

Book review

Amir, Lydia (2019). *Philosophy, Humour, and the Human Condition: Taking Ridicule Seriously*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan

The title of this book reflects its extraordinary ambition, covering not just humour but a broad swathe of philosophical history and nothing less than the situation of humans viewed as a collective whole. The humanitarian goal is stated directly and succinctly enough in the very first paragraph: “this study introduces *Homo risibilis*, a worldview that embraces contradictions in order to address the ambiguities of the human condition” (p. ix). It should be noted at the outset, however, that it is equally direct about what it does not offer scholars or aficionados of humour: “it has little to do with the spontaneously funny” (p. ix). This is ‘big picture’ philosophy; while humour theory is addressed to some degree, *humour* is approached less as an event or a form of discourse than as a disposition, a particular attitude to life and the world, seen through the multifaceted lens of a certain philosophical history. Given the extraordinary breadth of the argument, I will not attempt here to engage in critical dissection of the text and its claims. I aim rather to provide a useful overview of its content with some reflection on the reading experience for prospective readers.

The book sets out by attempting to establish a fundamental premise: that life for all, or the overwhelming majority of us, regardless of our situation, is pervaded by tragedy. The evolution of the concept of tragedy is discussed at some length, which entails distinguishing between the literary (or broader cultural) instantiations of tragedy, on the one hand, and tragedy as lived experience, on the other. It is an important distinction because unlike many thinkers who have dealt with the subject, Amir is principally concerned with the latter, tragedy as it is lived. This is because the author claims to be driving toward a practicable worldview, not an aesthetics.

The initial discussion of tragedy gives the reader a sense of prose throughout much of the book: the writing is highly referential, almost encyclopaedic. Rather than simply stating a working definition, the author typically marshals thoughts and quotes from across the history of ideas—with a strongly European philosophical slant—to identify how a term might be best deployed for the present purpose. Among the most frequently referenced philosophers are Montaigne, Spinoza, Hume, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Santayana, but many others are included, and there are voluminous footnotes.

Having brought a considerable amount of philosophical history to bear on identifying the tragedy seen to reside at the heart of being, the notion of tragedy is shown to be reducible to a basic discrepancy between what we desire and what we can get. Whether it is love or social ambition or simply the desire to stay alive, it appears we are doomed to disappointment. The question that arises then is how to deal with that dark inevitability, as an individual and as societies, without succumbing to crippling despair. The author launches back through the history of ideas, including religion, to elucidate earlier attempts to resolve the problem. According to the author, it comes down to desire and reason: she explains how some have posited renunciation of desire as the

answer, some that we should give up on rational attempts to harness and harmonise desire, some that neither desire nor reason will suffice. Amir then advances her own position: stop trying to resolve the tragic discrepancies; instead, reappraise the notion of discrepancy itself.

As the author acknowledges, this is actually a tendency that has been recognised in comedy for a long time. The terms *comic* and *tragic*, which may often be applied to the very same events or phenomena, are two sides of the same coin of radical discrepancy. Consequently, not just at an abstract philosophical level, but in our own personal and social conflicts, according to the author, we may be able to turn negative experiences of discord into comical, positive experiences of incongruity. Moreover, the ability to perform that manoeuvre may be trained. And it may be done without performing or viewing comedy: it is possible to experience the incompatibility internally, to view our own actions, thoughts, our own selves as inherently comical.

Again, this idea is not snatched out of thin air. It permeates at least some cultures in the notions of “being able to laugh at yourself” and “not taking yourself too seriously”. But Amir, in Chapter Four, casts that observable phenomenon into the philosophical realm for elaboration and expansion. It is noted what other benefits are garnered with the ability to transform the tragic into the comic. For instance, this play with contradictions encourages us, through pleasure, to view the world, events, ourselves from various angles, fostering self-knowledge, emotional distance, judiciousness, the ability to let go. Here, then, a comic sense — even if we do not make jokes and laugh out loud — may help us become a better person, and by making better people. There is just one example discussed at any length in the book, relating to what is referred to as the “woman condition” (p. 108). Drawing on the philosopher Nussbaum (2004), Amir notes how important it is for humans, perhaps especially women, to be able to mitigate the felt need to satisfy demands that they be whole and complete. The argument goes that by addressing oneself through a primarily humorous framework of essential incongruity, one may lessen that burden.

This leads more deeply into the subject of ridicule, mentioned in the book’s subtitle and weaving in and out of discussions of a humorous disposition. The author argues that as a kind of pre-emptive strategy against despair one should ridicule oneself. If one is able to do that, to thoroughly introject the notion that one is incongruous in relation to a world that is itself ultimately nothing but incongruity, then all those unrealistic expectations we place on ourselves dissolve. Ironically, by assuming incongruity as fundamental to being and freely ridiculing ourselves, we may actually attain harmony, even discover through self-awareness a new kind of “dignity” (p. 121), the author suggests. No mention is made of the familiar practice of humorous self-deprecation that we may indulge alone or in groups, but this seems to bear some relation to what is being proclaimed. Here it is projected to a cosmic level, since by acknowledging oneself as ridiculous/incongruous, one brings oneself into a kind of harmony with what is perceived as the fundamental contradictoriness of the world.

The term *Homo risibilis* is taken up from earlier philosophy to identify what amounts to a worldview. Chapter 5 is dedicated to locating the term within a history of thought and particularly in relation to a human struggle to establish meaning in life. The incongruity theory and incongruity-resolution theories familiar to most humour scholars are brought to the fore as a way of establishing a relatively consistent intellectual history supporting this conceptualisation (pp. 139-140). Everything and everyone is risible because incongruity is inherent in being. Something like an awareness of that is identified from ancient philosophy and religions right through to the literature of existential absurdity, not just Camus and Sartre, but the tragicomedy of Beckett. Surprisingly, there is limited discussion of the rise of postmodern culture and postmodernist practice out of the

impasse of absurdism even though there seems to be a fundamentally comic dimension to the postmodern, a playful self-reflexive adoption of incongruity, or at least insuperable difference.

A work that covers some similar territory to Amir's book on the subject of the absurd, John Marmysz's (2003) *Laughing at Nothing*, is alluded to, but the author is quick to insist that the new incarnation of *homo risibilis* is "more radical" than what is offered by Marmysz and others, because it offers not only an existential respite and buttress but a worldview that "celebrates humanity by enabling the acceptance of finitude and the gracing of human folly" (pp. 152-153). A key to that grace is something akin to an introjection of incongruity. The author claims that when we fully acknowledge the incongruity of being it no longer exists as a source of tension and anxiety. This potentially heralds a kind of transcendence. It distinguishes itself, then, as a route to peaceful human flourishing.

The book then proceeds to describe in some depth the perceived benefits in terms of fostering the "good life". It explains how *homo risibilis* can bring us to happiness and joy: "Accepting one's ridicule amounts to a harmonious congruence with oneself, others and the world, a condition that all philosophies seek to establish" (p. 155). It then launches into a discussion of the meaning and significance of happiness in philosophical history. Again, numerous thinkers are surveyed, but terms that the book returns to are *peace*, *stability* and *serenity*. This is far removed from a common vision of humour (and associated laughter) as disruptive; here we witness an apparently sustainable economy of positive feeling. Indeed, some brief reference is made to positive psychology and Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) concept of *flow*.

The book is now lurching toward its climax, the good life writ large on the international stage. The contention is that the *homo risibilis* concept as it is deployed by the author can bring not only personal serenity, but a new level of global harmony. Once more, Amir undertakes an extensive survey of history, purportedly across cultures, examining terms such as *sympathy*, *pity*, *empathy*, *love* and *compassion*, as they have been purveyed or betrayed by institutions of religion, humanism and scepticism. A final decision is made in favour of compassion as a privileged emotion, and *homo risibilis* is offered as its new vehicle, being a minimal shared experience not requiring metaphysical or religious assumptions: "It is for this reason that I add this worldview to the list of respectable philosophies and religions that advocate an ethics of compassion" (p. 203).

The book thus concludes with direct claims for its significance to humanity—without any obvious gesture of self-effacement, but perhaps that is implicit. The author notes, however, that this valorisation of *homo risibilis* may be a necessary but only temporary step in the human journey. Either way, the claims made in the book, if taken up, are likely to foster lively debate, especially among those concerned with the philosophy of humour. As noted at the beginning of this review and in the book itself, this is not a book for those seeking to learn more about the operations of spontaneous humour and laughter. It is unashamedly a book of philosophy with what most in the humour studies area would regard as a radical agenda. There is plenty of material here for philosophers given its provocative claims but also in its mine of quotes and diligent footnoting. At the same time, the argument is not weighed down by jargon and there should be value for some readers outside philosophy. While the frequent juxtapositions of diverse philosophers and ideas, sometimes within a single sentence, slows the flow of reading, the book conveys an intellectual energy that could stimulate a rewarding exploration of ideas.

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References

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