“The Ethical Ambivalence of Humor”

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In accord with Schutz’s idea of multiple realities, the finite province of meaning of humor includes: an *epoché* (break with pragmatic everyday life), a relaxed tension of consciousness (prioritizing passive syntheses and release of subconscious drives), a self-experience (as split between everyday life and the humorous province), a form of spontaneity (different goals), and distinct experiences of sociality and temporality. Using as an example interracial humor (in which an African-American friend has exposed the author’s cultural, bodily, and self-preconceptions), this paper argues that humor can be an ally of ethics since one’s humorous companion can: free one from pragmatic everyday life, its self-experience, it pragmatic purposes; uninhibitedly lay bare one’s unconscious practices (even the dominating of others), and reshape one’s experience of others (as “interrupters” instead of conduits for one’s action). However, humor (e.g. past interracial humor) can oppose ethics. It can involve discarding all norms and releasing subconscious hatreds and producing an uninhibited self (free from all “political”/ethical correctness) bent on the domination through ridicule. Humor is not inherently ethical even if it can illuminate everyday epistemic and ontological suppositions. It can, though, be subjected to critique from outside its boundaries through theory and because of its still having one foot in the pragmatic world where the other continually summons to responsibility. In addition, humor will be ethical depending on the social relationships that take place within it, i.e., whether the executor of humor is the other or oneself, or oneself responsible to the other (e.g. A Modest Proposal).

(250 words)