

The Ethics of Irony in Kierkegaard

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Irony, it has frequently been observed, is more readily recognized than defined. And if our definitions are less than clear, our conceptions of the ironist are more clouded still. Misconceptions and stereotypes abound. The ironist, for example, is commonly thought to be aloof, selfish and elitist, coolly detached from and unconcerned with the aspirations and needs of his fellows; in sum, at least a-moral, possibly immoral. In the following pages I wish to argue that such a notion of the ironist is every bit as partial and misleading as that definition of irony as »the clever use of words«. The common conception is not entirely incorrect, but it only touches the outermost edge and overlooks the essence. Ironists come in degrees of actualization and the essential ironist, I wish to contend, is not only fundamentally a moral person but may moreover be the paradigm of the moral man or woman.

For the greater part of the last century, irony has been left to the literary critics. Recent philosophers have rarely engaged it, even more seldom displayed it. Meanwhile, the field and proper subjects of philosophy continue to be hotly contested. New fields seem to open up and old ones are forgotten. Irony is such a neglected plot. Its soil is rich but demanding. I will not go so far as to call for an immediate reopening (the age may not yet be ready for irony), but only more modestly suggest that we restake a claim and clear a few weeds from old boundary stones. Nor will I go so far as to suggest having advanced the concept. For irony requires its own pace. The modesty of the proposal is perhaps striking, but not unwarranted when one recalls that in its history »irony« has hardly changed: the term remained unaltered for some 1500 years after its adoption and we should thus not expect too much advance in a concept that was only elaborated a mere 135 years ago by Kierkegaard.¹ However, a few words about the history of the term and concept are in order.

Irony is ancient, yet in a true sense neither the term nor the concept are very old. Wide self-conscious use of both dates from the German Romantics, a mere bicentennium.

From the linguistic point of view, irony remains a terminological muddle. The Greek root εἰρων (eiron) was never used by the Greeks in *our* sense. It appears by the Age of Pericles² but has exclusively negative connotations. Through a sort of rhetorical alchemy, Cicero and Quintillian give it positive meaning for the first time, in Latin, by associating the term with the manner of Socrates. In this state the term remained, semi-dormant, until Shakespeare brought it to life again.

Even then it was not so much English contemporaries as the German Romantics who hailed the irony of Shakespeare and stressed the irony of Socrates and the ancients. They did not claim to invent the concept. Everyone had known that Socrates was ironic, in our sense. All that was lacking was a standardized term and the growth of the germinal concept.

By our times, the term has come to mean (1) saying the contrary of what one means, (2) saying something other than what one means, (3) blame by praise and praise by blame, and (4) mocking and scoffing of any kind.³

Socrates is celebrated for (3) above, for incorporating it into his dialectical method in order to puncture all pretense, and for typifying it in a way of life noted for self-depreciation and mocking sympathy.⁴ In short, Socrates' irony consisted of »the splendid roguery of getting the better of the whole world.«⁵

It is this tribute to Socrates the moralist as well as the ironist which I wish to examine, in considering the ironist's stance in the world, as this issues from a new understanding of himself and of the nature of the world. Such considerations will quickly reveal an ethical dimension, and it is here the discussion will focus.

The notion of »philosophical irony« and the suggestion of an ethical, or moral, dimension to irony may still strike some as strange. If so, it may be because, to rejoin the metaphor above, philosophers have lately become rather like absentee landlords, neglecting the soil while taking up residence either in airy metaphysical castles or in concrete positivist condominiums. It is tribute to the literary critics that they at least mention philosophical irony, and they cannot be faulted for not taking on the philosopher's proper chores.

The literary critics list four primary forms of irony: rhetorical irony, dra-

matic irony, the irony of fate, and philosophical irony, or the irony of philosophical detachment. But this fourth form admits of further refinement, which the literary critics neglect. Not only is there a philosophical irony, but there are degrees, or stages, of philosophical irony. Much has been written of the first three forms, and the reader is easily referred elsewhere. So, for example, on rhetorical irony, one might well consult the recent work of Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1974). For illustrations of dramatic irony, one could do no better than to read Sophocles once more. For examples of the ironies of fate, one might confer with one's own biographer. As regards philosophical irony, for the moment at least, read on.

For some it may need to be argued that irony is more than a tool of rhetoricians, that an ironist is more than merely one who employs irony. Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus had no patience with rhetorical reductionists of this sort and dismisses them quickly, writing »Irony is an existential determination, and nothing is more ridiculous than to suppose that it consists in the use of certain phraseology.«⁶ If this is so, what are the distinguishing marks of the ironist? How is he set off from the rhetorician?

Not everyone is an ironist. This is clear from the rarity of irony, as well as the paucity of wit, in our times. The ironist is, first of all, intellectual, reflective and self-conscious.⁷ And, despite a cool exterior, he is a person of passion. He is one who, in the first stages, has taken on a new attitude towards the world. He breaks through its illusory promises of fulfillment and, for a time at least, he is likely to extend his disillusionment to disdain for the entire world. These characteristics especially mark the Romantic ironist. Kierkegaard, in the Hegelian terminology of his day, speaks of this phase as a break with the phenomenal and actuality and a demand for the essential and ideal.

More importantly, the ironist is characterized by a yearning for something higher, and the modes of seeking it will distinguish the various types of ironists. So, for example, while both Socrates and the Romantics in general qualify as ironists, they are noticeably different, not so much in the ways they display their irony as in the ways they try to transcend the debunked illusions about the phenomenal world. But all begin from the same painful perception of a basic contradiction in human nature and in the human condition.⁸

Socrates and the Romantics represent the two principal types of ironists. And while Socrates may be more familiar than the German Romantics, it is their irony, rather than his, which is nowadays better known, as well as the cause of our misconceptions of the ironist. D. C. Muecke, in his *Compass of Irony*, writes that

... in the Romantic and post-Romantic period irony becomes the expression of an attitude to life or more accurately a way of organizing one's response to and coming to terms with a world that seems to be fundamentally at odds with mankind.⁹

However, the response is more than merely intellectual. It is social and artistic as well. For the Romantic artist relates to the world basically the same as he does to his own creation – with suffering and joy and then with irony and rejection.¹⁰ (Note in this regard the typical endings of German Romantic poems which so often dismiss the piece.)

The Romantic renounces the illusions of the world, and all the world with them. He seeks to soar above the world, fuelled by what Kierkegaard calls »infinite, absolute, negativity«.¹¹ Negativity, because it rejects actuality and does so with a vengeance; absolute, because it makes its rejection for the sake of the absolute and the ideal; infinite, because it extends rejection to all actuality and not merely to a single phenomenon or time. A leap beyond the phenomenal is then attempted through imagination, especially in the work of art. The poet seeks to transcend himself and the human condition through his act of creation. According to Kierkegaard, however, it is an enterprise doomed to failure, culminating in »bliss without enjoyment ... superficial profundity ... hungry satiety«.¹² For fantasy and imagination provide, at best, momentary relief from the world. They do not constitute an escape, nor do they bring about true transcendence. Art, according to Kierkegaard, cannot indicate or reflect transcendence unless the artistic creation mirrors inner personal development and hence has an internal, rather than purely external, relationship to the artist. The self is, therefore, the sole source of transcendence, and true transcendence takes place only through inner, »spiritual« growth.

While not unsympathetic to the Romantics, Kierkegaard viewed their irony, in the sense of ironic existence-stance, as fundamentally flawed. Socrates, on the other hand, lends his name and example to another type and full embodiment of irony, the Socratic ironist. Some 2200 years before

the German Romantics he signals the first appearance of the ironist and of authentic subjectivity in the spiritual history of the race. By no means is Kierkegaard alone in the lofty assessment of Socrates. His is rather an orthodox view among literary critics and historians, even if more dramatically proclaimed. Socrates is the ironist par excellence, the individual whose life is colored with irony.¹³ Socrates too rejected the illusions of the phenomenal, especially as articulated in the wisdom of the Sophists. His own soaring negativity is portrayed in his comic characterization by Aristophanes in *The Clouds*, as he hangs in a foolish basket. But his irony, issuing from his own understanding of the world, is quite distinct. And from what we recall of Socrates, we may begin to suggest that it has some connection with our own notions of morality. Here his difference from the Romantics comes into clear view.

For he too employs irony and exposes illusions, but he emphatically remains »in the world«, and with his feet on the ground. His transcendence is inner, as he slowly fulfills the Delphic command »Know Thyself«. Meanwhile his outer activities are unmistakably ethically oriented. He is thus, in his epoch, the first ironist and the model of mastered irony. He is both ironist and moralist, and the connection is not casual but essential: Socrates is essentially moral and essentially ironic, and his irony is essentially moral as well.

»Mastered irony« is the term Kierkegaard uses for this matured irony, for a negativity which is so total that it also negates irony as a final stance. Mastered irony is a re-acceptance of the world, not on the world's terms, but from the perspective of a deepened and realistic understanding of the self and its relation to the world. Mastered irony retains a distance from the objective world, and so protects nascent subjectivity, but retains an active and critical relationship to it, as Socrates did in the Athens of his day. Mastered irony sees the limited validity of the actual historical moment, against the backdrop of the infinite and the eternal. And it understands, from experience, that access to the infinite is possible, but through personal inwardness rather than flights of imagination. It sees through all illusions, including the illusion of Romantic irony which would posit imagination as avenue to the infinite.

The master of irony does not reject the world but does maintain a limited detachment. His detachment, however, is not from the »world«, for the

Socratic ironist understands the impossibility of that. It is rather detachment from conventional absorption in the world, from the credos and limited horizons of contemporaries which the ironist experiences as needlessly constraining and not conferring sought-after meaning. To shift the point of reference, if the master of irony still seems to soar, it is not so much that he is cut loose as that others are simply bogged down in the mundane and trivial.

In essence, mastered irony is irony which has overcome itself.

... [F]or irony is first surmounted when the individual, elevated above everything and looking down from this position, is finally elevated beyond himself, and from this dizzy height sees himself in his nothingness, and thereby he finds his true elevation.¹⁴

It is a consciousness of an attainable higher self, an awareness of a personal spiritual evolution underway. It is continued resistance to the absolute claims of the relative and immediate, and it is a calm, balanced valuation of the actual world. In brief, it is the unity of ethical passion, by which it acts, and personal development, towards which it aims. And here emerges the possibility of an ethics of irony.

In his dissertation on European Romantic Irony, Morton Gurewitsch writes: Irony entails hypersensitivity to a universe permanently out of joint and unfailingly grotesque. The ironist does not pretend to cure such a universe or to solve its mysteries. It is satire that solves.¹⁵

In the same work, he also states however, »While the manners of men are the domain of the satirist, the mores of the universe are the preserve of the ironist.«¹⁶ Satire and irony, often identified, are quite distinct, as are the satirist and the ironist. The ironist as such does not offer a cure for some highlighted human foible, as the satirist often does. But this is because there is no surface remedy to the essential human foible of being ensnared by the phenomenal world. In this sense, the satirist, whether the congenial Horace at the Fons Bandusiae (Odes III.13) or the embittered Juvenal bemoaning a great people reduced to bread and circuses (Sat. X.81), may in fact be less moral and less curative, no matter how moralistic his tone or how tonic his wise sayings. For he does not, as satirist, penetrate beneath the manners to the root problem. And yet the satirist enjoys a much better image than does the ironist. His surface appearance is less hospitable, and it is surely much on this basis that the popular image of amorality, or irresponsibility, rests.

Irony does, however, have its dangers. Critics have frequently noted the danger of the ironist being corrupted by his own irony.¹⁷ This would surely count against claims for the morality of irony. But where danger exists – and it usually seems more a theoretical danger than a real one – it is the self-indulgent irony of the Romantic sort which corrupts, rather than the Socratic, or mastered.

The Romantic, I do not hesitate to concede, is not the moral ironist. For in his adolescent and inflated subjectivity, he has not yet come to an ethical consciousness and commitment to a community of subjects. (Kierkegaard creates a literary type of the self-corrupting Romantic ironist in the character Johannes of *Either-Or*.) The Romantic ironist is estranged. He asserts himself only abstractly, in his artistic creations, and so he lives, in Kierkegaard's words, »hypothetically and subjunctively«. ¹⁸

Perhaps the Romantic is only a-moral. He has broken with the crowd, with mass-man, in order to assert his sense of self. But he has not (yet) taken up a higher ethical relationship to his fellow men.

Socrates the moralist and ironist is quite different in this respect. While his morality may not imply irony, his mastered irony is fully moral and issues in concrete actions in the ethical arena.

The Socratic ironist is thoroughly moral, even essentially so. To the intelligence and passion of the Romantic ironist's exposure of the world's illusions, he adds self-discipline and a commitment to the world. The Socratic ironist thus rather than rejecting the world commits himself to it and, as Solger says, teaches men to abide in actuality and to seek truth in limitation.¹⁹

Mastered irony redirects the higher and objectless longing of the Romantic away from the ethereal unrealities of imagination and speculation, to the self rooted in the world, and it reveals the task of the self as the highest and most demanding human aspiration.

Kierkegaard remarks that in mastered irony the true significance of irony appears, viz. to serve as a check on personal life, to ward off excesses and to keep human aspirations realistically directed. In criticizing the Romantics and their characteristic irony, he does not ask that poetry be abandoned, but only that the artist not be self-deceiving, that he be, therefore, ethical first on a personal level, in dealing with himself, and then ethical on an inter-subjective level, by creating works of art from out of a mature subjectivity

in and for a real world of other subjects. (This argument is developed in his critique of Hans Christian Andersen's pretensions at being an epic novelist, in the essay *From the Papers of One Still Living*.)

When the ironist has overcome self-indulgence and reached self-discipline, Kierkegaard asserts that irony has come into its own. Fully emerged,

Irony now limits, renders finite, defines, and thereby yields truth, actuality and content; it chastens and punishes and thereby imparts stability, character and consistency.²⁰

The ironist begins to sound more like a responsible Burgher than a poet. But Socrates outraged the Burghers, as we know. His irony was responsible but was also intoxicatingly free. It is this latter aspect which attracted the youth of Athens and the Romantics later.

Socrates' irony had a definite purpose. When irony is mastered, the ironist's activity becomes self-consciously moral. No longer does the ironist place an incident or phenomenon within some larger, revealing context merely to mock the victims of the world's many illusions, but does so in order to point to the larger perspective, or horizon of understanding, which gives true meaning to oneself and the world.

How far does the involvement of the ironist in the world extend? The question arises quickly in an age recently become highly sensitive to the moral imperative of political action. Dare we ask about the politics to issue from ironic detachment?

Thomas Mann wrote in »Meditations of a Non-Political Man« that an intelligent person has the alternative either to be ironical or radical, that there is no third choice.²¹ The ostensibly a-political Kierkegaard wrote a century earlier:

An ironist who is in the majority is *eo ipso* a mediocre ironist ... Irony is suspect both to the right and to the left. Therefore a true ironist has never been in the majority.²²

Both remarks would suggest that an ironist cannot be politically active, or successful, that, instead, he may be relegated to the »silent majority« or left to the harmless orations of professors. As for avoiding political involvement, Mann's remark may be descriptive of the Romantic ironists, among whom Mann must finally be numbered himself. But taken with Kierkegaard's comment, it might suggest that the true ironist is beyond what passes for »radical« politics, in the sense that he penetrates to the deepest

roots of the world's ills. The Socratic ironist's sense of spiritual values and his perception of confused self-understanding as at the root of social misdirection may have difficulty finding a place in the major political parties (Governor Brown of California, whose credentials as an ironist need further investigation, may prove the exception here), but they may be readily voiced and heard, and hence be politically potent, in the local *agora* and at the center of the polis. The ironist is, after all, the true individual, and not a managed television personality.

The ironist *qua* ironist, I must concede, does not change reality. He merely points the way to its truer understanding. The social activist of the '60's may have little patience with him. But only the self-righteous will deny that his is a moral stance. Socrates did not, we know, lead a movement to change the social conditions of Athens. Yet one can suppose that he was not insensitive to them. The Socrates who daily met and debated his fellow citizens in Athens' *agora* certainly played an active and effective role in the polis. His conduct suggests that there are many authentic modes for the political expression of ethical passion.

We know, on the other hand, that the Romantic ironists were not wholly withdrawn from society, even if they theoretically valued it little. What distinguishes the morality of Socrates as an ironist here is the moral intent and self-consciousness of his irony in cultivating, and driving others to cultivate, the inwardness which contributes to making existence fully human. His irony is characterized by moral passion applied in equally stern doses to himself and his contemporaries. And if rhetorical irony is sometimes the proverbial honey on the cup's rim, it does not alter the medicine of essential irony.

In considering the morality of the ironist, one cannot ignore the interpersonal dimension. In brief, what is the ironist like as a friend? Is the ironist perhaps so inwardly oriented and outwardly eccentric as to make friendship – that high moral ideal of human relationship – difficult? Is the ironist, in his dedication to exposing illusions, not likely to be a little too messianic to pursue the calmer hours of human intimacy? Or are the ironist's relationships more likely to be more a form of camaraderie born of commiserating the world's illusions?

If true friendship is finally possible only to those who share a common philosophy of life, it may be that only the Socratic ironist is capable of

genuine friendship. The Romantic has no mature philosophy of life.²³ And friendship can hardly thrive in the thin air of imagination.

Two relationships grounded in irony may shed some light here: Socrates and Alcibiades, in the first instance; Edith Wharton and Henry James, in the second.

Socrates was well known for his influence over the brightest young men of Athens. »Corrupting the youth« was the way it was stated at his trial. Among his youthful companions was the wily Alcibiades of later fame and infamy. He was, for a time, virtually under the spell of Socrates, a spell which Kierkegaard suggests was the direct result of irony's seductive power.

Neither passion nor sentiment was at the base of their relationship then, but irony itself, the irony which posits nothing explicitly but only serves as an incitement, never constituting that third element which may finally join two people.²⁴

Kierkegaard wrote of its power:

The disguise and mysteriousness which it entails, the telegraphic communication which it initiates, inasmuch as the ironist must always be understood at a distance, the infinite sympathy it assumes, the elusive and ineffable moment (flash) of understanding immediately displaced by the anxiety of misunderstanding – all this captivates with indissoluble bonds.²⁵

The seductive power may be more a dangerous by-product than an essential characteristic, rather like the *siddhis* (magical powers) of a yogi. Its effect on our own judgment of the morality of irony will finally depend on how we determine culpability, Socrates' conviction by the Athenians notwithstanding. Did the seductive power cut short the possibility of mutuality? Alcibiades had no philosophy of life, as is manifest from his erratic career. The eccentric Socrates and the unstable Alcibiades, while a famous example, are not the model of friendship, if only because it was unsuccessful. But did irony incapacitate them, or does irony limit the ironist to the friendship of other ironists? The second example will be instructive here.

Edith Wharton wrote of Henry James that

The real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humor or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances at any subject cross like inter-arching search lights.²⁶

Here irony emerges as the key to a special intimacy, and inter-subjective irony may represent a higher form of friendship for those who evidence

mature subjectivity and a corresponding philosophy of life. It is the un-ironic Alcibiades who brings out a negative potential. True irony, individually attained and mastered, here emerges as the basis of a very special relationship. Rather than a danger, irony is a boon to him or her who combines modest self-abnegation and tempered seriousness with the coy mixture of apparent tolerance and a certain skepticism which is so characteristic of irony.²⁷

We have examined irony in the marketplace, in the work of art, in personal development and in intersubjective relationships and the results should suggest that in all these arenas the mastered ironist is thoroughly moral in intent and actions, as he moves to shake the foundations and establish a solid basis for a better human order. But if moral man is made in the image of his Creator, one ought to be able to find some trace of irony in Him as well. And, indeed, examples abound. The Dramatic Ironist frustrates the run-away prophet Jonah and brings him to save Nineveh, the city he despises. Job rails at the Almighty and calls for a debate, and He uncharacteristically obliges. Adam found the product of the knowledge of good and evil was not what he expected, and the sudden creation of many languages frustrated man's first cooperative effort to storm heaven with the Tower of Babel. (For other examples, cf. Edwin Good's *Irony in the Old Testament*. Westminster, 1965.)

In the end, how can irony be immoral when God himself is certainly the Supreme Ironist, occasionally taking time out from his cosmic affairs of state to point out, sometimes with smiling tolerance, sometimes with chastening wrath, the illusions of his individual and collective creatures? The Hebrews knew this side of their deity, and the author of Ecclesiastes writes, in what is a possible translation of *bevel hevlim*, »Irony of ironies, all is irony ...«

Irony is the saving grace of this flawed universe, the ability to rise above it without ever leaving it. Kierkegaard sums it up when he writes that in the end »One may claim that no authentic human life is possible without irony.«²⁸ The Supreme Ironist, himself very human, may well agree.

NOTES

1. *The Concept of Irony With Constant Reference to Socrates* (Copenhagen, 1841), translated by Lee M. Capel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).
2. Norman Knox, *The Word IRONY and Its Context, 1500-1755* (Durham: Duke University Press), pp. 3-5.
3. Knox, pp. 9-10.
4. Knox, p. 21.
5. Schlegel, quoted by D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 194-195.
6. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, 1941) translated by David Swenson and Walter Lowrie, p. 450.
7. Muecke, p. 6.
8. Muecke, p. 20.
9. Preface, ix.
10. Muecke, p. 192.
11. *Concept of Irony*, p. 278.
12. *Concept of Irony*, p. 302.
13. Booth, p. 139.
14. Kierkegaard, *Papirer* II A 627.
15. Cited by Booth, p. 92.
16. Quoted by Muecke, p. 27.
17. Cf. Muecke, p. 242.
18. *Concept of Irony*, p. 301.
19. Cf. *Concept of Irony*, p. 333.
20. *Concept of Irony*, pp. 338-339.
21. Quoted by Muecke, p. 235.
22. *Papirer* VII¹ A 64.
23. Cf. discussion by Kierkegaard in *From the Papers of One Still Living* (untranslated), *Samlede Værker* I 3rd ed.
24. *Concept of Irony*, pp. 86-88.
25. *Concept of Irony*, p. 85.
26. Quoted by Booth, p. 13.
27. Cf. Shaftesbury's advice on how to live ironically, quoted by Muecke, p. 237.
28. *Concept of Irony*, p. 338.