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Biographies of Contributors
Lydia Amir takes on an ambitious project in her book *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility*. The book consists of 15 earlier published and partly revised articles which Amir has organized in six parts, respectively: effective ethics, global concerns, conflict irresolution, philosophical loves, practical epistemology and vital tools. Each part and article can be read independently, yet Amir claims that the book explicates a coherent worldview that the articles together form. As an overarching concern, she is calling on philosophers to reconsider their role and responsibility towards their communities and the state of civilization at large, recommending rationality in everyday life. She assumes that “philosophy’s historical role, largely abandoned in the last century or so, was to provide realistic visions of the human condition combined with spiritual alternatives to established religions. It is time for the philosophers to reclaim this traditional role, because people’s yearning for worldviews, values, and examples to live by—what is commonly called “wisdom”—can be responsibly answered only by philosophers” (1). “More than ever,” she claims, “it is important to present alternatives not only to religions, but to the type of lax mysticism the New Age provides.” Furthermore, “and contrary to the widespread belief that is popular among philosophers, we do not necessarily have to turn to Eastern philosophies for practical ideals of wisdom. It is the task of philosophers to create new worldviews that help make sense of the human condition as we currently understand it, illuminated by modern scientific knowledge.” (1). The core of philosopher’s responsibility is for Amir to secure the role of sceptic rationality, expressed through humor, which she sees as highly important to issues in moral philosophy. Moreover, she imagines a near future where philosophers and psychologists collaborate to enhance the intellectual, emotional and practical capacities required for being an autonomous individual.

*Rethinking Philosophers’ Responsibility* is impressive in several respects. First, Lydia Amir shows a remarkable insight into philosophical traditions, using it with creativity in her discussions of a wide range of topics involving different aspects of the human condition as she sees it. All of the articles represent a unique perspective and an autonomous discussion, drawing on different parts of the philosophical tradition. Secondly, she philosophically investigates truly relevant topics of contemporary global society with a high level of academic expertise. Through this, she gives good overviews of philosophical arguments, and opens up the field of philosophy. Thirdly, the underlying argument of the book is that “since practice improves rationality, philosophy, as a custodian of rationality, is a practical discipline” (1). And this argument she manages to underpin throughout the whole book, for example by referring to the lines of argumentation from several major philosophies (for instance, in chapter 10 about impersonal loves). Drawing especially on the approaches of Karl Popper and skepticism, she outlines one of her central concepts called *homo risibilis*, that is, “a skeptical and secular vision that rivals the benefits of established religions without needing religious and metaphysical assumptions” (273). To her, the skeptic reduces life to its simplest expression, “to no more than what it actually is, revealing thereby life’s inherent richness”. The skeptic
is claimed to be “a living example of liberty for other men. Because he suspends judgement, he is the champion of tolerance and peace—the champion of everyone’s right to be safely at home, living as he pleases, and pursuing happiness as he pleases” (277).

Hence, the strength of the book is that each article is well argued, defending clear standpoints and positions, as well as being well-grounded in the history of philosophy. Amir demonstrates wide knowledge in a variety of philosophical domains, and discusses issues that are often neglected by philosophers, such as emotions, vulnerability, disgust, poverty and shame. She is outlining philosophy in a consistent way; however, there are also weaknesses to both her position and to the form of her book. The question remains, though, whether the so-called Western philosophical tradition is really so Western, and whether so-called Eastern tradition really is so unphilosophical or irrational. It is also relevant to question whether the essence of what Amir calls Western philosophy as such can be “boiled down” to rationality, i.e. in the form of skepticism and critical thinking. Let us begin with the first question.

1. Is the so-called Western philosophical tradition really so Western, and is the so-called Eastern tradition really so unphilosophical?

The answer to these two questions is “no.” When Amir argues a stance that equals civilization and rationalism, and connects this to a separate Western tradition alone, it becomes highly problematic. For instance, in his book, idea-historian Dag Herbjørnsrud (2016) argues that the idea of “the West” and of “the Western” is a myth created in the 1990s to promote a specific European-American identity, following the idea of a “clash of civilizations.” However, the Greeks of the antique world lived in the outskirts of the enormous Persian empire, culturally part of the region that we today call The Middle East, strongly influenced by the older cultures such as the Babylonians, Egyptians and Persians. Many of the rational philosophies and scientific disciplines that today are considered to have originated in the Western tradition, have their origins in what Amir (and many with her), considers “the East.” However, “the Canon of Medicine” by the Persian Ibn Sina (Avicenna) was part of the reading lists in European universities for 500 years until the 18th century. Moreover, Ibn Khaldun from Tunis was considered the founder of sociology with his major work from 1377, and Indian mathematicians Aryabhata (born 476) and Brahmagupta (born 596) created the numeral system that we use today, including the number zero, which Copernicus recognized in his major work from 1543, according to Herbjørnsrud. Also, Buddhism in India and Confucianism in China, which originated within the same 100 years as the philosophy of Socrates in Greece, were secular critiques of existing religious belief systems in the respective regions of the world, all focusing on ethics and giving the individual a responsibility for his own life, in opposition to earlier beliefs that humans were subjected to the goodwill of gods and to destiny. Hence, Amir’s suspicion towards “Eastern Philosophies” and praise of “Western philosophies”, is partly based on wrong assumptions, or at least on an oversimplification that does not do the great global tradition of philosophy justice.

2. Can the essence of “Western Philosophy” be boiled down to rationality in the form of skepticism and critical thinking?

Concerning this second question, the answer appears to be negative, too. Movements like Existentialism or Constructivism already indicate that Western Philosophy cannot be reduced to mere rationalism. While for Existentialism it is human existence as such which is center stage, Constructivism—especially Radical Constructivism—points out that each and every theory and worldview
is finally based on nothing but assumptions and hypotheses. This is not only the case with religions but also with Western science, as shown by, for example, Paul Watzlawick and others in the anthology *The Invented Reality: How Do We Know What We Believe We Know?* (1984) When it comes to more recent developments within academic philosophy, then, the field of philosophical practice can be mentioned. Though one can find many practitioners in this field who advocate critical thinking, there are also several major approaches which are not solely concerned or reducible to rational skepticism or critical rationalism. Examples here are, for instance, the approaches of Ran Lahav and Finn Thorbjørn Hansen.

Just like Amir, Lahav is a pioneer within philosophical practice and well-known for what he calls *worldview interpretation* as a conceptual framework for philosophical practice. Especially in recent publications, Lahav has further developed his concept of worldview interpretation (see i.e. “Stepping out of Plato’s Cave”, 2016). In this publication, he states that the task of philosophical practice is to support people to transcend their worldview in order to become responsive for deeper levels of human existence (that is, metaphorically, to step out of one’s cave, worldview or perimeter, as Lahav also calls it (Lahav, 2016). For this process of transcending one’s worldview and becoming open to more fundamental aspects of the human condition, Lahav chooses a contemplative approach. He assumes critical thinking to be insufficient for this purpose and states that it “does not utilize the rich, complex body of philosophical ideas which have been developed throughout the ages but satisfies itself only with the tools of rational analysis. This seems to me an unfortunate impoverishment of philosophy’s potential contribution to life” (28).

Being educated as a Socratic dialogue facilitator in the German tradition, Finn Thorbjørn Hansen soon developed this approach further in a more existence philosophical and life ethical direction, both theoretically and practically. For instance, he begins his book *The Socratic Dialogue Group* (2000), by discussing the figure of Socrates and different interpretations of his practice and methods. Hansen contrasts a rational approach and interpretation (Kant-Habermas) with an existential and life ethical approach and interpretation (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Arendt, Murdoch and Foucault), of Plato’s rational view of truth and Socrates’ existential view. He then discusses the history, theory and method behind the Socratic dialogue group, suggesting grounding it in existence-philosophical rather than rational interpretations. This view is elaborated in his doctoral dissertation *The Philosophical Life*, from 2002, and in his book *To Stand in the Open* from 2008.

Nevertheless, and without doubt, Lydia Amir is of course right when arguing that rational skepticism and critical thinking represent irreplaceable achievements in the philosophical tradition. However, in times when multiculturalism and interculturality can be found on virtually every street corner (i.e. in terms of food stores and restaurants), and in every classroom and higher education seminar room, the need for a dialogical approach is required. That is, to assume and accept different worldviews and establish common investigation (i.e. philosophical dialogues) which harness this diversity as an invaluable resource. To enter a dialogue and assume that there is only one authentic approach to life, be it a religious or rational skeptical one, dismisses certain lifestyles per se, and it jeopardizes a dialogical approach *a priori*. To deal with this issue in an appropriate way appears to fall within philosophers’ utmost responsibilities. Therefore, it would have essentially contributed to the highly relevant topic of Amir’s book, if she would have addressed this issue explicitly.
When suggesting that the spirit of rational and skeptic philosophy should replace religious spirituality, Amir is basically advocating a disengaged spectator position instead of an engaged participative position. In other words, she is putting distrust over trust, and uplifts the autonomous thinker (see the book cover) as opposed to the interdependent and connected dialoguer. Such a position is rather common in philosophy and even in philosophical practice. The question, however, remains: Can the philosopher, when truly living the position of rational skepticism, deal with trust, relatedness, empathy and participation in a proper way, or is this philosopher just placing him- or herself outside of society, detached from other people? Can this philosopher really fulfill the responsibility Amir calls for in the beginning of her book, that is, to take the role and responsibility towards his or her community and the state of civilization at large?

References


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