Is Laughing at Morally Oppressive Jokes Like Being Disgusted by Phony Dog Poop? An Analysis of Belief and Alief in The Context of Questionable Humor

In two very influential papers from 2008, Tamar Gendler introduced the concept of “alief” to describe the mental state one is in when acting in ways contrary to their consciously professed beliefs. For example, if asked to eat what they know is fudge, but shaped into the form of dog feces, they will hesitate, and behave in a manner that would be consistent with the belief that the fudge is really poop. They alieve that it is disgusting, while they believe it is not. This paper investigates laughter from self-proclaimed egalitarian, tolerant folk, in response to oppressive jokes that might fit the alief-model. If I merely alieve the content of a joke at which I laugh, will that constitute morally exculpating reasons for such laughter? My argument in brief: 1) Laughing at oppressive jokes is harmful, as per Bergmann et al., and the belief-endorsement view, they just targeted the wrong causes of the laughter. 2) The causes of such laughter are aliefs. 3) It is possible to control our alief-driven laughter. 4) Failure to control such laughter is analogous to failing to moderate one’s implicitly biased, alief-driven behaviors for which we are responsible. 5) So, we should be held morally responsible for such laughter. This paper will provide insights at the intersections of humor studies, ethics, epistemology, phenomenology, and the philosophy of mind, all while being moderately and appropriately amusing.