

Lydia B. Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy*. Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014)

If there is any continuity in the numerous theories of humor, it could be found in the idea of the sudden and unexpected. Paradoxes, contradictions and incongruities are inherent in the human situation. Thinkers of many different disciplines have explored these inconsistencies, given them a variety of definitions and suggested possible ways of dealing with them.

As Lydia B. Amir demonstrates in her book, the tragic is one possible way to cope with “the constitutive contradiction of the human condition” (p. 226). The tragic sense of life is in her opinion epistemologically relevant, but because of the absence of meaning in the tragic, it is incapable of making use of the therapy that “humor is able to provide” (p. 228). Preserving the revealing insights of the tragic view, Amir shows us the benefits of the comic not attainable in the tragic. Amir argues, that the tragic way is impassable for those who cannot live with doubts and sees in humor the best way to confront and endure the ambivalence of our existence.

In her book Amir clarifies these benefits of humour and how they are connected to the good life. Amir claims that only two modern philosophers have seriously studied the function humor has for the art of living well: the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671 - 1713) and the Dane Søren Aabye Kierkegaard who was born one century after Shaftesbury’s death. Between their works on the subject there is an interconnection, found in the studies of the German theologian Johann Georg Hamann.

Amir carefully explains the importance humor has for the good life according to both Shaftesbury and Kierkegaard. She describes the epistemological value Shaftesbury believes humor has for knowing the truth. According to Shaftesbury, what is true must endure the trial of humor. Among its benefits is that humor works as a lubrication and softener for critique and self-critique. Furthermore humor can have some kind of transcendence as a prerequisite: if you perceive reality or yourself with humor, then you have to do it from a distance from that reality or yourself. Humor has therefore its place in soliloquy, an important concept in the Shaftesburean philosophy. Soliloquy includes self-inspection, or the conversation of the mind with itself. Such a conversation requires the same kind of self-transcendence as humor.

The theories of Shaftesbury and Kierkegaard on humor are connected in the works of Johann Georg Hamann. Hamann elaborated the theories of Shaftesbury, whereas Kierkegaard has been called Hamann’s only disciple. Hamann and Shaftesbury found similar associations between truth and humor. Both saw in the latter the best attitude to grasp truth and both of them considered humor an epistemological necessity if God was to be apprehended. In the deistic thinking of Shaftesbury, with its emphasis on the harmony of existence, there was a much more direct link between rationality and truth than in the

thinking of Hamann and Kierkegaard. Hamann saw a great danger in the adoration of rationality. According to him, truth was only accessible as sensual and materially. The incarnation, the Word made flesh, is therefore a key concept in Hamann's theology, which is Christocentric, with an emphasis laid on the kenotic aspect of that event. Truth, Hamann says, is always paradoxical, and humor is the state of mind best capable of grasping paradoxical realities.

For Søren Kierkegaard - who has been named the greatest humorist in Christianity - humor is indispensable for a life that can be characterized as good. As also for both Shaftesbury and Hamann, this significance of humor has religious and metaphysical roots. It is impossible to understand existence and its many puzzles with the mere act of gaining knowledge, Kierkegaard says. If you want to understand existence you have to use subjective reflection, which is not opposed to objective thinking but completes it, as truth is never to be found in the objective reality alone. Humor has the function of assisting us finding truth which, according to Kierkegaard, is located in inwardness.

Kierkegaard thinks that human existence can be categorized in three main stages: Firstly the aesthetic, where all needs require instantaneous satisfaction; secondly the ethical, where the individual learns to master universally valid ethical demands; and thirdly the religious stage, which has eternal happiness as a goal. In order to advance from one stage to the next, the individual has to make the famous Kierkegaardian leaps by a free and conscious decision. Irony is the mark of those who have reached the borders of the aesthetic stage. Humor characterizes individuals who have completed the ethical stage and have come to its limits, where a jump to the religious stage is the only way for them to proceed.

The young Kierkegaard as well as Hamann believe humor to possess an epistemological value and both of them stress the mysterious aspect of truth in Christianity. Kierkegaard elaborated these insights where Christian truths have been metamorphosed into paradoxes and contradictions. Everything has been comically turned upside down and will not thus be apprehended without humor. The later Kierkegaard considered the humorous life-view inferior to that of Christianity. Nonetheless, he saw in it the supreme life-view attainable by human reason. Therefore, Kierkegaard asserted in his later writings that humor *per se* was not necessary for the good life, but represented the second best and could be supportive in realizing the highest stage.

Kierkegaard and Augustine agree on the premise, that man cannot, unaided, be his own salvation, but needs an intervention from a higher being. All of Kierkegaard's thought on humor is based on that religious condition. When Kierkegaard undertakes the assignment of

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teaching us to laugh well and properly, he is instructing us his version of Christian living, which is in his opinion the good life as such.

In her book Amir wants to find the function humor has for the good life, yet without the religious and metaphysical framework constitutive for the thinkers she discusses. Amir does not disagree with the assumption of Shaftesbury, Hamann and Kierkegaard, who all see the derivation of humor in the innumerable ambiguities of existence. She also has come to the same conclusion as they have, namely that humor is the best way and the most useful tool to approach, deal with and endure all the inevitable uncertainties of human life. The difference between Amir and the three thinkers is that she wants to propose a nonreligious theory of the function of humor in the good life, without an appeal to the Deism of Shaftesbury or the Christianity of Hamann and Kierkegaard.

This is the main task of the last chapter in Amir's book. There she gives the reader a synopsis of numerous secular theories of humor. This subject was both important and popular among 19th and 20th century thinkers. Amir begins with an attempt to portray for us the tragic sense of human existence - which could be said to be even more tragic without a genesis as well as consummation attached to some higher purpose or transcendental realities. Having recognized this deep tragic condition of human existence, Amir sets out to show humor as a possible way to deal with this tragedy incorporated in our being. She is convinced that humor can offer humankind a therapy for its inherent tragedy which, as already stated, becomes no less acute when the possibility of comfort and hope from a force that is not a part of this tragic world has been removed. As Amir shows us, at least one of the reasons for the promise of salvation offered by the religions can be seen as a reaction to the hopeless tragic vision of human existence. Amir finds that vision epistemologically relevant and she has no interest in bypassing it:

"I believe the knowledge of the human condition brought about by the tragic views of life is worth preserving, but without the tonality accompanying it, the maddening pain and the constant brooding over it. The comic, I suggest, may prove helpful for disengaging the content of the tragic from its pain." (p. 231)

Amir aims to define for us a sense of existence which shows respect both to the tragic and to the comic, without the metaphysical *sine qua non*. She adheres to a broader interpretation of humor, where humor is almost identical with the comical and approaches humor conjointly as a cognitive and emotional phenomenon. Amir recognizes numerous benefits of humor for the good life, both on an individual and on a social basis. Humor lessens social conflicts, helps achieving unity, it can be a sensible relief for aggression, it motivates empathy. Humor can be thought-provoking, self-corrective, and can be beneficial

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for figuring out and reaching philosophical goals, to name a few advantages of humor.

As mentioned in the beginning of this review, the origins of humor can be found in the notion of the incongruities and inconsistencies of the human situation. Religion offers a way to live with or to save individuals from these paradoxes and discrepancies. Such a salvation is called “redemption”, it leads to the good life, and as Amir shows in her book, humor can have an essential function in that task of religion. However, and that is the main objective of Amir’s study, there is no inevitable connection “between religion and redemption because the source of need for redemption, such as death, evil, human suffering, and ignorance, can be answered in religious as well as nonreligious terms” (p. 254).

Amir divides theories of redemption into three types. Regardless of whether the redemption offered is within a religious or nonreligious framework, each of these types demands the rejection of at least one element of our humanity: Firstly desire; secondly the awareness of the limits of human reason; and thirdly both the rejection of desire as well as the awareness of the limits of reason. All these types of redemption can contain possible dangers, because it is questionable to deny such a crucial part of our human existence, and as Amir points out, occasionally it can be wiser not to act at all. Sometimes the nonsolution is the best solution. There humor comes in. The relieving effect of humor can help us to live with unresolved tensions. Humor can serve as an effective way of self-knowledge and self-criticism. We must know how to embrace our own foolishness, accept the human ridicule, if we want to apprehend fully the truth of our nature. For Amir, therefore, *homo risibilis* “is a fitting description of humankind” (p. 264).

Humor smoothens the sharp edges of the many contrasts and paradoxes that characterize the human situation, therein having more than an assisting function for redemption, but also being itself a substantial element of the redemption. Amir proposes a redemptive function of humor where we accept the ridiculous situation of the human existence. That reconciliation with the ridicule has two effects: On the one hand, it saves us from the ridicule, as only those that are unaware of it can be ridiculous; On the other hand, this embracement decreases the yearning for redemption, which is in itself redemptive as it brings “about a liberated state capable of rivaling the highest ideals of religion and philosophy” (p. 273).

In the final section of Amir’s book, the author describes what she has in mind by using the concept of “The Good Life”. The idea of good life is essential for her study, as the title of her book suggests. Perhaps it would have been more constructive to explain for the reader the fundamentals of the good life right in the beginning of the book in order to lay the groundwork for the many connections the author and other thinkers see between humor and such an existence. Furthermore, it looks like the author presupposes a conformity in the use

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of the concept of the good life between the three main thinkers of the book, i.e. Shaftesbury, Hamann and Kierkegaard. It could be productive to ask if the Deist Shaftesbury and the devout Christian Kierkegaard have the same understanding of a life worthy of the predicate "good" and see if their differences have value for the study. Likewise, an analysis of potential divergences between religious based understandings of the good life on the one hand and secular on the other could have deepened the author's examination and clarified her intention, to describe the function of humor in the good life on nonreligious premises.

Among the benefits of humor, according to Amir's book, is that it helps us cope with the many incongruities of life without extinguishing them. In the religious idea of redemption, it is frequently included that paradoxes and contradictions must be dissolved: Sufferings will be transmuted into joy, despair into confidence and guilt into innocence. The Lutheran phrase "*simul justus et peccator*" could be stimulating for that discussion. Martin Luther thought that the believer was simultaneously both righteous and a sinner. His idea of redemption did not consist of one being absorbed by the other. Redemption does not annihilate the incongruity. The believer can rely on being righteous in the eyes of God but can at the same time recognize his or her awareness of an inner struggle. In Lutheran teachings, which focus frequently on the ambivalences and conflicts of the believer's conscience, redemption has an obvious similarity to the comical. Luther's attitude towards the double existence of the believer as a justified sinner was comical because in his opinion the awareness of sin and corruption was not capable of destroying the perfect joy of the Gospel.^[1]

^[1] *"Sein Glaubenshumor gründete gerade nicht, wie Eric W. Gritsch meint, im Gesetz, sondern im Evangelium. Der Beweis hierfür läßt sich mit dem Hinweis erbringen, daß Luther gerade angesichts der - allerdings zu komischen - Doppelsexistenz des Christen als Sünder und Gerechtfertigter Humor zeigte.... Dieses Nebeneinander entspricht dem von Gesetz und Evangelium im Bewußtsein des Christen. Aber Luther wollte es keineswegs als statisches verstanden wissen, sondern als höchst dynamisches im Durchsetzungskampf der Herrschaft Christi. Der Sünder und der Gerechtfertigte Stehen in der Glaubensexistenz neben- und ineinander, beide in totaler Weise! Will sagen: Vollkommene Freude wird durch die Sünde mitnichten verhindert oder ausgeschlossen."* Werner Thiede, *Luthers Humor. Zur Glaubensfreude des Reformators*, *Luther*, 81(1), 2010, 17-8.

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