Not taking oneself too seriously:

The value of humour in intimate relationships

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Abstract:

This paper lays out one positive role that humour can play in intimate relationships, focusing on the value of not taking oneself too seriously. It begins by looking at the positive value of humour in general (§1), before applying this to intimate relationships (§2). In doing so, it draws upon a general account of the value of humour, which claims that humour can defuse our fight or flight responses, and help us see ourselves honestly as others do. I make the case that both of these are beneficial in intimate relationships, as spaces where we can be safe and accepted for the particular individuals we are. Not taking ourselves too seriously, I argue, can help us cultivate vulnerability, trust, safety and acceptance together.

Keywords: Philosophy of Love, Philosophy of Humour, Philosophy of Relationships, Philosophy of Psychology, Intimacy.

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Humour matters to most people in intimate relationships. When asked why someone loves their partner or friend, they might reply, "they make me laugh". And in looking for a partner, people often have a strong preference for a sense of humour,[1] or someone who doesn't take themselves too seriously.

As far as I can tell, this is relatively underexplored in the philosophy of love, and the ethics of everyday life.[2] What I want to do in this discussion is think through a positive role that humour can play in intimate relationships.[3]

In general, there a variety of different positive roles humour can play in close relationships. Most simply, it's fun.[4] It's enjoyable to laugh. This can also relieve stress, fear and tension. It can be expressive too. We all have different senses of humour, and who we are comes through in the way we laugh and joke.[5] But here I want to focus in on a specific positive role that humour can play: the value of not taking oneself too seriously.

Of course, it's not all positive! Humour can be harmful. It can be used to put down, mock people, and deflect from serious issues.[6] And this can all be incredibly harmful and hurtful in interpersonal relationships. Some things ought to be treated seriously.

But not everything needs to be treated seriously. And we don't always need to be treated so seriously, either by those we are in close relationships with, or our own selves. For life is, well, kind of ridiculous at times.[7] Things go wrong, in often the most comic ways. You put on a clean shirt, you spill coffee all over it. You put on dry socks, you step in a puddle of

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[1] See, for instance, Wilbur and Campbell (2011) and Turliuc et al (2021).
[2] A notable exception can be found in Gordon (2014).
[3] Cf. Cohen (1999), who contends that *jokes* create a form of intimacy. I agree with Carroll (2000: 445-50) and Gordon (2014: 166-7; 169) that this intimacy is rather thin.
[4] Cf. Gordon (2014: 171).
[5] See Hall (2017: 3): "the fact that someone *gets* your jokes means they *get* you too". For an account of how humour can be expressive of individuals, see Saunders and Stern (2023). See also Jollimore and Jones (2012: 119): "One's sense of humor is rooted in one's sense of perspective"
[6] For accounts of the harm that humour can involves, see Atkinson (2015: 27-30), Hall (2017: 14), Morreall (2009: 90-110), O'Brien (2024: 153-4), Olin (2016: 338-341), Rodriguez (2014), Smuts (2010), and Walker (2024: 2-5). Cf. Cohen (2001: 69-86).
[7] See Amir (2019) for a compelling full account of the ridiculousness of the human condition.

water. You can't find your sunglasses, they're on top of your own head! Of course, these things can be irritating or worrying in the moment, but they don't really matter. They're silly! Laughing at them, and to some extent, yourself can be a healthy way of responding to life's absurdities.

Part of this is personal. I think I'm my better self when I'm not taking my self too seriously, when I'm able to laugh and get some distance from my own ideas, habits, idiosyncrasies, and see, in a non-defensive way, the particular and peculiar individual I am. And I suspect this applies to others too. In part, I'm starting with this hunch. But I want to move beyond it. For this, I turn to the literature on the positive value of humour to start to build my case.

I begin by looking at the positive value of humour in general (§1), before applying this to intimate relationships (§2).The main contribution of this discussion will be to apply this general account to intimate relationships, and to make the case for the value of not taking oneself too seriously.[8] In short, the general account claims that humour can help us defuse our fight or flight responses, and to see ourselves honestly as others do. I make the case that this can help our intimate relationships, as spaces where we're safe and accepted for the particular individuals we are.

1. The Value of Humour

Let's begin by looking at the value of humour in general. I'll follow others in claiming that humour can be a useful corrective to both vanity and pessimism (§1.1). I'll then turn to consider some worries about humour, and in particular the worry that it can lead to us not taking things seriously enough (§1.2), before outlining three moral benefits of humour (§1.3).

1.1 Humour as a corrective to vanity and pessimism

[8] Cf. Gordon (2010), who makes that case that laughing at oneself can help in educational contexts.

The psychology of humour suggests that it can aid with emotional regulation, and help defuse our fight or flight responses.[9] Here is Morreall on this idea:

> In early humans, whose lives were similar to those of apes, emotions were usually adaptive. Fear got them out of danger, anger helped them overcome obstacles and enemies […] In modern life, fight-or-flight emotions are usually counterproductive. When was the last time you faced a problem for which the ideal solution was running away or attacking someone? (Morreall 2009: 67)

Morreall (2009: 79) thinks that such responses involve a certain rigidity from us, almost like tragic heroes. He notes that this can be helpful in certain situations – a battlefield, for instance – but is generally unhelpful as an attitude to life. By contrast:

> The playful, imaginative attitude fostered by comedy not only feels better, but makes us healthier psychologically and physically. (Morreall 2009: 81)

Laughter can help defuse our fight or flight responses, reduce stress, and thus, can be a healthy response to life.[10] Imagine you glimpse a scary figure lurking behind you, only to find out it's your own shadow. The glimpse might have put you into a fight or flight mode, and laughing at yourself can help defuse this.

How does this relate to vanity and pessimism? An editorial in the *American Journal of Psychology* from 1907 says the following of humour:[11]

> Perhaps its largest function is to detach us from our world of good and evil, of loss and gain, and to enable us to see it in proper perspective. It frees us from vanity, on the one hand, and from pessimism, on the other, by keeping us larger than what we do, and greater than what can happen to us.

The part about vanity and pessimism seems right to me. When I spill coffee on my new shirt. that punctures any inflated ideas I might have had about myself and my shirt. But it doesn't require despair. I can just laugh at myself – one more coffee-stained shirt to add to the collection!

But I'm not sure about the talk of *detaching us from our world of good and evil*. I worry that might render lead to us not taking things seriously enough.

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[9] See Morreall (2009: 27-39) for discussion. For empirical work on the topic, see Samson and Gross (2012), who argue that good-natured humour can help with emotional regulation, but that mean-spirited humour might not.

[10] See Morreall (2009: 81; 1997, ch. 4; 2016, ch. 5–6; 2020). See also Vaillant (2000).

[11] I found this helpful claim in Morreall (2023); cf. O Brien (2024: 148; 151).

1.2 Not taking things seriously enough

Humour can detach us from our normal perspective, and sense of what matters. At times, this will be helpful and liberating. But at other times it won't be, for some things deserve to be taken seriously.

The worry is that humour can become too detached, too ironic, too amoral.[12] Bergson (1900: 5) noted that humour calls for a "momentary anasthesia of the heart".[13] And at one point, Morreall (2009: 53) talks about how comedians aestheticize problems "so that the jolt they give us brings pleasure rather than negative emotions". This certainly has its place. But negative emotions can be important, they let us know how we feel.[14] And it would be a mistake to always sidestep them towards pleasure. Sometimes the heart needs a little anaesthesia, but sometimes it needs to feel what it feels. There is also the worry that we over aestheticize, and everything becomes a joke, and nothing is taken seriously: not politics, not one's relationships with others, not one's passions and pursuits.[15] And a life like that is too detached.

Humour can rest on a knife's edge, between healthy and unhealthy detachment, taking ourselves and others too seriously or not seriously at all.[16]

Morreall recommends humour as a way to reject both self-centeredness and emotional attachment. He writes:

> […] comedy rejects the self-centeredness that attends emotional attachment (Morreall 2009: 82)

I think he is right that humour can help us overcomes self-centeredness. But we also have to be careful here, for we shouldn't lump emotional attachment and self-centeredness too closely together. Emotional attachments aren't all self-centred, nor things we should always look to detach ourselves from. I care about my local woods. But this need not be self-

[12] For glimpses of this, see Bergson in Morreall (2009: 31) and Morreall (2009: 53).
[13] See also Atkinson (2015: 24).
[14] For discussion of the important role negative emotions play in love and a good life, see Jenkins (2022).
[15] See Rodriguez (2014) for an account of how appreciating racist jokes can numb the heart.
[16] See Aristotle's famous remarks about sense of humour in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1128a1-11); cf. Walker (2024).

centred, nor is this simple emotional attachment something that I should strive to detach myself from.[17]

Morreall also suggests Zen Buddhism as a helpful counterpart to the western tradition here, where we might realise the self is illusory.[18] In a similar vein, Gordon writes that:

> Once we begin to question the notion of an independent ego – the empirical self that constitutes the core of our being – we are likely to stop taking this "self" so seriously. Such realization may lead one to be amused by the illusory nature of the self […] (Gordon 2010: 741)

I worry slightly about the ethical implications of this. After all, it's important to take one's self somewhat seriously. We need a healthy amount of individuation, autonomy and self-respect.[19] We are distinct individuals, and this needs to be respected. I'd be deeply wrong to dismiss your choices, agency and individuality, and then attempt to justify this by claiming that you don't have a self! We ought to take our selves seriously, just not too seriously.

1.3 Moral benefits of humour

There is something to the claim that humour can help us overcome our egos though. Roberts notes that:

> A sense of humor about one's own foibles is a capacity of character-transcendence; but character transcendence is basic to the very concept of a moral virtue. (Roberts1988: 127):

Morreall (2009: 115) agrees. He thinks that the "intellectual virtues of humour are intertwined with moral virtues", as both see us rising above personal concerns to appreciate the interests of others.[20] So conceived, humour allows us to overcome ourselves, and our egos:[21]

> It liberates us from the narrow perspective of fight-or-flight emotions and helps us […] to see ourselves as other people do. (Morreall 2009: 115)

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[17] See Hietalahti (2015: 125-6), who makes a similar point.
[18] Cf. Hyers (1989).
[19] See Hietalahti (2015: 125-6) and Rodriguez (2014, sec.5) for further discussion.
[20] See also Morreall (2020: 646).
[21] Cf. Hietalahti (2015: 123).

So there I am, stressed, coffee slowly diffusing over my new shirt, searching for my sunglasses on the of my own head. And then I realise how ridiculous I look. I laugh, and this laughter puts me at ease, and allows me to see how others might view me in that moment. My seemingly urgent and serious quest to find my sunglasses takes a back seat to my own ridiculousness.

Morreall thinks this is morally important:[22]

> Seeing oneself objectively is also important in being honest with one-self instead of rationalizing one's shortcomings. Thus humor can contribute to self-knowledge, integrity, and mental health. (Morreall 2009: 115)

I agree. So conceived, humour helps us to:

a) Defuse our fight or flight responses
b) See ourselves as other people do
c) Be honest with ourselves about our shortcomings, instead of rationalising them away

We now have a general account of some of the positive roles that humour can play.

2 Not taking oneself too seriously in an intimate relationship

How does this apply to an intimate relationship? Well, one thing I know about intimate relationships is that they are intimate! You end up knowing a lot about someone. You also spend a lot of time with them. And during this time, you might see them spill coffee on themselves, get annoyed at a toaster, develop a grudge against squirrels, and so on.

So let's look at the above three positive roles humour can play, and think about how they could help in an intimate relationship, specifically through not taking oneself too seriously.[23] In doing this, I'll attempt to draw out the thought that this can help cultivate safety and acceptance.

2.1 Humour, Safety and Acceptance

[22] Cf. Hietalahti (2015: 124) and Gordon (2010: 744).
[23] Cf. Gordon (2014: 171).

If humour can defuse our fight our flight responses, this seems helpful in intimate relationships. People in intimate relationships argue. They conflict, disagree, and can annoy each other. All of this can be healthy. But they can also trigger fight or flight responses in each other. And these aren't always productive. Humour can be a way of defusing such responses.[24]

Morreall discusses how humour might have evolved as a play signal, a way of signalling to others that we are safe, and able to engage in pleasurable play:[25]

> […] laughter sends the message, "We are safe. I enjoy this – you enjoy it, too." (Morreall 2009: 58)

Humour can, as Morreall (2020) puts it, "serve as a social lubricant, engendering trust and reducing conflict."[26] This all seems really important. In a healthy intimate relationship, we should look to engender trust, reduce conflict, create a safe environment, and defuse our fight and flight responses.[27] And insofar as humour does this, we should welcome it.

Humour can help us deal with difficult situations, by providing some tension relief. As Gordon (2010: 738) notes, it "can greatly reduce the tension among people and enable individuals who are different from each other to get along and even live together in harmony." It can also help us communicate difficult truths to each other, in a more palatable form.[28] But note that both of these helpful functions of humour can allow us to be *more* seriously committed to difficult tasks or conversations, or even our relationships. Otherwise expressed, humour isn't just about *not* taking something or oneself seriously.

This takes us to the next two benefits of humour, namely its ability to help us:

b) See ourselves as other people do

c) Be honest with ourselves about our shortcomings, instead of rationalising them away

At this point, I think it will help to ask: What does *not taking oneself too seriously* mean, in the context of an intimate relationship? I think it involves the ability to see, in a non-defensive

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[24] See Horn et al (2019).
[25] See also Morreall (2009: 37; 39) Cf. Hall (2017: 2).
[26] See also Hall (2017: 5).
[27] See Beauclair (2024: 17) for a touching discussion of intimacy and safety.
[28] See Gordon (2010: 744).

way, the particular and peculiar individuals that we are. After all, we all have our own peculiarities and flaws, what Annette Baier (1995: 443) refers to as "each other's familiar endearing weaknesses". And it's good to engage with these in an honest and non-defensive way. I think humour can be beneficial here, as it can help us to take an honest look at who we are, and to laugh at some of our ideas, habits, and idiosyncrasies.

Gordon (2010: 743) draws a useful distinction here between this, and a different, more *defensive self-deprecatory* humour, noting that:[29]

> […] laughing at one's foibles can also constitute a kind of defensiveness, as when someone uses self-deprecating humor to defuse other people's criticism. […] the self-deprecator is generally […] not willing to scrutinize oneself critically and truthfully. (Gordon 2010: 743)

By contrast, when one is able to laugh at oneself in a healthier way, there will be an honesty and openness to feedback.

This humour can help cultivate safety and acceptance.[30] We're all particular, and at times, idiosyncratic. And it's good to be accepted for the individuals that we are, warts and all. As Atkinson notes:

> […] it is acceptance that intensifies our connection to others and allows each of us to embrace a common humanity and mortality (Atkinson 2015: 26)

Some of this will be uniquely personal – your own peculiarities. But other parts of it might well be shared features of humanity, albeit ones we're often embarrassed of. If you'll indulge me, think of flatulence. We all do it, but we're typically not comfortable doing it around *anyone*. It is funny though.[31] Part of this is presumably down to the taboo. But it's also because farting is kind of ridiculous. Our bodies are kind of ridiculous, and not always under our control. Acknowledging this, and being able to laugh at oneself, and one's own body, involves a certain letting go.

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[29] Cf. Caroll (2000: 446) for discussion of how jokes can be used to avoid intimacy. See also Atkinson (2015: 22-3; 28-30) and O'Brien (2024) for accounts of how self-deprecatory humour can go right, and wrong.
[30] See Atkinson (2015: 25-6), Baier (1995: 444), and Horn et al (2019: 2379)
[31] Cf. Stewart Lee's (2005) claim that a fart should win the Perrier Award for comedy.

There is a vulnerability involved in this. You have to be open with who you are – warts and all. That allows intimacy to develop. You also have to be open to feedback from others that you are close to, including playful feedback, and that too requires and builds trust.[32]

I think humour can play an important role in developing such intimacy, but I should be careful not to overstate this. It's not doing all the work. For intimacy to develop and flourish, we also need the ability to be open with each other, and to share serious commitments.

2.2 Laughing at Oneself too much?

Annette Baier presents a challenge to the view I'm advocating here. She notes that when lovers laugh at each other's endearing weaknesses, they need not laugh at themselves in the same way:

> Each laughs at the other, but neither need laugh with the other, finding lovably ridiculous what the other so finds. Otherwise love would entail self-love. (Baier 1995: 443-44)

On this charge of self-love, she writes:

> As it is bad form to laugh at one's own jokes, so it is at least dubious form, incurring risk of a charge of narcissism, to laugh with real amusement at oneself, even on those occasions when one welcomes a lover's amusement. (Baier 1995: 444).

I'm not sure about this. After all, there are healthy forms of self-love, and these could involve laughing at oneself. Of course, Baier is right that it would be odd if this went *too* far, but I think I can accommodate this. My key idea is that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously, not that we should find ourselves and our quirks *hilarious*.

When this does go well, there should be something virtuously circular in play here. The other person finds something about you funny. And if this is tender, and you don't take yourself too seriously, you might laugh along with them. This loving laughter can foster self-awareness and intimacy, which in turn, can help move us away from the sort of unhealthy self-love that Baier is worried about.

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[32] Cf. Gordon (2014: 172): "humour and laughter *can help to facilitate* the development of intimacy in friendships and other close relationships."

Conclusion

Where does this leave us then? We've seen a general account of the value of humour, and I've attempted to draw out how this can be beneficial in intimate relationships.

Nathan Scott observes that the "major purpose of the comedian is to remind us of how deeply rooted we are in all the tangible things of this world."[33] And Morreall draws upon this to note that:[34] "Unlike tragic heroes, comic protagonists are at home in this world and live comfortably with their own limitations and those of their friends" (Morreall 2009: 144). I think he's right. And this seems like an important part of living in this world and with others: accepting people for who they are, and not taking ourselves too seriously.[35]

[33] Morreall (2009: 144).
[34] See also Atkinson (2015: 30) and Gordon (2010: 739; 2014: 168).
[35] I owe thanks to Alain Beauclair, Joe Houlders, Matt Robson, and Rob Simpson for helpful comments on drafts of this paper. I'd also like to thank the participants of The Ethics of Intimate Relationships workshop in Munich and the Leeds Centre for Love, Sex, and Relationships for valuable feedback and discussion on this topic. Finally, I want to thank my buddy Fabien Babonneau for not taking either himself or me too seriously over the years.

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