

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

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### Book Review

Lydia Amir, *Taking Philosophy Seriously*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018. ISBN (10): 1-5275-0896-X; ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0896-5. 492 pages.

REVIEWED BY MIRIAM VAN DER VALK  
FILOPRAX GÖTEBORGS FILOSOFISKA PRATIK

#### On the Possibility of Dialogue

French-Israeli philosopher Lydia Amir (b. 1955) writes and lectures on a number of topics; recent publications include *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* (2014) and *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility* (2017). She edited *Practicing Philosophy* (2015, with Aleksandar Fatic) and *New Frontiers in Philosophical Practice* (2017,) and is Founding President of the International Association for the Philosophy of Humor (IAPH.) The very first time I saw her name was in *Philosophy in Society* (2002, edited by Herrestad, Holt and Svare;) a compilation of the papers presented at the Sixth International Conference on Philosophical Practice in Oslo, Norway. Amir's "The Tragic Sense of the Good Life" was kind of like a set of exercises for coming to see yourself as laughable (a pleasant surprise, subject-wise!) and written with a superbly liberating combination of tenderness and cheerleading. I was immediately hooked. And the humor theme returns in *Taking Philosophy Seriously*, for instance in Chapter Eight, "The Human Condition: Humor, Humiliation, and Humility" (from Part III, *Unduly Neglected Topics*,) but it pops up less explicitly elsewhere too.

Humor enables personal change and facilitates self-knowledge, Amir writes (on page 211,) but it's also a vehicle of truth—laughing at incompetence, clumsiness, and misfortune implies using humor as "a strong defense mechanism against the awareness of [one's] own condition as humiliating." Those who do not laugh at receiving the cream cake right in the face sense intuitively that it is, in fact, the best illustration of the human condition. "If," she inserts between brackets, "you are the only sad and moved person in the cinema when watching a Charlie Chaplin movie, while everyone around you is laughing, you are one of those people." I've drawn a star in the corner of that page. Other starry pages include the ones where she writes that happiness requires hard work and internal change (133,) that virtue is necessary for happiness (144, on Shaftesbury,) that philosophical reflection and enquiry have a dialogical form, and about dialogue as a means to fulfil the philosophical imperative 'Know thyself' (337,) or where she writes about the alone/together-ness of maieutic relationships that enable one to "stand alone—by another's help" (87, on Kierkegaard.)

In Chapter Fourteen, "A Method: More Philosophy, Less Counseling" (page 349,) Amir tells us how she goes about things with, say, counseling a client. "First, one formulates the problem at hand as a question, preferably one with multiple answers. Second, one presents the alternative answers to the question. Third, one assesses each answer critically. One is ready, then, to formulate a second question which has usually some connection (logical or other) to the first..." All right. 'How is Amir's book useful to philosophical practitioners?' I asked myself, this review in mind (and secretly hoping that I had just stumbled on something that could help shorten laborious writing processes.) My head instantly turned into a Central Station where all the trains were about to take off at

the same time. I looked in the Table of Contents, for guidance. Part I: *Philosophers as Mentors and Apprentices*: “The Need for a Teacher,” and “Teaching Self-Education.” Ah, yes. Certainly. I’ve often thought about how much I learn in my own practice, and how infinitely grateful I am for it. That’s a train I’d like to get on. Part III: *Unduly Neglected Topics*: “Spirituality and Self-Integrity: Educating the Will.” Yes! That one too. And it’s connected to “Attaining the Good Life: Self-Change,” from Part V: *Rethinking Philosophical Practice’s Tools*. And then there’s Part IV: *Reconsidering Philosophical Practice’s Means*, about “Intra-Personal Dialogue” and “Inter-Personal Dialogue.” Quite. Something from there in my title. And then there’s another *Unduly Neglected Topic*: “Sexuality and the Practice of Philosophy.” I’m not even sure I know what ‘sexuality’ means—the physics of an adult love relationship? Genital health? Coming to terms with one’s perversions? Specific sexual acts and what they meant to us? Sexual identity; how one perceives and positions oneself in relation to ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity?’ Or simply having a body? Amir puts it like this (page 264): A “somatic activity” that is sometimes, “with age and physical impairment, not somatic at all [but] an activity where the whole human participates, making it a unique practical instrument for the unification of all faculties.” I’ll jump on that train too. The ‘unification of all faculties’ ... There’s a wonderful Russell quote on page 29: “The development of impersonal feeling is parallel to the development of impersonal thought.” I’m thinking about the body, and thoughts, and feelings, and a unification of all of those faculties. And now I remember the psychologist Eugene Gendlin (*Focusing: How to Gain Direct Access to Your Body’s Knowledge*, 1975,) who found that he could predict which patients would actually improve just by observing their bodily reactions during therapy sessions. The patient who suddenly sank in his chair, letting out a loudly sigh in connection with a formulated insight of some measure was much more likely to get better than one who sat motionless, unaffected—un-integrated, if you will. Words need a felt, somatic sense to be able to move you. It’s like hearing with your entire body, I thought to myself, forgetting all about methods and book reviews; like speaking with your entire body. It’s the difference between talking about real things in life and just talking about words. “There is an art of hearing as well as of speaking ... show yourself worthy or fit to hear,” says Epictetus, emphasizing the teachers’ dependence on their students (quoted on page 51.) Philosophy is a medium for mutuality, Amir comments.

*Taking Philosophy Seriously* has seventeen chapters divided into Parts I-VI. The sub-headings are unambiguous and what follows in each paragraph is clear, bite sized, and digestible. Quotes are readably inserted. Footnotes recommend further reading where applicable, or note where information is wanting, and give credit where it is due. The chapters can be read one by one, as an encyclopedia of sorts, which makes for some minor repetitions throughout the volume. (Personally, I don’t mind in the least.) Amir seems to write with an ease that at least a couple of times made me a bit envious—she seems to do exactly what she sets out to do, and it’s so well thought through. She writes cleverly, clearly; unambiguously. No nonsense. Steering clear of distortions. Nothing appears to be missing, yet there is room for continuation. As I was reading, I often found myself jotting down ideas for another podcast, for our local celebrations of World Philosophy Day, for the course I was about to lead, for a new article . . . But perhaps this is mostly a book about the possibilities for change. Personal growth. Entelechy, maybe. “Interpretation is simply an instrument for bringing about change,” writes Amir (on page 287, about Freud.) And, on page 319: “Philosophy changes those who can be changed by reflection, those who value thought so much that it transforms their whole being ...”—and here’s one of my favorite parts—“... One thing we know is that when a person is ripe for change, anything works.”

Right in the beginning of the book (on page 22,) Amir writes that there is a “contradiction between thought and being that existence brings about.” I hear an imperative there—a call to wonder, and to get up and start walking. Subjective reflection, Amir continues, moves in two directions: “First, it makes the movement of objective reflection. That is, abstract thought is employed to obtain a conception of existence and of the categories that make it up. Secondly, it bends objective reflection back on itself and applies it to existence.” The philosophical practice keyword is, of course, ‘applies.’ Calling forth and re-appropriating the great philosophical project ... “With the help of philosophy, we can work on ourselves, like craftsmen” (eloquently, on page 122.) And the first step is to develop a view of oneself as someone who is capable of change.

But what about the formulate-your-problem-as-a-question method? The method is straight-forward, widely applicable, and entices creativity in the user. (I admit that I took a few detours—it was my first time. Also, I quite enjoyed it. And yes, it has shortened my writing process!) How is *Taking Philosophy Seriously* useful to philosophical practitioners? It is, like much of Amir’s work, a great source of knowledge. It leads by example. It remembers and applies. It holds space; it makes allowances. It’s a book with the word ‘seriously’ in the title that includes a chapter on humor, which is great because humor is serious business. And there are many nice quotes and formulations—I find myself particularly indebted to Amir when I need to quickly explain what philosophical practice is all about. And, lastly, reading diverse texts put together in one volume is quite a special experience, as it invites you to see, well, to see what the author sees. See their lands ... And the sheep that they’re tending, so to speak. The philosopher as shepherd. I like it.

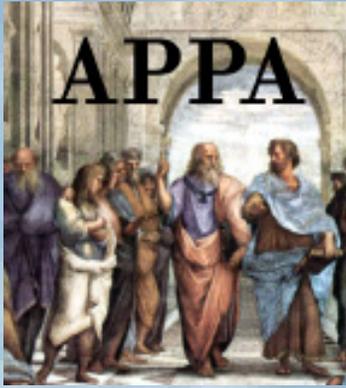
There is a *Concluding Remarks* section at the end, comprised of a composition of interviews with Amir. Answering the question, “With respect to present and future inquiry, how can the most important problems concerning philosophical practice be identified and explored?” she writes: “The way I see it, philosophy has three interrelated objectives. The first is truth ... The second ... liberation, and the third ... wisdom. The relation that holds among these objectives seems to be the following: Liberation from untruth is the path to wisdom” (page 431.) Asked about the practice of philosophy and her personal life, she answers: “... All the promises of philosophy were kept for me; it has been the love of my life. I followed it wherever it led; it clarified my path, and eventually illuminated me.” I find this so very beautifully humble and inspiring.

Once, on a dancefloor in my twenties, a perfect rhythm came on and I started moving. Gently, the people in my corner stepped back to give me space, as I was obviously in the zone. Some time after, I was telling a friend about it. When I dance, other people step aside, I said, with some pride. “When I dance,” he replied, “other people dance.” That was obviously a much better response—I didn’t pursue my line. In any case, what I wanted to say was that when Lydia writes, I want to write too. Write in the ‘stand alone—by another’s help’ way. Dancing to the same rhythm.

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### Aims and Scope

*Philosophical Practice* is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

### APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

### APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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