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3-16-2020

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Recommended Citation

Gimbel, Steven. "Richard Richards, Robert Roberts, and Aristotelian Aristotelianism." *Praxis, Poems, and Punchlines: Essays in Honor of Richard C. Richards*, edited by Steven Gimbel, 2020, pp. 71-85.

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Abstract

This paper is a tribute to a philosopher and a person I have long admired, Richard C. Richards. As a clear and rigorous thinker, a thoughtful and accessible writer, and as a kind, blunt, and extremely funny person, Richard embodies virtues I hope to someday claim as well. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Richard C. Richards, philosophy, virtue, Robert C. Roberts

Disciplines

Other Philosophy | Philosophy

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Richard Richards, Robert Roberts, and Aristotelian Aristotelianism

Steve Gimbel

This paper is a tribute to a philosopher and a person I have long admired, Richard C. Richards. As a clear and rigorous thinker, a thoughtful and accessible writer, and as a kind, blunt, and extremely funny person, Richard embodies virtues I hope to someday claim as well.

It is, I believe, fitting, to begin this tribute to Richard by considering the philosophical work of someone else entirely. Richard has a well-developed sense of humor, something he defines as the attitude to properly appreciate incongruities, and the idea of honoring one person by discussing the work of another is surely the sort of incongruity he has the attitude to appreciate.

The other philosopher I want to begin discussing in order to honor Richard C. Richards is another prominent name in the philosophy of humor, Robert C. Roberts. Roberts is emeritus from Wheaton College, that is, the Wheaton College in Illinois, not the Wheaton College in Massachusetts. (I want to be perfectly clear that we are talking about Robert Roberts from Wheaton, not Robert Roberts from Wheaton.) Richard Richards and Robert Roberts, we will see, are similar in that the

accounts of humor they give come from a commitment to an Aristotelian foundation.

Robert Roberts is quite explicit about this in his article “Humor and the Virtues.” In this piece, Robert Roberts, like Richard Richards, begins by adopting an incongruity account of humor. For both Robert Roberts and Richard Richards, an act is humorous only if it includes an incongruity that is at least perceived by the person finding the act humorous (more than perception may be required, but the perception of the incongruity is at least a necessary condition for an act to be an act of humor).

Robert Roberts, like Richard Richards, is not interested in humor theory for the sake of humor theory, but hopes to find how we ought to think about humor as embedded in the lived life.

The key to perceiving incongruities for the sake of humor, according to Robert Roberts, is “perspectivity.” When we see something as incongruous, what we are often doing is seeing the same thing from multiple perspectives. By seeing the same thing through different interpretive lenses, we can make sense of the same thing in different, perhaps contrasting, ways.

This perspectivity, he argues, requires dissociation, that is, (a) the ability for us to recognize that there is a perspective other than our own to be occupied, and (b) the ability to then occupy this

alternative perspective. To develop a sense of humor, that is, to be able to recognize humor, one needs to always be aware that one is perceiving through a perspective which is not the only possible perspective.

He does not, however, contend that all is mere perspective. He is committed to the existence of an objective reality. So, we must not attribute to Robert Roberts a perspectival perspectivalism, but rather a more limited perspectivalism which he terms "soft perspectivalism." There is a real world, he holds, but we experience it from one of many possible angles.

Humor is to found in simultaneously understanding: (1) the perception of the object of the perception from our perspective, (2) that there is another perspective from which the object of perception may be perceived, (3) the perception of the object of perception from the alternative perspective, and (4) that there is an incongruity between the two perceptions despite the fact that they are perceptions of the same object being perceived. Sometimes, but only sometimes, this incongruity will be of the proper sort to be humorous. A sense of humor is the ability to distinguish the proper from the improper cases.

The question he ultimately seeks to answer in setting this out is whether a sense of humor ought to be considered a virtue, or at least something

capable of enhancing one's moral education which he works out in terms of character development which in turn is worked out in terms of virtues. This is where the Aristotelianism is fully transparent.

This gets ramped up further with Robert Roberts' contention that each person possesses both a character and a nature and that virtue is the state of one's character being brought into line with one's nature. To recognize that there is a gap between one's character and one's nature is to see oneself in two different ways as being two different things. This is an incongruity and can, through proper dissociation and perspectivity, allow one to laugh at one's own flaws and foibles. This, then, puts us in a place of objective knowledge about what we need to improve in ourselves and that is crucial to personal growth. In Robert Roberts' own words,

“The concept of a virtue implies the concept of a human nature. To possess a virtue is to be ‘qualified’ as having to that extent realized one's nature, as having become in actuality what one inevitably was in potentiality. The concept of a virtue is thus the concept of a congruity between one's character and one's nature, and thus of the live possibility of lacking congruity between character and nature – of falling short of one's telos. Given this, the form of humor

closely connected with the virtues would be a representation of moral failures as incongruities. To perceive such incongruities in oneself and others would be a mark of moral knowledge, and the disposition to perceive them could be counted as an important part of wisdom. In so far as wisdom is a virtue which pervades the others – there being wisdom concerning justice, wisdom concerning truth-telling, wisdom about situations calling for courage, etc. – the moral sense of humor would perhaps apply, with differences, to the whole range of virtues (Roberts, p. 130).”

We see in Robert Roberts’ writing that a sense of humor may be an aid to becoming a more virtuous person, in other words, an aid in our moral education.

Let us now turn from Robert Roberts to Richard Richards. Richard Richards, like Robert Roberts, contends that we possess a character and, like Aristotle, holds character to be comprised of attitudes and proclivities that we develop through our choices and our actions. Like Robert Roberts, Richard Richards is committed to a real reality and among that which may be considered objective is humor. It is an objective fact of the world if something is humorous and those with a developed

sense of humor will be the accomplished judges that we can turn to in order to see whether an act was, in fact, humorous.

So, what is it to have a sense of humor according to Richard? In his words,

“A sense of humor is an attitude or set of attitudes that involve a tendency to notice, explore, and sometimes create incongruities, and to appreciate them in a playful way that is usually pleasurable (Richards, p. 72).”

A sense of humor is thus, first and foremost, an attitude or set of attitudes. What is an attitude?

“An attitude is a habitual psychological structure that influences and often controls what we perceive, that is, what we think and feel, and the beliefs we have about those things we perceive and feel. Though the term ‘attitude’ has, in common usage, come to mean mostly a bad or hostile attitude, I am using the term much more generally. Roughly, an attitude is a set of habits with which we approach life, and many attitudes are learned early in life (Richards, pp. 72-3).”

As with Robert Roberts, we see with Richard Richards, a firm commitment to a practical Aristotelianism.

A sense of humor for Richard is thus an attitude. It is an attitude which leads to the appreciation of incongruities. Let us take the notion of incongruity to be well-understood and well-defined (ignoring Robert Latta's objections here). The question remaining is therefore, "What is it to appreciate an incongruity?" Richard answers,

"The act of appreciating involves recognizing the worth of something. It involves the discovery or creation of value. You have to have some sort of knowledge in order to appreciate something. That also distinguishes it from simple cases of liking. You can like something without recognizing its worth or value. You can value something without liking it. The recognition of value or worth involves the possession of some kind of knowledge other than that involved in liking (Richards, p. 76)."

Appreciating something, an incongruity or otherwise, involves specialized knowledge which some may possess and others not. In this way, we see John Stuart Mill's famous passage from Utilitarianism being obliquely referred to in which

there are some who have developed a proclivity that makes them superior judges of value. "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question. (Mill, p. 10)." In the same way, if a person with a developed sense of humor finds something funny and someone else does not, the person without the developed sense of humor is wrong about the objective fact of the humorousness of the object.

The sense of humor as Richard Richards sets it out does not require an objective human nature. It is a desirable development in the character of a person, but not a failure of character the way Robert Roberts would have. As such, what we see in Richard Richards' conception of the human and the sense of humor is something akin to Kant's notion of an imperfect duty. It is a good to develop it, but not something morally necessary.

But its development is not direct. According to Richard, the development of a sense of humor requires first that one develop a sense of the funny.

"The sense of the funny is a skill at determining where a person is likely to find the amusing, rather than simply waiting for

something to happen which causes laughs. It also includes a habitual understanding of when it is appropriate to laugh and when it is not (Richards, p. 77)."

As a child, one develops a sense of the funny, but then as an adult one may go farther and develop a full-fledged sense of humor.

"When does the sense of the funny become the sense of humor? It varies in individual cases. We hone the ability to laugh at the proper times. From this proceeds the ability to appreciate the incongruities of life. It takes more learning for a person to have a sense of humor than to learn to laugh when others laugh, to laugh when someone says something that is called 'funny' and we feel obliged to laugh (Richards, p. 78)."

So, where Robert Roberts gives us an account of the sense of humor that comes not only from a commitment to a virtue ethics, but also a commitment to the underlying metaphysical picture of the human being, we can say that Robert Roberts has an Aristotelian Aristotelianism. Richard Richards, unlike Robert Roberts, does not have an Aristotelian Aristotelianism. Richard Richards' Aristotelianism is more intricate. He invokes the sort

of levels of knowledge being morally relevant that we find in Mill. He makes the sense of humor a desirable property along the lines of the imperfect duties of Kant. And he makes the development of it a stepwise evolutionary process of the sort we find in Hegel. Therefore, we can say that Richard has a Kantian Hegelian Millian Aristotelianism.

I love the phrase “Kantian Hegelian Millian Aristotelianism” because it might be a convoluted way of saying something straightforward which would make it quite Kantian. It might be a convoluted way of saying absolutely nothing, which would make it quite Hegelian. Or it might just lead one to have a nervous breakdown which would make it quite Millian.

I will mention the title of one of my favorite papers in the philosophy of language at this point by Nathan Salmon. His goal in this article is to revive John Stuart Mill’s approach to language and is titled, “How to be a Millian Heir.” I do not bring this up because it has any relevance at all to the points I am making here, but rather because this is my paper and I will talk about whatever the fuck I want.

So, we have with Robert Roberts and Richard Richards, two contrasting Aristotelian accounts of the sense of humor. Robert Roberts is an Aristotelian Aristotelian where Richard Richards is not an Aristotelian Aristotelian, but rather a Kantian Hegelian Millian Aristotelian.

Which of the two ought we prefer? To weigh the two alternatives with an eye toward seeing which is stronger, I propose we look to Richard Richards. Not Richard Richards – that would be to engage in circular reasoning precisely because the reasoning would be circular. Rather, Richard Richards, by which I mean not Richard C. Richards, the beloved member of the Lighthearted Philosophers Society and emeritus philosopher of aesthetics, ethics, and love and sex from Cal Poly, Pomona, but rather Richard A. Richards, professor of philosophy with a focus on the philosophy of biology at the University of Alabama. (That’s the University of Alabama not in Birmingham, but in Tuscaloosa, real Alabama – Richard Richards from Alabama Alabama). Richard A. Richards toured the world as a professional, classical dancer before he became a professional philosopher, completing his graduate work at Johns Hopkins where we took graduate seminars in philosophy of science together. I pride myself on perhaps being the only person who is friends with both Richard Richardses.

As one would expect from an expert on evolutionary explanation, Richard Richards gives an account of aesthetic judgment which is modeled upon the Darwinian concept of fitness. Evolutionary fitness, Richards argues, is a three-place relationship among the property, the organism, and the context in which the organism finds itself. It is the

contextual piece that is essential here. No property is itself good for an organism in general, but only good in terms of its context. That context may be internal – that is, advantageous in terms of the relations of the parts of the organisms – or external – that is, advantageous in relation to some environmental factor. But whether it is an internal or external context, we have to see fitness as a function of its functional context. Fitness for Richard Richards is a function of function.

Richard Richards' own fitness, for example, has been significantly aided by the contextual factor of his avoiding gluten. He told me he dropped fifteen pounds. Dude looked good last time I was down in Alabama.

Just as with evolutionary fitness, so too with artistic fitness. We have to see fitness as a three-place relation connecting a property of the work (e.g., unity, complexity, or intensity), the work as a whole, and the context of the work. Again, the functional context may be internal – that is, a function of the property understood fully within the work itself, such as color relationships, composition, or form – or it may be external – that is, an aspect of the social, historical, or political context in which the artistic work is appreciated.

As a philosopher with a strong biological background, he points out that a number of the properties we judge positively in works of art are

direct results of our cognitive structure which directly results from our brains being the product of evolutionary processes. The human brain, for example, is outstanding at edge detection because we naturally engage in lateral inhibition wherein the brain naturally exaggerates the contrast in light values when darker and lighter areas are juxtaposed. This is why we will naturally project boundaries and edges onto pieces like pointillist works in which none exist.

As such, our appreciation of art – and we can argue by extension, humor – is a function of our function as humans. This is very much in line with the sort of Aristotelian Aristotelianism of Robert Roberts as it posits universal human properties which we can see as the sort of human nature Roberts requires.

But Richard Richards also contends that the external context is crucial to understanding our understanding of art. We acquire categories through education and the more educated one is, the better one is as a judge of artistic quality.

“The experience of an artwork will therefore vary depending on which features we believe to be standard, variable, and contra-standard, and that depends on experience and learning. Consequently, functional context – and functioning – will

vary depending on the presence of this kind of knowledge in those who experience the work (Richards, p. 267).”

Further, the acquired knowledge affects how we perceive, not just how we interpret what we perceive.

“Education can affect the experience of an artwork in other ways. Experiments have shown that formal training influences visual scan paths in the scrutiny of the artwork (ibid.).”

If we take humor to be an artistic category, then this approach is precisely in line with the sort of Kantian Hegelian Millian Aristotelianism espoused by Richard Richards.

So, while Richard Richards may be seen at first to side with Robert Roberts against Richard Richards, in the end it does seem that Richard Richards supports Richard Richards over Robert Roberts. But he does not fully locate himself on either extreme, instead contending that the correct answer is to be found in the mean between two extremes. So, while Richard Richards may not espouse an Aristotelian Aristotelianism; Richard Richards, on the other hand, can be thought of as adopting an Aristotelian Aristotelian Aristotelianism.

But Richard Richards' Aristotelian Aristotelianism does not support Robert Roberts' Aristotelian Aristotelianism, rather Richard Richards' Aristotelian Aristotelian Aristotelianism supports Richard Richards' Kantian Hegelian Millian Aristotelianism. So, we must conclude that in this case, we should agree with Richard. That is, Richard, not Richard. But we agree with Richard because Richard agrees with Richard.

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