Mocking other people is a widespread social practice. Most of us have engaged in it, and most of us have also been the target of someone else’s mockery. It is easy enough to see that mockery is often morally troubling, but it is more difficult to explain why it is morally troubling and whether it is always so. Some instances of mockery seem straightforwardly wrong, such as when a middle school teacher mocks a student in front of his classmates or when a presidential candidate mocks a reporter’s physical disability on camera. In other cases, however, mockery seems harmless and perhaps even morally valuable, such as when comedians and cartoonists mock powerful political figures acting wrongly or irresponsibly. Is it possible to explain mockery in a way that can account for both intuitions? I aim to do so in this paper.

In what follows, I explore the moral boundaries of mockery in an effort to identify the moral concerns that mockery raises and the conditions under which it can be justified. My claim will be that there is a strong moral presumption against mocking people. In order for mockery to be morally justified, it must overcome or at least grapple adequately with these presumptions. Such justification is possible, but it is more challenging than it might seem on the surface. Mockery, I will argue, has multiple moral layers. This means that there are many ways for mockery to go badly, morally speaking. Employed carelessly, mockery has the potential to do considerable moral damage, not just to the target, but also to the person engaging in it and to the moral community as a whole.
I. WHAT IS MOCKERY?

I will begin by specifying the kind of mockery that is my focus in this paper. This is important because mockery can take a wide array of forms, making it challenging to provide anything like a definition. It is not obvious what distinguishes mockery from related practices like satire, teasing, or banter. Nor is it obvious whether mockery must have a person as its target, or whether we can mock nations, institutions, or even objects. We do sometimes mock persons by way of mocking non-persons, such as when I mock my neighbor by mocking her extensive collection of garden gnomes. Mocking the gnomes is a way of mocking her insofar as her propensity to collect garden gnomes reflects negatively on her.¹ If there is mockery that does not somehow make its way back to persons, then it may well be morally innocuous. I suspect, however, that this is unusual and that mockery standardly has a person as its ultimate target.

For purposes of this paper, I will set most of these complexities aside. I will restrict my discussion to mockery of persons and moreover, to a particular kind of mockery of persons that is common and that raises important moral questions; namely mockery that operates by creating a persona of its target.² By this I mean that the person doing the mocking constructs a caricature of the person who is the target of the mockery. The caricature might take the form of a written description or visual depiction, such as in the case of political cartoons. It also frequently, and perhaps most centrally, involves impersonation, in which the mocker assumes the persona of the target in whole or in part. In this paper, I will be especially concerned with mockery that consists of impersonation, but I think my account extends to other forms of mockery as well.

¹ Let it be noted that I do not think an affection for garden gnomes is a negative personality trait.
² I am indebted to a paper by Krista Thomason for getting me to think about attitudes aimed at a persona. The paper is “Shame and Contempt in Kant’s Moral Theory” Kantian Review 18, no. 2 (2013): 221-240. My use of persona in this context, however, differs from the way she uses it in that paper.
Mockery, I take it, is not strictly defined through the eyes of the beholder. In a well-known *Saturday Night Live* skit, Lord Edmund (played by John Malkovich) falsely accuses three different visitors ofmocking him, all the while being genuinely mocked behind his back by his two aides. The first visitor is a woman declaring her love for him, the second is an artist unveiling his new portrait of Lord Edmund, and the third is a groundskeeper requesting guards to help catch poachers. All three visitors deny the accusation that they are mocking him, but the groundskeeper is understandably puzzled by the charge. Although we can imagine how mockery could take place through insincere declarations of love or subtle caricatures worked into a painting, it is hard to see how the groundskeeper’s report of poaching could even be construed as mockery. (The groundskeeper suggests that if anyone is mocking Lord Edmund, it is the poachers, but Edmund rejects this.) One cannot engage in mockery by doing just anything. Moreover, not just any negative remark about the target can be properly described as mocking; otherwise, any critical comment would qualify as mockery, and that cannot be right. Mockery is doing something more specific.

As I am thinking of mockery, it is usefully understood as a kind of performance, aimed at getting uptake from an audience. In that sense, all mockery is public, although obviously the size and scope of the audience will vary. The person doing the mocking creates a persona of the target and holds it out for inspection and evaluation by the audience, which may or may not include the person who is the target of the mockery. The audience is invited to see the target in the light portrayed by the constructed persona. The persona often has exaggerated versions of features that the target actually possesses, and may be presented as behaving in ways that

---

3 The skit, which aired on January 21, 1989, can be seen here: [http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/you-mock-me/n9742?snl=1](http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/you-mock-me/n9742?snl=1). I am grateful to Cindy Stark for reminding me of it.

4 I set aside the question of whether it is possible to mock oneself.
resemble what the target has done or might be expected to do. The resemblance is, of course, important if the mockery is to be effective. The persona must bear enough relationship to the target to be recognizable to the audience, but it is also exaggerated or distorted in crucial ways, generally unflattering to the target. The persona is also, of course, standardly intended to elicit amusement or pleasure in the audience, at least those audience members who are not the target of the mockery.

A classic example of mockery familiar to philosophers is Aristophanes’s portrayal of Socrates in *The Clouds*. The play presents Socrates as a ridiculous old fool, spouting nonsense cleverly disguised as truth. Aristophanes took a very direct approach in his mockery by just naming the character in his play after the real person who was the target. Other satirists hide their targets under disguises of various sorts. Although political cartoonists will often draw a likeness of a politician, they sometimes use a symbol or icon to represent the target (a standard tactic for Garry Trudeau, creator of *Doonesbury*). The disguises, however, cannot be too thick since it is essential to mockery that the portrayal be recognizable as a depiction of the target. The reader of *Doonesbury* is supposed to know that the Roman helmet represents George W. Bush and that the waffle is Bill Clinton, and also why those icons were chosen to represent them.

When mockery takes the form of impersonation, the mocker directly adopts the persona of the target, by imitating features of the target in ways that make it clear to the audience what is happening. Sometimes the mocker does this while still remaining obviously himself, such as when comedian Stephen Colbert speaks in an exaggerated version of Donald Trump’s voice. In other cases, the mocker takes on the entire persona of the target, as when Alec Baldwin takes on the appearance and mannerisms of Trump on *Saturday Night Live*. We can also create a persona by interacting with the target as if he inhabited that created persona. Thus, if I have a friend who
tends to make peremptory requests, I may mock him by responding to his requests with, “Yes, your highness” or “Yes, sir.” In doing so, I interact with him as if he were a king or a commanding officer, with me as his subject or inferior. Here I create a persona of him and then attach it to him through my own actions and responses. It is a performance into which I draft him through a persona I am adopting for myself.

Different forms of mockery present us with somewhat different moral concerns. As I mentioned earlier, my primary concern here is mockery that involves impersonation. Impersonation, whether partial or full, is a very common way to mock people. Not unrelatively, it is also a very effective way of mocking people, especially in the hands of a skilled performer. The effectiveness of impersonation as a tool for mockery raises crucial moral issues about who counts as a legitimate target of mockery by impersonation and on what basis.

Most of us, I take it, think that certain people are fair game for public mockery whereas others are not. People who have set themselves up to be in the public eye tend to be thought of as fair game, whereas children and perhaps also people thrust into public view for things beyond their control seem like inappropriate targets for mockery. I will largely take this intuition for granted, although my account will help explain why the intuition is sound. I will work from the assumption that if any form of mockery is likely to be morally justifiable, it is mockery of public figures, particularly ones who wield considerable political or social power. Insofar as public figures claim the mantle of moral or political leadership, they can and should be held responsible for what they do and fail to do. I will focus, then, on whether public mockery of powerful political leaders can overcome the moral presumptions against mockery.
II. POSSIBLE MORAL JUSTIFICATIONS FOR MOCKERY

Before spelling out the moral presumptions against mockery, I will give a brief overview of three related, but distinct moral justifications that might be offered for mocking public figures. I will return to these justifications toward the end of the paper, but it will help to have them in view now. First, we might think that public mockery plays an important cathartic role, especially in times of political turmoil and dissent. In particular, mockery conducted by the less powerful toward the more powerful can be an important way of expressing negative feelings of frustration and building solidarity with like-minded people. Being able to laugh at figures who pose actual threats can make a difficult situation seem more manageable. Laughter can also be a source of energy and empowerment for people, so that they feel motivated to continue politically important work.

A second justification is the possibility that mockery can serve as an expression of self-respect in the face of threats to one’s moral standing. Macalester Bell has argued that counter-contempt as a response to racist contempt can be an effective way of rejecting racist attitudes expressed by another person and claiming one’s own moral standing in response. Insofar as racist contempt seeks to dehumanize and diminish a person in virtue of her race, mockery in response to such contempt might be seen as a way for that person to assert her own standing and deny that the other person’s dehumanizing attempts are legitimate. As an example, suppose that a local politician, such as a mayor, has been treated contemptuously by a politician of much higher standing and social status. She may respond to his contemptuous treatment by mocking his

---

words or behavior, thereby asserting her own moral status and rejecting his dehumanizing treatment of her. It is a tool she can use to push back against his attempts to marginalize her.

A third, related justification is the possibility that mockery can serve as a potent moral criticism of the target of the mockery. We often think of mockery as “taking someone down a notch,” and in cases where the person’s claim to superiority or power rests on faulty grounds, this might be thought a justified way of pointing it out. The creation of a persona can be a potent way of calling attention to the target’s flaws, particularly when those flaws are unacknowledged by the target and his allies. There is, of course, a long tradition in literature and drama of mocking public figures for their moral flaws and failings, and in the hands of talented playwrights, actors, and comedians, mockery is clearly a very effective tool. Of course, the effectiveness of a tool is not sufficient for moral justification of its use. But given that mockery often takes place in the context of unequal power relationships, it makes a difference who is employing mockery, against whom, and to what effect. Those who lack power may be morally justified in employing tools that more powerful people cannot permissibly wield.

I will return to these three moral justifications later in the paper. There is, as we shall see, something important to them, particularly the last one. I do think it is possible to justify mockery of public figures on these grounds; however, there are multiple moral hurdles standing in the way of the justification. Crucially, the effectiveness of mockery by impersonation rests on its distinctive power to recast people and reassign them to different positions in the social hierarchy. It has the potential to right important wrongs, but it also has the potential to cause them.
III. THE MORAL PRESUMPTION AGAINST MockERY

With that, I turn to what I have called the moral presumption against mockery or more accurately, the set of moral presumptions against mockery. The presumptions arise from different features or aspects of mockery as impersonation. It is therefore useful to distinguish some of these features as a way of getting a handle on the complex ways in which mockery can be morally troubling. In this section, I discuss three such features: 1) the fact that mockery involves the creation of a persona of its target; 2) the fact that mockery operates through social relationships that are characterized by power differentials; and 3) the fact that mockery standardly produces pleasant feelings of amusement in the person performing the mockery and the audience for it. Taken by themselves, these aspects may seem innocuous. (Indeed, if mockery didn’t produce amusement, it would hardly be worth doing!) But each of these aspects generates unique moral problems. Together, these moral problems form the presumption against mockery that must be overcome if it is to be morally justified.

Creation of a persona

Earlier, I suggested that mockery standardly operates through the creation of a persona of its target. It is possible to create a persona without actually impersonating the target (as in Doonesbury cartoons), but much mockery consists of the mocker creating the persona by adopting it or, more accurately, inhabiting it to a greater or lesser degree. When Alec Baldwin appears as Donald Trump on Saturday Night Live, he transforms his physical appearance to resemble him as much as possible, adopts his voice and mannerisms to the extent he can, and seeks to behave in ways that are recognizably similar to how Trump behaves, although of course these are all deliberately exaggerated in crucial ways. Some of these impersonations can be
startlingly accurate (e.g., Tina Fey’s adoption of Sarah Palin’s persona); others are inaccurate in ways designed to enhance a particular effect (e.g., Leslie Jones’s portrayal of Trump). Some are not intended to create physical likenesses at all (e.g., the representation of Steve Bannon as the Grim Reaper). But all of them create personas of their targets and operate by having those personas engage in activities and interactions that portray the target in a negative light for an audience, which is expected to be amused by the portrayal.

We are so accustomed to impersonations that it is easy to overlook the fact that there may be moral issues with the very action of creating a persona of someone, issues that are separate from using that persona for purposes of mockery. I suggest that there are moral concerns about both creating personas and also using those created personas for purposes of mockery, although they are not always morally relevant and certainly not always morally decisive. In order to understand the concerns, let us take a closer look at what is involved with creating a persona.

Consider the concept of identity theft. We typically associate this with hackers stealing someone’s Social Security Number or financial details as a way of obtaining money illegally. Obviously identity theft is wrong insofar as it aims to acquire money through impermissible means, but for many people, that does not capture the entire wrong of identity theft. The thief, after all, is posing as her victim in order to obtain a loan, get a credit card, and so forth. For many people, that is a more personal kind of intrusion than having money simply disappear from one’s bank account. Now consider an even more intimate form of identity theft—the assumption of someone else’s identity on social media. Pretending to be someone else on social media is often (although not always) deceptive, and that presumably is part of the moral problem with it. But again, describing it just as an act of deception is incomplete. It is deception that operates through
a very specific method, one that involves taking over part or all of the target’s identity. It is, I suggest, an intrusion into the target’s agency.

We already recognize a number of forms of intrusion into another’s agency, physical and non-physical, that we regard as morally problematic. It is possible to interfere with a person’s agency by physically restraining him, by coercing him at gunpoint, by lying to him in ways that hinder his rationality, or by taking over spheres of activity that he would ordinarily control. It is not that such interferences are always impermissible, but it seems straightforward that they require justification in order to make them permissible, sometimes considerable justification.

Impersonating someone is intruding into his agency in a somewhat different, but nevertheless significant way. If A opens a social media account under B’s name or under a pseudonym clearly associated with B and then proceeds to tweet or post as if she were B, then she has laid claim to what should reasonably consider to be at least some of B’s agential space. The agential space of “being B” is space that, by default, belongs to B. B is normally entitled to act as herself, and if someone acts as B in her stead, then they have assumed a prerogative that by default belongs to B. This is true whether or not anyone is deceived by A’s attempt to pose as B, or whether B suffers any harms as a result of what A does. Obviously those are important moral concerns, but my suggestion here is that there is a moral issue that arises just from the act of A’s impersonation of B. To impersonate someone is to co-opt their agential space in some way for some period of time. This is why it should be understood as an intrusion into agency.

The fact that it is an intrusion into agency does not necessarily mean that it is impermissible, but it does mean that it require a justification. Impersonating someone can, after all, have a considerable effect on that persons’ ability to construct his own narrative about himself and to act accordingly. Cyber bullying is so damaging to children and adolescents in part
because their own agential space is tentative and fragile. Children are still in the process of forming their identities, which means that they are not in a position to defend those unformed identities against outside attempts to redefine them. Insofar as an impersonation of a child foists a persona on him that he cannot readily or effectively escape, it restricts his agency in a particularly troubling way. This, I suggest, is why we are inclined to think that the impersonation of children as requiring more substantial justification than the impersonation of adults, and perhaps as impossible to justify.

It also, I think, helps explain why we tend to regard impersonation of public figures as less problematic than the impersonation of private individuals. Public figures tend to be powerful, and power is generally accompanied by expansive opportunities to proclaim and defend one’s identity against attempts to redefine it. The more a person is already in the public eye, the more difficult it is for an impersonation to take hold of her identity in a way that impairs, impedes, or constrains her agency. This is not to say that impersonation of public figures is necessarily justified, as it still qualifies as an intrusion into their agential space. That space, however, is generally significantly larger and hence, not as easy to take over in a morally objectionable way. The more empowered someone already is as an agent, the more difficult it is for an outsider to assume control over all or part of that person’s agency. Impersonation of a powerful person is, therefore, less damaging to that person’s identity than impersonation of someone who lacks social power. Indeed, social power plays a very important role in the moral permissibility of mockery, so let us turn to that feature.
Operates through social relationships characterized by power differentials

Mockery, like all interactions, takes place in the context of social relationships that are typically characterized by power differentials. Intuitively, one of the reasons we think it is wrong for teachers and parents to mock children is that it is an abuse of power. I claimed above that that children are more vulnerable than adults to the intrusion of agency created by impersonation. This is in part because a child’s identity tends not to be very well formed, but it is also because adults are often in a position to attach a persona to a child that will be given uptake by the child and by others. The created persona, in which she is portrayed in a negative light, is more likely to “stick” to the target in her own eyes and in the eyes of the audience. This is true in other power relationships as well. Indeed, part of what it is to have social power over someone is to be in a position to impose a persona on someone else this way.

Recall that I said that mockery is a kind of performance, one in which the person doing the mocking extends an invitation to an audience to regard the target in the way portrayed by the persona. The more uptake the audience gives that portrayal, the more effective the mockery. Social power is, in part, the ability to get an audience to see things in a desired light. It stands to reason that the more social power the mocker exerts in the circumstances, the more the audience will accept the persona as pointing to some underlying truth about the target. When the target lacks social power himself, it is more difficult for him to defend his actual identity against the co-opting of it by the person doing the mocking.

Social power is not, of course, an all-or-nothing matter. It is possible to exert or lack social power in one domain, but not in another. It is also possible to exert social power in virtue of some feature of one’s identity while lacking it in another. A U.S. Senator who is a white male exerts enormous social power. If, however, the senator is also physically disabled, then this is a
way in which he is vulnerable to having his social power undermined. Indeed, someone who sought to diminish the senator’s social power would probably find it especially effective to mock his disability. This is because, as we know, people with disabilities are frequently marginalized in society in virtue of being disabled. Insofar as a feature of a person makes that person susceptible to social disempowerment, it is a feature that puts them at risk of greater harm from mockery.

Let me give an example. Suppose that Ben and Josie belong to the same large group of friends. Josie has a speech impediment that slows her down when she talks and occasionally makes it difficult to understand what she is saying. Ben has been feeling irritable lately, mostly because he is unhappy at his job and feeling unappreciated by others. Josie, however, has just received a substantial promotion. While the group is out one night, Josie tells the story of how her boss announced the promotion in front of the entire department. After she is gone, Ben repeats part of Josie’s story to the group while mimicking her speech impediment.

As I have set up the example, there is much that we don’t know about the motives and the context in which this occurred. Perhaps Josie was bragging about her promotion to impress the group or deliberately trying to make Ben feel bad. Even if this were true, however, it seems evident that Ben’s mockery of Josie is wrong, that it is a morally inappropriate response, regardless of whether she has done anything that warrants moral criticism. This is because his response seeks to belittle Josie by way of mocking a feature of her that is both irrelevant to promotion and something in virtue of which others are already likely to view her in a negative light. In mocking Josie’s remarks, Ben is deliberately emphasizing and highlighting her speech impediment. Through impersonating her speech, Ben aims to remind his audience that Josie has
this feature and at the same time generate amusement in his audience. His goal is to get them to laugh at Josie’s speech impediment and hence at Josie in virtue of having the impediment.

I take it to be obvious that this mockery of Josie is wrong, even if she is in fact guilty of being arrogant or insensitive and needs to be brought down a notch. Although mocking her speech impediment does in fact bring her down a notch, it does so in a morally objectionable way. Ben invites his audience to laugh at Josie in virtue of a feature of her that is irrelevant to his real criticism of her and also one that makes her vulnerable to poor treatment by others. Moreover, by mocking Josie in virtue of a trait that is commonly regarded as a flaw and that other people share, he is reinforcing an existing narrative about all people with speech impediments. It is not just Josie that Ben is belittling; he is at the same time belittling other people with speech impediments and inviting the audience to do the same.

We would probably be inclined to call Ben’s mockery of Josie contemptuous of her and of other people with speech impediments. It is contemptuous in part because it expresses an attitude toward people with speech impediments that suggests that they are inferior and need not be taken seriously. I will call this the expressive dimension of contempt. But there is more going on in this example than Ben’s expression of a contemptuous attitude. Ben’s mockery of Josie is doing something in this situation as well. He is not simply expressing an attitude. By mocking her, he is creating a persona of her that invites the audience to treat her as inferior in virtue of her speech impediment. The highlighting of the impediment through the persona alters Josie’s social position with respect to other people. I will call this the functional dimension of contempt.

It is fairly standard to categorize contempt as a Strawsonian reactive attitude, as for instance Michelle Mason does in her influential account of contempt. If so, then contempt

---

engages people within what Strawson calls the participant stance. Within that stance, reactive attitudes are addressed toward people, and they serve as a way of holding people accountable for what they do and for the attitudes they themselves express. On Mason’s view, contempt is a way of regarding someone as low with respect to some standard of behavior. The contempt is addressed to the person who has failed to meet the standard, and it holds that person responsible for having failed to meet it.

But if contempt is a reactive attitude, it is a strange one. For one thing, it is globalist, meaning that it is directed at the entire person, rather than a particular action or character trait of a person. Contempt is also, as both Mason and Bell point out, generally accompanied by aversive behavior. We withdraw from the object of our contempt. These two features, I think, suggest that contempt is not in fact properly understood as something that we do within the participant stance. Rather, contempt is something we employ with the aim of moving a person from a participant position to a position where what Strawson describe as objective attitudes are appropriate. When we take up an objective attitude toward someone, we treat her not as a fellow agent, but as an object to be managed, handled, or circumvented. Thus, it might be necessary to take up an objective attitude when interacting with someone suffering from mental illness so severe that he cannot be engaged from within the participant stance, where reactive attitudes are appropriate. The person who causes harm because of his severe psychosis is to be restrained and treated and perhaps pitied, but not resented. Resentment, on Strawson’s view, is the appropriate response to another person’s expression of ill will. If someone lacks the mental capacity to harbor ill will in the relevant way, it is not appropriate to resent him.

I suggest that the expressive dimension of contempt consists of expressing the attitude that the person does not warrant the status of engagement from within the participant stance. Of
course we can believe that someone cannot be engaged as a participant without expressing contempt, as the example of the person with severe psychosis illustrates. Contempt is a normative judgment about someone’s value. The judgment consists in the attitude that the person is not worthy of engagement, and the expression of contempt is the expression of that attitude. The functional dimension of contempt is an effort to move the person out of the participant realm by attempting to alter social relationships in a way that treats her as not belonging there, as belong to the realm of objects. It is thus not itself a reactive attitude, but rather a refusal to grant the person the status in which she is subject to reactive attitudes.

I should note here that what I am describing as contempt is significantly different from what Mason and Bell describe as contempt. Indeed, it is closer to what Mason calls regarding someone as beneath contempt. It is possible that Mason and Bell, who both defend contempt as a morally justifiable emotion in certain cases, would not want to defend the practice that I am calling contempt. I will set that issue aside. Instead, I want to suggest that my way of thinking about contempt is important for understanding what mockery is doing, particularly with respect to its functional dimension. The reason why mockery is such a useful vehicle for contempt is that it is an especially effective way to relegate a person to the realm of objects. To see this, it will be useful to bring in Immanuel Kant.

Kant seemed to think that both contempt and mockery are incompatible with our moral duties to each other and to humanity as such. Although Kant does not distinguish between the expressive and functional dimensions of contempt, I think it is possible to see both dimensions in

---

7 For a Kantian argument against contempt, see Thomas Hill, “Must Respect Be Earned?” in Respect, Pluralism, and Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 87-118. Krista Thomason has argued that we can make sense the various passages where Kant seems to defend contempt by thinking of contempt as directed at a false persona. See Thomason, “Shame and Contempt in Kant’s Moral Theory” Kantian Review 18, no. 2 (2013): 221-240. See also Jeanine Grenberg, Kant and the Ethics of Humility (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
his discussion of it. Kant took a hard line on contempt, arguing that it violates the duties of respect that we owe to other people. Although he grants that we cannot always help feeling contempt, he thinks that the expression of it is deeply destructive:

To be contemptuous of others, that is, to deny them the respect owed to men in general is in every case contrary to duty; for they are men….I cannot deny all respect to even a vicious man as a man; I cannot withdraw at least the respect that belongs to him in his quality as a man, even though by his deeds he makes himself unworthy of it. ⁸

Kant goes on to suggest that certain forms of punishment are degrading insofar as they “dishonor humanity itself.”⁹ There are, in other words, certain standards of treatment that all rational beings deserve, regardless of what they have done or how we happen to feel about them at the time. Rational beings have dignity and, as the humanity formulation enjoins, must be treated as ends in themselves, rather than as objects of scorn, amusement, or personal profit.

We can readily give an analysis of what’s wrong with Ben’s treatment of Josie by way of the humanity formulation. In mocking Josie’s speech impediment, he treats her as an object for the entertainment of himself and his audience. Moreover, it is entertainment of a very specific kind. Ben’s mockery of Josie aims at diminishing her standing relative to others, especially Ben himself. He is trying to elevate himself within the group and in his own eyes by way of diminishing her. The tool he employs to diminish Josie is the creation of a persona that depicts her as someone whose way of speaking is tainted or absurd. He thus seeks to get the audience to see her as someone who has nothing valuable to say and who is not really eligible to contribute to the conversation of the group.

Of course the intended audience may refuse to give uptake to Ben’s created persona of Josie. They may pointedly not laugh, and they may even call him out on his objectionable

---

⁸ DV 463. This and all subsequent citations of the Doctrine of Virtue are from the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and refer to the Prussian Academy page numbers.

⁹ DV 463.
behavior. If this happens, then while Ben will have expressed contempt for Josie through his mockery, his contempt will not have altered the social relationships of the group members. We might say that Ben’s contempt has succeeded on the expressive dimension, but failed on the functional dimension. It fails because his audience members have rejected his attempt to alter the group’s social dynamics in a way that empowers him and disempowers Josie. Josie thus retains her social standing within the group.

Unfortunately, such mockery does not always fail. Indeed, it very often succeeds. When it succeeds, it is because the audience has accepted the persona as expressing something true about the target that reflects negatively on her. It is no accident that people seeking to mock someone will gravitate toward features of that person in virtue of which people are already disposed to view her negatively. Disabilities, of course, are such a feature. People with disabilities have long been dismissed, marginalized, infantilized, and dehumanized. If one is seeking to diminish the relative social standing of a group member who happens to have a disability, calling attention to that disability in a negative way is an effective way to do it. By mocking Josie’s speech impediment, Ben is playing into the existing negative perceptions of disabilities that he can expect his audience to be harboring. Although his criticism of Josie is technically independent of her speech impediment, he deliberately makes her impediment salient in his portrayal of her. This has the effect of making her seem less significant, less important, and unworthy of participation in the group. Although it helps make the moral criticism of her stick, it does so by taking advantage of existing negative stereotypes and encouraging the audience to transfer those negative feelings about speech impediments to Josie’s actual remarks.

We should note that contempt is often very subtle. Although most decent people would be able to recognize Ben’s mockery as impermissibly trading on Josie’s speech impediment,
matters are not always that straightforward. Personas may draw out biases and stereotypes in the audience without being overt about it. This is particularly true when the impersonation involves imitating many features of the person, making it difficult to see which feature is doing the work of creating the negative impression. Moreover, this can occur even when the person creating the persona is not deliberately trying to make the mockery trade on that particular feature. In other words, it is possible for mockery to be contemptuous on the functional dimension without the mocker intending to express contempt. A created persona can be sexist, racist, ableist, or homophobic even when the creator of the persona does not intend to mock the person for having one of those features.

Needless to say, this introduces moral complications for impersonations of people already vulnerable to marginalization in some respect. Consider the challenge faced by Saturday Night Live writers in creating characters for Barack Obama and John McCain during the 2008 presidential campaign. In order to avoid being contemptuous, an impersonation of Obama must avoid mocking him in virtue of his race and an impersonation of McCain must avoid mocking him in virtue of his physical disability. This, I suggest, is not easy. If an impersonation of Obama requires makeup to darken a white comedian’s skin, then of course the impersonation brings up troubling associations with blackface comedy. The impersonation must also avoid trading on stereotypes often associated with African-Americans. With regard to McCain, a non-contemptuous impersonation would have to involve portraying his disability without making it the feature of him in virtue of which the audience is supposed to regard him as inferior. In both cases, this is made more difficult by the fact that the impersonation is intended to be funny. This takes me to the third feature of mockery, which is that the point of it is to elicit pleasure in the form of amusement.
Produces feelings of amusement in the audience and performer

The fact that mockery is intended to be funny seems essential to it; indeed, it is hard to imagine anything counting as mockery that wasn’t intended to be amusing. Obviously mockery does not always succeed in being funny; however, the evocation of pleasure in the form of amusement is ordinarily an anticipated and expected effect of the performance that constitutes mockery. In a passage that does not do much to improve Kant’s reputation as a dour taskmaster, but that shows important insight, Kant expresses moral doubts about the pleasure we take in mockery:

Wanton faultfinding and mockery, the propensity to expose others to laughter, to make their faults the immediate object of one’s amusement, is a kind of malice. It is altogether different from banter, from the familiarity among friends in which one makes fun of their peculiarities that only seem to be faults but are really marks of their pluck in sometimes departing from the rule of fashion (for this is not derision). But holding up to ridicule a person’s real faults, or supposed faults as if they were real, in order to deprive him of the respect he deserves, and the propensity to do this, a mania for caustic mockery (spiritus causticus), has something of fiendish joy in it; and this makes it an even more serious violation of one’s duty of respect for other human beings.”

As Kant sees it, our propensity to take pleasure in showcasing or witnessing the faults of others has morally troubling roots. Unlike banter, which is not based on the ascription of genuine flaws, mockery is pleasant because it enables us to feel superior to the target of the mockery, in virtue of the target’s flaws or, as he notes, perceived flaws. That is what makes it an instance of malice, which Kant interprets as a kind of rejoicing in the ill fortune of others. Kant was very troubled by what he regarded as our natural tendency toward self-conceit, which leads us to desire our own elevation at the expense of others. Self-conceit causes us to take pleasure in situations where we come off as better than others, or where situations in which others come off as obviously
worse than us. Taking pleasure in the flaws of other people is pleasant for us, insofar as it feeds our self-conceit and enables us to rest smugly in our own feelings of moral superiority. This is why such joy is fiendish; it has its source in what Kant regards as the worst impulses of our nature, and the impulses that make it especially difficult to treat others with the respect we are morally obligated to show them. The moral law points us in one direction; self-conceit pulls us in the other. We have to take great care to ensure that self-conceit does not win.

Kant may seem to be overstating the problem here, but I suggest that he is on to something quite important. Fiendish joy is, after all, joy, and what is more, it is often hard to tell the difference between fiendish joy and what we might call righteous amusement. Although Kant is not necessarily criticizing the pleasure we might take in someone getting a well-deserved comeuppance, the fact is that it is easy for us to mistake malicious pleasure for high-minded moral satisfaction. This is both because we are rather too quick in our propensity to make moral judgments about others and also because we have a tendency to engage in self-deception about our own motives. It suits us to believe that others are worse than they are, and that we are better than we are, and certainly better than others. Moreover, as we saw above, mockery that proceeds by impersonation often induces us to be amused by features of person that are both irrelevant to the moral criticism being made and also playing into existing negative stereotypes and perceptions. When an impersonation trades on the fact that we are already inclined to think negatively about that person in virtue of their membership in a group, it runs the risk of feeding the audience’s self-conceit. If the performance produces pleasure by way of enabling the audience to feel superior to the target on the basis of unjustifiable or irrelevant comparisons, then the joy is fiendish in Kant’s sense.
Let me point to one further moral concern about mockery suggested by Kant’s remarks on defamation, which is the spreading of nasty gossip about people. In this passage, Kant expresses the worry that the practice itself undermines our ability to maintain respect for humanity as a whole:

The intentional spreading (propalalio) of something that detracts from another’s honor – even if it is not a matter of public justice, and even if what is said is true – diminishes respect for humanity as such, so as finally to cast a shadow of worthlessness over our race itself, making misanthropy (shying away from human beings) or contempt the prevalent cast of mind, or to dull one’s moral feeling by repeatedly exposing one to the sight of such things and accustoming one to it.\(^\text{12}\)

Interestingly, in this passage, Kant is not focused on the effects of defamation on the target and whether it constitutes a violation of a duty toward him. Rather, he emphasizes the destructive effects on the individual who engages in the practice and the audience for it. The constant exposure of faults in other people, particularly when done with malice, encourages us to regard human beings as essentially worthless. It “dulls” the moral feeling by making it even more difficult for us to see human beings in the moral light of the kingdom of ends. We might say that it makes it easier for us to hate people when our duty is to try to love them. Indeed, Kant goes on to suggest that we have a positive duty to “throw the veil of benevolence” over the faults of others, something that seems incompatible with mockery.\(^\text{13}\)

IV. JUSTIFYING MOCKERY AS MORAL CRITICISM

I think it is likely that Kant would say that mockery of public figures cannot be morally justified, even when it is intended as legitimate moral criticism of actual moral failings. I am not inclined to say this myself, but I do think that the moral barriers to such justification are

\(^{12}\) DV 466
\(^{13}\) DV 466.
significant. I will conclude by showing how such mockery might be conducted in a morally justified way. Even so, we have good reason to worry about the moral risks to a culture in which mockery is our “go to” method of moral criticism.

I have said that mockery faces moral obstacles based on it three different features of it – the fact that it operates through creating a persona, the fact that it takes place in social relationships characterized by power relationships, and the fact that it creates pleasure in the person doing the mockery and the audience for it. I will go through these three sets of obstacles one by one to see how they might be addressed satisfactorily. My working example will be impersonation of a powerful public figure who has committed a fairly serious moral wrong. Although it is possible that other forms of mockery are morally justifiable, this seems to me like an especially plausible case.

With respect to the first feature, I argued that creating a persona of someone is correctly regarded as an intrusion into that person’s agential space, making it reasonable to hold that the justificatory burden lies with the person doing the intruding. We are sometimes entitled to intrude into another’s agential space this way, particularly if the person has done something to make himself a fair target. If the target has done something to warrant moral criticism, we may think ourselves entitled to criticize him publicly through creating a persona that highlights the moral failings of which he is guilty.

It is worth noting that we do not always have standing to engage in public moral criticism of other people. In the case of public figures, political leaders, we probably do have such standing, but it is not something we should just take for granted. Furthermore, even when we do have standing to engage in public moral criticism of someone, it may yet be impermissible to conduct that moral criticism by way of mockery. Parents and teachers have standing to engage in
moral criticism of their children and students. It is far from obvious that it is permissible to use public mockery as a way of delivering that criticism; indeed, it seems clear that in most cases, it is not. Part of the explanation, of course, lies in the power differential between adults and children, and the authority relationships that create and reinforce that power differential.

In the case of mockery of political figures, the power differential normally works in the other direction. It is the political figure who is in a position of power and who is otherwise able to control and manage his identity in public. It may be that the best way to make his flaws visible to the broader public is to portray him in a way that highlights those flaws in an exaggerated way. When Alec Baldwin plays Donald Trump as a character absurdly susceptible to the influence of Vladimir Putin, it is an attempt to call attention to a genuine moral criticism of Trump’s seemingly divided loyalties (and of Putin’s manipulative tendencies). If it is effective, it may serve an important moral purpose that a more sober-minded newspaper editorial on the same subject could not.

Insofar as mockery of politically powerful figures aims to alter power imbalances, it standardly does so in a way that favors equality, rather than inequality. When mockery is “punching up” on the social hierarchy, it is less prone to moral problems arising from the functional dimension of contempt. Ben’s mockery of Josie is contemptuous because it capitalizes on a feature of Josie in virtue of which she is already vulnerable to marginalization. Baldwin’s mockery of Trump as too readily influenced by Putin does not capitalize on any feature of Trump in virtue of which he is vulnerable to marginalization. This is not to say that is impossible to treat a powerful political figure in a contemptuous way. As I mentioned already, mockery of an African-American politician that trades on stereotypes of race, or of a disabled politician that trades on stereotypes of disability, or of a female politician that trades on stereotypes of gender,
would run into moral problems about the functional dimension of contempt. It would invite the audience to take a negative view of the person not in virtue of their actual moral flaws, but in virtue of a morally irrelevant feature that, as it happens, contributes to the person’s marginalization. This is true even when the portrayal is not intended to express contempt for the person in virtue of having that feature. It is enough if it produces the marginalizing effect.

What this means is that there are moral constraints on how the personas of political figures can be constructed, even when the aim is legitimate moral criticism. The negative light in which the audience is invited to view the target, and the resulting amusement, must be generated by the portrayal of the target’s actual moral flaws, even if the impersonation incorporates other features of the target, as it standardly does. The implication is that impersonators have to be very careful when they consider what features can be brought into the persona and how those features get uptake in the audience members and generate amusement. Otherwise, they run the risk of treating the target with contempt in the course of making legitimate moral criticisms.

The moral danger of contempt, as I have defined it, is that it thrusts the target into the objective position, inviting the audience to view the target not as a fellow participant in the moral community, but as an object of entertainment or as something less than a person. I have argued that whether mockery succeeds in doing this will depend on a number of things, including the comparative social positions of the mocker and the target, and the way in which the audience gives uptake to the created persona. I suggest that for mockery of a public figure to avoid contempt, it must be done in a way that treats the target as part of the audience that is being addressed with the mockery. In other words, it must be possible for the target to give the portrayal uptake in the same way as other audience members. This is not, of course, a requirement that the target actually give it uptake; indeed, it may be predictable that the target
will not. The crucial point is that the moral criticism must be offered in a way that counts as addressing the target, where that means engaging the target in the participant stance. To put it slightly differently, the created persona must be compatible with the target and the audience continuing to see the target as an end in the Kantian sense.

In his discussion of contempt, Kant notes that corrections of error, whether moral or non-moral, must be done in a way that preserves the agent’s moral standing. We must work from the assumption that a mistaken judgment “must yet contain some truth” and that a vicious person “can never lose entirely his predisposition to the good.” Corrections and criticisms must enable the person to maintain respect for their own rational and moral capacities and express the view that the person has the ability to employ those capacities well. We might say that it is a duty to maintain faith in other people and encourage them to have faith in themselves. For mockery to succeed as moral criticism, it must treat the target as someone who could be a legitimate recipient of moral criticism and who could, at least in theory, give that criticism uptake. The criticism must work under the assumption that the target could take it up. That assumption requires that the target be treated as an agent throughout. I cannot coherently demand that someone behave better while at the same time treating him as incapable of moral reform. This is why mockery as moral criticism must avoid contempt. Insofar as contempt objectifies its target, it does not allow the possibility that the criticism could take hold.

Finally, I turn to the third aspect of mockery, the fact that it produces amusement. Here I suggest that if the mockery is to be justified, the pleasure it seeks to produce should not be fiendish in Kant’s sense. In other words, it must not be catering to the audience’s natural tendency to feel superior to the target. Mockery that feeds our self-conceit interferes with our

14 DV 463-464.
ability to maintain the proper moral stance toward other people. This is challenging to avoid, especially because it seems likely that different audience members will respond differently to the same persona. You may be able to maintain appropriate moral attitudes as you watch Saturday Night Live, whereas I succumb to malicious pleasure in watching people I despise being brought low and made to look absurd. In that case, I am guilty of harboring fiendish joy when you are not. I am inclined to think that this is the correct result. In Persuasion, the wise Anne Elliot recommends that a grieving man read more prose and less poetry, on the grounds that “it was the misfortune of poetry to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely.”\footnote{Jane Austen, \textit{Persuasion}, Modern Library edition (New York: Random House, 1992) p. 74.} It may also be the misfortune of mockery that it cannot be safely enjoyed by those who are capable of enjoying it most. The dangers of mockery are not limited to its negative effects on the target. It poses dangers to the audience as well.

On Kant’s view, the destructive possibilities of mockery extend beyond the particular instance of mockery. As we saw in his remarks on defamation, he fears that if practices like mockery and defamation become widespread, it will have an undermining effect on the broader moral community and the individuals who comprise it. Insofar as social practices cultivate misanthropy and cynicism in us, they make it far more difficult for us to live up to the demands of morality. This is true even in cases where the mockery is justified moral criticism of a socially powerful person, who genuinely needs to be brought down a notch and who can be brought down without contempt. Moral criticism in the form of mockery may well fill an important role. There do seem to be people who \textit{need} to be lowered in their own eyes and the eyes of others, especially when those people act in ways that indicate that they think themselves beyond or
above reproach. Used skillfully, mockery can be helpful in enabling people to see themselves through a more accurate perspective.

If, however, we find ourselves in a position where mockery forms the dominant method of moral criticism, whether in personal relationships or in public spheres, then we may find ourselves in a position where moral community is no longer possible. The existence of moral community depends on us being able to maintain an admittedly difficult attitude of hope about each other and about the prospect of moral progress. Mockery doesn’t have to be incompatible with hopefulness, but we should pay close attention to whether the pleasure it induces is turning us all into fiends.