

We will never know for sure whether Lincoln believed in Jesus, his resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, or biblical truth, Ferguson concludes. But

the uncertainty has made Lincoln “our common property,” appealing to believers and skeptics alike. Yet it also means something “definable and concrete.” Lincoln

believed that America was the “carrier of a precious cargo.” We assent to Lincoln’s creed, Ferguson says, “when we think of ourselves as Americans.”

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

# Joke Morality

**THE SOURCE:** “What Is Offensive About Offensive Jokes?” by Jeanette Bicknell, in *Philosophy Today*, Winter 2007.

IT’S PERFECTLY OK TO TELL lawyer jokes, musician jokes, or almost any joke about a rich guy. But jokes about race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or physical or cognitive ability are considered morally offensive. Why?

Philosophers have advanced two theories. “Cognitivists” say that jokes made at the expense of minority groups carry the suggestion that the jokester, deep down, believes them. “Consequentialists” argue that certain jests are morally suspect because they cause harm, or are likely to. But neither theory adequately explains what’s offensive, argues Jeanette Bicknell, a philosopher at Carleton University, in Ottawa. It is quite possible, she suggests, to tell a joke without embracing it as a truth—nobody believes that an elephant actually walked into a bar—but we suspend disbelief for the sake of a laugh. And almost *any* joke might cause harm to someone, sometime.

The main determinant of

whether a gibe is morally offensive is the “vulnerability of the group or individual joked about,” Bicknell argues. The moral fault lies in exploiting vulnerability for the sake of humor.

But vulnerability depends on context and time. Members of marginalized groups can make sport of themselves without condemnation, Bicknell says. Such humor can even have a salutary effect, such as encouraging group solidarity or exploring identity. After Bicknell’s article was published, for example, presidential hopeful Barack Obama was asked during a debate whether he agreed with author Toni Morrison’s characterization of former president Bill Clinton as “our first black president.” Obama said he would have to investigate “Bill’s dancing abilities” before he could

Humor ages poorly. The Museum of Humour in Montreal houses many “cringe-making” examples.

judge whether he was “a brother.” The audience cracked up, but it would have been shocked had Clinton made a similar jest about Obama.

Humor ages poorly, Bicknell observes. The Museum of Humour in Montreal preserves comedy routines from the earliest days of movies to the present. Some jokes are still funny, Bicknell writes, but “much of the remainder is cringe-making.”

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

# The War Against Luck

**THE SOURCE:** “Life, Chance, and Life Chances” by Lorraine Daston, in *Daedalus*, Winter 2008.

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE ALWAYS been uneasily aware of the wheel of fortune that sends both good luck and bad breaks their way, but they haven’t always seen it in the same light. Only recently has anybody even dreamed of stopping it.

Through most of human history, luck was not seen as purely arbitrary, notes Lorraine Daston, a director of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. The wheel-spinning goddess Fortuna, for example, stood lower in Rome’s heavenly moral order than Justitia, the goddess of justice. Lives were ordered by the gods and gov-

erned by fate, the cycle of reincarnation, or divine providence. You might not like the hand you were dealt, but it was what you deserved.

That view of chance prevailed well into the 18th and 19th centuries, when something drastic came along to change it: statistics. As proto social scientists began to take the measure of human populations, unusual patterns began to emerge. Today we are struck by cases of people who defy the statistical odds—the chain smoker who lives to 100—but at the dawn of statistics, people were fascinated by the regularities. Why did almost the same number of letters end up in the dead letter file of the Paris post office every year? Why did virtually the same number of Englishmen commit suicide every year (and what did this say about the concept of free will)?

Then came the mountains of data sorting people into categories such as race, sex, and religion that

could be correlated with particular outcomes, from striking it rich to being struck dead by heart disease. Suddenly, Daston says, it became “possible to conceive of biographies in terms of life chances and society as a vast lottery.”

One response was noble: a new commitment to the principle of equality. How could the misfortune of others be tolerated if it was caused only by an accident of birth? The other response, though, was alarming: a powerful drive to conquer chance. “To exercise ‘control over one’s life’ has become perhaps the paramount goal of the well-off, well-educated, and well-placed minority,” Daston writes. It has fueled the desire for everything from chain hotels—no surprises, please!—to genetic engineering. “For those who yearn for control, to be surprised, however innocuously, is to be ambushed by life.”

There are many arguments

against making designer babies—the narrowing of human diversity, for one—but none more compelling to Daston than the need to preserve the role of chance itself. “Some contingencies may end in sorrow, others in joy, but almost all result in the discovery of something not known and not felt before. . . . Chance can also act as a catalyst to the making of new meanings, both for individuals and whole cultures. . . . Chance disrupts tidy lives, unsettles habits—and taps unplumbed resources, both personal and social.”

The philosopher David Hume said that in situations in which the chances of a positive outcome and a bad one are equal, people choose fear over hope. Today, that seems truer than ever. “The most secure societies seem by and large to be the most timorous, the most cowed by the prospect of future danger, whether probable or improbable,” Daston writes. Hope deserves a bigger role. Spin the wheel!

## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

# Scientist in Chief

**THE SOURCE:** “Dr. President” by Chris Mooney, in *Seed*, Sept.–Oct. 2007.

A BARRAGE OF SCIENTIFIC questions will face the winner of the November presidential election. Should space be militarized? Can world pandemics be prevented without paralyzing international trade? Can diseases be cured without crossing moral lines? Should

America cede world leadership in physics to Europe, with its gigantic new particle accelerator?

America’s new president will be not only commander in chief but also scientist in chief, inheriting a \$150 billion research budget, 200,000 scientists, 38 research institutes, and dozens of related laboratories, writes Chris Mooney, a Washington, D.C.–based science writer.

The president will confront the issues of bioethics, climate change, nuclear proliferation, and energy. Momentous decisions about whether to sign treaties that might curb economic growth, which scientific facilities to build, and how many scientists the country needs are on the to-do list. The incoming president needn’t be conversant in the latest fruit fly research, but must know how to *learn* about technical matters that require a decision even before all the evidence is in, Mooney writes. “Americans’ public health, job security, well-being, defense, and qual-