Regular Article

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Irony and Sarcasm in Ethical Perspective

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Abstract: Irony and sarcasm are two quite different, sometimes morally dubious, linguistic tropes. We can draw a distinction between them if we identify irony as a speech act that calls what is bad good and, correspondingly, sarcasm calls good bad. This allows us to ask, which one is morally worse. My argument is based on the idea that the speaker can legitimately bypass what is good and call it bad, which is to say that she may literally mean what she says. This is not true of the opposite case: one cannot bypass what is bad and, therefore, she paradoxically does not mean what she says. In other words, irony is a morally less guilty trope. What is bad has its faults and thus it can be ironized; what is good is without blemish and thus it is difficult to know how it could be called bad. Also, irony can be freely intended, or verbal, or it can be situational in social context. I also discuss dramatic irony in Classical context. Sarcasm does not allow such complexity. Instead, we speak of cynicism and even nihilism as moral attitudes that accompany sarcasm and give it its typical force; or sarcasm may lead to cynicism and nihilism, that is, to the denial of values. Irony does not entail any corresponding attitudes or moral positions. This paper is a philosophical contribution to the ethics of communication and language.

Keywords: free irony, situational irony, sarcasm, cynicism, nihilism, ethical evaluation, Marquis de Sade, Euripides' Bacchae

"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil." (Isaiah 5:20)

1 Types of irony and sarcasm

In Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae*, the God Dionysus, or Bacchus, meets Pentheus, the King of Thebes. Dionysus' attitude is sarcastic:

> PENTHEUS: I am Pentheus, son of Agave and Echion.
>
> DIONYSUS: A suitable name. It suggests misfortune. (630)

The god, now in human guise, says: your name is good, and it will kill you in due course; actually, he is going to humiliate and then kill the king. The god muses: "Hunt down evil by committing evil – that sounds like a wise way to proceed" (1030).[1] He is going to trap Pentheus in two ways, first by leading him across the city dressed in women's clothes to see the spectacle of Bacchants on a nearby sacred mountain and then making him prey for them. He is after revenge because the king refused to recognize and worship

1 Euripides, *Bacchae*. (References to the translation are by line numbers.) See also Segal, "Chorus and Community in Euripides' Bacchae."

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him. This infuriates him; therefore, he plans his revenge, his "wise way," in terms of humiliation and violent death. The Bacchic women will indeed hunt Pentheus down, now dressed in women's clothes, shake him down from a tree and tear him apart limb by limb.

Does Dionysus' reference to his "wise way" count as irony or sarcasm? One may deny this by saying that a cruel god like Dionysus is entitled to this kind of speech, or he is supposed to say, literally, that evil can be compensated by means of another evil, which justifies his vengeance. If this is the case, his strategy indeed is a "wise way to proceed." It all depends on how we understand the idea of revenge: in ethics we condemn it, popular thought and folklore justify it.[2] So what Dionysus says may be taken literally or not; whether we can establish the validity of one reading and invalidity of the other, I do not know – actually it does not matter. However, the god's utterance can be read as if it contained a trace of irony or sarcasm.[3] This is because revenge is a prima facie inconsistent idea: to hurt somebody only because you cannot accept that she hurt you, namely, you do not accept the first act although you praise your own reaction. Something is not quite right here. The god is indeed vengeful, and I read him, he uses irony and sarcasm as a tool to elevate himself (the speaker) from moral judgement, yet he thinks he genuinely deserves his rites.

Therefore, in what the god says, the *ironic marker*, is the word "wise"; or it is the implicit reference to the satisfaction of one's less than self-consistent intentions concerning payback. Here the sources of irony are different: in what he says irony is open and explicit, or freely chosen and intentional; in the case of revenge, irony is implicit and embedded in the situation, or situational. In the first case, the speaker can create and control the ironic aspect of his utterance; in the second case he cannot, as the situation itself is ironic as if objectively. I call these two tropes the verbal or *free* and *situational* mode of irony.[4] (Perhaps "free" may align with the vocabulary of ethics more than "verbal.") Free irony depends on what I say; situational irony depends on how the audience imagines a social situation, or how the situation is.[5] Compare this with humiliation: in some cases, someone humiliates me; in other cases, my social situation is humiliating. Of course, all irony is context dependent, yet free irony is based on a freely chosen utterance in its typical context.

Next, I will sketch a simple and basic notion of irony or perhaps proto-irony: *irony treats what is regarded as* (*actually*) *bad as* (*apparent*) *good*, and typically evaluates and exaggerates the case.[6] I will define sarcasm accordingly. *Sarcasms says good is bad*, just like Dionysus does when he says "Pentheus" is a good name, it spells death. As Joana Garmendia puts it, "the ironic speaker tends to exhibit an apparent positive attitude in order to communicate a negative valuation."[7] It follows, paradoxically, that the speaker does not believe what she says: irony raises ethical questions.[8] This entails an intriguing play with falsehoods without telling a lie: it is as if the speaker told a lie without lying, or she utters a falsehood as a truth without misleading anybody.[9] This is the same type of paradox as G. E. Moore's famous "The cat

2 The film "Death Wish" (1974) with Charles Bronson is a wonderful study of blind rage and monomaniac revenge.

3 We have here an example of dramatic irony, or irony that appears in speeches and situations of a drama and is, paradoxically, grasped by the audience unlike the characters in the play. See Williams, "Ovid's Canace: Dramatic Irony in Heroides 11." About the utilization of this special trope, see Clifton, "A Notorious Example of Failed Mindreading: Dramatic Irony and the Moral and Epistemic Value of Art," and Goldie, "Dramatic Irony, Narrative, and the External Perspective."

4 See Bryant, "Verbal Irony in the Wild," Popa-Wyatt, "Pretense and Echo: Towards an Integrated Account of Verbal Irony," and Popa-Wyatt, "Embedding Irony and the Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction."

5 See Green, "Irony as Expression (of a Sense of the Absurd)."

6 Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, ix: "There is no agreement among critics what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic claim [...] that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it." This sounds ironic. Cf. Walton, "Meiosis, Hyperbole, Irony." In what follows, I argue that sarcasm is different from irony. The terms are not synonyms, or it is not true that sarcasm is biting irony; see Tabacaru, "When Language Bites," 186: "the definitions have often been loose and confusing, integrating it [sarcasm] into the concept of irony."

7 Garmendia, "Irony is Critical," 397.

8 Irony is an ethical problem, see Miller, "Ethics and Irony."

9 Gans, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*, Part I.

on the mat but I do not believe it" – the point is that utterance itself entails belief, yet the speaker does not believe it.[10]

Dionysus calls his cruel revenge a "wise way," which is to call what is evil good. He positively evaluates his own strategy; he indeed is a cruel god who acts beyond moral values and virtue. As a god, he freely celebrates his own cruelty by showing what he is capable of: he need not believe what he says. The characterization of irony and sarcasm in terms of good and bad is central for my argument: these two terms must be understood as umbrella terms that cover all kinds of evaluations, both commendations and disapprovals. I do not claim that my tentative definitions apply to all the possible cases of irony and sarcasm. Nevertheless, when we discuss ethics, the definitions above are clearly relevant and, I hope, interesting. Verbal strategies can create havoc in social situations when one evaluates and criticizes persons and personal matters, which allows us to discuss them in ethical terms. Irony and sarcasm have their consequence now and in the long term. When we focus on sarcasm we notice that it leads to denial of values, that is to cynicism and nihilism – this is the ethical problem I am interested in.[11] For instance, if "we ourselves are nothing more than our ways of speaking," the cynicist's *cu-de-sac* becomes obvious.[12] Irony can be nasty and even dangerous but sarcasm has much worse long-term implications and consequences, as I will show.

In the free case, irony entails that one calls what is bad good, when one does not mean it literally; moreover, one has a socially recognizable reason to use this trope. Such reasons are sometimes not shared or accepted but yet understood by the intended audience. They understand the situation as somehow bad or wrong, either linguistically, ethically, socially etc. – any anomaly works here – and this creates a typical setting for ironic praise. Let us call them *objective* reasons as the speaker believes that her negative evaluation is valid. Then there are purely subjective and idiosyncratic reasons. In this paper, I pay attention to the first type of reasons, or socially comprehensible reasons, that is, prima facie objective reasons. Suppose a speaker says, "A is wonderful," when she believes A is subpar. She sees A as somehow problematic and expects others to share her view. Her motives may vary, for instance, she intends to ridicule A and all those who are committed to A, or she wants to criticise A.[13] This type of intentional free irony is *direct* irony.

When Dionysus says his way is wise, he does not speak only of the strategy but also indirectly of himself and his own normative reasoning. Therefore, his irony is also *indirect*. It is no longer merely intentional – when in the case of A (above) it was free, intentional, and direct. Think of a relevant indirect case: Dionysus' strategy would be dangerous to any human agent because it leads to a cycle of vendettas, but a god does not need to worry about this. He is safe because no mortal person can harm him, or at least he always is entitled to the last move in the game of hurts: Pentheus initially offended him by refusing to worship him and now the last move is his. Therefore, when Dionysus says his strategy is wise, he is aggrandizing himself, which makes the irony, as I assume, intentional but indirect. He mockingly says, you cannot hurt me back: "What punishment am I to suffer? What harsh penalties will you inflict?" (614). Here he ridicules his audience by glorifying himself: how would a mere mortal punish a god? It is as if the god said: you want to punish me, good. In this case, he again calls what is bad good.

The god has chosen an evil strategy and, as we already saw, he anyhow directly praises his own choice by calling it wise. Yet, he may as well praise himself for being able to do what he is doing without

10 See Williams, "Moore's Paradox in Thought: A Critical Survey."

11 Grimwood, "The Problems of Irony: Philosophical Reflection on Method, Discourse and Interpretation," 355 on the traditional approach: "the trope of irony is only included as a categorical form of refutation." And "Gadamer's attempt to limit irony to a mere confirmation of the existing order of meaning" produces "yet more irony" (361). Bernstein in his *Ironic Life*, 142 note 22, reminds us the ethical problem that irony may "destroy a human life" and "Rorty is more sensitive to Kierkegaard's point when he stresses how irony can be cruel"; this relates mainly to sarcasm, as I see it, cf. Dionysus and Pentheus. On irony in the history of philosophy, see Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy*.

12 Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy*, 31; she discusses Richard Rorty.

13 Garmendia in "Irony is Critical" says this distinguishes irony from metaphor, which is true. But it is not the only way (see note 14).

minding the consequences; in this sense, he is above the moral law and virtue. If his way is wise, he is wise, and he is wise only if his way is wise. This is ironic in two ways, *first* an evil strategy and *then* the agent who adopts the strategy is called good. Dionysus thinks Pentheus must be punished, which may be fine, but the god's prolonged cruelty and his delight are another matter. Clearly, the second irony (good agent) above depends on the first (evil strategy). Notice that Dionysus is a god in human guise, and thus some of his actions may look human, too. He is a thoroughly ambiguous character in the play.

Next, the purpose of the god's irony relates it to the punishment he is about to mete out, or he wants to convey a sense of humiliation to his opponents as victims who are facing such a superior opponent.[14] The god is saying, he can do whatever he likes to them and they have no grounds for complaining, although later in the play he explains and justifies his own actions to an audience, and this counts as a clear sign of weakness that is typical to human beings: "Not so, for the god makes no distinctions – whether the dancing is for young or old. He wants to gather honours from us all, to be praised communally, without division" (260). This "upstart god" truly suffers in the hands of humans. Therefore, he fails to rise above ethics, and then it is easy to see that the context is ironic in a situational sense, too. Why explain and insist if you are so mighty? The boastful god speaks in the free ironic mode (when he looks so strong), but at the same time the context looks ironic in the situational sense (when the god looks so needy and weak).[15]

Let us now look more closely into the second type of irony, namely, situational irony, or irony that we find embedded in a given situation. When Dionysus calls his choices wise, he aggrandizes himself. Then he explains and justifies his strategy and by doing so degrades himself by behaving as if he were human; in the case of a god this should not happen, and this entails irony in the situational sense. His audience may respond by saying something like, "Gods need what they despise." For example, from the divine point of view, the humans are miserable but yet their rites are desirable. The god desires what is in itself worthless, I mean human acts are worthless as they are but also desirable, which entails that bad is good. Therefore, the situational case is deeply ironic.

Think of two different examples, first hypocrisy and second miserliness. A hypocritical person applies different standards to himself (loose) and to others (strict), and this entails situational irony in the following way. First, one condemns the actions of others as bad and, then, allows similar actions in one's own case as if it were all fine. A miser is bad as he refuses to share any of his wealth and yet he considers his attitude customary and justified, and in this sense good. These two cases also create a sense of secondary irony based on the person's inability, or perhaps refusal, to recognize the primary irony that is situational in the case, or his refusal to recognize the sad *comedy* in which he plays the leading role. Not to recognize situational irony in one's own case is a source of secondary situational irony. Not to recognize irony has its own ironic overtones.

2 The problem of distance

Next, let us discuss the free case and, more specifically, the notions like distance, detachment, estrangement, and social, personal, and self-alienation.[16] Free irony is a matter of a direct speech act, in the sense that irony depends on what is said, and in the normal case, irony is the intended effect of the speech act. The standard idea is that irony entails some *distance* between the speaker and the subject

14 Notice that in this context the use of irony entails no criticism. It is pure mockery that makes the speaker look better. One may not criticize oneself by calling oneself bad, like, "Look how bad I am, and you can do nothing about it," when "you can do nothing about it" is an ironic marker: bad is called good.

15 Should we call situational irony indirect? It does not depend on speech acts; therefore, we cannot. When we notify a situational irony, we do not speak ironically because we only state what the case is like. We say, for instance, "Look how ironic this case is," which is a non-ironic or literal expression.

16 See Gunnarsson, "In Defense of Ambivalence and Alienation."

matter. Indeed, distance is an essential element in ironic speech, but what do we mean by this? It means I do not take the subject matter seriously when I utilize an ironic marker and call a thing something it is not. And the sentence displaying an ironic marker must be ceteris paribus false; it also is known to be false by the speaker and, conditionally, by her intended audience.[17] This is to say that the audience may and will come to see the sentence as false. Suppose I do not want to deceive my audience; I call A B, and I know that B is not the case, I do not take my approach to A seriously, and yet I invite my audience to follow me. If I am serious about A, in an epistemological sense, I would not call A something it is not, B; moreover, I would expect the audience to know or come to know that this is the case. In the normative sense, I do not even pretend that A is B, that is, bad is good, which is to say that I do care what A actually is. However, I make it explicit that I do not value or want it. In this sense, I have detached myself from A – here the discussion slips away from epistemology to ethics, to discourse ethics that is: think of A that I refuse to take seriously by praising it. I happen to own two bad paintings, a Churchill and a Hitler. I am sentimentally attached to C but not to H. I can easily ironize my relationship to H – I call it good – but not to C. I am too close to it. Of course, I can distance myself from C, which requires a special reason, and then I may ironize C, too. However, in this case my irony may seem misplaced and dishonest, I mean, if I really love my Churchill.

Irony may be subtle and discriminating, or not self-evident at all, but anyway it entails one's personal alienation from the speech community formed by the speaker and his audience. The audience can no longer simply trust what the speaker says because he means something else than what he says, or his speech act has a covert meaning. The audience must then ask, quietly, what the speaker could possibly mean if he does not mean what he says: he mentions a blind man as a seer. They cannot be sure, they hesitate, except in the case of some blunt and conventionally formulated ironic expressions. Why does he introduce an ironic marker that looks like a metaphor? Such a question announces a communicative gap that opens up between the speaker and the audience, and it will take some time and effort to close it.[18]

Such estrangement easily morphs into social alienation if the speaker's ironic mode stays on for a long time. The audience will turn away if the cost that is associated with the initial suspension of belief and the consequent effort to close the communicative gap appears excessive. These are then the risks of free irony: first, the speaker loses his touch with the subject matter as it is (invalid truth claim); second, she flirts with what is bad (normative pseudo-acceptance of it); and third, she compromises her audience (social cost). Of course, some cases of irony are conventional and based on idiosyncratic social constructions; think about some free irony that only a racist audience understands and appreciates. But in the case of Dionysus, the god's speech acts certainly alienate him from his audience.

How is all this epistemology and ethics related to the situational cases of irony? In a situational case, we experience less distancing. I may see irony in a social situation, but I still think it as bad. When I see a hypocrite in action, I may notice exactly what she is, a bad person, and I also *say*, without irony, that she is bad. This entails no distancing; yet, the irony of the case prevails because the case itself is indeed ironic. When I see the case as ironic in the situational sense, I may still condemn it, which entails no distancing. I *say* she is bad even when I *see* the irony of her actions, that is, their illusory goodness from her own point of view. Hence, in a situational case distancing may be minimal. What can we say about this? Free irony knowingly celebrates its own falsehoods and false acceptances. This creates a comedy and entails distancing. Situational cases, on the contrary, are comic only in the sense that they are *available* to celebration in terms of free irony, which entails minimal distancing.

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17 This standard idea may not be valid: Suppose I am a hopeless procrastinator, but this time I performed a difficult task quickly. My wife says, "Oh, you did it already," and she means what she says, and it is true that this time I am not late. She meant what she truthfully said, hence the case either fails to be ironic or the standard idea of irony is wrong. We may also see this as a situational case: it is ironic that now I am on time when the task is so demanding. The distinction between the free and situational case is important.

18 See Kittay, *Metaphor, Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure*, 294.

3 Rejecting toxic descriptions

Certain situations are deliberately and freely construed by the speaker to appear in ironic light. In those cases, the bad aspect of the object must be recognized and acknowledged. One can ironize almost anything, if one wants to. Some cases, however, are such that they suggest themselves to be discussed in terms of free irony. In other words, certain situations look, when they are described, somehow literally and truthfully weird – or bad in a broad sense of the term – and as such they invite free ironic treatment. This is to say that our literal reading of the situation displays its *toxicity*, which is to say that one's ironic speech act is now based on the perceived problems of the given situation. Say, a pompous but bad pianist pretends to be good and believes he is good; the case may be so impressive that its toxicity invites celebration by means of free irony and its false statements. The ironic marker here could be something like "wonderful" or "impressive." We welcome the alienating effects of irony that hopefully ease our embarrassment and suffering. In fact, such toxic cases are examples of situational irony that one makes explicit. But this is not always the case.

Which one is the primary type of irony, is it the free or the situational case? I already hinted at the primacy of the situational case, for the following reason. We regularly face fake, weird, and anomalous situations in social life, such that the arrangements of their atomic component parts create mutually disharmonious or toxic social molecules. In other words, those situations display dissonant, discording, and generally troublesome elements, so that their collections are, when we look into them, false, inauthentic, and alienating – this leads to distancing. As we see them, such situations are indeed toxic. My very reading of the case feels contaminated and thus I should do something about it. The case is, say, embarrassing and I may not want to get involved, but I may compensate for this uncertainty by means of free irony that releases the accumulated tension. What looks toxic, I call good, and if my intended audience agrees, I am happy. I say when I witness grossly hypocritical behaviour, "What a lovely idea." The most natural cases of free irony are based on perceived toxicity, and hence situational irony indeed is the primary type of irony. But, as I said above, free irony may not be based on situational irony. Think of melting January snow in the North; I say, "Look, how nice, spring is coming." What is the source of perceived toxicity in this case? The case is not toxic, it is innocent.

The basic psycho-linguistic fact of situational irony concerns what we mimic when we formulate an utterance we may classify as *grounded free irony*. This is the logical order of things: we are faced with a situation that we first reject as toxic and then falsely celebrate it as good, thus inviting our intended audience to do the same; this forces a certain distance between the speaker/audience and the situation. The more toxic the case, the more strongly we reject it, and hence the distance will be proportionally greater. If the rejection is too strong, we cannot talk about irony anymore, or the fear, horror, and disgust brought about the case blocks any attempt to ironize it. Grounded free irony works only when the cases are moderately toxic. Again, if the degree of toxicity is too low, irony is not called for as the case is not interesting as such, irony has no bite, and one must use other linguistic tropes or stay silent about it. Therefore, let us only deal with those moderate cases. We read their properties, we recognize their toxicity, but we do not like what we see, we reject it, we distance ourselves from it, and we look back at it without participating in any way. Then we call them good, considering it as a comedy with a dark twist, and that is all we achieved in this case.

Certainly, to witness toxic incongruities is painful or at least disturbing and confusing. And thus the rejection of the toxic contents creates distance and ultimately feeling of alienation, when the irony of the case, in the situational sense, becomes too obvious. One praises the tragedy of war and it becomes a comedy, which it cannot be – except after being freely ironized. Again, is it not strange that one denies the comedy of war and then ironizes it, and by doing so recreate the comedy? Such warlike cases illustrate and explain the idea of distancing that is regularly involved in irony. To repeat, distancing is based on one's rejection of the situation as toxic. At the same time, these examples provide us an idea of the length of the distance that is directly proportional to the strength of rejection, which in its turn is based on the subjective evaluation of the toxicity of the situation and its description.

We can see how situational irony turns from something that is bad per se into something that is pretentiously said to be good. Irony works like that: what is bad, that is logically faulty, linguistically incongruous, epistemically dubious, socially strange, or morally condemned, and as such toxic, must be rejected. Hence, call it good! Nevertheless, because of the created distance, the ironic reconstruction of the case turns out to be something comic and even ridiculous. In this way, we are able to celebrate the inherent imperfections of those situations – toxicity turned into a falsehood. The celebration itself does not create the irony because it is dependent on one's observation of the true toxic aspects of the situation. I want to say that the situation itself is ironic and the speaker merely recognizes this agent-independent fact and then celebrates it by unleashing its inherent ironies in a speech act. This looks like psycho-linguistic alchemy when discrepancies rejected as toxic turn via false descriptions into something else that indeed is worth celebrating in comic terms.

Now, it seems natural that, once the situational irony is recognized by the speaker, it may make sense to celebrate it by announcing it to a wider public; the next step is to mimic the situational case by freely constructing one's own ironic expressions. An instance of free irony is thus related *mimetically* to situational irony, that is, free irony becomes possible because it copies the idea of irony from the situational case.[19] The ironist artificially and freely recreates, in his speech, the socially relevant and factual situational irony in its mimetic representation. In this way free irony copies and represents situational cases, sometimes directly using a situational case as a model, sometimes indirectly by creating its ironic representation as if from nowhere but at the same time tacitly referring to the toxic situation in question. In the first case, one recognizes the situational irony of, say, "What a glorious war" and then mimics it by creating a freely ironic, falsely glorifying speech act. In the second case, one mimics the very case of situational irony itself by focusing on the lack of irony in the original idea. For instance, one illustrates "What a glorious war" by showing and discussing pictures of decorated war heroes and grand victory parades – this is then what war is not. If one shows war victims, one is simply criticizing war. The point is, any refusal to recognize situational irony is in itself ironic: one may ask, is it not ironic that they do not see any irony here?

4 Sarcasm, cynicism, and nihilism

We already saw that Dionysus was sarcastic when he praises Pentheus' name by saying it spells death. This was at the same time a prediction and threat. Socratic irony also may turn into sarcasm: Socrates says he knows nothing, although he clearly is a wise man. He even says he is wise because he knows nothing.[20] This qualifies as free irony without situational grounding. But we may put this in another way, namely, if you are a wise man you are, for that very reason, an ignoramus, which is to say good is bad: wisdom now looks toxic. This is a sarcasm.

We drew a line between irony and sarcasm: the two concepts, though related, do serve different purposes. Of course, one may define sarcasm as strong irony or extended evil irony (dictionary meaning). Nevertheless, we need a term to identify a linguistic trope that is related to irony but has its own logic; hence, two different tropes exist, and we need a name for both of them.[21] I will suggest that sarcasm is different from irony as an expression of cynicism, which sometimes indicates nihilism.[22] The key difference between irony and sarcasm is clear because *sarcasm calls a good thing bad*, when irony calls a bad thing

19 See Melberg, *Theories of Mimesis*, 1: Mimesis is always a connecting point of two opposites. Mimesis is a crypto-ironic notion.

20 See Vlastos, "Socratic Irony." Sören Kierkegaard is often discussed in this connection, see Muench, "Socratic Irony, Plato's Apology, and Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony," in Cappelørn et. al. *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*.

21 See Camp, "Sarcasm, Pretense, and the Semantic/Pragmatics Distinction."

22 See Vice, "Cynicism and Morality."

good. The question is: are these two tropes somehow symmetric? [23] I suggest they are not, which makes them two different tropes. For instance, irony may entail criticism; sarcasm does not. You should criticize what is bad, but you cannot criticize good. Let us see how this works out. When one calls a good thing bad, or uses a sarcasm, one in an emphatic and dramatic way rejects, plays down, or supresses something that is good. Yet a good thing does not display any signs of toxicity, I find this safe to assume, and as such, it is beyond fault, blame, and criticism. What could be toxic in "Pentheus?" We say it is good because we sense no toxicity. Why call it bad then? What does sarcasm achieve?

I find it strange that the notion of sarcasm compared to irony should be neglected; for instance, Kenneth Burke offers this example of irony: the function of the cure is to perpetuate the illness. This is in fact a sarcasm because cure is something good and to perpetuate Illness is a toxic idea; therefore, what is good is now called bad.[24] James Joyce writes, "[W]hen the quaint old songs had ended and he heard again the voices in the room he remembered his own sarcasm: the house where the young men are called by their Christian names a little too soon."[25] Why is this a sarcasm? The answer is not obvious. Perhaps the speaker, Stephen Dedalus, thinks these people are nice, but he also wants to distance himself from them and their customs. They are good but he rejects them anyway. They are good people but not in the way he appreciates. He rejects what is good, and he means it. He has given a sarcastic form to an actual act of rejection.[26]

Irony mockingly celebrates the bad thing by calling it good. Yet, to suppress what is good sounds alarming: it indicates *cynicism*, or denunciation of value and entails moral pessimism and scepticism – think of the case of Stephen Dedalus above. All this becomes evident in moral *nihilism*, which denies the validity of any established value in a comprehensive manner: all current value ascriptions are invalid. Perhaps we can distinguish between two types of nihilism: one says that current value ascriptions are faulty and the other that all possible values are faulty. Classical political nihilism exemplifies the first type.[27] Obviously, two types of sarcasm exist: occasional and systematic. If irony is indeed a prima facie morally suspicious linguistic trope, sarcasm is even more suspicious, sometimes it even hints at the speaker's personal moral error or even moral competence, especially when it leans on cynicism and flirts with nihilism. Irony may entail social and moral alienation, but this is less suspicious than the nihilistic denial of value that may entail self-alienation.

One may rhetorically reject what is good directly and indirectly. In the first case one says that good is bad; in the second case one praises good in such terms that the audience should realize that the opposite of what is said is meant by the speaker. I glowingly praise something good in order to say it is bad. Such a praise is *als ob*. For instance, a nice artistic performance can be scorned and rejected by means of too many outrageous superlatives. If the performance is good, the speech act is a sarcasm, if it is bad we get irony. Obviously, an exaggeration of the positive aspects of a good thing may have its effect as a more or less well-hidden sarcasm, or crypto-sarcasm. Many different strategies of sarcasm exist as expressions of one's cynicism. However, the main point should be clear: I, emphatically, do not appreciate a good thing when I use sarcasm. I agree a person is beautifully dressed and yet I call her appearance ridiculous; this is a case of proto-sarcasm that expresses my cynicism concerning the finer things in life. Yet those things are

23 Irony blames, but sarcasm does not praise, see Garmendia, "Irony is critical." See also Currie, "Why Irony is Pretence," 121. He asks, how to react to "the world which they would consider to be superior to their own." He says we tend to adopt such the good world. But, as I argue, we can also react with sarcasm. Currie says the "defective" outlook irony is almost like an analytic truth.

24 Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 512. Bernstein, in *Ironic Life*, does not mention sarcasm at all; yet, he recognizes nihilism.

25 Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 185.

26 When you reject good in this way and mask it by means of a verbal sarcasm, the situation is meta-ironic: you dislike it, yet you are happy about your nice sarcasm. But "nice sarcasm" comes close to an oxymoron. Camp in "Sarcasm, Pretense, and the Semantic/Pragmatics Distinction," 587, says about sarcasm that it is "merely the expression of a dissociative attitude toward an evoked thought or perspective." She rejects this idea that, nevertheless, explains what Joyce writes.

27 In this sense Mackie's infamous error theory of value is a nihilistic project of the second type; see his *Ethics*, *Inventing Right and Wrong*, 48–9. He says all possible value ascriptions are false.

not toxic, and the speaker realizes this very fact – he admits and believes that the object is good. Perhaps one can say that in the case of irony, the object is toxic but in the case of sarcasm the motives behind the speech act are toxic? This is not always the case, as I will show below.

Can we apply the idea of alienation and the distancing argument in the case of sarcasm as well as irony? Perhaps we can. Notice that a cynic's beliefs do not concern his belief in goodness de se. The good in question does not really concern the person, it is not his good, although he admits it is good, which is to say some basic distance to goodness must exist. He now admits that the object is good but not his good, so to speak. He says, it is good but what do I care?[28] His speech on such goods is indirect. This may be ambiguous, but it is still a coherent normative attitude. Hence, a cynic is ex ante distanced from the good object, or from its goodness. And so sarcasm entails cynicism that does not represent comedy but rather the tragedy of one's self-alienation and painful distance to what is good. In this sense, cynicism is indeed a tragic attitude, unlike irony. In the case of sarcasm, I have already alienated myself from the good, which is not good de se, and now my speech act makes explicit the fact that I have lost contact with the good in question. We can now see that a cynical motivation of sarcasm need not be toxic: the speech act is not motivated by something bad; one only evades good and does it in a typically dramatic manner. This is not to say that the motives could not be bad and evil, or toxic.

Sarcasm falsely states that a good thing is bad, which leans on cynicism and nihilism, or it leads to valueless void.[29] Irony, on the contrary, leads us nowhere. I said above that irony entails distancing and therefore personal alienation, but this is a different phenomenon. This is a precondition of free irony and hence it does not lead you anywhere; it leads you towards irony but that is all. Sarcasm leads one towards something that is new and disconnected from sarcasm itself. In this sense, sarcasms have a psychological background, irony does not. Sarcasm is a psychologically loaded speech act, irony is not.

Look at the following two sentences, "A is good" and "B is bad" and think of the attitudes of acceptance and rejection. It seems clear that one can reject A, or not to want it, when the ascription of goodness in not understood de se. Example: I see a nice dress and say it stinks. Such a metaphor rejects the good by exaggerating criticism for no obvious reason: in fact, the dress is nice. One can say good is bad only if one intends to bypass this instance of the good, and as I said above, one can do so without becoming guilty of a logical anomaly. If I want to bypass an obvious and socially shared good and announce my intention by saying this good is bad, I may mean your good is not my good, which is fine. But I also can bypass the common good and exaggerate my attitude by calling the good in question bad – cynicism works like this. The point is, irony does not make literal sense (I cannot want bad) unlike sarcasm (I can bypass good). Hence, when I reject good by calling it bad, two different speech acts can be deployed, a sarcasm (good is bad) and a literal truth-claim (I bypass this good, it is not my good). Therefore, sarcasm tends to be ambiguous, which makes it all the more problematic. In the true literal case, I bypass this good because I believe it is good but not in de se sense; via sarcasm I may call good bad and thus (falsely) imply its toxicity. Hence, some sarcasms themselves sound toxic: to say good is bad is bad.

Sarcasm exists only as a speech act, it is always free, or it has no situational interpretation. I do not see any possibility of finding a situational variety of sarcasm: how could a good social situation invite its own condemnation as if objectively? The very idea of goodness prevents this. Can we argue that in some typical cases too much good turns into something bad or reveals some signs of toxicity as if they were situational in the case? Can too much good appear somehow disconcerting, irregular, and suspicious as if in itself? Can too much good – in fact – look so gross that it deserves to be mockingly condemned by means of a sarcastic speech act? Perhaps one can give examples of cases where too much good tends to

28 Perhaps all bad is to be understood de se? If A is bad, A always is my concern and in this sense I cannot bypass what is bad in good faith. But I can bypass good in good faith. Compare: "B is good, what has that to do with me?" and "A is bad, what has that to do with me?" The second sentence is an expression of cynicism; the first sentence is innocent. What is bad always worries a rational moral agent, even in supererogatory cases. In fact, the existence of supererogation speaks for the validity of the idea that all ascriptions of bad are de se.

29 See Bernstein's *Ironic Life* on nihilism and its ethics, 91–2.

look simply too much and hence bad but that does not seem likely. However, certain cases may display so much good that they look unreal, but this is different from being bad. A mother can be ridiculously loving but this is not bad or toxic as such. Notice that a toxic mother becomes an object of criticism when she is called bad – this is no longer a sarcasm. If ridiculous good entails toxicity, the case turns out to be condemnation, or bad that is called bad. Sarcasms is a mysterious trope, even if its basic logic is clear: I use sarcasm to emphasize my current detachment from what is good, or to make a point about it, or in other words, my motives are toxic.

5 Marquis de Sade as a cynic

Sarcasm is related to cynicism and burdened with such a heavy social and moral package that to recommend it to any audience is problematic. Let me provide two simple examples borrowed from that arch-cynic and proto-nihilist the Marquis de Sade.

> *Irony*: Murder is the greatest of all pleasures, and pleasure is the main good, or all that one truly values.
>
> *Sarcasm*: Your conscience is your first executioner,[30] so you should get rid of it by doing evil deeds until your conscience ceases to be.

The first sentence is ironic because murder is bad and yet it is recommended as good. What about the second sentence? Conscience is good; to call it bad, like an executioner is, is a sarcasm and reveals a cynical mindset. Sade intends to reject what is good but the rejection of good is tragic. The reason is that one indeed can take the sentence literally as a truth-claim and argue that the advice given is sound. We may find it hard to tell the literal and figurative interpretations apart. Sade provides us with a cynical piece of advice that one can take seriously, logically speaking, if you want to become an evil person, say, a fully egotistical agent. To repeat, a sentence that looks like sarcasm can be literally true – because one can reject what is good; irony cannot because we cannot choose bad. This is the key point.

When I reject good, it is still good; I only say it is not my good, or good de se. However, this is not the main point of sarcasm. The real point is a tragic expression of cynicism or nihilism. Perhaps we should say any isolated sarcasm is an innocent speech act, as an expression of cynicism and nihilism it is not: then it rejects too much of good. You can bypass good in any particular case as emphatically as you like but you should not reject all good. Therefore, the background of sarcasm is highly suspicious. Why emphasize the fact that you want to bypass this given good if you are not leaning on cynicism? It is as if some instances of good irritated you. Perhaps your motives are toxic?

In fact, many people have wanted to kill their conscience along the line Sade recommends. They think they are better off as carefree egotists. Such cruel gods as Dionysus may truly succeed; but only a god can be a self-consistent cynic and egotist – he or she need not carry the burden of ethical responsibility. In this sense, sarcasm does not mimic innocent comedy, like irony, instead it looks like a tragedy as Pentheus and his unlucky relatives must have seen it. Sade's works are disturbing because their linguistic tropes are so deceptive: we can only pretend we understand him literally. Perhaps he is an evil educational reformer as well as a clever author of fiction. In the first role, he is evil, in the second, he is good – all this makes him such a genius.

In sum: When I celebrate what is bad (irony) this should not be taken seriously because I cannot choose bad anyway. When I mock good (sarcasm) and emphasize my rejection of it that must be taken seriously and even literally because I can bypass and even reject good. Therefore, sarcasm has its dubious normative consequences that lead the speaker via cynicism to the dead-end of nihilism, which is of course

30 Originally used without any irony by Julien Offray de La Mettrie; see Airaksinen, *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade*, 33.

deplorable. If nihilism entails rejection of values, it clearly is an ethically bad position. My conclusion is that the two cases, that is, calling bad good and good bad are not symmetric. Moreover, the second speech act, sarcasm, is morally more problematic than the first, irony. It is indeed less advisable to call good bad than bad good.

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