

"The Dark Side of Humor and Happiness"
(Commentary on Richard C. Richards, "Humor and Happiness")
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Once again the idea of happiness rears its ugly head as we are reacquainted with concerns that once divided Bentham and Mill. Is it all about the maximal aggregation of short-term pleasures or happinesses of whatsoever sort? Or ought we to give special consideration to so-called higher and typically longer-term pleasures, which themselves are not reducible to short-term pleasures, inasmuch as these and, as Moore held, their associated values, are not simply additive? Richards does not address the moral concerns of these philosophers, but otherwise his take on happiness seems to agree with Mill and Moore, remarking that

While it is evident that happiness is not a continuing positive frame of mind, much less a life of successive pleasures uninterrupted by any feelings less than positive, it also seems evident that happiness does involve successive positive emotions of various sorts, interrupted and perhaps accompanied by the stresses of life.

We can agree, too, setting aside countervailing considerations of the merely logically possible and acknowledging the de facto human condition. Richards goes on to say

The important kind of happiness for our purposes is relatively long term. I believe this kind of happiness consists of a state of being, produced by a set of attitudes.

We will later see that some of those attitudes might be quite unsalutary.

Okay, so we have some people who are happy people living longish-term-happy lives that nevertheless have their shorter-term ups and downs, with the downs not overwhelming the ups. Next, Richards wants us to believe that happy people "appreciate" their worldly situation and make pretty good sense of their world, and aren't generally given to self-deception. My worry with these claims is that ignorance need not involve self-deception and may indeed involve impeccable

rationalization, and of course ignorance can be a blissful state, especially when you don't know you're in it. (Oh, for the simple peasant life!)

Is a sense of humor essentially involved with laughter? Richards says not, but even if humor only sometimes accompanies laughter, that doesn't by itself settle the issue. Essential involvement may be indirect; there still could be a conceptual dependency even if instances of laughter and humor don't always coincide. For example, it might be that there could not be a concept of laughter without a concept of humor (cf. the literature on pain and its relation to pain-behavior). However, this issue can be set aside for now, since Richards's central question is how a sense of humor can make a life happy or happier, where happiness is writ as long- or longer term.

According to Richards, whereas laughter is more here-and-now and often quite mindless, a sense of humor involves a habitual use of the intellect. In explaining this use of the intellect, he makes much of the idea that humor involves the "appreciation" of incongruities, even going so far as to define a sense of humor as "a tendency, habit, or disposition to playfully appreciate some of the incongruities with which our existence is so copiously endowed". But appreciating incongruities is not the same as finding them funny. Nor *pace* Richards is it quite the same as *understanding* them; the OED entries for "appreciate" and "appreciation" do not resort to that term and I submit that the notion of understanding as an act of intellect may just be too highfaluting in many cases where appreciation of humor is evident. One can be sensitive to an incongruity, recognize it, and yes, find it funny, without fully understanding it (even, in fact, *misunderstanding* it) and certainly without understanding it playfully in some positive sense.

Is *toying* with someone always playful? I ask this with two real life examples in mind. The first concerns two elementary-school boys adopted as infants by a couple of my acquaintance. One of the boys had various adjustment problems at school, likely stemming from congenital deficits. He also had a quirky and sometimes cruel streak in his humor. He often took humorous delight in the discomfiture of his brother, knocking down his building-block house, ruining his drawings, and the like, thereby intentionally generating the very incongruities he found funny. My second example is that of an abusive father who frequently teased and provoked his elementary-school son with taunts and unwanted tickling, finding the child's distress amusing. (And when the child responded in a way he didn't like, e.g. slapping away the tickling hand, out came the belt....)

What are we to say of such cases? Certainly we can and do say they involve a warped or sick sense of humor. (On the other hand, such a sense of humor is not that far removed from the sense of humor involved in the appreciation of slapstick or practical jokes, which are forms of humor that come with a recognized pedigree.) Happiness figures in such cases as well, whether it be as a short-term feeling of Schadenfreude or as a long-term tendency that evinces a person's character.

A sense of humor can be "developed" in various directions by various forces. It's not all sweetness and light; it can serve the dark side too. If, however, we want to elevate Richards's notion of a *developed* sense of humor, we must regard it as a normative notion, i.e. as meaning a *well* developed sense of humor, where the adverb is a moral term. And this takes us back full circle to the moral concerns of Bentham, Mill, and Moore that were merely mentioned at the onset.