

Roasting Ethics with Luvell Anderson

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Funk and Flash]

Christiane: If you've ever watched a Comedy Central Roast, you know that there's a variety of ways to insult someone. And you've probably noticed that while some of the jokes kill, others don't quite land with the audience. Stand-up comedy is a tricky art—throw morality into the mix, and it becomes trickier still. My guest today, the philosopher Luvell Anderson, helps us explore the ethics of the comedic roast.

Luvell Anderson: You would initially think that there's some kind of a contradiction really between insulting someone, but also it being fun. And I just wanted to explore that dynamic a bit and think about, well, ok, here's this thing that already you're on guard against in normal non-joking contexts. So what happens when you enter into a space where everyone is in, everyone understands what's gonna happen and we subject ourselves to this?

Christiane: We'll discuss the art of humor, whether morality makes comedy less fun, and much more on this episode of Examining Ethics.

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[interview begins]

Christiane: Welcome to the show. We're here to discuss your article "Roasting Ethics." And just so people know, we're not roasting ethics, we're talking about the ethics of roasting. So, first of all, just briefly, could you tell us what you're doing with this project? And just in case people aren't super familiar with the term roasting, help us understand what that is too.

Luvell Anderson: So roasting is a kind of comedic practice whereby you use insult to generate fun, mirth, et cetera. And it usually happens in a number of different contexts. It can happen in a formal context like, New York City's Friars Club, for example, where you have typically a bunch of famous comedians on the stage or dais and someone who is like the honoree, the sort of object of the roast and people would hurl insults at the this person as a way of honoring them really.

And then you see like the, a sort of more contemporary version of this in the Comedy Central's celebrity roasts. That's sort of the more formal version of this and then there's an informal version that happens between say friends or with random strangers really. So it's again, just a way of insulting others, usually for fun. Sometimes the person being roasted is in on it. Sometimes they're not, same kind of mechanism though—it's a way of throwing insults at someone to generate laughter, either in everyone participating or those who are just looking on. And then the object is sort of just, the means to the mirth of those looking on.

Christiane: Why did you decide to write an article about the ethics of this, of this practice?

Luvell Anderson: So I found it very... an interesting phenomenon because it's, you know, you would initially think there's some kind of a contradiction really between insulting someone, but also it being fun. And I just wanted to explore that dynamic a bit and think about, well, ok, here's this thing that already you're on guard against in sort of normal non-joking contexts. So what happens when you, for example, enter into a space where everyone is in—let's say, let's take the roast as the example right now—where everyone's in on the, on the roasting. And so everyone understands what's gonna happen and we subject ourselves to this, right?

So, I mean, this also happens sometimes in comedy clubs, if you sit up in front, there's a good chance you will be a target of a comedian on stage. There's some insults that they might sling towards you and knowing that we still go and we still sort of find it fun or find it amusing, but there also seem to be limits. There also seem to be moments where you think things go too far or that the person doing the roasting has done something they shouldn't have. And so I wanted to figure out, okay, can we say anything about the limits of roasting, the limits of insults where it turns from something that's humorous to something that's denigrating or felt like an attack?

Christiane: I think if, if you watch those Comedy Central specials or if you're like, I guess in a friend group that has like a roasting culture, you kind of understand that the purpose of the roast isn't to hurt the recipient. Like you're not trying to like, actually make somebody cry. So like then what is the purpose of roasting—what's the speech act happening with the roast?

Luvell Anderson: So this is interesting because I think it does depend on whether or not we're speaking about, for example, a formal context or informal context and the relationship between the person involved in the informal ones.

So in the formal contexts, it's quite clear that the speech act usually taking place is a kind of honoring speech act, it's a way of honoring the person being roasted. In an informal context or interpersonal contexts, let's say between friends, usually it takes on the shape of strengthening that relationship between those involved, a kind of solidarity building? I have an aunt who basically this is her whole mode of engagement where it's a way of trying to create a kind of endearing relationship with, with everyone else.

If you're unfamiliar with this kind of practice, it can sort of take you aback, right? It can be kind of off-putting or you don't really know how to respond. But then even then I think that, that her primary intention is not really to harm you, but it's, you know, a way of trying to feel you out or provide, I guess a kind of potential moment for bonding or something along those lines. And I think that's sort of what happens usually when the people, what, usually when people roast one another where they have a kind of already standing relationship with one another.

And then there are these other moments where there are just people who are kind of cruel. And so, they'll, they will roast unsuspecting others for the sake of, you know, causing laughter among their peer group or whatever. There was a comedian—a YouTube comedian—I wanna say in the late 2000s, who made these YouTube videos of them in a mall setting or a public setting roasting people who want to buy.

So these people didn't have any idea that they were the object of the roast. This person was creating content essentially for an audience, right? And they were just using the persons they were hosting as a kind of means to that end. So there the speech act really is a kind of, there's an attempt at a joke that is being produced for an audience. And yeah, I mean, the, the roast could get kind of mean, but again, thinking that well, as an audience, we seem to enjoy the hostility and meanness and they're sort of just providing that content for us.

Christiane: So I kind of, I wanna get into like the nitty gritty of your, of your argument here. And I wanna start by talking about the “talking shit view,” which is like, definitely my new favorite philosophical jargon. So help us understand what the talking shit view is when we're talking about the ethics of roasting.

Luvell Anderson: Yeah, I think at the heart of it, it really is sort of the idea that, “Well, I'm just joking, this is not meant to be taken seriously. I don't have any intentions of harming you or, or really attacking you. I'm really just saying things in a context where you shouldn't take it seriously.” I think that's what talking shit really boils down to. And so there, the kind of justification for doing it or the defense against those who might object to it, really is: “Well, if you are offended, if you feel attacked, it's pretty much on you because you're

interpreting it in a way that I don't intend for it to be interpreted. I really mean it in the most non-serious way possible. I am just sort of talking shit."

Christiane: The problem there, which I, I feel like if anybody enjoys comedy or enjoys like that culture or that world, you know, that that's like, that's like typically like the white guy's answer. "I'm just, I'm just joking, it's comedy, it's just, that's what this is, right?" And so, a) is that OK? and then b) are there different degrees of like comedians caring about ethics when they're doing their acts?

Luvell Anderson: I think one thing that kind of response assumes is that what's happening in the comedic context is wholly distinct and separated from what's happening in the broader society, that the two don't interact at all. There's a view in aesthetics literature, usually around the relationship between art and ethics that suggests as much, that suggests that well, ethical categories are just the wrong sorts of categories to use when evaluating an artwork.

So if we take humor as a kind of artwork, for example, you're making a kind of category mistake when you bring in morality thinking about jokes. So that's, I think a kind of basic line or I would say kind of underlying premise of the talking shit view is that you have this kind of distinct separation between art and morality. But again, I think in my view that wrongly assumes that the joking context is hermetically sealed from the rest of society. Most of this is obviously not the case.

With respect to different levels of care from comedians and thinking about the ethics of the joking, I think it's interesting to think about who pays attention to the impact or the effects of their humor on their audience versus who doesn't. Historically, I guess white men in particular, but not always, seem to be the most wedded to the distinction, the sort of separation between art and morality. "We don't have to think about morality. We think about the artistic part."

But also they've been the ones who've been on stage or the ones who have been given the specials or whatever, right? So it's been based in terms of just who's been able to stand up in front of audiences. Traditionally, it has been mostly white men. And so you get a particular skewed view of whose interests, sort of center the practice. You get a little bit further along, you see the, the introduction and, and the growing exception of comedians from other social groups who might have different interests, who have different experiences and different modes of engagement.

So you get to see some pushback on the kinds of rules, the kinds of things that have emerged as standards for producing jokes or stand up or whatever. And yeah, typically, the ones who seem to care or those who seem to incorporate a more careful or at least a different sort of approach to that relationship between art and morality, tend to be people coming from other social groups who traditionally haven't been given the spotlight.

Christiane: You write about amoralist comedy, immoralist comedy and then I forget that. Is it? What's the other one?

Luvell Anderson: Ethicist.

Christiane: Yes. So can you help us understand those categories and how that might help us think about ethics and roasting?

Luvell Anderson: So I've already kind of described the amoralist position, this version of it, where morality just has nothing to do with art, evaluating art. That is, to bring in ethical categories is really kind of a mistake because of things that are relevant for determining, for example, whether a joke is funny or not, isn't anything about ethical attitudes, moral attitudes. It's more, has more to do with things like delivery, content, innovation or something like this about, about joke work, stuff like that, right? So if you're formalist with respect to aesthetics, then you're gonna appeal to more formal features of joking or it might be producing a particular kind of experience. So whatever the sort of aesthetic view you have, it's basically going to be, well, there are certain kinds of features that are aesthetic features, those are the only ones relevant for determining whether or not a joke is funny.

Then the moralist and ethicist positions are basically two versions of a general idea that basically there's a connection between art and morality and that the moral stuff can impact how we think about the aesthetic stuff. So for the ethicist, they say that the inclusion of negative or bad, ethically bad attitudes, in a joke need not block its being funny, but its inclusion always counts against it being funny.

The moderate moralist positions says, well, they disagree with the ethicist that the ethically bad attitudes always count against the funniness of a joke. But they suggest that well, at least for some some inclusions, it can block one's ability to find it funny. So this is usually the idea that there's a kind of imaginative resistance that's triggered by your recognition of some ethically bad thing that the work is calling you to entertain for the sake of the joke. And then there's another view, the kind of view that says—this is the immoralist—it says, well,

contrary to the ethicist, the inclusion of ethically bad attitudes always or can enhance the funniness of the joke. So rather than take away from it, it makes it funnier.

Christiane: I was going to ask you if you had an example of each, but that might be too... that might be asking too much.

Luvell Anderson: I think there's something to the idea that yeah, we find naughtiness... there's something appealing about it sometimes, right? So when comedy is too safe and antiseptic or something like that, people tend to find it boring and banal or something like that. But if you include naughty elements, things that somehow subvert, let's say social norms of civility or niceness of politeness or something like that. It has a kind of edginess to it that I think people are really drawn to. And you can just think about your own reactions to say the kind of humor you would find on PBS or something like that, right? It's on a children's show, versus, virtually any comedian, who has a stage, who goes beyond the kinds of norms and rules you expect when the audience is full of children.

So there is something to the idea that we're aroused by a kind of edginess, but the moralist is where I think the moralist is, right? There do also seem to be those moments where say some joke will call on us to entertain a kind of sketchy ethical attitude. So take the controversial Chappelle specials, for example, where he's trading in trans jokes that draw on ethically bad attitudes that you have to somehow entertain in order to recognize and enjoy the humor in the specials. For many people, being called on to entertain those attitudes blocks your ability to find the jokes funny because you just find the ethical attitude you're being asked to entertain, too far, too hostile or, or too dangerous or, or something. They're just not the kind of attitude you can entertain and find enjoyment in. So there's a bit of, but for some people they're edgy and they are the kind of edgy that invites mirth or enjoyment.

Christiane: The interesting thing about thinking about this is that all that to say is that I guess the level of morality that a comedian takes into their act, like, you can't map it and be like, well, they're super moral and so they're not funny or they're super immoral so they're not funny. Right? Is that kind of the idea here?

Luvell Anderson: Yeah. You know there's a kind of ambiguity happening, too. And so for the, especially between the, called the ethicist view and the moderate moralist view, where in the ethicist view when it says that, that an ethically bad attitude always counts against the funniness.

They get the sense that what's being presented as a kind of prescriptive view that says, well, if this joke contains an ethically bad attitude, let's say of the Chappelle sort that you should not find a joke funny, that you have a kind of moral duty to find it unfunny or, or not to enjoy it or something like that. So that's a kind of prescriptive sort of claim. The moralist points to something different. It seems to be a bit more of a descriptive sort of claim that is that there are just some attitudes, there are some prescriptions of attitudes that, at least for some, it just makes it virtually impossible for them to enjoy it.

Not that they're making a decision about whether to enjoy it or not, it's just that you just can't bring yourself to do so. And so I think, I think there's this kind of ambiguity between the two so that when you think about trying to come up with rules for determining the limit of humor, are you appealing to their perspective about what people should and should not find funny or are you appealing to the descriptive, which is a fact about a person's psychology or the background beliefs or something like that?

So that's gonna make a difference to how we think about the possibility of prescribing some sets of rules or norms for the ethics of humor in general.

Christiane: What makes for a successful roast? Because it's not all subjective, right? Like there are some Comedy Central specials of roasts that I watch where people are laughing harder or that I'm laughing harder, I think it's funnier than other ones. So what makes for a successful roast? And then like, you know, how is ethics connected to that? How is the ethics of roasting connected to the success?

Luvell Anderson: So this is a good question that I don't think I've figured out for myself—what the connection between the successful roast and the ethics of the roast is. Because typically, I think this sometimes happen...well, let me just answer the first question about what makes a roast successful. In the paper I suggest, well, there are basically two broad features that determine its success.

That is the content has to be ridiculous enough that it draws your attention to...well, that is pushes you out of the serious frame, pushes you out of a frame of, "Okay, am I trying to figure out truth or falsity?" Into some, some other frame. And then the manner of its presentation. So things like timing, things like the intonation and emphasis, focus, sort of more formally linguistic, social linguistic stuff.

So those two things have to marry in a particular kind of way and the more skilled the person is, the more they're able both to phrase it in the right way, but also to deliver it in the

right way. And especially with those Comedy Central roasts, you see the difference between, for example, those skilled comedians who are able to do that (and the Roast Master General Jeff Ross) versus the celebrities who aren't professional comedians who are reading someone else's material and there's a kind of drop, right? You can tell that, well, one of these people do this for a living and the other not so much. So they are like, they're skill-based considerations that go into the success of a roast.

It can sometimes be the case that a person is so skillful at delivery and content crafting, that ethics can sometimes take a back seat or take a lesser role in determining the success of the roast. So I think there was this interview Paul Mooney did once. So Paul Mooney for those who don't know, is a black comedian who used to write for Richard Pryor and I think he did an interview once where he said something like... he was, he was being asked about racist humor, racial humor and using racial stereotypes and stuff like that, because his humor traded a lot in race and he talked a lot about race in his humor. And I think he said something to the effect of, "Well, if it's funny enough, you can basically tell any joke."

That's a very strong position. But, there's something to it, there definitely is something to it. That is, you can sort of see the difference between someone even for the same performer. Some nights they deliver the joke very well, it kills. Other nights, they can bomb with the same joke. And the difference between those performances isn't gonna be about the content, there's gonna be something else. So, the difference seems to be something about the way that it's performed more so than anything else. And so that plays heavily in the success.

Christiane: I feel like when somebody's, when somebody has like a clear set of values that they're working with and they play with that and like, deliver a joke successfully that to me, like, amplifies it even more, it makes it more funny because it feels more dangerous at the start. And so you're more relieved. But then also I just appreciate the art of it more and it just feels better.

Luvell Anderson: Yeah. I mean, and so I do think that... I think, you can draw an analogy with other sorts, sort forms of entertainment that this also seems to track, that this danger element is a thing that we really enjoy. And that, I think that's why, for example, a lot of people enjoy roller coasters. There's a kind of element of danger, but there's also kind of element of, well, I know I'm not in true danger, even if I feel like I'm in danger momentarily.

And there's something about the comedian's ability to tread that line in a careful way, where you feel the danger, but you also, at the same time, feel like you're not really in imminent danger, that makes something feel more enjoyable.

Christiane: What's the role of power when it comes to ethics and thinking about comedy?

Luvell Anderson: Yeah, so this is a good question—I think this goes back to the, the question about the relationship between art and morality and whether or not you can cordon off the joking context from everything else. I think that considerations of power are quite important for thinking about, you know, whether a joke lands or trying to figure out how an audience is going to receive it. Because I think comedians are definitely thinking about—especially ones who are starting up and trying to gain an audience—who they're standing in front of and how the jokes are gonna land.

Just can't see that even if they don't recognize that this is what's happening that they make... they're considering power relations and how that factors into how an audience will receive what they're saying. I think, yeah, probably, I think a particularly important role in how I think about joking and audience reception... because it's, you get a kind of feedback from the people you're trying to depend on, to support you and they tend to let you know if you've run a, if you've run afoul of these, these important considerations.

Christiane: So, well, I just talked about how it doesn't take the fun out of comedy for me to talk about, to think about ethics with it. But when you're working on this stuff, does it take the fun of it out of it for you?

Luvell Anderson: No, not really. So it's true that it's interesting to think about this stuff theoretically because then you're basically just putting it under a microscope and dissecting it and you're not doing the thing that it's meant to do, which is enjoy it for its own sake. So that's a little weird, but I guess I approach it in like a two-pronged way. At first I just sort of sit with it to see whether or not I enjoy it or not, see how it hits me sort of aesthetically. And then like, "Oh, yeah, it seems to be working." So then, like, oh, I can think about it and think about, ok, what do I think is happening here ethically or aesthetically? And how do those two things meet?

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Rambling]

Christiane: If you want to find more about our guest's other work, download a transcript, or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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