

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS REGARDING THE USE AND ABUSE OF IRONY

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Abstract: The analysis of the ethical implications concerning the use of irony is not an easy task. Even though there are notable differences between the various ironical expressions, it looks like irony in general plays with people's emotions. Ironically, it seems that it gets them together and pulls them apart at the same time. Thus, whether we refer to philosophical or rhetorical irony, it is hard to say when is it morally right to turn into ridicule. Therefore, in this paper, considering Linda Hutcheon's view on the edge of irony and Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatist philosophy, we analyze the moral limits of ironization. We emphasize that, in some cases, the difference between the use and the abuse of irony is cancelled, the limit between innocent irony and real offence being almost inexistent. For this reason, we claim that irony is acceptable only in a culture that is opened to all ironic modalities, such as satire, parody, caricature, pamphlet and even humor.

Keywords: irony, ethics, Socrates, Linda Hutcheon, Richard Rorty

At first sight, for most of us, the research on irony involves the interpretation of the senses of a malicious allusion or of an expression whose target we would not like to be. Thus, that definition of irony according to which it is a light mockery against someone or something, certainly expressed by senses that are contrary to the usual significance of words or assertions, is commonly known. By referring to the etymology of irony, we know that this used to have a doubtful moral character. In Ancient Greece – where the denomination of the aforementioned figure of speech also originates – irony was interpreted as a type of dissimulation by which someone only meant to deceive. Nowadays instead, upon hearing the word “irony”, almost any person of rigorous moral principles either starts or thinks of its “unserious” character. “Many of the foes of postmodernism see irony as fundamentally antiserious, but this is to mistake and misconstrue the critical power of double voicing. [...] In fact, irony may be the only

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way we can be serious today”¹, Linda Hutcheon remarks, trying to bring the philosophical fertility of irony back in the limelight. And if, indeed, as the same author writes, “the current distrust of the radical potential of irony (and humor) is reminiscent of Jorge da Burgos in Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* who fears the disruptive irreverence of laughter enough to resort to murder”², this means that we still can expect all kinds of violent breaks from the humans and a philosophical research in the anthropological field of irony is vital. Of course, this study does not represent an apology to mendacity, fable or grotesque, on the contrary, its target is that of underlining them as opposite to the subverting power of the above-mentioned controversial figure of thinking.

Beyond the fact that it reflects the relationship between what is said and what is not said, in comparison with other figures of speech or communication strategies, irony distinguishes itself as being quite acid. In her study on irony, Linda Hutcheon catches the limits and, therefore the risks of irony, indicating its main characteristic: “Unlike metaphor and metonymy, irony has an edge; unlike incongruity or juxtaposition, irony can put people on edge; unlike paradox, irony is decidedly edgy”³. Although most of the irony’s authors and receivers enjoy this game, the Canadian researcher notices that irony can agitate spirits. Because of its somehow hidden meaning people can feel stressed about the correctness of their interpretation, becoming even furious. In some cases, irony can cross every limit. “Irony may play on the edge, but it can also force people to the edge, and sometimes over it”⁴. In other words, as there are great chances for those who did not get the significance of irony to feel frustrated and, sometimes, even irritated, it looks like irony plays with people’s emotions, maintaining them somewhere between agony and ecstasy. This is why we could say that socialization by irony is paradoxical, as its incisiveness and inherent allusions connect people and drive them apart at the same time.

However, before issuing any judgment of value regarding irony, we must say there are notable differences between the various ironical expressions. For example, the following observation of a

¹ Linda Hutcheon (2002). *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Romanian translation: *Poetica postmodernismului*. Bucharest: Univers Publishing House, p. 73.

² *Ibidem*, p. 331.

³ Linda Hutcheon (1994). *Irony’s Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 35.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

misanthropist: “Not all people are annoying, some are dead” is an example of sarcasm. The following remarks are also equally sarcastic: “Did you change your haircut?! You look great! Haven’t you thought about changing your mirror as well?!” The following assertion is an irony instead: “One can preserve a lot with alcohol, but not dignity”. One can notice that, in comparison with the crushing sarcasm, irony does not directly regard a certain person; we can see from its ambiguity that anyone can be its target, including the issuer. As a matter of fact, it is well known that irony is mainly manifested as self-irony. Therefore, when limits of ambiguity are crossed and the sense is clearly directed to a certain person, we deal with humiliating attitudes.

As regards the ethical implications of the use and abuse of irony, we must say even from the beginning that none of its gentle or acid forms kills any of the ridiculers but sometimes precisely the one who ironizes. We are talking about the sacrifice of the buffoon, “the very embodiment of ironic conscience who [...] [after] having reminded of your flaws and errors [...] sometimes serves as a scapegoat”⁵. In other words, from a ceremonial point of view and in a quite brutal manner, the buffoon is simply executed. Or, from the civilized world’s perspective, this cannot be but a step back: “It is the hint to a moral weakness, to a spiritual involution of the executioner. The society or the person is no longer able to entirely take responsibility for it: therefore, by its victim, it sacrifices its very part it wants to get rid of”⁶. Rhetorically speaking, who can get rid of only half of itself without suffering in anyway because of the elimination of the part it thought belonged to *the other* from *itself*?!..

Sometimes, it happens for irony to be associated to lie. Obviously, the liar, just like the ironist, expresses the opposite of his thinking, except the intent of the first is exclusively that of deceiving. It is true that “the ironist also cheats, but being conscious that his false pretences are *guessed*, that his imposture is just an aspect that needs to reveal the truth by contrast (therefore, more significant)”⁷. Therefore, the essential difference between irony and lie is represented by the

⁵ Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (1995). *Dictionary of Symbols*, vol. I. Romanian translation: *Dicționar de Simboluri*, vol.I. Bucharest: Artemis Publishing House, p. 215.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Mircea Doru Lesovici (1999). *Ironia. Ipostaze în poezia română contemporană/Irony. Hypostases in the Contemporary Romanian Poetry*. Iași: Institutul European Publishing House, p. 11.

moral intent of the author. For example, when someone simulates not earning any income in order not to pay his taxes and contributions anymore, we are talking about lie, not irony. However, if a father, for example, simulates clumsiness in front of his son, precisely to sensitize him, thus testing his compassion feeling, we are no more talking about simple deception, but about irony. In other words, if the speaker expresses something that is contrary to the obvious and the discussants do not possess the necessary means to notice the slips, we are clearly dealing with fraud. At the best, it can be proof of clumsiness of the ironist, who did not take into account the inappropriateness of irony or the limited receptivity of the ironized person. Because “what’s more stark than completely failed irony because of the lack of fine enough ears to catch it? Therefore, irony is gnostic. Irony (which is no disdainful insult or obscurantist persiflage) solicits intellectual understanding; [...]”⁸ Jankélévitch considers. Practically, irony by its nature cannot cheat because, more or less disguisedly, it only wants to make itself understood. Someone who wants to be ironic, Gregory Vlastos implacably asserts, cannot cheat at the same time: “Those two intentions are at odds; in so far as the first is realized the second cannot be”⁹. As obscure as it might be, the unconfessed target of irony is that of making the discussant or, as case may be, a third person, conscious. As Handwerk also writes, irony cannot function if the others do not feel somehow involved: “Irony will actually be fully operative only to the extent that both speaker and hearer (not necessarily the addressee) are aware of it and feel implicated by it”¹⁰. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be about irony but simple mystification. Therefore, the ironist must be aware of the cognitive abilities of the person he addresses to and, furthermore, he must pay attention to the receptivity of his listeners.

As about Socratic irony, there were (and probably still are) doubts on the good faith of the Athenian philosopher, as many authors consider his common dissimulation would be frivolous. However, although deceiving, Socrates’ irony is no sign of hypocrisy because, as Gregory Vlastos said, this would mean he cheated himself: “To cheat his partners in this search would be to sabotage the process by which

⁸ Vladimir Jankélévitch (1994). *L'Ironie*. Romanian translation: *Ironia*. Cluj-Napoca: Dacia Publishing House, p. 57.

⁹ Gregory Vlastos (1991). *Socrates. Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 22.

¹⁰ Gary J. Handwerk (1985). *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 136.

he hopes to discover moral truth himself; to cheat his interlocutors would be to cheat himself”¹¹. Which of course this is not the case. Despite all this, some of his discussers suspect Socrates of hypocrisy, as happens, for example, in *The Republic*¹², where Thrasymachos gives the impression of unmasking the ironist, accusing him of only avoiding answering by simulating ignorance. Even if Socrates *pretended* not knowing anything, most of the times his adversaries concluded that they no more knew anything on the subject they approached. Socrates’ “dissimulation” is about the complexity of his irony, which implies that, although we know something, this “something” does not help us discover the absolute truth. Therefore, at least in our case, the Greek ironist pretends to be ignorant in order to deflate the vanity of those who think they know a lot or even everything.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard delimitates hypocrisy from irony in a quite peremptory manner, writing as follows: “Hypocrisy is about morality. The hypocrite always struggles to seem good, although he is bad; but, on the contrary, irony is part of the metaphysical sphere and the only intent of the ironist is that of seeming someone else so that, as he hides sarcasm in gravity and gravity in sarcasm (like nature sounds in Ceylon), the same can happen to him and pretend to be bad, although he is good. But we must not forget that, in fact, all moral categories are too concrete for irony”¹³. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, irony is somehow meta-ethical and the freedom it implies and disposes of is dangerous for the common moral conscience. That is why, as regards the decision of the Athenian state to condemn Socrates to death, the Danish thinker agrees with Hegel in that the ironist, as an undermining factor of the official religion of the state, was rightfully condemned. Moreover, seen that irony is the supreme embodiment of epistemological, ontological and axiological negativity, Hegel also called irony “infinite absolute negativity”¹⁴. Although he does not suspect Socrates of hypocrisy, Kierkegaard also thinks that, from the point of view of communitarian moral, he is still

¹¹ Gregory Vlastos, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹² Cf. Plato (1986). *The Republic* 337a. Romanian translation: *Republica* 337a, in *Opere*, vol. V. Bucharest: Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House.

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard (2006). *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Romanian translation: *Despre conceptul de ironie, cu permanentă referire la Socrate*, în *Opere*, vol. I. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, p. 366.

¹⁴ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel (1966). *Lectures on Aesthetics*, vol. I. Romanian translation: *Prelegeri de estetică*, vol. I. Bucharest: Romanian Academy Publishing House, p. 74.

to be blamed. Not having anything concrete to object or to add to the issues society has to face, this irony is distinguished as being deeply negative in relation with the order and knowledge of what is human. As it does not offer a positive knowledge, sometimes hiding under the mask of a selfish grin, the ironist can be suspected of superficiality in thinking and even of irresponsibility. And “from there it is a small step to seeing irony as irresponsible, empty, even silly”¹⁵. However, although the negativity of irony might seem complete, this is not the case at all. From an ethical point of view, irony is positive, contributing to the decrease of the society’s flaws and traditions. The positive moral significance of Socratic irony, for example, is clearly underlined in the ending of Socrates’ defense, where the philosopher suggests to his fellow countrymen how they should act in front of their sons so that the latter become men of the right sort: “Still I have a favor to ask of them. When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing, – then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, I and my sons will have received justice at your hands”¹⁶. In other words, if they shall use his ironic method, it means they had a positive attitude from a moral point of view, as it also happened in case of the inquisitive philosopher.

Despite all these, the social and moral apology of irony has certain limits, first determined by its elitist character. To tell something different from what you think is based on the idea that anyone who is not smart or educated enough on the subject in discussion shall automatically be excluded from the dialogue. “In a negative sens, irony is said to play in-groups that can be elitist and exclusionary. Irony clearly differentiates and thus potentially excludes: as most theories put it, there are those who «get» it and those who do not”¹⁷. For this reason, the ironist can develop a tradition that may be quite disturbing for his followers or listeners, conferring an impression of superiority. From here to being arrogant, gibing his speakers is one-step only.

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹⁶ Plato (1974). *Apology*, 41e. Romanian translation: *Apărarea lui Socrate*, 41e, in *Opere*, vol. I. Bucharest: Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, p. 44.

¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon (1994). *op. cit.*, p. 51.

Moreover, if by his tact and subtleties the ironist goes too far from those around him, becoming hermetical, there is no doubt his obscurity shall only awake feelings of hatred from his discussion partners. This is why maybe we should not be surprised that Socrates scandalized his accusers and then his judges. Although irony is clearly aristocratic, its author should not forget about freedom of expression's limits. And if we are to analyze these limits, we may bring into discussion the point of view of Richard Rorty, who considers that irony is an element of the private sphere, being opposed to the so called "public opinion" and even to common sense.

Taking into account that the thought and actions of every person are determined by their affiliation to a certain axiological system and, therefore, by a specific *language*, in his try to comprise all those words and concepts by which people support their beliefs, the American philosopher uses the phrase "final vocabulary". He calls it "final" because no one can defeat his concepts or opinions with something than his own vocabulary; anyone trying to get out of his sphere, by invoking the authority of a meta-vocabulary comes to offer only redundant explanations. In fact, we are talking about a neo-pragmatic re-evaluation of the solipsism affirmed by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "*The limits of my language represent the limits of my world*"¹⁸, namely the idea "that the world is *my world* is shown by the fact that the limits of *language* (of the language only I understand) mean the limits of *my world*"¹⁹. Based on this assumption, Rorty considers that the ironist is the person doubting of the capacity of the final vocabularies of giving absolute answers. Therefore, the Rortyan ironist does not believe that his own vocabulary is more "authentic" than other vocabularies. He does not try to discover universal moral principles, as Socrates used to, but to consider as valuable only those things established by dialogue, meaning by agreement with the other speakers. Solidarity, for example, is not a value that we need to remember or that we have to rediscover by *maieutics*, but a target we have to achieve by creation, imagining the impact pain can have upon any human being. In other words, Rorty writes, "human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish

¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, p. 140.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

hope, the hope that one's world – the little things around which one has woven into one's final vocabulary – will not be destroyed"²⁰. And that because "simply by being human we do not have a common bond", says him, "all we share with all other humans is the same thing we share with all other animals – the ability to feel pain"²¹. Therefore, the Rortyan philosophy is based on the idea that there are no truly objective moral values. According to the American philosopher they do not exist by themselves, being as contingent as the material things, the meaning of irony being that of undermining the metaphysical edifices human kind built with so much hope for a better world.

From this point of view, we deal with an issue regarding the liberal irony of Rorty: the relativism. We know from the Ancient Greece that sophists were famous for their moral relativism. Defining ironists as those persons who realize that "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed"²², Rorty was extremely criticized because he seems to situate them outside moral. However, as Frazier argues, Rorty's "ironists" would not avoid social responsibility at all: "The claim that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed is not a pivot point that enables ironists to evade their moral responsibilities to others when it is convenient for them to do so. Rather, for Rorty, it is a belief that is closely related both to the pursuit of autonomy, as it is related to the possibility of substantial revisions in one's current final vocabulary, and the development of tolerance and moral imagination"²³. Therefore, by virtue of certain moral benefits, the neo-pragmatist philosopher states that what is important is not the existence of supreme good or truth, but only what one can call "good" and "true" by consensus.

However, if man, as opposed to animals, is able of feeling another type of pain except physical pain and, therefore, he can also experience mental pain, then wouldn't the ironization of his final vocabulary – meaning of the *language* and culture he was initiated into and in which he truly believes – be dangerous? Is it possible for the respective individual to have an aggressive reaction now that his metaphysical credo shall be undermined or relativized? Undoubtedly, the one who

²⁰ Richard Rorty (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 92.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 177.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 73.

²³ Brad Frazier (2006), *Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment. Philosophical and Theological Connections*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 67.

cannot see his own “preconceptions” as *simple* opinions, not as fundamentals or universal principles shall suffer and eventually glower at those who attempt the *ubiquity* of his values! In fact, Rorty admits that irony cannot function in case of those who are not ready to endure such criticism, being aware that the irony relationships must be initiated “with people intelligent enough to understand what one is talking about – people who are capable of seeing how one might have these doubts because they know what such doubts are like, people who are themselves given to irony”²⁴. Therefore, we cannot make abuse of the patience of those who do not enjoy the salt of false naivety. We cannot mock anything, anyone and anyway, based on the value of the “freedom of expression”, especially because what is ironic to some people can be extremely insulting for others. According to Linda Hutcheon, “what is approved of as polemical and transgressive to some might simply be insulting to others; what is subversive to some might be offensive to others”²⁵. This is why the forms of irony, indifferently how acceptable could seem, cannot be used against a person with a certain very rigid system of (philosophical, religious, political, etc.) ideas.

Therefore, leaving apart what exceeds the usual limits of common sense, we can say that we certainly do not have the freedom to ironize anyone we meet in our way. Of course, irony is based on the freedom of expression, but only in certain communities, as Rorty also suggests: “If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself. If we are ironic enough about our final vocabularies, and curious enough about everyone else’s, we do not have to worry about whether we are in direct contact with moral reality, or whether we are blinded by ideology, or whether we are being weakly «relativistic»”²⁶. In other words, the satire, the parody, the caricature, the pamphlet, the humor etc. are acceptable only in case of a culture like the Western one, which is opened to all these ironic modalities. As about a culture that cannot be ironic about its own final vocabulary, as Rorty says, we can only be “curious” and definitely not “ironic”.

In conclusion, in a world where cultures and civilizations meet more than ever, we cannot ignore the ethical implications implied by the use of irony. In some cases, the difference between the use and the abuse

²⁴ Richard Rorty, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

²⁵ Linda Hutcheon (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²⁶ Richard Rorty, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-177.

of irony seem to be cancelled, the limit between innocent irony and real offence being almost inexistent. This is why we have to maintain a kind of benevolent indifference against those who are not used to ironist practices. Also, even in a community whose members are dedicated to irony, there are certain ethical aspects we need to take into account. Although irony often refers to stereotypes, we have to be careful not to let irony itself become a stereotype. In addition, in order to blow the speakers' suspicions away as regards any obscure intention, it is recommended for any benevolent dissimulation to involve self-irony. Then, to be sure about the impact it can have we need to be patient, meaning to wait for the right moment to launch it. Moreover, ironization needs a quiet moment immediately after being issued, precisely to make the others pay attention to the shades of the used words. Let us not forget that most of the times the sound of the voice is the only one making the difference between malice and goodness.

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