

Acting Unnaturally

Jay dropped out of high school and moved to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career. For years he barely survived by working part-time jobs and living in poor conditions. Despite his talent, he found it difficult to get cast, in large part because roles for non-white actors like Jay are limited.

Now, after years of toiling, Jay is close to his big break. He's been offered a major part in a new network sitcom that will air 22 episodes per year. Unfortunately, Jay is uncomfortable with the role: He would be playing the main character's "wacky minority friend," essentially acting out nasty racial stereotypes for easy, lazy laughs. His character will speak in an exaggerated accent, be unable to avoid "hilarious" cultural misunderstandings, and rarely say anything particularly interesting beyond the occasional bit of trite "wisdom." He will, however, have plenty of lines and jokes in what will likely be a hit show.

On one hand, Jay is so disgusted with the role that he finds it difficult to imagine accepting it. How could he sleep at night if he helped to entrench these stereotypes, allowing the world to laugh at his expense? Even worse, he would be enriching himself by embodying this nauseating racial caricature.

On the other hand, Jay needs the money and believes that this role would finally launch the acting career he has so relentlessly pursued. Who knows what kinds of interesting, fulfilling, even socially important roles he could play after spending a few years on this sitcom? Moreover, he assumes that these negative impacts will occur whether or not he takes the role, and he feels that it is unfair that he should have to worry about "selling out" whereas more privileged white actors do not. Should he sacrifice his chance to fulfill his dream because of racism in society?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Suppose that Jay knows that the show will be a big hit whether or not he takes the role. How, if at all, should that affect his decision?
2. How, if at all, would the case be different if Jay was already successful?
3. How, if at all, would the case be different if Jay was white and offered the role of the main character (so that he would perform with, but not as, the "wacky minority friend")?