Review of *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition: Taking Ridicule Seriously*, by Lydia Amir. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. By Michael Picard, MSc, PhD.

Forthcoming in Philosophy of Humor Yearbook, Vol 2, 2021.

Prof. Amir has written a rich, complex and searching book with a vast scholarly range that defies the poor reviewer. I shall confine myself to an overview of the main theory, the worldview *homo risibilis*, as well as a few of the claims she makes about its promise. I have some questions too about the dialectical logic by which we are to obtain the promised relief. I end with a brief discussion of a Theravada Buddhism perspective on desire and compassion, an alleged rival to Amir's theory, and ask how well it fits into Amir's typology of opposing solutions.

A worldview is a theory of the human condition. As such, *homo risibilis* strives to be a "traditional philosophy", setting itself in competition with world religions and other world-historic philosophies. Prof. Amir's ambition is not so much to frame a correct theory of humor, but to *apply* what she takes to be a correct theory of humor (she focuses on a self-referential version of the incongruity theory) to an understanding of the human condition. Among the advantages she touts of her theory are its minimalist epistemic and metaphysical commitments, which set it above its idealist and religious rivals. Moreover, in the book's final two chapters, a case is laid out for a suite of personal and social benefits of the worldview. In particular, an egalitarian ethics of compassion is arrived at (though at times it seems to need to be as much an input as an outcome). Though I speak here of a *theory* of the human condition, we are clearly not dealing with any straightforwardly verifiable empirical theory that stands or falls with consensus evidence. The proof of *homo risibilis*, if it is to have one, will be shown by its fitness in our lives, by its use to readers in coping with, and reconciling with (what in technical language is known as) the shit that happens. Indeed, Amir sets the bar high, hoping to rival world religions and once "mighty philosophies".

The starting point of Amir's thinking is the ridiculousness of the human situation. In many respects this is similar to the notoriously alleged absurdity of human existence, and certainly it reflects an alienation that is endemic to society and transcultural in complexion. The realization of absurdity might tempt one to despair; but just as we are told Sisyphus must be happy, so, in Amir's view, we must imagine him laughing. (Or better, through laughter reconciling to his ridiculous fate.) Indeed, Amir "never loses sight of the tragic overtones", and does not seek to transcend or eliminate the root tragic tension. Instead she wants to provide what "helps us live with unresolved tension" (p. x), since "living with unresolved tension of our situation is required to preserve our humanity" (p. xi). Though the equivocation is inhumane, one may wonder whether preserving our humanity is worth all the trouble, since we begin with so little of it.

Prof. Amir develops the *homo risibilis* vision, first by contrasting it with tragic visions of the human condition. This is done in a masterful survey spanning millennia of philosophy, the first of many such surveys that give the book its astonishing richness. This first discussion culminates in a particular framing of the problem as a conflict, in principle or practice, between desires in general and reason, which perceives their

ultimate futility.

The exact "formula proposed" to articulate the bind we find ourselves is quoted verbatim below. It is, according to Amir, importantly "validated further by its implicit intimations in the fundamentals of most religions and philosophies, both Eastern and Western" (p. 41). Although Amir's precise "formula" setting out the essential human tension as a conflict between reason and desire is significant enough to be repeated elsewhere in the book, it is not strictly clung to. For instance, Amir sometimes writes, not of a conflict between desire and reason, but of conflict in the very nature of desire itself. Thus at one point she concludes "that contradictions are inherent to desires" (p. 46). Is the problem *desire*; or is the problem a conflict between desire and reason? To some this may seem like a terminological point, but it seems prudent to begin with a correct analysis of the fundamental problem. The issue, related to how successfully Amir's *homo risibilis* can rival other philosophies, arises again below, where I address her general conception of desire.

In any case, the conflict so formulated is used to set up another contrast, namely amongst types of solutions to the fundamental problem. We have those that renounce desire; those that denigrate reason; and those that dump on both. All three of these approaches are found wanting. The only remaining possibility, in Amir's argument, is "abstaining from resolving the problem":

> "Since our humanity seems to depend on a precarious balance between our desires and our reason, leaving it unresolved may be the better course of action when solutions require negating one or the other, or both." (p. 56)

So instead of resolving the tragic tension she finds to be ineradicable from human nature, the power of humor is invoked as a way "to ease somewhat this tension" (p. xi). One begins to see my difficulty: if the tragic tension is better conceived as a problem within desire (rather than between desire and reason), then not only is Amir's typology of solutions cast in doubt; but also the arguments founded upon it — notably the alleged costs of alternative solutions — appear to shudder, and not with laughter.

Far more importantly, one feels the goal posts shifting.

Let me explain. We are told that, due to too high a human cost, we must put up with a tension that other traditional philosophies and world religions promise to resolve. Now even if humor is successful in lightening our load, can we really say that Amir's attempt rivals those that still aim to resolve it? Has the bar not suddenly lowered? (Or is that the boom?) If, for comparison, we were led to hope that we may overcome suffering, and then discover that in fact we may only moderate it, we may be glad of progress. But, when told to make do, are we still vying for the *original* goal? Have we not abandoned it? One might even reach the reduced goal of better adjustment without getting effectively any closer to the original promise. Rivals must play at the same game.

What if, instead humor, were a friend to them all, and rival to none? This much is clear: the power of humor to help us bear our burdens is comprehensively supported in Amir's book. In that respect, this reviewer finds little to dispute and much to celebrate. If the tragic character of our essential human tension is prodigiously documented by Amir, so is the power of humor to "transmute the tragic into the comic". Amir understands humor to be a "multidimensional construct involving simultaneously cognitive, emotive and conative or motivational components". Working through "'bisociation' or constant incongruity" (p. 104), humor "enables the simultaneous perception of multiple points of view" (p. 84), including contradictory ones. Thus it is a conceptual tool that can handle contradictions. Humor works emotionally in part by "reduc[ing] desire and impeding action"; plus "it reduces our intolerance of ambivalence" (p. 84). It can lower "shame and disgust" and leave us "more at ease when dealing with reality" (p. 85). Humor also possesses the power to "encourage self-acceptance and tolerance of others" (p. 86). Chapter 4 deals with a number of philosophical benefits of humor, starting with self-knowledge but proceeding to improved deliberation and positive self-change. Humor is lauded for "its permissiveness, its tolerant and reflective character" (p. 73).

The obvious objection to this boosterism (fair as far as it goes) is that humor may just as easily be put to opposite non-constructive uses. Doesn't humor, for its effects to be humane, require an ethics of compassion, rather than deliver one? One way Amir counteracts this objection is to lay emphasis on self-directed humor (which scorners deny even exists). Self-directed humor "encourages self-acceptance, tolerance 'of self and others' and a sense of identification with humanity'" (Amir quoting Dziemidok). But evidently self-directed humor would be especially relevant to conflicts within the self. Humor is able to grasp both inner and social conflict as exactly the sort of incongruity that feeds it. Regarding inner conflict, Amir writes:

> "Once an intrapersonal conflict is construed as an incongruity, humor is able to bring about recognition of the conflict and knowledge of its components, which then allows an individual to either live consciously with unresolved conflict or facilitate its resolution." (p. 83)

And again:

> "Intrapersonal conflict calls for self-directed or self-referential humor. …. Self-referential humor is a moderator of extreme emotions, a proponent of sympathy or empathy, a conceptual tool for holding contradictions and a form of intrapersonal communication that is conducive to philosophic self-education." (p. 81)

We see here how humor could conceivably be deployed systematically to reduce all manner of inner or intrapersonal conflict; and indeed, much the same applies to social or interpersonal conflicts, which have their roots in individual minds. But now watch. If we regard the human predicament as pervasively riddled with tragic conflict, then we can set humor to work at large. In this way *homo risibilis*, a worldview that regards the human condition as inevitably in conflict, also provides the conceptual, emotional and

motivational wherewithal to transform tragic conflict to comic incongruity, and set to work … *laughing*. Thus even though, cosmically speaking, we are "the butt of an anonymous joke" (p. 238), by adopting *homo risibilis* we "can transmute suffering into a serenity and joy that rivals the highest philosophical and religious ideals." For, the *homo risibilis* vision "construes tragic tensions as comic incongruities." We have to imagine Sisyphus laughing.

Of course the joke wears off. The effect of humor is transient. Says Amir: "The outcomes of self-referential laughter as defined until now do not last" (p. 120). This presents a snag for a proposed solution to a perennial problem. Amir's response, the heart of the important Chapter 5 of her book, is dialectical. Roughly, humor must keep at it, since its effects wear off. But bisociation is creative, and can keep coming up with humorous jokes or other new material. "[T]he very repetition that a humorous mood requires in order to reduce the tension defining the human condition is itself a higher form of the comical." (p. 119).

Thus repetition is required but "repetition itself is comical". Instead of increasing the ridiculousness of our position, however, this move dissolves it. "The humorous mood obtained through transposing tragic oppositions into comical incongruities is transitory" (p. 121); but when the mood dissipates, our ambivalence at having to repeat it is, and "remains the bread of comedy". Our amusement is now "a higher level of comic awareness" (p. 122) in that it allows for a transcending of the tragical and the comical at once. In this way, the vision of *homo risibilis,* and our comic ridiculousness itself, can be dispensed with: "Like the Buddhist's raft, the Taoist fisherman's net and Wittgenstein's ladder, we can dispose of "the ridiculous human being" vision when its benefits are reaped even more easily than these mighty philosophies can get rid of their instruments of deliverance" (p. ix; see also pp. 138, 235). It is this dialectical move that I should like to problematize.

I have assumed the infinity productivity of humor to respond ever new to the same old eternal shit-bind we are in. One can question that assumption. But even if humor is infinite, all I have is my own sense of humor, which friends and students know has its limits. And if I didn't have even that, and was - as so many people are- humourless; or if my humor is not working for me just now, when I most need it; then how does Prof. Amir's worldview help me? How can I laugh at myself if (even mistakably) I don't think I am funny (or laughable)? In a way, I am all the more laughable for even asking that (as Amir notes), but that doesn't help me while I can't see it. Unless perhaps the laughter of another could still liberate me.

The problem is: Does everyone have a funny bone? Does Amir's solution work only for those who are already humorous, and who can sustain humor in the face of calamaty? Prof. Amir admits and addresses this problem. She states that "a tragic incongruity cannot always be perceived as comical by the person while she is experiencing it". Yet (basing herself on a noted kinship between tragedy and comedy, and various other observations) she nevertheless avers the following: "I believe that most intrapersonal tragic

conflicts have the potential to *transform themselves* into comical incongruities" (p. 76. My italics.)

I was relieved here to learn that the conflicts will "transform themselves", since the Sisyphean work of comedy is exhausting, and I could use the help. But on closer examination we see that only the potential to do so is literally asserted here. The mere potential for transformation, when one might have expected assurances of effectiveness, casts doubt on Amir's claims to rival (at least the very best of) what some traditional world philosophies offer. I want to suggest that she has a solution without a method, for there is no recipe for converting tragic conflicts into humorous incongruities, nor any way to generate the necessary sense of humor in someone in dire straits and in dire need of one. Granting the insight of *homo risibilis*, it advances no yoga. (In fairness, the book never set out to deliver exercises or a routine by which one might develop and make use of humor in life; in fact, it would be well complemented by a practical workbook in future outlining a "yoga" or discipline of humor.)

I want now to return to the beginning, and look closely at the "proposed formula" with which Amir articulates the essential human tension. Amir takes the human condition to be:

> "defined by a tension between one's desires on all levels, instinctual, emotional, moral, intellectual and spiritual, and the (im)possibility of fulfilling them either in principle in practice, brought to us by reason." (p. 28; see also p. 41 and p. 236)

The difficulty I have with this framing is not the simple misunderstanding that opposes rational reason and irrational desires; Amir considers the idea and rightly puts it aside (p. 46). We can and do sometimes talk as if reason had its own desire and desire its reason. But to set desires "on all levels" (including *intellectual*) over against reason, cast as the bearer of bad news, makes this opposition lopsided and incoherent. The tension so formulated seems to slip away. Plato regarded all but just philosophical souls to be in turmoil, with desire squared off against reason, which was allied with shame, anger, and a painful concern for one's own reputation. Hume re-analyzed this messy threesome and claimed that reason had no part in the fray, that one desire was pitted against another. Now Amir nicely remarks (p. 47) that she does not know whether reason is the ruler or slave of passion, but that normative question is quite another matter. While she may thus neatly sidestep the question as to the role reason *ought to play* in the psychic economy, she can't very well plead indifference as to whether the fundamental human predicament is a clash amongst desires, or one between reason and desire. As I said, one can certainly speak of the desires of reason, or of reasonable desires. But if reason is not to be just one among so many desires, with grounds irreducible to our own satisfaction, we ought to make clear whether we are dealing most fundamentally with a conflict amongst desires — perhaps already inherent in the nature of desire — or with a conflict between the nature of desire and that of reason.

One may think that this is a mere quibble, a choice of terminology. To that extent, however, the disjunctive syllogism against her rivals becomes merely verbal. To be sure, one must allow that the words can indeed be used in different ways; and that some looseness of phraseology allows the "formula proposed" a certain neutrality across competing worldviews. But though the appearance of neutrality is thereby enabled, that only frustrates its verification. In many communicative contexts that may be just fine; (indeed, I exploit that appearance of neutrality routinely in life and in lectures). But looseness and neutrality obscure the logic of the opposition, and the dialectical synthesis withers. Indeed, at some points, Amir herself seems to lose sight of the reason-desire tension, and to frame her quasi-resolution as a reconceptualization of desire itself. Thus in a fascinating remark, she writes:

> "My own position may be considered as offering direction from the experience of desire as lack to the possibility of experiencing desire, even an unfulfilled one, as enjoyment or delight" (p. 46)

Note there is no actual mention of reason here, only old and new experience. Perhaps reason's role is to change its interpretation, its news; it now brings us the possibility of satisfaction and delight, instead of their impossibility. But then it is reason that has changed, reason that was in error, reason that was the problem. But reason is not mentioned here at all, though the experience of desire transforms. So it seems in the end rather to be desire that must change if our tension would lessen; desire is the problem, not any reason-desire conflict.

Now there is something miraculous indeed if desire as lack could simply be re-experienced, or even reinterpreted, as "enjoyment or delight". Imagine if the pain of unrequited love could somehow just be re-experienced as delight, and suffering as enjoyment. We would do more than merely "ease somewhat the tension"; we would once again rival the highest aims of the great traditional philosophies. So perhaps this is a more promising path. But I doubt it. I think more will be required than interpretation, more than reason itself, to convert each lack into a delight, and every absence of the beloved object into its enjoyment. For that, not logic, but magic alone will suffice.

The worry I have about the formulated opposition between reason and desire "at all levels" goes deeper than the mismatch of generality. Is it even a clear idea — "desire at all levels"? At that extreme level of generality, is there still coherence? Surely Wittgenstein has taught us that not everything by the same name is the same kind. And yet we read the following in Amir, explain how she came to her general conception of desire:

> "It comes as no surprise, then, that the terminology used in various discussions on desire is not fixed. ... This dialogue of the deaf, ... led me, while attempting a synthesis, to use "desire" in the most encompassing way. Thus, to account for this variety while avoiding ontological determinations, I understand by desire all the efforts of human nature designated by such words as appetites, needs, drives,

> impulsions, wishes, hopes, etc. It follows that contradictions are intrinsic to desires." (p. 45)

Notice that the contradictory nature of desire follows directly from the definition of desire. Reason has nothing to do with it. But vagueness is no synthesis. Far from avoiding them, generality includes the subsumed ontological determinations. As intimated above, this impossibly broad" definition" casts Amir threefold typology of solutions into doubt, while yet giving us no aid in analyzing the problem of desire, whose contradictions may be our tragic tension. And there are more serious consequences as well, primarily whether *homo risibilis*, in ameliorating our tensions, can still claim "to reach the highest promises of philosophy and religion, of the East and West".

To illustrate the problem consider Theravada Buddhism. When discussing Buddhism, Amir appears to be thinking mostly of later developments within Mahayana. With regard to Theravada Buddhism, however, one may even complain of misrepresentation. In fact there are reasons to doubt that Amir's "formula" really is "implicit[ly] intimat[ed] in the fundamentals" of the religion.

While one can certainly discern a broad resemblance to the Buddha's teaching in Amir's formulation of the human predicament, the parallels soon fall apart. Amir's tragic starting point corresponds well enough to the Buddha's First Noble Truth, which is the universality of *dukkha*, often translated as suffering, but fittingly also as "unsatisfactoriness", as if life were "out of joint" (like an injured shoulder) or "dysfunctional" (like a broken axle — life rides rough). Amir summarizes her description of the human predicament as "dissatisfaction" (p.4 1); *dukkha* is clearly a lack, rather than a delight. The fit appears appears to remain fairly close when we come to the Buddha's Second Noble Truth. Though Amir discerns the essential human tension between desire and reason, the Buddha assigns the cause of human misery directly to *tanhā*, which indeed has often been translated as *desire*.

That translation, however, badly distorts the Buddha's insight, as becomes crystal clear when we learn in the Third Noble Truth that the cure for the dis-ease of *dukkha* is the eradication of *tanhā*. Thus Amir classifies Buddhism as among those world religions that teach us to renounce our desires (lack or delight). However, if we use the term *desire* in Amir's broad and even unwieldy sense, that conclusion is quite misleading. Buddhism does not teach that liberation requires you to renounce and eradicate all your "emotional, moral, intellectual and spiritual" desires. To renounce intellectual and spiritual desires for the sake of knowing the truth and spiritual development must be considered an outright impossibility. That said, intellectual and spiritual desires are not perfectly innocent, either. So, to understand desire in the comprehensive way Amir does badly distorts the Buddhist understanding of the problem, and misconstrues its solutions.

One does a little better by using the words "craving" or "clinging" to translate *tanhā*, for then it is only craving or clinging which must be got rid of, not "desires at all levels" (to use Amir's phrase). But is there no earnest yearning? Better still, one might translate

tanhā with the more complete phrase "desire-based-in-self". Then the Buddhist formula for overcoming the tragedy of existence is to eliminate desire-based-in-self, not desire *tout cour*. Intellectual and spiritual desires based in self, which the Buddha denounces as "attachment to views", are recognized as a major source of our problems, but not intellectual or spiritual desire as such. Non-self-regarding desires, such as wishes for other people's benefit, desire to understand, and the determination to eradicate desire-based-in-self, need not be harmful at all; they may even be perfected into the spiritual virtues like wisdom and compassion. In other words, it is the entanglements of self that bring about suffering, according to Buddhism. The problem indeed is not so much desire as what or how we desire. And it is not because, as Amir suggests, we cannot in practice or principle fulfill desires. Fulfilled desires-based-in-self are no less out-of-joint, dysfunctional, and unsatisfactory than unfulfilled ones. Desire fulfilled is also suffering, according to the Buddha. If reason perceives this flaw, it does not thereby become part of the problem; and really it is just calm awareness that perceives the problem, not any chain of reasoning. Nor is reason really part of the solution, which does not consists in a compelling argument, or a persuasive rationale, but a discipline of volition (*i.e.*, a yoga).

These considerations cast quite a different light on Amir's advice, which perhaps makes the humor solution seem more complete than perhaps it is. She writes:

> "we should also be wary of solutions that urge us to renounce our desires, lest we be dehumanized by a solution that purports to do away with that which makes us human" (p. 56)

The backhand critique is that religion, including Buddhism as just outlined, obliterates the human in us, which drives its costs too high. But must we preserve humanity just to enjoy the joke? Which cost is too high? How costly is "desire at all levels"? Does Prof. Amir think, for instance, that "intellectual and spiritual" desires are on the chopping block in Buddhist meditation? In any case, it is quite wrong to claim, as she does baldly on p. 43), that "Ethical reflection on desire originates in Greek philosophy". Tacit qualifications were no doubt intended, but should not have been left unstated.

Amir is concerned that the eradication of desires will result in the obliteration of the human. At this point, it seems to me, Amir's argument becomes ideological, since it rests on the non-empirical concept of human nature, a well-known political football. Indeed, if we insist that she stick in *this* concern to her impossibly broad definition of desire, the claim becomes untenable. Surely not *all* desires are essential to human kind. So we may demand to know which desires are we actually able to do without. And we might even decide some desires are worth keeping, without thereby committing ourselves to any essentialist claims of human nature. But again, put aside the whole question of human nature, a derived notion, and ask what goes to the main: which sorts of desires can humor best keep alive, and which laugh out of existence, to be replaced by a delight even their satisfaction could not provide? In this light, a sympathetic Buddhist perspective on humor might see it rather as a feature of the smiling teacher's renowned *upāya*, or *skillful means,* in teaching.

One last question about compassion: is it a necessary input to or an outcome fostered by humor? Amir tabulates it as chief among the ethical benefits of assuming *homo risibilis*, and we may grant here (what remains perhaps disputable) that humor softens the heart and strengths compassion. But does humor create compassion, or merely intensify it? And can it not also reduce it? Humor might spread compassion or shrink it. Amir covers the positive and negative results of humor that sociology has documented; but relies on the positive results to create the sorts of self-change, reduced tension and "identification with humanity" that support her case. Yet the negative side of humor also shows itself, sometimes in sad and sickly forms, *even in self-directed humor*. Sometimes we laugh at ourselves in all the wrong ways, even unto death. And yet, the necessity of some compassion to begin with, lest humor become mean and destructive, is not squarely a critique of Amir's position, any more than the existence of compassionless physicians refutes medical science. Perhaps the appearance of critique comes from the harsher connotations, impossible to avoid in English, of especially the verb form, *to ridicule*. Our hearts may be defrosted by our own ridiculousness, but when did compassion ever mock or ridicule?

In a final word, that again and perhaps inevitably must seem more critical than it is: *homo risibilis* is not - after all - ridiculous, is not to be ridiculed, taunted or derided. *Homo risibilis* is precisely risible, laughable, able to be roused by laughter, and worthy of a send-up.