

Review of Lydia B. Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. State University of New York Press, 2014; paperback 2015. pp. 393.

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For many people, the notion that Kierkegaard was very interested in humor and had a sense of humor, will be surprising. Yes, as Lydia Amir points out in her chapter on Kierkegaard, one humor scholar, Richard Simon, suggested the “Kierkegaard understands himself as a comic figure,” and Amir suggests that Kierkegaard recognizes that “the comic is the main tool of examination, correction, and evaluation an individual possesses for reflecting upon himself, his life, and his personal experiences, and for communicating this to others.”

This is one of a multitude of extremely interesting insights into the relationship between humor and philosophy and their relationship to the good life. Humor, we recognize, is a subject that has fascinated some of our greatest philosophers, writers and thinkers from Aristotle’s time to the present. The same could be said about trying to figure out what “the good life is.” And now, Lydia Amir, in this remarkable book, bravely tackles three complex topics: humor, the good life, and modern philosophy, each of which is the subject of endless theorizing and disputes among scholars in many fields.

Her book is an important contribution not only to our understanding of the relationships between humor and philosophy and their connection to our ideas about the good life, but also to our insights into the nature of humor itself, which is discussed in the third chapter of the book, devoted to “Humor and the Good Life.” The first chapter is on Shaftesbury and deals with “Ridicule as the Test of Truth.” Part of that chapter is devoted to the ideas of the eighteenth-century German philosopher and theologian, Johann Georg Hamann, who Isaiah Berlin described as the man who “struck the most violent blow against the Enlightenment and began the whole romantic process.”

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The second chapter is devoted to the ideas of Kierkegaard. It is the longest chapter in the book, starting on page 89 and ending on page 209. She concludes this chapter writing “Given that Kierkegaard’s edifying discourse of the comic is intended to lead us to a certain form of Christian living, the question of whether we should let Kierkegaard teach us how to laugh is disputable. In the next chapter, I propose a role for humor in the good life in which the views on humor and the good life are independent of religious presuppositions.” The third chapter, then, is devoted to analysis of humor that does not tie humor to religion, like the first two chapters.

This chapter, “Humor and the Good Life,” deals with thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Hegel (and his followers), Carlyle, Bergson, Santayana, and Freud, as well as a number of modern scholars of humor such as John Morreall, Rod Martin, Wallace Chafe, and William Fry. She adopts a non-religious skeptical perspective on humor and concludes the book writing, in her last paragraph, “I have described a multi-stage process involving a systematic use of humor for disciplining our taste so that we can find pleasure in incongruities not immediately funny to us... This achievement is gradual and based on changing visions of oneself, others and the world that correspond to the human capacity to transmute suffering into joy through the alchemy of humor.”

Amir’s book is a work of prodigious scholarship, with more than forty pages of notes and a bibliography of thirty-five pages, but it wears its scholarship lightly. It is very academic, with many quotations of interest, yet it also very readable and is full of fascinating insights into the nature of humor. It is a major contribution to our understanding of humor and its role in our lives and in the thinking of not only early modern philosophers such as Kierkegaard and ancient philosophers such as Plato and Socrates, but also of numerous contemporary humor scholars.