

## Book review

### Humour as a supreme virtue

**Amir, L. B. (2014). *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 393 pp.**

In the Introduction the author says that her work is a response to a perceived gap in scholarship: “Philosophy’s relations with the comic have been understudied” (p. 9). It is a mighty response, indeed. The readers of EJHR already know the range of Amir’s project from her survey article “Philosophy’s attitude towards the comic: A re-evaluation” (2013), while the bulky volume under review is presented as the first in a series. We are informed (p. 287 n. 4 and 5) that the author plans two subsequent volumes provisionally titled *Laughter and the Good Life* (on Nietzsche and Santayana) and *Nietzsche’s French Laughing Followers* (on Deleuze, Bataille and Rosset). One might think that this would be ambitious enough but Amir’s agenda extends beyond wide-ranging studies in the history of philosophy from her chosen perspective. As she states in the first sentence of the present volume: “The aim of this study is to investigate the role of humour in the good life” (p. 1). Thus, she also intends to provide a substantive ethical argument concerning the significance of humour in the human condition.

Accordingly, the book consists of two major parts. The first one is an exercise in the history of philosophy. It comprises two long chapters on Shaftesbury and Kierkegaard, as well as a short one (an “intermezzo”) on Hamann. The choice of the protagonists is justified by the claim that Shaftesbury and Kierkegaard are the only modern philosophers (with the exceptions Amir wants to investigate in her later books) who “gave humour or any other kind of the comic a prominent role in the good life [...] as they conceive[d] it”, while Hamann is an intermediary providing a historical link between the two (pp. 1-2). The second part of the book takes the form of an exhaustive roll call of names and a survey of positions concerning the comic, the tragic, humour, ridicule and the good life. We also find there a statement of the author’s own view on the ethical value of humour.

Amir’s scholarship is impressive. With the exception of John Morreall perhaps (whom she thanks in her acknowledgments), she seems to be unique among contemporary scholars in her single-minded efforts to investigate the intersection between philosophy and the study of humour. She has read everything in her chosen field, apparently (there are almost 40 pages of references in the book) and the number of names, terms and topics mentioned is truly staggering. Generally, Amir writes in lucid prose. At places, however, the reader may lose the thread of her exposition, especially when rare terms, which do not seem intelligible in the context without further explanations, appear out of the blue. For the present reviewer this is certainly the case with the sentence “The tragic sense of life is a vision that wanders wild without the cathexis provided by the aesthetic form in which it originated” (p. 8). This statement is repeated almost

verbatim after some 200 pages (p. 219; see also pp. 220, 222, 228), in both cases without any preparation of the ground (why should the Freudian term, or rather its questionable English translation by James Strachey, be used here?). The same may be said about the term exoteric which crops up several times in various phrases (pp. 5, 66, 81, 83). The opposition between esoteric and exoteric teachings or writings (for the few vs. for the many) is often invoked in reference to ancient philosophers as well as Leibniz in modern times, but what can one make of Amir's statements that "For Shaftesbury, all philosophy is exoteric moral teaching" (p. 83) or "[...] most people are exoteric, which means that feeling or experience counts for them more than thought" (p. 83)? The reader would be grateful for some elucidation.

The small lapses mentioned above are perhaps symptomatic of a more serious problem concerning the contribution of the historical or interpretative part of the book to Amir's general argument. It usually takes special pleading to use a given author's term or concept beyond its original context as this requires a stable enough common perspective on a part of reality. Consequently, there is normally a tension (in philosophy especially) between historical studies, focused on particular intellectual itineraries, and, say, "critical" studies searching for an overarching, "universal" view on a phenomenon under investigation. It seems to me that Amir downplays this tension or, at least, is too quick in her attempt to offer a synthesis of sorts. First, her choice of protagonists seems idiosyncratic. Clearly, it would be impossible to claim that they belong to a common school of sorts and Amir's argument does not seem to extend far beyond historical coincidences and marginal influences (see pp. 87-88, 89-90, 99, 101-102). She rightly points out the importance of Shaftesbury, a rarely discussed figure, for humour studies (an assessment shared by Billig 2005: 74), but neither Hamann (his translator into German) nor Kierkegaard (Hamann's only "authentic disciple", in one opinion, who later renounced his mentor, see p. 164) can be viewed as Shaftesbury's continuators in his approach to humour as a primarily social tool. Second, Amir's general thesis (about which anon) is firmly secular and thus stands at odds both with Shaftesbury's deist account of the epistemological role of humour and with Hamann's and Kierkegaard's intrinsically religious accounts of irony and humour.

This brings us to the ethical vision of humour advocated by Amir. It may be placed in the tradition -of Pico della Mirandola, Montaigne, and Pascal- according to which the dignity of man is inextricably linked with man's dubious or miserable status in Nature. For Amir, man is not just homo ridens, a laughing creature, but also homo risibilis, a laughable creature. In this she seems to follow (or agree with) a recent account of humour by Critchley (2002). Additionally, Amir believes that her ethical proposal accords well with the views of ancient sceptics or Pyrrhonists. Here is her vision of the transformative power of humour in a nutshell:

Through a multistage process involving a systematic use of humour that disciplines our taste to find pleasure in incongruities that are not immediately funny to us, a ladder of perfection can be climbed that leads to a state rivalling the highest philosophic and religious ideals. This achievement is gradual and is based on a changing vision about oneself, others, and the world according to one's capacity to transmute suffering into joy through the alchemy of humour.

The lucidity we gain frees us from the comic as well as the tragic, at least from that part of the tragic that has been transmuted into the comic and has thus become constitutive of the tragic-comic protagonist that describes each of us. The freedom that results from the newfound harmony with oneself, others, and the world is characterized by joy and serenity (p. 220).

It is of course uncontroversial to credit humour with some healing power. The phenomenon of gallows humour manifests its potential to provide strength even in desperate situations. But the

claims made by Amir in the name of ridicule (or self-ridicule) go far beyond the uncontroversial and clearly require a more extensive phenomenology of humour to gain credibility. The first step in this direction, in my view, requires a critical encounter with accounts of humour which underline its negative aspects (e.g. Billig 2005).

To conclude, Amir has done a lot of valuable interpretative work and has offered a new vista on humour as an important virtue (perhaps, the virtue). It remains to be seen in her subsequent publications whether that inspiring vision will be made more tangible.

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## **References**

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