

# PERFORMANCE OF MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE ETHICS OF SATIRE IN STAND-UP COMEDY

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This paper explores one particular approach to satire in stand-up comedy, a popular cultural genre of oral performance, which is at the intersection of emotion and ethics. It is suggested that morally charged emotional language is particularly situated in stand-up due to the interactionally engaging features of this genre. The argument consists in framing satire as a practice and performance of moral accountability. The analysis explores how the invocation and potential dramatization of moral accountability and (intentional) agency dialectically enhance the emotional and moral efficacy of satire, and why certain habitual practices constitute fruitful targets for satire. Several cases are presented to examine how satire gives rise to dialectic of moral accountability and emotion through the use of specific stylistic and textual devices.

*Keywords:* satire, accountability, morality, emotion, stand-up comedy, performance

One of the stereotypical, reified images evoked by the popular cultural genre of stand-up comedy certainly includes a person raging in front of others, as a spectacle of anger – an image encapsulated distinctively in the comic personas of 1990s American performers like Andrew “Dice” Clay and Denis Leary (see Peterson 1997; Ahmed 2004). The attributes of “brutal honesty”, “shamelessness”, and “unruliness”, frequently invoked by both practitioners, followers, and advertisers of stand-up alike, underpin this impression of (emotional) liberty and fearlessness as some of the genre’s most reiterated metapragmatic emblems (e.g. Louis C.K. 2007; May 2015). While potentially construed as commercial aestheticizations of emotion from just one perspective (e.g. Jameson 1991; Meštrović 1997), these attributes also

hint at the nature of stand-up comedy as an intimate and interactionally engaging form of performance clearly laden with heightened expectations of responsibility and competence for performers and audience members alike. Apart from apparent character comedians, one could read the action of *standing* in stand-up comedy as implying a heightened moral standard (cf. Limon 2000). Prototypically speaking, stand-up comics stand behind their personas and words while often demanding similar accountability and interactional investment from their audiences.

In the following text, I explore the understandings and practices of emotion and satire in the performance genre of stand-up comedy. Emotion provides an analytically compelling objective in the context of this genre, insofar as stand-up performances are

mimetically structured around an emulation of spontaneous conversation while also regularly invoking, inviting, and playing with strong affective responses from the audience. Although one should obviously hesitate to label stand-up as an art form dedicated to deception, it is fair to say that it is based on certain “contrived misperception” (Tausig 2006: 123). In this regard, the very *leitmotif* of stand-up comedy could be construed as one of the double binds famously articulated by Gregory Bateson ([1972]2000): “Be spontaneous!” This illusion of immanence, which in stand-up is coupled with a metacultural embrace of newness (Urban 2001; see also Wilce 2009b: 31, 34) that encourages improvisation and authenticity, intersects in interesting ways with the ongoing research into emotions as interactional, performative, and embodied phenomena (for immanence in the theatrical arts since the 1970s, Lehmann 2006: 18, 145–152, 96–97; Fischer-Lichte 2008: 18, 22–23).

With an eye on what he labels the “reportability” of narratives (also known as tellability), William Labov (1997, 1972) generalized three thematic areas worthy of recounting across different cultures: “The universal principles of interest [...] dictate that certain events will almost always carry a high degree of reportability: those dealing with death, sex and moral indignation.” It needs to be mentioned, though, that such formulations that have to do with absolute standards of reportability have been heavily criticized using more context-sensitive perspectives (e.g. Norrick 2005; Goldstein & Shuman 2012; also Savolainen 2017). In any case, by spinning their yarn around any of these subjects, comics may well increase the odds that listeners will be captivated. While it is not uncommon for stand-ups to discuss death at a very personal level – for instance in the Finnish stand-up scene I have been following, Anita Ahonen is known for frequently addressing heavy topics such as cancer and death, and Joni Koivu-niemi has openly dealt with his mother’s passing as part of his set – and sex figures as a major thematic hub of stand-up even to the point of compromising its tellability (i.e. becoming hopelessly clichéd), it is safe to say that moral indignation is not far behind.

It is in the latter focus that I am primarily interested in the current effort.

### Preliminary Remarks

Moral indignation can be conveyed in comic contexts by using the stylistic and communicative device of satire; more often than not it also serves as a comic motive. Satirists are affectively invested in their cause, for they claim to “speak ‘from the heart,’ from a sense of acute, unmediated anger” (Rosen 2012: 2), which can be historically traced back to satire’s roots in magical curses and taunts (Elliott 1970). Of the varieties of humorously inclined expression, satire can be seen as an exceptionally “passionate” and engaged mode of discourse, in contrast with the (perceived) more distanced nature of many other types of humor and irony (cf. Oring 2003: 78; Chatman 2001: 30; Bergson 1935).

I propose that we should approach satire as an everyday communicative device (rather than, for example, just a literary genre) that can be heuristically understood as a form of ironic discourse that engages with ethics in very specific ways. Downplaying the conventional viewpoint of satire as only negative social critique and emphasizing the multimodal affordances and interactional aims of stand-up comedy as oral performance, I focus on how satire traces and invokes a sense of moral accountability for the positions of both the producer and the target of satire. The presumption is that this can be fruitfully done by concentrating on instances of multimodal satirical texts that manifest elaborate and/or extended fabrication, thus bringing forth this invocation of accountability. In this regard, a particularly interesting viewpoint of this discussion is the notion of intentionality, as far as the latter constitutes a prominent aspect of the broader idea of agency.

I first address the issues of emotion, accountability, and emotional expression in stand-up comedy by elaborating on what can be described as emotional management or the instrumental use of emotion signs in ritualized performances. Taking cue from the character of stand-up comedy as an elusive performance genre that simultaneously builds on interactional investment and responsibility, I argue for a

semiotically informed approach, by focusing on the pragmatic aspects of emotional expression in social interaction. This approach will be illustrated by looking at a sequence of stand-up from a recent commercial release by the popular South African comic Trevor Noah, which also can serve as a bridge to the following section on satire and ethics. Here I develop an outline of satire as a practice and performance of moral accountability that places its emphasis on the cultural and social ramifications of satire instead of its more formal or technical definition.

In the final section I apply this conceptual framework to the topic and develop some of its further implications by using various examples, most notably my field recordings of the Canadian-Finnish comic Jamie MacDonald. This material consists of performances by MacDonald, which were recorded in Helsinki during late 2016 in the context of documenting material for my dissertation. I have been drawn toward societally and politically oriented or what has elsewhere been called “charged” (Krefting 2014) comedy, and paid particular attention to the intersections between stand-up comedy and satire from the perspective of their concomitant communicative forms and contexts. The various examples presented in this paper, while perhaps seemingly disparate or sparing in quantity, represent a discretionary sample of ongoing work that I have chosen with an eye for their relevance to problematize the interactional dynamics of satirical stand-up comedy.

Rather than adhering to the conventions of a classic ethnographic research article, I prefer to characterize the following discussion as an argument for thinking through the practices of satire and comedy using fresh theoretical perspectives and as an outline of a novel definition of satire. Consequently, the theoretical and methodological basis for this approach is also delineated as a combination of various sources. Even though my disciplinary home remains in folkloristics, and that background continues to prime me toward variations in cultural expression, performance, and group dynamics, I have now drawn freely from related academic fields, such as (linguistic) anthropology, semiotics, cultural theory, and humor studies. It is my contention that socially

central and culturally inexhaustible phenomena, such as comedy and satire, not only deserve but also require interdisciplinary perspectives without which their analysis would remain inexorably tenuous.

### **Ration Your Passion: The Emotional Expression in Stand-Up**

Insofar as stand-up comics may be considered ritual specialists, the presentation and management of appropriate emotions (with respect to genre, occasion, narrative storyline, etc.) is a core element of stand-up performances. Emotional expression is particularly highlighted in stand-up, as the bodily co-present interactional set-up of the genre generally demands engagement, investment, and involvement of its audiences in performance – most obviously by their voluntarily joining in on the collective laughter (for more on the intimacy and distance in stand-up, see Brodie 2014). Such intimacy and social cohesion, however ephemeral or temporary both may turn out to be, is effectively produced by performers through their use of emotional language. Comparably, modalities and genres of discourse like personal confessions, opinionated stance-taking, and gossip, that both imply and invoke heightened forms of accountability, provide comics with potent means for interactional engagement (relatedly in terms of confession and gossip, see also Robbins & Rumsey 2008: 409).

More often than not, emotional language use and moral judgments are also closely intertwined. For instance, disgust is an especially efficient emotion that is deployed for (corporeally) authenticating moral judgments, or rather *moralization* in the sense that the practice of labeling others’ behavior as disgusting or shameful is functional in constructing hierarchical distinctions between perceived normality and abnormality (Paasonen 2011: 88–89; Warner 2000: 4).

Earlier, I adopted the notion of “management” so as to integrate various textual, poetic, narrative, gestural, spatiotemporal, and interactional aspects of stand-up performances from the perspective of the performer (Lindfors forthcoming a; forthcoming b), and I suggest that emotional expression can be ap-

proached in the same way. Management pushes us to focus on how means are organized toward a fixed set of goals and in this case on how conventions of emotional language are instrumentally used by stand-up comics in interaction (cf. Scheer 2012: 209; Reddy 2001: 122).<sup>1</sup> Given certain qualifications, the notion of “emotional management” can additionally override the still dominant Western conception according to which emotions are thought and spoken of as preceding their expression via verbal or non-verbal modalities (Lutz & White 1986; Wilce 2009a).

A case could be made against conventional views that locate emotion safely in subjective inwardness by simply recalling that emotions are communicated through public expressions that fall under a speaker’s metapragmatic awareness and can be thus explicitly reflected on. This aspect is all the more obvious in the specifically “framed” environments of performances that both contain and open up these (potentially negative) expressions to inspection and aesthetic valuation (Bendix 2015; Beeman 2007: 286). Secondly, emotional expressions are understood as having an effect on those states to which they seemingly are only just referring (Reddy 2001: 103–104, including the citations). As William M. Reddy points out, public, personal expressions of emotion (“emotives” in Reddy’s terminology, although not to be confused with Jakobson’s [1960] classic use of the term) are performative in the sense that, as expressions, they are organizing experience. James M. Wilce (2009a: 10–12) similarly recalls that human action frequently makes use of indexical signs that precede their referents: emotion signs do not merely reflect some prior causes of which they are the effects; they may themselves have entailments as when we provoke emotional states in ourselves.

These ideas shake the foundations of the received wisdom that views performances of emotion through the lenses of “sincerity” or “authenticity” – two notions that also organize stand-up comedy to a high degree (Colleary 2015: 41–66; Reddy 2001: 101; Fenigsen & Wilce 2012; Keane 2002). In terms of stand-up comics, this means that whether or not comics regularly feel the (extreme) emotions they present, they certainly do use the verbal and non-

verbal conventions of the emotion signs available to create the possibilities for intersubjective states with their audiences (Wilce 2009b: 47; Scheer 2012: 214). Authenticity or “accuracy” of an emotional expression is thus not necessarily ascertained by any reference to supposed inner states or intentions, but rather is a function of its coherence with other co(n)-textual utterances, gestures, and acts (Reddy 2001: 100).<sup>2</sup>

To refine our take on emotional expression as well as gradually orient ourselves toward the specifics of satirical discourse, I suggest we acknowledge emotion signs as operating on all three Peircean levels, namely, the iconic, indexical, and symbolic. Not only are emotion signs often read as indexical, causal or “natural” emissions associated with psychological or physiological states, the iconic similarities inferred from their discursive and sensuous qualities can vary according to context, and their conventionalized symbolic meanings have been shown to be as historically and ideologically volatile as those of any other communicative signs (Wilce 2009a). These qualities are brilliantly invoked, objectified, and playfully explored in the latest stand-up special by Trevor Noah (*Lost in Translation*, 2015), a South African comic whose fame skyrocketed in 2015 when he replaced Jon Stewart as the host of *The Daily Show*, a long-time spoof news show that satirizes current events. I thus want to briefly introduce a sequence from this performance before moving on to satire as a morally and affectively charged communicative device.

In a sequence that follows seemingly organically from his entrance onto the stage (starting at approximately 30 seconds into the commercial recording), Noah explores the indexical, performative, and (mock-)etiological aspects as well as the ideological mediation of what appears to be a seemingly natural, raw emotional interjection. When well-known comics enter the stage, an audience is regularly expected to holler, applaud, whistle, and express their excitement in various ways. At first thanking, greeting, and welcoming the audience, Noah eventually picks up on one of these hollers, juxtaposes this style of communication with propositional language use,

and lifts a specific emotional interjection up for inspection:

This is us, Washington D.C! [cheers and applause] Are you guys feeling good? Yeah! Whoo-hoo, whoo-hoo to you... and that as well, ma'am, that as well. I love the sounds people make. It's so much fun, yeah. We're just – we're just throwing language out of the window, I like that. I feel like we're devolving as human beings now. No, 'cause that was the thing that separated us from the apes, wasn't it? The fact that we chose speech. Yeah. The monkeys used to run around and screech. [screeching while mimicking the gestures of apes] And we, we're like, "No." [points to the side] – "English." But now we've started to go back to that, started to embrace our roots. People get excited: "Are you happy?" – "I'm real happy." – "How happy?" – "Whoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!" "Whoo-hoo!" [writhes and twists himself]. (Noah 2015)

In short, Noah objectifies the embodied emotion sign of *whoo-hoo*, renders it explicitly available to reflective awareness. This emotion sign seems to be marked by its aural, but also its embodied, gestural, and other sensuous qualities, such as the facial expression and the bodily writhing that Noah exemplifies when emitting the sound. His embodied performance of the interjection illustrates what Webb Keane (2003: 414–415) describes as the *bundling* of sensuous qualities in iconic signs, as well as the bringing into relief of some of these qualities that is typically a function of simultaneous indexicality. That is, while we might intuitively associate the aural qualities of *whoo-hoo* as indexical of its social significance (excitement, "happiness"), these qualities are inescapably bundled with various other sensuous qualities of the interjection that "can become contingent but real factors in its social life". The fact that Noah is able to take the interjection as an object of explicit attention and perform it without actually "engaging" with it, without meaningfully using it, in turn provides the yet-to-become-significant proof that the purportedly self-evident qualities of such "spontaneous" signs are also outcomes of naturali-

zation. In other words, in everyday use, the intense sound *whoo-hoo* is naturalized as an icon of an intensified "inner state" as well as an index of an emotion that Noah labels "happiness".

Next, Noah contrasts the seemingly self-evident, natural roots of the interjection with what is generally regarded as anything but self-evident – the domain of ideologies.

And you know what's crazy is that we all know what that sound means. We don't agree on anything in this world – race, religion, politics – but that sound, that "whoo-hoo", has united us all. You can make that sound anywhere, and people accept it. As long as there's alcohol present, you can make that sound whoo-hoo! But there has to be alcohol. (Noah 2015)

By extrapolating from this apparently agreed-upon nature of emotional interjections, Noah suggests how this specific interjection has "united us all". There are some contextual qualifications, however. Working from "alcohol" as an experiential boost, Noah goes on to explain how you cannot emit the sound in the office, nor in church after common prayer. But in any case, he recapitulates that it is commonly taken for granted that everyone knows what *whoo-hoo* means: "It means happiness, yeah. It means the happiness of the people."

A fracture to this logic emerges when Noah notes that he personally would not have "picked" this particular sound as the sound of happiness: "No one asked me to vote on it. I didn't get to choose." From him, we hear, *whoo-hoo* might be more apt as the sound of sadness, a notion that is elaborated on through dramatization of a funerary rite. The prototypical indexical value of "happiness", then, seems not to adhere to the interjection or the sound *by itself*, but rather is unveiled as an outcome of conventional agreement and typification. Not only does iconicity entail indexicality, as Noah seems to remind us, but indexes and icons both entail (potentially contested) symbolic and ideological mediation for them to become intelligible and functional socially as tokens of a type (Keane 2003).

Having finished exploring what is understood as the primarily indexical aspects of the said interjection, the mood of the performance changes slightly as Noah moves on to what I call a racially oriented mock-etiological account of the origins of this emotion-sign:

Such a fun sound. The sound of happiness. *The sound* [raises voice] of white happiness, in particular. Yeah... I've tracked it. I've searched for the source of "who-hoo" and I found it originated with white people. White – white woman, in particular. Yeah, that's where it comes from. That is the sound, of a white woman's turn-up. That is the sound of her getting into the game. (Noah 2015)

Noah traces the etiological origins, or "the source" of the interjection – somewhat playfully no doubt, although outwardly, he still appears perfectly serious – to white people, white women in particular, who can thus be held accountable for its social value and meaning. He relates this information as his own, the result of his investigations, calling forth a sense of engagement, as the audience can receive this piece of knowledge first-hand. Moreover, he discloses the interjection not only as a joyful sign of white group-identification, but also as a social and sexual signal by which white women "instinctively" draw the attention of white men, who reciprocate by mimicking the call. In other words, this interjection is described as performatively functioning as a "mating call". It is suggested that the sound has mimetically, "as a virus", expanded onto the society and other groups and from the "natural" and "instinctive" use of white women to a "learned" use by everyone else. And so, the very different experience of black people is ultimately occasioned against this framing background:

Black people whoo-hoo, but it's not the natural sound black people make for fun, you know? Black people can whoo-hoo. Black people often do whoo-hoo. But it's not instinctively a black sound of happiness. And I think it's because black people aren't comfortable with the "who-hoo".

Deep down inside, there's a certain moment in whoo-hoo when every black person stops enjoying it. There's just – there's just a moment, when – and maybe this is just my personal experience but I fear it sounds eerily similar to a police siren. [laughter arises] There's just a moment when it stops being fun. [laughter and cheers continues] There's just that split second, where it's like "who-hoo", "who", "who", "who", "who", "whoop-whoop", "whoop", "whoop", "boop" [the interjection transforming into the sound of a siren]. (Noah 2015)

The long preface for developing this seemingly off-the-cuff topic – an individual interjection – is thus revealed as a stylized elaboration of satire on racial relations in the U.S. In short, to be anxiously reminded of the police by an everyday interjection has to be read as also being hyper-oriented toward the police. Noah develops the theme further by narratively dramatizing his own experience and anxiety as a black subject in close contact with the police force, which then leads into a long discussion of institutional racism in recent U.S. social history. By first invoking the incident of Trayvon Martin followed by the cases of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Walter Scott – innocent black men killed at the hands of the police during recent years – he ultimately unfolds his concerns explicitly, without a hint of irony: "Cause every day I turn on the TV, it seems like another black person has been shot."

To take a step back, the satirical footing of the speaker as well as the target of the satire are keyed by the appropriately incongruous (Oring 2003) association of a police siren with an emotion sign that has been framed by Noah as an emblem of predominantly "white" happiness. Recalling once again the fact that indexical signs necessitate ideological mediation, the satire here seems to be instrumentally manipulating these mediational processes. In other words, it flouts our ordinary ideological assumptions according to which interjections ("oops", "phew", "who-hoo"), seemingly spontaneous, embodied emotion signs, would be immune to confabulation and historical and political manipulation. After all,

interjections have been traditionally located at the very periphery of language. They are something that Herder thought of as the human equivalents of animal sounds and in modern linguistics are still regarded as being “nearest of all language sounds to instinctive utterance” (Sapir 1921: 6–7; Kockelman 2003). The motivation for a “natural”, indexical sign that we would not normally regard as politically or ethically charged, is thus playfully denaturalized.

Characteristically for satirical discourse, the suggested interpretation is playful fabrication (cf. Simpson 2003: 167; Haugerud 2013); folklorists here recognize an etiological legend, a narrative that purports to explain the origin of something (see Oring 2008). Yet what interests me is precisely what is being accomplished by this elaborate fabrication or legendry. In short, its function seems to relate at least in part to *the priming, contextualizing, and gestation of a particular moral accountability upon which the eventual satirical punch of the routine is emotionally and causally dependent*. While presenting itself as a neutral description, Noah’s satire seems to indirectly suggest that something is not as it should be, that a certain someone (“the whites”) could and should be held accountable for this state of affairs – even more so as the satire has been uttered by one who is a member of the group of people being wronged.

### **Satire and Ethics: Toward a Heuristic Model**

Satire is not something only professional comics are able to master; it is a basic, arguably, even mundane, communicative device and discursive practice (Simpson 2003). It is generally described as a “venomous”, “biting”, or “stinging” critique of hypocrisies, ideologies, or “vices” present in society (for attributes such as “venom”, see Elliott 1970; for satire as targeting “social vices”, Draitser 1994: xxi). Further still, satire tends to be intuitively aligned with “progressive” social interests – providing us with the first hint of the culture-specific linguistic ideologies related to this discursive practice that associate specific people with certain linguistic forms – even though claims for satirical purposes are naturally heard from other social and political fractions as well. While perhaps handy as a provisional

elaboration, such an evaluative and possibly normative starting point is hardly useful in any rigorous analytical context. Whose “vices” and “hypocrisies” are we talking about, after all? What does this “venom” or “bite” entail? And how does satire differ from mere irony that is also deemed to be a form of negative critique (Rahtu 2006; Hutcheon 1994; also Shoaps 2009)?

As a metapragmatic label for a discourse practice or device, satire is identified as having a minimum of two positions, one of which is construed as the target of the satire, while the other is its producer, that is, the one responsible for the satirical text (both positions naturally indexing alignments with presupposed systems of sociocultural value, see Du Bois 2007). As is also known, whether or not some communicative event is satirical or whether the event can be construed as such, and what are the ramifications of such an interpretation, frequently becomes the very bones of contention in the explicit social and ethical debate. It is even possible to argue that satire has no stable ontological status, as Paul Simpson has pointed out. The status of “satire” rather emerges in interaction: it is *conferred* upon the text or performance as a consequence of the inferential work done by its recipients (Simpson 2003: 153). This means that both the targets of satire and the intentions of the satirist are conferred and mapped onto the performance, which thus increases the satire’s social contentiousness to the point where explicit metapragmatic reports by the satirist (“what I said was meant as satire”) can be invalidated by recipients.

The prominently value-laden nature of satire as a metapragmatic label is also manifested in that cultural texts and performances representing worldviews and moral codes foreign to one’s own – let us say satire carrying racist implications if we are determinedly anti-racist – are not easily granted the status of satire but perhaps preferably regarded as coarse or insulting ridicule (symptomatically, see, e.g., Weber 2013: 57). Didier Fassin’s (2012) remark concerning the interpretation and even the mere description of moral facts as always being at risk of normative positioning is thus clearly pertinent here, and as I

hope to convincingly argue, has to be understood as also including the labeling of a discursive artifact as satirical. To summarize, the problem of satire as an *analytical* concept is that it might insidiously recruit the objects of analysis and the analyst herself to a partial and normative framework that may not actually be at play for the agents and groups under study (to paraphrase Nakassis 2012: 717 on brands). This aspect is something that will be kept in mind as I here gradually outline my own, heuristic approach to this device and discursive practice.

When satire is approached as a communicative device and discursive practice used in everyday interaction and performance – rather than as a literary genre, as strong tradition would have it – it is typically articulated with irony, if not also humor. As a point of departure, it is fairly noncontroversial to suggest that a necessary feature of satire is an ironic, negative comment with respect to some chosen target. For instance, Simpson (2003: 99) argues that the impetus of satire is a certain *disapprobation* by the satirist of some aspect of the satirized target, and then extrapolates from this view by suggesting that “all categories of satirical target can ultimately be expanded upwards to encompass the discursive practices of elite groups, dominant institutions or powerful individuals” (2003: 148). And insofar as practices are designated as systematically forming the objects of which they speak (e.g. Foucault 1972), satire thus emerges as inherently performative, or rather, as counter-performative.

Simpson further claims that satire is built on what he dissects as a “double irony”, and thus, I would suggest that we simply look at satire as a form or subcategory of irony (see Simpson 2003: 90 and onwards; also Rahtu 2006). The difference between irony as a broader, more neutral term and satire as its singular subcategory, I argue, is that satire specifically engages with ethics and morals in both the positions of target and producer. While earlier research has certainly taken note of this aspect of satire, as an area of sustained focus, it seems to nevertheless have remained underdeveloped and often implicit. Still, remarks such as Northrop Frye’s famous definition of satire as “militant irony”, noting how satire

requires “at least an implicit moral standard” (1957: 224, 233–234), and W.H. Auden’s claim that a suitable satirical target was someone who transgresses “the moral law” ([1952]1963: 383–384), do indeed point the way. Revealingly, Auden added that anyone who lacked the “normal faculty of conscience” (the wicked and the lunatic are Auden’s type examples) is unsuitable for this position. In other words, the target of satire has to be both capable of moral responsibility and committed to that responsibility.

Taking my cue from Auden, I propose that satire generally functions by way of tracing, invoking, and attributing moral accountability, and thus by implication, an agency. Whereas irony is very much possible in accidental and unintentional situations and settings, our linguistic ideologies dictate that satire depends on a target that falls within the purviews of moral accountability (on “sarcasm”, cf. Haiman 1998). Sometimes this accountability is distributed across a broader social field (via various rhetorical framing devices for example), as when we satirize certain institutional practices or even large-scale processes like “modernization” or the general *Zeitgeist* (see Enfield & Kockelman 2017). On occasion, it can be concentrated into a single agent, be it a named person (e.g. politician) or a corporation whose liability is being raised (cf. Hill & Zepeda 1992: 197). In any case, it is the moral integrity of the target that is brought into question as somehow reprehensible. Ralph M. Rosen (2012: 29) refers to this “driving” aspect of satire as its “didacticism” and puts it thusly: “The guiding premise of all satire [...] is that something is not ‘as it should be,’ and it takes a satirist to set the world straight.”

Attributions of accountability and agency are endemic to social life, just as intention-seeking is a basic human propensity. Indeed, the two are intertwined aspects of social behavior in the sense that ethical reasoning typically involves ascriptions of intention and motivation (Keane 2016; Laidlaw 2010; Williams 1993). However, depending on cultural sensibilities and (ontological) assumptions, accountability and responsibility can also be assigned to nonhuman agents and entities: spirits, gods, supernatural forces, etc. Attributing moral responsi-

bility to corporations, on the other hand, makes it reasonable to satirize their practices. Illuminatingly, this can be done by metaphorizing such entities as discrete agents with voices, intentions, even emotions. The point worth raising here is that in the latter case of corporate responsibility, the notion and implications of agency cannot be reduced to intentionality or “conscious planning”, but must rather be understood as encompassing the more general theme of wielding power or having an effect on social reality (Duranti 2004: 453). Intentionality presupposes agency, not the other way around.

Finally, it seems to me curiously symptomatic that while self-parody and especially self-irony are well-established notions and popular activities, also among stand-up comics, the label of “self-satire” does not seem to be part of our common vocabulary. While part of the problem is presumably related to the popular or intuitive conception of satire as a form of outwardly directed social critique, I propose that this aspect is also – if not more intimately – connected to satire’s invocation of moral accountability. Self-irony is often directed at features of oneself that are perhaps more lightly discounted (appearance, body image, personality traits, viewpoints and opinions, etc.), but satirizing oneself, I believe, would imply a more thoroughgoing and (ambivalently) serious critique of one’s own ethical constitution or moral integrity as a social being.

That being said, it is perfectly possible for the satirist to have taken part in (institutional) practices that are the targets of her satire. Universal methods of calibrating the narrating-I with the narrated-I in first-person narratives (see e.g. Herman 2013; cf. Double [2005]2014: 393–408; Seizer 1997), for instance, enable speakers to denounce their antecedent actions or personas morally, that is, in a manner that could be labeled self-satirical. In fact, an ethical incongruity of the kind has been recognized as defining “postmodern cynicism”, a condition in which we routinely act in accordance with prevailing ideological norms (of market liberalism, consumerism, etc.) while simultaneously (mis)recognizing these norms as false, detrimental, or oppressive. In such sociopolitical and cultural predicament in which

also humor may “cease to struggle” (Sloterdijk 1987: 305; also Boyer & Yurchak 2010; Yurchak 1997), the notion of self-satire might as well become regarded as contradictory or even conceited.

With these preliminaries in mind, satire can be heuristically outlined as *a form of irony that is characterized by its ethically accountable and emotionally charged target, which is perceived (and insinuated) by the satirist as being morally reprehensible*. Not so much a definition as an invitation, this model is hardly detailed technically, as it does not say much about the mechanism for how satire works. However, following the suggestion of the humor scholar Seppo Knuutila (1992), I chose to begin with the aims and purposes of the study and tried to steer the attention toward the social and cultural ramifications of satirical discourse as a practice and performance of moral accountability instead of its formal definition or technical details (cf. also Hutcheon 1994). Next, I develop the further implications of this framework in the context of stand-up performance by looking at an example drawn from fieldwork.

### **Satire as Performance of Moral Accountability**

By attributing and assigning accountability and agency, does satire give rise to both of these qualities? Judith Butler (1997: 45–47) would probably side with this performative viewpoint, insofar as she notes by drawing on Nietzsche that the subject often appears only “as a consequence of a demand for accountability.” She refers to the fact that we tend to isolate the causes of events and doings in intentional agents, simultaneously producing and figuring these agents as singular subjects. By purposefully raising the question of moral accountability, satire can similarly foreground or recast chains of events or casual behavioral patterns as intentional, meaningful actions of agentive beings – a direction that Trevor Noah’s routine also pointed toward. One way of achieving this seems to work by transforming “natural” signs into seemingly “non-natural” ones, so as to simultaneously invoke notions of accountability (for such transformations, see Grice [1961]1989); however, the methods of satire are not reducible to this element. If satire may have a tendency to treat

surrounding events as meaningful signs, perhaps expanding the field of social agency in the process (cf. Laidlaw 2010: 157), this would indicate that the purpose of satire is to trace ethically accountable targets. Moreover, if we accept the premise that satire is indeed “play with a bite to it” (to borrow from Moira Marsh [2015: 66] expanding on Gregory Bateson), the sort of stylized dramatization of (intentional) agency described above can be intimately linked with just the emotional and moral “bite” in question (cf. Oring 2016: 104).

I will now turn to an instance in which an individual agent (although representing a group, the neo-Nazis) is discursively mobilized in the service of satire to see how satire gives rise to the above-mentioned dialectic of moral accountability and emotion by the use of various stylistic and textual devices. The following transliteration constitutes a sequence from a performance by Jamie MacDonald, a Canadian-born stand-up comic who has lived in Finland for fourteen years (the video material is in possession of the author). MacDonald is a transgender man who has dealt with aspects of his gender reassignment process as part of his stand-up – the reason I bring this point up relates to the fact that the following routine also turns on the trope of gender transition.

The performance partly transcribed below was recorded on December 11, 2016, in Helsinki at a club called Feminist Comedy Night (hosted by MacDonald himself), and should be contextualized by understanding the prominent rise of both populist and far-right political movements as well as outright neo-Nazis in Finland (following on the heels of their international counterparts, of course). In fact, the bit was first performed on September of the same year at another stand-up club in Helsinki, Kekkoslubi, a week after a man named Jimi Karttunen had died in Finland while opposing a demonstration of the neo-Nazi organization Suomen Vastarintaliike (“Finnish Resistance Movement”), as a result of an assault by a member of that same organization. In the stated performance on September, which I also saw, MacDonald first took issue with media for dealing with the death incident ignorantly, for asking “What had Jimi

done to provoke these Nazis?”, and secondly, for juxtaposing neo-Nazis with immigrants. According to MacDonald’s proposed syllogism, juxtaposing and “tolerating” both neo-Nazis and immigrants is a false or skewed balancing act, because while a portion of immigrants are Muslims, and a portion of Muslims are angry Jihadists, it does not follow directly that all immigrants will be Jihadists – while contrarily all (neo-)Nazis are indeed Nazis.

Similarly, in the performance recorded in December, MacDonald lays the groundwork for his routine by reminiscing on related protest against fascism and neo-Nazism and by elaborating on the renegotiation of Leftist identity in an unprecedented societal and political situation (in Finland) where one has to deal with self-proclaimed Nazis. In particular, he recounts how he had recently had to rework his idea of tolerance “now that there are actual, [...] literal Nazis around.” Again pointing out a rhetorically skewed and ungrounded demand for reciprocal balance, he quotes the Nazis as demanding the liberal Left “to be tolerant of white supremacists” in the same measure that the Left demands equal rights for minorities, immigrants, women, etc. Rather than elaborating on the familiar problem of “tolerating intolerance”, MacDonald promptly invokes the notion of causal necessity: “Were you born a Nazi? I don’t think so.”

Importantly, in both performances, MacDonald’s main targets seem to have been constituted by public discursive practices that share logical and moral fallacies: 1) the discursive practices of the media, and 2) the discursive practices of neo-Nazis, both of which are represented and criticized as skewed and unsound. However, a sociopolitical debate or a critique such as this one does not in itself constitute satire: first of all, nothing particularly ironic has yet been uttered. That is to say, the properly satiric (as well as more artistic and elaborate in terms of performance) sequence of this particular routine is yet to come, namely, consisting of a counterfactual imagining of turning to Nazism as a transition along the same lines as a gender reassignment operation:

- 1a that's kind of the tautology there  
 1b and it's not like you kind of...  
 1c people think you kind of like wake up in the morning like [...]  
 2a "I think I'm gonna...  
 2b I – I identify now as a Nazi  
 2c I – I wanna like, you know  
 2d I gotta, you know, change my political orientation"  
 3a and people'll be like:  
 3b "When did you first know that you were a Nazi?"  
 [turning over to his right, questioning an imaginary interlocutor]  
 4a "I was very young, I was a child, I heard *Finlandia* [L]  
 [repositioning himself spatially to his right while turning slightly over to his left to answer an imaginary interlocutor]  
 4b and... one time I shaved my head and... it looked really right [L]  
 4c I just went into... went into the mirror and I...  
 4d you know, I put on my bomber jacket from my cousin and I did this salute in the mirror  
 [raises left arm in a Nazi salute]  
 4e and it just looked like me  
 [open left palm touching chest]  
 4f so, I want to 'Nazition'"

MacDonald juxtaposes some of the stereotypical phases related to newfound gender identification with discovering and identifying with Nazism as a political and social orientation (this implicit juxtaposition was made even more salient in the earlier performance on September when MacDonald set the imaginary conversation as having happened in a "Nazi clinic"). While this is not the place to discuss mutual interrelations and theoretical discussions regarding gender and (biologically perceived) sex, this sequence is conditioned by the premise that whereas gender identification is regarded as causally predetermined by natural constraints, holding or supporting ideological systems, such as Nazism or fascism, is in contrast an intentional choice which one can – and should – rationally oppose. The sa-

tirical superimposition of the two domains is functional in highlighting the moral accountability that we associate with voluntary (and generally harmful) identifications such as (extreme) political affiliations in contradistinction with gender identifications that are seen as predetermined, necessary, personal, and most definitely non-harmful. In this regard, the foundational opposition between causal determination and free will emerges as one of the most powerful tropes that satirists seem to lean on (cf. with Trevor Noah's invocation of an opposition between the natural vs. "learned" use of the *whoo-hoo* interjection).

I would like to remind the reader here that what is critically targeted by the comic is presumably still reprehensible discursive practices held and publicly reiterated by certain groups, not necessarily individuals, even though an individual agent is explicitly mobilized here for satirical purposes. We could say that certain (fabricated) consequences or "logical" outcomes of these discursive practices are illustrated by the comic through the use of a brief scene. Bearing this focus in mind, consider how and why the experience and the mindset of the imaginary Nazi-transitioner is then foregrounded by various stylistic and textual devices. Most importantly, the counterfactual scene is mostly enacted rather than recounted, which intensifies the visual and perceptual experience of the scene by narrowing the (temporal) distance between the narrated event and the ongoing performance event. Embodied enactment allows the comic to gesturally portray the actions from the perspective of the target agent, which iconically enhances the vividness of the sequence. The sequence is further layered with direct quotations that expressively portray and give us access to the mindset of this agent. The epiphanic realization of the would-be-Nazi is verbalized as a string of repetitive clauses that highlight and dramatize his or her intentions by placing the emphasis on desires and moods (2a–2d). Similarly, the phases of physical readjustment to a new "political orientation" (4a–4d) are described in a way reminiscent of what Keane (2016: 86–87) labels as "overdescription of the action". Briefly put, the method of "overdescription" constitutes a pur-

poseful violation of the Gricean maxim of quantity (“be as informative as is required”) in the sense that by willfully drawing attention to the verbose or otherwise overly descriptive quality of utterance, such as listing individual action sequences discretely, speakers are understood as specifically intending to enhance the emotional and moral efficacy of their accusations.

The formal technique utilized by the comic here is one of parody, parodying the stereotypical phrases (and phrases, e.g. 3b) related to adapting to a new-found gender identification, as depicted through aesthetic, corporeal, and sartorial practices. The sequence culminates in a pun (“Nazism” and “transition” equals “Nazition”) that succinctly captures the creative juxtaposition and cognitive blending of these two frames (see also Simpson 2003). Finally, the sequence is framed by the comic – and I will come back to some of the implications of this framing in a minute – as a general practice with farther-reaching ramifications rather than as an idiosyncratic fancy (“people think you kind of like wake up in the morning like”).

What should one make of such an extended dramatization and enactment of intentional agency? First of all, in the context of an interactionally engaging genre of oral performance such as stand-up comedy, vivid gestural enactments and indirect forms of expression may be seen as increasing communicative efficiency by drawing audiences in to participate in meaning-making (see Besnier 1992: 163). (In addition, such an artistically elaborate sequence seems to receive the biggest laughs from the audience, not the least of which is due to curious details such as the portrayal of Jean Sibelius’ *Finlandia* hymn as triggering the political conversion process in childhood.) However, I believe that the emphasis on intentional agency bears implications regarding to satire, and even more so if we follow through on the theoretical outline of satire as engaging with moral accountability.

In general, “causal accounting, as the figuring (out) of agency, tends to focus on those causes that are particularly relevant to the agents who are doing the accounting” (Kockelman 2017: 16; also Keane

2016: 80; Carroll 2001; Drew 1998). What is meant here is that we purposefully foreground those aspects of agency that we deem relevant to whatever context or situation we might be inhabiting and whatever interactional or social ends we might be pursuing – for instance, criticizing or satirizing (or alternatively praising) certain targets. It is fair to assume that similar fine-tuning with respect to the definition of the situation takes place when people attribute responsibility and accountability to others and their actions, and I suggest that the technique of foregrounding (intentional) agency in satire must be understood in terms of this self-serving premise. Each of the textual devices and small stylistic choices highlighted above, such as the “overdescription” and the mimetic, gestural reenactment of the scene, are seen as participating in this emphasis on intentional agency, so it becomes more reasonable to simultaneously (if only implicitly) invalidate and ridicule the actions being depicted. More precisely, it becomes reasonable to ridicule the false logic of the discursive practices from which these counterfactual actions could potentially follow.

I would also like to draw attention to the fact that satire often targets what appears to be habitual action, unpacking it as *intentional and yet lacking self-awareness*. Habitual actions, in this case, have to be understood as encompassing both the discursive and the verbal as well as embodied and non-verbal practices. To clarify, it is possible for an actor to do something both intentionally and without awareness at the same time – in fact, this mode can be argued as constituting the very notion of the habitual. By necessity, a lion’s share of our routine, everyday actions and doings are performed below the reasonable level of awareness, and yet it would be a clear mistake to deem these actions as unintentional. For example, when swimming (given that I am a competent swimmer) I am very much intentionally performing the embodied, patterned movements that constitute that particular action sequence. But this fact does not translate to the idea that I would consciously *be aware of* my embodied actions at all times. In contrast, the fact that I *do not* have to consciously focus and fixate on these movements means

they have been ingrained in my embodied habitus practically – indeed, gestures form a major domain of the habitual (Young 2011). These movements and actions have been sedimented into habitual practices, to “an intentionality not necessarily based on propositional thought” (Scheer 2012: 203; Duranti 2015: 20–21; also Throop 2010: 40–41). In addition, practices are fruitful targets for satire, I would argue, because un-self-aware practices are interpreted as unconscious responses that are driven in large measure by unregulated emotions.

In this regard, it is indeed illuminating to look at the intersections between satire and the structural setting and dynamics of practical jokes as analyzed by the folklorist Moira Marsh (2015). In practical jokes that are specifically organized to cultivate a moral comment (not all are), the performative frame that is unilaterally imposed on the unassuming target importantly also builds on and plays with the (attributed) intentional mindset of the target. Practical jokes will frame the (reprehensible) actions of the target as his or her own intentional doing, consequently fixing the responsibility of the action on the target’s own shoulders and thus satisfying “our thirst for poetic justice on small-time wrongdoers” (Marsh 2015: 60). In particular, Marsh explains how the logic of practical jokes does dictate that “targets are not acting but being themselves, unwittingly putting themselves on display” (Marsh 2015: 63). The description of “unwitting” action here has to be understood as an ideal expectation by the joker, as for the practical joke to work ideally, the target must be acting “unwittingly”, or at least the quality of “unwitting” action has to be attributed to him in terms of interpretative acts. Needless to say, this quality as identified by Marsh, which I have here described as “un-self-aware and yet intentional”, also constitutes the general domain of habitual practices.

Consider lastly here the following satirical quip by the British stand-up comic, Stewart Lee, known as a politically liberal or Leftist performer (as well as a columnist for *The Guardian*). He starts an episode of his *Comedy Vehicle* (Season Four, Episode Two) dealing with Islamophobia by calmly asserting: “Like most reasonable people, I hate all Muslims,

except the ones I’ve met, who seem fine.” By following the line of reasoning developed in the current article, we can say that through parodic imitation, Lee presents Islamophobia as a habitual practice of unfounded and self-conflicted hatred. This practice is depicted as feeding on unreflective prejudice and crumbling upon the slightest hint of personal experience with the object of hatred. Stylistically, the un-self-aware intentionality of the parodied mindset is, once again, emphasized by a simplified – almost syllogistic – clause syntax that enhances the satirical effect by giving rise to the appearance of habitual self-evidence. By implying that the Islamophobe follows what appears to be highly scripted behavior, the full agency of this target is both questioned and ridiculed, insofar as “any habitual behavior pursued unreflectively makes us foolish and vulnerable” (Marsh 2015: 68; cf. Bergson 1935). To also take Lee’s trademark deadpan delivery into account, it is intriguing to note that his paralinguistically and gesturally unmarked, deadpan form of expression produces and underscores this habitual behavior through an iconic resemblance. That is, the unreflective and unmarked casualness on the level of embodied expression, which becomes salient in the context of crude Islamophobia, metapragmatically diagrams itself as an icon of an unreflective and habitual social practice.

### Concluding Remarks

It is the guiding premise of this article that satire can be regarded as a form of ironic discourse that engages with ethics and morals in very specific ways. In particular, I have explored the idea that the target of satire has to be one to which moral accountability (and by implication, the potential for agency) can and should be attributed. Further, I have looked at how this dynamic is harnessed and dialectically dramatized to enhance satire’s emotional and moral efficacy in comic performances. I would like to emphasize here that satire does not necessitate elaborate dramatization of *intentional* agency. There are plenty of satirical cartoons and jests, for instance, that depict their targets as one-dimensional stereotypes without sparing much explicit thought on the issue

of intent. That is, satire often depicts (fabricated) outcomes or consequences and seems to concern itself explicitly with *who* has done or continues to do *what*, rather than *why* something occurred (see Duranti 2015). However, intentions and purposes can be regarded as something that satire addresses or points toward even in the absence of any explicit dramatization.

As importantly, I have considered it valuable to broaden our perspectives on satire by problematizing it in various communicative environments, including embodied oral performances. Insofar as communicative media, channels, and contexts have their particular purposes and (visual, verbal, aural) affordances for meaningful expression, these outlets also bring variegating aspects of common stylistic devices, such as satire, into greater light. In particular, interactionally engaging genres of performance, such as stand-up comedy, seem to favor gestural and embodied (re)enactments that enable its performers to vividly portray intentional or habitual agency by affording a visual supplement to verbal narration (also Lindfors forthcoming b).

I have also drawn attention to the fact that habitual practices seem to provide satire with suitable targets in that 1) practices are by definition recurrent, conventionalized, and socially influential, not coincidental or idiosyncratic, and 2) as intentional actions of agentive beings, they articulate intimately with notions of accountability. What is more, satirists seem to draw pleasure from targeting their ridicule specifically on the unaware, sedimented nature of many practices, thereby simultaneously questioning their moral integrity. Veena Das (2012: 139) points out that because of the “strong emphasis on intentionality and agency in our contemplation of ethics, habitual actions are often reduced to ‘mere behavior’”. The Western domain of the moral foregrounds conscious agency and decision-making, which is inversely seen with Euro-American satire insofar as satirical texts tend to dramatize these aspects of behavior. However, by articulating habitual actions with intentionality, I have looked at how satire can interrogate or counter such tendencies by showing us how habitual practices are also suffused

with moral aspects and choices. Satirical attacks on (morally reprehensible) habitual practices can be thus construed vis-à-vis the classic Bergsonian viewpoint according to which laughter corrects behavior that has become too mechanical, and can thus bring out “the human” – the moral – in us (Bergson 1935). In doing so, satire provides its users with an efficient tool to provoke moral stances from their audiences, which as a tendency can be said to constitute important (ethno-)methodological and epistemological aspects of this multipurpose communicative device.

It is an inherent aspect of any study of satire – one that should be answered by analyzing cases in their ethnographic contexts and taking into account the broader repercussions of satirical texts – to question whether this communicative device actually serves any higher good by unveiling “truths” or triggering democratic debate, instead of merely circulating negative stereotypes of its targets and in the worst case supporting the cynical point of view according to which “things never change”. The focus on the (attributed and dramatized) moral accountability that is presented here can be understood as partaking in the same problem, but from a complementary angle, especially when we should regard such attributions and dramatizations as potentially rendering the targets of satire more multi-dimensionally and morally approachable.

Cultural and social analysts need to pay attention to satire and stand-up comedy insofar as these cultural forms regularly engage with and comment on such fundamental aspects of social behavior as accountability, agency, and concomitant perceptions of intentionality – and are able to do so with considerable traction. In this respect, I would give the final word here to Paul Kockelman (2017: 22), who has recently mused as follows: “In some sense, the most consequential forms of agency reside in who or what determines what counts as agency, and thus who or what should be held accountable as an agent.”

## Notes

- 1 The *locus classicus* inevitably invoked by “emotional management” is of course the work of Arlie R. Hochschild (1979, 1983). While I want to acknowledge her

pioneering research on emotion work and emotional labor, my own semiotically informed approach differs from hers in consciously abstaining from assuming any “true” emotions within a person that would become shaped for the purposes of emotional labor or management.

- 2 To broaden the perspective, one should also take into account the linguistic ideologies that dictate specific valuations of interrelated linguistic forms and contexts: cultural and social contexts that privilege concerns with personal sincerity, an example being the Protestant West, often distrust ritualized (emotional) expression because of its perceived “emptiness” deriving from conventionality (Robbins 2001, esp. pp. 598–599).

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