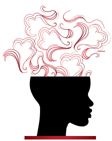
ABOUT NICK RIGGLE, PHD

Nick Riggle is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at the University of San Diego. His work centers around questions about the nature of aesthetic value, its place in our lives, and its importance for our practices and institutions. He draws on and contributes to work in value theory, philosophy of language, history of philosophy, moral psychology, social philosophy, and other areas. He also writes for non-academic audiences and has published work in various popular outlets, including two books: On Being Awesome: A Unified Theory of How Not to Suck (Penguin Books), and This Beauty: A Philosophy of Being Alive (Basic Books). His work has appeared in The Philosophical Review, Mind, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, The New York Times, McSweeney's, LitHub, Aeon, and others outlets.



STANCE: We really appreciate you meeting with us today. We've been reading through pretty much all of your work, and we've been really enjoying it.

RIGGLE: Yeah, happy to hear that.

S: We wanted to start by giving you the opportunity to talk about your educational journey. You've had a bit of a nontraditional path. If you'd like to, just give us a quick rundown of the path of your education and your professional career, and touch a little bit on how participating in the X Games shaped your philosophical outlooks.

R: I never really cared about school until I was twenty or twenty-one. That was largely because I fell in love with rollerblading—street inline skating—around the age of eleven. Instead of being at school, I was at the skate park. And it didn't help that when I got to high school at age fourteen, the skate park was literally across the street. This was in Santa Rosa in the '90s. So, I was just really distracted. I didn't care about doing my English and math homework or passing a geometry exam. School just couldn't matter to me, because this other thing mattered so much. I was deeply in love with skating and devoted all of my extra time and energy to it.

My household wasn't super stable and being at home wasn't always the most enjoyable thing. And I had that other incentive to be at the skate park and hang out with people who I could look up to and emulate, people who were really cool, talented, funny, and supportive. By the time I was fifteen or sixteen, I was getting a lot of real opportunities to travel, make money, and compete internationally as a professional.

But my parents were supportive of my skating. They didn't ever have much money, and here I am getting a salary and plane tickets to Japan, Paris . . . all kinds of places throughout the world. They were supportive. They were like, "Hey, we can't provide this for you, and you're doing good things, so you should pursue it."

My high school wouldn't recognize the legitimacy of my sport. They would recognize ice skating and gymnastics. And they would offer independent study opportunities for a child actor or someone who is talented in some recognized sport. So, I ended up dropping out my junior year.

I was seventeen when I fell in love with reading. It's funny, when people were telling me what to read, I just had no interest. But when I could read whatever I wanted, I realized I had this voracious appetite for studying. I was interested in everything. I was reading

books on world religion, I was reading all kinds of fiction that I had never read, I was exploring philosophy and studying music theory—I was just all over the place. An upshot of dropping out was realizing my passion for learning.

BUT AS A TEENAGER, AND ESPECIALLY AS A YOUNG ADULT, I DID WANNA DETERMINE MY OWN VIEWS. I WANTED TO FIGURE IF I BELIEVE IN THIS STUFF OR IS THERE SOMETHING ELSE THAT I FIND PLAUSIBLE?

I eventually found my way to philosophy. I kept coming back to it. I grew up in a Christian house, and my mother is very religious. I never identified with the religion, it always felt very strange to me. I didn't understand the tenets or the stories, and I just I didn't connect with it. But as a teenager, and especially as a young adult, I did wanna determine my own views. I wanted to figure out if I believe in this stuff or is there something else that I find plausible? I fell in love with Buddhism, I studied it very intensively for about two years. Both in theory, but also mostly in practice, I was obsessed with meditation. It was actually through meditation that I realized that my true love was philosophy.

I thought maybe Buddhism would answer some questions I had about existence, meaning, and spirituality. I ended up being really skeptical of some of their metaphysical claims, philosophy of mind, and theory of consciousness. A lot of it was very interesting, but it wasn't something I was just gonna swallow wholesale. And my philosophical, skeptical mind eventually recoiled. I found, "Oh no. Philosophy is where you actually develop this more critical approach, this more argumentative and logical approach."

By the time I was twenty, I was thinking about developing my career in extreme professional sports, which would be starting a wheel company or becoming a tour manager—skaters can't really be a top pro forever. People expand, they build out their career with other things. I was looking at that. But I also realized that I could go to community college. I dropped out of high school, but I could still go to community college and see what's up with studying philosophy. I didn't really have the stomach to be the owner of a company or do something within the industry. It didn't feel right to me.

I kept skating, but I also started taking philosophy classes at the community college and never looked back. I did really well in

community college. I was able to transfer to UC Berkeley, and I did really well there. I was just laser-focused on philosophy—the rest is history.

S: That's awesome. I think that would connect with a lot of people who don't have a traditional path to any field of study. This feels like a great spot to jump into the area of philosophy that you focus on. Most of your writing, especially recently, has been about beauty, and aesthetics more generally. Was there any pivotal event or text that inspired you to take beauty seriously as a philosophical topic?

I'VE ALWAYS DEEPLY CARED ABOUT BEAUTY, SOMETHING WHOSE POWER OVER ME SEEMED SO MYSTERIOUS, AND SOMETHING WHOSE VALUE IS TOTALLY UNCLEAR. AND BEAUTY IS RADICALLY UNDER-THEORIZED RELATIVE TO OTHER MAJOR CATEGORIES OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY.

R: I had a funny experience when I was at Berkeley. I was a transfer student. I was there for five semesters and then hung around for a semester to TA for a couple logic classes. When I was there, I really focused on philosophical logic, philosophy of language—these more austere technical branches of philosophy, which I still enjoy. But, every summer, when I wasn't doing assigned work, I kept obsessing about beauty. If you were to ask me, "What do you think about over the summer?" I would say "The nature of beauty." I've always deeply cared about beauty, something whose power over me seemed so mysterious, and something whose value is totally unclear. And beauty is radically under-theorized relative to other major categories of philosophical inquiry.

But I was unable to study beauty at Berkeley because they had no classes in aesthetics at the time. I was faced with that gap in my education. When I got to graduate school, that gap persisted. There was no one at NYU—where I was a graduate student—who even offered undergraduate classes, let alone graduate seminars, in aesthetics.

In graduate school I was pretty dead set in my first couple of years on exploring aesthetics. In my second year, I noticed that Noël Carroll was offering a series of seminars up at CUNY. The fall seminar was Classics in Aesthetics and the spring one was Contemporary Aesthetics. It was pretty ideal, because CUNY was

just right up the street from NYU, and I was able to sit in on those seminars. I took them for credit and learned a ton.

I'D TRAVEL AROUND THE WORLD AND SEE STREET ART EVERYWHERE. WHEN I WENT TO NEW YORK IN 2007, THERE WAS A STREET ART BOOM, THIS POST-9/11 FLOURISHING OF STREET ART EVERYWHERE. I WAS OBSESSED AS A FAN.

In fact, for the spring seminar I wrote the paper on street art that eventually was published in 2010, which is my first publication! I asked Noël Carroll, "Hey, what should I write on?" I had two ideas. One of them was on political art or something; I don't even remember what it was. But the second one was on street art, which I'd been a fan of since my skating days. It was all over the skate parks, and I'd travel around the world and see street art everywhere. When I went to New York in 2007, there was a street art boom, this post-9/11 flourishing of street art everywhere. I was obsessed as a fan.

When I did research about street art, I couldn't find anything. There was some stuff, but nothing in philosophy. Arthur Danto published a couple of essays on early graffiti in the '80s, but they were art criticism, not so much philosophy. I pitched this idea to Noël Carroll and he lit up. He was like, "You should write that; that would be great." I did, and I had a blast writing it. He commented, "You should send this to the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*." I was like, "What? What even is that?" I worked on it little bit, sent it to the journal, and a year later it was published. That whole experience—the joy that I felt in writing that paper and the coolness and welcoming nature of Noël Carroll—was something that really got me thinking, "Oh, maybe I should work on aesthetics at NYU. No one is doing it here." I went for it. I was working with a few people who were really open to it: David Velleman, Béatrice Longuenesse, and Paul Boghossian. Ultimately, near the end of my time there, NYU hired Rob Hopkins, who is a genuine specialist in aesthetics, and very talented. I got his advice towards the end there, and it all worked out. It was a bit of a leap of faith, really, to specialize in.

S: That's really cool. This seems like a great spot to segue into a question we intended to ask a little bit later. You mentioned that there was almost a total lack of opportunity for you to get invested in aesthetics. Did this have any effect on how accessible your work is? When people think of philosophers, they think of thick language like Kant and other old-timey philosophers. But your work is very

accessible. You use a lot of everyday examples. Did your experience accessing aesthetics in graduate school have an effect on how you write your books?

R: That's a great question. One of the main things is that I love writing. I think I would be a writer no matter what career I went into. And I don't just write philosophy—I recently finished a novel that I'm trying to sell. I've written poetry for almost my whole life. I don't share it, really. I was in a band for several years and wrote a lot of music. I just love writing. I write lots of different kinds of things and just enjoy the process.

Gosh, almost twenty years ago when I was in graduate school, there were a lot of expectations to fit your academic writing into a certain formula. I think there's been a lot of progress in professional philosophy where the formula of the academic essay is a bit looser. But back then I found, and still do find, the formula for academic writing utterly oppressive. As a person who really cared about creative writing, when I was a graduate student attempting to respond to these demands, I needed an outlet. I was feeling my creative side wasn't flourishing. So, in graduate school, I was writing a bunch of stuff. I started working on fiction more seriously and poetry was an outlet.

At one point, I really got lucky. I wasn't really thinking about writing trade books in philosophy. It hadn't really crossed my mind. But, as I was finishing my dissertation, I had this idea about the nature of awesomeness. In fact, it started as an idea about the nature of suckiness. My wife and I were just joking one day and thinking—I hate to say it—but some people just suck. "What is that? What is that quality?" We were just puzzling over it. It just seems true, and it's not clear what exactly that picks out. As a philosopher, of course, I'm like, "Hmm, this is really interesting." I quickly noticed the opposite of suckiness is awesomeness, so, what's that?

As a parenthetical, since you're students, I'll give you this rule that I've followed my whole life: every idea gets five minutes. You have to be attentive to any idea you have. When you have an idea, make note of it, and when you have time, spend five minutes developing it. Write about it, think about objections to it, and do a little research on who's already written about it. What you'll notice is that over time, the good ideas snowball. Once you've spent five minutes on a good idea, then later on in the day, later on in the week—at some point—you'll have another idea about that idea, and that gets five minutes. And the bad ideas: you write them down, and they don't snowball; they don't come back to you.

So, this idea about awesomeness snowballed, and I kept thinking about it. Then I got lucky again, because right as I had a mini-essay and a little outline for this series of ideas, Aaron James visited NYU for a semester or a year. Aaron James had recently come out with a book, *Assholes: A Theory*. It's in the same spirit—it's a trade book. It sold really well, and it's about what it is to be an asshole. I asked him out for lunch and pitched him on the idea about awesomeness, and he loved it. I remember very vividly, he said, "This idea has legs." Meaning, it's gonna go somewhere. That just encouraged me.

I was on the job market that year, which was really stressful. Working on the book gave me a lot of joy that I needed. I needed a counterweight to all the stress I was under to try to get a job in academia. That encouraged and influenced me to write on this idea even more. One thing led to another, and it became a book. I think part of it is that I have an obsession with creative writing, and then the other part is that I'm a first-gen student who was a pro skater. I just think my personality is very not academic. I don't fit in that well. I felt like I could communicate with academics, but also with non-academics. I felt in my heart I had to try to communicate with a broader audience, people who I felt more of an affinity with. It was almost like a way of staying true to myself and my background. Writing trade books and public philosophy speaks to that.

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S: That's awesome. It reminds me a little bit of what you talk about in being a creative community builder. It sounds like your work is a form of that. To jump into the specifics of your book On Being Awesome, why don't you just give a brief overview of what it means for someone or something being awesome versus sucking?

R: Being awesome is being good at creating social openings. Sucking is a matter of declining to take up social openings for no good reason. A social opening is an opportunity to break out of our social roles and our habits and express our individualities to each other in conditions where we don't always get to. When we're out in public, we're often just enacting a script that's more

or less determined by a social role—that of a customer and an employee, or a person walking down the street. When enacting these social roles, we don't have terribly many opportunities to just be ourselves. A social opening is an opportunity to break out of that role, to put those habits and routines aside, to express individuality, your sense of humor, your taste in food and drink, your sense of playfulness, your sense of what's good in music, and so on. You can think of a range of aspects of individuality that you might express given the opportunity. So, awesome people are good at noticing when there are these opportunities—taking them up or creating them. Sucky people are ones who decline the opportunity, essentially for no good reason. They notice it, but they just can't be bothered.

S: Right, perfect. That's generally what we gathered. Staying in the same vein, another concept that you talk about is volitional openness. Our understanding of this idea is that it means someone's open to opportunities of awesomeness; that they're receptive, they're open to new ideas or experiences, and that they don't just turn them down for no good reason. Could you expand a little bit on how volitional openness relates to awesomeness and suckiness?

R: Good. In *On Being Awesome*, I don't use the concept of volitional openness, but I do use the concept of play. The philosopher that I'm inspired by with respect to volitional openness, is Friedrich Schiller. His notion is playfulness. Play, for him, is what really matters. It's not just being open to ideas; it's actually a mode of engagement with value. Volitional openness is a way of being receptive to, responsive to, and engaged with the values that are immediately present to you in your environment. Its contrast or complement is autonomy. As autonomous beings, we have our values. We have the things that we've committed to, the responsibilities we have taken up, the promises we've made. And those are self-shaping. Those are important. They make us who we are as autonomous beings. But—and this is really Schiller's point—autonomy limits freedom. Although autonomy allows us to be free,

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in a Kantian sense, from our inclinations, it also constrains us, because it can limit our openness to value.

THE PLAYFUL PERSON IS NOT GONNA FORGET WHO THEY ARE—THAT WOULD BE MORALLY BAD—BUT THEY'RE ABLE TO TEMPER THEIR AUTONOMY, QUIET IT DOWN, AND SET IT ASIDE. THE PLAYFUL PERSON IS ABLE TO JUST BE IMMEDIATELY RESPONSIVE TO PRESENT VALUE: THE CONVERSATION, THE SCENTS, THE SIGHTS, THE SMELLS, THE SOUNDS, THE PEOPLE.

Think of a lawyer who is very into being a lawyer. A lot of their dispositions and habits and thoughts are just lawyer thoughts and dispositions and habits. They come to your dinner party and they're just a lawyer being a lawyer. They're always responding in a lawyerly way, bringing up lawyer things, and being very "lawyer-y." Schiller would say their form drive is too dominant. He would say, "They're not playful enough. They don't understand the value of playfulness." The playful person is not gonna forget who they are—that would be morally bad—but they're able to temper their autonomy, quiet it down, and set it aside. The playful person is able to just be immediately responsive to present value: the conversation, the scents, the sights, the smells, the sounds, the people. When you're like that, Schiller thinks, you're at your most free; that's the highest freedom that you can possibly attain.

Schiller also thought that beauty and art were the things designed to actually help us enter that state of volitional openness, that state of play. Beautiful paintings with their vivid colors—boom! All of a sudden, we're just immediately attuned to the values in front of us. And we've forgotten about our lives. You go see a movie, and then it ends, and the lights come on, and you're like, "Oh wait, wait, oh—oh gosh. I'm here, in the world. I'm back. What?" You were gone. You lost yourself in the immediacy of the present experience. So, Schiller says beauty is the only path to freedom because it's the only thing that you can regularly bring you to this ultimately free being. Beauty is actually able to temper autonomy and open you to immediate value in this volitionally open way.

One addendum here. Playfulness does feature in *On Being Awesome*, but given the description of volitional openness, you can see that openness to social openings requires playfulness. Again, if

someone gives you a social opening in the middle of your day, you could just continue to be the autonomous being you are and just ignore it. Or you can notice that opportunity, be volitionally open and responsive to it, and be playful.

S: Perfect. As a point of clarification: How do we differentiate between when someone is given an opening and rejects it (therefore being sucky) versus someone who rejects an opening as a matter of taste or preference?

R: I think it's a little delicate. I think there are a lot of ways of rejecting a social opening as a matter of taste that are also sucky. I think good aesthetic interactions and social aesthetic nature requires two things: (i) the vulnerability of expressing yourself as an individual, putting yourself out there as someone who has this taste in music, who has this taste in painting, who likes these things and not those and (ii) an openness to the expressions of other people you're interacting with who are also being vulnerable in that way, which is where volitional openness and playfulness come in.

IT'S A DANCE BETWEEN VOLITIONAL OPENNESS AND WHAT I CALL DISCRETIONARY VALUING.

It's a dance between volitional openness and what I call discretionary valuing. You're trying to do both in a harmonious and supportive way. That's aesthetic community for me. Awesomeness really is just a different word for aesthetic community. If you're rejecting a social opening because it's not your taste or it doesn't fit your individuality, well, that's a bit sucky, because the whole idea is to be open to expressions of individuality. But, that said, tastes are wild—some are incompatible. It's reasonable sometimes to decline a social opening, because there is no productive vaesthetic community there. You don't find it interesting to engage with someone who really loves that music. I think that's totally possible. To give you specific examples is hard. But surely that's possible.

S: Yeah, that makes sense. I think that gives me a good idea of where the line is. Just a minor question: Would you say that noticing awesomeness is a skill that's built up from experience?

R: Absolutely. My developed view about the nature of aesthetic value and aesthetic community is that it's a skill. Part of that is this

idea that we have these basic and general capacities. Volitional openness and discretionary valuing are general human capacities, ones that we're born with. I'm open to that. The capacity is innate or natural. But aesthetic valuing calls on us to do a couple of things. One is to take these two capacities that are independent and exercise them together. We're asked to be playful individuals, volitionally open to discretionary valuers and to do that socially. To yoke them together in yourself and then express yourself in community with others takes skill. The artistic and aesthetic media we deploy to socialize around these capacities takes skill to engage with, to create, to share.

S: Great, thank you. To stick to awesomeness and suckiness, you talked about how the initial idea for this book actually started on suckiness and then developed into awesomeness. We were wondering could there be awesome people if sucky people didn't exist?

I THINK WE COULD RECOGNIZE THE RICHNESS OF DIFFERENCE IN AESTHETIC VALUING AND APPRECIATE THE VALUE OF AESTHETIC COMMUNITY WITHOUT THERE BEING VERY MUCH SUCKINESS, OR MAYBE NONE AT ALL.

R: I think it might be harder to notice, but I think it's still possible. To put a little more meat on those bones, part of it is discretionary valuing, which is essentially choosing what to care about in your aesthetic life—choosing what music to love, what fashion to embody, what cuisines to geek out over, and stuff like that. Different people are gonna exercise that capacity in different ways, and I think there's a lot of opportunities to engage with one another productively and aesthetically without being sucky, without being dismissive, rude, or gratuitous in your dislike of certain things. So, I think we could recognize the richness of difference in aesthetic valuing and appreciate the value of aesthetic community without there being very much suckiness, or maybe none at all.

S: Right. This feels like a great place to talk about a connection in your other book, Aesthetic Life and Why It Matters*, that you wrote with Bence Nanay and Dominic Lopes. In the final breakout chapter, in the section on individuality, you say we waste our time on bad art, ugly clothes, and sucky bands. Is there a connection between aesthetic objects individually and your theory of awesomeness? Are there objects themselves that are awesome for the psyche?*

R: Right. One way to think about being awesome in my theory of aesthetic value, is its magnified look at aesthetic socializing. What

does that framework look like when it's just put into the wild? How do we engage with these values as social beings? Basically, my theory of aesthetic value is that the things that have aesthetic value are the ones that are worthy of aesthetic valuing, and those are the things that are capable of grounding aesthetic community which, for me, is the mutually supportive exercise and cultivation of the capacities for discretionary value and volitional openness. So, aesthetic community is actually a process. It's a thing we do together. Aesthetic objects, things that have aesthetic worth are things that are conducive to awesomeness. Like, a good joke could be aesthetically good for the same reasons, because it can create a social opening. And the product of a successful social opening is aesthetic community. In the book I call that awesomeness. This value that we seek in being awesome—it's the same. It's essentially the same thing as an aesthetic community.

It's a little funny. In a way, *On Being Awesome* should have been written later in my career since it is basically a social application of more foundational works I published later. Writing it helped me articulate a bunch of ideas I had about the nature of aesthetic value. But it's only recently that I have published the main paper that gives the whole theory, "Aesthetic Value and the Practice of Aesthetic Valuing."

S: As a follow-up, you're talking about what can make an object aesthetically worth valuing. In that same breakout chapter, you mentioned that you don't think that individuals can make legitimate demands on anyone else to aesthetically value in a particular way or another. Is there a way for us to make clear and homogenous determinations of what is worth aesthetically valuing? Or is that necessarily a subjective lens that always comes into play?

R: My view there has to do with the nature of discretionary valuing. Remember, aesthetic valuing for me comes first, because aesthetic community is the highest good in aesthetic life. Aesthetically valuable objects are a means of grounding aesthetic community. It's part of what's essential to aesthetic community is this capacity for discretionary valuing, an individual capacity to choose for yourself what to value, how to value it, how to interpret it, how to be inspired by it, and how to incorporate it into your life.

I don't think anyone can tell me how to exercise that capacity. What you can do is invite me to value something. I think an invitation for me to exercise my aesthetic valuing capacities on the thing is fine. I develop this idea in a paper called "Convergence, Community, and Force in Aesthetic Discourse." In my view, when you say to me that

something's beautiful, socially, what you're doing is attributing a certain aesthetic property to it and then inviting me to value it. You're not necessarily saying that I must agree with you that the object has that property. You're just saying, "Hey, Nick, tell me what you think?"Aesthetic claims have the illocutionary force of invitation.

I don't think people can make demands about what I ought to value aesthetically. But I think we can make sense of the idea that, for some people, certain things just are not worth their time. But that has to do with facts about the connection between our ability to exercise these capacities and things like our circumstances, our personalities, and our other goals in life. It might be that I'm exercising my discretionary valuing over a certain band, but it's partly because I'm in a certain social group. I'm gonna really try to like it, but it's just not my personality. There could be a clash between personality and an aesthetic item, there could be clashes between your circumstances and the time you might spend doing a certain thing. It's stuff like that, which would generate potential wastes of time.

S: Personality segues nicely into our next main topic: artistic personality. We were wondering: Is artistic personality something that exists across all art forms, even ones that might be conducted alone? For example, you mentioned that you don't really share your poetry. Another example is the painter Francisco Goya, who painted a lot in his home with no intention of the paintings ever being shared. After he passed, they were discovered. Where do those fit into your concept of artistic personality?

R: In a couple of papers, including a co-written paper with Rob Hopkins, artistic style is the expression of ideals—ideals that you have for your own art, as an artist. I think you can develop those ideals on your own. I think it's typical that people develop them on their own. I think the cultivation of an aesthetic—specifically an artistic personality—is something that we can do alone.

I THINK THE CULTIVATION OF AN AESTHETIC—SPECIFICALLY AN ARTISTIC PERSONALITY—IS SOMETHING THAT WE CAN DO ALONE. BUT NOTICE THAT WHENEVER YOU DO IT, YOU'RE ENGAGING IN A TRADITION.

But notice that whenever you do it, you're engaging in a tradition. You're responding to a practice that has existed for a long time. So, I'm not so sure that people can cultivate an artistic personality on a lone island. It's in response to the painters that have come before you that you develop your own painterly ideals. It's in response to the filmmakers who came before you that you can develop your directorial ideals, and so on. You might, like Goya, create a work that no one ever saw in his time. Maybe he was even thinking, "No one's ever gonna see this." Does it still have aesthetic value? My answer is yes, because he's engaged in aesthetic practice, which is a social practice. Once the social practice exists, well, people can engage in that practice in all kinds of deviant or normal ways.

Still, the products they make are products of the practice. If they're successful or if they're good products of the practice, they'll have the value that that practice is designed for, creating aesthetic value in this case. One analogy that I like to use is baseball, which is an enormous communal social practice. It involves fans, coaches, umpires, and teammates who have all kinds of different roles, and they have to work together. You can still practice baseball by yourself. You could throw the ball up and hit it. You could throw it against the wall. There's all kinds of things that you could do by yourself. But when you do, you're still engaging in the practice of baseball. You're just doing it alone. Of course, there are limits to that, but I think once you have a social practice, there's all kinds of ways you can develop skills for it, contribute to it, or act somewhat deviantly towards it.

S: That circles back into an example you talk about: the origins of the high five, that it actually coming from baseball. You talk about it as a one of the practices of being a creative community builder. Is there a specific favorite way for you to be a creative community builder? Do you like the high five best or are there potential practices that you tend to lean towards?

R: I do love the high five. I would say the big picture is food. I'm really chef-y. I love cooking. I've been doing it for years. I'm always experimenting with new things. I love cooking for my friends; I love having them over for dinner, creating that social opening, the dinner party, the barbecue—whatever it is. Food is my thing.

S: I also love cooking. That leads me to a question about something you said in Aesthetic Life and Why It Matters*. You talked about how food is the stuff that's worth eating, that's worth valuing You mentioned some examples, including things like chicatanas. But I noticed you didn't have an example from your life. Is there a specific dish that is your go-to ground for community and for aesthetic valuing?*

R: Yes, wine. I make wine. I have a giant 700-liter terracotta amphora from Italy that I use to make wine in with my friend Chelsea Coleman. Wine making is a wonderful practice. Every year there's a harvest from mid-August to mid-October. We help each other out, and we get our haul. The amphora takes one ton of grapes, which would basically fill up the back of an F-150, pile it up over the top and you've got a ton.

We harvest our grapes and crush them. They go through primary fermentation and we spend weeks tending to them, making sure everything's developing right and smells all good. Then they go through élevage for however long—that's the second phase where the wine is aging. At some point, you press the grapes, probably age it a little more, then you bottle, and you drink it with your friends. The whole process is just a joy. It's labor, it's sensory, and it's beautiful. So, making and sharing wine is a big deal for me and creates a lot of social openings. I would say it is super awesome.

S: We have a few more questions. In "On the Interest in Beauty and Disinterest" you talk about the concept of disinterest and how it has misguided people. If the importance of beauty becomes less profound, what do you think we would lose? Would we lose some aesthetic values towards beauty?

I THINK IT WOULD BE A SHAME IF, AS A CULTURE, WE LOST TOUCH WITH THOSE SELF-INVOLVING, LOVE-INVOLVING, PASSION-INVOLVING ASPECTS OF BEAUTY. I THINK WE'D LOSE TOUCH WITH BEAUTY AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND COMMUNITY.

R: In one way, the concept of disinterest is very academic. It has obviously influenced a lot of philosophers to think about the nature of aesthetic affect, though I think a lot of people in the wild don't really think of beauty that way. They think of it as passionate and erotic, involving love, self, and profundity in ways that are not well-theorized by the concept of disinterest. I think it would be a shame if, as a culture, we lost touch with those self-involving, love-involving, passion-involving aspects of beauty. I think we'd lose touch with beauty as a source of inspiration and community. I think there's a lot of community in those features of beauty.

S: You mentioned briefly the poser: someone whose ideal is a certain set of ideals. We were curious to know how that relates to technology and social media, and how algorithms are giving the ideals to you? Do you think social media and algorithms are adding to disinterest, making people think about beauty less?

R: It's hard to say. I do think there are a lot of algorithms that are designed for engagement. If they're working, then they're engaging people. That's their whole purpose, because they're money makers. The more engaged people are, the more ads are sold, and the more money is made. I think the problem comes from the fact that [algorithms] influence us almost without our knowing it. And in that way, they diminish our capacity to exercise our discretionary valuing and undermine aesthetic practices.

IF YOU MAKE THE EFFORT TO CULTIVATE YOUR OWN INDIVIDUALITY AND EXERCISE THAT DISCRETIONARY VALUE IN A WAY THAT'S TRULY YOURS, I THINK SOME OF THESE TOOLS CAN BE QUITE LIBERATING.

But I also think I don't wanna be too pessimistic about this. I think some of these things are actually quite empowering. I've been introduced to a lot of new music, and I'm able to find obscure films and find communities of people who are talking about these films they love. So, I'm a bit on the fence. I think the dangers are real. I think they're undermining aesthetic practice, especially for young people. But I think if you make the effort to cultivate your own individuality and exercise that discretionary value in a way that's truly yours, I think some of these tools can be quite liberating.

I'm working on a new trade book right now exactly about this. One of the arguments is that we're no longer in the age of criticism. Criticism was a very twentieth-century thing. If you wanted to engage with criticism about literature, film, painting, or whatever, you'd read long-form criticism in periodicals and newspapers. People just don't do that anymore. Instead, they look at lists: the top ten books of 2020 or the top twenty albums of the twenty-first century. You might have an "Ugh, they're just trying to sell more stuff" cynical attitude toward lists.

But I actually think that it's not just publishers and media companies giving us these lists. If you go to TikTok and Instagram, they're scorers. "Oh, it's 9.6 out of 10, yeah." I think we're in the age of lists and scores, and this age is under-theorized. I think that we can engage with lists and scores in a really cool, productive way for the practice of aesthetic valuing. Although there's some reason

to be a little cynical, I think there's also room for an apology or defense of lists.

S: That really interesting. A lot of times this list-making is an aesthetic practice that builds community. Someone makes a list, then a bunch of people agree or disagree about whether its rankings are appropriate.

R: That's exactly right. I think it's an aesthetic practice that has replaced criticism, the predecessor practice. A list is really an invitation, and you can see it play out online. Someone gives a list on TikTok. Then comments open up, Boom! "Oh, but what about this movie?" "I think four should be five because of this . . ." And there are people who don't get the invitational aspect of it, who think it's an epistemically strict list. They suck, right? They're not getting the invitation. They're dismissing it for no good reason. So, I think "the list" is very under-theorized. We're a quarter way through the century. We need to reckon with lists.

S: So, some people disagree with the ranking in the list. But what about a person who just wants to be a person who reads the top one hundred books? Is this person a poser? How does the idea of being a poser play into the idea of lists?

R: I don't think disagreeing with the list is bad. It's the register of disagreement that matters. It's dismissiveness that's the problem, as in "How could you put that at number one? You're an idiot." That's not good.

But I do think it's amazing if someone comes out with a list that you totally agree with. I play this game with Matt Strohl, a friend of mine—a really good philosopher and an incredibly talented film critic. We each have a ranking of all eleven *Fast and Furious* movies. If one day our lists converged, that would be cool. I'd bet they don't converge. We have disagreements, but all by way of aesthetic community.

We can diagnose the problem with being a poser within my system as a failure to understand the nature of aesthetic community. If you want to like something just because other people like it, you might get community of a sort, but it's not necessarily aesthetic community. It's actually a response to aesthetic value that fundamentally misunderstands the nature of aesthetic value.

S: To go a little back a bit into the algorithm stuff, we're really curious about how to make sense of the brain rot that comes from the stuff that algorithms feed us. Our scrolling isn't really an expression of our ideals or artistic sense. It's just fed to us and there's not a lot of passion behind it . . . To stitch that together with aesthetic merit, can we view something like that as having aesthetic merit,

even so much to say that it's beautiful; not in the sense that it's beautiful for us engaging with it, but from a third-person point of view. If a space alien saw that the humans were battling with brain rot, could it be viewed as something beautiful from that zoomed-out lens?

R: That's a really cool question. That takes a lot of theoretical imagination. Is the whole thing beautiful? Oh man, I have a million thoughts. I'm tempted to take this even more big picture. Human life itself is something we can zoom out on and see that as beautiful because it's full of chaos and struggle. I deal with this a bit in my book, *This Beauty*. It's structured on the idea that life is really difficult and full of pain. Life's difficulty is inescapable: the pain, the challenge, and the difficulty. And, of course, we die at the end, and no one asked to live, feel pain, or struggle. This is not to diminish the fact that we also feel joy. But the fact is, we didn't agree to this thing and we have to deal with it.

One response that people have had to this problem is a theodicy. You could justify existence with God. You could focus on the fact that the universe itself is beautiful, the universe is fundamentally good. You are made in the image of a loving being, God. It's a way of saying that everything's beautiful.

I CAN TELL THEM THAT LOVING BEAUTY IS A WAY OF KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH THE VALUES THAT MAKE LIFE WORTH LIVING.

I can't accept that. I'm a father and I can't tell my kids that. I can't. I don't think I would be honest. What can I say is that they didn't have anything to say about it. It was my choice. And they're gonna suffer and struggle, and I'm gonna die. And then they're gonna die. In the book, I developed the thought that I can tell them that loving beauty is a way of keeping in touch with the values that make life worth living. It's, "Hey, just make sure you're doing this a lot. Make sure you're in love with the beautiful." Because then you're gonna be developing your playfulness, your individuality, and you're gonna be in community with other people who are doing the same, and they're gonna support you. Next, you're gonna have these answers about why you should continue to live your life, even though you didn't decide to have a life and it's full of struggle and pain and suffering.

Let me zero in a bit more on brain rot. I'm a doom scroller. If what you're talking about is just scrolling through all the content,

that's actually a really unique, technological way to engage in the practice of aesthetic valuing. I do this as well. I mean, I have a long day, I need a reason to shut my brain down, and this is it. But in the process, I'm like, "Oh, this is funny" or "This is interesting" and I'll send it to my friend. This is a way of engaging in the practice of aesthetic valuing. It's not always aesthetic, it might just be information sharing, but a lot of it is.

S: Do you have a favorite brain rot trend at the moment?

R: I don't know. Maybe I'm too old, but I just find it all delightful and curious. I don't feel like I'm a super insider in a way. I would never be the one who created this stuff. But I don't know, I'm kinda open to it all.

S: What are some other fun things for us to talk about? You have a lot of interesting stuff but we're running low on time. Let's wrap up on this: You say there is an existential imperative of carpe diem. As you explain it, it's not about "seizing the day." Rather, it's about harvesting and plucking the day, of paying attention to what is around you, and interacting with the beauty that's presented to you. So, we were wondering, what have you done today to pluck your day?

R: Oh, man, well, it's only 12:21 p.m. Besides talking to you, the main thing I did today was go to the gym. I had a thirteen-hour day yesterday. I worked myself to the bone. So, I thought I was gonna get this really great night of sleep. Well, I woke up at five a.m. I was like, "What the hell?" On a Wednesday I normally would go to the gym, and I really didn't want to, because I was tired. But in the spirit of seize the day, I made it to the gym. I didn't just do a minimal workout. I went for it. So, that's about all I achieved today. Well, I also got the kids ready for school, made them lunches, etc. But I feel like hanging out with you guys is seizing the day! This is great.

S: We hope it's seizing the day! I have one more question. I'm pretty sure it was in On Being Awesome that you said swimming sucks? Why does swimming suck?

R: First of all, I'm probably not being fair to swimming. But to qualify that a little bit, what I wanted to say is that swimming is full of value. It's a great sport, it's just that it doesn't have the awesomeness-suckiness structure of value. Its value is end-oriented, it's about competition and achievement.

S: So, swimming doesn't compare to baseball or another team sport because it doesn't have the community aspect that you talk about?

R: I don't want to say it doesn't. There's a relay sport in swimming, which is team oriented. Rather, it's that there are these impressively strong and talented people going super-fast in water, and what matters is just being the fastest; it's very end oriented. I do think swimming is awe-inspiring in the classical sense. When you see what Katie Ledecky does, you can't help but think, "How?" It's so awe-inspiring. But it's structured around individual excellence at achieving a specific goal. So, there's no fundamental emphasis on things like cultivating your individuality or achieving a style. Again, maybe someone who knows more about swimming will put me in my place. I'd like to be put in my right place on this.

More generally, I do think there are different categories of value. I mention swimming just as a contrast case to things like rollerblading, skating, and skateboarding. Although there are skate competitions, every skater would admit that they're a little artificial. They're not the heart of the sport. The heart of the sport is cultivating your individual style in a community of people cultivating their individual styles, and you do it in a supportive and rad way. People wanna develop their own lexicon of tricks, they wanna do it with other people. Different people can do it in really different ways. It's not about getting the fastest time, jumping the highest, or whatever. It's way more communal and organic.

As a contrast, you might think of a sport, whatever it is, that's about just about meeting some goal in the best way, where cultivating individual style is not as central to it, and even, in some sense, being in a supportive community is not essential to it.

S: That makes a lot of sense within the context of your theories. So, we can consider this a call for papers for someone to justify the aesthetic value of swimming.

R: You guys are gonna publish this, then I'm gonna get a bunch of hate mail, like from Katie Ledecky. That'd be cool. I'll take hate mail from Katie Ledecky.

S: I don't think we have any other questions for you, Dr. Riggle. I'd like to, again, extend a thank you. Thank you so much for meeting with us. We really enjoyed this conversation!

R: Yeah, this is my pleasure. Thanks for thinking of me for this!