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Christine A. James\*: *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition: Taking Ridicule Seriously*, Lydia Amir. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. pp. xv + 305.

Over the last few decades, the philosophy of comedy has begun to develop a set of specific questions that have provided a wealth of insights: for example, the ethics of jokes within social and political philosophy; or the incongruity theory of humor within epistemology; or the role of humor in healing and applied bioethics; or the cognitive difference between types of humor related to philosophy of mind and neurobiology. What was needed in the literature, and what Lydia Amir achieves in her new book, is a comprehensive view of humor that connects a variety of areas of philosophy in a framework. The conceptual framework that is introduced and developed by Amir is that of the *Homo risibilis*: not merely the human being as laughing, but the human being who understands their condition, sees the ridiculousness and humor within it, and then transcends that ridiculousness.

As stated in the introduction, *Homo risibilis* is a worldview that embraces contradictions in order to address effectively the ambiguities of the human condition, without losing sight of the tragic undertones of the human condition. Over the course of the book, the concept of the tragic and the comedic are both addressed in detail, with carefully constructed insights from a variety of philosophers (from the ancient Greeks to the Enlightenment to more recent Continental thinkers, Immanuel Kant to G. W. F. Hegel to Arthur Schopenhauer) and theorists of comedy (from John Morreall to Harry Frankfurt, Heinz Kohut, and Joel Kupperman). Amir catalogues the variety of philosophical reflection on the human condition throughout chapters 1–4, and Chapter 5 is where the concept of *Homo risibilis* is fully formed.

*Homo risibilis* is the view that the human being is inherently ridiculous, a step further than the concept of *Homo ridens* (the laughing animal). The *Homo risibilis* is founded on the insight that the human is not merely the species that laughs at itself, but is also laughable and aware of its own ridiculousness.

Amir's text is able to bring together a specific set of philosophical time periods and concepts to give new insight into the human condition. For example, the idea of the absurdity of the human condition associated with Albert Camus and the existentialists is synthesized with theories of comedy that rely on conceptual understanding and incongruity associated with earlier philosophers such as Kant. The incongruity of our expectations of life with the actuality of

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the human condition gives *Homo risibilis* relevance to many approaches to humor. For example, Amir explains in Chapter 5 the concept of the absurd and how recognizing laughable situations is necessary for resolution, especially cognitive resolution regarding the human being's understanding of their own condition. This kind of resolution is typically described as unreachable in existentialist philosophy, but Amir makes the case convincingly that there is a potential for this kind of resolution by bringing together a range of examples from Aristophanes, to Kant and Hegel.

In Chapter 6 the concept of *Homo risibilis* is brought into relationship with the work of more recent theorists of comedy, such as Ted Cohen and Simon Critchley. Self-realization, and self-laughter, are described by Amir as a form of self-knowledge once again: "I believe that reflection on and recognition of one's own ridiculousness suffices to qualify as a comedic judge." Indeed, this process of reflection is needed for having a full human life, with joy and happiness—the "*hilaritas*" described by Benedict Spinoza as joy and cheerfulness emanating from "the whole self."

The concept of "the whole self" is challenging (for example in Richard Taylor's libertarian response to the question of free will, where free acts are those done by the self as a "whole being"). But this idea of *Homo risibilis* helps us to connect our awareness of the ridiculousness of our own life, with our ability and tendency to use humor to deal with life. Amir is describing how we use humor to construct our own individual history. Her account promises "a rich account of both comic and tragic aspects of life, as well as the potential to overcome them to attain timeless and steady joy."

Chapter 7 provides an account of the ethical implications of *Homo risibilis*. The knowledge of one's own ridiculous condition, and that of others, provides a way to view the self and others with compassion. It is important to note that this compassion is not rooted in any particular religion or doctrine, but in understanding of the human condition as a universal condition: "*Homo risibilis* founds an ethics of compassion based on an egalitarian view of humanity exemplified by all, without subscribing to Schopenhauer's metaphysical assumptions, or any kind of mysticism, religion or spirituality." This provides a unique bridge between ethics and epistemology: *Homo risibilis* is both skeptical and secular.

The most intriguing areas of the book that may be explained further and may be fruitful for future research include the perspective in Chapter 7 that *Homo risibilis* can be discarded when no longer needed. The theory of *Homo risibilis* has excellent explanatory power, and provides a clear connection to compassion. But if there is a theory of development for the individual self, the discarding of *Homo risibilis* at some specific stage of development needs to be clarified. For example, is there a way to tell when to discard? Are there benefits of a life

that continues to remain conscious of the ridiculous/laughable nature of the human condition we all share?

It is a wonderful virtue of Amir's text that there are a variety of points which can inspire future research and new directions for the philosophy of humor. For example, in Chapter 1, the tragic sense of life is described as the confronting of dualities, such as the mind and body, or the biological self and the self as a product of sociocultural constructions. I think there are a variety of other dualities described both by examples of comedy performance, and dualities in specific contexts (performance compared to teaching, for example) that would be well served by future research using Amir's concept.

Another area of the book that deserves further attention comes in Chapter 4, with the section on women's experience. For example, the concept of *Homo risibilis* is related to women's self-acceptance. Amir is careful to point out that this kind of self-acceptance is predicated on change over time; and the example of women's liberation is an excellent one. I would like to see further research on how this connects to comedy and humor for other members of groups that are underrepresented or who have been historically left out of certain discussions of humor, and performances of comedy.

In sum, Amir's text brings together a wealth of different perspectives from the history of philosophy as well as theories of humor, resulting in a very new and insightful concept of *Homo risibilis*. Hopefully in acknowledging the human condition as ridiculous in this way, we can achieve, as Amir says in the conclusion, a "harmonious congruence with the self, others, and the world."