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05. Aesthetics, Humor, and Virtue: Reflections on Richards and the Good Life

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Abstract

In *A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor*, Richard C. Richards discusses how one's appreciation of and ability to create incongruities is a necessary condition for developing a sense of humor. One's sense of humor, according to Richards, can be a component of happiness. In this paper, I will build on Richards's concept of the sense of humor. I will argue that Richards account is consistent with an Aristotelian picture of happiness as holistic well-being. Specifically, I will suggest that the attitude underlying the aesthetic and/or the humorous is a kind of pro-attitude that must be cultivated (i.e., one is not simply born with a developed sense of humor). I argue that a sense of humor, as an Aristotelian virtue, is consistent with Richards's developmental account of a sense of humor. However, I am making a stronger claim than Richards; I will argue that the sense of humor is necessary for happiness. In this way, I am filling out Richards's account of the role one's sense of humor plays in one's long-term happiness. Since a good Aristotelian will offer examples to elucidate the intermediate position between the extremes, I offer an analysis of Richards own writings and behavior as exemplifying an excellent sense of humor, one that has served as a model for others to emulate the kind of play necessary to "transform a simple incongruity into the stuff of humor". [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Philosopher looks at the sense of humor, Richard Richards, humor

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Aesthetics, Humor, and Virtue: Reflections on Richards and the Good Life

Elizabeth Victor

Introduction

In *A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor*, Richard C. Richards discusses how one's appreciation of and ability to create incongruities is a necessary condition for developing a sense of humor. One's sense of humor, according to Richards, can be a component of happiness. In this paper, I will build on Richards's concept of the sense of humor. I will argue that Richards account is consistent with an Aristotelian picture of happiness as holistic well-being. Specifically, I will suggest that the attitude underlying the aesthetic and/or the humorous is a kind of pro-attitude that must be cultivated (i.e., one is not simply born with a developed sense of humor). I argue that a sense of humor, as an Aristotelian virtue, is consistent with Richards's developmental account of a sense of humor. However, I am making a stronger claim than Richards; I will argue that the sense of humor is necessary for happiness. In this way, I am filling out Richards's account of the role one's sense of humor plays in one's long-term happiness. Since a good Aristotelian will offer examples to elucidate the intermediate position between the extremes, I offer an analysis of Richards own writings and behavior as exemplifying an

excellent sense of humor, one that has served as a model for others to emulate the kind of play necessary to "transform a simple incongruity into the stuff of humor".

Richards' Theory of The Sense of Humor

In Chapter five of his book, Richards tells us that a sense of humor is a "kind of aesthetic experience" that is a playful engagement with incongruities. He explains, "[s]ince humor is a response to the incongruous, the sense of humor is the mental capacity...to playfully discover or create unexpected and surprising combinations of elements" (Richards 2013, 71). He employs a developmental account to explain how one goes about training up a sense of humor, telling the reader that attitudes (a sense of humor being one of them) are "a set of habits with which we approach life." Said habits are learned early, Richards tells us, including one's sense of humor. We can see evidence for this in the way that children play with incongruities—trying on a sense of humor when they first learn how to tell a knock-knock joke. I was recently around some small children, and they were tickled pink by the silliness of the incongruities within these kinds of jokes. Here are a couple of choice knock-knock jokes:

Knock, knock!
Who's there?
Cow Says!
Cow Says who?
No silly, cow says 'moo' not 'who'

Knock, knock!
Who's there?
Boo!
Boo who?
Oh don't cry, it's just a joke

These sorts of jokes capture what Richards calls “the sense of the funny.” We might think of the sense of the funny as a nascent sense of humor. As Richards indicates, “[t]o become the sense of humor, the sense of the funny must become habitual... [a]n attitude involving the development of appreciation of incongruities must occur” (ibid, 77). From the habitual “play” with a sense of the funny, we develop a sense of humor through the cultivation of the aesthetic appreciation of incongruities (ibid, 77-78).

This cultivation of an aesthetic attitude or stance toward incongruities is what gives the sense of humor value, over and above a cheap thrill or temporary amusement. Beyond eliciting “happy laughter” from others, a sense of humor allows us to face the difficult fact that we’re all going to die, and

everyone we know will die, and life is likely meaningless. The cultivation of the sense of humor, as a form of art, gives us power over the fact that we're mere mortals, and that is something that gives humor value above and beyond the instrumental use of humor in, the classroom, or the hospital...or the bedroom. This stance or pro-attitude that underlies the sense of humor directly contributes to a person's well-being.

Yet, even as Richards maintains that a sense of humor has a role in happiness, he seems to stop just short of claiming that a sense of humor is necessary for a person to be happy. A person might, for instance, develop other coping mechanisms to help him through life's rough patches, building a fulfilling life without having acquired a sense of humor. However, he hedges this claim in the very next paragraph as he states, "I think a person can be happy without having or experiencing joy and delight, but it would be a rare person who could do this...a sense of humor is in almost all cases necessary for a happy life" (ibid, 114-15).

Richard and Aristotle Walk into a Bar (and they both say ouch!)

On my interpretation, it seems that Richards is suggesting that the attitude underlying the aesthetic and/or the humorous is a kind of pro-attitude that must be cultivated (i.e., one is not

simply born with a developed sense of humor). In this next section, I argue that a sense of humor, as an Aristotelian virtue, is consistent with Richards developmental account of a sense of humor, but I don't think Richards goes far enough. In building on Richards arguments, I will make the further claim that the sense of humor is necessary for happiness.

Aristotle on Humor

Some might argue that what Aristotle considered wit was quite narrow, maybe too narrow to capture the range of funny stuff Richards discusses. Aristotle goes so far as to hint that some kinds of joking ought to be outlawed. Specifically, he states, "since a joke is a type of abuse, and legislators prohibit some types of abuse, [the legislators] would presumably be right to prohibit some types of jokes" (Aristotle 1999, 66). John Morreal, for instance, interprets this passage as evidence that "though Aristotle considered wit a valuable part of conversation (Nicomachean Ethics 4, 8), he agreed with Plato that laughter expresses scorn." (Morreal 2016). What is clear is that Aristotle presents wit as one of the virtues and he discusses humor in *Rhetoric*.

In Book II, Chapter 8, section 13 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle first presents us with the virtue of wit. He describes wit as the intermediate position between buffoonery and

boorishness (Aristotle 1999, 26). In a more detailed explanation of the virtue of wit, in Book Book IV, Chapter 8, Aristotle states that wit is a matter of character as he says, “[t]hose who go to excess in raising laughs seem to be vulgar buffoons...[t]hose who would never say anything themselves to raise a laugh, and even object when other people do it, seem to be boorish and stiff. Those who joke in appropriate ways are called agile-witted. For these sorts of jokes seem to be movements of someone’s character...” (ibid, 65, my emphasis). Aristotle cautions that we must be discriminate in our use of humor, being sure to pay attention to context and our audience, as he says that if humor is to contribute to relaxation and amusement, one must “...say and listen to the right things and in the right way. The company we are in when we speak or listen also makes a difference” (ibid.). In this way, the wit, as a virtue, is like many other virtues, we must be trained up through practice and wise counsel.

Aristotle is short on the details of how we go about training up the virtue of wit, but he does give us an account of humor that is similar to the incongruity theory Richards depends upon. In *Rhetoric* (III, 2), Aristotle presents us with something akin to the incongruity theory of humor. He states, “[t]he effect is produced even by jokes depending upon changes of the letters of a word; this too is a surprise. You find this in verse as well as in prose.

The word which comes is not what the hearer imagined.” (Aristotle 1941) For Aristotle, the laughter expressed comes from the incongruity between the joke and the facts of the world. When taken in combination with his explanation of wit in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it makes sense why one would need to know his audience. Incongruities change, depending upon context and audience education level, gender, life experiences, etc. For instance, if I’m at a party with a bunch of MDs, I might use the pun “Conjunctivitis.com — that’s a site for sore eyes”, but this joke would fall flat with my siblings. If I’m in a room full of philosophers, I might say “Zeno walks half way into a bar...”, but again, this joke would fall flat with just about everyone in my family. Knowing the audience is crucial to the apt exercise of wit.

The Role of Wit in Happiness (Eudemonia)

The link between joking and pain, when taken in conjunction with Aristotle’s stress that wit be expressed in the right place, at the right time, gives us insight into how wit is tied to happiness. The cultivation of an attitude to see incongruities, and play on incongruities that appear in our lives can, as Richards indicates, act as a coping mechanism. Developing a means to alleviate the tension or face our own mortality (or the mortality of those we love), will certainly help us cultivate virtue in other

areas of our lives. Indeed, if we fail to cultivate an appreciation of incongruities, we may be deficient in other facets of our moral lives. Being deficient in one area of our character may erode other facets of our character as well. For instance, if we never really “get” a joke or appreciate a double entendre, this might undermine our friendships, incite anger when we don’t get that something is said in jest, or act as a barrier to being pleasant (can you imagine how frustrating it might be to not get a joke; being a person that only laughs for social cohesion?). In addition, I find it hard to imagine, as Richards implies, what other coping mechanisms might function as a sense of humor does. For instance, exercise is certainly good stress relief, or so they tell me, and it may help reduce my rage, but does it really help others reduce stress or face the hardships of life?

There is an inherent social dimension to a sense of humor that is other-oriented, connecting to the sense of political that Aristotle tells us is part of our essence. Other coping mechanisms seem to differ insofar as they are self-centered. No doubt, humor and laughter can be self-centered, but it need not be. Moreover, the virtue of wit and the sense of humor, as described by Richards, is responsive to one’s environment; in a word, responsive to others in a way that restores our humanity and recognizes the humanity in others. It is this dimension of the

sense of humor—the fact that it calls us to attend to the environment around us and others that makes it an essential element of well-being. Of course, to develop a sense of humor, like any virtue, requires that we have role models to help us cultivate wit.

Developing ‘The Sense of the Funny’ into ‘The Sense of Humor’

Moral education is an essential aspect of developing virtuous habits, and Aristotle stresses the importance of role models for us to emulate. Toward that end, I propose that Richard C. Richards be considered a role model for exercising wit, particularly within professional academic philosophy. I offer three examples to help illustrate my point:

Autobiography of Richard C. Richards (on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com))

Now that I’ve gone through all of the dry material—let me get to the good stuff! If there ever was evidence that Richards is a man of wit, let me submit, for your consideration, his autobiography that he posted on his Amazon.com profile. I stumbled upon this beauty while I was getting a free copy of his book from kindle:

I remember little of my conception and birth. I assume it took place, but I was not in a position to appreciate it. It was all just a whirl of

chromosomes and genes. Plus a rude exit into the world at Moscow, Idaho. They tell me it was in 1935. They could be wrong. I had what was, compared with children today, an idyllic youth, spent in an atmosphere of no TV and other digital devices, mostly because they had not been invented yet. We roamed the fields and woods near Boise, Idaho, fished, and threw rocks at Neanderthals, who were plentiful at the time.

A move to Santa Barbara, California, after the late, great WWII introduced me to the world of thinking, stimulated and occasionally threatened by some really great teachers at both Santa Barbara High School and the University of California, Santa Barbara. At the latter I discovered my true vocation, but became a philosopher instead. UCLA put the cap on my bottle of education, and I spent nearly forty years teaching at California State Polytechnic on a one-year temporary appointment. I got all the mileage out of that appointment I could.

My first marriage produced one son, Randal, who produced nine grandchildren, who produced four great grandchildren so far. A wonderful marriage to Marlene "Marty" Richards has added immeasurably to my life. The philosophy of humor has interested me for years, and with retirement, I decided to write the book, *A Philosopher Looks at The Sense of Humor*. It has a serious intent and a humorous approach. That way I

can offend a larger number of people: both the humorous and the serious. My funeral occurred several years ago, but it did not take. But I got to put the fun back in FUNeral. (Richards n.d.)

You can't make this shit up—and yet he does! It's glorious—funny, punny, loaded with examples of incongruities that you have to both laugh at and appreciate.

Putting the Fun in Funeral

This next anecdote serves as further evidence of Richards's wit—it's not just something he crafts in writing, but something he has cultivated through action. Some of you may be wondering what it means to put the "fun back in FUNeral"; allow me to elaborate. Now I don't know all the details, but as legend has it, some number of years ago, Richard C. Richards actually faked his own death and arranged his own funeral. At said funeral, he greeted people with t-shirts that actually said "putting the fun back in FUN-eral"! Could you imagine?

Speaking of funerals—I think Jerry Seinfeld said it best, "According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy." This is actually true—several surveys

ranking people's fears have confirmed that people actually fear speaking more than death (Croston 2011). Unless you're Richard, then you speak at your own funeral!

Author-meets-Critics Sessions

For Richards, the sense of humor is not something to be checked at the door of academic philosophy. If anything, that's where the incongruities shine the brightest. As some of you may know, Richards has been a regular contributor to the Lighthearted Philosophers' Society annual conference, both as a presenting author and as a heckler. He has really has been one of the foundational figures and has had a heavy hand in shaping this organization, shoring us up when we just started to ensure we could continue philosophizing over the good, bad, and ugly jokes for years to come. These are some of the many reasons why we honor him with the Richard C. Richards almost memorial prize. That's right—that prize money is, well, I wouldn't call it sugar-daddy money, Splenda-daddy money—that's what it is!

One of the most memorable "presentations" involving Richards was the Author-Meets-Critics session on his book *A Philosopher Looks At The Sense of Humor*. Turning the traditional APA-style panel on its head, Richards was joined by three hecklers: Tom Brommage, Steve Gimbel, and

Eugene Zaldivar. Instead of the stuffy, traditional panel, the author met with heckles and jeers, for a lively roast of the book. Chock-full of dick jokes, rips on Richard's age, and good old-fashioned jabs, the hecklers incorporated a good amount of philosophical analysis into their bit. As a member of the audience, it was fascinating to watch and really set the example of what this organization is about: doing serious work, all the while not taking yourself (or your work) too seriously. I don't want you to take my word for it, though, so I've garnered some additional evidence from one of the hecklers—
Eugene Zaldivar.

Zaldivar was kind enough to offer additional evidence from this author-meets-critics session. In a recent correspondence, he told me of some choice quotes that Richards asked to use for promotional materials (on the book's website or the book jacket). What, pray tell, were these words of high praise? Zaldivar said, "I'd like to start by admitting that I found this to be a really nice book. It has all of the hallmarks of a classic. It's printed on paper. It has a lemur on the cover. It's written by a human with a sense of humor. Yup, a really nice book. Richard notes that one can disgust by using humor. Reading this book is proof that this is true." Richards was sure to carefully couch his request, noting, "[m]y editor may come up with some other dastardly way to use the quotes, with, of course, proper citation of

academic affiliation, thereby all but guaranteeing that you will be fired and disgraced as a philosopher and as a person. It would be a favor to me if you would agree to any part of the above requests. If not, I respect your good judgment” (Victor 2018). Zaldivar kindly agreed, noting that he didn’t want to appear unkind with the “disgust” bit. He shared this with me for two reasons; as he explained, “[f]irst, it shows his humility and sense of humor. In picking two quotes that are clearly meant to be digs at his expense he shows that he doesn't take himself too seriously and that he can appreciate humor even when he's the butt of the joke. In addition, the fact that I trusted his instincts shows the respect I have for him. I can think of many other people who I'd be less willing to entrust with material that is less than well-mannered” (ibid.).

The second anecdote, Zaldivar offers is from last year's panel on Steve Gimbel's book, where he read Richards’s review:

The first major criticism is that trying to understand humor through comedy is a gigantic, super-colossal mistake. Comedy is a performance art. Humor involves the sense of humor in a wonderful way. Approaching humor through the mid-wifery of comedy leaves important insights unaccounted for. Those insights include the role of the sense of humor in the creation of comedy, and in the enhancement of human existence. Minor

considerations, of course, but monumental nonetheless...With a remarkable grasp of the field of the Philosophy of Humor, Steven has introduced a productive new perspective into the philosophical brew from which the dove of acceptance of the Philosophy of Humor is now emerging. His background as a stand-up comedian gives us all fresh insights into older problems and brings up a few new ones in addition (ibid.).

As Zaldivar explains, “[i]n the first line Richard gives a fairly strong critique (he clearly disagrees with Steve!) but does so with humor and self-deprecation in order to take some of the sting out of the criticism. In the hands of a lesser person this could have been a very contentious point. And then he adds some very nice comments about Steve and the book at the end” (ibid.). These examples are meant to illustrate how Richards has served as a model of incorporating humor into academic settings. As Zaldivar interprets them, these kinds of examples “demonstrate a kindness of spirit, sense of humor and sharp understanding of the material that are individually in short supply and almost unheard in aggregate” (ibid.). Until the Lighthearted Philosophers’ Society, I had thought seriously about humor, but I had never seriously exercised wit, and I definitely didn’t have a sense of humor about academic philosophy. For me, developing a sense of humor has been essential to my well-being when

navigating the bullshit that is the academic market, overcoming flagrant instances of sexism and misogyny (in general and at academic conferences in particular), and the shit show that is “making it” in this profession. How to do this, and how to do it well, is something that I’m learning from Richard, and others who emulate him. Lest this be a big kiss-ass session, I’ll end by saying that I hope to hear more about how Richards regards the limits of the sense of humor, and how one could be happy or have a fulfilling life without a sense of humor.

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