

In Defense Of Satire

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A sense of humor is integral to appreciating the warp and woof of human life. It is for this reason that satire can have tremendous didactic value. It exposes human folly via a tongue-in-cheek emulation of that folly. As it turns out, the fatuousness of fatuous things can be elucidated via a judicious deployment of exaggeration. As Thomas Jefferson once noted: “Ridicule is the only weapon that can be used against unintelligible propositions.”

Done well, satire serves as an epistemic jolt. It forces us to reassess that to which we have become overly-accustomed; and it invites us to notice things that we may not have otherwise noticed. The key is to do so without being gratuitously sententious.

Using humor (parody) is the best way to expose the dysfunctions of those in power (the socio-economic elite). A dry, turgid critique is not nearly as effective—as poignant—as a well-crafted lampoon; and what better way to expose privilege than to simply flaunt it in all its obnoxious-ness?

Those who insist that nobody ever ruffle the feathers of certain people (to wit: people of THEIR choosing) tend to be aficionados of political correct-ness. This is an authoritarian mindset characterized by puritanical sensibilities as well as a censorious attitude to all things heterodox. For p.c.-mongers, anything that infringes on anyone’s sense of propriety is seen as intolerable—irrespective of objective merit; and is denounced.

In evaluating the different ways in which human society has evolved over the centuries, it is important not to underestimate the importance of dissent; and to bear in mind that dissent often entails agitation—to wit: irritating those who insist that things remain a certain way (i.e. the way that THEY very much prefer). Homeostatic systems require a modicum of disruption if they are to do anything but stagnate. Systems cannot evolve without shaking things up from time to time.

The idea is to catalyze progress, which often involves “rocking the boat”. The alternative is torpor...and ideological calcification.

Perturbations are instigations. Static social systems don’t evolve. The point, then, is to rouse—nay, STIR—those who are intellectually complacent, inured to social norms, and thus aloof. Complacency and comfort are symbiotic; and both are friends of those benefiting from the status quo. The aim of satire is to break the stasis by introducing perturbation into an otherwise static system. Agitation is—in virtually all contexts—a catalyst for change; and, hopefully, progress. A measured degree of disruption—psychical and/or social—is required for evolution. This invariably involves some degree of discomfiture. As P.T. Barnum put it: “Comfort is the enemy of progress.”

Satirists shake things up. They do so not to cause consternation, but to bring to light that which is often occluded in the public eye. Naturally, this does not sit well with those who’d prefer the status quo be left fully in tact. And it certainly does not sit well with anyone with a Puritanical mindset. Reactionaries are easily thrown into a dither, claiming to be “offended” by anything that does not hew to their delicate sensibilities. Tampering with the established order is seen as a threat to what is a precarious equilibrium—a stasis upon which some have come to depend (whether ideologically or financially). Naturally, those who’s

bailiwick is upsetting sacred apple-carts are promptly rendered personae non grata.

Ultimately, though, a tenuousness of conviction explains outsized responses to the merest hint of blasphemy. When it comes to any instance of religious fundamentalism, we behold a friable ideology to which mobs of disgruntled, feeble-minded votaries cling in desperation. Such votaries are unable to contain their resentment for having their creed shown to be fatuous. Their agitation betrays the neurosis underlying their overwrought exhibitions of piety. Heterodoxy cannot be tolerated because it threatens the integrity of what turns out to be a house of cards.

And so it goes: Proponents of a frangible memplex tend to have a captious disposition. This ensures that they will go into any interaction with a massive chip on their shoulder. So when they encounter biting satire, their grievance is not about the credence of the points being made; it is that someone, somewhere had the audacity to rock a boat that they insist must never be rocked...or ruffled feathers that must never be ruffled.

Ideologues are often high-strung because of a nagging insecurity about the credence of their beliefs. Their conviction, it turns out, is as strident as it is groundless—a kind of overcompensation for the speciousness of their creed. Insecurity, then, is the root cause of the tizzies enumerated above. Only by attenuating the attendant neuroses can robust Reform become a viable prospect.

Meanwhile, it is the critics who drive progress. It is those willing to engage in critical reflection—even when it is very uncomfortable, even when it is stupendously inconvenient—who have the most courage. Demagogues, especially, are incapable of withstanding ridicule. The best way to expose the illusions they peddle is to MAKE FUN OF them. The best way to debunk specious ideologies is to MAKE FUN OF them. The best way to dismantle rickety dogmatic edifices is to MAKE FUN OF them.

Questions remain: In using stereotypes, are we ridiculing them or reinforcing them? The point, of course, is to shed a light on the obtuseness of stereotypes, not to validate them. Satire is supposed to EXPOSE folly, not encourage it. Its measured use of caricature is deliberate: as the role of such heightened portrayals is didactic.

A Brief History:

There is a long history of using satire to highlight the absurdities of society. We might start by going back to *the 6th century B.C.*, when the Ionian social critic, *Xenophanes of Colophon* composed his “silloi”. In these sarcastic critiques, widely-accepted ideas were satirized by a deft use of hyperbole known as “fabulism”. Interestingly, the object of Xenophanes’ satire was often religion. After all, what better object of critical scrutiny than that which is deemed sacrosanct...yet turns out to be deleterious to the weal of society?

The tradition of satirizing the sacred gathered steam in Athens during *the 5th century B.C.* The Athenian poet, *Cratinus* may well have been performing a public service when he parodied the most vaunted Greek oracles in his “Drapetides”. Naturally, he was impugned for “offending” those who took oracles seriously. Even as he was forced to contend with the ornery pearl-clutchers of Classical Antiquity, Cratinus demonstrated that worthwhile critique often requires an ample dose of temerity.

Further ground was broken by *Aristophanes of Kydathenaion*. In his play, “The Clouds”, he explored the comedy of ideas that circulated in the agora amongst its gaggle of preening apparatchiks. “The Acharnians” was a parody of the foibles that defined Athenian politics—bringing to light things that everyone knew

about, yet was reticent to comment on in polite society. Aristophanes was eventually persecuted for his insolence. By whom? By those who found him to be too offensive, of course. (Finger-wagging, it turns out, has a long history.)

Tellingly, this renowned playwright's persecutors happened to be those with the most clout. Consequently, THEIR offense was taken as an indication of HIS depravity. The satirist's impertinence is typically seen as a kind of sin whenever gilded toes are stepped on. If the socio-economic elite don't like it, the thinking went, then it must be ignoble. Alas. Power—be it affluence or social status—has been mistaken as a sign of virtue since time immemorial. Even way back then, it was a sign of privilege to decree what is and isn't socially acceptable; so the self-professed victims were often the real culprits.

As we will see, the reaction of socio-economic elites to such material—that is: to being made fun of—is manufactured ire. But as has always been the case, the haughty impresarios of propriety are not trying to help anyone; they are merely ensuring nobody else has a chance to make them look foolish. It's one thing for their iniquities to be exposed; but critique has much more of a sting when this is done in a comedic way. Indeed, a wink and a nudge can be more chafing than a punch.

In the early 4th century B.C., the Athenian playwright, Menandros of Dionysia / Lenaia (a.k.a. "**Menander**") satirized the panoply of common misconceptions in Greek folklore (ref. his "Dyskolos").

In the early 3rd century B.C., the Pyrrhonist philosopher, **Timon of Phlius** carried on the tradition of "silloi". Timon demonstrated that satire was about eschewing sycophancy in favor of a healthy skepticism (esp. of conventional wisdom). Those who were taken in by the superstitions that he mocked were, of course, "offended" by his comedy. However their grievance did nothing to show the credibility of their position. If anything, it is they who were guilty of the mendacity that they scoffingly ascribed to HIM. Later in the 3rd century B.C., Old Latin writer, **Gnaeus Naevius of Campania** pioneered "Palliata [Greek-style] Comoedia"...and, sure enough, was persecuted by the powers that be for making fun of them.

Over and over, the world learned that thoughtful parody is a surefire way to bring human folly to the fore. Hilarity is effective because it does this in a way that is relatable to the masses. That's why parody is a vital instrument of critique. The Cynic, **Menippus of Gadara** recognized this. Though his works have been lost, Menippus was renown for using satirical takes to expose the weaknesses his interlocutors' positions. While we cannot read his text, it seems that he set an important precedent. The canny rhetorician avoided ad hominem attacks, addressing the merit of the ideas themselves.

Menippus' aim was to make the discussion about the ideology rather than about the ideologue; and to skirt the pitfall of misconstruing the PRESTIGE OF an ideologue for the merit of his position. High socio-economic status has too often been associated with credibility. Thus the main point of a Menippean satire was to expose charlatanry rather than besmirch the charlatan personally.

For the rest of Classical Antiquity (**from the 2nd century B.C. thru the 2nd century A.D.**), satire became a prodigious force across the Roman Empire. This was demonstrated by luminaries like:

- Quintus Horatius Flaccus (a.k.a. "**Horace**")
- **Gaius Petronius** (known as the "Arbiter Elegantiarum")
- **Gaius Julius Phaedrus** of Macedonia
- Lucius Annaeus Seneca of Cordoba (a.k.a. "**Seneca the Younger**")
- **Aulus Persius Flaccus**
- **Lucian** of Samosata
- Marcus Valerius Martialis (a.k.a. "**Martial**")

- Decimus Junius Juvenalis (a.k.a. “*Juvenal*”)

Such men made waves with their canny impertinence. Predictably, some satirists met their fate when their material displeased the authorities (in Petronius’ case: Emperor Nero). Those in power do not like their cupidity and excesses brought to everyone’s attention. Avarice typically loves to be dressed in the garb of virtue. (This is why plutocrats tend to fashion themselves as “captains of industry” rather than as affluent knaves.)

Seneca’s “Apocolocyntosis Divi Claudii” (Gourdification of the Divine Claudius) mocked the deification of Roman Emperors. This was an indiscretion that was what we would now refer to as “politically incorrect”. It is easy to laud Seneca’s brazen irreverence NOW; but at the time he was doing precisely the sort of thing that p.c.-mongers forbid in our own day: offending the sensibilities of those who relish exalted conventions. Those who were loyal to Rome’s imperium surely found Seneca’s material “insulting” and “disrespectful”. Of course, that was the POINT.

This tradition continued into *the 1st century A.D.* A proponent of Stoicism, *Aulus Persius Flaccus of Pisa* mocked excessive consumption, linking it to derelictions in our moral sense—a prescient foreshadowing of the depredations of modern hyper-consumerism. Meanwhile, the parasitical nature of Rome’s oligarchs was parodied by Gaius Petronius in his satirical novel, appropriately entitled the “Satyricon”, written during the reign of Nero. In it the anti-hero was a buffoonish plutocrat named Trimalchio. The “Satyricon” was notable for ridiculing the conceit and decadence of the Roman aristocracy.

So it went with the great Syriac writer, Lucian. *In the 2nd century*, Lucian mocked cult activity with “On the Syrian Goddess”. Meanwhile, he assailed embellished historiography with a sardonic work that he cheekily entitled “True History”. In this classic work (alternately known as “A True Story”), the Syrian writer used outrageous caricatures to mock the risible apocrypha found in the sacred histories of his time...which were all-to-often passed off as “true” (and rendered sacrosanct by the authorities). The use of hyperbole to parody the fantastical events so often recounted in “received wisdom” demonstrated how utterly daft people could be when dealing with sanctified tall-tales.

And so it went that Lucian became renowned for mocking those who are credulous and superstitious with his “Philo-pseudes” [Lover of Falsehoods]. He even directed his opprobrium at the early Christians: “The Passing of Peregrinus”. Such work was a reminder that there is a difference between being sardonic (which can serve a didactic purposes) and being perfidious (simply scoffing at anything that one finds objectionable, as if ethical standards could be culled from a given party’s sensibilities).

Lucian was not alone. Juvenal’s “Vanity of Human Wishes” and “Satires” are likely the most renown satirical works of this era. But what then?

Looking strictly at the occident, it turns out that there was over *a thousand years* during which satire was almost unheard of. Why? Well, from the transition of the Roman Empire to a Christian theocracy in the 4th century through the Renaissance (then the Reformation), when heterodox thinkers like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus were willing to start offending people, saying ANYTHING out of turn was punishable by imprisonment and/or torture and/or death.

As it turns out, what is often esteemed “decorum” is nothing more than an excuse to enforce conformity. Prizing decorum above all else is the best way to ensure the status quo remains undisturbed; as it vilifies those with a penchant for heterodoxy. Decorum is a way to exalt whatever has been decreed to be “good form” by those who benefit from the established order. It is dictated by those in power; yet is a flattering way to mask their own moral dubiousness. (Oftentimes, what is considered “decorum” is just iniquity in

regal vestments.) Those who covet the establish order don't want their memetic homeostasis disrupted; and so will resent anyone who introduced perturbations in the status quo (the regime of conventions on which they've come to depend). This is why totalitarian States prohibit dissension...or even just a modicum of impertinence. The sacred applect must NEVER be upset...lest the house of cards come tumbling down.

And so it went: During the Dark Ages, the incidence of satire become rather sparse—a dearth in material that speaks to the intellectual blight of the era. Even so, there were a few notable instances of well-crafted critiques that used humor to make their point. There were only a handful of exceptions. *In the 8th century*, the commentaries of *Du Fu* abjured people to revisit conventional wisdom in medieval (Tang) China. *In the late 10th century*, *Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi* mocked idiotic rulers in “The Moral of the Viziers”. *In the 12th century*, *Nivardus of Ghent* penned a satirical fable about Roman Catholic clerics in medieval Europe: the “Ysengrimus”. Meanwhile, a satirical poem criticizing the Catholic Church became a big hit: the “Apocalypse of Golias” [Latin: Apocalypsis Goliae] by an unknown author.

The lack of such material spoke not only to the intellectual impoverishment throughout the Occident (read: Christendom), but to the stifling climate created by a domineering magisterium. What with Inquisitions and severe punishments for heresy, even the most talented writers likely balked at ruffling feathers.

Felicitously, during the Renaissance, satire emerged as a crucial art-form—a development that, in turn, fueled the Renaissance. *In the 14th century*, *Geoffrey Chaucer* ridiculed the hypocrisies of the Roman Catholic Church through partially-veiled satire—a necessary measure, as having explicitly lampooned the clergy would have landed him in hot water. (Kings Richard II and Edward III, who appreciated his insights, were patrons of his work.) The epic French poem, “Aucassin et Nicolette” satirized people’s obsession with piety. *Petrarch* mocked Augustine’s obtuse conception of Faith in his “Secretum”. And Catalan satirist (and apostate from Judaism), Isaac ben Moses ha-Levi of Perpignan (a.k.a. “Profiat Duran”; “*Efodi*”) composed “Al-Tehi Ka-Aboteka” [Be Not Like Thy Fathers] and “Kelimmat ha-Goyim” [Dismay of the (Christian) Gentiles]. The best way to expose blinkered thinking, it turned out, was to FLAUNT it.

When the German humanist, *Sebastian Brandt* composed “Ship of Fools” *in the late 15th century*, he broke new ground in criticizing the Roman Catholic Church. It is likely that he was able to get away with such an audacious project by couching it as parody. “I’m just kidding around” tends to defuse acrimony—reminding us of the power of jest. (The ol’ “Don’t worry; I’m just joking” excuse is a timeless one.)

The Dutch humanist, *Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam* composed his cheekily-entitled, “Stultitiae Laus” (a.k.a. “Moriae Encomium”) c. 1509. Rendered “In Praise of Folly” in English, the work mocked superstition—especially the consecrated dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church. (The ultra-Reactionary Thomas More served as inspiration for the tale’s main target.) The work also lampooned ivory-tower charlatans (mostly Roman Catholic clerics) for their hot air and ideological obduracy. In doing so, Erasmus helped set the tone for the Reformation...which, we might note, would not have occurred BUT FOR irreverence.

During the 16th century, the castigation of institutionalized dogmatism in general—and Roman Catholicism in particular—proved crucial in paving the way for Enlightenment thought. *François Rabelais* did so with his sardonic “Gargantua” c. 1534; while *William Baldwin* did so with his sardonic “Beware the Cat” c. 1553 (“Cat” standing for “Catholic”). Meanwhile, uber-pragmatist *Niccolo Machiavelli* penned “La Mandragola” [The Mandrake] c. 1524, in which he satirized Florentine politics (with special emphasis on the avarice of the Medici).

In the late 16th / early 17th century, **Ben Johnson** made fun of the norms of English society. Once again, satire proved to be the best way to shed light on human folly. In “Valpone”, Johnson satirized greed and gullibility. In “The Alchemist”, he showed how cupidity engenders credulity—foreshadowing the racket known as the “prosperity gospel”. Quackery is as old as time; and continues to plague society to the present day.

Even as the Enlightenment was gathering steam, key figures reminded us that, when it comes to debunking errant thinking, eliciting a chuckle is preferable to drumming up acrimony with overt attacks. When it comes to sending a message that many people might be reluctant to heed, history has shown that humor is more effective than hate. Time and time again, we’ve seen that the best way to expose absurdity is not with hostility, but with mockery. Angst begets angst; so fighting fire with fire often augments the conflagration. (Laughter, on the other hand, tends to extinguish the flames of enmity.)

We often forget the degree to which free speech is symbiotic with free thought; yet the Enlightenment provided a deafening reminder starting **in the 17th century**. The importance of free speech was articulated by **John Milton** in his disquisition, “Areopagitica” (c. 1644). Milton pointed out that conformity—and the mental laziness germane thereto—was antithetical to deliberative democracy. He recognized that the urge to silence others (because one is bothered by what they say) is incommensurate with an open society. “Let Truth and Falsehood grapple; whoever knew Truth [knew it by it having been put in combat] in a free and open encounter.” He added: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” And here’s the kicker: Milton was adamantly against blasphemy. The point here: **EVEN SOMEONE OPPOSED TO BLASPHEMY** recognized the importance of allowing everyone to express themselves in the public square. The decision to stifle expression is inextricable with the stifling of critical thinking.

French master of parody, **Molière** exposed the hypocrisy often encountered in polite society in brilliant satires like “Tartuffe”, “Dom Juan”, and “The School For Wives”. His classic characters, Tartuffe and Harpagon made points which were sufficiently irreverent to get his books banned by Church authorities. Nevertheless, he was also able to make important points with “The Misanthrope” (1666), in which he satirized the hypocrisies of aristocratic society.

Though not a satirist, Michel de Montaigne’s (brutally-frank) critical reflections in his “Essays” were groundbreaking in their unabashed irreverence. (Irreverence, we should be reminded, typically entails heterodoxy: two things that p.c. aficionados refuse to abide.) To reiterate: It was such audacity that helped usher in the Enlightenment.

In England, **John Webster**’s “The White Devil” illustrated the differences between how people portray themselves as upstanding and the reality of the true character. Meanwhile, **John Oldham** critiqued the lowly image of the working class in the eyes of the affluent, and even railed against the daftness of the Roman Catholic Church. His “A Satire against Virtue” (1679) was extolled by none other than John Dryden.

Throughout the 18th century, satire was employed to argue against the enslavement of Africans—as with the tongue-in-cheek work: “The Petition of the Sharks of Africa”. When it came to the tendentious issue of slavery, **Montesquieu** made the case for abolitionism. In “The Spirit of the Laws”, he offered a hypothetical list of arguments for slavery to demonstrate how preposterous a defense of the practice really was. Hence he exposed absurdities by presenting an overwrought version of them. Again, we see that satire forces us to look askance at how we are used to thinking about things. Advocates of slavery were offended by Montesquieu’s list of wacky rationalizations. This was a reminder that if a groundbreaking insight is NOT offending a lot of people, it is probably not offering anything of import.

Subversive literature emerged in Renaissance France—from the *Marquis d’Argens* to the Marquis de Sade. The former (Jean-Baptiste de Boyer) made waves in the 18th century by criticizing the Catholic Church with biting satire in his “Thérèse Philosophe” (which illustrated the absurdity of witch trials and other persecutions).

In England, satire continued to play an important role. Famed Irish playwright, *Richard Brinsley Sheridan* mocked the emphasis on propriety his satirical “The School For Scandal” (1777). His aim was to catalyze discussion about the status quo. In this spirit, Sheridan mocked the fatuity of self-proclaimed “intelligentsia” in his play, “The Critic” (1779). Charlatanry is a timeless concern; as we’re dealing with mountebanks in our own day—from Paul Weyrich and William F. Buckley Jr. to Avital Ronell and Karen Armstrong. Exposing frauds is what satirists do; and do BEST.

The point cannot be emphasized enough: The satirist seeks to instigate conversation, not to terminate it. The point is to expose, not to repress. For GENUINE satire has a didactic purpose. It exposes absurdity by countenancing it. This is done by presenting embellished manifestations of the object-in-question. A parody of X involves a caricature of X that resembles the real version just enough to be plausible...while highlighting faults by exaggerating them to a degree that elicits a chuckle.

In “The History of Tom Jones” (1749), *Henry Fielding* juxtaposed probity and hypocrisy—while offering some incisive commentary on religion: a reminder that the best morality tales make us snicker at human folly.

It is no news to anyone that when something nudges us out of habits of thought, it will tend to not be welcomed with open arms. As adults, we have learned that this is not a warrant to rebuke something; it is part of GROWING. Maturity is about being able to deal with discomfiture...and adapt to new insights, even if it means jettisoning that which had theretofore been considered sacrosanct.

In his “The True-Born Englishman” (1701), *Daniel Defoe* lampooned the notion (taken as conventional wisdom at the time) that bloodlines were a pertinent way to determine the merit of a ruler. Defoe did NOT make his point by using dry, turgid disquisition (that is: explicitly proclaiming racial purity to be specious). Rather, he did so by simply being ridiculous—reflecting the absurdity of the spurious convention back in the faces of those who countenanced it. This, of course, offended the monarchists. But that was not an argument AGAINST Defoe; it only further made his point.

Like his heterodox forebears, Defoe demonstrated that the optimal way to expose fatuity is by over-indulging that which is fatuous, bringing things to people’s attention simply by holding a mirror up to them. Satire coaxes us into looking at ourselves...and laughing at how daft we humans can truly be.

Irish author, *Jonathan Swift* satirized Christianity in his “Tale Of A Tub” (1704). In 1726, he satirized human nature in “Gulliver’s Travels”. Looking at things in a new (unflattering) light is usually something we won’t enjoy; but it’s oftentimes something we need. Edification often requires being coaxed outside of our comfort zones. It is inevitable that those who have the audacity to push against boundaries will be rebuffed by those who COVET those very boundaries.

“Memoirs of the Twentieth Century” was an epistolary novel by the Irish writer, *Samuel Madden* from 1733. In it, he explored the dangers of Roman Catholicism by speculating about how it would exist at the end of the 20th century. Meanwhile, *Denis Diderot* mocked religiosity in “Rameau’s Nephew” (1762)...though the work was not released until Goethe did a German translation of it in 1805. Why? The highly-esteemed Diderot refrained from publishing the work for fear of being imprisoned by irate Reactionaries who enjoyed positions of authority (as they so often do). Goethe finally published it 43 years

after it was written, 21 years after the author's death.

Satire seeks to agitate, not to aggravate; to rouse, not to harass; to bring things to light rather than exhorting people to thoughtlessly dispatch. Political correctness conflates these starkly different exercises—subsuming them under the catch-all epithet “offensive” / “insulting”. It proceeds from the maxim: If it disquiets anyone, it must be pernicious. And so it must be verboten. {1}

Well-crafted satire is done with a wink and a nudge, not with a sneer. Think of Montesquieu's “Persian Letters” (1721) or Jonathan Swift's “A Modest Proposal” (1729) or *Voltaire*'s “Candide” (1759). In most of the cases enumerated here, parody proved to be far more potent than some turgid academic disquisition.

But there's a catch: Parody is INEVITABLY offensive to those who would prefer not to be made fun of. Consequently, it is often SATIRE, not the overt casting of aspersions, that those in power most fear. Their only recourse is to denigrate those who are insolent—not for lack of merit, but for lack of decorum. It's not that satirical commentary has no credence, it's that it's INAPPROPRIATE...and might actually succeed in its mission.

In its churlish attempt to rectify wrongs, political correctness only succeeds in being boorish. Rather than being incisive, it comes off as petty and officious, like an fusty schoolmarm—persnickety BY CONSTITUTION. Usually, rebuking an obdurate ideologue will only succeed in exacerbating his zealotry.

He will respond to every critique with augmented defiance, digging in his heels as a counter-measure. Satire does not leave this option open to him; for in making him look like a fool, he will only look more foolish by doubling down on his ideology. As Theodore Adorno once wryly put it: “He who has laughter on his side has no need for proof.” A censorious attitude is the only recourse for those without sound argumentation on their side.

The fact remains: In order to challenge established social norms, commentary NEEDS to be impertinent. This is the opposite of being officious—which often backfires. Intelligent satire is revelatory; not just a jeer. (One cannot debunk specious thinking simply by scoffing at it.) But it needs to elicit a snicker if it is to resonate with a wide audience. Comedy only works when it is relatable.

It might be noted that in order to recognize the virtues of even the most impertinent satire, it is not enough to look at those who DID it; we must look at the kinds of people who were AGAINST it. In virtually every case, it was the authoritarians who were obsessed with some vision of puritanism. Today, the puritanical, authoritarian mindset exists as political correctness (though its Reactionary practitioners now masquerade as “Progressive”).

Such humorlessness has a long history amongst hyper-traditionalism. The puritans of yesteryear and of today use fear and intimidation to enforce compliance with their sacred codes. They stoke neuroses by wielding shame as a cudgel. This orientation all but precludes a good-humored nature. The 4th-century bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom might be considered the father of puritanism. He warned against that sinister thing known as laughter. Why? Humor, he averred, “often gives birth to foul discourse.” What he decried as foul discourse was simply UNSANCTIONED discourse, something that he considered “the root of subsequent evils.”

In the 19th century, the foibles of British Parliament, the inanity of British aristocracy, the hypocrisy of Victorian propriety, and the perfidy of British corporations were there to be exposed—and such things were exposed in a way that resonated with wide audiences. So that is where *Gilbert Abbott à Beckett* excelled. Other satirical works that chastised the hypocrisy of Victorian England included *William Thackeray*'s “Vanity Fair” (1848), *Samuel Butler*'s utopian “Erewhon” (1872), and *Anthony Trollope*'s “The Way We

Live Now” (1875). Toward the end of the century, *Oscar Wilde* mocked the vapidness of the aristocratic classes in “An Ideal Husband”. His razor-sharp wit elicits laughter to the present day; and—miraculously—succeeds in making the same points. After all the themes he addressed were timeless.

Unsurprisingly, these broadsides did not sit well with England’s aristocracy.

In 1821 *Lord Byron* composed “Irish Avatar”, a satirical pamphlet that was critical of the spinelessness of the (oppressed) Irish—who, he believed, were not standing up for themselves against the British crown. It lampooned their submission to the English monarchy. (Byron, who supported Irish independence, was dismayed by the fawning reception King George IV received when he visited.)

Satirists also played a crucial role in mocking racism. In 1835, *Jerome B. Holgate* satirized anti-integrationists and anti-abolitionists in the anti-dystopian “A Sojourn in the City of Amalgamation”.

The next year, *Thomas Carlyle* satirized the naiveté of unbridled idealism in “Sartor Resartus” [The Tailor Re-tailored].

Meanwhile, in Hungary, *Kalman Mikszath*’s composed his classic satire, “New Zrinyiad” (1898). And the Persian rendering of “The Adventures Of Hajji Baba Of Isfahan” (by *Mirza Habib* of Isfahan; not the original rendering by James Morier) was a satirical take on Iran’s Reactionary establishment.

Satire is often warranted; but not always. Take, for example, the British librettist for comic opera, William Schwenck Gilbert. {3} Gilbert aptly poked fun at dunderheaded government (“The Mikado”), at pompous aristocracy (“The Sorcerer”), at the fatuity of Victorian mores (“Charity”), and at the hubris of corporate power (“Utopia Unlimited”); and he did so with staggering efficacy. However, when he attempted to poke fun at feminism and Darwin (“Princess Ida”), it backfired. The joke was on him. Female empowerment remains an estimable enterprise and Darwinian Evolution has been shown to be incontrovertible. But here’s the thing: Each prevailed NOT because they were insulated from stultification. The fact that these positions have withstood mockery reveals them to still be worthy of endorsement. (More on that point later.)

In the early 20th century, the pro-labor, anti-war “Wobblies” used cheeky protest songs to mock the established order—demonstrating that satire is one of the most potent tools for dissidence. In “Elmer Gantry” (1926), Sinclair Lewis addressed the absurd aspects of religiosity in America, illustrating the fatuous thinking underlying it. Evelyn Waugh’s “Decline and Fall” (1928) satirized the conceit of occident-centrism.

In the 1950’s and 60’s, Mort Sahl pioneered political satire with biting comedic riffs (paving the way for the likes of Lenny Bruce and George Carlin). In the 1960’s, the British stage-comedy “Beyond the Fringe” broke important new ground by showing that it was okay—even necessary—to make fun of the Queen (and the Church) of England. Chastising such inane institutions reminded everyone that certain things NEED to be made fun of...especially when they had traditionally been thought of as sacred.

ALL cultures have SOME satirists. As we’ve seen, satire has been vital in exposing absurdity since time immemorial; and has always been resisted by those who have a vested interest in maintaining the established order. The craft continued around the world. In India, Harishankar Parsai exposed human folly via an adept use of “vyangya” (Hindi satire), using humor to make his points. And in Bohemia, Vaclav Havel mocked conformity and obsequiousness—critiquing the sycophancy that was responsible for societal dysfunction—in his masterpiece, “Vyrozumeni” [“The Memorandum”] (1965).

Harishankar Parsai and Vaclav Havel were not alone. Some of the modern era’s most estimable satirists often contended with censure. Behold Alexander Griboyedov, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, Nikolai Gogol,

and Mikhail Bulgakov (who's masterpiece, "Master And Margarita" is a must-read) in Russia.

Time and time again, regardless of where they were in the world, brilliant satirists were denounced even as they brought things to light. Also notable were:

- Kedar Nath Gurung of Sikkim (**Nepalese**)
- Sarat Chandra Pandit (**Bengal**)
- Gopala Chandra Prahara-raj of Odisha (**Indian**) {12}
- Albert Pieter Hahn (**Dutch**)
- Sebastian Brandt (**German**)
- Wilhelm Busch (**German**)
- Karl Kraus (**Austrian**)
- John Arbuthnot (**Scottish**)
- Ignacy Krasicki (**Polish**)
- Jaroslav Hasek (**Bohemian**)
- Tudor Arghezi (**Romanian**)
- Stephen Leacock (**Canadian**)

...to mention a dozen more. {12} None of these firebrands were anything that was—even remotely—"politically correct". Quite the contrary. All were unabashedly iconoclastic; and thus could not help but be extremely "offensive" to many.

Bottom line: The virtues of satire transcend culture. Indeed, we can all relate—irrespective of ethnicity—to Samuel Butler when he chastises those who lord it over the masses with what Pierre Bourdieu dubbed "cultural capital" (in such works as "A Degenerate Noble", "A Huffing Courtier", and "A Modern Critic").

Every satirist listed thus far would have agreed: If one was not offending SOMEONE, then one was probably not doing anything groundbreaking with one's commentary...and certainly not saying anything that might threaten the established order. Each of them had the gall to make what was normally seen as august look foolish—something that is often a rather perilous venture. For those who have the gall to question the status quo—who challenge incumbent power structures—are summarily vilified by those who benefit the most from the status quo.

All the while, those who refuse to be subservient to the established order understand: NOTHING is beyond reproach. One might say that satirists specialize in sacred cow-tipping.

This long list of satirists demonstrate that the virtues of satire transcend culture.

This is also demonstrated by the crucial role played by satirical PERIODICALS. From "L'Esquella de la Torratxa" and "El Be Negre" in Catalonia to "De Roode Duivel" in Netherlands; from "L'Asino" in Italy to "Szpilki" in Poland; from "Awadh Punch" in India to "Charlie Hebdo" in France {4}, politically incorrect "takes" on the world have been an integral part of any intellectually-vibrant society. And so it has gone with "Spy" and "The Onion" in America.

Even SERIOUS works can be subversive, bringing social norms into question—be it Henrik Ibsen's "A Dollhouse" (1879) or Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" (1952). But in the end, Reactionaries know that being laughed at does far more damage than being criticized head-on. Often a point is best made not by a direct assault, but by taking the object of criticism to its logical conclusion. Nikolai Gogol's political satire, "The Government Inspector" (1836) parodied the incompetence and avarice in Imperial Russia. (His mockery of the Czarist bureaucracy elicited widespread vexation amongst Russia's Reactionaries.) Vaclav

Havel's clever use of parody in his "The Memorandum" (1965) exposed the absurdities of communist bureaucracy (and demands for conformity)—making use of a fictional language, "Ptydepe". And Karl Kraus made a similar point with "The Last Days of Mankind". Such parodies conveyed their message far more poignantly than would have a more conventional critical analysis.

The works enumerated here illustrate something very important: Satire only has a point when its object of criticism is that which is held sacred. (To repeat the point: If one isn't offending people, one isn't doing it right.) Admittedly, the line between a good-natured ribbing and hectoring is blurry. Where does "just poking fun" end and traducement begin? At what point does harsh critique become pointless slander? How is one to ascertain if it is more productive or more counter-productive, all things considered? These are all pertinent questions; yet posing them only serves to underscore the virtues of satire.

In every case, impropriety—nay, irreverence—was THE POINT. Be that as it may, we might still ask: In countenancing trenchant satire, allowing for even the most abrasive impertinence, might we sometimes be in danger of making light of grave matters? Perhaps. But the risk is worth it...if it means SHEDDING LIGHT ON grave matters. Even the untenability of history's worst abominations can be illustrated via dark humor—as with Armando Iannucci's hyper-sardonic "The Death of Stalin".

The key to satire is bringing oft-elided things to light in jarring ways—as so many have done with the audacity to question the established order (and challenge authority). This involved having the gall to unabashedly repudiate what was considered "appropriate" in the event that repudiation was warranted.

We might also note the role of cartoons. Honoré Daumier once portrayed King Louis Philippe of France as an engorged monarch excreting political favors. (He was imprisoned for the indiscretion.) English caricaturist James Gillray chastised Napoleon with irreverent cartoons. George Cruikshank chastised aristocrats. Such heterodox commentators were TRYING to offend. After all, iconoclasm was the point.

Ambrose Bierce pioneered the art in America. In his irreverent commentary, he inveighed against militarism and war using biting satire. Such brazen gestures often got him into hot water—as with his "A Horseman in the Sky" (1889). Knocking the audience off-kilter proved to be an effective way to make a point. Alas, Bierce eventually discovered that satire is not well-received by Reactionaries when the targets are sacred cows. (His disappearance remains a mystery.)

Mordant parody, though discomfiting, is often salubrious. Eliciting a chuckle is a great way to grab people's attention. More to the point, it is a very effective way to get people to relate to the point you're trying to make. Laughter is not only part of our humanity; it brings out our humanity. We must bear in mind that to be impertinent is not necessarily to be hubristic. Insofar as the satirist considers himself part of humanity, making fun of human folly is a kind of self-effacement. It says not "Look how stupid YOU are" but "Look how stupid WE HUMANS can be."

Only the most unctuous Reactionaries can't abide irreverence. Freethinkers realize that propriety is not probity. So they are undeterred by the prospect of causing offense.

By highlighting our foibles, satire reminds us of our fallibility—keeping us humble even as it asks us to be impertinent. Radicals aren't priggish. Being puritanical never helped one be a humanitarian.

Behold the satirists enumerated in the present essay. It is not enough to say that such figures contributed to society EVEN THOUGH they said things that certain people found "offensive". It is more accurate to say that they contributed to society BECAUSE they were willing to give voice to things that offended so many people. Indeed, satire that is not subversive is somewhat of an oxymoron. Each of these men demonstrated

the vital role that “poking fun” at the status quo can play. This was demonstrated by the English social reformer, Henry Mayhew—co-founder of the satirical magazine, “Punch”.

The fetishization of “propriety” in certain circles often manifests as the inability to—or, as the case may be, the unwillingness to—take a joke. Such a mindset proscribes satire because satire tends to ruffle well-groomed feathers; and feather-ruffling is impermissible in a p.c. world. After all, political correctness is about what is seen as socially acceptable by the tetchiest denizens of the public square; and satire is based on impertinence. And so the cancellation of Bill Maher’s “Politically Incorrect” for being politically incorrect was not an aberration. Reactionaries have been excoriating sardonic commentary since time immemorial.

The most important thing to be able to laugh at is, arguably, oneself. After all, each of us is PART OF the bewildering world in which we find ourselves. More importantly: Each of us is a part of humanity itself; and so obliged to express—and appreciate others’ expression of—our humanity. Crucial to realizing one’s humanity is being able to snicker at the human condition—that is: at the more absurd quirks and foibles of our shared human nature. Failure to find the humor in simply BEING HUMAN entails failing to fully understand what it is to be human.

To the extent that one defaults on the opportunity to laugh at oneself, one loses touch with a crucial part of one’s humanity. The same might be said of artistic expression. By its very nature, iconoclastic art is offensive; yet to censure art due to the fact that it might offend certain people is to drastically undermine much of what artistic expression is about. Just as art can inspire by being consoling, it can do so by being jarring.

Satire works ESPECIALLY when it is politically incorrect; and often works BECAUSE it is politically incorrect. Indicting a satirist for countenancing a taboo is like dismissing an iconoclast because he failed to countenance the status quo. Recall that Sinclair Lewis’ satirical novel, “Elmer Gantry” was banned in the United States because its irreverence offended Evangelical Christians across the country. The ecclesiastical set despised it precisely because it brought to light the hypocrisies endemic to the clerisy. So it needed to be sacrilegious in order to make its point.

That the point Lewis made was both valid and—as it turns out—vitaly important was entirely beside the point for the obstreperous censors, who denounced it as “offensive”. According to p.c. protocols: Because it upset the sensibilities of an entire religious community, such material should be forbidden. Yet those who prize rectitude are not deterred by attempts to shame them into dissimulation.

We soon find that the protocols of p.c. are invariably selective. When Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett composed a satire of the Abrahamic End Times, “Good Omens”, in 1990, very few complained...even as it effectively undercut the credence of the eschatological flights of fancy found in the Book of Revelation (and in the Koran). However, overt mockery of these same ideas is often met with a paroxysm of pearl-clutching. People push back when a point is SPELLED OUT for them. They’d much rather the point be made in the subtext so that they can come to their own conclusions.

When it comes to satire, though, being impertinent is THE POINT. Americans were reminded of this in the new Republic’s earliest days when Benjamin Franklin penned “Rules By Which A Great Empire May Be Reduced To A Small One” (1773). We could go on and on. Ten other notable examples:

- Washington Irving’s “Salmagundi” (1807) and “Tales of a Traveler” (1824) lampooned political culture in the new American Republic. {5}

- Charles Dickens' "Nicholas Nickleby" was a scathing critique of the socio-economic inequality of 1830's Britain; as well as a rebuke of puritanical Victorian sensibilities.
- Mendele Mocher Sforim's (Yiddish) "Masa'ot Binjamin Ha-Shelishi" ["Travels of Benjamin III"] (1878) was a satire of the Jewish diaspora.
- Saltykov-Shchedrin's "Modern Idyll" mocked sycophants who posed as intrepid scholars (1883).
- Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence At Owl Creek Bridge" (1890) derided the fixation on glory in war. Meanwhile, his cheekily entitled "Devil's Dictionary" (1906) lampooned Orwellian doublespeak before Orwell coined the term "doublespeak".
- Mark Twain's "To The Person Sitting In Darkness" (1901) was a parody of the self-righteousness of imperialism. He did this by showing the condescending paternalistic mindset of the colonialist. Twain reminds us that ALL empires claim to be bringing light to the savages...even as they oppress them. Meanwhile, his "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" (1907) parodied the Christian conception of salvation in the advent of America's Third Great Awakening.
- P.G. Wodehouse's "Psmith, Journalist" (1909-10) satirized racketeers, and his famous character, Jeeves (an intellectually astute valet for a ne'er-do-well aristocrat) illustrated how anti-meritocratic socio-economic hierarchies can be. Meanwhile, his "The Code of the Woosters" (1938) parodied fascism.
- Nathanael West's "Miss Lonelyhearts" (1933) addressed existential beleaguerment in an impoverished American city.
- Isaac Asimov's "The Endochronic Properties of Resublimated Thiotimoline" (1948) and "Pâté de Foie Gras" (1956) mocked anti-scientific thinking in the decade following World War II.
- Ryszard Kapuscinski's "The Emperor" (1978) parodied the cult of personality that surrounds autocratic regimes.

We can also look at satire in film—as with Charlie Chaplin's "The Great Dictator", which parodied Nazism (1940) and Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove", which parodied Cold War hysteria (1964). Such material was considered politically incorrect at the time. And thank heavens it was!

More recently, Robert Heinlein's "Job: A Comedy of Justice" (1984) parodied the daffiest elements of Abrahamic religion. And Steven Lukes' "The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat" (1995) used hyperbole to chastise right-wing ideology (super-patriotism, militarism, free-market fundamentalism, etc.)

So what about the Muslim world? Satire (commonly known as "hija" in Arabic) has been—to put it mildly—rather limited in Dar al-Islam. From the Middle Ages, only three names stand out:

- The 9th-century Mu'tazili writer, Abu Uthman Amr ibn Bahr of Basra (a.k.a. "Al-Jahiz"), who's "Kitab al-Bukhala" [Book on Miserliness] was a sardonic take on greed.
- The 13th-century (Seljuk) Sufi satirist, Nasir ud-Din of Khoy (a.k.a. "Nasreddin Hodja"), renown for telling cheeky morality tales.
- The 14th-century (Safavid) Persian satirist, Nizam Ubayd-i Zakani of Qazvin (a.k.a. "Nizam al-Din Ubayd'ullah Zakani").

All three seem to have been at least partly apocryphal. Nasreddin ended up becoming somewhat of a folkloric figure himself; and so was commonly used as a character in various folk-tales. While these writers seem to have been rather sardonic in their commentaries, none of them ever actually (seriously) challenged the powers that be; or sought to instigate any notable changes of major societal significance. Rather, they limited their material to a just-for-the-fun-of-it mockery of the quotidian...so as not to displease the authorities. {2}

It has not been easy for heterodox writers to succeed in the Muslim world. It was not until the late 19th / early 20th century that we encounter radical poets like Ma'ruf ibn Abdul Ghani al-Rusafi, Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, and Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri—who were brazen enough to stultify the backwardness of social norms encountered throughout the Muslim world. Such writers were stalwarts of irreverence—which is to say that impertinence was their virtue, not their vice.

Ten of the most notable instances of Muslim satirists in the modern era:

- Azeri thinkers, Al-Akbar Zeynalabdin oglu Tahirzadeh (a.k.a. “Mirza Alakbar Sabir”) and Jalil Huseyn-gulu oglu Mammad-Guluzadeh mocked the clergy while championing women’s rights in the late 19th / early 20th century.
- Syrian cartoonist, Ali Farzat used illustrations to mock political corruption...until his work was outlawed by the Assad regime. His hands were broken for his insolence.
- Palestinian author, Emile Habibi composed “The Secret Life of Said, The Pessoptimist” in 1972. It was a satire about the LACK OF satire in the Arab world.
- Palestinian political cartoonist, Naji Salim Al-Ali was murdered for his sacrilege.
- Egyptian TV host, Bassem Youssef hosted a television show, “Al-Bernameg”. It was banned by the Morsi regime in early 2014. {6}
- Egyptian v-logger, Shadi Abu-Zeid was arrested in 2018 for subversive material (promoting civil rights).
- Iraqi freethinker, Faisal Saeed al-Mutar was a human rights activist who was eventually forced to seek refuge in the U.S.
- Persian author, Reza Khoshbin-i Khoshnazar was forced to work in exile when he started offending Iran’s ayatollahs.
- Waleed Wain (a.k.a. “Veedu Vidz”) was banned from Youtube for being politically incorrect.

These men all realized a simple fact: It is difficult for those in power to control you when you are allowed to openly laugh at them. It was not as much the 2012 voting that enabled Egyptians to begin to understand democracy as it was Bassem Youssef’s satire that gave them a taste of what democracy could be like; meanwhile exposing the flaws in their society. That Youssef did so via parody made his voice even more galling to the authorities. {7}

Reza Khoshbin-i Khoshnazar offers an illustration of prevailing attitudes. He was banished from Iran after he penned his sardonic “The Gods Laugh on Mondays”. Meanwhile, his publisher’s building was burned down. Khoshnazar has since published “The Prophet With The Head Like A Squash In The Shadow Of A Dead Clock”. Religious zealots invariably find such material offensive. According to the Shia theocracy’s hyper-Reactionary cabal of ayatollahs, such material is “politically incorrect”; and so should not be allowed. (Some people might find that offensive; therefore you must not be allowed to say it.) This should sound eerily familiar to p.c.-mongers in the Occident. (After all, p.c. is puritanical and authoritarian in nature.)

This is nothing new. Alexander Griboyedov’s classic “Woe From Wit” (1823) got him lynched by a Muslim mob in Persia. And Persian cartoonist, Ardeshir Mohasses was a liberal satirist who remains exiled in New York City to the present day.

A more recent example of the fate of satire under Islamic regimes was the treatment of the famous Turkish satirical magazine, “Penguin” pursuant to the ascension of the theocratic dictator, Recep Erdogan. In 2015, its editors were imprisoned; and the magazine was shuttered two years later. Alas, this opprobrious treatment was in keeping with other famous Turkish satirists like Nazim Hikmet Ran.

All of the works enumerated here remind us that, in order to be incisive, social / political / cultural criticism often needs to be irreverent. At its best, satire disrupts our habitual perceptions of the world. It unsettles us just enough—that is: enough to cajole us into revisiting what has become the all-too-conventional manner of thinking. It forces us to look at things from a new vantage, thereby revealing things we may not have noticed before.

The next time one is inclined to condemn biting satire (simply due to the fact that it happened to offend the sensibilities of a certain constituency), one is best advised to think of the crucial role that irreverence has played in the progress of human civilization. One might ask oneself: What kind of world would we live in if satire were forbidden? It's safe to say: It would be not nearly as evolved as the one we now have.

As we have seen, satirists were almost always secular (nay, anti-religious); and thus invariably Progressive. This is no coincidence. For satire has typically been the handmaiden of dissent. It has proven to be a surefire way to bring the folly of human activity to the attention of those who would otherwise not notice. {8} Its irreverence has always been its virtue. Indeed, satire works largely because it is provocative. It agitates in a way that straight disquisition—tedious and academic as is so often is—never could. Critical thinkers with a good sense of humor (and a bit of courage) have understood this since time immemorial.

HOW SATIRE WORKS; AND HOW POLITICAL CORRECTNESS WORKS AGAINST IT:

To appreciate satire is to recognize that the best way to expose human folly is to amplify it...and then pretend everything is perfectly fine (with a wink and a nudge, of course). Oftentimes, this can only be done by being impolitic.

Feather-ruffling is a time-honored tradition. As we've seen, in most instances of great satire, irreverent commentators were derided for their impolitic speech—especially insofar as they were iconoclastic. Yet it was often THEY who had the most important points to make. Those who have staked their claim on sacred apple-carts will vilify anyone who deigns to upset them. Such revanchism is effectively what undergirds the holy crusade that is political correctness.

In a world governed by the p.c. mentality, propriety tends to trump—or even masquerade as—probity. Etiquette is treated as a form of ethics. Consequently, anyone with the audacity to tread on sacred ground (which is supposed to be cordoned off from critical scrutiny) is rendered persona non grata by the power elite.

Says the Reactionary: How dare you besmirch the hallowed name of [insert sanctified dogma here]? Meanwhile, satirists flout established convention; as their vocation is upsetting sacred apple-carts.

Satirical commentary exposes absurdity by presenting that very absurdity in unexpected ways. It exacerbates nascent absurdity so as to show what happens when it is taken to its logical conclusion. Usually the result of this is the opposite of what most people would expect; which makes irony the engine of most satire.

To parody X is to pretend to extol X, thereby illustrating the daffy implications of doing so. Thus one shows the speciousness of X by heightening its signature features—in a kind of exaltation of the absurd. The use of irony to make a point often involves taking illogic to its logical conclusion, yielding unexpected results that amuse as much as they surprise. With well-wrought irony, it is typically the OPPOSITE of what we'd expect—an awkward juxtaposition that brings to our attention the ridiculousness of what we've come to consider normal.

Juxtaposing how things REALLY are with how we'd rather believe them to be is a surefire way to make a point. This is what a skilled stand-up comedian does. (There's a reason stand-up comedy is not a thriving trade in theocratic environs.) Parody brings our attention to idiocy by casting it in terms that make the idiocy more apparent. Of course, those who ENDORSE the idiocy will tend not to welcome this exposure.

The use of irony to expose faulty thinking is valuable because it SHOWS rather than TELLS. Its virtue lies in the fact that there is no moralizing involved. Rather than officious, it is playful...thereby inviting the audience to be participants in the judgement. It elucidates without preaching; thereby rendering it far more potent than preachy asseverations. H.L. Mencken may have put it best when he said, "One horse laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms."

Political correctness deprives us of this learning opportunity; rendering commentary toothless. (One might say that p.c. takes the "iron" out of irony.) But the fact remains: One can accomplish far more by making fun of idiocy than by getting angry at it. Vituperation has never been the basis of sound thinking. (Invective is the enemy of cogency.) Oftentimes good humor is the breath of fresh air that people need to see things in a new light. When people are amused, they tend to be more receptive to what one has to say. Acrimony is incommensurate with sound thinking.

When it comes to any sincere endeavor to elucidate, perspicacity demands brute candor. It is inevitable that those who revere the object of reproach will not welcome an infelicitous verdict with open arms. They would much prefer everyone in the world respect the same things that they do; but this should not dissuade the rest of us from being frank in our assessments.

When the object of reproach is a sacred cow, disparagement becomes a matter of desecration; but that is entirely beside the point. As H.L. Mencken put it: "The liberation of the human mind is best furthered by men who heave dead cats into sanctuaries." That some people happen to sanctify X does not magically grant X exemption from the standards by which we evaluate credence.

Ironically, the kind of chiding that is mean-spirited has much in common with the p.c.-evangelists who most vociferously denounce it. For BOTH refuse to engage with those with whom they do not see eye-to-eye. In this sense, dissimulating ends up being just as unproductive as a maligning. Such things are done in bad faith. Ultimately, nobody benefits when everyone is simply putting on airs.

Society's arrested development can often be attributed to the inability for people to endure a ribbing. After all, frangible ideologies need to be protected, as they tend to fracture easily when subjected to strain. It is no surprise, then, that the proponents of spurious belief systems have little tolerance for being made fun of. Deep down, they know that sunlight will expose their fatuity.

Puritanical interlocutors have traditionally seen critical inquiry as DANGEROUS; and have seen impertinence—especially irreverence—as a kind of CONTAMINATION. In this scheme, propriety is correlated with purity; and so impropriety with impurity. As if their closed-mindedness is not bad enough, Puritans operate in bad faith (even as they proclaim to be STEWARDS OF this or that Faith). It is important to note, though, that the animating sentiment behind their rebukes is shaming, not compassion. (Alas, political correctness renders one incapable of experiencing shame; as shame is only something the p.c.-monger strives to make everyone ELSE feel.)

Just as we make our body (bones, tendons, ligaments, muscles) stronger by subjecting them to strain, we make our minds (that is: our critical capacities) stronger by subjecting them to strain. Part of a productive exercise regimen is "surprising" the body by forcing it to incur a burden. This goes for mental acuity as well. Whether one's immune system or one's thought processes, adversity strengthens.

Admittedly, sometimes the object in question fails the stress-test. However, when it comes to IDEAS, whenever it has unassailable merit, it will withstand however much pasquinade it is subjected to. That's why those who have the confidence of their convictions are unafraid of mockery.

So what of the cartoons of Mohammed of Mecca published in Denmark's newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, in 2005—which spurred lethal reprisals around the globe? And what of France's satirical journal, Charlie Hebdo—which spurred a lethal reprisal in Paris in 2015? In such cases, we bear witness to a frail constitution indicative of a friable dogmatic edifice. It seems pitiable that so many fanatics worship an entity that is unable to endure satire. The message is effectively: “Our god is embarrassingly meek; so please handle him with kid-gloves.” (Behold: A feeble deity for feeble minds.) It was for similar reasons that the Roman Catholic Church called for a ban on Monty Python's “The Life of Brian” in 1979. Houses of cards cannot withstand critical analysis; so their only recourse is to retreat into some sort of memetic quarantine. Indeed, there is a very good reason that religious fundamentalists—be they Christians or Salafis / Wahhabis—cannot abide ridicule: They fear it will reveal the fact that their gilded dogmatic edifice is comprised of nothing more than meticulously-varnished bullshit.

And so it has gone with the fragility of such dubious organizations as the Watch Tower Society and the Church of Scientology. Flimsy ideologies demand an exemption from criticism because they could not possibly subsist if they were to be routinely subjected to scrutiny. It is worth noting the kinds of regimes that DO ban satire—and even enact draconian strictures against insolence. The list is long: from Stalinism in Russia and Maoism in China...to Juche in North Korea to whatever the heck is going on in Turkmenistan...to the Iranian Grand Ayatollahs and the Arabian House of Saud. Forbidding subversive activity is the hallmark of totalitarianism.

The comic irony of erecting a hermetic seal around one's belief system in order to “protect” it from harsh critique is that the hermetic seal ITSELF ends up becoming the very mockery it was intended to prevent. In their ham-fisted attempt to be seen as non-absurd, absurd ideas ending mock THEMSELVES. It is their adamant demand to be treated as anything but absurd that they expose their own absurdity.

The need to appeal to political correctness is oftentimes what reveals a creed's fragility. Hence: An sign that we will no longer have a problem with reactionary elements within the Ummah is when the day comes when, in addition to the cheeky “Book of Mormon”, a “Book of Islam” can have a successful run on Broadway...without incident. That is to say: We'll know when Islam is undergoing a genuine Reformation when such a musical can be staged at a major venue without scandal, without outcry, and with plenty of hearty laughter. The Church of Latter-Day Saints does not augment its credibility by showing that it can take a joke; but it is savvy enough to recognize that it avoids BROADCASTING its lack of credibility by putting up a big fuss over a Broadway musical. {11}

There is nothing to be afraid of when it comes to even the most biting satire; as it simply urges us to see things from an alternate point of view. It cajoles us into thinking of things in a way that may have never occurred to us. It helps to caricature real life in a way that is ironical, highlighting the absurdities in things to which we are accustomed.

So far as p.c. aficionados are concerned, though, biting satire is verboten not because it is erroneous; but because it is UNCOOUTH. Trenchant commentary is deemed heretical in p.c. circles, as it can be quite unsettling—even unnerving to those who much prefer to never be disturbed. (Searing ridicule is beyond the pale; as irreverence is BY DEFINITION offensive to certain people.) A consequence of this censorious attitude is that one of the most useful didactic tools is rendered off-limits to heterodox thinkers. Deprived of the license to express oneself in a brutally frank manner, one finds oneself in society that is not only closed, but humorless.

Being “disrespectful” is not necessarily a sin; especially if its aim is to simply call a spade a spade. Indeed, sometimes dis-respect is warranted; as certain things are not worthy of respect. Shall we be eternally obliged to feign respect for that for which we really have none? Indeed, in a gambit to forestall hurt feelings, p.c.-mongers propose a regimen of obligatory disingenuousness. Such an onerous mandate helps nobody. The fact of the matter is: In certain cases, derision is called for. In those cases, anyone who is honest does not dissemble in the name of politesse.

ALL of the writers enumerated above would have been censored—nay, castigated—by the p.c. aficionados of the present day. “What you are saying is offending people; so you should shut up.” Those are the same people who would have gladly handed the vile of hemlock to Socrates. Such scolds fail to see that satire plays a vital role in bringing things to our attention that may not have otherwise occurred to us.

Satire—especially when brash and cutting—is one of the most effective didactic tools at our disposal because it ILLUSTRATES rather than DICTATES. Done well, it encourages critical thinking; and subsequently spurs active engagement. There is nothing that reveals the untenability of life’s hidden absurdities the way that satire can. We might recall Vladimir Nabokov’s great insight: “The difference between the cosmic side of things and their comic side depends on one sibilant.”

Well-crafted satire helps us preserve a modicum of common sense in the midst of epidemic fatuity. It shows us why certain things don’t make sense. It does so by recourse to one of the most human sensibilities: humor. Comedy brings us together because it transcends virtually every human construct. (Laughter knows no tribal divisions.) It is something to which anyone can relate. Consequently, even when it is caustic, it highlights our shared humanity.

To reiterate: Satire is a potent didactic tool—a tool of which we must be able to avail ourselves when seeking to make an important point in a compelling way. While we might balk on causing offense, we should bear in mind that feather-ruffling is the life-blood of participatory democracy.

It is no secret that inconvenient facts can be irksome. When they are presented in a way that makes people laugh AT ME (and those who share my ideas), it becomes well-nigh intolerable TO ME. The key, then, is for each of us to resist the trappings of epistemic narcissism, and remind ourselves that it is not “all about ME”.

Unadulterated Truth—especially when unsolicited—can be abrasive, specifically in the event that it upends our most cherished beliefs. Brute candor, then, can cause severe irritation. Even so, it plays a crucial role in deliberative democracy; so even the most unsettling material must be abided. That said, good satire is not only emotionally provocative; it is—more importantly—thought-provoking. (After all, the two tend to go often go hand-in-hand).

Some satire is intentionally zany (as with, say, “Saturday Night Live” in the U.S. or “Little Britain” in England); but done well, it is very effective at making a point. Oftentimes, it is ONLY efficacious insofar as it is disagreeable, even disturbing. Snark can be either sophomoric (vapid, and thus pointless) or sapient (insightful, and thus edifying). We should not pretend that there is no distinction to be made between such scenarios. Should we have begrudged Richard Prior for not having been sufficiently p.c.? He was carrying on a legacy in America that started with Ambrose Bierce—a legacy that has always played a crucial role in deliberative democracy.

Satire can be high-brow (as with the hyper-cheeky “Yes [Prime] Minister” in Britain)...or brusque (as with “Veep” and “Parks and Recreation” in the U.S.)...or dry (as with “The Office” in both its British and American incarnations)...or even slightly preposterous (as with “Monty Python” in Britain). All of these

have been effective BECAUSE they are politically incorrect. However it is done, so long as it has something important to convey, it works.

To recapitulate: Well-crafted satire requires temerity. And, while it is always done tongue-in-cheek, it is intended to be jarring. It is SUPPOSED TO BE agitating, as its goal is to agitate. As Thomas Paine stated, in response to (monarchist) American critics of his insolent pamphlet, “Common Sense”: “He who dares not offend cannot be honest.” As the aforesaid satirists attest, this is nothing new. It goes back to Aristophanes...and has continued into contemporary culture.

As the above survey shows, no matter where it was done, satire has always been up against the Reactionary forces of hidebound ideologues. Consequently, it was held in contempt by those with a vested interest in the status quo. Predictably, those who wished to maintain the established order resented those who disrupted things. So each instituted its own version of political correctness.

Not being able to take a joke is the signature trait of a Reactionary mindset. An incapacity to laugh at oneself is a sign of retrograde thinking. (Such humorless interlocutors are contemptuous of those who laugh at anything they hold dear. Insecurity precludes amusement.) The hidebound ideologue is incapable of abiding a parody of his dogmatism; as parody exposes speciousness in a way that he can't avoid noticing.

A feature of political correctness is the inability and/or unwillingness to endure a good-natured ribbing; as it's not about objective merit, it's about how one happens to FEEL. But this goes beyond simply not being able to take a joke (a sign of insecurity and/or neuroticism). There is an irony here. To the degree that one allows oneself to get tied up in knots whenever one's coveted dogmas are parodied, one has rendered oneself incapable of serious discourse. For humorlessness indicative of a cognitive handicap.

In order to hold one's own in the agora, one must embrace the slings and arrows of incisive critical engagement. Trenchant satire requires audacity. And when an interlocutor becomes apoplectic each time trenchant satire is encountered (where the “butt of the joke” is his own ideology), he has revealed himself to be inadequate to the task.

After all, the point of a well-crafted lampoon is to poke holes in social norms; to push back against what is accepted; to buck propriety...with one's tongue in one's cheek. Satirists from Jonathan Swift to Oscar Wilde demonstrated the efficacy of this approach. Swift made use of the outlandish to make his point—as with “A Modest Proposal”. By contrast, Wilde made use of ultra-dry humor. (In Wilde's dialogues, everything was tongue-in-cheek to an absurd degree; yet that is what made his writing so compelling.) {10} Both men used an amusing narrative to reveal the absurd embedded in quotidian life. Satire works because it is poignant; and it is poignant because it is clever. Not coincidentally, such commentators were invariably liberal; and usually grounded in humanism. (After all, iconoclasm is by definition anti-Reactionary.)

Insofar as the satirist seeks to rock the boat, those averse to boat-rocking will tend to vilify him. Those who are DETERMINED to be offended will insist the boat is about to capsize any time they perceive the mildest sway.

One might call this heterodoxy-phobia. After all, it is a pathology, as it is a subset of hamartophobia (fear of imaginary crimes). As is often the case, the phobia often manifests itself as angst. (Oftentimes, FEAR OF can translate into HOSTILITY TOWARD.) The flip-side of this is a dependency on—nay, an addiction to—orthodoxy. This is the hallmark feature of neurosis, whereby INSECURITY can quickly manifest as ANIMUS. This creates an inhospitable environment for any kind of critical engagement; and ensures the climate is downright fatal to irreverence.

Satirists are radicals in a sense—as they refuse to kow-tow to the powers that be; to acquiesce to the guidelines of accepted conduct; to be subservient to the established order; to be choreographed by the enforcers of convention. They refuse to mouth the pieties that have been prescribed to them. They eschew “propriety”. The most incisive satire is not merely irreverent; it is astringent. If people do not find it jarring, then it’s not doing its job.

The expectation for satire to not be controversial is like expecting an exposé to not expose anything (at least: nothing that its subject didn’t want exposed). The POINT of satire is to be controversial. Doing so “insensitive” insofar as sensitivity is measured by an indiscriminate deference to the sensibilities of any / all interlocutors. The satirist isn’t trying to ingratiate himself; he’s trying to make a point that others were too obsequious to make.

Shall discomfiture a dependable measure of credence? Is sentiment to be the ultimate standard for what shall be deemed impermissible? This is a dubious proposition, to say the least. For while malice can be caustic, so can even the most estimable instances of iconoclasm. It is a grave mistake to presume that anything that is discomfiting is ipso facto nefarious. ALL great satirists are “insensitive” when it comes to what has been consecrated by the self-appointed impresarios of propriety.

As it turns out, satire is only possible when it flouts what is considered to be the “appropriate” way to exercise speech. Instead of cow-towing to sacred cows, it urinates on them with a mischievous grin. This does not sit well with those with a vested interest in maintaining incumbent power structures. It’s one thing to urinate on someone’s sacred cow; it’s quite another thing to wink and smirk while doing it.

This is not to say we should be heedless of hurt feelings. It simply means that hurt feelings should never be seen as an insurmountable obstacle when trying to get to the heart of the matter. Diplomacy is important, but critical inquiry cannot be held hostage by any given party’s sentimentality. All decent people would agree that it is generally nice to be nice. However, de rigueur niceties can only go so far. Hollow congeniality is an empty gesture. At some point, SOME feathers will need to be ruffled—if, that is, headway is to be made. Oscar Wilde put it well when he said that a great writer is “someone who has taught his mind to misbehave.” The sine qua non of satirical commentary is to—as it were—shake things up.

Every one of us needs to be jarred sometimes—cognitively, emotionally, existentially, and—yes—sometimes physically. The same goes for dogmatic slumbers. A bucket of ice-water over the head isn’t supposed to be pleasant; but it serves a purpose. The goal of satire is to BOTHER us in a way that forces us to re-evaluate how we think of things. After all, revealing uncomfortable truths is bound to cause discomfiture. Comforting truths are easy to discuss. But consolation is the opposite of what satire is meant to do.

Well-crafted satire serves an important purpose: It cajoles people into thinking about things in a different way; into seeing things from a new perspective. The most incisive commentary breaks rules, makes people feel a bit awkward. It tries to nudge us out of our comfort zones. It does so by being somewhat “off-color”. It refuses to adhere to the paint-by-numbers routine to which we’ve grown inured; and consequently sometimes shocks us.

Satire, then, is a wake-up call. We might bear in mind that nobody ENJOYS wake-up calls. Nevertheless, it is generally conceded they are eminently useful. (We call “rude awakenings” RUDE because they are unwelcome; but in retrospect we’re glad we had them.) When we want to be roused from a slumber, we tend not to select a Nocturn by Chopin to play in the background; a bucket of ice-water dumped over our heads does the trick. It works BECAUSE it is uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, the point of satire is to show why we SHOULD BE bothered by certain things. The showing will ITSELF bother certain people—as they don't want to be bothered; NOR do they want to have it brought to their attention that others are bothered by what they hold dear. The idea is to overcome this tendency to be narcissistic. Embracing satire is about embracing discomfiture. This is all about being open minded...yet, at the same time, remaining principled. In other words: Keep an open mind; but not so much that your brain falls out.

As I hope to have shown, irreverence is a crucial didactic strategy. This almost always requires one to breach the accepted bounds of what was considered “acceptable” or “appropriate”. Every great satirist has understood this. Thomas Nast understood it; Mark Twain understood it; Sinclair Lewis understood it; Art Buckwald understood it; H.L. Mencken understood it; Kurt Vonnegut understood it; Terry Pratchett understood it; Dick Gregory understood it; Lenny Bruce understood it; and George Carlin understood it. In each case, if the audience remained in its comfort zone, they weren't doing their job.

So WHAT OF curtailing toxicity in the agora? In attempting to promote free speech, at what point are we enabling dysfunction? In attempting to mitigate “offensive” speech, at what point are we stifling expression? These are difficult questions to answer.

Posed another way: At what point are we being overly fusty? At what point are we just being ridiculous? Where do we draw the line? Of course, the POINT of satire is to be ridiculous. To indict satire for being ridiculous is like begrudging a memoir for being too personal...or complaining that an exposé exposed a tad-bit TOO much.

At the end of the day, we cannot deny the fact that intelligent ridicule has vital didactic purpose. For it is done out of a sincere effort to expose absurdity. It elucidates folly by amplifying it. Meanwhile, pernicious ridicule has no civic value. The former must not only be tolerated, it should be celebrated. The latter should be denounced. It should be denounced because it is counter-productive; not because it happens to cause discomfiture.

To reiterate: That some things offend does not mean such things are mean-spirited; it means they are causing discomfiture. Yet it is important to curtail mean-spiritedness: commentary done in bad Faith, simply as a way to libel interlocutors rather than bring to light their errancy. Comedy is not a license to denigrate simply for the sake of denigration.

Humor is not an excuse for, well, just being a jerk. Some people are just assholes...which helps nobody. That said, the repudiation of gratuitous mockery (mockery done to malign rather than to edify) should not disqualify all mockery. While it is clear that certain mockery—done with sneerful disdain—is not done in good faith, it does not follow that mockery PER SE cannot be done in good faith. The key is to be brusque without being overly brash. {9} Irreverence does not require truculence; it merely bucks propriety (flouting the commonly-accepted rules of what we're supposed to think / do), with the aim of making a point that needs to be made.

Some things SHOULD be mocked; and doing so is effectively a public service. The “catch” is that estimable satire is about elucidating, not obfuscating. It seeks to expose, not to decimate. It tears down the curtain rather than tearing down what's behind the curtain—leaving the thing it has revealed for everyone else to subsequently judge. This gesture is, of course, seen as an attack by those who would much prefer the curtain remain drawn.

We might go so far to say that artistic expression that is NOT rocking the boat is rather pointless. If somebody's feathers are not being ruffled, then the commentary is probably not worthwhile. For the point

of great art is to provoke; and the point of revolutionary art is to go against the grain.

The point of satire is to rebel against SOMETHING—something, that is, that most people would otherwise be inclined to accept as a matter of course. Satire is pointless without iconoclasm...which is, by nature, offensive to someone. After all, one cannot be ground-breaking without breaking ground. A key way to do this is to get people to laugh at what has generally been considered normal.

Large swaths of people not being able to take a joke is a sure sign that culture is normalizing illiberalism. Czech writer, Milan Kundera demonstrated this in 1967 with his parable, “The Joke”. Kundera pointed out that prosecuting someone based on ill-advised humor is the mark of a society slipping into totalitarianism.

Generally speaking: It is the tyrannical mindset that cracks down on artistic (read: free) expression the moment such expression is deemed insufficiently reverent. It is solely an insufferably puritanical sensibility that forbids satire. Civility is, in part, predicated on having a sense of humor. Being able to laugh at oneself is a precondition for a liberated mind; and the freedom to laugh at OTHERS is a precondition for liberalism itself. Once we deprive ourselves of the prerogative to be cheeky about the stuff of life, or to josh each other, we pave the way to a closed society. Participatory democracy is, in part, about challenging one another.

Some can be mean-spirited in their mockery; but it does not follow from this infelicitous fact that chiding itself is problematic. The problem is the mean spirit. Rather than move the conversation forward, mean-spirited satire is not undertaken in good faith. It is malign instead of sassy. It berates instead of cajoling. It antagonizes rather than edifies; and so is counter-productive. It is castigation / defamation done for its own sake. It is denigration done for sport. It is born of ill will more than from a sincere interest to “get to the bottom of things”. It is not constructive, as it is done merely to tear down—to deprecate, to slander, to demean.

This is NOT the same as well-crafted satire. Well-crafted satire challenges rather than traduces. It is provocative but not vituperative. It is pro-social, not anti-social. It lampoons because it wants us to be better. It urges us to improve ourselves and the world around us.

Let’s be clear on the crucial point: There is a difference between being sardonic and being snide. Caustic wit does not entail malice. Mean-spirited satire goes beyond “just for the fun of it” joshing; and becomes a means of calumny. It is a weapon rather than a prod. It is done with scoffing dismissal rather than with playful engagement. It only wants to inflame. The intent, then, is anti-social rather than pro-social. This is not to be confused with satire done in good faith.

The problem is this: Those who rail against satire are inclined to caricature ALL satire as invidious. Just as unsettling critical analysis is treated as traducement (when it is nothing of the sort), unsettling satire is treated as traducement (when it is nothing of the sort). When people are incentivized to feign offense at every infelicity, this charade will persist unabated; thereby undermining the integrity of public discourse.

Puritanical thinking rarely ends well. A censorious approach to expression is the hallmark of fascism. To ban unpalatable speech is to undermine the very foundation of free speech. For incisive artistic expression is, by its very nature, disruptive. It is SUPPOSED to aggravate. As John Cleese once put it: “ALL humor is critical.” Thus one of the greatest comedic minds of the 20th century felt compelled to remind us that criticism—nay, offensiveness—INHERES in comedy.

Satire makes things look bad not because it is mean, but because it seeks to expose absurdity. We know that a lampoon is done with good intentions rather than just to be hurtful when it exhibits certain traits. It

decries the abuse of power rather than justifying it. It pokes fun in order to shed light on human folly, not to foster hate. It edifies us rather than causing neurosis.

Done well, satire uses irony to elucidate the truth rather than to obfuscate it. The trick is often to take the faulty logic out of its native context and apply it in a surprising new context, whereby its flaws are laid bare (typically in outlandish ways). The use of parody—especially when it exposes absurdity where it might not have otherwise been noticed—is one of the most effective didactic tools—especially when its target is a sacred cow.

The didactic power of cheeky humor derives from the fact that it is disquieting; yet p.c.-mongers strive to stifle it BECAUSE it is disquieting. In other words, they see the virtue of satire as its primary sin. And so they fail to recognize what is obvious to anyone who is level-headed: nobody can be oppressed by joke. Off-putting (nay, even snide) comments are not tantamount to oppression. Being “offended” is not the same as being persecuted. They fail to see that progress is facilitated by “stirring things up” (i.e. introducing perturbations into a homeo-static system). Agitation catalyzes paradigm shifts; yet political correctness urges us to be wary of anything that agitates.

This is about eradicating pretense. Well-crafted satire strips away the facade that enables asinine things to masquerade as acceptable. It’s about showing that certain things that we’ve heretofore considered normal are really quite preposterous—something we can only recognize if we look at them in a new light.

In many ways, satire is the antithesis of propaganda, which seeks to obfuscate rather than elucidate. Instead of conditioning us, satire is meant to BREAK conditioning. Propaganda elides incongruity with Reality; satire magnifies it. Propaganda obfuscates folly; satire exposes it. Propaganda behooves us to stop thinking critically and to just accept; satire behooves us to START thinking critically and to NOT just accept. Underlying all satire is “But don’t take OUR word for it; see for yourself.”

Being a satirist is the antithesis of being an apparatchik. For candid critiques are diametrically opposed to sycophancy. Those who abide sycophancy are INEVITABLY offended by anyone who flouts the sacrosanct protocols to which they’ve wed themselves.

Sycophancy cannot abide ridicule. It should come as no surprise, then, that Reactionaries (esp. authoritarians and those swept up in tribalism) and anti-intellectuals (esp. hyper-dogmatists) are far more susceptible to conditioning and groupthink (read: propaganda), more governed by biases, and much less tolerant of satire. Oftentimes, it’s not merely that they cannot take a joke; it’s that they fear—deep down—that what the comedy exposes might undermine the perceived credence of their sacrosanct truths.

Beware those who forbid satire. For it is a contempt for critical commentary that enables the prohibitions of blasphemy, not vice versa. Hidebound ideologues understand that the best way to control people en masse is to institute taboos: no-go zones for asking questions. If no inconvenient inquiries can be made, no inconvenient truths will be found. Parody exposes absurdity better than any other didactic tool. It forces us to revisit long-accepted “truths” by putting them in a different light. This requires us to flout norms...which means making ourselves UNCOMFORTABLE.

The question remains: How are we to ascertain whether or not satire is being done in good faith? On its surface, biting satire seems gauche—even louche. Its abrasiveness is often misconstrued as a sign of moral depravity. Nothing could be further from the truth. When truth meets power, what is empowering to the truth-teller is invariably caustic to those who benefit from the incumbent order. As it turns out, impertinence is often a virtue.

A laudable parody can come off as overly brash...especially when it “hits a nerve”. Yet this is not indicative of a problem when it is SUPPOSED TO BE unsettling. Satire works best when it is jarring; so the distress it may elicit does not itself indicate mean-spirited-ness. So we must look beneath the surface of things if we are to ascertain if there is any merit to the impertinence. Put another way: Vulgarity is not to be found in the expression ITSELF; but rather in what is BEHIND the expression. After all, the mode of articulation of X (as expression) is beside the point when the crux of the matter is the merit of X (as thesis). One must consider the context within which the expression-in-question is embedded in order to determine its true spirit.

This should to be distinguished from jeering—a cynical exercise designed simply to taunt. Chastisement that is gratuitously abrasive is ignoble; for it is simply done out of spite. Poking fun of others just to make them feel bad is underhanded, not edifying. Good satire—even when acerbic—is done to edify, not to vent. A splenetic rant has no pedagogic value. What makes all this confusing is that even the most acerbic satire is often not done in good faith; and ends up being antagonistic rather than productive. The problem is that those taken in by political correctness are wrongly convinced that ALL impolitic satire is of this nature (as if irreverence were an indication of iniquity).

There is a fundamental distinction to be made between sneering disdain and judicious repudiation. Not all contempt is of equal endowment. What we should discourage is derisive speech born of thoughtless, emotive ejaculation; not dissidence born of erudition. It is to our own detriment when we pretend that a discerning rebuke is no better than a thoughtless jeer.

Hence, of any given instance of mockery, we must ask: Is the gesture productive or counter-productive? Is the criticism an attempt to be constructive or to be destructive? There is, after all, a key difference between parody (which deigns to edify) and denigration (which is done to smother or traduce). The former is an exercise of free speech; the latter is an attempt to curb it.

When it is a case of the stronger castigating the weaker BECAUSE they are weaker, it is bullying. In such instances, the criticism is done not to pull up, but to push down. Estimable forms of satire punches across or up, never down. That is, it pokes fun ONLY at things formidable enough to adversely affect the common-man. Bullying, on the other hand, is more about intimidation than it is about engagement. The distinction, then, is between being irreverent FOR A GOOD REASON and just being an asshole.

In cases where it is NOT the privileged buffaloing those who are disadvantaged, yet it is done in bad faith, it amounts to a gratuitous slight—which invariably leads to exacerbated enmity. Such aspersions are unnecessarily inflammatory. Here, we make a distinction between goading on principle and, say, heckling. The satirist uses prodding to induce a rude awakening; whereas the trouble-maker needles his target in order to cause humiliation. Heckling is a way of squelching others’ ability to exercise free speech. In the more pernicious cases, it aims to cause psychical distress. When the ultimate aim of a speech-act is to cause consternation, one is not engaged in critique; one is just being a jerk.

Thus a heckle is more about curbing discourse than about making a point. It is not about expression; it is about drowning out expression. Hecklers seek to taunt and harass. They make noise, yet contribute nothing of value to the conversation. It is not people being offended (feeling insulted or somehow disrespected) that makes heckling an odious affair; it is the mean-spiritedness behind it.

And so a fundamental distinction must be made. Biting satire is done by irreverent expositors; heckling is done by bullies. Both require gall; but one is commentary while the other is buffoonery.

Note that satire needn't be ill-intentioned in order to be poorly-crafted. It can be just plain daft. That is to say: BAD satire can be bad for reasons other than mean-spirited-ness. It can be petty and sophomoric. It can traffic in cheap caricature. It might be unscrupulous or misleading. There is, after all, a crucial difference between being deft and being daft. In order to be pro-social, satire needs to be done in good faith. More to the point, it must be edifying in some way...lest we devolve into juvenile antics.

Good satirists aren't bullies; they are the emasculators of bullies. They are not fools themselves; they bring foolishness into the full light of day for all to see. (That's why only fools are afraid of satire.) Satirists are scathing, but not malicious. They agitate people, yet not in a way that is counter-productive. They are not timid; but neither are they reckless. They are jarring not merely to shock, but to enlighten. Hence their work is vital to the subsistence of social democracy.

Satire, then, is an integral element of liberal democracy; and so should be celebrated. Alas, evangelists for p.c. strive to render this vital didactic tool off-limits; and do so in the name of placating those who prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. As far as they're concerned, morality is entirely about etiquette; so breaching their protocols is somehow immoral. They consider scathing commentary iniquitous not because it actually causes harm; they considered it iniquitous because it is impolite.

They have failed to learn one of the most important lessons of cosmopolitanism: If we can laugh together, we can live together. A citizenry that can't take a joke is doomed to eternal fractiousness. Comedy is supposed to bring people together. Those who can laugh with each other form a bond, making it less likely they will fight with each other. Laughing together is one of the most powerful foundations for human solidarity.

When well-executed, satire can strike the ideal balance between amusement and pedagogy. Humor helps us maintain our sanity in the face of perfidy; and in the midst of adversity. Ribald is one of the most common devices for satire; yet the mandarins of p.c. proscribe it in a ham-fisted attempt to palliate the tetchiest members of the audience. Priggish bystanders insist on being eternally palliated; and assail anyone who fails to comply with their demands. So the rest of us are expected to toe the line...lest we be excoriated for being unsettling...or "offensive"...or "insulting"...or "disrespectful".

In order to ascertain an expression's moral nature, we do not look to the the psychical effects the expression happens to have on this or that party; as subjective states are not a dependable arbiter of credence. Rather we must look at what is BEHIND the expression. We can then inquire into how well it was articulated. Be that as it may, effrontery is not itself a dependable gauge, as ANYTHING critical is seen as an affront by SOMEBODY. Nobody is in a position to adjudicate the rights of one party based on the sentiment of another.

There is a time to be facetious and a time to be serious. Aristotle once cited Gorgias, who noted that one is best advised to defeat an opponent's earnestness with jesting, and defeat his jesting with earnestness. The pen is mightier than the sword; but jest can be far more powerful than even the most eloquent prose. The prerogative to be irreverent is one of the surest signs a society is genuinely free. Meanwhile, the best friend of compliance is silence; as dissimulation is typically concomitant with subservience.

The established order depends on everyone "knowing their place" and "staying in their lane"; not upsetting sacred apple-carts. The archaic notion that we all have our assigned roles to play must be jettisoned. At some point, one needs to tread on sensibilities in order to make headway. All pioneers must—BY DEFINITION—be blasphemers (that is: iconoclasts, subversives), as they buck trends, flout long-accepted norms, and color outside the lines. Progress in ANY context is predicated on a willingness to eschew outdated precepts; and, yes, engage in heresy.

The key is to maximize audacity without compromising perspicacity.

In a free / open society, the satirist is willing to unsettle—even disturb—what is an otherwise complacent demos. Creativity thrives on psychical agitation (that is: the disruption of ingrained habits of thought). This amounts to throwing a bucket of ice-water over the heads of the smug, the intellectually moribund. Satirists do so in order to spur progress—like giving an electrical jolt (NEVER comfortable) to those who have slipped into a protracted dogmatic stupor.

The point, then, is to disrupt what is often a psychical / social homeostasis: something that can only be done by introducing a dialectical perturbation into an intellectually moribund system.

In the event that a snarky quip or silly cartoon can throw MILLIONS of gormless—and peevish—ideologues into paroxysms of discombobulation, there is no other conclusion than that they are afflicted with gnawing insecurity. Such people are quick to be offended; and quick to lash out...no matter how trivial the perceived slight. This is a reminder that insecurity quickly translates to irritability, then to hostility.

A reactionary (obdurate) mindset accounts for the uptight disposition exhibited by hair-trigger offense-taking. Such heightened skittish-ness indicates that a dogmatic system is far too weak to withstand any serious critique. When the folly of the sacrosanct is exposed, temper tantrums can't help but ensue.

When comes to ideology, obduracy is typically a sign of frangibility—a point illustrated by the current neo-Maoist regime in China being offended by Winnie the Pooh. Like Mao himself, Xi Jin-ping cannot abide even the slightest hint of dissent. Show me someone who can't laugh at himself and I'll show you an authoritarian.

Feeble constitutions are indicative of feeble minds. This is why obsequiousness invariably accompanies sycophancy—as demonstrated by virtually all instances of cultic thinking since time immemorial.

Dogmatists are funny that way. Disturb their epistemic homeostasis, and they are apt to panic. For it turns out that their ramshackle dogmatic edifice is embarrassingly fragile. Any perturbation threatens the integrity of this teetering edifice; and—deep down—they know this. So they will become apoplectic the moment anyone has the gall to “shake things up”. This is especially so if they've staked their name on—nay, built their entire lives around—a certain set of beliefs. This is most apparent when it comes to those who's continued socio-economic status depends on the established order being left “as is”.

When an ideology is so delicate that it sees even the most fleeting ball-busting as an existential threat, we are witnessing the flailing of a faltering dogmatic system. It makes sense, then, that those who are insecure are unable to abide even the mildest of satire. Their obduracy belies their professed confidence in their convictions.

In summary: A lampoon is good when it seeks to bring dysfunction to light; a lampoon is bad when it is done just to be mean. Exposing human folly invariably causes discomfiture; so discomfiture cannot be a reason for censure. Parody—even measured degree of parody mockery—is, as they say, “all in good fun”; as it keeps people on their toes. When done in good faith, it is intended to awaken rather than to derogate.

Exposing folly is imperative if we sincerely want to progress, even when the folly is our own. And sometimes a well-placed jape is an effective way to do that. On the other hand, a censorious attitude is inimical to robust discourse; and is therefore antithetical to deliberative democracy. A willingness to laugh at oneself is a sign of open-mindedness; a willingness to learn and grow.

To support satire—ESPECIALLY when the target is a sacred cow—is to recognize the vital role that unhindered heterodoxy plays in sustaining liberal democracy. A humorless polis is a repressed polis. In reflecting on the importance of irreverence in civil society, we should harken back to the words of Voltaire: “To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize.”

Footnotes:

{1 Satire is not necessarily controversial. It can be relatively anodyne—as when it is simply making fun of life-in-general, the world-in-general, or human nature (that is: all of humanity qua humanity). It tends not to ruffle feathers when it has no discrete targets—a scenario in which certain people feel singled out. See footnote 2 below.}

{2 When Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi composed his “The Moral of the Viziers” in the late 10th / early 11th century (a work that mocked idiotic rulers in the abstract), it likely never occurred to anyone who really needed to be mocked that the characters applied to THEM. In such cases, nobody thinks that THEY are the butt of the joke; it’s always the OTHER people who are the idiots. So it goes with sardonic cartoons like Doonesbury, Dilbert, and The Far Side.}

{3 Gilbert and Sullivan (the composer) were also famous for “The Pirates of Penzance” and “The Gondoliers”.}

{4 France has not always been so liberal. From 1830 to 1835, there were the popular satirical daily magazines, “La Caricature” and “Le Charivari” (distributed in England as “Punch”). Alas. In 1835, the (illiberal) French monarchists banned political cartoons.}

{5 Interestingly, Washington Irving penned a massive dramatization of Mohammed of Mecca (“Mahomet and His Successors”) in the 1840’s.}

{6 Bassem Youssef was an Egyptian satirist who’s television series, “Al-Bernameg” lasted only two years (2011-2013; plus eleven episodes aired in early 2014) before it was curtailed due to threats to Youssef and his family. It is instructive to note WHY Youssef’s television show was banned. It was taken off the air not for blasphemy; but for “offending” people (that is: for being too condescending). In other words, the ban was done not for explicitly religious reasons; but for socio-political reasons. We were thus reminded that political correctness is just another form of censorship. Note that other shows have been inspired by Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show”, including Hikari Ota’s “Bakusho Mondai” in Japan.}

{7 On the heels of the so-called “Arab Spring”, the election in Egypt was a non-choice between a Mubarak stooge and a Salafi theocrat. Either path led to a non-democratic outcome. Being able to vote is a vital part of democracy; but democracy is about far more than just being able to vote. As I write this footnote, Egypt still does not know genuine democracy.}

{8 At any given time, the most erudite people are invariably the least dogmatic; and thus the least religious (that is: the least apt to be doctrinal). Revolutionary thinkers are, by nature, not reactionary. Indeed, they are suspicious of “received wisdom”. (Fetishizing ancient creeds means assuming we have learned nothing of import since they were first codified.) As a consequence, revolutionary thinkers are less susceptible to the trappings of institutionalized dogmatism than those who are transfixed by the status quo.}

{9 When it comes to assaying culture, the point is to strike a balance between being overly austere and overly libertine. The idea with cultural prescriptions, then, is to be imaginative without either devolving

into anarchy (that is: indiscriminately lashing-out) or getting carried away with decadence (that is: being florid, and thus cloying). Meanwhile, the satirist is obliged to be responsible in his commentary without succumbing to the temptations to remain prim and proper. (It is possible to be conscientious without being up-tight and stodgy.) Thus the credo is: Loosen up! But not TOO much.}

{10 This approach would later be used in animated television series like “The Simpsons”, “South Park”, and “Family Guy”—each of which offered a witty yet irreverent take on the absurdities of American life. This is a reminder that even zany satire can be a powerful didactic tool.}

{11 Imagine a day when a vaudevillian production of “Mohammed, Bedouin Superstar” could be staged in the middle of the Muslim world...to rave reviews. Or imagine “Book of Islam” instead of “Book of Mormon” receiving critical acclaim across the Muslim world. Until then, a truly Reform Islam remains forthcoming.}

{12 During the 20th century, Indian satire flourished in Kerala more than anywhere else—as demonstrated by famed Malayalam writers like E.V. Krishna Pillai, Mannikoth Ramunni Nair (a.k.a. “Sanjayan”), Sukumar[an] Potti, and Velloor Krishnankutty. Other notable Indian satirists included Sushil Siddharth and Gitchandra Tongbra.}