

*Teaching Caselettes*

## Teaching Notes

# THE ETHICS OF POLITICAL SATIRE

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Political satirists like Jon Stewart, Larry Wilmore, Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah and John Oliver have become trusted critics and investigators of American political culture. Do these comedians have any ethical responsibilities regarding the political information they disseminate or does the responsibility ultimately lie with the public?

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## Ethical Frameworks: Social Roles, Deontology, and Consequentialism

As social people, we play a variety of roles within our families and communities: teacher, parent, businesswoman, journalist, comedian, citizen. Each of these roles carries role-specific rights and obligations. Elementary school teachers hold themselves to a different ethical code than politicians. Fathers have different obligations from insurance agents. We all play multiple social roles and often expect to follow different ethical considerations according to the role we are actively involved with.

*The question at the core of the case study of political comedians is how we should arbitrate between our goals and intentions and the social perceptions of those goals and intentions, particularly as they pertain to role-specific ethical considerations. Do our ethical obligations depend on the role we choose or believe we have or do they depend on the expectations other people around us have?*

While both deontology and consequentialism generally apply to individual acts or actions, one can imaginatively stretch these ethical frameworks to cover the choice of social roles.

According to a *deontological approach* to ethics, the main concern is the inner state of the acting agent: What are her intentions? Is she pursuing a certain course of action out of concern for its intrinsic rightness or is she merely concerned about the consequences to herself and/or others? A deontological approach to roles could also focus on the internal states of the individual, prioritizing her own will to play a particular role in society. When an individual chooses to describe herself as a comedian, she occupies the role of comedian, no matter if people laugh at her jokes, sob uncontrollably or award her a Nobel prize.

According to a *consequentialist approach*, however, we should focus on the consequences of our actions and words. We should only pursue courses of action that maximize good effects or at least minimize bad ones. When extending this concept to cover the choice of roles in society, one should consider the social consequences of playing the particular role and choose an ethical code commensurate with the social perception. If the public perception of political comedians is that of trustworthy critics and journalists, the consequentialist argument would go, we should expect them to adjust their behavior to the ethical standards of this new role, provided that it leads to the greater good for the public (who represent the greatest number).

*In this case study, we examine whether political comedians should follow the ethical code appropriate for entertainers and comedians (which they identify with) or whether they should be bound by an ethical code more similar to that of journalists (which the public increasingly identifies them with).*

## **Discussion Questions:**

1. *How do we judge whether the public perceives political comedians such as Jon Stewart or John Oliver as mere entertainers or as trusted public intellectuals and journalists?*
  - a. *Do we ask the political comedians themselves or do we focus on the behavior of viewers and guests on the shows?*
  - b. *If we focus on the public, do we rely on public opinion surveys or do we consult expert testimony such as that of the Peabody Award committee?*
2. *Are political satirists responsible for the truth of stories they report?*
  - a. *Should they be more transparent about their standards for fact-checking, reporting and interviewing?*
  - b. *Should they recant or correct stories that turn out to be either misleading or factually incorrect?*
3. *Are political satirists expected to be impartial towards the different sides in the political process?*
  - a. *If not, do we expect them to be open about their partisanship or biases?*
4. *Should political satirists consider their effect on the political process itself (e.g. on the level of civic engagement, on partisanship, on Congress' approval rating, on which candidates get most support from young people)?*
5. *Is the public responsible for evaluating the accuracy and impartiality of political satire?*
  - a. *Does public responsibility absolve comedians of ethical considerations?*
6. *How should the public express collective responsibility for evaluating political satire?*
  - a. *Do we trust the best judgment of individual voters or would it be better for civil society or the government to assist the public in distinguishing accurate from inaccurate aspects of comedy reporting (e.g. by fact-checking or public service announcements)*