

No Laughing Matter: Tarantino and the Theology of Humor

We read in Proverbs that “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine.”¹ And yet, in keeping with the way God’s gifts can be misused, we also recognize that laughter is sometimes ill-advised, ill-mannered, or at least ill-timed. We judge some attempts at humor to be inappropriate, indecent, and indefensible. The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is “a time to laugh”—quickly followed by the reminder that there is “a time to mourn.”²

So humor can be a kind of God-ordained medicine for us. It can also serve to undermine God’s plans and purposes for us. Where do we draw the line? When someone tells a joke or shares a funny story, how would we determine whether it was a Godly or a sinful use of humor?

The films of Quentin Tarantino provide us with a large and very useful set of examples as we explore a theology of humor. A common element of Tarantino’s films is that they are heavily reliant on humor—from the carnival-type scenes in *From Dusk Till Dawn* to the continuous, bubbling-below-the-surface humor throughout *Inglourious Basterds*. At the same time, Tarantino’s films are notoriously violent, raising the potential objection that humor really can’t find a proper context within these films.

God’s Purposes for Humor

¹ Proverbs 17:22.

² Ecclesiastes 3:4.

As a first step in distinguishing Godly versus sinful uses of humor, we need to clarify the reasons God gave humans the capacity to appreciate and use humor. This task requires us to make certain working assumptions about the reasons God gives us *any* of the gifts and abilities we have. The following paragraph is my own best attempt to summarize the historic Christian consensus about God's reasons for creating us and giving us abilities:

God created us so that we might participate in the ongoing life—that is, the ongoing, loving relationships—that exist within the Trinity. Our ultimate fulfillment as creatures in the image of God is to participate in the kinds of loving, interdependent, self-giving relationships enjoyed from eternity by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As part of God's plan to draw us into these kinds of relationships with himself and with others, God has given us various gifts and abilities—including the capacity for humor. Accordingly, a use of humor that promotes the kinds of relationships that mirror the relationships within the Trinity will be a Godly use of humor. Any use of humor that works *against* such self-giving, harmonious relationships will be contrary to the will of God.

With this working assumption about God's purposes for humor, we can now explore some of the specific ways in which humor can promote Godly relationships. Four ways are especially important. I do not want to argue that these four avenues exhaust the ways in which humor can contribute to Godly relationships, but these four ways do seem particularly noteworthy. In the following few sections, we will use examples from Tarantino's films to illustrate these four uses of humor—along with observing how these uses of humor, when perverted, serve to work against Godly relationships.

OK, This Is Awkward!

A scene in *Pulp Fiction* has Vincent Vega reluctantly agreeing to take out the wife of his boss, Marcellus Wallace. Vincent and Mia sit across the table at a 1950's style diner, trying to think of things to say.

Mia: Don't you hate that?

Vincent: Hate what?

Mia: Uncomfortable silences. Why do we feel it's necessary to yak about bullshit? In order to be comfortable?

Vincent: I don't know. That's a good question.

As relational creatures, we can sometimes feel at ease with others; and sometimes we can feel *ill* at ease with others. It would perhaps be interesting to try to list all the reasons we can feel uneasy or uncomfortable around others. But whatever the reasons, the phenomenon of social awkwardness is something we all experience as very real. And of course this awkwardness works against the kinds of harmonious relationships through which we flourish as creatures in God's image.

One way to relieve social awkwardness is to draw attention, in a humorous way, to the source of the awkwardness. Typically, if we simply try to ignore an awkward situation, the tension only builds. It becomes the elephant in the room no one dares talk about. But by drawing attention to it, and laughing about it, the tension is diffused. Mia uses just this strategy in the scene above. Instead of trying to ignore the uncomfortable silence with Vincent, she draws attention to it. She

even adds, “Well, I’ll tell you what: I’ll go to the bathroom and powder my nose, while you sit here and think of something to say.” By humorously making a ‘big deal’ of the awkward silence, she paradoxically reduces the awkward silence to a playful, small deal. Humor has played its positive role of fostering a harmonious relationship.

Awkward situations also arise when various social expectations aren’t met: when we say the wrong thing, eat with the wrong fork, or arrive at a social function either overdressed or underdressed. In *Pulp Fiction*, Vincent finds himself in yet another awkward situation when his gun goes off on a morning car ride (poor Marvin), necessitating an impromptu change of clothes for Vincent and his partner Jules at their friend Jimmie’s house. With their new outfits of old tee-shirts and swim trunks, they will be uncomfortably underdressed for the rest of the morning.

Winston Wolf doesn’t ignore the awkwardness of their situation. Upon seeing Vincent and Jules in their new clothes, he comments: “Perfect. Perfect. We couldn’t have planned this better. You guys look like...what do they look like, Jimmie?” It’s unclear to me whether Wolf is inviting humor in an attempt to *diffuse* the awkwardness of the situation or to *increase* it. If it’s the latter, then the positive potential for humor will have become perverted. Instead of *relieving* awkwardness and aiding harmonious interaction, humor would be used with the intention of highlighting the cause of awkwardness and making it an even bigger deal.

What *does* seem clear is that Jimmie’s response to Mr. Wolf’s question involves an obviously negative use of humor. His response is to say, “Dorks. They look like a couple of dorks.” By emphasizing just how awkward their outfits should make Vincent and Jules feel, Jimmie is clearly not concerned with making them feel better. He’s not attempting to diffuse and move past the awkward situation. He’s highlighting just how awkward the situation is.

We've seen the first positive role that humor can play. It serves to diffuse awkward situations and foster in its place harmonious interactions. But just as humor can play this first, positive role, it can also be perverted to have the opposite effect of fostering self-consciousness and alienation. This same general pattern emerges when we turn to our second, divinely-appointed role for humor.

The Path Of Humility

The Christian scriptures repeatedly emphasize the importance of humility.³ Humility is of course especially essential when it comes to our relationship with God, given God's role as our creator who invites us to relate to him as lord. Still, humility is important within any relationship. We have all experienced how bragging, competitiveness and one-upmanship can cause others to be ill at ease and drive wedges between friends. Humility keeps such attitudes in check, allowing for healthy relationships where all parties feel encouraged and not threatened. Humorous self-deprecation is one avenue through which we can express humility to others. However, just as humor can play this positive role in fostering smooth relationships, the opposite effect can occur when we pervert this positive role and use humor to reduce and denigrate *others*.

Both this positive and negative use of humor can be found in various places within Tarantino's films. In one particularly humanizing scene in *Inglourious Basterds*, the German

³ As a sampling, consider: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves." (Philippians 2: 3); "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6); "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Matthew 23:12).

soldier Frederick Zoller attempts to woo the young French cinema owner Emmanuelle Mimieux as various German soldiers fawn over him and beg for his autograph. Emmanuelle is surprised: “You’re not just a German soldier. Are you somebody’s son?” Frederick tries to deflect attention, playfully responding, “Most German soldiers are somebody’s son.” When it becomes clear that Frederick is a war hero, he reluctantly explains that he is a sniper who killed 250 enemy soldiers over a three day period. He sheepishly recounts how Goebbels himself made an upcoming movie, *Nation’s Pride*, about the event and drafted Frederick to play himself in the film. Emmanuelle can hardly believe her ears: “*Nation’s Pride* is about you? *Nation’s Pride* is starring you?” Frederick again turns to humor in an attempt to downplay his achievements: “I know, comical, huh?”

What Frederick is trying to avoid is a situation where Emmanuelle thinks a meaningful relationship with him will not be possible on account of their dissimilar social standings. So he uses self-deprecating humor to protect the kind of equal footing needed for a healthy relationship between peers. (Emmanuelle has deeper reasons for despising any German soldier, but Frederick is not aware of these reasons.) Solely with regards to his attempt to use humor in this instance, he is using it as a way of expressing humility—which of course is the second positive role that humor can play.

Inglorious Basterds also contains scenes where deprecating humor is used in the *negative* way of ensuring that equal footing is *not* achieved. During a scene in a basement bar, three members of the Basterds are impersonating German officers and meeting at a table with movie star and double-agent Bridget von Hammersmark. A German soldier, Sgt. Wilhelm, is also in the bar with friends celebrating his son’s upcoming first birthday. He asks Bridget for an autograph to give to his son, Max. He then overextends his welcome by asking, “So, Frau von

Hammersmark, what brings you to France?” Archie Hicox of the Nazi-hunting basterds, still impersonating a German officer and wanting privacy for his table meeting, bellows,

None of your business, Sergeant! You might not have worn out your welcome with the fraulein, with your drunken boorish behavior, but you have worn out your welcome with me! Might I remind you sergeant, you’re an enlisted man. This is an officer’s table. I suggest you stop pestering the fraulein and rejoin your table!

A startled and somewhat confused Sgt. Wilhelm takes a step back and notes that Hicox has an unusual accent, asking where he is from. Another member of the basterds, Hugo Stiglitz, screams at the sergeant, “You must be either drunk or mad to speak to a superior officer with such impertinence!” Stiglitz then shouts at the sergeant’s companions, “I suggest you take hold of your friend, or he’ll spend Max’s first birthday in jail for public drunkenness!”

The reprimands have their desired effects, and Sgt. Wilhelm’s friends quickly bring him back to their own table. What has happened is that the (pseudo) German officers have minimized the social role of Sgt. Wilhelm, elevating themselves by comparison. This is accomplished by making Sgt. Wilhelm an object of ridicule, a laughingstock for everyone in the room to see. The basterds here are repeating a pattern that playground children already understand. When we derisively poke fun at someone, we inhibit that person’s ability to participate in a circle of friendship built on dignity and encouragement. Instead of using humor to foster our own humility, inviting others into our circle of friendship, the use of humor is perverted and healthy friendships are impeded. (Of course, in our movie example, the basterds’ decision to use

derisive humor can probably be forgiven, as they had good reason for wanting their circle to remain isolated and exclusionary !)

An interesting example of our second use of humor occurs at the end of *Kill Bill: vol. 2*. Beatrix Kiddo is struggling with mixed emotions after injuring her mentor and tormentor, Bill. With Bill's demise now imminent, she confesses through tears that perhaps she's a bad person. Bill responds, "No, you're not a bad person. You're a terrific person. You're my favorite person. But every once in a while you can be a real cunt." What's interesting about this example is that Bill's final remark comes in the form of a put down; and perhaps there's at least a small part of Bill that is still sparring with Beatrix. But his main motivation clearly is not to belittle her. He is instead trying, in a humorous and sarcastic way, to elevate her in comparison to himself. (After all, he's just referred to himself as a "murdering bastard.") And so this example seems to be a positive use of self-deprecating humor, even while the example is perhaps slightly mixed with a negative use of humor as well.

A Balm To Ease Our Pain

Aside from using humor to elevate Beatrix, Bill's use of humor in our last example also eases Beatrix's pain. It allows her to laugh in the midst of her tears, which introduces a third, positive use of humor. Humor can be a wonderful relief from both physical and psychological pain. Even in the midst of trying circumstances, humor can give us moments of genuine reprieve. Indeed, we sometimes talk about a person "forgetting she is in pain" as she is distracted by a funny incident.

Generic action movies are replete with examples of using humor in this positive way of relieving pain. Frequently one of a team of thieves will be mortally wounded during an attempted robbery. While traveling in a getaway car, another thief will try to comfort him by making him laugh: “Soon you’ll be sipping margaritas on a sandy beach!” Whenever that line pops up in a movie, you can be pretty sure that the wounded thief is going to bleed out within the next twenty seconds!

This use of humor can be found within Tarantino’s films, although the dialog is usually subtler than an overused line about margaritas. In *Pulp Fiction*, Vince and Mia share a harrowing evening centered on a drug-induced emergency. At the end of the evening, a shaken Vince says goodnight to Mia, adding, “If you’ll excuse me, I gotta go home and have a heart attack.” Mia takes the opportunity to ask if he’d like to hear the corny joke she had earlier been too embarrassed to tell. She then tells her “ketchup” joke to Vince, which is her attempt to use humor to ease the psychological trauma he’s experiencing. Vince doesn’t manage to laugh, but the joke does make him smile.

Just as humor can serve this positive role of relieving pain, the use of humor can once again be perverted and lead to the opposite effect. In *Kill Bill: vol. 2*, Elle positions a black mamba to strike Budd in the face. After Budd is bitten and writhing on the floor, Elle sits nonchalantly on a chair and reads from a notepad.

In Africa, the saying goes, in the bush, an elephant can kill you. A leopard can kill you. And a black mamba can kill you. But only with the mamba—and this has been true in Africa since the dawn of time—is death sure. Hence its handle: death incarnate.

Elle looks up from her notepad and asks Budd, “Pretty cool, huh?” She finds her place in the notepad and says to him, “Now you should listen to this, cause this concerns you.” She continues reading.

The amount of venom that can be delivered from a single bite can be gargantuan.

Looking up again she remarks, “You know, I’ve always liked that word ‘gargantuan’; and I so rarely have an opportunity to use it in a sentence.”

Elle’s use of humor is an attempt to rub salt in Budd’s wounds. She’s adding psychological torment to the intense physical pain Budd is already experiencing. If ever there were an example of perverting our third use of humor in order to *increase*—rather than ease—another person’s pain, this is it.

There’s A Time And A Place For Laughter...But Is This It?

The fourth and final positive use of humor I want to consider involves the way we order our priorities. For any community to function as God intends, it must prioritize certain goals above others. We find in the Christian scriptures, for example, a much heavier emphasis on societal, structural injustice than on fashion appropriateness. Accordingly, a church has lost the plot if it exhibits more concern about the length and color of its choir robes than about the wages and working conditions of the poor who have little social voice. From the Christian perspective, any

community whose priorities and values don't align with those of God will inevitably fall victim to antipathy, resentment and other destructive dynamics.

Humor is one way for a community to regulate its priorities and prevent molehills from becoming mountains. We commonly make references to "laughing off" or "making light" of some minor issue, thereby preventing it from becoming a major issue. Even though two people may recognize that a point of tension exists between them, a humorous response to the issue can be a way of agreeing that the issue should not amount to any serious threat to their relationship.

Instead of illustrating these points using scenes within Tarantino's movies, I'd like to ask whether Tarantino himself, in using humor within his movies, is rightly prioritizing issues. Some viewers of Tarantino's movies may feel that his use of humor is inappropriate, if not obscene. Does the juxtaposition of violence and humor within Tarantino's movies mean that he is unduly *de*-prioritizing the issue of violence itself? Of course, if the issue is merely one of taste, then there is no moral issue at stake. But we sometimes hear the deeper objection that Tarantino's use of humor de-sensitizes us to violence, that it leads us to overlook its terribly destructive effects. The issue here is one of prioritizing: dismissively making light of something that communities should instead keep highlighted.

We all recognize that there are occasions of seriousness and solemnity, where flippancy is clearly inappropriate. A well-known "out of bounds" topic for comics is the recently deceased. If we were to hear someone responding to a death announcement with a frivolous joke, we would rightly denounce this response. We would judge that the deceased person's life wasn't being appropriately valued and that the person was being dishonored. Even in *Kill Bill: vol. 2*, Beatrix's nemesis, Elle, expresses indignation when she thinks that a great warrior like Beatrix has met her demise "at the hands of a bushwhacking scrub" like Budd.

This same kind of appreciation for the value of human life lies behind the objection that the humorous tenor of Tarantino's films is inappropriate, given that their context is so often the violent demise of people. For example, there's the comic element in the prolonged maiming and killing of the Crazy 88s in *Kill Bill: vol. 1*, or in *Inglourious Basterds* the humorous revelry as the group awaits the Jewish Bear's arrival with his executioner's baseball bat. In *Reservoir Dogs* we find ourselves suppressing laughter at Vic Vega 'speaking into the ear' of the captive cop, recognizing that the horrific scene is certainly no laughing matter. We find ourselves smiling in *Pulp Fiction* at Butch's surveying of potential weapons in the pawn shop, even as we remain mindful that the scene he is trying to stop is as ghastly as they come. Do these (and many other) scenes in Tarantino's movies have the effect of acclimatizing us to violence and making it more palatable to us, despite the fact that our hearts truly should break when any of God's creatures are harmed?

A defender of Tarantino might suggest that we could approach this issue of priorities from a different angle. Perhaps, it might be suggested, in the light of eternity we really shouldn't prioritize *any* earthly event. The writer of Ecclesiastes declared, "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."⁴ Perhaps Tarantino's juxtaposition of humor and violence can be viewed as a useful reminder that we should never take any event in this temporary, earthly life too seriously. After all, from the Christian perspective we should never think that this world is our home. Instead, like the great characters of faith described in Hebrews 11, our eyes should remain fixed on "a better country—a heavenly one."⁵

⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:14.

⁵ Hebrews 11:16.

I do not want to suggest that the issue of prioritization is the *only* issue on which we should reflect in assessing Tarantino's use of violence. To make such an all-things-considered assessment, we will want to reflect on broader issues about the purpose of art. Is there some goal toward which art *should* lead us? Should it point us to some objectively good value that exists beyond what we see in a painting or in a movie?⁶ Or does art serve its purpose when it challenges our thinking and evokes emotions in us, irrespective of the moral direction in which we are led? Such broader issues lay beyond the scope of this essay, though the issues again become quite important in making an all-things-considered assessment of the appropriateness of Tarantino's juxtaposition of violence and humor.

My point has been that *part* of our assessment of Tarantino's use of violence should include a theological look at how it helps shape the list of our priorities. Is our primary, sinful tendency to take temporary and finite things too seriously and allow them to play roles that only an eternal and infinite God should play?⁷ If so, then perhaps Tarantino's use of humor serves as a useful reminder not to take any aspect of our fleeting, earthly existence too seriously. On the other hand, is our greater tendency instead to be apathetic toward the trials and suffering of others? If so, then perhaps Tarantino's use of humor does tend, unhelpfully, to acclimatize us to others' suffering, making them more palatable to us.

Finding myself ambivalent on these questions, I leave it up to the reader to form his or her own view. Whatever one's view on this matter, though, I again note that making an all-things-

⁶ For a defense of the beauty of art being grounded in objective values, see Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011). For arguments that our assessments of art should not involve *moral* judgments, but only aesthetic ones, see Richard Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism" *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 21: 1997; and "Against Ethical Criticism: Part II" *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 22(2): 1998.

⁷ The term used throughout the Christian scriptures to describe this scenario is of course *idolatry*. For a nuanced discussion of idolatry see Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, chpt. 8 (Oxford University Press, 1999).

considered judgment about Tarantino's use of violence would not only need to consider the theology of humor, but more broadly consider the theology and philosophy of art.

Conclusion

To recap our discussion, we have linked the theology of humor with God's purpose of fostering human communities that reflect the loving relationships within the Trinity. God's gift of laughter can advance this community formation in at least four ways. It can help us move past awkward situations; it can serve as a way to express humility; it can ease pain we all experience; and it can help us prioritize our concerns. We have also seen that each of these positive uses of humor can be perverted. In such cases, humor serves the role of *undermining* the kind of community God intends for us.

The various positive—and negative—uses of humor are amply illustrated within Tarantino's movies. As for Tarantino himself and his set of priorities? Well, you can be the judge. His movies are really violent. They're also at times really funny. At the very least, given the uplifting nature of laughter itself, I don't think anything that makes me laugh can be wholly bad.