

Now Go Practice

Miriam van der Valk*

Abstract: Showing that philosophical practice is ready and set for engagement in society, I bring up the possibility for philosophical takes on psychological methods and models, and introduce the term ‘entelechial agency’ as a loadstar for a combination of what can be taught and learned, and what is acquired by practice and training.

Key words: philosophical practice, humor, adult-to-adult, *homo risibilis*, entelechial agency

In *Rethinking Philosophers’ Responsibility*, Lydia Amir examines the role of philosophy in our contemporary world. Philosophy, that is, as a practical discipline, and the ways in which it can answer to contemporary needs. Fourteen chapters in six parts, among which we find *Global Concerns, Vital Tools and Conflict Irresolution*. Two underlying themes loom large throughout the book, Amir writes in her introduction; “One is the acknowledgement of the invaluable work undertaken by practical philosophers in picking up where academic philosophers have lost interest.” Sounds promising, doesn’t it? The other is “a novel philosophical theory of humor ... that enables self-transformation through intra-personal dialogue.”¹⁾ Humor is seriously philosophical—and it’s what got me hooked on Amir a few years ago.²⁾ To me, reading Lydia Amir is a bit like having an unacknowledged weight lifted off your shoulders, or like

* Filoprax Göteborgs Filosofiska Praktik, Sweden.

E-mail: kontakt@filoprax.se

1) L. Amir (2017), p. 4.

2) Notably her book *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* and the chapter “The Tragic Sense of the Good Life” in *The Socratic Handbook* (both from 2015.)

stepping out of the fog. “Oh,” you think to yourself, “of course. Ah.” And you walk on, lighter. In this article, I’ll discuss personal favorites among philosophers’ possible responsibility areas, such as the interplay between psychology and philosophy (from part 1, *Effective Ethics*) and intellectual virtues (part 5, *Practical Epistemology*.) And humor, naturally.

The first time I saw Amir in real life was at the *14th International Conference of Philosophical Practice* in Bern, Switzerland, 2016. She was moderating a talk on Sexuality and Philosophical Practice. One or two hesitations and bewildered expressions in the panel had already prompted supportive giggles among us in the audience. “All right,” said Amir as she wrapped things up towards the end, “that was the theoretical part. Now, go practice!” Everybody laughed. Amir sat there, calmly smiling, sensing, I suppose, our mental barriers fall like washing on a clothesline in the wind. “The joy that follows from embracing one’s ridicule is a serene joy, heir to the Stoic and Spinozistic joy,” she wrote in “The Tragic Sense of the Good Life,³⁾” *The Socratic Handbook: Dialogue Methods for Philosophical Practice* (2015, edited by M. N. Weiss.) ‘Ridiculous,’ as I understand it, means chucklesome, farcical, side-splitting, zany, absurd – and it is the cornerstone of Amir’s concept *Homo risibilis*. *Homo risibilis* as a worldview “resolves the basic conflict ... in the human condition and opens up new possibilities for the liberated self.”⁴⁾ It presents a way of viewing the gaps between what is, and what ought to be. And it supports an “ethics of compassion,⁵⁾” as Amir puts it. Seems relevant. Especially now that mental health has more or less replaced moral virtue as a criterion for evaluating behavior.⁶⁾

Or where there’s astrology, healing, channeling, Kabbalah, Sufism, reincarnation and karma, Shamanism, and tarot, and no one to talk to about it. If you don’t want to tell your psychologist – who do you call to get any wiser? The practical philosophy that

³⁾ L. Amir (2015), p. 120.

⁴⁾ Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁾ L. Amir (2017), p. 2.

⁶⁾ Ibid., p. 53.

Amir brings forth includes a proposal that part of philosophy be reformed as a social science – a science of wisdom – seeking activities that we undertake together. I like that. “Wisdom,” writes Amir, “need not be presumptuous. Wisdom can be a call for a humble and humoristic skepticism, rather than a system of knowledge.”⁷⁾

Philosophy, writes Amir, answers to a need created by the weakening of established religion. “This role has been taken over by psychologists for various social and historical reasons,” she explains, but “partly also because philosophy has willingly relinquished it in the last century.”⁸⁾ We’re ready to pick it up again, I’d say.

1. A Philosophical Way of Feeling

I recently had the chance to get acquainted with the differences and similarities between therapy and coaching. Therapy, I noted, has to do with insights into the meanings of the past; healing, and recovery. It is about emotional processing, examining earlier wounds as a means for understanding the present, and for laying good grounds for the future. The therapist helps you see what you need. Coaching focuses on capacity, potential, authenticity, accountability, and roads ahead. The client is the expert and sets the agenda. “Coaching connects insight to action,” I enthusiastically professed in the article I was writing.⁹⁾ I found myself constantly next to my copy of *Rethinking Philosophers’ Responsibility*, underlining this and that and feeling generally inspired. What Amir writes in “Philosophers on Emotions” and “Psychologists on Morality” tied in perfectly with what I was trying to grasp – the incongruences of personhood, words, dialogues; the meaning of ‘health,’ possibilities for fruitfulness – how to show that there are

7) Ibid., p. 31.

8) Ibid., p. 57.

9) You can read it all here if you like: <http://www.filoprax.com/2018/03/11/coaching-mentoring-therapy-a-note-on-the-benefits-of-philosophical-coaching>

possibilities for agency. There *must* be. *Entelechial* agency. (What a marvelous word, entelechy.) That's what I was getting at, because to me, philosophical practice is ultimately a question about what to *do*. Best action. Autonomous, authentic agency, despite all. What I should do in my life, and who this 'I' is. Or, perhaps, *what* and *how* this 'I' is. Am I a rational, freely choosing human being? Is everybody equally answerable to the state of their lives? Or maybe everything was already predetermined. Genetics etc. our whole world – maybe everything is doomed. Either or. For, surely, a choice, big or small, can't be *both* predetermined and free, right? Isn't it obviously logically impossible for both of those positions to be true at the same time? A clear contradiction. A conflict of ideas. Yet *light*, in the same vein, is apparently both a particle and a wave. That means neither that 'wave' is a synonym for 'particle,' nor that you can pick one definition and forget the other. It means that the 'Both-And'-ness tells us more than either description on its own. So when my clients and I are face to face with conflict and irresolution, I like to think about *Homo risibilis*. Smile and embrace the incongruity. "A humorous mood," says Amir, "fosters awareness of conflict, facilitates deliberation and helps live with unresolved conflict."¹⁰) Humor is

philosophical tool for fostering self-knowledge, acknowledging ambivalence, reducing painful emotions such as shame and disgust, enabling acceptance of self and others, living with irresolvable conflict, and alternatively, providing conflict-resolution through the adoption of a worldview that considers conflict as characterizing the human condition.(L. Amir, 2017, p. 129)

Humor reduces shame. What is shame anyway? Simply the condemning gaze of 'the Other,' whether internalized or external? It's a civilizing emotion too – psychopaths lack it, I gather. Both-And.

Humor facilitates living with 'conflict as characterizing the human

¹⁰) L. Amir (2015), p. 100.

condition.’ Aha. Yes. I might even add these comforting words by Mary-Elaine Jacobsen:

Remind yourself daily that apprehension and unknowns are intrinsic to progress. Learn to wear ambiguity like a comfortable old sweater. Try new things with less fear of appearing foolish, mindful that no matter how brilliant your action, someone will disapprove. Intelligently persist in your efforts, the way Albert Einstein did. When asked how he worked, Einstein replied, ‘How do I work? I grope.’ (M.-E. Jacobsen, 1999, p. 316)

Philosophy, after all, is not for perfect people. Like the Biblical characters – hardly exemplary, hardly ‘angelic’ – what counts is the transformation. Philosophy is a loadstar, a quest, a direction; a horizon. And a “self-directed intra-personal humor enacts an inner dialogue which is a highly efficient tool for gradual change,”¹¹⁾ as Amir writes in her chapter on women, shame, disgust and humor. I wish I could go back and have a gentle conversation about this with earlier versions of myself. In any case, Eugene Gendlin popped up in my mind as I was reading. In his *Focusing*¹²⁾ we learn to find words for the ‘all of that’ sense of our emotions. (‘What’s *all that* about the anger I’m feeling?’) Gendlin had analyzed video recordings of therapy sessions, and found that he was able to accurately predict which patients would be helped by their therapy. They were the ones who sighed, gasped, sank in their chairs or sat up straighter on finding the words for the *all that of* what they were feeling. They had what Gendlin called a ‘felt sense’ of the words, and that seemed to be the key to therapeutic success. “Emotions,” Amir quotes Robert Solomon, “are not just a phenomena to be analyzed and understood; they lie at the very heart of ethics, determining our values, focusing our vision, influencing our very judgement, giving meaning to our lives.”¹³⁾ If emotions determine our values and influence our judgement, they

¹¹⁾ L. Amir (2017) p. 129.

¹²⁾ See E. Gendlin (1978).

¹³⁾ L. Amir (2017). p. 65.

seem likely to have a bearing on our behavior, relationships, careers and, well, our lives paths. And, seeing as so many of us struggle with some or all of that from time to time, a theory of emotions could benefit from ‘highly efficient tools for change.’

Elsewhere, Solomon also writes:

Nothing is more immediate to us than our own emotions, but nothing about us is more prone to self-deception, suppression, lack of recognition, and even straight-forward denial than our emotions. I take the unconscious to be not just a deep psychoanalytic discovery so much as a fundamental datum. People don’t always know when they are angry, and they don’t always know what they feel.(R. Solomon, 2007, p. 28)

If we don’t know what we feel, how can we be authentic? If we can’t be authentic, whose lives are we living? Oh dear. Is there any way out of this spirit-crushing loop? Looking at it like this, isn’t it a little ... farcical, zany, *risible*?

Humor is a ‘philosophical tool for fostering self-knowledge.’ Self-knowledge aims to make our character less fortuitous and more deliberate.¹⁴⁾ I’ll let Amir’s Bertrand Russel quote take the baton: “What philosophy should do in matters of feelings is very closely analogous to what it should do in matters of thought.”¹⁵⁾ According to Russel, there’s a philosophical way of feeling that goes with a philosophical way of thinking. We can study our emotions, like in the therapy room. Especially sudden, strong ones. Or very argumentative ones that seem to desperately want to convince us one way or the other. We can examine them philosophically. Perhaps view them like Helge Svare and Henning Herrestad¹⁶⁾ do – as well-meaning friends with a message for us. Emotions as problem-solvers, stemming from an honest and real desire to help ourselves. We can be adults in relation to our emotions. Come of

¹⁴⁾ L. Amir (2017), p. 130.

¹⁵⁾ B. Russel in Amir, L. (2017), p. 229.

¹⁶⁾ H. Svare and H. Herrestad (2007), p. 194. Swedish translation from the Norwegian by Ulla-Stina Rask.

age. Words of wisdom from Aleksandar Fatić:

Realizing that we hate someone might be an emancipatory feeling, just as understanding that we suffer from an allergy to an external factor might save us hospital treatment. ... To do this we need to be able to access our register of emotions in an effective and reliable way which is sufficiently unhinged from the politically correct values that dominate our rational projections of value. (A. Fatić, 2015, p. 73)

“To be autonomous in one’s thinking calls for intellectual skills,” adds Benson through Amir, “but it calls also for the ability to control the emotions that prevent those skills from being properly exercised.”¹⁷⁾ Quite. Need to be clear about what we’re feeling. To many of us, it’s one of those things that sound very easy but, indeed, are not, and to some of us, it takes therapy to get even-keeled. But having a vivid, frightening emotion, for example, does not automatically mean that we’re off track, unhealthy, and in need of someone to step in and take charge. Sometimes it just means that we are profoundly human and in need of some philosophy.

Philosophers who study psychology as a philosophical discipline, as it were, can bring those interesting psychological models and methods to their practices. Not to ‘do’ them *on* or *to* the clients, but to discuss and test them together. Use them as a way to meta-think around our images, narratives, histories, motivations, and futures. (“There are no memories *from* childhood, *only of*,” “to remember is always to discover, never to recover,”¹⁸⁾ according to psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell.) When we do, we speak as adults, and we speak with the adult in our clients. And we can perhaps accomplish what Amir suggests: “Each of us should engage in internal dialogue to mediate between the values revealed by emotions and those conveyed by reason.”¹⁹⁾ An inventory might do

¹⁷⁾ Benson in L. Amir (2017), p. 251.

¹⁸⁾ Benson in L. Amir (2017), p. 251.

¹⁹⁾ J. Mitchell (2000), pp. 283-315.

well to follow up – are the values you find really yours? Perhaps rather a lot needs reworking. Perhaps a kind of ‘values hierarchy’ needs to be set up too. (Especially, if you are the type of person who’d otherwise require several life-times to honor all of them.)

2. Cultivating Agency

“Health,” as Viktor Frankl once wrote, is based on a certain degree of tension between “what one is and what one should become.”²⁰⁾ Like the acorn that should become an oak – if only we’d give it its required measurements of sun, soil and water. Entelechy with mission and vision. On route to becoming the best version of yourself. (Here, I’m reminded of those wonderful lines by Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos; “They tried to bury us – they didn’t know we were seeds.”) ‘Health’ in a very broad, life affirming, compassionate way. And a way that is able to combine a sense of being as *becoming*- something in motion, something with a pulse. Psychologist M. Scott Peck wrote somewhere that mental health is a commitment to reality at all costs. Amir has a similar idea; “developing a taste for reality through the systematic use of humor is a worthy goal…”²¹⁾

When I think about humor as a philosophical tool for self-liberation, this is what I envision – a liberation from a kind of concept slavery, being freed as in lifting the veil that prevents you from seeing properly. Humor is the lantern that lets us discern the terrain. Especially useful when you’ve trod in gung, which, I guess, happens to all of us. Or, for that matter – humor is the logbook for the riverboat pilot: “Since the river is forever changing, a riverboat pilot must develop an understanding of how different forces and conditions interact to impact the river’s course.”²²⁾ Humor helps her navigate orderly and less orderly times and places with graceful urgency. And, following Popper, we understand that we can learn

²⁰⁾ V. Frankl (1946, 2008), p. 110.

²¹⁾ L. Amir (2017), p. 135.

²²⁾ T. W. Johnson (1993), p. 251.

from our mistakes.²³⁾ We should search for them, even. (*Gently. Nota bene.*) I dare say that if you're fortunate, you'll find many rather than few. There's something very powerful about overcoming resistance, forgiving yourself and paying homage to your past.

"The true meaning of life," according to Viktor Frankl, "is to be discovered in the world"²⁴⁾ rather than 'within' you, or within some closed system. To find it, we must experience and engage with the world. "Man should not ask what the meaning of his life is ... rather, he must recognize that it is *he* who is asked."²⁵⁾ I take this as an imperative to find out what kind of seed you are and read the instructions carefully. And remember that in order to flourish, we shan't grow in each other's shadow. Human flourishing *requires* humor, Amir writes. "To have a sense of humor is to enlarge the self by adopting the perspective of others toward the self; that is to say, by diminishing it."²⁶⁾ Imagine that. Seeing as others see. Seeing as 'God' sees. Seeing with the eyes of friend and foe at the same time. Seeing that individuality means separateness and connectedness at the same time. Shredding outdated stories, replacing with new, better narratives. "A capacity to be critical," Amir writes in her chapter on intellectual virtues, "remains vital if we are to maintain a degree of independence. Critical thinking is at the very heart of philosophy as the key for emancipation"²⁷⁾ Matthew Lipman notices something related for what we might call deliberate agency:

Just as scientists apply scientific method to the exploration of problematic situations so students should do the same if they are ever to learn to think for themselves. Instead, we ask them to study the end results of what the scientists have discovered; we neglect the process and fixate upon the product. ... Discoveries and inventions seldom just happen.(M. Lipman, 1991, p. 15, p.

²³⁾ L. Amir (2017), p. 19.

²⁴⁾ V. Frankl (1946, 2008), p. 115.

²⁵⁾ Ibid., p. 110.

²⁶⁾ L. Amir (2017), p. 295.

²⁷⁾ Ibid., p. 240.

197. my italics)

This seems to be something that philosophers can assist with – building autonomy with integrity and authenticity, through work on values and virtues. (‘Integrity’ is the inner experience; ‘authenticity’ the outer expression, says my friend and colleague Silver.) A practical philosopher can be someone who helps increase faith in your own capacity to think. Someone who is “a leader of a process that empowers people through thinking.”²⁸⁾ (“Nothing benefits us more than another rational human being”,²⁹⁾ said Amir in 2002.)

Intellectual virtues can be taught and learned,³⁰⁾ writes Amir. I’d like to think that curiosity is a virtue. Taking an interest, and pursuing it. I overheard someone say that interest is ‘the highest form of respect.’ It may have been said in affect, as a kind of punishment maybe, but I couldn’t let it go. Philosophers are well suited to take an interest in anything that informs the human condition – how nice to think of that as an act of respect. Reverence. Among philosophers’ favorite interests is often that which presents itself as correct, decided, final, given – in short, anything that evades inquiry. We ask questions like these, from Matthew Lipman’s suggestion from *Philosophy in the Classroom*:³¹⁾

What reasons do you have for saying that?
Why do you agree (or disagree) on that point?
How are you defining the term you just used?
What do you mean by that expression?
Is what you are saying now consistent with what you said before?
Could you clarify that remark?
When you said that, just what is implied by your remarks?
What follows from what you just said?
Are you sure you’re not contradicting yourself?
What alternatives are there to such a formulation?

²⁸⁾ H. Herrestad in H. Herrestad, A. Holt, and H. Svare (eds.) p. 102.

²⁹⁾ L. Amir (2002), p. 229.

³⁰⁾ L. Amir (2017), p. 248.

³¹⁾ M. Lipman (1977), p. 112.

Eva Brann shows:

A community comes into being. People who undertake such a program of learning together become friends – not, as a rule, intimates, because their purpose is to look not to each other but rather to a common enterprise – yet nevertheless serious and steady companions. (E. Brann, 1993, p. 484)

My inner idealist skips cheerfully in circles around my heart when I read quotes like this. The adult I mentioned – the adult that I can speak as and address in my friends, colleagues and clients – that adult is also in my ten year old daughter, and in Lipman’s classrooms. Stepping aside of the roles we’ve taken and the games we play in order to philosophize together can be extraordinary. As Helge Svare writes:

One thing I have frequently observed, and which I think has deep significance, is a feeling that I have found the dialogues to produce in those attending them. ... if I forced myself to describe it, I would attempt to do so by saying that it consists in a certain kind of happiness.(H. Svare, 2002, pp. 245-246)

Happiness, Amir writes, is virtue itself. “Blessedness is not the prize of self-control, as most moralists and religious thinkers led us to believe. To the contrary, we can be virtuous because we are happy.”³²⁾ This idea is found in both Spinoza and Nietzsche, explains Amir. “Instead of arguing that virtue is necessary for happiness, they maintain that virtue is predicated on happiness.”³³⁾ Interesting! Where intellectual virtues are taught and learned, moral virtues are acquired by practice and training. (A more practical and longer sequel, *Taking Philosophy Seriously*, is in the making, as far as I understand. Will it say something about happiness? I can hardly wait to read it.) “Philosophy,” writes Amir, “has come of age.”³⁴⁾

³²⁾ L. Amir (2017), p. 303.

³³⁾ Ibid., p. 301.

3. One Becomes a Philosopher by the Exercise of Will

Picasso said something like, “The meaning of life is to find you gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.” When you find your calling(s,) you’ll know by the desire to act. Being a pianist, or wanting to be one, for instance, isn’t a ‘calling.’ But playing the piano is. I like that. Agency. Process, activity, and movement are crucial elements of being, as Erich Fromm pointed out; the active, *alive* person is like a “vessel that grows as it is filled and will never be full.”³⁵⁾ Like my little baby girl, seven weeks old, who seems to expand simultaneously in all directions. Expand like the universe. Boiling, birthing, flowing in and beyond oneself. And perhaps practical philosophers can help by naming some of the driving forces. Showing where to fit the reins, so it doesn’t get too far out of hand. For “combining emotions and intellect is complex and difficult,” as Amir writes.

One of the attributes of virtuous people is that they accomplish it smoothly. Their advantage over most of us is that combining emotions and intellect is not a source of conflict, but a valuable means to a moral and happy life. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 152)

A worthy goal, isn’t it? Combining emotions and intellect smoothly. There’s something profound about simplification. Reducing life to its simplest expression reveals so much richness. “One becomes a philosopher, not by virtue of intellectual gifts but by the exercise of will,”³⁶⁾ said Leonard Nelson, one of first modern-day philosophical practitioners.

Nietzsche supposedly made the observation that a thought comes when *it* wants to. Reading Amir often means that a lot of thoughts want to come, so to speak. My intention was to write as I had read, that is, in a *homo risibilis* framework. I confess that it was very

³⁴⁾ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁵⁾ E. Fromm (1976), p. 65.

³⁶⁾ L. Nelson (1993), p. 442.

difficult, and I had more than one ‘face palm’ revelation as I was struggling with these words. I wanted so dearly to write *everything* the book had got me thinking about ... And then I saw myself, staring at the computer, shoulders by the ears, trying to figure out which thoughts to formulate and in which order, my table with all of those papers and books and notes, my house, my city in the wonderful spring; I saw myself from an ever wider perspective, and suddenly had no problem smiling at myself com- passionately. I want very much. OK. It’s all right. A *homo risibilis* moment, what a relief. Now I want to pay it forward. And I say that with the utmost respect for the suffering that inevitably accompanies us in this life. As Jaspers put it, we “all have to suffer, labor, be guilty, be subject to chance and die.”³⁷⁾

I remembered something I’d come across when I at university in Amsterdam – a Swedish poem that I translated and included in the foreword to my MA Thesis:

Since ‘the best cure / for heart break / is laughing’ / I’ve thrown open, nearly cracked the jaw / for some twenty years now. / Cackled the cheeks into big bumps / blazing of lust for life... (M. Johansson, 2002)

A bittersweet beginning, but an unprecedented determination towards the end. Blazing of lust for life! I want to blaze of lust for life too. Albeit a bit happier – so I can become more virtuous. Hah.

Rethinking Philosophers’ Responsibility is, for lack of a better word, simply very useful. As a source of inspiration – here I’m thinking humor as well as topic width – but as a reference work as well. Apart from everything else, Lydia Amir is also something of an encyclopedia. And she writes accessibly; readable, academic literature about our practical discipline. There’s a lot to be thankful for, I feel. And what is philosophers’ responsibility? To philosophize. To keep asking the question, “What sort of life constitutes human flourishing?”³⁸⁾ To show that we’re here to take

³⁷⁾ K. Jaspers in E. van Deurzen (2002) in H. Herrestad, A. Holt, and H. Svare (eds.), p. 143.

responsibility for that roles we've retained at last, with grace and urgency. And to hold space.

All right, that was the theoretical part. Now let's go practice.

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³⁸⁾ Amir, L. (2017) "Intellectual Virtues," *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility*, p.243.

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