

Humor and the Good Life

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Abstract

The significance of humor for the good life is well attested in various disciplines, such as medicine, psychology, sociology. How come that philosophy – the custodian of the good life – is considered to be silent about it? In what follows, I suggest that contrary to common opinion, humor and laughter have been given a significant role in philosophers' visions of the good life. In this article, I concentrate on three Modern philosophers—the third earl of Shaftesbury, Johann Georg Hamann, and Søren Kierkegaard—and I argue that humor's significance for the philosophic good life, although significantly enhanced by these philosophers, has not been exhausted by their thought. I conclude by a short presentation of a new worldview I call *homo risibilis*.

Key Words: humor, the good life, Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard, *Homo risibilis*

Introduction: Humor and the philosophers' good life

The relations philosophy entertains with laughter and the comical, antedating its relation with humor, are complex and rich, yet they are only recently being uncovered by contemporary philosophers (Halliwell, 2008; Nussbaum, 2009; Amir, 2013). The reasons for contemporary ignorance are varied (see Amir 2014b), but modern philosophers, who were better educated than we are, were familiar with Ancient philosophers' use of the comical. Although few modern philosophers take laughter as their signature, those who do rekindle Ancient philosophers' interest in laughter and the role it fulfills within the philosophic good life. This is not to say that the moderns did not devise new uses for laughter to cater for the contemporary challenges their worldviews met. For example, the epistemological role of laughter is a modern development we owe to the Neo-Platonic Third Earl of Shaftesbury's association of laughter with truth. And the view that considers the world's contingency comical is a later development we mainly owe to the 20th century philosophers George Santayana and Clément Rosset.

Modern philosophers who gave a form of the comical an important role within the good life should be further divided according to their interest in laughter or humor, I suggest, because these phenomena are different. True, today we often use “humor” as an umbrella term for the comical, but this is confusing when looking for past uses of laughter. Thus, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Johann Georg Hamann, and Søren Kierkegaard are interested in laughter, but they mostly emphasize humor, as well as good humor and wit (Shaftesbury), irony (Hamann), and irony and the comical (Kierkegaard). But Michel Montaigne, Friedrich Nietzsche, and George

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Santayana use “laughter” in their writings (as well as foolishness – Montaigne – and the comical – Nietzsche and Santayana). The 16th century French philosopher had no much choice, as the word “humeur” did not have the comical denotation “humour” acquired in the British enlightenment. But the 19th and 20th philosophers Nietzsche and Santayana were accomplished aestheticians, and therefore their choice should be respected. A further group of philosophers, who infuse the recommended good life with some form of the comical, comprise Nietzsche’s French laughing followers, George Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Clément Rosset. Although usually considered post-modern philosophers, their form of laughter should be set apart from Post-modern laughter and irony.

Only these nine philosophers, I have found, entrust laughter or humor with an important role within the good life they propose. It is interesting to note that Henri Bergson, the sole philosopher who wrote a book on laughter (1911), does not entrust it with a significant role within the good life, when his late philosophy is taken into account.² This leads us to the following observation: philosophers who entrust laughter or humor with an important role within the good life are not necessarily the best theoreticians of the comical nor the best comical writers. But the former explicitly argue for the significance of their preferred form of the comical within the good life they offered. This invites a systematic study of their claims. And, in order to do justice to these thinkers’ views, an understanding of their views of the comical also in relation to the tragic is necessary for a fuller presentation of their attitude toward laughter, humor and related concepts, in relation to their visions of the good life.³

In the following exposition of the role of humor in the modern good life, I follow the argument presented in my monograph, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* (2014), as enlightened by the further insights I have since gained.⁴

² See the Appendix in Amir, *Laughter and the Good Life: Montaigne, Nietzsche, Santayana* (Work under contract for SUNY Press).

³ I have undertaken this study in what has now become a series of monographs: *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), is to be followed by *Laughter and the Good Life: Montaigne, Nietzsche, Santayana* (Work under contract for SUNY Press), and *Nietzsche’s French Laughing Philosophers: Bataille, Deleuze, Rosset* (Work in Process).

⁴ Since the publication of my first monograph on this subject (2014), I have further developed its views within a series of publications which elaborate on Kierkegaard’s relation to Antiquity (2013a) Kierkegaard’s relation to Shaftesbury (2014c), Shaftesbury’s practical philosophy (2015), as well as further improved my own vision of the role of humor within the good life which I initially exposed in the third and final chapter of the monograph (2014c; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c). Forthcoming are also further studies of the religious import of Hamann’s view of humor (2016b) and of Shaftesbury, Hamann, and Kierkegaard’s views of humor as related to religious truth (2016a).

The Third Earl of Shaftesbury

The study of humor and the good life in Modern philosophy begins with the British Enlightenment philosopher, the third earl of Shaftesbury. At least, this is what I have argued and believed until I engaged more deeply with Michel de Montaigne's views. I now understand that, among many other writers, Shaftesbury is a follower of Montaigne, as already William Hazlitt noted (Hazlitt 1966, p. 47). The most British humorist among the French (Escarpit 1960), Montaigne advanced views on laughter which qualify some of it as "humor" (Cameron 1966). As Montaigne could not use in the 16th century the word humor in its comical, modern sense, the modern study of humor and the good life *strictu sensu* begins with Shaftesbury.

As part of his defense of the freedom of speech, Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury, made an un-precedented and since unequalled defense of wit and humor. Recognizing philosophy's practical potential if taken out of manuscripts and universities, he thought of putting philosophy to use in educating the new class of citizens emerging in the British Enlightenment (see Amir 2015). As right reasoning improves one's moral life, which for the Deist Shaftesbury is the whole content of the good life, we need to make reasoning attractive by making it witty and humorous. And, as good humor enables us to grasp the benevolence of true reality and the goodness of human nature, humor should fight melancholy. Shaftesbury's originality lies in his attempt to associate reason, truth, and humor or ridicule in such an inextricable way that by making reasoning important, he also makes humor important for philosophy; and by trusting truth's power to withstand all tests, he also entrusts ridicule with the mighty task of testing it. Thus, his originality lies in his unprecedented and unparalleled defense of humor, wit, ridicule, and good humor as important epistemological tools that promote truth and rationality.

Shaftesbury considers ridicule a test of truth, humor a tool for reason, properly educated laughter a form of critical reflection, and good humor or cheerfulness the disposition in which philosophical and religious truth are most effectively comprehended. Because he associates the comic with truth, he views humor as a necessary tool for self-education and moral advice in the philosopher's inner dialogue, conversation, and writing. He is mainly remembered, however, for the view that ridicule is the test of truth.

By challenging the melancholy of solitary reason, humor exchanges life-denying solitude for life-promoting good humor, a necessary condition for understanding truth—the world's harmony, human goodness, God's good humor and Christianity's cheerfulness—and for appropriately creating in oneself the virtuous and good-humored character that constitutes the good life. As a liberating, life-giving, and life-forming power of the soul, humor is constitutive of the Shaftesburean good life, for without humor, the good life cannot be attained nor maintained (see Amir 2014, chap. 1).

In stating that ridicule is a test of truth, that humor and good humor have a habilitating function with regard to truth, that to be effective criticism must be humorous, and that humor is the mark of rationality, Shaftesbury assigns humor an unparalleled role within philosophy. The view that criticism must be humorous in order to be effective has antecedents in moral exoteric philosophy. The rest of Shaftesbury's views are extremely original. Plato defines the comical in the *Philebus* (48A–50B) as unaware self-ignorance, and argues for the comical's necessity in the *Laws* (VII, 816D–E) by emphasizing its cognitive role in teaching its opposite, seriousness (Jouët-Pastré 1998; Amir 2013). Shaftesbury's Neo-Platonism may transpire in his disclosure of the negative role of ridicule with regard to truth, but the habilitating role of humor and good humor with regard to truth is unprecedented and to this day un-followed.

After having been at the heart of a raging controversy about ridicule's relation with truth and reason, the view that ridicule is a test of truth gained followers in the 18th century. That humor has a habilitating function with regard to truth influenced Johann Georg Hamann, Shaftesbury's translator and admirer, and through Hamann and otherwise as well, it impacted the young Søren Kierkegaard.

Johann Georg Hamann

The 18th century German philosopher, Johann Georg Hamann, adopted Shaftesbury's view of the habilitating role of humor with regard to truth. He agrees with Shaftesbury on the correspondence of true humor to reality and therefore on the view that humor represents the state of mind in which truth is best apprehended. However, truth, for Hamann, is the reality of Christ that can only be apprehended by faith. Hamann follows Shaftesbury in holding that humor (and Hamann adds irony) is epistemologically necessary for grasping the truth, but differs from Shaftesbury on the contents of the truth. Contrary to the usual philosophic categories, humor and irony are the only appropriate modes of thought for grasping the truth, that is, the "Word that has become flesh."

Humor affirms that God is wholly other and that Divine reason is fundamentally disjunctive with human reason and consequently bound to appear absurd to humans. For Hamann, humor is the appropriate human attitude toward Divine folly because only in the absurd does the possibility of seeing God arise. The significance of humor, then, is not only to expose the impoverished state of finite reason, but also to laugh at all human attempts to scale the heavens with unassisted understanding. Humor's positive function is higher than irony's negative function: it opens up the individual into accepting the reality of paradoxical truth and ultimately the highest paradox of all—the incarnation. Thus, for Hamann, humor is the road to salvation (see Amir, 2014, *Intermezzo*).

Hamann is an important link between Shaftesbury and Søren Kierkegaard, as Hamann appropriates Shaftesbury's view of the epistemological role of humor and passes it on to his only

disciple, Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard could have known about Shaftesbury from other sources than Hamann, however, such as Johann G. von Herder and Karl Friedrich Flögel (see Amir 2014c).

Søren Kierkegaard

The Danish 19th century philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, found in Hamann not only his vision of the epistemological role of humor, but also a model for using irony and humor as indirect communication in the service of Christianity. Early in his career, Kierkegaard adheres to Hamann's view of humor and considers Christianity the most humorous form of life. Eventually disengaging himself from Hamann, he changes his mind and argues that Christianity is inaccessible to humor. Humor, however, is a way of life for Kierkegaard, a phase that can help the intellectual accede to faith, and a mask of the truly religious man.

As a way of life, humor is a worldview in which the tragic and the comic are held in balance and the fundamental paradox of life and the contradictions of individual existence are given full expression. This is the worldview that represents philosophy as lived thought, as epitomized by Socrates. Kierkegaard criticizes organized religion, proposing instead a tragic faith characterized by resignation, guilt, suffering and dread. The Kierkegaardian religious life can be chosen from the approximating vantage point, which is the humorous worldview. At the highest level of existence, which is Christian faith, humor is still possible, but only as an incognito, as a mask to hide the profound religiousness of the true Christian.

By equating humor with philosophy, Kierkegaard attributes to humor the highest possible role within philosophy as he conceives it. The main problem with his view of humor results from its dependence on his view of religion. This accounts for the subordinate role he gives humor with regard to religion and for his view of humor as tied up with God, guilt, and suffering.

The comical has an original role to play within Kierkegaard's philosophy as well. The comic is not the highest category for Kierkegaard, as it is subsumable under the tragic not only in the hierarchy of life's stages, but within each stage as well. Within these limitations, however, the comic fulfills a crucial role in the Kierkegaardian good life: it is an instrument of truth, the primary tool of philosophy once it steps into the new existential role Kierkegaard designed for it, which is to lead the individual towards worshiping the true God.

The comic is the main criterion of advancement one has on the negative Kierkegaardian theological ladder and the only positive indicator of one's relation to the truth. Kierkegaard maintains, I suggest, that only by examining the content of our laughter can we know the sort of person we are. For lack of an external criterion for inward advancement, which is the sole progress Kierkegaard recognizes, the comic is the main tool of examination, correction, and

evaluation an individual possesses for reflecting on himself, his life, and his personal experiences, and for communicating this to others.

In order to fulfill its role in promoting truth, the comic becomes for Kierkegaard an ethical-religious category. Kierkegaard's ethics of the comic, devised on the basis of his hierarchy of existential spheres, prescribes a correct use of the comic, which will lead to the good life. The ethics of the comic justifies laughter when an individual's existential position in life is higher than the position at which one is laughing. Through this device, Kierkegaard makes certain that his edifying lessons on the comic bear on his lessons on the good life, because laughing well is living well for Kierkegaard.

The epistemological role of the comic is at the heart of Kierkegaard's ethics of the comic, as Kierkegaard indicates by referring to Shaftesbury just before introducing his views on the comical in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1992, p. 512-13). Kierkegaard never mentions the Enlightenment philosopher again by name; yet he paraphrases Shaftesbury in several places in the journals and in his published works, notably making the Shaftesburean "laughter the test of truth" his own ("the test of jest" [*Journals and Papers*, 2, p. 213]).

In his ethics of the comical, Kierkegaard provides the criterion to differentiate between true ridicule and false ridicule which Shaftesbury's original thesis of the epistemological role of humor assumes but does not provide. Unless Kierkegaard is seen as partaking in the debate about ridicule's relation to truth, the sense of what he attempts to do with the comical is lost and the immense significance he attributes to it can hardly be accounted for (see Amir 2014, chap. 2).

Homo risibilis

The three philosophers studied above are religious. Their visions of the role of humor within the good life is ultimately also a vision of its role within religion, and an argument about philosophy's relation to religion. We should be careful to assume that humor is beneficial only within religious worldviews, however. Humor's potency is better revealed, I believe, without religion's solace. *Homo risibilis* is a skeptical worldview I advance, which is predicated on self-referential laughter.⁵ It means the ridiculous human being, and its thesis is that being aware of our necessary ridicule liberates us from it.

⁵ Self-referential laughter, advocated by Democritus, the Laughing Philosopher from the 5th century B.C., Seneca, Montaigne, Thomas More, Nietzsche and Santayana, and exemplified by the emblematic teacher of philosophy, Socrates, is considered by Daniel Dennett the paradigm of all humor (Hurley et al. 2011, pp. 131-3), and is singled out by Avital Ronell as constitutive of philosophic consciousness (Ronell 2003, pp. 298-9).

Variouly defined, the human condition has been mostly interpreted as paradoxical and the human being as contradictory.⁶ Opposition may be seen within the individual, between persons or groups, in the very nature of things, or all three. At the individual level, we have a predilection for reading the psyche as an internal struggle between contending forces. The heart of the tragic is the divided personality, and the theme of the inner torment of the tragic psyche has had a long history, from Sophocles' King Oedipus, through Plato, Paul, the Middle Ages, Shakespeare, the Romantics, Dostoevsky, till Freud.

The common ground of most religions and philosophies, both Eastern and Western, has been to solve the constitutive contradiction. It can be defined as the discrepancy between our desires on the instinctual, emotional, and intellectual levels, and between our awareness of the impossibility of fulfilling them, for practical as well as principled reasons.

Solutions to the human condition come at a price, however. Were we to find a way to endure, if not enjoy, this contradiction, it would be better not to dispose of our humanity by giving up one of the poles that define it: desires, on one hand, and the (im)possibility of fulfilling them, brought by reason, on the other. Desires are spiritual, intellectual, emotional, instinctual, ranging from the yearning to meaning and understanding, love and happiness, to needs for sex and food. And, our rational or cognitive powers enlighten us about the practical or principled reasons that make it impossible for us to satisfy our desires.

We may want to leave the conflict unresolved when the price of resolving it requires relinquishing either our rational powers, or renouncing the desires we identify as characterizing us no less than our reason. Most religious and philosophical solutions to the basic human predicament require renouncing one or more aspects of our humanity as we know it. Theories of redemption, or peace of mind, either Eastern or Western, religious or non-religious, can be divided into general types. The first type negates desire. The second type of theories makes light of reason's limitations. The third type of theories denigrates both desire and reason (see Amir 2014; 2014d).

If we accept that humans are doomed to an everlasting clash between desires and their satisfaction, the human condition lends itself to a double and contradictory evaluation as both comic and tragic. The possibility of characterizing the human condition as both tragic and comic is insufficient for favoring the comic interpretation over the tragic. An additional argument is required: I suggest that something that is both tragic and comic, or that has the potential to be either tragic or comic, cannot in the last account, be solely tragic. The tragic lacks the capacity of uniting contradictions that the comic possesses. Thus, a comical vision of sorts is the sole vision, I suggest, that enables us to view the human condition simultaneously as comic and tragic.

⁶ For the following description of *Homo risibilis*, I rely heavily on Amir 2014, chap. 3, and especially on Amir 2014c.

Humor is effective in reducing the tension of these inherent contradictions whose instances we experience daily. The reduction of tension that humor affords helps us opt for deliberately leaving the basic human conflict unresolved. We can endure the basic human contradiction through a humorous mood which reduces its tension by converting tragic oppositions into comical incongruities (see Amir 2012; Amir 2014, chap. 3). But the humorous mood brought about by transposing tragic oppositions into comical incongruities is transitory. When it dissolves, the individual finds himself emotionally humiliated and conceptually amused by the awareness of repeatedly transmuted tragic oppositions into comical incongruities, with an ever new capacity for suffering the former and no steady results from the latter.

Repetition itself is comical, however. The awareness that takes place instead of the humorous mood, I suggest, is ridiculousness, the view of human beings as ridiculous or *Homo risibilis*. *Homo risibilis* is a fitting description of humankind because of the necessary seriousness and ensuing suffering with which we take ourselves and our endeavors in conjunction with the view that in the large scale of things we and our endeavors are futile; for lack of proof of the contrary, we rightly assume the latter view. This is tantamount to experiencing reality first as tragic (reality is serious and brings suffering) and construing it as comical (reality is futile).

Other theories have attempted to teach us lessons about our humiliation, frustration, and resulting humility. Their road is more arduous, first, because they involve metaphysical presuppositions on whose knowledge my future well-being depends; and, second, the road they propose is quite different from the end, making their lessons intangible and thus less productive. But a vision that uses humor guarantees some pleasure in the process of implementing it: the pill being necessarily sugared, it is more readily digested.

Moreover, looking at life through its incongruities is especially suited to philosophers because of their sensitivity to contradictions, logical and ethical. Enjoying incongruities forces the philosopher to supplement reason's limitations through the rest of his being. It makes him cohere as a human and a mind, a social being and a philosopher, a lover of wisdom and a lover of truth.

This coherence is possible because it is predicated on necessarily being at odds with oneself. Whilst existential theories of authenticity may claim the same, they lack the appeal to make it happen. In contradistinction to humor, anxiety, boredom, nausea, suicide are not very attractive.⁷

⁷ In her attempt to devise an ethics out of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir points to the possibility of assuming the failure that is the human being: "Man makes himself a lack, but he can deny the lack as lack and affirm himself as a positive existence. He then assumes the failure... To attain his truth man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it. He rejoins himself only to the extent that he agrees to remain at a distance from himself" (de Beauvoir 1970, p. 13). It is unclear, however, how one is led to such a task, as sober realization if often not sufficient for change.

It is noteworthy that theorists of the absurd lack a sense of humor. They seem to forget that the absurd is a category of the comic. The playwrights of the absurd consider our ridicule tragic. But a comedic vision of life, faithful to both its tragic and comical aspects, is beyond the comic and the tragic, as John Burns has recently noted in characterizing “comedy” as “outside the alternatives of tragic and comic” (Burns 2014, p. xiv).

Once ridicule is acknowledged, it disappears (Baudelaire [1968]; Bergson [1911]). Self-knowledge and self-acceptance free us from ridicule. We regain our dignity. Unbothered by internal conflicts, we are free to act on behalf of others.

Other paths that lead to joyfulness may achieve as much. There is a special characteristic of the life lived in full acknowledgment of one’s ridicule, however, as one’s personal dignity and self-esteem do not arise from comparison with others. If comparison is the thief of joy, as Teddy Roosevelt said, and competition cannot be the aim of life, as Bertrand Russell argues in the third chapter of his *Conquest of Happiness* (1930), ridiculous human being finds no use for envy, jealousy, anger, and other comparative emotions. There is no one to compare oneself to, as ridicule equalizes. And, the only self-esteem available to us stems from our sense of truthfulness, which, if made our supreme maxim, is, at least according to Kant, “the maximum of inner worth” (Kant 2006, p. 195).

An egalitarian vision free of the metaphysical assumptions required by Christianity and Buddhism is particularly apt to found an ethics of compassion. Joy is not only a predictor of ethics, as Nietzsche, Benedict Spinoza, and contemporary research indicate (Argyle 1987, pp. 216-7), but has an epistemological function as well. It enables us to withstand more truth about reality, which in turn secures the ground of our serenity.

Serenity or tranquility is a goal of Eastern philosophies and religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as Western philosophies and religions such as all Hellenistic philosophies, Neo-Platonism, and the philosophies of Spinoza and Santayana. Religions that aim at redemption also aim at serenity. I have criticized above these philosophies and religions for the means that lead to that goal, renouncing desires or reason or both, but I believe their goal is both worthy and within reach.

Apart from the Hellenistic and Roman philosophy of Pyrrhonism,⁸ the proposal outlined here is the only skeptical worldview I know of that aims at such an ideal and the only one to use humor

⁸ Pyrrhonists graphically declare that peace of mind follows the suspension of judgment like a shadow following the body: we suspend all judgments because of the skeptical doubts that undermine all dogmatic claims to knowledge, and tranquility follows the suspension of judgment—in technical terms *ataraxía* follows *epochē*—like a “shadow following the body” (Laertius 1925, 9.107; Sextus Empiricus 2000, 1.29). This means that we achieve tranquility as a result of suspending judgment without intending to do so (Sextus Empiricus 2000, 1.25-30).

to reach it. In contradistinction to Pyrrhonists, however, whose skeptical task leading to peace is arduous, the one proposed here is more humble. It is self-enabling, moreover, due to the pleasure humor secures and the benevolent way in which one treats oneself in humor (Freud 1928).

Furthermore, the sort of humor described shortly in this article and at length elsewhere (Amir 2012; Amir 2014), can be learned without requiring special comedic skills. Its benefits are in proportion to its use, and the serenity it offers is gradual. The tragic sense of life that it assumes is common enough to make it serviceable to most, if not all, who wish to use it.

Finally, *Homo risibilis* amounts to a harmonious congruence with myself, others, and the world, a situation that all philosophies seek to establish in their attempt to overcome alienation (Cooper 1996, p. 5). By considering conflicts as normal because they are constitutive of the complex being I am and the complicated relations I entertain with and in a world I do not fully understand, *Homo risibilis* echoes Heraclitus' phrase: "They do not understand that in being at variance with itself that it coheres with itself: a backward stretching harmony, as of a bow or a lyre" (Diels and Kranz 1972, Heraclitus, B51, 80). If David Cooper is right about the initial philosophical spur, the view proposed here inserts itself in the history of philosophical attempts to overcome alienation, and does it successfully, I believe, without unwarranted assumptions or other unnecessary difficulties.

Through a multi-stage process involving a systematic use of humor to discipline 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 rivaling the highest philosophic and religious ideals. This achievement is gradual and is based on changing visions according to one's capacity to transmute suffering into joy through the alchemy of humor. 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 tragi-comic protagonist that describes each of us. The freedom that results is characterized by joy, happiness, and peace.

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