On the Moral Status of Irony

Dustin Peone[1]

Abstract: Irony has long been an object of philosophical distrust. Although irony is often thought to have been embraced by post-Socratic philosophers, it has in fact usually been approached with deep suspicion. The reason for this is that irony is essentially dishonest. It is a mode of speaking untruth. Most major theories defend some version of the doctrine that it is wrong to knowingly speak untruth. We are therefore compelled to admit that irony is, at least to some degree, immoral. In this paper, I wish to question the moral status of irony. I begin with a simple ethical argument: It is unethical to intentionally deceive another rational being; irony entails intentionally deceiving other rational beings; therefore, irony is unethical. While one could easily reject or insist on modifying the first premise, I do not want to do so. I wish to hold irony up to the most extreme form of Kantian criticism and see if it is defensible. In order to stage an apology, I address the inherent limits of language as a tool of expression. Language itself is almost always elliptical; seldom can we say what we mean in straight-forward, unambiguous, non-metaphorical speech. Because this is the case, we must reevaluate what it means to deceive. I suggest that a more appropriate standard for morally assessing ironic speech is "effective/ineffective" or "illuminating/obfuscating" rather than "true/false."

Keywords: irony, lying, metaphor, Vico, Pirandello

> Without the trope of irony combined with that of metaphor,
> nothing great can be said.
> —Donald Phillip Verene (2018, 17)

Introduction

We have been told often enough by thoroughly respectable sources that it is morally wrong to intentionally deceive our fellow human beings. The Judeo-Christian story has it that this maxim

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[1] Mercer University, Atlanta, GA, USA; peone_dk@mercer.edu.

was inscribed in stone at the behest of God in the imperative mode: "Thou shalt not bear false witness!" Islamic scholars tell us, "The curse of Allah be on him if he is one of the liars" (Surah an-Nur 24:8). Secular teachers of ethics routinely insist that deception denies the deceived of his or her basic human dignity, or that it undermines the efficacy of truth-telling and thereby injures the whole of humankind.

The strongest philosophical opponent of lying was the eminently respectable Immanuel Kant. Kant insists, "Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to hold morally, i.e. as the ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity." The exemplary moral law in Kantian ethics is "Thou shalt not lie" (Kant 2013, 4:389.) This principle is taken to its extreme limit in Kant's essay "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy." Here, he says, "Truth in utterances that cannot be avoided is the formal duty of a man to everyone, however great the disadvantage that may arise from it to him or to any other" (Kant 1923, 362). What if this duty conflicts with other commitments and obligations? May we deceive another human being to save a life? Certainly not! Even if there is a murderer at the door, asking whether his intended victim is at home, it is unethical to put the fellow off the scent with a lie.

I mention these well-known moral prohibitions against lying as a preface to a discussion of irony. Irony, apart from all of its other characteristics, is fundamentally a mode of speaking untruth. In this paper, then, I wish to investigate the moral status of irony. Given the premise that deception is immoral, must we commit ourselves to the position that irony is immoral? Is straight-forward, literal speech demanded by human dignity? This would be bad news for many. If we wish to defend the ironist against moral outrage, what grounds are there to redeem this verbal trickster?

1. The Nature of Irony

By "irony," I mean the poetic trope or rhetorical device: the irony of words, not the irony of things, which is a different topic.[2] Irony in this sense is always verbal, and its nature is the saying of what is not in order to suggest what is. In other words, the ironist says the opposite of what he or she means. Alexander Bain defines irony as the expression of "the contrary of what is meant, there being something in the tone or manner to show the real drift of the speaker" (Bain 1867, 62).

Irony originated as a device of the classical Greek theater. The word "irony" (*eironeia*) comes from the Greek *eirôn*. The *eirôn* was one of the stock characters of Greek comedy, a comic underdog hero. This figure is usually contrasted with a boastful *alazôn*. The *eirôn* is not a character in a position of power; he is often a servant or slave, subordinate to the *alazôn*. However, what the *eirôn* lacks in power he makes up for in cleverness. He has a clear understanding of the true character of his master, and can apprehend the disparity between the appearance and reality of the *alazôn*. Because it is dangerous to speak truth to power, the *eirôn* uses his wit to deflate his stronger opponent. Irony is his mode of speech (Carlson 1993, 337).[3]

Characters of this type abound in the comedies of Aristophanes. For example, we have Cario, the slave of the boastful Chremylus in *Plutus*. Throughout Chremylus's discourse with the god Plutus, Cario interjects with pointed irony. "Don't desert me," Chremylus pleads; "Search where'er you will / You'll never find a better man than myself." Cario is quick to defend his master's veracity: "No more there is, by Zeus—except myself" (Aristophanes 1962, lines 104–6). Cario is the likeable trickster, in whom we see ourselves, and Chremylus is the tyrant who causes our long suffering. The blustering tyrant has power and therefore has no need for indirect speech.

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[2] Needless to say, Alanis Morissette's idea of "irony" has no connection to *any* traditional sense of the term.

[3] Paul Gooch calls *alazoneia* "playing up the truth," i.e. boasting, and *eironeia* "playing it down," i.e. understating (Gooch 1987, 95).

The slave must dissemble in the name of prudence.[4] Neither party, however, achieves the moralist's ideal of honesty.

The most important early philosophical discussion of irony is found in Book IV of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. This discussion occurs in the midst of Aristotle's explanation of the "golden mean"—the doctrine that every virtue is a mean between two extremes, which are opposite vices. Aristotle says that the mean in the sphere of self-expression does not have does not have a proper name, but that it is a matter of pursuing truth "in words and deeds and in the claims they put forward." The two extremes related to this mean are boastfulness (*alazoneia*) and irony (*eironeia*). Aristotle defines the boastful man as "apt to claim the things that bring repute, when he has not got them." The *eirôn*, on the other hand, is a "mock-modest man" given to "disclaim what he has or belittle it." Between these two vices is the truthful fellow who "calls a thing by its own name, being truthful both in life and in word" (Aristotle 1984, *Nic. Eth.* IV.7, 1127a13–25).

Aristotle says that the boaster is the worse of the two characters, and cites Socrates as a worthy *eirôn* (Aristotle 1984, *Nic. Eth.* IV.7, 1127b23–32).[5] Nevertheless, for Aristotle the ironist is still far from what he ought to be. This opinion mirrors the majority opinion of Athens. It was well known that Socrates feigned ignorance in order to draw out his interlocutors through the method of *elenchus*.[6] This was viewed as ignoble by his critics, a treacherous manner of dealing with good, solid citizens! Socratic irony—and nearly all later philosophers have tended to follow Aristotle's lead in associating Socrates with irony[7]—is scandalous. In reference to truthfulness, irony is not a virtue, but a deficiency. *Irony is not truthful*. The person who loves and speaks truth is equitable, whereas the *eirôn* is not entirely so. Aristotle, like many before and after him, is suspicious of irony. In his opinion a thorough moral education should excise this vice.

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[4] The ancient tyrant's power springs from a monopoly on the instruments of force. This is, of course, different for *political* power, which relies on popular support and therefore has a use for rhetorical devices like irony.

[5] See also Aristotle 1984, *Rhet.* III.18, 1419b2–9, where Aristotle says that irony is "becoming to a gentleman" as a form of wit.

[6] For instance, *Euthyphro*: "If you, who have full knowledge of such things, share their opinions, then we must agree with them, too, it would seem. For what are we to say, we who agree that we ourselves have no knowledge of them?" (Plato 1997, *Euth.* 6b).

[7] On this matter, Gregory Vlastos is interesting, interpreting Socratic irony as more complex than the orthodox view—partially false but partially true. See Vlastos 1987 and Vlastos 1991.

2. An Invincible Argument

Irony is a form of speech that entails deception. We are obliged, like it or not, to pay attention to a simple and self-evident logical deduction:

P1 It is unethical to intentionally deceive another rational being.
P2 Irony entails intentionally deceiving other rational beings.
C Therefore, irony is unethical.

The logical form of this deduction is unimpeachable. It is valid. However, it may ultimately prove to be unsound. If we wish to demonstrate as much, we must show that at least one of its premises is false.

Let us begin with the first premise of our argument, that deception is always ethically wrong. This premise can be rejected outright, in which case irony may be defended in any number of ways. For instance, (1) a utilitarian could justify a particular lie by producing a worked-out hedonistic calculus to demonstrate that its effects are more generally beneficial than the effects of strict truth-telling. Or (2) a classicist could argue with Plato that the *pia fraus*, the noble lie, is justifiable by reference to the virtuous and wise intentions of the liar. Or (3) we could consider irony in regard to its utility as an invaluable rhetorical trope for the embellishment of oratory (as was the case for Cicero and Quintilian). Or (4) one could point to other moral functions of irony as a rhetorical instrument—for instance, it enables the weaker party to speak a semblance of truth to the stronger. In this respect, it is a weapon for emancipation.[8] I am, in fact, committed to (4), I am willing to consider (1) and (2) under appropriate conditions, and (3) is a simple fact. One may argue ethically without holding a strong commitment to Kant's categorical imperative.

I do not, however, wish to deny the first premise. In general, it is a good principle of provisional morality (and I doubt that any *post*-provisional morality actually can exist). I want to put irony through a crucible, and to do so I will accept the principle that intentional deception is always unethical. I will play the Kantian for the remainder of this paper. *If* we take this principle as a given, is it still possible to stage a defense of irony?

3. The Philosophical Scandal of Irony

We now turn to the second premise, that irony entails deception or untruth. With regard to the rhetorical sense of irony, I do not think that this can be reasonably denied. We have seen that Aristotle tells us this is the case. In the following ages, we can find many more philosophers who have been similarly scandalized by *eironeia*. We could point to both the Stoics and the Epicureans in antiquity, the Roman Catholic Church throughout the Middle Ages,[9] and any number of individual critics from modern and post-modern times. It is a widespread belief that, following Socrates, philosophers have generally embraced irony. This claim is unwarranted by the evidence. In a recent study of the reception of irony in the history of philosophy, Lydia Amir has demonstrated that, outside of the Ciceronian school of rhetoric and the Romantic period, irony has generally been held in low regard by philosophers. She concludes her essay with the assertion, "*The relevance of irony to philosophy* should be reevaluated once we disclose that irony has been criticized more often than not, especially by philosophers" (Nilsen, Nilsen, and Amir 2025, np).[10] Why would this be so? Because of irony's close relationship to untruthfulness, insincerity, and dissembling.[11]

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[8] See, for example, Willett 2008 and Peone 2023a.

[9] And up to the present. See Fisher 2012.

The list of irony's critics is long and highly esteemed. Hegel teaches that irony is the supreme form of subjectivism, an instrument useful when directed against persons, but only a pale image of the true movement of thought (dialectic) (Hegel 1973a, par. 140). In *Human, All-Too-Human*, Nietzsche similarly warns, "Irony is appropriate only as a pedagogical tool … its purpose is humiliation, shame." Outside of the pedagogical relationship, irony is a "base emotion"; "The habit of irony, like that of sarcasm, ruins the character" (Nietzsche 1986, par. 372). Adorno teaches that the original medium of irony (the difference between ideology and reality) has disappeared in modernity, leaving irony today in contradiction to the truth (Adorno 1994, par. 134). *Et cetera*, *et cetera*.

I refer the reader to Amir's study for a comprehensive history of the topic. I will only take a moment to supplement her list with two Italian literati (themselves often ironists of the highest order).

Luigi Pirandello, in his monograph *L'umorismo*, writes, "As a rhetorical figure, irony involves a deception which is absolutely contrary to the nature of genuine humor" (Pirandello 1960, 5). This deception is the suggestion of an apparent contradiction between what is said and what is meant. For Pirandello, true humor is a phenomenon in which the comic and its opposite are both genuinely present; thought is tied to its opposite, every "yes" concurrent with a "no." Irony exists at the level of *seeming* contradiction, not real contradiction. It deceives its victim with an untrue representation of the world. To this extent, it fails to honor the inherent dignity of the auditor. Pirandello says, “Even when irony is employed towards a good end, one cannot remove from it the notion of a certain mockery and mordancy” (Pirandello 1960, 8).

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[10] Amir has elsewhere asserted that *all* French philosophers frown upon irony. See Amir 2021, Concluding Remarks.
[11] Many recent authors in various fields have attempted to formally distinguish irony and lying. See the references in Dynel 2018, Chapter 1.4. I am skeptical that any such distinction is possible.

This point is made more forcibly by the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico. Vico was suspicious about irony and saw it as the trope natural to ages sunk in the “barbarism of reflection.” In his account in the *Scienza nuova*, he says that the earliest peoples did not yet know how to deceive. They were simple and limited, but forthright, because they were entirely sensuous, without past or present. Their mode of thinking was largely poetic (Book II of the *Scienza nuova* is titled “Della sapienza poetica,” “On Poetic Wisdom”). However, at this time, the master poetic trope was metaphor, and all metaphors are, for Vico, simply true. It is through metaphor that human beings make sense of the hostile and unfamiliar world. A metaphor that is drawn out into a narrative becomes a fable, and the first peoples understood themselves and the world around them by way of fabulous histories. Now, metaphors are often the result of mistakes, as Walker Percy has demonstrated—“misnamings, misunderstandings, or misrememberings”—but they are nevertheless forthright (Percy 1958). For the simple first persons of the gentile nations, fables were “true narrations” (Vico 1984, §§404–11).[12]

Vico says that irony is a much later innovation, coming about only when people had learned to feign. He writes, “Irony certainly could not have begun until the period of reflection, because it is fashioned of falsehood by dint of reflection which wears the mask of truth” (Vico 1984, §408).[13] Reflection removes us from the immediate presence of the world. It allows us to distinguish one idea from another. In doing so, it allows us to willfully *substitute* one idea for another—that is, to speak untruth in place of truth. Truth and falsehood are introduced only when humans learn to reflect upon what is immediately sensed and felt. Irony, then, arises with the power of judgment.

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[12] On the subject of humor, irony, and metaphor in Vico, see Peone 2023a, chapter 4 and Peone 2023b.

[13] In *Institutiones Oratoriae*, Vico defines irony as “the trope by which we say that which is other than we feel” (Vico 1996, 145).

Incidentally, this is the same set of criteria that gives rise to the practice of philosophy. The reflective thinker who escapes immediate sensation is the first person who is able to philosophize—also the first ironist and the first deceiver. This, I believe, is the true sense in which irony may be considered the basic trope of philosophy.[14] They are coeval capacities. Poetry arises at the same time as metaphorical thinking, and philosophy arises at the same time as ironic thinking. Vico was well aware of this, and in his narrative of the course of nations, the rise of philosophers is the beginning of the end. The end comes when reflection wins the day entirely. Having learned to deceive, humans abandon truthfulness: "Through long centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned them into beasts made more inhuman by the *barbarism of reflection* than the first men had been made by the *barbarism of sense*. For the latter displayed a generous savagery, against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one's guard; but the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates" (Vico 1984, §1106). Philosophy itself is an offshoot of the capacity to deceive. What, then? Could philosophy be—a vice?

4. Essaying a Defense of Irony

Pirandello, Vico, and company are correct in their assessment. Irony is fundamentally untruthful. Ironic speech deliberately says something other than what it means. To define irony in any other manner would strip it of its essential character. If we wish to admit it into our discourse, an *apologia* is necessary. So what may we say in defense of this poetic device? In short, the defense will suggest that there are lies and then there are lies. We ought to qualify what exactly we mean by the claim that irony entails deception. This requires a short digression on the nature and use of irony.

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[14] This is to say that philosophical irony does *not* begin with Plato, as the orthodox story has it, but that the very capacity to reflect *already* entails the capacity for irony.

Let us return for a moment to the *eirôn* of the classical theater. Because there is a disparity of power between *eirôn* and *alazôn*, the former cannot criticize the latter in forthright language. Prudence, which is loath to sacrifice self-preservation to no end, forbids this. It is a hard fate for a clever man to be subordinate to a fool. Aristophanes's *Plutus* begins with the *eirôn* Cario's lament: "How hard it is, O Zeus and all ye gods, / To be the slave of a fool!" (Aristophanes 1962, lines 1–2). The tyrant cannot tolerate contradiction from subordinates, for the tyrant rules not by reason but by force. In order to speak truth to power, the inferior must practice a form of double-speech. This entails double-thinking; the subordinate must learn to think "two thinks at a time," as James Joyce says (Joyce 1986, 583), to hold two disparate things together in thought. One thing is the truth as known to the *eirôn*, and the second thing is the apparent truth desired by the *alazôn*. The clever ironist combines these two elements in one. His or her speech is a "twone" (Joyce 1986, 3), a two-in-one.

This double-speech has two meanings, one for the ears of the foolish tyrant and another for the audience.[15] Ironic speech arises when the possibility of literal speech is impeded by political realities. The "Yes, master," of the long-suffering slave is the most rudimentary form of ironic speech, and the double-speak of Socrates is its most developed form. In both situations, the speaker means quite the opposite of what the conceited *alazôn* is likely to hear. In *Hamlet*, the prince must play the *eirôn* when he stands before his step-father's throne. Claudius remonstrates with Hamlet to remain in Denmark, after which Gertrude echoes this request in two lines. Hamlet responds, "I shall in all my best obey *you*, madam" (Shakespeare 2005, I.ii.120, my emphasis). Nothing could better demonstrate Hamlet's utter contempt for the king, though this is lost on Claudius.

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[15] When we are not speaking about staged performances, it happens that in most cases, the ironist has only himself or herself as audience—an audience of one.

The *eirôn*, then, is a deceiver. He or she lies—but also speaks truly. In the words of Gregory Vlastos, "What is said both is and isn't what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another" (Vlastos 1991, 31).[16] A different message is delivered to two different recipients at once, by way of one and the same speech act. Each auditor interprets the message in a different sense. The ironic speech is never a complete falsehood because there is an intended audience to whom it conveys truth. Nevertheless, it is never a *fully* forthright speech either. If the true sense were conveyed to all auditors, it would not be irony at all. It would be a simple and direct statement, and we could easily assess its truthfulness with the instruments of formal logic.

However, this *partial truth* apology does not get irony off the ethical hook. If we are convinced Kantians or orthodox followers of the Torah, we must hold that *every* deception is unethical, even if it deceives only one person, and even if the intentions of the trickster are noble. Neither prudence nor expediency is a justifiable excuse for violating a categorical imperative. Nor are we let off the hook by a "deceptionist" theory of truth-telling.[17] A deceptionist (St. Augustine, for instance) holds that lying requires the intention to deceive, and that in the absence of this condition there is no fault. It is true that the *eirôn* does not intend *exclusively* to deceive, but the intention is unequivocally there to deceive at least one person, namely the person to whom it is dangerous to speak truth. Nor can we say that this person is not a "ratified recipient." The very purpose of the ironic speech is for the deceived person to receive it and to misinterpret its esoteric meaning.

One way that irony might be ethically defended is by pointing to a conflict of imperatives.

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[16] "Complex irony" is here contrasted with "simple irony," in which "taken in its ordinary, commonly understood, sense the statement is simply false."

[17] On the various forms of "deceptionism," see Mahon 2014.

This is something that Kant generally ignores but Hegel emphasizes, especially in his earliest writings. There seldom arises a concrete situation in which one's decision does not entail some opportunity cost. We may always uncover categorical duties that both compel and prohibit every action, and reflective thinking cannot adequately resolve these contradictions. Hegel holds that a true Kantian is never able to decide on an action in good faith, for the fulfillment of every duty is a violation of other duties (Hegel 1973b, 426–27).[18]

The claim might therefore be made that, over and against an ethical principle that prohibits lying on the grounds that it treats the other as a means rather than an end, the use of irony could be justified by a separate ethical principle, the right of self-defense. Now we are faced with a moral antinomy. Hobbes tells us that the first inviolable right of nature is "the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life" (Hobbes 1996, XIV.1). When this principle comes into conflict with the imperative to not deceive, the natural right to exist might very well override the purely formal imperative of honesty. However, this is a weak defense. It covers only those rare situations when one must actively appear to praise the tyrant or else be thrown to the wolves. However, even extreme cases of this sort still do not justify the use of lying for Kant and self-consistent Kantians. Furthermore, we cannot leap from these cases of life and death to a more general grounds for justifying irony. That is, a successful appeal to an extreme situation does not permit the use of irony for philosophical or aesthetic or comedic effect when annihilation does not loom in the background. I wish to pursue a more overarching defense. I wish to justify irony in its own right, with or without "mitigating circumstances."

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[18] On Hegel's criticism of the Kantian ethical position, see Peone 2021.

5. Irony as a Necessity of Language

In order to defend irony from the invincible deduction of its immorality, it is necessary to take the argument in a different direction and ask not whether the premises are “true,” but whether they are “coherent.” Do they make sense? In particular, is the notion of “deception” perfectly clear and distinct? Our collective intuition is that yes, we do understand what it means to speak truth or untruth, even if in many cases the truth is not known or cannot be known. If we were not able to speak the plain truth when called upon to do so, most of our social institutions would have shaky foundations at best (for instance, jurisprudence and deliberative democracy).

But is there a clearly demarcated line between truth and falsehood in human communication? Even setting aside the epistemological problems of what constitutes “knowledge,” how am I ever able to speak the literal truth? Does my language allow it?

In his Seventh Letter, Plato writes, “There is no writing of mine about [my true philosophy], nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself” (Plato, 1997, *Epist. VII* 341c). The many thousands of words that Plato left us are not his true philosophy. It is not that he withheld this true philosophy out of spite or some other reason. Rather, he found that those philosophical truths he knew *could not* be said within the limits of language. The Platonic dialogues point in a certain direction, but cannot say what must be said. The reason for this is that the philosopher is condemned to operate within the domain of language, subject to its rules and limitations. An analogy could be made to classical paintings of John the Baptist, which represent the saint as silently pointing to Christ. Mere mortals may behold the light, they may turn us toward it, but they cannot literally speak it; language recedes before the truth.[19]

Languages are pragmatic institutions. Without casting judgment on the origin of languages, we may say something about their progress. They grow and develop along with the life of the social group. As common needs and interests arise, the group's vocabulary expands in a piecemeal manner. Languages allow us to communicate with one another about those things that are regular and universal, but are notoriously weak with regard to the novel and the personal. In the course of our lives, we never once encounter a class or a species; we encounter only concrete particulars. However, our languages induce us to speak in abstractions, through class names and general types—and this is a good thing. If we were mired in the dilemma of having different names for every concrete individual thing, communication would never get off the ground. The sentence, "There is a wolf!" elicits a particular set of prescribed reactions from those who hear it spoken. In fact, the abstract "a wolf" is a class name. What is there is this particular wolf, with its particular history and its set of quantitatively unique characteristics. But at the moment when the wolf is present, all of this data is all trivial.

Furthermore, languages are largely metaphorical. As was said above, metaphor is the first poetic trope to develop. It arises at a time when perception itself is the entire form of thought. Aristotle defines metaphor as "giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy" (Aristotle 1984, *Poet.* 1457b7–9). He also says, "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilar"

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[19] We could here call in Heidegger, Derrida, and many other philosophers of the past century to give their testimony, but my feeling is that the testimony of Plato is sufficient.

(Aristotle 1984, *Poet.* 1459a5–8). Metaphorical thinking discovers similitude between distinct objects. In this way, it is the root of knowledge and has an originary power for giving us a world.[20] Metaphor expands our understanding by relating the novel experience to something more familiar. The storm raging above is understood metaphorically by our own tumultuous passions, and it is thus that we create vengeful gods. The poetic tropes at the heart of discourse transfer meanings from one thing to another, and it is only by discovering such connections between experiences that persons make the human world.

The earliest metaphors were believed by the sincere persons who used them, but a metaphor is not literally *true*. Juliet *is not* the sun, our blood *does not* literally boil, a potato is not an "apple of the earth" (*pomme de terre*), and so on. These are all expressions, explaining what is not understood by means of what is. *Could it be that metaphor too is a form of deception? If this is so, then language itself is immoral.*

Lakoff and Johnson, in their now-classic study *Metaphors We Live By*, have convincingly argued that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3). I believe that this is the case, to a much greater degree than we generally realize. The finest dictionary in the world can only explain words through other words. In order to excise all modes of deceitful speech, we must abandon language altogether. But this is not a solution! We thereby also abandon our capacity to speak truthfully.

No, this is clearly a wrong turn. Language is a necessary instrument for conveying any sense at all to one another, even when we acknowledge the enormous non-literal element of discourse. This is true not only of everyday speech, but of philosophical speech as well. R. G. Collingwood correctly advised, “The philosopher must go to school with the poets in order to learn the use of language, and must use it in their way. … [This requires] skill in metaphor and simile, readiness to find new meanings in old words, ability in case of need to invent new words and phrases … to treat language as something not fixed and rigid but infinitely flexible and full of life” (Collingwood 1995, 214).

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[20] Ernesto Grassi, whose understanding of metaphor I share, writes, "Metaphor is nothing other than the modality through which what is 'originary' is revealed to us and by means of which words carry the appeal of the abyss. Metaphor is therefore a continuous task and an uncontrollable possibility" (Grassi 1994, ix). The whole of this work is invaluable for an understanding of the rhetorical construction of meaning in the human world.

What I wish to suggest is this: we cannot hold irony up to the binary standard of truth/falsehood any more than we can other poetic tropes. Kant and the Yahwist and so many other critics are all mistaken in their shared belief that discursive truth-telling is a simple and easy business. The poetic tropes have a very important function—though they are non-literal, they nevertheless allow us to express things that we otherwise could not express at all. Irony is an instrument made necessary because of the limits of language, an instrument for expressing what cannot be expressed—or expressed *as well*—in literal discourse.

I have said that true/false is not an applicable standard for assessing ironic speech. This does *not*, however, mean that irony is freed from every ethical standard. It does not mean that we ought to grant irony free reign. There is still something unsettling about its deliberate use; an age of total irony is, as Vico says, a short way from anarchy. It points instead to a new manner of assessment and a new question that we must ask in forming our judgments. The question is this: *has the eirôn’s speech more effectively achieved the imperative of truth-telling than a different mode of speech could have done*?

Often, especially when we use irony to point out absurdities, this is patently so. This is the function of satire, which is irony extended into a narrative.[21] The travels of Gulliver are a much more effective critique of certain aspects of Jonathan Swift's contemporary society than anything a literal-minded thinker could have produced. I have said that irony develops in lock and step with philosophy, and philosophy would be largely shackled if it were unable to speak ironically. Descartes begins his *Discours* with the famous assertion, "Good sense [*bon sens*] is the best distributed thing in the world: for everyone thinks himself so well endowed with it that even those who are the hardest to please in everything else do not usually desire more of it than they possess. In this it is unlikely that everyone is mistaken" (Descartes 1985, I.1). Those of us with ears to hear understand that Descartes means the very opposite of what he says, and it is conveyed much more clearly and powerfully than if he had spoken bluntly and forthrightly. Meanwhile, the *alazôn* (in this case, the Roman church) is placated without Descartes having had to sacrifice his authenticity.

However, irony is a tool, and like any tool it can be put to noble uses or base uses.[22] It fails to reach our ethical standard of truth-telling when it is employed to the detriment of the message—that is, when a forthright speech would evidently have conveyed the same truth more effectively to more persons. Irony that is too think becomes impenetrable. It leaves its auditors in greater darkness, greater confusion. Rather than enlightening, it obfuscates; it intentionally conceals the truth. Conscientious communication aims at lifting veils, whereas ill-used irony lowers them. When this is the case, we have an immoral form of irony. Our standard, then, for making moral judgments about irony must be situational, and rather than the tandem of true/false, it should evaluate the ironic speech-act by the terms effective/ineffective.

The English language does not have separate names for effective and ineffective irony.[23] I suggest “positive irony” and “negative irony” as appropriate terms. “Negative irony,” that which casts obscurity and confusion rather than enlightenment, negates the intelligence and human dignity of its audience. “Positive irony,” on the other hand, promotes this dignity through an appeal to the intelligence. This standard still allows us all—both serious-minded and light-hearted philosophers—to criticize irony on ethical grounds, but it does not force us to excise ironic speech altogether from human life.

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[21] Satire parallels fable insofar as fable is metaphor extended into narrative. On this point, see Verene 2023, Part I.
[22] See Willett 2008, Prologue and Peone 2023a, chapter 5.
[23] I initially thought to call ineffective irony "sarcasm," but this deviates from the normal usage of this term.

Conclusion

Because language is so largely figurative and so little literal, the premises of our ethical deduction are ultimately not coherent. The stringent prohibition against untruth assumes an unreal, perfect language that is always adequate to literally express the speaker’s meaning. Many philosophers before and after Leibniz have sought such a perfect language.[24] I have not yet heard that they have found their El Dorado.

The tablets of our rigorous moralists, Moses and Kant, tell us what we must not do: Thou shalt not lie! On this matter, I prefer a positive statement of our ethical duty: Thou must speak what thou meanest! This formulation admits of degrees, and also allows for the Platonic impossibility of literally speaking our true philosophy. We ought to learn from the poets how best to convey our inner intuitions by means of the many tropes and figures of speech available to us—certainly metaphor, but also irony, which is not inherently more or less ethical a device than metaphor. Insofar as we communicate at all, we are condemned to deceive. Our work, then, should be to become the most honest deceivers we can be.

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[24] On the history of this quixotic search, see Eco 1995.

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