

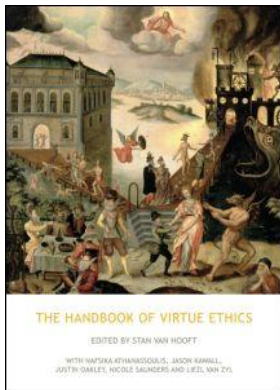
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Wit

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19

Wit

Raja Halwani and Elliot Layda

Not much has been written on wit as a virtue. This is surprising given the revival of virtue ethics and Aristotle's giving it as much discussion space as some other virtues. What has been written denies that it is a virtue (often without much argumentation) or that it is an important one.¹ Our aim is to offer arguments for and against the claim that wit is a virtue, thus paving the way for a more sustained discussion. Though we are more convinced by the arguments that wit is not a virtue than by those that it is, we conclude by explaining which of Aristotle's insights regarding wit might be preserved.

**THE FIRST CASE FOR WIT'S BEING A VIRTUE:
A DESCRIPTION OF ITS STRUCTURE**

Our first argument that wit is a virtue relies on a description of its structure, including how wit differs from continent, incontinent and vicious forms of humour. Its structural resemblance to other virtues makes it a good candidate for being a virtue.

Wit has an essential connection to the humorous, which admits of a large variety: telling and listening to jokes, practical jokes, mimicry, punning and slapstick.² However, wit is not mere joke-telling. One doesn't need to be witty to tell jokes, even to deliver them properly. Wit often involves saying or doing something funny that is fitting for the occasion, say, at a party, at a meeting or in a piece of writing. Moreover, wit seems to involve a particularly intellectual quality, a quickness or sharpness of perception.³ This is one reason why it is not mere joke-telling (which need not involve such intellectual aspects), and this is why sarcasm might well be a form of wit, albeit one that can be caustic or intended to wound.

We understand wit, broadly, to be the disposition to deliver something humorous (joke or other) in the right situation. To succeed in saying something witty, as opposed to saying something merely vulgar, impolite, brash, dull, insensitive, one needs to discern what one should say and how one should say it, including how it connects to the circumstances.

Saying something in a particular manner might be witty in one set of circumstances but not in another.

Such considerations support the idea that wit is a character trait. But “wit” is also a success term: to say something witty is to succeed in delivering something funny, not something merely flat, dull, vulgar or crude. Thus, a witty person – as opposed to someone who sometimes says something witty by luck – has the disposition to say something witty in the right circumstances.⁴ If wit is a virtue, it would, like other virtues, require wisdom to discern what, how, and when to say something, and it would be connected to other virtues, such as tact, compassion, sensitivity, and even courage and fairness. Without tact, one can say something inappropriate. Without compassion, one can say something humiliating or insensitive. Without courage, one can fail to say something funny that should have been said. And without fairness one cannot be witty regarding someone who deserves or does not deserve to have some fun poked at him.

A witty person, then, is not necessarily someone with a repertoire of jokes but someone who can say a funny thing “at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (Aristotle *NE* 1106b21–4). However, “for the right end” might rub some the wrong way for two reasons. First, although the timing, the delivery and the sensitivity to the occasion need to be just right for something to be witty, the motives seem not to matter, because something is either witty or it isn’t, period. Suppose that at a meeting John says something funny in order to hurt Lee. Being privy to information to which others in the room are not, Lee is hurt by what John says, but to the others it was simply witty.

This raises the question of whether someone can *be* witty, that is, have the disposition to be humorous in the above-specified ways, without having the proper motives – without acting for the “sake of the noble”, as Aristotle would say. This question contains the seeds of an argument against wit being a virtue, which we explicate below. For now, someone defending wit’s status as a virtue could reply that John and Lee’s co-workers might very well reverse their judgement about what John said once they understand his motives for saying it. What seemed witty would then be cruel in light of the new information about Lee and about why John said it. This indicates that the motives behind saying something witty are crucial. First, the humour isn’t so humorous after all, and, second, even if what John *said* is witty, this no more makes John a witty person than does acting honestly on occasion make a liar an honest person. For even if we agree that what John said was witty, his motives were cruel. This shows that as far as *being witty* is concerned, motives matter.

Because we distinguish between saying something witty and saying something merely vulgar, cruel, stupid, dull, and so on, and because most people are good at doing one of these, being witty is a matter of character rather than merely an ability or a talent. If we further agree that being witty is saying something at the right time, about the right thing, towards the right people, and so on, wit seems to be a virtue, an excellence of character. Thus, following Aristotle, we can say that wit’s genus is the humorous and its differentia are the different ways that one can go wrong with respect to the humorous, such as being cruel, vulgar or insipid.

But if wit is a virtue, is it an important one? Aristotle considers wit, along with truthfulness and friendliness, to be “concerned with common dealings in certain conversations and actions” (*ibid.*: 1128b5). About wit he writes: “Since life also includes relaxation, and in this we pass our time with some form of amusement, here also it seems possible to

behave appropriately in meeting people, and to say and listen to the right things and in the right way” (*ibid.*: 1128a). If relaxation and amusement are indispensable parts of life, there must be proper and improper ways to relax, amuse and be amused. Thus, there is a virtue, and vices, whose “domain” or “field” is relaxation and amusement. This is why, objecting to the boor, Aristotle finds him defective on the ground that “relaxation and amusement seem to be necessary in life” (*ibid.*: 1128b4). Someone who neither amuses nor is amused⁵ fails to grasp the truth that not all life should be serious and unceasing work. He shows a defective attitude towards life. Despite their brevity, Aristotle’s remarks point to wit’s importance: someone without wit is someone who fails to feel and conduct herself properly in a crucial domain of life, that of relaxation and amusement.

Wit does not merely allow us to survive. It allows us to go through life with humour. It allows us – when appropriate – to laugh at ourselves (and others), at our follies, limitations and endeavours. Of course, wit need not – and usually is not – about cosmic matters and our place in the universe. But it reflects the attitude that life should be taken with a grain of salt. People who reject the idea that there is no place in life for relaxation and amusement, and people who think that life should be nothing but (or mostly) relaxation and amusement, seem to take life too seriously or not seriously enough.

This does not mean that, for example, a parent should, after three days of mourning, shrug off his child’s death, saying, “Well, I’ve mourned long enough. Any longer and I would be taking life too seriously”. And it does not mean that “when a black South African attempts to escape from permanent poverty and fails time after time” (Harvey 1995: 23), a sense of humour makes these failures less threatening.⁶ If wit is a virtue, it displays itself at the right moments, towards the right people, for the right reasons, and so on. The parent and the black South African are thus displaying vice in shrugging off their misfortunes. It is important to not lose sight of the distinction between wit’s reflecting a proper sense of life’s place in our lives, and knowing when, how and why to display wit.

Keep in mind that wit and humour pervade virtually all areas of life. Along with enjoying humour and listening to and reading other people’s witticisms, we also enjoy our friends’ company, our children’s growth into maturation and successes, walks on the beach, and the occasional work of art, often *because* of their wit. Although all these can be enjoyed without wit or in addition to it, when we do enjoy wit, it is almost always in one area of life or another. Wit, like Aristotle’s pleasure, is the “bloom on youths”.

If wit is a virtue and an important one at that, what are its continent, incontinent and vicious forms? Its vicious forms, according to Aristotle, are the buffoon and the boor. The buffoon “cannot resist raising a laugh” and spares no one, not even himself, from his rapacious sense of humour. His unrelenting desire to satisfy his lust for laughter suggests that he is willing to tell jokes that “the sophisticated person would never make” or would be willing to hear (*NE* 1128a35). Thus, what he says goes wrong in different ways. For example, if he relishes in verbally eviscerating his opponents, he runs the risk of disregarding justice. He may, more specifically, have a lust for vengeance or may experience *schadenfreude*. Or he might just lack a much-needed sense of decorum, which would allow him to distinguish between times when it is appropriate to be humorous and times when it is not. The boor, compared to the buffoon, is boring: he “contributes nothing himself, and objects to everything” (*ibid.*: 1128b).

What would continence be?⁷ If continence is a struggle within the agent between doing what is right and heeding base desires that pull her away from the action, it is hard to see

how wit could have continent and incontinent forms. For why would anyone struggle with saying something witty? What base desires could be so tempting as to pull the person away from that? However, one can argue that the real struggle occurs not between the need to say something witty and the base desire not to, but between the need to *not* say something witty and the desire to do so. The continent person struggles between her desire to say something witty and her knowledge that she should not. Moreover, the difference between her and the incontinent agent would then be that the latter succumbs to the desire and says the witty thing, whereas the continent does not. And the difference between her and the vicious agent is that whereas she knows she should not say that particular witty thing, the vicious thinks it perfectly all right to do so. So a convincing picture can be drawn of the continent, incontinent and vicious forms of wit.

THE SECOND CASE FOR WIT'S BEING A VIRTUE: HABITUATION

If wit can be habituated, then it would bear another resemblance to the virtues. Can it? Not if we think of wit as a talent that some people, but not others, have, and that can, at best, be honed. Wit would then be like having a good singing voice. But if we think of wit as a kind of practical skill (as the virtues partly are) then it can be cultivated through habituation. One would then not only have to learn what kinds of things to say, but also develop a sense of when it is appropriate to say them. Over time, one develops this sense, and it is something that can be improved upon as one has more and more experiences with a wider array of people.

Indeed, even if we do think of wit as a talent, nothing precludes it from being developed in the above ways. The real issue here, we suspect, is not whether wit is a talent, but whether one is born with it. For if only some people are born with wit, then wit cannot be a virtue, given the idea that we are all “by nature able to acquire” the virtues (*NE* 1103a25). However, the idea of being born with wit is just obscure enough to make it a weak reason for thinking of wit as not a virtue. Furthermore, even if some people are not born with wit, there is no reason why they cannot develop it later in life.

Moreover, if we consider the ability to *appreciate* wit to be part of wit, as Aristotle believed, then the plausibility of the idea that such appreciation can be habituated would strengthen even further the similarities between wit and the virtues, thereby strengthening the case for wit being a virtue. However, it is not plausible to think of the ability to appreciate wit as part of wit, because, first, the appreciation of wit seems to be not a skill but a type of taste and, second, people with this taste are not themselves witty but are, simply, able to appreciate wit. We don't think of people who appreciate wit but who themselves lack the disposition as witty. Thus, the similarity of wit to other virtues rests on the skill of producing wit, not appreciating it.

THE THIRD CASE FOR WIT'S BEING A VIRTUE: WIT ON THREE ETHICAL THEORIES

Considering what three main ethical theories might say about wit further strengthens the case that it is a virtue.

Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism

On Rosalind Hursthouse's account of virtue ethics, if a trait is a virtue it first benefits its possessor, enabling "her to flourish, to be, and live a life that is, eudaimon". Second, it makes its possessor a good human being: "Human beings need the virtues in order to live ... to live a characteristically good, eudaimon, human life" (1999: 167). Although the two criteria are connected, the second encapsulates naturalism.

How might wit benefit its possessor? First, because witty people bring joy and amusement they enjoy the company of those who seek and desire their company; being witty is one way to have friends and be loved. Second, witty people enjoy being witty because people take joy in others' joy. Third, there is pleasure in telling a good joke, delivering a punchy line, or writing a funny sentence (of course, not all pleasures are benefits, but the pleasures obtained from wit seem beneficial). Fourth, the witty person is likely to have an outlook on life that takes life just seriously enough to not look upon it irresponsibly. This, too, is a benefit.

How might wit make its possessor a good human being? Hursthouse describes four ends which, if a trait contributes to their furtherance, it is a virtue. The four ends are: (a) "individual survival through the characteristic life span" of a member of its species (*ibid.*: 198); (b) "continuance of the species" (*ibid.*); (c) individual "characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic pleasure or enjoyment" (*ibid.*: 199); and (d) "the good functioning of the social group" (*ibid.*: 201).

Does having wit contribute to the survival of individual human beings? Under oppressive conditions, having wit allows one to bear life more easily and even with a sense of dignity. This is also true in the normal course of life when one undergoes life's ups and downs. Again, having wit reflects a certain outlook on life that allows its possessor to neither underestimate nor overestimate life's good and bad turns.

The second end – continuance of the species – is troublesome because it seems to be about procreation, and it is hard to see how wit can play an indispensable role in procreating. Of course, being funny is often a main characteristic people want in their love-mates, so being humorous is often a good way of attracting someone, which usually leads to sex and procreation. But "continuance of the species" is not only about procreation (Hursthouse does not understand it this way). It also includes the ability to rear children into a mature and more or less healthy age. Without exaggerating the role wit plays here or denying the ability of many parents to raise their children well under difficult and wit-less circumstances, wit can play two important roles in rearing children. First, it is reasonable to assume that children who grow up in cheerful, humour-filled households tend to lead happier and more productive lives. Second, in so far as wit allows individuals to surround themselves with people who desire their company, parents who are witty tend to have a close circle of friends and family members from whom children benefit because they have more access to sources of affection, attention, advice and educational opportunities. In such ways, wit furthers the second end.

Wit furthers the third end – characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic pleasure or enjoyment – by allowing us to enjoy life in a particular way. Wit and humour pervade virtually all areas of our lives. They make activities more enjoyable, which, in turn, makes life more generally enjoyable. Because we are social creatures, this enjoyment, to use Hursthouse's word, is "characteristic" of our species.

As important, if not more, is the role wit plays in allowing us to overcome and bear pain in our lives. Whether the pain is "characteristic" of our species – necessary as a way

of alerting us to potential dangers, say – or uncharacteristic, such as warfare and the suffering brought on by human-made disasters, wit plays a crucial role in making us bear the pain.⁸ Whether joking about one's disciplinarian parents, bossy boss, tyrannical rulers, society's stifling conventions, or the hurricane winds blowing above one's basement shelter, humour and wit allow us to more easily bear difficult situations.

Humour does this primarily because it produces enjoyment but also because it brings about a type of intimacy between the witty person and her audience, and intimacy helps people go through difficult times. It is easier to go through pain and suffering when people do so with others with whom they are bonded, whether intimates in the usual sense (friends, family members, lovers) or intimates by circumstance (bonded together by a certain experience, including being audience and tellers of jokes).⁹

According to Hursthouse, for a social group to function well – the fourth end – is for the group to enable its members to live well, especially with respect to the first three ends. A wolf that does not hunt with the pack is defective because she does not contribute to the good of the group (*ibid.*: 201–2), even though she might, somehow, not only survive but also do so magnificently. Wit contributes to the fourth end because humour is a crucial way in which human beings engage socially with each other. We are laughing animals; every culture known to us has had some form of humour. Indeed, part of what it means for us to function well as a social group is through humour, as humour is usually social by nature.

Consequentialism

Julia Driver has developed a virtue-centred version of consequentialism. According to Driver, “a virtue is a character trait that systematically produces a preponderance of good” (2001: xvii); moral virtues are “character traits that systematically produce more actual good than not” (*ibid.*: 68); or, finally, “a virtue is a character trait that produces more good (in the actual world) than not systematically” (*ibid.*: 82). Note the word “systematically”: Driver does not deny that sometimes a virtue could lead to overall bad results. Her claim is that it leads to good results in general (*ibid.*: 74).

Although Driver is not clear on the good produced by the virtues and how far into the future the consequences count (*ibid.*: 84), she claims that “virtues function in social contexts to contribute to human (or social) flourishing and happiness, often by alleviating interaction problems among people” (*ibid.*: 74). Moral virtues produce good for others, prudential virtues produce good for the agent, and aesthetic virtues are merely pleasing (*ibid.*: 91). If wit is a virtue that “alleviates interaction problems among people”,¹⁰ then, on Driver's taxonomy, it would be a *moral* virtue. Driver herself sees it this way; both charm and wit are good-producing traits, and are therefore moral virtues (*ibid.*: 105–6). Since wit on the whole produces good results, on a consequentialist account of the virtues there should be no difficulty in considering it a virtue.

Kantian ethics

Kant defines “virtue” as “the moral strength of a human being's will in fulfilling his duty, a moral constraint through his lawgiving reason, insofar as this constitutes itself an authority executing the law” (1996: 6.405); it is the “moral strength of the will”. The basic idea

is that a person is virtuous in so far as she is able to resist temptations and inclinations in order to perform her duty.

Kant has no definite list of virtues, because, as Allen Wood puts it, “Kant thinks the virtues needed by a person differ with their ends and plans of life, which vary too much from person to person to make any generalized list pertinent to all of us” (2008: 145). The question then becomes whether wit could be a virtue that some agents might need in order to overcome temptation.

There are cases in which wit can help an agent do what is right. Telling someone a difficult truth might be easier if garbed in humour; the humour can at least be a first step to a more serious conversation. Wit can often help see someone through the tough job of calming another’s fear or anger. Fulfilling promises can be easier if done in an atmosphere of joviality and humour. The basic idea is that wit lights the way for agents, helping them perform a difficult duty or one they don’t feel particularly inclined to do. Put differently, discharging a duty humorously is often easier for some agents than doing so non-humorously.

Perhaps more important from a Kantian point of view is the idea that humour sometimes helps preserve people’s dignity. According to Kant, we have three duties of love (towards others): beneficence, gratitude and sympathy (1996: 6.452–62). If not discharged in the proper manner, each duty carries with it the danger of making its recipient feel belittled or in the agent’s debt. We should not be beneficent in such a way that our recipients feel that they owe us or that we do it because we feel superior to them. We should avoid coming across as superior when we sympathize with others. Because, as Kant recognizes, human beings have the tendency to feel superior to others, discharging our duties with the aid of wit helps reduce the likelihood of humiliating the recipients of our duties. Helping in a humorous way might alleviate the embarrassment and shame that the sick and the needy tend to feel when physically tended to. Sometimes expressing our sympathy for others in a funny or witty way also helps remove feelings of inferiority on their part. In such ways, wit can aid us in discharging difficult duties and in overcoming the temptation to do so in a grumbling, haughty manner.

A trickier issue for wit and Kantian ethics is that since much humour involves ridicule, it goes against Kant’s injunction to not ridicule and mock others. Yet not all humour involves ridicule and mockery, and, more relevant, humour that ridicules or mocks need not express a mocking or ridiculing attitude. It is generally acceptable to tease one’s friends and loved ones if it is “all in good fun”, suggesting that insulting humour can be actually an expression of affection. After all, one need not accept the attitude of a joke in order to appreciate it. As David Benatar suggests (2002), we need to distinguish between recognizing (and thereby appreciating) the attitude of a joke and endorsing it, a distinction applicable to racial and gender-based humour, commonly regarded as unethical. Thus, virtuous people can engage in ridiculing humour so long as they do not endorse, and thereby express, a ridiculing attitude. People can enjoy telling and hearing such humour because they enjoy comedy, not because they relish mocking others.

So there is a good case to be made that wit is a virtue in Kantian ethics.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST WIT BEING A VIRTUE

We turn in this part to arguments against the claim that wit is a virtue. Some have to do with the weakness of the above arguments; others have to do with fundamental dissimilarities between wit and the virtues.

If relaxation and amusement are important parts of life, why focus on wit? According to Aristotle, wit is the virtue that corresponds to relaxation and amusement, but since the domains of relaxation and amusement extend far beyond what is humorous, it would seem that Aristotle was mistaken. Why would wit have anything to do with the following examples of activities that are forms of relaxation: solving a crossword puzzle, reading the Sunday paper, reading a novel, enjoying a nice meal or walk, or attending an art opening? Granted that each one of these *might* involve wit (witty clues in the puzzle, a witty conversation during the walk, witty art at the opening, etc.), they need not. So wit is not the only way to manage the domain of relaxation and amusement. We need a host of other virtues to manage the different “regions” within it. Thus, either we accept the idea that there are many virtues in this large domain, of which wit is one, whereby it would not merit special treatment, or we need stronger arguments as to why wit is *the* virtue.

One might reply to the above argument that the proliferation of virtues would not indicate that wit is one virtue among many, because it is the only one that reflects the outlook on life discussed above. Thus, wit would stand out as an important virtue among those many others.

This brings us to the second argument that wit is not a virtue. Above, we articulated one main reason why wit is important: it reflects an outlook on life that takes life neither too seriously nor too lightly. But the connection between wit and this outlook is too strong. Surely many witty people have no such outlook. Surely some witty people take life too seriously and some witty people take life too lightly. Indeed, in some cases, their taking life too seriously or too lightly might be the reason why they are witty. Moreover, many people have the above outlook on life without being witty. The point, simply put, is that while some witty people have the above-explained outlook on life, saying that all witty people do is a tall order and defies logic. It is difficult to establish any generalizations here, let alone any necessary connections. Moreover, it would be implausible to claim that all witty people have this outlook but some have it unconsciously, because this seems an *ad hoc* way to get around the objection. Because this argument challenges the idea that wit is an important trait by undermining its link with this outlook, it sheds doubt on its very status as a virtue.

In the first part of this chapter, we argued that continence regarding wit makes sense if we think of it as being a struggle between the agent’s desire to say something witty and her knowledge that she should not. But now we argue that wit has no continent form. For if the right thing to do is to *not* say something witty, then being pulled by one’s desires to say something witty means that one’s desire to say the witty thing is base. For example, if one is severely tempted to crack a joke at a funeral but one knows that one should not, it is one’s desire to joke that is base. Thus, saying something witty is not opposed to base desires, but aligned with them. Thus, it seems that we cannot, after all, preserve the usual structure of continence (and incontinence) when it comes to wit. Unless being witty also includes not saying something witty, it is difficult to imagine what continence in regards to wit is.

Why would wit not have a continent form? Probably because it does not seem that we are required to act in a witty way. If on some occasions we are required to be honest, courageous, and generous, we can see why some agents would struggle with doing the right thing and are thereby continent. But since we are not required to act in a witty way, there seems to be no room for such a struggle. Hence, wit has no continent form, which indicates that it is not a virtue.

Perhaps the most striking dissimilarity between wit and other virtues concerns moral obligation: even if one is witty, one is not required to be witty on particular occasions. People simply do not have a moral obligation to be funny. Granted, sometimes individuals feel social pressure to amuse their friends or lighten the mood, but this would probably derive from etiquette or another moral obligation – to be tactful, for example. When one fails to be amusing, whether through omission or blunder, one is not guilty of performing a morally bad human action. However, when one fails to be honest, brave or just (whether maliciously or not), a significant moral shortcoming occurs.

The above argument is about actions; there is another about character: while virtues can be expressed in positive injunctions to be a certain way (“be honest”, “be brave”, “be just”), it would be silly to demand that someone “be witty”. Morality does not require that we be funny people. Lacking this particular character trait is of little consequence. This is another substantial difference between wit and the virtues. In general, being virtuous makes for a good life but, while being witty can undoubtedly enhance the quality of one’s life, it is not, strictly speaking, necessary for living well. In other words, lacking wit does not make for a bad life, all things considered, while lacking the virtues does. Someone could, for instance, have absolutely no skill in telling jokes and, at the same time, live a perfectly happy life, full of love, beauty, excitement and joy. If this individual is able to appreciate good humour (which is, again, not the same thing as being witty) then so much the better. Further, we would be remiss to assume that this individual has a defective character. Thus, lacking wit does not preclude one from being a good person or leading a good life.

That said, a champion of wit might insist that wit is necessary for living well; a world without wit is simply not a good world, like a world without music or fine art, for example. Existence without wit would be bleak and unhappy.

This objection is not ultimately convincing. First, to say that wit must exist in order for human beings to live well is not the same thing as saying that everyone ought to be witty. It might be that only some individuals need to be witty in order for the world to not be “bleak and unhappy”. After all, only a few people in a given population actually develop their artistic talents. In spite of this, the world is not a desiccated cultural landscape. Wit is similar. Not everyone needs to be witty, and so we don’t require everyone to be. Also, even if everyone were witty, this would not necessarily make the world a better place: murdering, lying and stealing done humorously are, by adding insult to injury, worse than when done without humour. Notice that this conclusion does not apply to the virtues. It is not enough that only some of us are honest while others are not. If most people, or everyone, were honest, the world would indeed be a better place.

Second, it is not obvious that a world without wit would be a bad world. In all likelihood there would still be kindness, beauty, adventure, love and pleasure. People could still be eloquent, intelligent, insightful, considerate and passionate without being witty. A world without wit could still be conducive to human flourishing. The absence of wit need not preclude the possibility of a good life. There would still be much to live for.

The third and final dissimilarity between wit and other virtues concerns wit's nature as an enjoyable characteristic. Since humour is generally created for the sake of pleasure and amusement, it is primarily aesthetic. And because wit finds its expression in humour, it is heavily subject to aesthetic demands, unlike the other virtues. People evaluate the success of humour in terms of how funny it is. The success of humour is often affected by the degree to which it conforms to social mores, but the unusual thing about humour is that, in some instances, the more it strays from decency, the funnier it is. In other words, the ethical "badness" of a joke can be precisely what makes it "good". This suggests that aesthetic and moral judgements do not always align. Indeed, much good humour is brazen, lacking in dignity, and in bad taste. Indeed, many genuinely witty remarks are dispensed for completely non-virtuous ends. Consider the TV medical drama, *House*. The main character, Gregory House, is a sardonic diagnostician who uses his unmatched intellect and abusive sense of humour to save lives. House is witty. His jokes are delivered well, they are clever, and they often play a crucial role in his method for arriving at the truth. The problem is that House also uses his humour to alienate himself from the people he cares about and deflect attention away from his problems, like his addiction to Vicodin. When it comes to humour, one's motives can fall short of virtue while retaining those aspects that make it funny. Joking well, it seems, is not necessarily synonymous with joking virtuously.¹¹

The fact that a bit of humour may be considered witty despite its moral defects suggests that wit is not a virtue. Rather, it provides an occasion to enact the virtues. As we say above, humour is a pervasive way in which human beings relate to one another. It is, therefore, worth discussing how to be good in this respect. Although the term "witty" may not be synonymous with "joking virtuously", a virtuous person who is also witty would exercise her wit in a particular way and on particular occasions, depending on the directives of her practical wisdom. Since the virtues are considered excellences of character they will not produce morally deficient actions. Therefore a virtuous, witty person would refrain from making funny remarks that are vicious in some way or another (jokes like the ones Gregory House is prone to make).

This is not to say that hurtful jokes are entirely off-limits. On rare occasions comedic insults may be entirely moral. For example, bullies and other abusive personalities often deserve a lesson in humility. Few things are swifter in deflating a bloated ego than an insulting joke. If a bit of insulting humour can effectively disabuse someone of a supercilious outlook then it is permissible. Part of what it means to be witty in such situations is directing one's wit at the appropriate target and expressing it with the appropriate tone. The virtuous person does not indiscriminately unleash her wit on just anyone and she does not set out to obliterate others, but she sometimes does use wit to deliver a hurtful, albeit necessary, message.

CONCLUDING REMARK

We have presented arguments in favour of, and arguments against, wit as a virtue. We find the latter more compelling than the former because they contain good criticisms of the former and because they uncover serious asymmetries between wit and the virtues.

Does this mean that Aristotle was wrong in his remarks about wit? Aristotle is right that relaxation and amusement are important, but wrong that there is one particular virtue

whose domain is the relaxing and the amusing. Our hunch is that it is the usual virtues – justice, courage, honesty, and so on – that tell us how to act when relaxing, amusing and being amused. Aristotle is also right that the boor and the buffoon are defective people, but their defects can be explained in their lack of one or more of the other virtues, not wit. Being witty might thus still be a matter of character in that it reflects the agent's virtues or vices when it comes to humour. Moreover, being witty might sometimes reflect an adequate attitude to life's ups and downs. But it need not, and the attitude it reflects need not be the only proper one.

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NOTES

1. See for example Kupfer (2007: 105 n. 17). Gracia (1997) claims without argument that wit, charm and being great-souled are not moral virtues. A main exception to this trend is Swanton, who considers wit as a virtue, a view stemming from her capacious view that the moral virtues are "legion" (2003: 71).
2. On the variety of humour, see Morreall (1983), especially chapter 6.
3. Thus, dictionary.com defines wit as "the keen perception and cleverly apt expression of those connections between ideas that awaken amusement and pleasure" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/wit?s=t>; accessed 27 April 2012). All of Merriam-Webster's definitions of "wit" include an intellectual aspect. For example: "astuteness of perception or judgment"; "the ability to relate seemingly disparate things so as to illuminate or amuse"; "clever or apt humor"; even "a person of superior intellect" (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wit [accessed November 2013]).
4. We say "disposition" and not, say, "talent" or "ability" because having a disposition says something about one's character while merely having a talent and an ability do not; the ability to shoot free-throws at a basketball game reveals little about one's character but a (reliably) calm disposition in high-pressure situations does.
5. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of witty people: those who delight in listening to wit and those who produce wit (1984a: 1234a5–24). This distinction is (at best buried) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Aristotle's remark that to be witty is to "say and *listen* to the right things and in the right way" (emphasis added). We disagree with Aristotle that the person who appreciates wit and delights in it is herself witty (see the second case for wit's being a virtue).
6. Harvey (1995) rightly criticizes Morreall's view that humour makes all failures less threatening.
7. Continence regarding wit must be continence "by similarity" to real continence, because continence and incontinence are really about bodily desires (1999: 1148a5), but since all virtues have continence "by similarity", we bracket this difficulty.
8. Ted Cohen considers "relief from certain oppressions" to be one principal purpose of joke telling (1999: 10).
9. See Cohen (1999) on the importance of jokes and intimacy.
10. A plausible view; see Morreall (1983: 116).
11. But see Berys Gaut (1998) who argues for a tighter connection between the two.