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## ■ Editor's Note

This issue of *Journal of Humanities Therapy* contains a book symposium on Lydia Amir's book, *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), which consists of six review papers and author's answer to them.

The book symposium is the first ambitious attempt of this journal in order to promote a more profound understanding of the ideas on philosophical practice suggested by contemporary scholars. Recently, Lydia Amir has actively published books on philosophy and philosophical practice: she has published three books and edited two books, and we selected *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility* as the first target book.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to six reviewers who participated in the book symposium: Anders Lindseth, Detlef Staude, Jialian Li, José Barrientos Rastrojo, Leon de Haas, and Miriam van der Valk.

As a matter of fact, the book symposium started in the last issue of this journal (Vol. 8, No. 2), which had Lydia Amir's introductory paper on the book, "The Custodians of Rationality: Introducing Lydia Amir's *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility*". I would like to thank Lydia Amir who wrote the introductory paper and the answer, and provided a lot of help in preparing this book symposium.

Kangwon National University  
Young E. Rhee

# Philosophy in the Market for Happiness and Self-transformation - Lydia Amir's Contribution to the Restoration of Philosophy's Lost Key Role

Leon de Haas\*

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**Abstract:** Lydia Amir calls on philosophers to take responsibility in society by offering rational alternatives to irrational New Age cosmology in spiritual matters and to amateurish psychological answers in moral issues. She offers a skeptical worldview, in which humor plays the key role. This essay discusses her worldview critically. Her view of epistemology is limited, like her view of skepticism. In both cases, the Socratic practice of skeptical investigation of truth claims in dialogical encounters is ignored. Her project is seen as one of the contemporary attempts to restore philosopher's lost key role in society.

**Key words:** philosophical practice, practical philosophy, epistemology, critique of knowledge, skepticism, happiness, self-transformation market

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In her book, *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility*, Lydia Amir calls us, philosophers, on to recapture our lost historical role in society. To her, philosophy is a rational worldview; its realistic visions of the human condition provide spiritual alternatives to religions, nowadays especially to New Age spirituality. Philosophers must not leave the rational answer to psychologists, which are amateurs in the moral field.

Amir elaborates her rational worldview in the spirit of skepticism,

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which she updates which her favorite theme, humor (she calls her worldview '*Homo Risibilis*'). As the search for (new) morality is an important and strong contemporary need in our societies, Amir wants to prove that philosophy is the only discipline that can provide answers in ethics. Her proof is a wrestling with the question about first philosophy; is it ethics or is it epistemology? I think, the chapters about these issues are central in the book. Therefore, I will focus on part V of the book ('Practical Epistemology').

Where can Amir's approach be positioned in the field of philosophical practice? It is confusing that she uses the terms 'practical philosophy' and 'philosophical practice' as being interchangeable. This conveys the impression that she is actually doing practical philosophy (i.e., the application of theoretical, academic philosophy in questions of everyday life), made up as 'philosophical practice'. In the latter, philosophy is not an application of knowledge and visions, but the dialogical thinking-together by a philosopher and his guest(s).

Amir herself betrays that her book is actually a marketing offensive in the field of spiritual worldviews and moral hold. Pushing of New Age and psychological counseling is an important part of her argument and plea. Her call to recapture our responsibility in society is a call to gain a market position in the coaching and counseling market. In my opinion, this call does not come from experiences in philosophical practice. If there is such a source, it is not visible in the book. Amir's worldview is the product of academic industry in the Ivory Tower (with a view ...). As such, the book can be seen as one of the attempts to restore those parts of academic philosophy that lost their social influence at the end of 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

## **1. A Competitive Worldview**

Amir calls on philosophers to take responsibility for rational answers to today's needs for cosmology and spirituality.<sup>1)</sup> This is

particularly important, since people mostly take refuge with New Age practices, which are “intellectually sloppy”, and with psychological counseling, which “cannot do the epistemological and ethical work that philosophers have been trained to do”.<sup>2)</sup>

This book is a call for philosophers to reconsider their responsibility toward the communities in which they live and toward the rational enterprise that Western civilization represents.(L. Amir, 2017, p. 1)

With Amir, philosophers are the owners and guardians of rationality, particularly when it is about worldview and ethics. If they hold on to rationalism, especially skepticism, philosophers can offer an alternative to “the dubious metaphysical claims of traditional religious and philosophical worldviews”.<sup>3)</sup>

In this book Amir offers a philosophical worldview. She calls it a skeptical worldview, which she brings into action polemically against New Age practices as well as against psychological counseling. Her worldview is a conceptual construction, of which the key words are morality, self-knowledge, self-transformation, and humor. She calls on philosophers to recapture their lost historical role in society, “largely abandoned in the last century or so”, which was

[T]o provide realistic visions of the human condition combined with spiritual alternatives to established religions. It is time for 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. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 1)

It would be irresponsible to leave wisdom to New Age devotees and psychological counselors. Amir’s call is not less than an

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1) L. Amir(2017), p. 5.

2) Ibid., p. 1.

3) Ibid., p. 2.

attempt to save wisdom from New Age irrationalism in the spiritual field and from psychological amateurism in the moral field.

In Chapter One, Amir asks if philosophers should address the needs of their societies. Her answer is ‘yes’.

Today’s needs for cosmology and spirituality are being answered mainly within the New Age Movement for lack of viable alternatives. Philosophers’ minimal response requires construing logic and epistemology as practical fields to be taught outside the Academe. The maximal response requires reforming part of philosophy as social thinking in order to answer contemporary needs.(L. Amir, 2017, p. 5)

Note that logic and epistemology must be *taught* outside the Academe, apparently not *developed* outside the Academe. Amir’s project is academic missionary work in society to save society from irrational catastrophes.

Amir claims that her rationalist worldview makes clear.

... that the contemporary turn to religion is unnecessary. If philosophy is loyal to its historical role as an alternative to established religions, it can revitalize itself as well as provide a viable alternative to the intellectual laxity and potential dangers of the New Age Movement.(L. Amir, 2017, p. 5)

It is Amir’s motivation to restore and revitalize philosophy’s lost historical role in society and to fight the irrational and therefore dangerous worldviews of contemporary spiritual worldviews and practices (which she calls ‘New Age’, an outmoded term). Besides needs for cosmology and spirituality, Amir observes needs for answers to moral questions in society. As in the spiritual field, there are incompetent competitors in the moral field as well. Here, psychologists control the market with their amateurish approaches of morality.

Not only are psychologists untrained to do what they are doing, the historical and social factors that led to this situation indicate

that the role of discussing moral and ethical questions should be taken over by practical philosophers.(L. Amir, 2017, p. 40)

Amir thinks it fit to stress that practical philosophy (or philosophical practice) is not necessarily opposed to psychology. Rather, practical philosophy

... answers a need in our society created by the weakening of established religions. This role has been taken over by psychologists for various social and historical reasons, partly also because philosophy has willingly relinquished it in the last century. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 57)

Philosophers have to acknowledge blame, and to answer contemporary needs of cosmology and ethics with a rational worldview. They must develop such contemporary worldviews and bring them to the people. The Ivory Tower - I am inclined to add - needs applications that fit modern life and it needs 'vans' to spread the Word in society.

Is Amir's plea convincing? What kind of philosophy is it? Has it something to do with philosophical practice?

## **2. A Conceptual Construction**

Can scholarship be a sufficient argument in defending a philosophical position?

In Amir's book, the terms 'philosophical practice' and 'practical philosophy' are interchangeable. Many philosophical practitioners, however, are attached to distinguishing philosophical practice from practical philosophy. The latter is a branch of academic philosophy, i.e., so-called "applied" philosophy in the fields of ethics and politics. When the application takes place outside the Academe, e.g., in medical ethical committees or in the media, the philosopher is 'practical' as a knowledge expert in the field of ethics or politics. On the other hand, the philosophical practitioner does not 'apply' any substantive knowledge to some public issue; as far as the

practitioner is an ‘expert’, it is in the field of ‘dialogue’. In philosophical practice philosophical thinking only takes place in a dialogue, it is dialogical. Therefore there is no application; there is nothing to apply, except a dialogical attitude and dialogical skills. Moreover, the dialogue is not on paper; it happens in a physical encounter between two or more human beings.

Anyway, in this book Amir does not practice a dialogical philosophy. It is not even a record or account of philosophical practice. It is an academic construction of a worldview by means of concepts. So, it is a proof of practical philosophy in the field of ‘meaningful worldviews, values, and ideals of wisdom’.<sup>4)</sup>

Amir’s ideas about rationalism, epistemology, skepticism and humor play key roles in the construction of her worldview. In the book she is not present – not even in her mind – in dialogical encounters in situations of everyday life; she stays in the virtual world of her concepts. In this book, it not clear whether Amir does philosophical philosophy at all. If she does, on the basis of this book I only can imagine her doing philosophical practice as someone who tries to convince her guest/client of her worldview called ‘*Homo Risibilis*’. Reading the book, we are in Amir’s verbal virtual world, the reality of which is unclear.

### **3. Argument by Narrative, Morality, and Citation**

The academic and non-dialogical nature of Amir’s contribution to philosophy is also implied in the implicit rhetorical method of proving the truth of the propositions with which she constructs her worldview. Why should Amir’s statements be true? She does not worry about that explicitly in the book. It seems that there are three reasons.

First, they are true because they are part of Amir’s narrative (truth by narration). From the first page, the tone of Amir’s words and sentences is so self-assured, and she sounds so convinced she is right, that the reader is carried away by the narrative – or cannot

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<sup>4)</sup> L. Amir (2017), p. 320.

keep from bracing himself. The writer is on a mission; the reader can follow or flee.

Second, this narrative is true because Amir's intentions are good (philosophers should take their social responsibility in the field of spiritual and moral matters; truth by morality). The New Age Movement is irrational, so it is dangerous. Aren't we, philosophers, all against irrationality, and therefore against New Age? Don't we, philosophers, all now that philosophy is "the custodian of rationality" (Amir: 1), and aren't we, therefore, morally obliged to restore rationality in socially such important fields like spirituality and ethics?

Third, Amir's definitions of rationality, skepticism, humor, etc., are true because other philosophers say so, or because her criticism of other philosophers' definitions are better because of the above mentioned reasons one and two. She argues by citation. The author and the reader move through a verbal landscape of concepts. Her worldview is made from concepts, and her concepts are made by investing specific words with self-invented meanings. This self-invention is relative, as it is related to what others have said before. Actually, Amir's (plea for a) worldview is a verbal tissue made from (Amir's use of and comments on) quotes. This rhetorical technique of citation might be called 'scholarship', but from a skeptical point of view it is not convincing. The technique can only be convincing on ethical (if you share Amir's moral preferences) and esthetical grounds (if you like Amir's concepts and the way she presents them), which, however, are not philosophical grounds, at least not in the skeptical tradition.

Part V of the book, called 'Practical epistemology', consists of two chapters, the first on 'Intellectual Virtues', the second on 'Skepticism, Reason and Emotion'. Amir's view of epistemology is practical in the sense that it is a set of intellectual virtues; her view of skepticism is that is a worldview that grounds intellectual virtues. What kind of epistemology is it? And what kind of skepticism?

#### **4. Epistemology as a Set of Skills**

Rationality is Amir's weapon against religion, New Age in particular. In her view, epistemology is "one of the most representative fields of philosophy".<sup>5)</sup>

She understands rationality in terms of intellectual virtues.

Epistemological virtues such as intellectual carefulness, perseverance, humility, vigor, flexibility, intellectual courage, and thoroughness, and the virtues opposed to wishful thinking, obtuseness and conformity. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 238)

Not only in the Academe, but also in everyday life, we are concerned with epistemological question. So, "epistemology is also a practical discipline."<sup>6)</sup>

Apparently, this conclusion justifies the academic philosopher to address people outside the Academe and teach them about the good life. For that reason, Amir opts for "an epistemology that addresses the cognitive set-up of the agent rather than episodes of cognitive activity in isolation".<sup>7)</sup>

She connects epistemology and ethics by understanding both in terms of virtues.

One area in which philosophers are essential is moral education, the other is critical thinking. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 239)

Amir discusses the virtue trend in ethics and epistemology in the last twenty years.

Virtue theories make the properties of persons most fundamental, and then understand other normative properties in terms of these. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 242)

This virtue trend in philosophy and the art of life trend are closely connected. I see both trends as a reaction of philosophers to

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<sup>5)</sup> L. Amir (2017), p. 238.

<sup>6)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7)</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

the lost status and function of philosophy in the Academe and in society. On the one hand, science has taken over philosophy's public role understanding reality rationally. On the other hand, positive psychology and all kinds of spiritual relief, understanding and enlightenment haven taken over philosophy's role in speculative metaphysics. In the margin of public life, some philosophers try to sell books and seminars on the so-called philosophical alternative with regard to the deeper issues of life. They sell the 'better' answer to questions of life and death. Skills training, called the development of one's character by means of 'virtues', is popular among contemporary philosophers. It is their 'asset' in the self-transformation market. It gets a rhetoric value from, first, the scientific and non-metaphysical looks, and, second, from the applicability in everyday life. Here, philosophy presents itself as a positive and rational science of self-knowledge and self-transformation. Like positive psychology and contemporary spirituality, they focus on the person's suffering and promise happiness. Amir is a representative of such a positive philosophy. Actually, Amir supplies happiness; humor is her selling point.

## 5. Critique of Knowledge

Amir's choice of epistemology in the sense of intellectual virtues fits her striving for conquering a position in the happiness market. Evidently, another epistemological approach does not suit her. In the history of philosophy, we not only know positive epistemology (the analysis of concepts like knowledge, truth, belief), but also critical epistemology. Immanuel Kant's "*Erkenntniskritik*", critique of knowledge, investigates the fundamental conditions, *possibilities* and *limits* of knowledge. Philosophy as a critique of knowledge dates back to Socrates. A Socratic investigation is not about establishing knowledge, neither about teaching cognitive skills, but about questioning whatever claimed truth. In this philosophical practice, the one and only philosophy is epistemology in the sense of a critique of knowledge, questioning someone's believed truth.

Among them are moral truths. Socratic practice is not an ethical theory, but, among others, the investigation of claimed moral truths. Socrates is the father of the sceptic attitude, combined with an active practice of investigating someone's truth.

Modern philosophy started with the revival of the skeptic attitude and questioning, think of Descartes and Hume. Cartesian meditation is a process of skeptical doubt; it may result in a certainty, but this certainty is a state of being present without the certainty of material knowledge (not to mention cognitive skills). About three centuries later, in the time of the scientific revolution and the crisis of Modern philosophy, Husserl resumed Descartes' skeptical meditations. With him, too, the meditations resulted in a state of being present without the certainty of material knowledge or cognitive skills. In Socrates' tradition, philosophy is the practice of questioning (some)one's truth claim – no more, no less. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* belongs in this skeptical tradition, although he didn't like Plato's dialogues, and although his investigations were directed towards philosophers' malpractice of inventing concepts *in general*.

This critical notion of epistemology is lacking in Amir's book, even though she refers to 'The Critique of Pure Reason'.<sup>8)</sup> With her, epistemology is not critical, it is positive, it formulates cognitive skills. Not surprisingly, two of the most important representatives of the phenomenological and linguistic turns of Modern philosophy, Husserl and Wittgenstein, cannot be found in the index of Amir's book (Wittgenstein's name turns up somewhere, but not related to a critical approach of knowledge and truth). If we consider the phenomenological and linguistic turns of Western philosophy to be paradigmatic, it is a historical blunder that these turns are ignored in this book. But of course, Amir's interest is totally different. Looking for a philosophical competitive product in the market of happiness and self-transformation, she constructs "*the practice of philosophy as a moral endeavor even when teaching practical epistemology*",<sup>9)</sup> firmly of the opinion that

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<sup>8)</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

her worldview will be competitive in that market.

Looking for the philosopher's unique selling point, Amir got the bright idea to link rationality to ethics. First, the market in view wants answers to questions about the meaning of life, existential dilemmas, personal identity, personal change, etc., shortly, moral and spiritual guidelines. Second, the niche she believes to see in this market is a rational/skeptical worldview – a view of intellectual/moral virtues. On the basis of a discussion of opinions about intellectual and moral virtues, Amir agrees with Zagzebski, who

argues that intellectual virtues are, in fact, forms of moral virtue. It follows that intellectual virtue is properly the object of study of moral philosophy. This claim is intended not to reduce epistemic concepts to moral concepts in the way that has sometimes been attempted, but to extend the range of moral concepts to include the normative dimension of cognitive activity: normative epistemology is a branch of ethics. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 250)

Why, the two ingredients needed– intellectual and moral virtues – are combined to get the virtual/conceptual product ‘philosophical worldview’. Now, clients can be trained in rational self-education, intellectual self-control and self-transformation, and humoristic skepticism.

## 6. A Worldview Version of Skepticism

Amir's product has a name, “*Homo risibilis*”, a human being capable of risibility. She calls it “a secular and skeptical worldview”.<sup>10)</sup> It is secular, because it is not based on religious or metaphysical beliefs. It is skeptical, because it is a “*bearer of rationality, tolerance and peace both inward and outward*”.<sup>11)</sup>

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<sup>9)</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>10)</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>11)</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

Amir calls it skepticism, but actually it is a mixture of agnosticism towards religious beliefs<sup>12)</sup> and stoicism in handling emotional and other passions.<sup>13)</sup> Her “new skeptical worldview” is

a skeptical and secular vision that rivals the benefits of established religions without needing religious and metaphysical assumptions, ... an egalitarian worldview which founds an ethics of compassion similar to the Buddhist and Christian ethics, yet free from the metaphysical assumptions those ethics rely on. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 273)

Despite Amir’s repeated incantation that her worldview is not metaphysical, it shows signs of metaphysics. First of all, it is nothing more than a conceptual construction of reality (in this case human feeling and behavior), without any empirical or experiential founding. Second, it claims to be the proper and true knowledge of reality, in this case true knowledge of knowledge and morality. Third, the only guarantee for this cognitive superiority is the philosopher’s definition of concepts and construction of arguments.

As to skepticism, Amir claims the better vision of skepticism to be an attitude of “redemption, or peace of mind”<sup>14)</sup>. “[O]ur humanity depends on a balance between desires and reason”.<sup>15)</sup> The point is whether we are capable of providing ourselves

[R]elief from the basic tension between our desires on the instinctual, emotional, and intellectual levels, and our awareness of the impossibility of fulfilling them, for practical as well as principled reasons. (L. Amir, 2017, p. 274)

I would call this Amir’s cheerful version of the Stoic attitude. The practice she offers, is humor.

Humor enables us to reduce the tension created by this clash

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<sup>12)</sup> Ibid., pp. 261-264.

<sup>13)</sup> Ibid., p. 273-276.

<sup>14)</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>15)</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

between expectations and reality, because it can construe the clash as an incongruity, and we can learn to enjoy incongruities that are not immediately funny to us. ... This enables us to be satisfied with dissatisfaction without paying the price of renouncing our desires, our reason, or both, that most solutions to dissatisfaction with the human condition require.(L. Amir, 2017, p. 274)

Don't be mistaken, Amir's humor is an intellectual virtue, a cognitive skill, a rational attitude. To be sure, with her, humor is an attitude, in the pejorative sense. At least, so I understand her elaborations on the subject. (I am skeptical about laughter workshops, too. Laughter is something that happens to you.)

In her discussion of skeptical positions in the history of philosophy, Socrates is absent. As Amir ignores epistemological critique of knowledge, she also ignores the non-theoretical use of the skeptical attitude. Does she have any idea of the difference between the skeptical attitude of investigating and questioning truth claims on the one hand (skeptical questioning), and the theoretical belief that any absolute knowledge is impossible (skepticism)? Socrates did not hold a theoretical position; he practiced a sound and sober suspicion of someone's truth claim. Therefore, his practice was to enter dialogues and to challenge the other person to investigate his truth.

Amir's positive philosophy yields profit:

Joy and serenity follow from accepting our ridicule, a view that liberates us without metaphysical assumptions but with remarkable emotional benefits.(L. Amir, 2017, p. 276)

## **7. Defensive Philosophy**

Amir's so-called philosophical worldview is an attempt to restore philosophers' historical but superseded superiority in understanding the world and human existence. Like many other philosophers nowadays, she claims epistemology and ethics to be the exclusive

work area of philosophy. By doing so, she follows the trend among ‘orphaned’ philosophers to sweep the coaching and counseling market with their product. One of the marketing strategies is the demarcation towards alleged competitors. In Amir’s book, the competitor is the New Age industry. Her strategy is playing off rational mind against religious mind.

Skills training, called the development of one’s character by means of ‘virtues’, is popular among contemporary philosophers. It is their ‘asset’ in the self-transformation market. It gets a rhetoric value from, first, the scientific and non- metaphysical looks, and, second, from the applicability in everyday life. Here, philosophy presents itself as a positive and rational science of self-knowledge and self-transformation.

Philosophers like Amir are longing for a basic and central position of philosophers in society. They think to find this position by stressing philosophy’s rationality and its supposed superiority in morals and in epistemic skills. While (neo-) Socratic practitioners believe in dialogue and dialogical rules, Aristotelian and stoic thinkers believe in character, virtue and education.

Practical philosophy, being the practice of “a new skeptical worldview” (“Home Risibilis”), is presented as being the better alternative (to New Age and psychology) in the market of meaningful worldviews, values and ideals of wisdom.<sup>16)</sup>

Reading Amir’s book, it is not clear what happens in philosophical practice sessions. Is a meeting between a philosopher and his guest an educational event? Is the philosopher trying to convince the guest of the power of the *Homo Risibilis* worldview?

Humor functions as a philosophical medicine with which the ambivalence of human condition can be endured and overcome. Isn’t it a special version of the Stoic attitude of life?

## **8. The Many Voices of Philosophy**

It is clear that my opinion of Amir’s book is rather rejecting than

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<sup>16)</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

embracing. It is philosophy's destiny: to contain a lot of – often conflicting – views and practices. The word 'philosophy' is one of those words that are meaningless because of an implosion of meanings. On Dictionary.com you can find 26 synonyms of philosophy:

attitude; doctrine; idea; ideology; logic; outlook; reasoning; system; tenet; theory; thinking; thought; truth; view; viewpoint; wisdom; aesthetics; axiom; beliefs; conception; convictions; metaphysics; ontology; rationalism; reason; values.

Philosophy is a word in everyday language and it is being used in a lot of different situations for a lot of different purposes of everyday life. In the academic world, the word philosophy stands for a specific discipline, which is being taught and practiced at a special faculty, where you can get academic titles. But even there, in the academic world, the word philosophy has different meanings, partly contradictory and conflicting. It is both metaphysics and the rejection of metaphysics. It is both ontology and critical investigation of any ontological proposition. It is both the development of fundamental knowledge of the world and principal skepticism towards any truth claim. As the community of academic philosophers does not have generally recognized paradigms, but only influential leaders and dominant approaches, there are no clear and undoubtable criteria, with which we can judge the philosophical quality of a philosopher's doings. So, we might expect that an academic philosopher - i.e., someone who has got an academic title in philosophy - is clear about his or her philosophical preferences and bias. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. On the contrary, most philosophers express themselves in such a way that it seems as if their philosophy is the whole philosophy. Even if they rebel against other philosophers, they disqualify the others and extol the superiority of their own philosophy, without critical investigation of their own position. I am sorry to say, that this is the case with Amir.

## Reference

Amir, Lydia. 2017. *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility*, New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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