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07. Richard Richards is a Gay Scientist

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07. Richard Richards is a Gay Scientist

Abstract

A little recognized and under-appreciated fact about the august Richard Richards is that he is a gay scientist. I know what you may be thinking—Richard’s never shagged dudes, and if he has, it’s shitty to out him in an essay that’s meant to honor him. That’s strictly his business. Or you may be thinking that that Richard identifies as a philosopher, not a physicist, biologist, or even (egads!) a psychologist. As far as I know, you would be right in both cases—and it would be terrible to call him out—despite the fact that this will hardly rise to the level of an essay.

No, what I mean is that Richard Richards practices the sort of approach to philosophy that Nietzsche prescribes in *The Gay Science*. Now, I won’t pretend to know fuckall about Nietzsche—but that’s okay because there are roughly 7,500 budding philosophy majors lurking in coffee shops, craft breweries, and organic grocery stores around the country who’ve got him figured out and would be delighted to expound on my ignorance. If you are genuinely curious about whether I’ve got Nietzsche right, ask one of them. Or read some Nietzsche. In any case, I’m not entirely convinced that getting philosophers “right” is the point; rather, good philosophers plunder brilliant ideas from better philosophers or scientists, looting those concepts for their own ends—just ask Schopenhauer—and I think Richard might agree with this (c.f., his devotion to Provine and incongruity theory). *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Richard Richards, philosophy, Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

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Richard Richards is a Gay Scientist

Dave Monroe

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philosophers or scientists, looting those concepts for their own ends—just ask Schopenhauer—and I think Richard might agree with this (c.f., his devotion to Provine and incongruity theory).

But let me try to clarify my meaning. The very title of Nietzsche's work, *The Gay Science*, as well as many of the passages contained therein (no bloody citations forthcoming) suggests that systematic inquiry (*wissenschaft*: obligatory use of a foreign word to give gravity to this paper) into very serious subjects can be approached with a lighthearted spirit of joy. It is in this sense that I mean Richard is a gay scientist.

It goes without saying that most philosophers take themselves, and their work, far too seriously. It's understandable, of course. Most of us spend so much time steeped not only in our particular areas of study but also fighting for tenure, or struggling to demonstrate the legitimacy of our field, that we lose sight of our own provincialism. It might be worth remembering that the average person would *literally* consider these debates the raving of lunatics. Richard cannot be counted among those who've lost this perspective. There's nothing he won't laugh at, including his own demise. As we all know, he's committed to putting the 'fun' back in 'funeral.' Won't that be a sight? Let's hope that day isn't soon.

Richard is funny. There's no doubt about that. He's especially deft with "dad jokes," which I suppose is appropriate, and, given his age, we might rename them "great-great-great-great-great-grand dad jokes" in his honor. Richard actually took lectures from Nietzsche at the University of Basel. It's a little known fact that Nietzsche resigned in 1879 due to Richard's being a thorn in his side. There's also no doubt that Richard is a *very good* philosopher—all jokes aside—and, most importantly, that Richard not only philosophizes about humor, but integrates humor in his philosophy. His work is both risible *and* rigorous simultaneously. With all due respect to other funny philosophers, it is my considered judgment that no one strikes the balance so perfectly. He is a living rejoinder to Joseph Ellin's claim (in the very first paper read at the Lighthearted Philosophers' Society) that philosophy cannot be funny. Richard shows us that Old Joe is *dead wrong*. And just dead, for that matter, though we miss him dearly.

I would be remiss if I didn't recount Richard's heroic courage and willingness to tackle tough issues head on, too. That's a pretty Nietzschean quality, I think. In the spring of 2013, I invited Richard and Steve "The Checksecutioner" Gimbel (so named because he rakes in cash with his side gigs) to give the Annual Keith Goree Memorial Ethics Lecture at St. Petersburg College. The Goree

Lecture honors one of my former colleagues, who, incidentally, was a charter member and early financial supporter of the Lighthearted Philosophers' Society. Two founding members dead already? Damn. Richard's probably next.

Anyway, the lecture is a showcase event for my department and the college; we typically shell out big bucks for relatively famous people with moderately interesting things to say about boring contemporary social issues. I was able to throw Richard and Steve a couple of ducats and pay for them to visit Florida, so, essentially, I misused public funds so I could hang out with friends. Let's recall, after all, that was the initial mission of the LPS. They agreed to talk about the ethics of humor, which I thought fitting because Keith was a wonderfully funny guy.

There was a palpable excitement in the air on the night of the lecture. Students and a spectrum of people from the community filled one of our auditoriums to capacity, eager to learn about the ethical limits of joking from two sagacious masters. Gimbel opened with a standup routine meant to offer food for thought—and, I must say, he killed. Almost everyone laughed and enjoyed the entire "lecture" (it ended up mostly consisting of Steve and Richard telling jokes) until the *hard* questions about racist, sexist, and religiously insensitive jokes came up. One should note that the crowd was *very*

diverse; there were as many Black and Latino attendees as White. Richard, undaunted by the stigmas around those subjects, gave a rousing oration on disempowering hate speech by losing our fear of using racially insensitive words. He *showed* that he wasn't afraid by chanting the 'n-word' to the crowd, who looked on with expressions that were equal parts horror, amusement, and fury. It was a little like watching a 90-year-old white man dropping N-Bombs in public. Actually, it was *exactly* like watching that. The audience began to thin, but Richard was undeterred. "N-word," "N-word," "N-word," he continued. Notice that I'm not nearly as courageous as Richard because I can't even bring myself to write the n-word.

The confused audience began leaving in droves and I started to fear for my job. Richard continued. The tension mounted. Soon, groups of angry students stormed the stage, crying out for Richard's head. Gimbel and I were forced to defend him, fending off the mobs by threatening to drop stage lights on them and beating them with microphone stands. Richard was so courageous that he did not stop the lecture until we were showered in gore.

Some of that story is *actually true*. Ask Steve or Richard—or any of the administrators at SPC who called me on the carpet. Incredibly, my dean still asks me to find the Goree Lecture speakers. And,

believe it or not, I'd enthusiastically, joyfully, have Richard come back. Again, and again, and again. And again. And again.

C'mon now! As everyone reading this essay—and all the kids in the brew pubs, coffee shops and groceries--know, *The Gay Science* (Section...uh...) is the one of the earliest deployments of the eternal return of the same. I wouldn't be doing my solemn philosophical duty if I didn't make a shitty joke referring to it. In all seriousness, Richard, I love you and am pleased to call you a friend and inspiration. You are an innovator of a new spirit of doing philosophy—a Zarathustra—and are the soul of the Lighthearted Philosophers society. Thank you for showing us the way, you gay scientist.