

**Review of *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition: Taking Ridicule Seriously*. Lydia Amir. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. ix +133. \$84.99**

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**Steven Gimbel\***

The general rule is that the sequel is never as good as the original. But general rules can be broken. In the case of Lydia Amir's *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition: Taking Ridicule Seriously*, the new book is as good—if not better—than her previous book in philosophy of humor.

In 2014, Amir published *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* establishing herself as the preeminent historian of the philosophy of humor. It is a post that is greatly needed. The received account of the history of the philosophy of humor has been long fixed. Everyone from Plato to Aquinas to Kant to Schopenhauer to Freud is read as if they were post-positivist 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophers offering a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for x to be an act of humor and then placed in the standard “superiority,” “relief,” “play,” and “incongruity” boxes. This narrative is anachronistic and trivializes the actual work of those who thought about the nature and place of humor in human life and society. Amir, leading the way for writers like Sheila Lintott and emerging scholar Jennifer Marra, challenges this narrative, replacing it with an historically more accurate, contextualized, careful accounting of the work of these early figures in philosophy of humor.

In *Humor and the Good Life*, Amir focuses on three interrelated thinkers who take us from the Enlightenment through the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic backlash, showing us how their views on humor were integrated in their larger philosophical projects. This thread is one that most philosophers would not see as weaving the way Amir demonstrates, allowing for novel insights in reading figures we usually do not connect, but now must.

While I adore that work as a whole, the last chapter always felt odd to me. Unlike the rest of the book that was meticulous in its attention to scholarly detail and in its historical contextualization, the last chapter took us from Kierkegaard to today, running full speed through a hundred years of major figures, waving as we passed, and then concluded with a light sketch of a view of her own. I recall vividly at the time thinking that this last chapter, especially her own view, should have been cut in order to turn it into a book of its own. That is exactly what this new

\* Steven Gimbel, Department of Philosophy, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, USA

book is. The seed that was planted in *Humor and the Good Life* has grown into its own and blossomed.

This new book, *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition: Taking Ridicule Seriously* bears all the marks of Amir's writing – masterful scholarship, tight argumentation, and a staggering range of sources including major and minor figures from the philosophical canon from antiquity to the contemporary, theological writers and sacred texts from a multiplicity of traditions, social scientists from psychology and sociology, even Niels Bohr makes an appearance. Amir deftly weaves insights from a stunningly disparate number of writers in a way that is entirely organic. Her knowledge of the history of thought is breathtaking and utilized in a way that is not showy, but deep.

Do not let this praise of Amir's scholarly acumen lead you to think that this is a historical text. It is not an exercise in exegesis, but it is a philosophical work presenting a central argument, one that is in ways classical in tone. It is an attempt to formulate a metaphysical account of human existence and then extract an ethic from it that leads to the well-lived life.

The metaphysic begins with a claim about the human condition. To be human is to be endowed with both desire and reason. In a Heideggerian fashion, we project ourselves, living in the possible future. But we have an understanding of the world as it is that these plans, hopes, and dreams will likely be quashed. "Yearning is frustrated by acknowledging the impossibility of its fulfillment. Among the constant sources of frustration, we may count spiritual desires, the need for meaning, the thirst for knowledge, our dreams of happiness and hopes for immortality, the yearning for homeliness in the world, whether by love or other means, as part of a community, with another human being or with oneself. In certain cases, the frustration arises simply due to practical hindrances." We want that which we know we will not get. That conflict is at the heart of human life.

The obvious stance toward such a frustrated being is pessimism. Human life becomes tragic. But the nature of philosophy is optimistic. The larger philosophical project which has a barely hidden Christian influence that results in an intrinsic bias toward optimism. If life is pointless, meaningless, and tragic, why bother philosophizing? The only reason one would undertake philosophy in the first place is if there was the possibility of understanding the meaning of life, of finding some way to solve the riddle, of some hope of redemption, of providing us with

a way to live ethically, of answering the seemingly unanswerable. Philosophy presupposes optimism.

But, giving us an angst-ridden teenager's bumper sticker, Amir tells us "Optimism is challenged by experience." There is no way to untie the knot. We could choose to surrender one or the other of the conflicting elements. We could surrender hope or we could step away from reason. There are famous thinkers and major traditions that have argued for both. But to jettison a central element of our humanity would be to cease to remain fully human.

We could follow the lead of the intellectuals who give in to their pessimistic orientation and seek to accept the contradiction. Such philosophers are frequently driven to the arts, which can be an aesthetic counterpoint to philosophy, using the various artistic media to do philosophical work. For this reason, pessimistic philosophers—Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Schlegel—have venerated the arts. The result is that an understanding of the human condition has needed to synthesize the optimistic philosophical and the pessimistic artistic. Blending the two creates a seemingly unresolvable tension that is the human condition.

But this dichotomy leaves out one side of the artistic. The symbol of the theatrical is the pair of masks, one sad symbolizing tragedy and the other laughing symbolizing comedy. If there is an unresolvable tension between the optimistic rationality of philosophy and the pessimistic tragedy of art, perhaps the problem is that there is a third factor that needs to be added to the mix, a new dimension, the other side of art. This is humor. Humor is ability to appreciate and enjoy the puzzling, the contentious, the incongruous and find a way to either resolve or live happily with it. Humor, according to Amir, is the key to understanding the well-lived human life.

We are ridiculous beings, *homo risibilis*. We need to accept the inherent incongruity and instead of languishing in pessimism, we must relish it. We laugh at ourselves and in doing so transcend ourselves. The pessimist is stuck because she cannot have both of that which she must have. But the ridiculous can revel in having both. "A tragic state of mind is dominated by an either/or attitude, while the comical attitude is characterized by a both/and approach. The latter attitude is more appropriate for handling internal contradictions or intrapersonal conflicts without losing epistemological content. Additionally, as the humor that enables the transmutation from the tragic to the comic lessens the tension that the tragic generates, various ethical benefits ensue." The first rule of improvisational comedy is "yes and"; no matter how odd, no matter how

contradictory, no matter how incongruous, all additions from all colleagues are accepted and incorporated. Life, Amir argues, needs to be seen as the ultimate in long-form improv comedy.

By embracing the contradiction at the heart of being, by seeing this as enrichment, not as self-sabotage, we can understand ourselves, accept ourselves, and move beyond inner-conflict to a fuller human life. With a reference to the famous phrase from Henri Bergson, Amir argues, “After acknowledging the existence of conflict and encouraging the emergence of the conflict’s components, humor may also help in deliberating a solution by siding with the intellect and mediating between the various components of the conflict. By keeping desire in check, and reducing sadness, fear, anger, shame and disgust, humor puts into effect ‘a momentarily anesthesia of the heart’ that is conducive to calm deliberation.”

We cannot but be conflicted. That is what it is to be human. But such conflict need not doom us to a life of despair. “[H]umor enables the gradual exchange of tragic oppositions into comical incongruities. Comical incongruities help endure conflict and, eventually, dissolve it by yielding. The embrace of inevitable conflict, whether internal or external, dissolves the tension it generates. Accepting ourselves without shame, guilt, fear or anger liberates us from the ridicule of resisting the necessities of our nature. We exchange false dignity, which feeds on hiding our common defects, with genuine dignity that liberates us from the tragic feeling of life while retaining the tragic knowledge of reality. The conversion of suffering into joy through humor leads to emancipation. The steady joy that accompanies it deserves to be called happiness.”

Humor as individual acts is a source of mere hedonistic pleasure. Jokes are funny. We love to laugh. But humor as a stance toward the inescapable contradiction at the heart of Being, that leads to something deeper and more profound than mere pleasure. It may be the one way to be human and to be happy.

In her new book, *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition: Taking Ridicule Seriously*, Lydia Amir has given us a combination of rigorous argumentation and wide-ranging scholarship that is truly a *tour de force*.