctor go… "Holy shit! Why don't we get some cole slaw and serve this up?" I was laying in the hospital with tubes and shit up my nose… an I.V. In my arm… and a brother come in wanting an autograph. I mean. Steam and shit was still comin' off me. Brother come in. "Hey, Rich. Hey. Hom. Can I get this autograph? Come on. Let me have this last autograph (Pryor 01:15).*

Those are brilliant, hilarious words, and you probably laughed. It's also important to note that a standup comedian has the additional medium of verbal and physical *delivery*: where do they pause? When do they talk faster, or slower? Do they use silly voices? Are they jumping around onstage? All of these techniques can help emphasize absurdism and therefore increase laughter—by drawing attention to particular moments where they subvert your expectations, or just by being outright silly. Unfortunately, I won't be able to get into these extratextual elements of comedy in this thesis for the most part (stay tuned for my next thesis: It's Just Me Making Silly Noises!), but we have plenty to examine just with the way these comics manipulate words. However, I will talk about one important pause Pryor does here, at the ellipses after "and the doctor go…" Pryor tells you it's a doctor speaking; based on your knowledge of doctors, presumably the doctor will say something professional, medical, and soothing. Instead, Pryor's

doctor yells, "Holy shit!" and the audience is in stitches because that is an absurd thing for a doctor to say. Then he just wrings that joke out, giving the doctor more and more ridiculous things to say, and all of this is funny.

But most important thing about this joke is that Richard Pryor got you to laugh at a story about him going to the hospital because his cocaine addiction was so bad that he set himself on fire. That is not funny. If you saw that story on the news, "Richard Pryor was taken to the hospital today after being seen running down the street, on fire. Reports indicate he was heavily addicted to cocaine, and inadvertently set himself on fire during a cocaine binge," you would not laugh. That would ruin your day. But because of the way he tells the story, Pryor finds absurdity in the situation, placing the words in an order so that you see the contradiction, too. It is absurd that anyone would ask a burn patient for an autograph. But the patient is Richard Pryor, so his fame takes precedence over his human suffering. By telling the story from his perspective, Pryor makes a joke that points out how ridiculous that is. Upon seeing a man on fire, asking to light your cigarette on the flames engulfing their body is an absurd way to react. They are a little preoccupied right now. But in all likelihood, a drunk man on the street did not actually ask to light his cigarette on Pryor's on-fire sleeve. Pryor made it up to make a point about addiction: how all-consuming it is, to the point that you might actually do something so absurd as to ask a man aflame to light your cigarette. Or set yourself on fire.

So, did Pryor manipulate us? Let's revisit the definition of manipulation again:

__Manipulation__ is an attempt to change another's beliefs and desires by offering them bad reasons, disguised as good, or faulty arguments, disguised as sound—where the manipulator themselves knows these to be bad reasons and faulty arguments.

Did Pryor change your beliefs or desires? Let me ask you, before this standup set did you believe addiction was funny? Did you desire to laugh at a recovering cocaine addict? The way I framed that question is somewhat uncharitable to you, as well as to the honest and nuanced portrayal of addiction that Pryor does in this set. However, the fact remains that Pryor makes the fallout of substance addiction a major punchline of this joke. Did he give you good reasons to laugh at this joke? Did Richard Pryor offer, step-by-step, a logical argument as to what is so funny about addiction? No. He told a crazy story about a crazy man (himself) running down the street, on fire, because he was so addicted to cocaine–and you laughed. He got you to laugh at addiction. What is he arguing there? What did he get you to agree to? On a base level, he argues that there is something funny about addiction, or at least a way to laugh about it now that he's doing better. His point in these jokes is that there is fundamentally something absurd about addiction, that some random liquid or powder can make you do crazy things without your control. His point (nor mine) is certainly not to diminish addiction, or imply that it isn't actually so powerful—rather to point out exactly how powerful it is, and how frustrating that absurd truth is. That is one of the arguments he got you to agree to.

But the real punchline is not addiction, it is the man at the end of the bit, asking for his autograph. It is the way Pryor closes the set, saying, "Y'all did some nasty-ass jokes on my ass too. Yeah. Y'all didn't think I saw some of these motherfuckers. Since you love me so much. I remember this one. [He lights a match and waves the match through the air] What's that? Richard Pryor running down the street" (Pryor 08:36). The audience erupts because that is hilarious. But they know that the punchline is them, the audience, laughing at a man suffering. The joke tricked you into laughing at something you know you shouldn't be laughing at. The joke, by causing you to laugh, made you condescend addiction. It shows how you are the same as

the man at the end of the story, asking for his autograph while making fun of his suffering. That, too, is absurd. Pryor forced you to see your own folly, you laughed, and you saw it.

Here is another instance of manipulation from a standup comic, this time from Michelle Wolf's Netflix special "Joke Show." Wolf is talking about confronting historical oppression, and specifically white women's position in the history of oppression. She explains how white women have been oppressed, but not in the same way or to the same degree that other groups of people–like people of color, and especially women of color–have been oppressed. As she describes it, "You know, for the longest time we couldn't vote or have bank accounts, but for the most part, we had nicer houses. So it was a very different oppression. It was a very air-conditioned oppression. You know, we were the only ones in four-poster mahogany beds being like, 'Sometimes things aren't fair for me'" (Wolf 39:04). Then she says this:

That's the thing, white women, we're the most privileged victim. We're a privileged victim. We've seen privilege because we're white, but we've seen disadvantage because we're women. You know, we haven't had it the best, but we have certainly not had it the worst. And I don't really know where that leaves us. You know, you want to go with white men? All right, that's fine, but you're always gonna be under them. You want to go with women? All right, that's fine, but you gotta advocate for Black women and Black men, and you're probably always gonna be under them. I think the fact is that white women, I don't think we're ever gonna have it the best. I don't think we're ever gonna find greatness or glory, but maybe we can be the supporters. We can help other people get there. You know, we can sacrifice ourselves so that other people have it better. And maybe in that sacrifice, we can find some sort of satisfaction. And that… is how you play the victim! (Wolf 39:10)

Oh! She got you! The last line is, of course, the big punchline of this bit. The audience was not laughing, mistaking this for a serious moment of the show, up until that line. Right after this Wolf says, "I almost had some of you, I could feel it. There was white women who were like, 'I will martyr, I will be a martyr.' Black women were like, 'No, this is a sneaky bitch'" (Wolf 41:23). Of course, there is a big laugh after every one of these punchlines: play the victim, I almost had some of you, I will be a martyr, sneaky bitch. The audience laughs each time because Wolf did, in fact, get them. She manipulated her words in such a way to lead them to a specific thought, and so when she correctly guesses the thought she intentionally meant to plant in their head, she makes it obvious to her audience that it was a ruse all along. In this case, the comic openly claims credit for manipulating the audience, and *that is the punchline*.

As I mentioned, for most of the joke, the audience is not laughing; Wolf does not want them to. She acts like she is pausing the jokes for a moment to make a serious point–that happens sometimes in standup comedy. The serious point she's making is terrible of course, an annoying white savior complex monologue. But she speaks with such an earnest passion that–and this is the important part, which she points out at the end of her bit–those white women already predisposed to believe the things she's saying will go along with her. Not to mention, the flow of a standup set already puts the audience in the mindset to go along with whatever the person onstage with the microphone is saying. Like the comedians from *Dying Laughing* were saying, a good comedian puts the audience in a trance: they make you laugh, again and again, and so you just start expecting to laugh with them, to agree with them, as they single-handedly guide the emotional journey of this audience. So, 40 minutes into the set, Wolf has put the audience in a trance, thoroughly lulled into complacency, and therefore perfectly primed to have the rug yanked out from under them. She gives her impassioned, fake speech right up until she's sure

she's got you. Then she says, "That's how you play the victim!" and you realize that she took advantage of the comic-audience dynamic to trick some people (maybe you) into playing the victim. And you have to laugh, because she just did a live demonstration of the exact point she is making about white women's privilege; you are forced to realize your own folly and that she is correct. She made you a fool. Or, as she acknowledges, if she did not get you, it's still funny because you can watch and laugh as other people get tricked into confronting their own privilege.

Wolf makes it clear by the very structure of her joke that she manipulated us, but let's apply the definition just to be sure. Did she attempt to change your beliefs or desires? She revealed your own beliefs and desires to you (that you are a victim), and then showed you that they were flawed as an attempt to change them (by pointing out that you are not really a victim). Did she offer you good reasons to change those beliefs? She tricked you into feeling those beliefs and desires (that you are a victim), then revealed that she tricked you into feeling that way by making fun of you for feeling that way (because you are not really a victim). There is certainly a level of logical reasoning to Wolf's overall argument–as is often the case in comedy, seeing as it requires a good understanding of logic to be able to maximally disrupt it for a laugh–but objectively this is not a logical appeal to reason. This is a trick (that makes a point). This is manipulation. And what argument does she make, what does she convince you of in the moment that you laugh? She shows you how easy it is to convince yourself that you are a victim, and that you are wrong to believe so. You laugh because you just saw her point, she just tricked you into seeing it.

Finally, let's look at one last example of manipulation in standup comedy. As a brief aside, have you noticed how I keep doing three examples of things? Three philosophers defining manipulation, three satire headlines, three standup comics, and three things on this list? That is

because the "Rule of Three" is a principle in comedy: if you're doing a list of things, you always have to do three. Write that down.

Back to our last comic. We will be looking at a series of jokes from John Mulaney's Netflix special "Baby J." This time, in addition to the way he manipulates you in the moment of the joke, we will also look at some factors external to the standup set which give Mulaney additional motivation for wanting to manipulate his audience.

Mulaney yanks the audience in from the start, with a high-impact, self-aware one-liner. As some brief background for several of Mulaney's big punchlines in this set, this was his first stand-up show back following a highly publicized divorce, stint in rehab, new romantic partner, and birth of a child with said new romantic partner. All this was a big blow for Mulaney's previous reputation (and comic persona), as all of his previous specials had heavily featured material about his wonderful relationship with his wife and how he is sober. So it is Mulaney's big return; a lot rests on the first words he says. He opens with:

"The past couple years, I've done a lot of work on myself. And I've realized that I'll be fine as long as I get constant attention."

(Mulaney 00:04)

It's so genius. This joke does three things. 1) Address everything you have been wondering about 2) Acknowledge that he *knows* you've been wondering about it 3) Fail to give a satisfying response to all your concerns about who he is now–which is funny–*which is satisfying*. Even if it still does not actually answer your questions. And *that* little maneuver is key to the comedian's unique form of manipulation: when laughter acts like a band-aid.

First, Mulaney brings up the elephant in the room, because he has to. As we know, comedy requires the collision of contrasting elements, forcing comic absurdity. Tension and its

release is a classic comedic strategy for this very reason–the opposite of tension is relief. To build tension, then cut it, produces a contrast between that discomfort and its release. You can do it in a horror movie: the doorbell rings, the main character slowly approaches it, weapon in hand, certain the murderer is on the other side. You, the viewer, are tense. She opens the door–and it's a Girl Scout. Hilarious! You were held in suspense, dreading a jumpscare, and you could not have been more wrong. You have been led to believe, since it is a horror movie, that the scary bad guy you are afraid of will be on the other side of that door, so you anticipate fear. And the main character is holding a weapon, anticipating the same thing, and so you brace yourself for a confrontation between them. Then the door opens, and both you and the main character could not have been more off about who was on the other side, and the main character looks silly holding up a weapon in front of a Girl Scout. Tension and release: contrast. Of course, if it is a good horror movie, immediately after the Girl Scout says, "Do you want to buy any Thin Mints?" the murderer jumps out of a bush with a chainsaw, but I digress. The comedian does the same thing: set you up with an expectation for what they are about to say, give you a premise that leads you into thinking you know the next logical thing they will say–and then they say something totally different, defying logical expectations, creating absurdity, and causing comedy.

But back to Mulaney: whatever jokes he wants to make will not land right until he addresses the big thing on everyone's mind, so of course he brings it up first–causing tension with your anticipation of his highly-anticipated answer. He must attend to the credibility of his comic persona if any of his jokes are going to work tonight. So he mentions the work he has been doing on himself, referring to rehab, preparing the audience for a response.

Second, by even mentioning it in the first place, he acknowledges that he *knows* it is the thing on everyone's mind. He is aware of how his reputation and comic persona are at risk,

recognizing that he must deliver a satisfying response if he is going to save his reputation and get people to feel okay laughing at his jokes again.

Third, he intentionally gives a dissatisfying response. Saying "I'll be fine as long as I get constant attention" is certainly not the kind of work on oneself that the beginning of that sentence seemed to be leading towards, and is also a deliberate disdain of the fact that he acknowledged the audience's desire for a satisfying response. Because he openly fails to accomplish something that would be mutually beneficial for both himself and the audience–the audience gets their explanation, and he gets his reputation back–and instead demonstrates (jokingly) that he has accomplished no character growth whatsoever, that is hilarious. It is exactly what none of us needed! And finally, because he addresses all this in the form of a joke, the laughter itself is cathartic and satisfying, but also the context of it being within a joke that he fails to demonstrate any character growth, in fact demonstrates character growth. Presumably he did do a lot of work on himself this year, which is what gave him enough insight to come up with the worst possible lesson learned from the whole situation–jokingly. So in a roundabout way, we *are* satisfied, even though he did not actually address the thing on everyone's mind. He satisfied the tension, but did not actually resolve the thing that caused it. But through the joke, you get an arguably false sense of satisfaction. Through laughter, the comedian has healed his reputation–because by making you laugh, you like him again. Watch out, because right there is where he gets you. Your perspective of Mulaney has just been changed for the better, in a way that maybe he did not earn. That is manipulative. His argument is that you should like him again. And when you laugh, you do.

And all of that was just one joke! Two sentences, set-up and punchline, it took him 10 seconds to say it. And it took three paragraphs to describe the ways we have been influenced just

by laughing at this joke. It perfectly demonstrates Freud's short circuit, the rhetorical power of a joke to say a lot while only actually saying very little. That initial joke, whose meaning we have taken several pages to wring out, was only the setup for Mulaney's grand finale for this bit, his big official address of everything that happened. After some jokes about how he has always liked attention, stories from his childhood about wishing his grandparents would die so he could get attention in school, Mulaney apologizes for starting the show on such a dark note. Then he sings a little song.

Well, I apologize for beginning the show on such a… dark note. But I didn't want to start way too upbeat, you know. I've had a weird couple years. You've had a weird couple years. I didn't wanna come out all phony, you know. Be like… [mimics trumpet] bada bada da da! "Hey, Boston! It's time to laugh!"

♪ Raise up your smiles ♪

♪ Lower those masks ♪

♪ You know what I mean ♪

♪ We all quarantined ♪

♪ We all went to rehab and we all got divorced ♪

♪ And now our reputation is different ♪

♪ No one knows what to think ♪

♪ Hey, yeah! ♪

♪ All the kids like Bo Burnham more ♪

♪ Because he's currently less problematic ♪

♪ Likability is a jail, ah ♪

So we can't start that way.

(Mulaney 06:57)

Because we have all already endured quite a lot of analysis of what, exactly, is funny about certain jokes, here is a quicker analysis of this particular bit. With helpful arrows!

All of these jokes, all of these individual instances of comedic manipulation work towards one big goal: bring back John Mulaney's reputation. This is his big argument: "you should like me again." As mentioned, Mulaney's clean-cut wife guy persona took a big hit when tabloids announced that he was going to rehab, getting a divorce, and having a child with his new girlfriend, all within the span of a few months. It was an issue for his career as a standup comedian because so many of his jokes hinged on the particular comic persona he had crafted for himself, a persona which his abundance of fans had really latched onto. I had to give that context at the beginning of this section about Mulaney because most of these jokes, these particular ways

he has arranged his words to make you laugh, only work if you are familiar with his backstory and star persona. That means Mulaney has written these jokes for a specific audience: his audience. The one he fears he has lost and is trying to regain. All wordplay jokes work this way– there must be something you are familiar with that it pushes against, a norm to disrupt. The satire headlines expect that you are familiar with normal news headlines of current events, and so this is the model it defies to make a joke. Richard Pryor expects that you are familiar with his fame and cocaine addiction, and he teases himself but also criticizes the audience for their response to his addiction. Michelle Wolf expects that you are familiar with dialogue about white feminism, and her punchline rests on you being able to recognize your own participation in that phenomenon. And in "Baby J," John Mulaney expects that you are familiar with him. His jokes rest on your knowledge of his previous reputation so that he can work to establish this new comic persona—not unrecognizable from the last one, the structure of the jokes feels familiar, but it turns out that the person making them is different than we imagined.

If Richard Pryor was not an edgy comic with a well-known cocaine addiction, his jokes about cocaine addiction would not land the same. If Michelle Wolf was not a white woman known for her controversial jokes, her points about white feminism would not be as tongue-in-cheek as they are, and her point about white women's particular lack of awareness would be less effective. Through sharp, well-written jokes that address his previous persona, Mulaney establishes his new comic persona by making fun of the old one, acknowledging that we are all in on the joke: there's a new John Mulaney now. And he got you to believe that not by rational persuasion, but by joking his way to success. He made you laugh at jokes about his tabloid drama, about his old persona, but he has given you no information that actually responds to any of your questions. Those jokes told you nothing about the specifics of his personal life while

trying to justify those very actions that were so upsetting to some fans. If you were upset by any of the news from Mulaney's personal life, he has not given you a *good reason* to forgive him. All he did was make you laugh again. John Mulaney's goal was to redeem John Mulaney's reputation, in peril because of fans' qualms with details about his life that revealed he was not the person they thought he was. They believed that they no longer liked John Mulaney. In turn, Mulaney offers no good reason to like him again; but he makes you laugh again, and it turns out that was the thing you really liked about him in the first place—so you like him again. He has a new comic persona: John Mulaney (the new one).

3.3 Ulterior motives

Comic persona is important for successful comedians. Anyone can arrange words in a clever way to make them funny; but a famous comedian can use their persona to lend a particular voice to their words that makes the joke even funnier. A successful comedian's career is built on the character they play onstage. This person might be pretty similar to the person they are in real life, but a stage is not real life. Onstage is where a comedian becomes a comedian, someone who has one goal: to make you laugh. Inevitably a comedian's stage persona is going to be the person who is most able to make an audience laugh, someone a little larger than life, more exaggerated than a real-life personality, and likely with character traits that are emphasized or de-emphasized for the sake of being able to deliver certain jokes. Some things are just funnier when said by certain people; credibility of the speaker is a rhetorical tactic. So when news about Mulaney's personal life shattered his comic persona, he had to build a new one. When people watched "Baby J," his first special after it all happened, there were three questions on their mind:

1. Is he going to address what happened?

2. If so, how?

3. And is he still going to be the same John Mulaney? Am I still going to like him?

There was, clearly, a lot of pressure resting on this standup special for Mulaney to rebuild his comic persona, upon which rests his career as a comedian. Dyer explains the money-making significance of a star's persona in his book *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*: "Images have to be made. Stars are produced by the media industries… Stars are made for profit" (Dyer 4-5). A celebrity's reputation is crucial to Hollywood's ability to market the media that star is in. "Oh, did you like Harrison Ford as a rebellious charmer in *Star Wars*? Did you like watching him narrowly avoid danger and woo maidens in space? Well, here he is again as a rebellious charmer in *Indiana Jones*–but this time you get to watch him narrowly avoid danger and woo maidens in, like, jungles and stuff. Come see our new movie! You already know you'll like it!" That is how it works. Mulaney, however, is not a movie star by trade. His star persona is not for the purpose of selling movies. John Mulaney's star persona only needs to sell one thing: John Mulaney. Mulaney's work as a standup comic culminates merely to interest you in Mulaney's subsequent work as a comedian. It is less ensnared in the machinations of the Hollywood machine–Dyer goes on, saying, "Stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces. They do not produce themselves alone" (Dyer 5). Standup comedians, for the most part, actually do produce themselves alone. Of course, just like movie stars, tabloids and fan responses do play a role in the production of comedians' personas. However, the comedian does not have the movie studio, and the movie, and the costars, and the red carpet events, and the next movie, to help them craft their star persona. Their near-exclusive opportunity to take control of their public reputation is when they get a

microphone and an hour onstage. So they had better kill. Which means there is a lot more pressure on Mulaney himself to maintain his own reputation.

That brings us back to "Baby J," and the three questions on audiences' minds as they sat down to watch it, whether live in-person or at home on Netflix.

1. Is he going to address what happened?

Mulaney must do this immediately. Like we talked about in the analysis of his first joke, this is the biggest question on everyone's mind, so he has to bring it up first. What happened is what threatens his star persona, and so threatens Mulaney's ability to make jokes. He knows the audience doesn't quite know who the man is making the jokes they are about to hear. If he wants his jokes to be maximally effective, he needs to get his star persona in check, fast. It is in Mulaney's best interest to make a joke that addresses it, salvages whatever is left of his old star persona, and establishes his new star persona. It is completely remarkable he accomplished all of those goals in two sentences: "The past couple years, I've done a lot of work on myself. And I've realized that I'll be fine as long as I get constant attention." Such a feat demands a masterful manipulation of language. Such a feat requires a great joke.

2. If so, how?

In that first joke, he addresses what happened cheekily, with a clever joke that reminds us of the old John Mulaney we know and love, while also allowing these new facts about him to be accepted into the canon of his star persona. To cement this, he follows up the initial joke with a long routine about wishing his grandparents would die–uncharacteristically dark for Mulaney's previously shiny persona. But it is of course told with his distinct voice, razor-sharp arrangements of words and a little bit of whimsy. He brings it back around to addressing his personal controversy, sandwiching this introductory bit to make it clear this is his response. He

brings it back around with a song and dance routine that is once again reminiscent of Mulaney's familiar style, just with a darker edge. And it is inescapably cheeky, a comedian's response to a public that felt entitled to his personal life: "You guys thought I couldn't still be funny?"

3.   And is he still going to be the same John Mulaney? Am I still going to like him? Mulaney's opening bit proves he is still the same joke-crafter he always was, just with a little more baggage he has to talk about this time. Whether you still "like" his new persona is up to you, but his new persona is definitely still able to make you laugh–which seems like a pretty good indication of likability, at least for a comedian. The first two questions lead into this one, because this last question of his star persona all rests on his ability to properly address the event that damaged it, and the only way he can properly address it is to be funny. A standup comedian must be funny. That is the only reason these people care about you. You wouldn't pay someone to go up onstage and talk about their life for an hour wherein you do not laugh the entire time. You know the old John Mulaney, and he made you laugh. Now, having lost the character that was so effective before, Mulaney must quickly forge a new persona that is still able to get the same laughs, because his career is at stake. His livelihood depends on his ability to tell jokes that you buy. He has to argue, convince you, not by asking but by proving via your involuntary response to comedy, that he can still make you laugh. He must manipulate you.

3.4 One more argument—I mean, joke

Not every comedian is grappling with a shattered reputation to rebuild. Comedians don't always want something–but don't they, though? Comedians, plainly, always, have at least one goal: to make you laugh. And, as we saw, they manipulate you in order to achieve that goal. And as part of laughing at that joke, you are agreeing to something the comedian is saying, without

you necessarily realizing they are saying it. Rational persuasion must make you aware of exactly what it is convincing you of, because it persuades you by giving you good reasons to believe it. Comedy does not do that. It plays with the structure of language in a way that causes you to laugh, involuntarily. The comedian did not give you good reasons to laugh, they made you laugh. And when you laugh, you cannot reflect on what you've just laughed at, what argument you've agreed to by laughing, until after. But it's too late! You've already been manipulated.

That assessment I've just made makes comedy sound a little too all-powerful: it is not the case that any comedian can make some nefarious arrangement of words and trick you into laughing at something awful, into agreeing with some evil argument. There is definitely some level of awareness of the content of a joke's argument: otherwise, how could you understand the joke to laugh at it in the first place? Think about it this way (this question is just for people who think they are not racist or sexist): do you laugh at racist or sexist jokes? Probably not, because you can tell what argument those jokes are making, and you do not agree with it. I asked my friends this question to crowd test this argument—whether they laugh at racist or sexist jokes— and they said they saw the point, but also that they sometimes do, in spite of themselves, laugh at racist or sexist jokes. That response could mean one of two things. A) It is an honest testimony of the pitfalls of human nature, that we all unintentionally internalize some amount of prejudice as a result of living in a society that has been plagued by such prejudices for so long. So when we hear a joke that plays on those biases, it brings them out in us, revealing that we already agreed at least a little bit with the joke, enough to find its argument funny. Or, B) It is possible to construct a joke so insidiously manipulative that it can make you believe something that you do not believe at all. Either way, I am still right.

Still, I bet there are some topics you would not find funny at all. I bet you can think of some. Don't dwell too hard, they're probably pretty awful. So for that reason, we can still see the case that there is some level of understanding a joke's argument, even if we are not consciously thinking about it. But in the times that you do not laugh, that is because you understood the argument and actively disagreed with it. So then, every time that you do laugh… aren't you agreeing? And didn't they manipulate you into agreeing? When a comedian has got you laughing, has you in a trance, what are you agreeing with? What are you failing to reflect on? What did they get you to think, even if just for a moment, by making you laugh?

Let's look at one more joke. Please, for me. It's a good one. It's the title of my thesis:

Comedy is manipulative and I can prove it: laugh, now!

The setup I give you is my claim that comedy is manipulative and that I can prove it. Because you are presumably familiar with thesis titles, you expect a long and academic jargon-filled clause to follow the colon. And because you are familiar with proving things, you are expecting a good, well-reasoned argument justifying my claim. Instead, I say something very short, and very silly: I command you to laugh. Telling someone to laugh is a terrible way to get them to laugh. Famously, people must be trickily manipulated into laughing. You cannot just tell them to do so. You know that this is a bad reason for you to laugh, because if it were that easy, we wouldn't need complex verbal arrangements in order to induce involuntary laughter. Laughter is not voluntary, so you cannot just do it on command. But you know all that, so when you read my thesis title, expecting a good explanation of how comedy is manipulative, and are met with a terrible example of how to manipulate using comedy—it is absurd. It contradicts your expectations for a thesis title, and for an attempt at laughter. And that is why it is funny (or at least, I think it's funny). And then, when my bad reason for you to laugh actually makes you

laugh, it proves that the claim of the thesis is correct: that comedy is manipulative, and I can prove it. I just proved it, by manipulating you into laughing. Really the thesis should have just ended after the first page.

CONCLUSION: WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH COMEDY?

It's important to me that by the end of this paper, I have completely ruined the experience of comedy for you. I hope that you never enjoy another standup special, and I hope that you never again crack a joke or share a laugh with friends. These things are, of course, terrible and not enjoyable. Ahh just kidding. I don't mean that. But what does it mean for us, as enjoyers of laughter and whimsy, that comedy is manipulative? Is *all* comedy manipulative? Is manipulation inherently always bad? Let's start with that first question.

The answer is yes. But I will explain myself. There are a lot of different kinds of comedy, and there are a lot of different formats of comedy. Jokes can sound (or look) many different ways, and you can encounter them many different places. As far as kinds of comedy, there's observational humor, dark comedy, deadpan, physical comedy, wordplay, satire, and far more. You can encounter these manifestations of humor at a stand-up show; in a comedy movie, TV show, or play; in a satirical news publication; and those are just sites specifically designated for comedy. I guarantee your favorite sad movie has at least one joke in it. Anyone can make a joke, at any time. So of course, you also hear jokes in everyday life. Is comedy always manipulative, in all of those kinds and formats? All jokes must fundamentally work in the same way: if you want someone to laugh, you must arrange words in such a way that it creates absurdism (or, as the physical comedy case may have it, you must slip on a banana peel in such a way that it creates absurdism). You must craft the scenario from scratch, alter the environment through your words or actions to conjure absurdism. If you want to make someone laugh, you must *make* a joke; that is manipulation. Regardless of location or kind, the structure of comedy and its relation to laughter is the same. If the comedian wants to force a laugh, they must force absurdism. To

work, jokes must work this way; they must be manipulative because you cannot explain rationally to someone why they must laugh. I'll prove it to you.

Here are some good reasons for you to laugh right now:

- Laughing is fun.

- Fun things make you feel happy.

- If you laugh while reading this, people around you will believe that my paper about comedy is also, itself, funny, and that would benefit me greatly. I think you should care about benefiting me.

- You have a really nice laugh.

Those were all great reasons for you to laugh—are you laughing right now? Didn't think so. We can see here that you cannot convince someone to laugh via rational persuasion. Because laughter can only occur when something is absurd, if you want to cause someone to laugh, you must contrive absurdity: comedy is *necessarily* manipulative. You cannot persuade someone to laugh, but you can trick them into it (or at least ignore norms about standards of communication, then do whatever works best to get a laugh). That was a joke about Klenk's definition of manipulation.

Assuming that was convincing, we agree that all comedy is manipulative. Does that mean comedy is wrong? Maybe I'm biased, but personally I am inclined to believe that comedy is not wrong. Sue me, I love to laugh! I also love to manipulate—I mean, make others laugh! And I feel reasonably confident that you also love to laugh. We're all wondering: why would it be that manipulative acts are generally frowned upon, but not this kind of manipulation? I cannot get into a big philosophical explanation again because we already did that once and it took a really long time and this is the conclusion. In the spirit of jokes, let's keep this explanation short.

Immanuel Kant's theory of deontological ethics posits that the categorical imperative is the foundational principle of morality. That was one more joke for you—what a terrible sentence to follow promises of "short" and "not launching into a big philosophical explanation." Anyways, we actually are going to talk about Kantian moral theory. Kantian ethics is based fundamentally on rationality. For Kant, being rational is what allows you to be moral (Kant 12). Rationality is required for morality because it enables you to make decisions, and therefore to make right decisions (Kant 35). To be moral, you must be rational. We should act rationally out of the motive to be moral. The key principle of Kantian ethical theory is the categorical imperative, which states:

"act only on a maxim… which you can also will to be a universal law" (Kant 3).

This is a principle of rationality. An *imperative* is an "objective principle of action" (Kant 2), expressed by the word 'ought' (Kant 37). An imperative is a way we ought to act, how we should behave morally. *Categorical* means "required without any particular purpose being assumed" (Kant 3). For something to be categorical means that the principle is always in play— because it is rational.

What does it mean to act rationally? Why would that be the determining factor for morality? How does this help us determine the right thing to do in a given scenario? To act rationally means to act consistently. Consistency is required for rationality. If *A* is true, *not A* cannot also be true. To say *A* and *not A* is false; it is irrational. Let's say *A* means "murder is bad." *Not A* would then mean "it is not the case that murder is bad." So it is the case that *A*, murder is bad, and I murder someone, according to rationality you would say that was a bad thing to do; that is consistent. But then let's say Joe comes along and murders someone, and you say "that was not bad." That wouldn't make a lot of sense, because you just told me it was not

okay to murder. Murder was not okay when I did it; rationally, it should also not be okay when someone else does it. It is irrational for murder to be okay and not okay at the same time because that is inconsistent. This is the idea we see in the categorical imperative, to act only on a maxim *that you can also will to be a universal law*. Morality must be based on rationality because it would be inconsistent for an action to be sometimes permissible and other times impermissible; that doesn't sound like an ethical principle, that sounds like arbitrary rules. How, then, do we determine the kinds of actions that are moral? They must be actions that would be rational if you would will everyone else to do them. If I want to borrow money but not give it back, that is not rational because if everyone were to do that, I would never get my money back. It is irrational, and therefore immoral. Therefore, the categorical imperative explains how to be ethical: act only on a maxim which you can also will to be a universal law. It is the rule that requires a person to act in a way that they could rationally will everyone else to follow. You would not rationally will everyone to murder.

Would you rationally will everyone to manipulate others? Would you rationally will everyone to do comedy? I don't think you could rationally will everyone to lie to each other. But I do think you could rationally will everyone to make jokes, which indicates that there is something that separates it from regular, ill-intentioned manipulation.

There is one more idea from Kantian theory that might help us out. The Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative says that under the categorical imperative, every human is a rational being that "exists as a purpose on his own" (Kant 4). The reason that the categorical imperative works as a moral, the reason that rationality is intrinsic to morality, is because every person is a rational being with moral status. We should—and must—respect persons because they are a reasoning moral agent and inherently deserve respect. To act

immorally against another person is to infringe on that individual who exists as a purpose on their own. Therefore, there is an imperative to treat humanity as a purpose, "and never merely as a means" (Kant 4). You cannot treat another human being as a mere means to your own ends—you cannot murder because then the victim of your murder becomes a means to your ends of your wanting to murder. Their life, their own independent purpose, is sacrificed in favor of your ends, and that is immoral. Clearly, manipulation also fails to respect persons because the entire point of manipulation is to use another person as a means to an end. And in most cases of manipulation, it is often without the target's knowledge and often to their detriment.

But what about comedy? We know how it is manipulative; it is clear how comedians use their audiences as a means an end. The comedian wants the audience to laugh, then says or does things to manipulate the audience into laughing in order to achieve their goal. But Kant specifically says that you cannot treat another person "*merely* as a means." Do comedians use audiences as a *mere* means? Is that really all that's happening in comedy? Does a comedian just use other people as laugh machines, wringing an emotional response out of them against their will, and that's all there is to the interaction? A parasitic relationship, the audience gets nothing? That doesn't really sound like the experience of comedy, for either comedian or the laugher.

What if comedians use people as a means, but not merely a means? Perhaps comedians and audiences are participating in the joint project of comedy. The comedians need you for their jokes to work, but you need them to laugh. Don't you enjoy laughing? What could be so bad about that? Sure, a comedian manipulates you into the physical act of laughing—but isn't that the point? Perhaps by engaging in the manipulative act of comedy, a comedian is not using you as a *mere* means to an end, but rather you are each participating in the generation of laughter as a

shared end. The comedian enjoys getting us to laugh, and we enjoy laughing. We participate in the shared end of laughter.

Here's another question for you: a rabbi, a priest, and a Lutheran minister walk into a comedy club—what did they agree to just by being there? We often engage with comedy, as a genre, on purpose. By going to a stand-up club, or watching a comedy, or reading satire, we know we are signing up to laugh; in fact, we expect to laugh. There is a level to which we agree to being manipulated by comedy when we seek it out. That kind of implicit consent also makes this form of manipulation more permissible than others.

But how far does that implicit consent extend? What is a comedian allowed to do in their jokes, how far are they allowed to manipulate you? Can a comedian lie? This is something we often assume they will, and do, do—embellishing some details to make a joke slightly funnier, or crafting a funny scenario that maybe didn't really happen. Lying is something we often excuse in comedy because it is in pursuit of the noble goal of making us laugh. But what is a comedian allowed to lie about for the sake of a joke? When do imaginary stakes become *too* manipulative? Can they lie about having a fake girlfriend? How about being an alcoholic?

And how about the jokes you don't see coming at all, when you're just living your life? You can't give implicit consent then—is unexpected manipulation okay? Maybe in class someone cracks a joke, or a friend says something outrageous at dinner. Or your coworker screws you over at work, but he's really funny and charming so you let it slide. Or a salesman makes you laugh, and somehow you end up buying a vacuum cleaner you don't need. Or a politician has a few knee-slappers at the debate, and suddenly you're feeling more inclined to vote for him. How do you feel about that kind of manipulation? And what are these joke-tellers gaining from it? Did they deserve it, did they give you good reasons to benefit them? Or were

they just funny? You tell me—did you enjoy reading this paper? Did you enjoy it more because

it had some jokes in it? And did those jokes allow me to persuade you more effectively? Hm…

now isn't that funny. But don't think about it too hard. That would ruin the joke.

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