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# Satire and Stability<sup>i</sup>

Carl Fox<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

In his comedy special *Inside*, recorded over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bo Burnham expertly pokes fun at the idea that comedy is a serious political activity through which a performer can effect substantial change and leave the world better than they found it. Indeed, at one point Burnham directly addresses the viewer and says that the real point of the special was to help him come through a difficult time and that he hopes it might do the same for them. This sense of scepticism about the political role of comedy is developed into an interesting philosophical account of satire by Dieter Declercq (2021), who similarly tries to pull back from any grandiose claims about its political significance. He focuses instead on the relationship between satire and mental health, and argues that the primary contribution satire should aim to make is to help us cope with a world that is “sick beyond full recovery”. This retreat from politics to focus on other ways in which satire might enrich our lives is entirely understandable, and chimes with a deep feeling of exasperation that many people have towards a world in which, to cite just one example of a political event that boggles the mind, Donald Trump can become the President of the United States. Clearly politics is not working as it should, and satire has not prevented it from generating any number of absurdities.

In this chapter, however, I argue against downplaying the political significance of satire. I will do this in two ways. The first is to rehearse some of the reasons why satire, as one practice within a larger public sphere, can underpin the legitimacy of a representative democratic system of government by contributing to an open, accessible, and productive public discourse about the kinds of issues that must be dealt with collectively. The second takes us beyond the traditional focus of political philosophers on the relationship between the public sphere and legitimacy, and shows that satire is uniquely equipped to play another crucial political role by shoring up the stability of pluralistic democratic communities. A stable polity

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is one in which a high proportion of citizens are reliably disposed to play fair with each other and abide by a common set of rules. We are coming to understand that a commitment to having and maintaining what John Rawls called a “sense of justice” is a resource that is as critical to the smooth functioning of democratic systems of government as it is fragile.

I show that satire helps to secure stability in a few key ways. First, I will explain how public ridicule constitutes a tangible sanction, and thus creates a disincentive, for bad behaviour. Unjust actions, especially by people in positions of authority, exacerbate a deep worry we all have that our commitment to justice will be taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals or rival political groups. Second, satire can be a way to call out abuses of power and authority, and at the same time reaffirm our own principles. Third, by shining a light on the dangers of vicious behaviour, satire provides a spur for self-reflection, which can assist its audience in avoiding those pitfalls and retaining a sense of humility, which makes cooperation and partnership with other citizens, particularly citizens who have different views about what makes for a good life and a good community, easier. Finally, satire can indeed be a valuable tool for managing and protecting our mental health, but I argue that we not only have personal reasons to look after ourselves in this sense, but also political reasons that spring from our civic duties.

I will start this chapter by outlining an account of what satire is, arguing that satire exposes authority that is unsuitable for the position it holds, and that laughter is always an appropriate response to satire because of the absurdity of that mismatch. I will then draw a contrast between legitimacy and stability, and show that satire can contribute to both. Finally, I will conclude with some brief reflections on the implications of my view for the state and, indeed, for satirists themselves.

## 2. Satire

Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, in which he appears to argue earnestly in favour of eating the children of the poor as a progressive social policy, is perhaps the most celebrated modern example of satire. Swift mimics the forms and conventions of the essay to brutally expose the callous attitude of the British ruling class to the poverty and misery endemic in Ireland at the time. It is shocking, funny, irreverent, witty, and yet at the same time manages to drive home a very serious message. Dieter Declercq (2018) argues that satire is defined by a dual purpose to critique and entertain. In this section I will consider Declercq’s definition, and argue that we

should be even more precise. First, I will show that at the heart of satire is a particular criticism, which is that the target of a satirical work ought not to hold whatever position of power and authority it currently occupies. Typically, satirists make this argument by juxtaposing the significance of that role with the subject's unsuitability for it. Indeed, the dark humour that is characteristic of satire comes from the absurdity of that mismatch. This leads into the second point. Entertain is too broad a term. Although satirists often deploy a wide range of artistic forms and skills to engage and enthrall their audience, satire is always conducted in the key of humour for the simple reason that exposing a state of affairs in which some person or thing holds an office for which they are patently unfit renders that person or thing ridiculous. Although laughter is not the only appropriate response to apprehending that something is ridiculous, especially when that thing is consequential, it is always a fitting one.

In order to illustrate the centrality of a moral dimension to genuine satire, Declercq (2018, p. 321) identifies examples of what he calls "pseudo-satire", such as *Mock the Week* in the UK and *Saturday Night Live* in the United States. Although such programmes make fun of newsworthy individuals, which is to say people whose decisions have a significant bearing on the well-being and life-chances of the citizen body, he argues (2018, p.322) that they fall short of satire because they lack a "critical purpose". Declercq is surely right to make this distinction. It is perfectly fine to have some fun at the expense of powerful figures, but that is not sufficient to constitute satire. What elevates Swift's work is the fact that it is trying to identify and castigate a serious moral failing on the part of his target. However, I think we can be even more precise about the nature of satirical criticism. In order to explain this it will be helpful to consider the other element of Declercq's definition of satire.

He rejects the commonsense understanding of satire as a branch of comedy and contends that rather than aiming to be funny, it must only attempt to be "entertaining". His reason for this is that he wishes to accommodate some sensible intuitions about two iconic artworks with significant moral dimensions. Declercq wishes to draw a line around satire that *includes* Jimi Hendrix's stirring rendition of the Star Spangled Banner at Woodstock in 1969 but *excludes* Pablo Picasso's disturbing painting *Guernica* about the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. Both works clearly meet the criterion of moral critique. Hendrix's heavily distorted take on the American national anthem captured the frustrated idealism of the sixties and reflects the distance between the ideals enshrined in its constitution and the reality of a deeply divided country that was in the midst of waging a disastrous war in Vietnam. Picasso depicts the brutal aerial bombardment of a defenceless civilian population by the future dictator Francisco Franco's fascist allies from Germany and Italy.

Declercq (2018, p.321) contends that Picasso's work is neither enjoyable nor intended to be enjoyable, and so cannot be classed as entertaining. Hendrix's performance, on the other hand, is certainly something that one could listen to for pleasure. Although this distinction delivers the right result, it invites a range of difficult questions. We might well wonder how an aesthetic work can captivate an audience without being enjoyable in at least some sense. Is the composition of *Guernica* not beautiful? Does it not engage our critical faculties and so provide an opportunity to exercise and develop our mental capacities? We might also wonder exactly how enjoyable paradigmatic satire is meant to be. *A Modest Proposal* sets out – in some detail – a plan to cook and eat poor children. For all the wit and stylish prose, the chief effect it has is to leave the reader feeling distinctly uncomfortable. A full defence of Declercq's distinction would require answers to these questions. However, we can avoid these complications once we understand that they are only prompted by a move that Declercq does not need to make. His motivation for broadening the definition of satire is to accommodate clearly satirical works such as Hendrix's performance and George Orwell's *1984* that are not funny. However, this analysis rests, I believe, on a mistake. There is something funny about them. Once we can see why that is we can see why successful satire is always comedic. It may not have us rolling in the aisles, but laughter is always a fitting response.<sup>ii</sup>

Let's look at Hendrix again. On the face of it, he is simply playing his national anthem. However, the way he plays it turns it into something other than a sincere expression of patriotism. The manner of his playing, the fact that he himself is a veteran, and the context provided by Woodstock itself – the apex of the counter-culture – all combine to achieve an ironic effect. It transforms the performance into an indictment of the American state for failing to live up to the hope and promise expressed in the lyrics of its anthem and the symbolism of its flag. The choice to play the national anthem is significant because it contrasts the noble political aspirations associated with the founding of the United States of America and the deeply disappointing reality that Hendrix's generation were faced with, including a political establishment that had largely resisted the political optimism and activism of the early 60s and had just seen Richard Nixon elected president.<sup>iii</sup> By juxtaposing the ideal with the reality, Hendrix exposes the profound unsuitability of the state, its institutions, and its leaders to realise its lofty ideals.<sup>iv</sup> Essentially, he showed that America itself had become a joke, and that, in turn, rendered all naïve acts of performative patriotism darkly comic.<sup>v</sup>

Now, laughter is not the only fitting response to Hendrix's performance. In a widely-seen television interview on *The Dick Cavett Show* a month later, he said that he thought the rendition was "beautiful". And this is right too. It can also be understood as a kind of

reaffirmation and reclamation of American ideals, a call to arms for those dissatisfied with what America had become. However, humour remains the primary register of satire. Because it aims to make the ridiculousness of its target transparent to the audience it cannot but aim to be at least wryly amusing.

Although particular instances of satire will, of course, have particular things to say about their subjects, this message about the lack of fit between its target and the position of authority that that target either holds, or aspires to hold, is apparent in work as different in tone and content from Swift to South Park. The real difference between Hendrix and Picasso, then, is not that one is entertaining while the other is not. Rather, it is that for all the latter's use of symbolism and surrealism in *Guernica*, its chief effect is to convey the sheer awfulness of the last moments of the victims. The perpetrators of the atrocity are implicitly condemned, but there is no contrast or juxtaposition. Ultimately, the painting is not about them, but about the terrible thing that they have done.

This focus on a particular form of absurdity is why satire is not limited to targeting individual human beings. Anything that has authority can be a subject for satire. A nice example of this is provided by Tom Walker's character of Jonathan Pie. Pie is a political correspondent for a television news programme who blows off steam between his attempts at official takes by ranting about particular injustices and the general state of politics and society. However, although it might appear that his targets are the policies and individuals that he cites in the monologues, it is actually the news media itself that is being satirised. Although the length and intensity of his diatribes show that Pie is at his wits' end, the videos generally end with him starting to record his actual segment for broadcast. He somehow shakes off his rage and disgust to adopt a cheerful demeanour and neutral tone. The contrast between his unvarnished thoughts on the topic at hand and what he says in his professional reporting is striking. The underlying message that Walker is communicating to the audience is thus that the conventions and norms of the news media are hopelessly outmatched.<sup>vi</sup> Not only are they an impediment to telling people what they need to know, but they are, in fact, actively harmful to society because they facilitate both misinformation and disinformation. Satire is thus not limited to critiquing individual human beings, but may take aim at beliefs, norms, principles, social structures, institutions, and so on. Anything that has authority over us is a potential target of satire.<sup>vii</sup>

One interesting point that follows from the idea that satire attacks people and things that hold some sort of privileged standing in our community is that genuine satirists cannot "punch down".<sup>viii</sup> It is clearly possible to make fun of the poor and the weak, but on my

understanding it is not possible to satirise them. As Basu (1999, p.393) notes, attempts by the powerful to use humour to isolate and control the weak are generally strained.<sup>ix</sup> When efforts to punch down appropriate the tools and forms of satire, the absurdity is found in the wrong place because it is the conception and execution of the performance that is an abuse of power and privilege, rather than anything about the target.

So, that is what satire is, but perhaps a more consequential question is whether satire is simply something that people do and consume for their own personal reasons, and so should be permitted simply as an activity that falls under the scope of our interest in having a broad sphere of personal liberty, or a practice that has a distinctive and valuable role to play in a functioning democratic system. If the latter is true then there are important implications for how the state ought to treat satire and satirists. For instance, it would be an important step in an argument establishing that satirists ought to have special exemptions from libel laws, which is a point I will return to briefly in the conclusion. In the next section, though, I will explore the relationship between satire and political legitimacy.

### 3. Satire and Legitimacy

One common view of the political role of satire conceives of it as an activity that checks various kinds of power in our political system. On this understanding, the satirist effectively plays the role of the small child in the folktale about the emperor's new clothes. By puncturing the air of authority that surrounds some figure, or institution, or norm, they thereby constrain its ability to cause harm. However, we might well wonder how successful satire is in playing this role. As Declercq observes, "all the satire in the world did not keep Trump out of the White House in 2016," and the lesson he draws from this failure is that "these heroic claims about the political impact of the genre seem doubtful," (2021, p.28).

This keen sense of satire's failure to make the world a more just, or even just a less absurd place, I think, is also part of what motivates Burnham, and both of them have a similar response, which is to downplay the political significance of satire and to situate its main contribution in the realm of mental health. Though this approach does, I think, capture a genuine and important benefit that satire can produce, retreating from the notion that satire is a distinctively political activity is more costly than it may seem. In the rest of this section I will explain how political philosophers have argued that satire is related to the legitimacy of a state, and in the next section I will develop an additional argument for continuing to think of satire

as a political activity that relies on the ways in which it is important for the stability of a political community.

Let's understand legitimacy as the moral permission that we generally assume states to have to issue binding commands and to back them up – even with physical force if necessary. Clearly, this is an extraordinary moral permission that stands in need of justification.<sup>x</sup> On the face of it, something deeply odd seems to be going on. Even though most of us are (or will grow up to be) autonomous individuals with both the capacity and the will to make decisions for ourselves, states operate on the assumption that some people – those who hold office in the government – get to order other people around, and to send the police around to compel obedience when it is not forthcoming.

To be procedurally legitimate, a state must make and enforce its decisions in a way that is consistent with the widely-held belief that above some threshold all persons count as equals.<sup>xi</sup> In the political context this is generally taken to mean that we should all have an equal share of decision-making power. But how can this be? Though my vote in a general election may count for the same as a president or a prime minister, they clearly have a much bigger say in the day-to-day decisions that determine so much of our lives. One way in which we can mitigate the distance between most citizens and the nitty-gritty of decision-making is by creating more opportunities for citizens to be involved in it. This is where the public sphere adds something additional to the idea of 'one person, one vote'. When issues and policies are discussed in public fora such as newspapers, broadcast media, and social media, there are more opportunities to contribute.

Jürgen Habermas (1996) is a significant proponent of this notion of the public sphere as an enormous, rolling conversation about matters of public importance. On his view, along with the procedural concerns we have been discussing, outcomes also matter in considering the legitimacy of a political system and the best guarantee we can have that our governments will produce good outcomes is to ensure that our collective cognitive resources are deployed to identify potential problems and to propose and assess potential solutions. By having more conversations about issues, policies, candidates for public office, etc... we give ourselves more opportunities to scrutinise them and ensure that they are thoroughly evaluated.

Satirists can facilitate this ideal of an open conversation about matters of public significance by creating and entering a unique discursive space that permits a distinctive form of political communication. Humour and irony can engage audiences in a different way to straight reporting or sincere debate. Indeed, perhaps satirists can stitch together new or different audiences, thus bringing together groups of people who might not normally encounter one



another or share much in the way of experiences or influences. We also expect satirists to push buttons that are usually off-limits in public settings. As Jeremy Waldron (1987) argues, shock can be a prompt for reflection and re-evaluation. This is one reason why we permit satirists more leeway to be outrageous and offensive than we afford to many other parts of the public sphere – notably journalism which has to play with a much straighter bat (Fox 2017).<sup>xii</sup>

Satire allows us to reveal awkward or uncomfortable truths, and truth is the lifeblood of the Habermasian public sphere. An accurate understanding of the world is essential if we are to make good decisions about it. Jerome Neu (2008, p.230) compares the court jester who was “licensed to tell in his jolly way unwelcome truths under the cloak of nonsense” with the modern satirist who “in allowing us to laugh as he makes his point, is in turn permitted to tell us how things really are”. Satire, then, can make uncomfortable truths that ought to be part of our discussions apparent and palatable.

Of course, one issue with ascribing a legitimating role to satire is that it is often very difficult to trace back concrete outcomes to particular parts of the public sphere, and even more so to particular instances of speech within them. For this reason, it is possible to remain sceptical about the political impact of satire as a discrete activity. However, if it is working well, then the myriad people and practices that make up the Habermasian public sphere should be deeply intertwined, pulling ideas, arguments, and inspiration from all over. This is meant to be a feature, rather than a bug. If we think that satire is capable of providing a unique discursive space for the reasons I have given, then we must be prepared to extend some trust that it is already playing a useful political role, even if it is not always clear what results it is delivering. Indeed, instead of wondering whether satire has achieved much of anything at all in recent times, we might ask where would be now without it.

In the concluding section I will briefly touch on what else we might do to nurture and promote satire, but before that I want to consider another important political dimension in which satire can make a contribution that has not yet received much attention. This is what I shall call the *stability* of a political community composed of people with different backgrounds, experiences, and worldviews.

## 4. Stability

In the aftermath of Donald Trump's shock victory in the 2016 US presidential election, Arlie Russell Hochschild's book *'Strangers in Their Own Land'* became a bestseller, and a focal point for Americans trying to understand the origin of the deep fissures in their political landscape. In it, Hochschild, a sociologist, sets out to understand the perspective of supporters of the Tea Party movement in Louisiana by finding out their "deep story", which she describes as a "*feels-as-if* story," (2018, p.135). The story she creates to capture the emotional core of their political worldview revolves around the metaphor of line-cutting. The people she spoke to all felt as if they had been queuing, patiently waiting for their share of the good life – the 'American Dream' – only for various groups to jump in front of them, apparently receiving preferential treatment that set their own painfully slow progress back even more. Hochschild is clear that this is not a story grounded in reason or evidence. It is simply how many Americans *feel*, deep down, about the way that their country distributes the benefits and burdens of social cooperation. The key element of the deep story is that people believe that their goodwill and decency are being taken advantage of by others. As they see it, they are playing by the rules – they are, after all, *queuing* – and that is precisely what makes them vulnerable.

We are, I think, coming to appreciate just how toxic this feeling can be in a political community characterised by what John Rawls (2005, p.4) called "the fact of reasonable pluralism". He believed that it is inevitable that people will come to hold different and competing views about deep ethical questions. He thought this largely because these questions are hard and admit of a range of plausible answers to which individuals can be sincerely committed.<sup>xiii</sup> However, he also believed that it was possible to manage these disagreements politically because we could acknowledge that fact. If we can disagree about such matters without it being the case that anyone is making a mistake, then Rawls thinks it follows that we should commit to abiding by a shared set of rules that guarantee respect for everyone's right to determine for themselves their own understanding of what matters and what makes for a good life and a good community.

If you acknowledge others as having the same moral and political standing as you do and you are disposed to adhere to a fair set of common rules in this way, then you have a "sense of justice" (Rawls 2005, p.19). Possessing an effective sense of justice means that you are reliably motivated to play fair with others, even to the point that you will restrain yourself if you are presented with the option to exploit political advantages that might arise for your

worldview if it would mean treating others unfairly. If a high enough proportion of the population have a sense of justice, then the system will be stable in the sense that it will contain within it the will to maintain or return to a specified equilibrium when it suffers shocks or encounters challenging conditions. For instance, can it continue to hold and observe the results of free and fair elections in the face of shocks such as a pandemic, a cost of living crisis, or a wave of immigration without descending into acrimony, suspicion, and political turmoil?<sup>xiv</sup>

Essentially, if you have a robust sense of justice then it is not foolish for other people to trust you to exercise your political power responsibly. If most people are the same then any individual is warranted in trusting that the public as a sovereign body will behave responsibly. Thus this kind of attitude holds a political system together and makes cooperation possible amongst people who disagree on fundamental ethical and political questions.

However, it is not easy to preserve one's sense of justice. Not only do you have to be prepared to pass up chances to realise cherished political aspirations that may partly define your identity, when they cannot be achieved without ignoring the requirements of justice, but you have to trust that your opponents will also play by the rules. Rawls (1999, pp.295-296) was particularly worried about the corrosive effect that fear and mistrust of the motivations of other groups might have on the ability of a pluralistic community to distribute the benefits and burdens of cooperation fairly. And this is precisely the nightmare scenario that Hochschild describes. The belief that your commitment to justice makes you vulnerable to unscrupulous others injects a brutal Hobbesian logic into political competition. Rawls (1999, p.296) puts it this way: "given circumstances of mutual fear, even just men may be condemned to a condition of permanent hostility". What he means is that if you suspect that your opponent will toss out the rulebook and strike against you, then the superior strategy is to get your retaliation in first. To do anything less is to be a mug.

A society scarred by this kind of suspicion and mistrust will be difficult, if not impossible to govern in a way that is consistent with democratic principles. Its commitment to those principles will be insecure and dependent upon circumstance. In short, it will be unstable. This is not a hypothetical risk. In the present moment we can see how ideological polarisation, hyper-partisan media, and culture war politics can combine to produce moments such as the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection in the United States. Fortunately, there are things that we can do to cultivate and nurture citizens' sense of justice, and this is another area in which satire can make a meaningful political contribution.

## 5. How Satire Contributes to Stability

The aim of this chapter is to show that satire can contribute to the health of a democracy by buttressing and nurturing its citizens' sense of justice and so promoting its stability.<sup>xv</sup> In this section I will set out four ways in which satirists can do this.

First, the kind of public ridicule that satirists deploy can be a deeply unpleasant experience for the target, and even sometimes one which can have long-term ramifications for a person's career and aspirations in public life. This means that satire can attach a tangible sanction to the kinds of vicious behaviour in politics and other aspects of public life that erode citizen's belief in the good faith of others. Aside from directly disincentivising bad behaviour, the knowledge that such a sanction exists can also help to alleviate the worry we have been discussing that complying with the rules of the community will make you a 'sucker', and open you up to exploitation.<sup>xvi</sup>

It is important not to overstate the ability of satire to deter powerful public figures from unethical behaviour. To take one category of public figure, there are clearly many politicians who seem largely unaffected by satirical portrayals, and there may even be some who welcome any publicity as good publicity. John O'Farrell, who was one of the chief writers on the original run of the *Spitting Image* television programme in the UK, has argued that satirists will struggle to create a perception of a politician that has no roots in existing public opinion. However, he observes that satire can "help crystallise a feeling about a government policy or individual politician that is already in the ether," (1999). By sharpening our focus on some feature, satirists can make it easier to identify, discuss, and evaluate it, and so nudge the public discourse in a particular direction. So, although satire's ability to shape public opinion may be limited, it does seem likely that it is nonetheless real, and in the right circumstances may be highly consequential.

Second, even if the subject of satire is immune to ridicule, calling out a person or a norm that is unacceptable is worthwhile in itself. Satirists turn bad and vicious behaviour by powerful people into a spectacle to be witnessed, considered, shared, and discussed. This means that satire provides a very public way of holding people to account. This is particularly important when other mechanisms of accountability have either failed or are not appropriate. Take as an example the Adam McKay film *Vice*. Dick Cheney – the subject of the film – arguably bears responsibility for egregious human rights violations and over the course of his career played an instrumental role in the degradation of the fabric of American democracy. The film depicts the corruption of his character as he gradually comes to prize power above all else, to the point that he eventually sacrifices his one redeeming feature in order to pursue it.

Cheney, however, essentially got away with it. He was never punished by the voters and there was never any question that he would suffer legal consequences for his actions. Indeed, whatever about the many questionable actions he took during his years in power, there simply is no legal remedy for the underlying problem that the film unsubtly diagnoses. For McKay, Cheney is ultimately heartless, and the film strongly suggests that anyone who lacks a moral centre ought not to be trusted with political power. However, as the end of the film implies, the target may be too far gone or too insulated from public opinion to be successfully shamed or changed by the satire. However, there are important ways in which simply calling out the behaviour as unacceptable may be worthwhile. There is expressive value simply in condemning forms of behaviour and, indeed, kinds of lives, that are inimical to the public good. I submit that it is much the same as trying criminals in absentia. Even though they will not suffer the appropriate punishment, holding the trial and delivering a verdict is a symbolic act that expresses the community's determination not to let a wrongful action pass and be forgotten.<sup>xvii</sup> By formally and publicly condemning the perpetrator, the community stands with the victim, reasserting their status and reaffirming the collective commitment to justice.

It seems to me that laughing together at tainted figures like Cheney can achieve something similar by uniting the audience in condemnation.<sup>xviii</sup> By ridiculing the subjects of the piece, the satirist enlivens the reasons that count against their behaviour and encourages others to renounce them. Indeed, by getting the joke and laughing along, the audience are also encouraged to take a more positive step and reaffirm their own commitment to justice.

Third, engaging with satire may also inspire some personal humility. By turning our attention to the ways in which authorities can lose the run of themselves, we are invited to reflect on our own flaws and the ways in which we might fall down in our dealings with others. The capacity for this kind of self-reflection is crucial for preserving an atmosphere of tolerance and respect. One nice example of this is the programme *South Park*, which reserves a special level of scorn for self-righteousness. One of the lessons that we took from Rawls in the previous section was that people who disagree with us may do so reasonably. If we are to treat them as political partners then we need to keep that fact in view and avoid becoming close-minded and dismissive.

Finally, as Burnham and Declercq suggest, there likely are significant mental health benefits to producing and enjoying good satire. Laughter can lift our spirits by puncturing rage and dispelling despair. In doing so it can make it easier to achieve a sense of perspective about some problem or issue. It can also take us out of ourselves, and establish a sense of camaraderie and fellowship with others when we laugh together. Declercq articulates an account of satire

in which its primary role is to help us cope not only with the experience of being confronted with the myriad injustices in the world, but also with the dispiriting realisation that our efforts to critique and reform the world will, at best, only ever be partially successful. As he says, if we cannot manage the balance between caring for others and caring for ourselves, then “we either become political apathetic or psychologically unhinged in the face of suffering which we cannot alleviate,” (2021, p.108). Even here, though, we can see an acknowledgment of the political significance that satire can have. We do not only have personal reasons to use tools like satire to help us cope, but political reasons too. It is our duty as citizens to try to maintain a robust sense of justice. This is not to say that we are required to be suckers, but, rather, that we owe it to other reasonable citizens to remain open to the possibility of cooperation within a fair system of shared rules.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that satire consists in an artistic attempt to expose the absurdity of a mismatch between the demands of some position of authority and the person or thing that occupies it. Laughter is not the only fitting response when something is ridiculous, but it is always appropriate, and this, I contend, captures the dark humour that is characteristic of satire. I have made two broad arguments for resisting the temptation to reconceive satire as act that is not primarily political. The first depended on the idea that satire, as part of the wider public sphere, can help to legitimise the democratic state by creating a unique communicative space that helps to widen participation in decision-making and introduce relevant truths into the public discourse. My second argument developed a version of Rawls’s notion of stability, and identified four ways that satire can help to make it easier for people to retain their sense of justice, which is a crucial but fragile resource in a political community that is characterised by deep disagreements about what people have reason to do and how a society should be run.

If I am right, and satire does have a politically significant function to perform, then it is clearly important that it be able to play that role effectively. I will conclude with some very brief reflections on how we might better support it. First, we could provide additional legal protection for work that is deemed to be satire. While exaggeration and hyperbole are effective tools for getting your point across to an audience who are expecting to laugh, they can fall very flat outside of that context. As satire comes at truth sideways, it has always flirted with the boundaries of defamation law. The standard defences against a defamation suit, such as honest

opinion, public interest, and privilege can be hard to establish in a courtroom,<sup>xix</sup> especially if your stock-in-trade is metaphor and outrageous imagery. If shocking and biting satire is really in the public interest, as I have argued that it is, then we have strong reason to consider affording it tailored protection in our laws. Legislation could also establish common standards that satirists would have to meet to qualify for these privileges, which could help to clarify when the mantle of satire is being inappropriately claimed to cover unjustifiable behaviour.

Second, we can use public resources to provide a platform for satire and to help budding satirists hone their craft. One way of doing this would be to support public broadcasters, who are often incubators for performers who may struggle, particularly early on in their careers, to find large audiences. An important risk, then, of insisting that public broadcasters compete in an open market is that they may be less able, or inclined, to take risks on a form of comedy which attracts trouble and criticism even when it succeeds.

Third, more philosophical work needs to be done not only to determine the special permissions, protections, and supports that we should extend to satirists, but also to identify and articulate the unique moral responsibilities that may fall on them. For example, I think it is incumbent on satirists to eschew easy jokes if they needlessly alienate particular cohorts. It might get an easy laugh and build a rapport with a left-leaning audience in the UK to take a swipe at Brexit voters, but if that means that the real substance of the work is certain to be dismissed and ignored, perhaps by the people who would benefit most from hearing it, then there is a very strong reason to avoid it. Of course, additional academic work on satire runs the perennial risk of sucking all the fun out of it, but if everyone had a clearer grasp of what it is fair to expect of satire and satirists, then the latter would be better equipped to challenge us in the ways that we enjoy, and the practice as a whole would be better able to fulfil the public function that I have outlined in this chapter.

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<sup>ii</sup> Though I do not have time to go into it in as much detail as perhaps I should, the claim I am making here is that satire is a sub-genre of comedy. I thank Dieter Declercq and Víctor Durà-Vilà for pushing me on this point. On categories of art, the classic starting point in the literature is Walton (1970)

<sup>iii</sup> It is, of course possible, that the target of satire might change and improve, perhaps even partially in response to this kind of moral criticism, and so become worthy of occupying a position of authority. I will return to this point in Section 5.

<sup>iv</sup> Many think that all humour revolves around incongruity (Basu 1999, p.386). I am not committed to that claim in general, although I do think that it is true in the particular case of satire. On this point see also Shaw (2010) and Critchley (2002). On theories of humour more generally see Carroll (2014).

<sup>v</sup> This focus on a target is why satirists so often rely on hyperbolic impersonation. By exaggerating the subject's flaws and vices they invite the audience to reflect on the absurdity in the more prosaic expression of those vices which they may not have noticed before, or to which they have become numb.

<sup>vi</sup> For a helpful account of norms see Elster (1989).

<sup>vii</sup> Although this does not presuppose any particular account of authority, it does fit well with Raz's "service conception", under which one person has authority over another if the second would do better by all the reasons that apply to her by simply taking the directives of the first as binding reasons for action. See Raz (1986, esp. Ch.3).

<sup>viii</sup> I will not here consider questions that arise when we consider unsuccessful or bad satire. We can imagine someone who attempts to satirise a group that is in fact vulnerable because of a false belief that they secretly wield immense power. One option would be to deny that this is a case of satire because it fails to make fun of something that actually possesses authority. Another option would be to allow that it is satire if it is sincerely motivated, but designate it as unsuccessful because it is misguided. A satisfactory account will allow for the possibility of genuine satire that is simply bad, but if we wish to institute special legal protections for satire – as I think we should – then we will need to establish some objective criteria for determining when protections should apply. I thank Jamie Dow for discussion on this point.

<sup>ix</sup> On this point, see also Neu (2008, p.228).

<sup>x</sup> There are, of course, other ways of cashing out the idea of state legitimacy. For an alternative view, see Buchanan (2002).

<sup>xi</sup> On the basis of equality see Williams (1973, Ch.14) and Carter (2011).

<sup>xii</sup> On this point see Declercq (2021, p.38). On taking offense, see McTernan (2021).

<sup>xiii</sup> Rawls (2005, pp.54-58) describes several "burdens of judgment" that explain this, including that empirical evidence is conflicting and complex, we have to assign weight to competing considerations, many of our concepts are inherently vague, and the way we make our decisions is shaped by our various life experiences which will inevitably differ.

<sup>xiv</sup> This is not quite what Rawls himself means by stability. He understands it as a property of sets of principles of justice (1999, p.398). Those principles are stable if living under them would generate sufficient allegiance to them to ensure that a society would support and maintain them in the face of the kinds of shocks I have described, which is to say challenging political circumstances that make things more difficult but which do not fundamentally alter the conditions of relative scarcity in which we live. On my revised conception of stability, it is a property of existing states that obtains when a sufficiently high proportion of the population have a sense of justice that is robust enough for democratic procedures such as free and fair elections and the smooth transition of power to function effectively. For a helpful and detailed discussion of the place of stability in Rawls's work see Weithman (2013).

<sup>xv</sup> A stronger claim would be that satire's main political contribution would be to promote and maintain stability. I will not defend that claim here, though I find it plausible.

<sup>xvi</sup> Literature from social psychology backs up the idea that people generally have a strong aversion to being 'suckers' and would rather suffer a cost themselves than let free riders prosper. Indeed, there is evidence that cooperative schemes that are known to punish free-riding are more secure and receive greater buy-in from all participants. For instance, see Fehr and Gächter (2000).

<sup>xvii</sup> On symbolism in punishment see Bennett (2008).

<sup>xviii</sup> See Chris Bennett's chapter in this volume on the difference between, and significance of, denunciation and expression.

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<sup>xix</sup> See, for instance the UK Defamation Act 2013:  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/26/crossheading/defences/enacted>