

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-