

Charles Shi

Ms. Small

Humanities

17 December 2025

The Age of Selfishness and the Power of Satire

In a culture increasingly centered around convenience, efficiency, and personal gratification, empathy is often treated as expendable rather than essential. Human suffering becomes something to be acknowledged briefly, processed through headlines or entertainment before being tossed aside. Writers have responded to this moral shift in different ways. In “The Death of Intimacy,” cultural critic Martin Jacques examines how individualism, market ideology, and media culture have gradually worn away the emotional bonds of human connection. Writing in *The Guardian*, Jacques situates his argument within broader social trends, seeking to explain how selfishness has become normalized as the product of systemic forces rather than individual cruelty. On the other hand, *The Onion*’s satirical article “Fun Toy Banned Because of Three Stupid Dead Kids” abandons explanation in favor of exposure. Through irony, exaggeration, and deliberately offensive language, the article adopts the logic of consumer culture to portray a society that no longer treats human life as its highest value. As a satirical news outlet that mimics journalistic form, *The Onion* uses parody to exaggerate familiar attitudes to the extreme. Although both Jacques and *The Onion* confront the decay of empathy in modern society, Jacques relies on analytical explanation to guide a reflective audience, whereas *The Onion*’s satire proves more persuasive by dramatizing emotional collapse through shock and irony, compelling readers to confront their own moral complacency rather than merely understand it.

Despite both Jacques's essay and *The Onion*'s article addressing a society increasingly shaped by selfishness and emotional detachment, they differ significantly in rhetorical approach. Jacques adopts a serious and analytical tone, aiming to diagnose the cultural forces that have produced modern selfishness. He argues that "the rise of individualism ... has made self the dominant interest ... and one's own needs as the ultimate justification of everything" (Jacques), using sophisticated language to frame selfishness as a systemic condition rather than an individual moral failure. His diction is explanatory, emphasizing concepts such as "market logic" and cultural ideology to show how efficiency, competition, and convenience have taken priority over empathy. Jacques extends this argument into family life, noting that parents increasingly lack the time required to raise children emotionally, even as he insists that "time is the most important gift a parent can give a child" (Jacques). Through this logical progression, Jacques clarifies how selfishness has become normalized. However, this rhetorical strategy also limits his persuasive reach. By focusing on broad cultural forces, Jacques distances readers from personal accountability, allowing them to view the problem as systemic and therefore difficult or unnecessary to confront individually. His argument therefore reinforces the views of readers already inclined to see selfishness as a systemic issue, rather than unsettling those who might otherwise feel implicated. By contrast, *The Onion* employs irony and exaggeration to confront readers directly with the consequences of selfishness. The article's title, "Fun Toy Banned Because of Three Stupid Dead Kids," immediately establishes its satirical method, reframing tragedy as inconvenience and shifting blame onto the victims for being "stupid." Rather than explaining selfishness, *The Onion* exposes it through exaggerated voices, from authoritative figures to medical professionals, using dark humor to make the critique immediate and accessible to a wider audience. Moreover, the article initially mimics the neutral tone of conventional

reporting, noting that “for years, countless children played with the Aqua Assault RoboFighter without incident” (*The Onion*). This statement utilizes language that rationalizes the cruelty, adopting the voice of corporate common sense to justify indifference toward human loss. By invoking the toy’s long record of safe enjoyment, the article mirrors the logic through which harm is dismissed as insignificant. This rhetorical move is central to *The Onion*’s satirical approach: instead of explaining why empathy has corroded, the article speaks as if empathy is already long gone. Through irony and exaggeration, the satire exposes selfish reasoning by inhabiting it, forcing readers to recognize the moral emptiness of a worldview in which convenience and entertainment outweigh human life. In contrast to Jacques’s careful diagnosis of cultural decline, *The Onion*’s method confronts readers with the language and logic of selfishness itself. In this way, *The Onion* turns the cultural forces Jacques describes into a concrete example, showing what a society shaped by individualism and market logic looks like when empathy has already disappeared.

While Jacques’s explanatory rhetoric guides readers to understand why empathy erodes over time, *The Onion*’s satire more powerfully exposes its absence, forcing readers to confront how casually human life is dismissed when it interferes with consumer enjoyment. Jacques presents empathy as something that breaks down slowly, warning of “a growing loss of intimacy and a decline in emotional intelligence” (Jacques). His language emphasizes gradual erosion rather than overt cruelty, suggesting that emotional numbness develops through weakened communities. By arguing that the decline of “settled” communities and the rise of media culture have altered how people encounter suffering and death, Jacques explains how tragedy becomes distant and easily forgotten (Jacques). His reflective tone and diction appeal strongly to logos, guiding readers to understand why empathy disappears, whilst also maintaining emotional

restraint. *The Onion*, on the other hand, portrays a society in which empathy has already collapsed. Through shock, humor, and brutal diction, the article treats children's deaths as inconveniences rather than tragedies. A doctor bluntly states: “[t]here's no point in feeling bad about this child's demise ... what we should feel bad about is the fact that because of him, millions of other children will no longer get to fire the RoboFighter's super-cool missiles” (*The Onion*). Authority figures echo this sentiment, with a Consumer Product Safety Commission commissioner dismissing the victims as “morons who deserved what they got” (*The Onion*). This deliberate use of obscenity and invective terms such as “dumba**,” “stupid,” and “r*****s” normalizes apathy and forces readers to confront how casually human life is dismissed when it interferes with consumer enjoyment. By exaggerating emotional numbness to an extreme, *The Onion* causes the reader to confront the problem and wonder about their own qualities. The discomfort produced by the humor compels readers to question why entertainment and profit appear to outweigh human suffering. In this way, the satire dramatizes the endpoint of the process Jacques describes, depicting a world where death itself is evaluated through consumer inconvenience.

The difference in persuasive power between Jacques and *The Onion* lies in how their rhetorical strategies compel personal moral reflection. Jacques relies primarily on logos and ethical appeal, constructing a sociological argument that encourages readers to recognize the erosion of intimacy and humanity. His use of a rhetorical question: “[w]hat, after all, could be more important than our humanity?” (Jacques), invites moral contemplation, but does so in a restrained manner that assumes readers are already willing to reflect. This approach persuades through reason and shared values, yet lacks urgency. Readers may agree with Jacques's conclusions without feeling compelled to alter their own behavior. *The Onion*, by contrast, uses

satire as a form of moral confrontation. From its opening paragraph, they understate that the toy was recalled only after “three dumb kids managed to kill themselves … ruining the fun for everybody else” (*The Onion*); the article reframes tragedy through the language of inconvenience and loss of pleasure. This inversion immediately changes the reader’s expectations. The satire further strengthens its impact by mimicking institutional authority, as when the Consumer Product Safety Commission declares that “three deaths stemming from contact with a particular toy constitutes an ‘unreasonable risk’” (*The Onion*). By reducing the deaths to mere statistics, the article exposes how bureaucratic logic can erase empathy altogether. Unlike Jacques’s reflective warning, *The Onion* collapses emotional distance, immersing readers in a world where human value has already been overtaken by efficiency and profit. By exaggerating the very logic Jacques critiques, the satire translates his analysis into an immediate moral experience, making the consequences of selfishness impossible to dismiss.

Ultimately, both Martin Jacques and *The Onion* expose a culture increasingly shaped by selfishness and emotional detachment, but their rhetorical strategies produce very different effects on the reader. Jacques offers a diagnosis of how empathy erodes through individualism, market logic, and weakened social bonds, inviting reflection and intellectual agreement. *The Onion*, however, transforms those same cultural forces into lived experience, using satire to strip away emotional distance and confront readers with a society in which human life is casually sacrificed for convenience and pleasure. By exaggerating cruelty and adopting the very logic it condemns, the satire forces readers to feel the moral consequences of empathy’s absence rather than merely understand them. In doing so, *The Onion* proves more persuasive, demonstrating that exposure may succeed where explanation alone cannot.

Works Cited

“Martin Jacques: The Death of Intimacy.” *The Guardian*, 17 Sept. 2004,
www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/sep/18/britishidentity.comment.

Staff, The Onion. “Fun Toy Banned because of Three Stupid Dead Kids.” *The Onion*, 16 Aug. 2000,
theonion.com/fun-toy-banned-because-of-three-stupid-dead-kids-1819565691/.