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How to Be Awesome

Philosophy professor Nick Riggle offers “a unified theory of how not to suck”

By Gareth Cook on September 19, 2017



Author Nick Riggle *Credit: Viking/Penguin Books*

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It's pretty safe to say that Nick Riggle is the only former professional skater who also holds a Ph.D. from New York University's prestigious philosophy program. It's also hard to imagine that anyone else has thought so deeply about the nature of awesomeness: its meaning, its importance, and the ways that true awesomeness is under threat. In "[On Being Awesome](#)," Riggle offers a careful dissection of the psycho-philosophical categories of sucking ("killjoy" is fundamentally different from "sucky"). But the book also works as a practical, and surprisingly inspiring, guide to better living. He answered questions from Mind Matters editor [Gareth Cook](#).

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How did you become interested in awesomeness, and what is it, exactly?

A good person is great; but an *awesome* person—they're on another level. I'm all for tasty sandwiches; but I'd rather have an *awesome* one. In a Socratic spirit I started wondering what was going on with "awesome" and whether there was anything to gain from a philosophical inquiry into its contemporary significance. I started to notice that "awesome" is often being used in a distinctive social sense to talk about people and actions that bring people together in a certain way.

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Around the same time I was also wondering about the contemporary significance of “sucks”. It seemed to be a distinctive critique of someone to say that they, or something they did, “sucked”. My sense was that standard moral theories don’t capture suckiness—that it also had a kind of social import that was worth investigating. It wasn’t long before I noticed, even in my own idiolect, that “awesome” and “sucks” were related as antonyms. Now I notice people using them that way a lot, but it’s one of those conceptual connections you might not notice without some good old *a priori* reflection. Further reflection revealed connections between those concepts and a complex taxonomy of other terms—being down, game, chill, wack, a blowhard, braggart, killjoy, and others—which I systematically detail in the book.

One of the things Socrates was really good at was investigating and critiquing culture by publicly investigating and critiquing the ways individuals understood their actions in terms of value concepts: piety, justice, virtue, self-control, courage, and others. So, he’d ask a person who was on their way to court to accuse someone of impiety exactly what they meant by “piety”. This got them to reflect on their values, their actions, and their culture in a way that often had a positive (if a little uncomfortable) effect on their thought and action.

Anyway, I arrived at the view that being awesome is being good at creating “social openings”—moments of mutual appreciation between people when they break out of

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Can you maybe give another example or two of awesomeness?

Of course! I discuss a lot of examples in the book, but one of my favorites is the invention of the high five—the great symbol of awesomeness. The high five is such a fixture of our culture now that it boggles the mind to learn that it was invented in 1977. Credit is widely given to the early exemplar of awesome Glenn Burke, the man Major League Baseball recognizes as the first openly gay major league baseball player. Dusty Baker had just hit his 30th home run of the season, and Burke was up to bat next. When Baker approached home plate, Burke was there with his hand up in the air. Baker could tell Burke wanted him to slap his hand, so he reached up and slapped it. Burke was up to bat next, and he proceeded to hit his first major league home run. When he came around third, Baker was waiting at home with his hand up high. And the high five was born.

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Another example I love is from a Celtics basketball game. The Bon Jovi song “Living on a Prayer” was playing during halftime, as the fan cam went around projecting

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jumped out of his seat and started enacting the role of Bon Jovi in a music video. He roamed among the crowd, inviting them to join in on the pretense—and so many people were game. They encouraged him, cheered him on. Clearly awesome.

This might make it sound like I focus on sports in the book, but I don’t. There are so many other examples. From swings installed at bus stops, to street art and municipal governance. One of the points I emphasize in the book is that there are opportunities to be awesome and not suck every day, in some of the simplest interactions like ordering a coffee.

What can each of us do, day in and day out, to be a little more awesome?

We’ll consider what we normally do when we order coffee. We tend to simply enact the generic role of “coffee shop customer”. But when we do this we act more or less like anyone else enacting that role. There’s nothing wrong with that, and society chugs along nicely when we have these efficient public roles to enact. But when we enact them we don’t express our individuality much at all, and we tend not to really look and see the individual we are interacting with.

One way to create awesomeness is to break out of the role and express yourself to them in a way that gives them an opportunity to express themselves. Crack a joke, compliment them or the drink they made, ask a kind question, or simply sincerely thank them. Of course, there are many ways we can fail at this! But when was the last time you gave someone a gift just because, had a nice chat with a stranger, or went out of your way to cook a special meal? We are awesome when we break out of our norms and routines to create these opportunities for shared expression and appreciation. That’s what Glenn Burke did when he gave us the high five; that’s what Jeremy Fry did when he burst out of his seat at half time. But being awesome doesn’t have to be on the grand scale of inventing a joyous form of human expression or acting like Bon Jovi.

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I think you need to explain how a high school dropout ended up with a Ph.D. in philosophy?

I dropped out of high school to be a professional in-line skater. I was completely in love with street and park skating from roughly age 12 to 22. By age 16 or so I was getting a lot of opportunities to do competitions and demos all over the world—France, Japan, Korea, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Malaysia, all over the US and Canada, etc.—and my local public high school in Santa Rosa, CA wouldn't set up a proper independent study program for me. They wouldn't acknowledge the legitimacy of what I was doing professionally, as they would with an ice skater or gymnast. I seem to remember getting very low grades, like Ds, in my gym class because I was absent so much—but when I would show up to run the mile and stretch or whatever my teacher would be like “Oh, I saw you on ESPN last night!” I did enough to receive passing grades, but I was more than happy to drop out and pursue pro skating full time.

But something unexpected happened once I was skating full time. I found that I had a lot of intellectual curiosity and energy. When I wasn't being told what to read or write, I found I really badly wanted to read and write—just about the things that interested me. I wrote a bit for the skate magazines but I also started reading a lot

during all of the down time I had when I was traveling. In my late teens I was doing a lot of soul searching. My parents had divorced and I was having to take a hard look at

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me that I was a passionate autodidact.

That's how I found my way to philosophy. It was the thing I loved to read and think about the most. By the time I was 20-21, I thought I might study philosophy at the Santa Rosa Junior College. I was getting pretty burned out on the pro-skater lifestyle, which is ridiculously fun, but I also thought it was time for me to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. It was scary though—I was a high school dropout who never really cared about school, yet there I was in love with the most venerable tradition in Western education. I enrolled and got straight As the first semester. I really couldn't believe it, but I was able to keep that going. After a brief move to southern California (to play shows and record with the band I was in) and a stint at the excellent Santa Monica Community College, I transferred to UC Berkeley. I spent five intense but blissful semesters there, studying with some of the most amazing professors. I wrote an honors thesis with Professor John MacFarlane and used that to apply to graduate school for the PhD.

I was able to see it all through, and was eventually extremely lucky to land a job at the University of San Diego. I can skate and philosophize year-round here.

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Do you feel like Americans are becoming more or less awesome?

I worry that we are becoming less awesome. We can't create these opportunities for shared expression and appreciation if we're afraid of one another, dismissive, petty, or too quick to stereotype. I often come across examples of extraordinary awesomeness in the United States. But we won't be as awesome as we can be until we get inspired by these and similar examples and let them shape ourselves, our everyday interactions—and ultimately our society

Are you a scientist who specializes in neuroscience, cognitive science, or psychology? And have you read a recent peer-reviewed paper that you would like to write about? Please send suggestions to Mind Matters editor [Gareth Cook](#). Gareth, a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist, is the series editor of [Best American Infographics](#) and can be reached at [garethideas AT gmail.com](mailto:garethideas@gmail.com) or Twitter [@garethideas](#).

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