

REVIEW of
the dissertation of Mr. Evangelos Kalfopoulos
Philosophical Irony: a Metaphilosophical Study,
Submitted for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

In the beginning of the review as chair of the jury I have the pleasant duty to present the academic CV of the Greek colleague, according to paragraph 71 (1) (2) of the Rulebook of the Sofia University for the application of the Law for the Development of the Academic Staff in Republic Bulgaria.

Mr. Kalfopoulos is a bachelor of Democritus University of Thrace, where he has studied Classics from 1998 to 2002. After that from 2003 to 2005 he has studied in the Department Cognitive Science, History and Philosophy of Science in the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. He obtained Master's degree in Cognitive Science there in 2005.

He has attended seminar on special education in the University in Thessaly in 2008 and 2009. In 2017 and 2018 he has attended courses in the philosophy of psychiatry at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

He has gained significant work experience in various positions in the fields of healthcare and education.

In 2019 his study in the Doctoral Program in Philosophy taught in English in the Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University has begun. He has passed the majority of the obligatory exams successfully with excellent marks. The doctoral duties and the writing of the dissertation have been guided by Prof. Alexander Gungov as his scholarly supervisor.

The preliminary discussion of his dissertation in the Department Logic, ethics and aesthetics happened on the 21st of March and the colleagues, who attended, unanimously approved the text, giving consent for the future steps of its public defense.

The dissertation of the colleague Kalfopoulos is an extremely ambitious and gigantic undertaking. It consist of introduction, four chapters, formulation of the principal contributions according to the author, and bibliography; 241 pages.

The first chapter is dedicated to the Socratic irony. Here the academic qualification of the colleague in Classics is excellently applied. The analyses start with an inspection **in** the birth of irony in the Satyr-dramas and in the plays of Euripides. After that the famous reprimands of Nietzsche in his *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music* are on focus. Central part of this chapter are the deliberations on the role of Socrates in the dialogues of Plato in the three groups in which they are usually sorted, according to their chronological appearance, composition, thematic scope and most of all – the

manner in which Socrates behaves and speaks in them. The colleague correctly refers to the authority of internationally recognized contemporary scholars as Gregory Vlastos, Alexander Hehmas, Guthrie, Stegmaier, Michael Frede and to many of the articles, included in the enormous volume *A Companion to Socrates*, Edited by Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

There are many claims of the Greek colleague that deserve mentioning, but for the sake of brevity let me select the most poignant of them: according to him in a way Plato disapproved of some aspects of the ironic challenges of Socrates, judging them as a sign of disdain and contempt.

We do have reasons to believe that Plato was not articulating Socrates' philosophy and he might be even critical to some aspects of Socrates' thought and comportment. Frede maintains that there is enough reason for someone not to exclude the above possibility. Based on this possibility we maintain that Plato was critical of Socrates on this point and thought that he had made hubris towards philosophy that he needed to pay with his life. I think that few if any contemporary readers of the dialogue would fail to feel the threatening presence of Anytus and the ignorance of fate that characterizes Socrates at the dialogue. Plato's choice of using the same formalism of dramatic irony in trying to convey these feelings would equally not escape from his contemporaries. And then they would be perhaps able to further their thinking into what kind of hubris, what kind of arrogance Socrates commit in order to deserve the punishment inflicted upon him by the kind of people like Anytus. My guess is that Plato was being critical of Socrates at that point and that at some extend he was also justifying his own approach to teaching, doing and living philosophy as opposed to his teacher. So, the hubris that Socrates commits is that he exhibited an excessive belief on his argumentative power that prompted him to philosophize in the Agora, he forgot his own ironic retreat from the hubris (p.11 Autoreferential summary)

The second chapter is entitled *Modern irony*. In its first subchapter the colleague Kalfopoulos discusses the early modern irony, explaining why the analyses omit Michel de Montaigne and focus on Giambattista Vico and Johan Georg Hamman. Here the *New Science* of Vico is interpreted as Socratic echo. The colleague suggests that Vico's relation to Descartes and the criticism of his bold rationalism is nuanced, mentioning that both were writing in their national languages (p. 55) On this point I have to object, because *not all* of the treatises of Descartes were written in French. His most popular text is in Latin. The colleague is convincing in his claim that Vico draws a limit to human knowledge and his understanding of the irony is akin to the Socratic *pretended ignorance*.

In the exposition of the *Socratic Memorabilia* of Hamman the accent is put on the criticism against the aim of Kant to establish the autonomy of reason, contrasting it with the understanding that the reason does not have the power to determine its principles independently of other faculties, but on the contrary, always operates in a context and is

a product of social and cultural forces. Important moments here are the view of Hamman, picturing Socrates as a kind of apostle to Christ; the Socrates' confession of his ignorance and his demon or genius.

The next subchapter is *Early romantic irony* and in it the Jena romanticism is debated. The main thinker and artist here is Friedrich Schlegel, mainly his *Philosophical fragments* and *On incomprehensibility*. In this part of the dissertation the reader may remain a little bit confused because the observations of Mr. Kalfopoulos are correct and textually solidified, but the way of presenting them is messy. The considerations of the preoccupation of Schlegel with the ancient literature and philosophy, and his appreciation of the irony in the tragic, digresses to interpretations of Philippe Lacou-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, then to Peter Szondi, who is canvassing the tragic personality of Hölderlin as poet, translator, dramatist and philosopher. Then the reasoning turns to Hegel, seen again in the perspective of Szondi, then to Christoph Menke and Paolo Diego Bubbio. And after this long compilation and reflections of modern and post-modern writings, Mr. Kalfopoulos returns again to Schlegel summarizing that the romantic author was interested mostly in the poetic genres and the tragic in the tragedy. This was a shared predilection of his brother August and his friend – the dramatist Ludwig Tieck. The best in this part is the emphasis on the formulation of irony as a permanent *parabasis* or *parekbasis* in the tragedy and the treatment of the Socratic irony as paradoxical, at the same time involuntary and deliberate.

In the next subchapter the development of the processes of reactions and confrontations to the philosophy of Kant are traced. The main ideas of Karl Reinhold, Fichte, and again Schlegel are exposed. The colleague Kalfopoulos in his approach to the metaphysical irony of the Jena romantic is stressing on his antifoundationalism and the understanding of reason as merely regulative and not constitutive, which lead to the preference of the fragments instead of the systems, and the conscious avoidance of completeness.

The two concluding subchapters of this chapter are of utmost importance for the whole dissertation and the shaping out of the theses of Mr. Kalfopoulos. What should be the taxonomy in the line Jena Romantics-Hegel? Should they be examined under the same group, or not, and what are the reasons for each of the answers in the dilemma? In this crucial conceptual point of the text the author of the dissertation is clearly stating:

My proposition is that, despite all the misconceptions and personal feelings between the protagonists of the Jena period there might be philosophical reasons that connect metaphilosophical irony and idealism in a similar way as Plato's idealist philosophy, as distinct it might be from the Socratic teachings, constitutes but one - perhaps the most fruitful – interpretation of these very teachings. And as other than Plato's interpretations of ironic philosophy existed in antiquity – one can think here of the cynics and the skeptics – so too romantic irony is perhaps given other interpretations than idealism, such as

Kierkegaard' existentialism and the post-modern variants that we will examine in the next chapter. (p. 99-100)

Kalfopoulos substantiates his interpretation with many references, some of which expressing disagreement, to other points of view: in publications of Frederick Beiser, Fred Rush, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Thomas Mauthner, Paolo Diego Bubbio, Michael Inwood, Aakash Singh & Rimina Mohapatra, Donald Phillip Verene, Walter Kaufmann.

The climax of the dissertation is the analysis of the Christian existential dialectics of Kierkegaard. The main writings, on which the reflections are guided, are championed understandably by *The Concept of Irony, with continual reference to Socrates* and *Philosophical Crumbs*. In the genealogy of the ancient, pre-modern and modern conceiving of irony this is the highest peak and as Kalfopoulos summarizes:

... the initial closeness of Kierkegaard to Hegelianism helped to underline the fact that Hegel was not only unfair to the phenomenon of irony in respect to Socrates, but that his own dialectical method had much in common with it. Kierkegaard's subsequent distancing from Hegelianism was a big contribution to put existence at the center of the philosophical interest (p. 133-134 of the dissertation).

Thus Kierkegaard launched a tendency, which reached the 20th century, up until the poststructuralists. It is also stressed, that:

... there is a considerable difference between Kierkegaard and the Jena romantics, because he sees the possibility of a relation with the Absolute that is constitutive, in opposition to the infinite longing of the Absolute of the romantics. In contrast to Hegel his Christian relation to the Absolute was not rational, but existential (p. 133-134 of the dissertation).

The third chapter presents the postmodern irony and here the main philosophers in focus are Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Lyotard and Guattari, Christoph Menke and Paul de Man.

In the subchapter dedicated to Rorty, the analysis begins with the general framing of his philosophizing in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, published in 1979. It is stressed that he is a neo-pragmatist, in the sense that he takes empiricism to be radical and to have causal relations with humans, relations that do not offer a privileged way of forming beliefs about the world. The more specific reflections of Kalfopoulos, pertaining to the topic of his writing are concentrated on the concept *edification*, and the book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, published by Rorty a decade later, in 1989. There is a passage, which clearly formulates the explanation of the Greek colleague on the deepest grounds of the philosophy of the American thinker:

For Rorty the claims that the world is out there and that the truth is out there are not identical. Truth is a property of the sentences that are to be found in human languages that are also products of humans, contingent artifacts that are used only to describe and redescribe reality as human societies evolve alongside their vocabularies. According to

Rorty, Davidson, as the later Wittgenstein, views language and vocabularies more as a tool that allows the people that know how to use it to grasp and express the new historical reality of their time. There is no final vocabulary, at least not one in the collective sense; final vocabularies can be found in the personal level, but they are still contingent. (p. 149 of the dissertation,)

Our Greek colleague disapproves and criticizes some of the convictions, in which the understanding of Rorty is rooted and his disagreement seems well defended to me. Here is the most important reasoning of Kalfopoulos in this respect:

We would argue that the inability of Rorty to relate his irony with the tragic element, an element that has a genealogical linkage with it, makes his secularist version weak in philosophical grounds. Rorty fails to appreciate the importance of actualizing a possibility and the consequences, often tragic, that this actualizing entails. For sure he is not blind to the fact, since he notes that "Redescription often humiliates"; but he doesn't seem to be preoccupied with what that humiliation would entail, what would be the result of ruling out the possibility of any other, personal or someone else's, redescription, that comes from the mere fact that one of them has been realized. (p.160-161)

The subchapter on *Derrida' disguised irony* begins with the affirmation, that Derrida is close to Nietzsche at least in two ways that are relevant for us: namely the notion of difference and the importance of metaphors in human discourse. Kalfopoulos notes that Derrida cannot escape the culmination of metaphysics that the Hegelian system reaches in the thought of Heidegger, but nevertheless he seeks to displace it radically through his conception of force and difference.

In my reading this segment of the dissertation is interesting and deserves special attention not with the generalities, known even to the beginners in philosophy, but with the meta-interpretations proposed by Kalfopoulos of tens interpretations of contemporary theorists. The most appropriate of them is the one, sketched by our Czech colleague Karel Thein, which Kalfopoulos uses and develops fruitfully. Both for Karel Thein and Kalfopoulos in the case of Socrates and Plato this infinite striving towards the absolute, towards the limits of philosophy is seen, whereas Derrida on the other hand seems more self-conscious about these limits and their transgression. (p. 171-172)

For the overall conclusions of the dissertation one final point of Kalfopoulos is to be underlined:

Both Kierkegaard and Derrida, as we posit, are alluding to the complex relationship between silence and irony: irony needs silence because no absolute affirmative telos or closure can be sustained in its global reach and yet silence obliges irony to speak but at the same time pointing back to it. Some of these new traits of irony are also interlinked with the notion of the Other. These Derridean concerns are in a way summed up and addressed

by his notion of the ghost, which becomes the sign for declaring an ethics of the other, not just the other in terms of physical alterity, but also in terms of temporal alterity. (p. 37 auto-referential summary)

This subchapter finishes with a pondering over the relationship that deconstruction in general and also in the specific use of Derrida might have with romantic irony through the work of Paul de Man and Menke.

The fourth chapter is entitled *Conclusions*. In it all main claims of the previous analyses are recapitulated, adding to them a sketch of the applicability and the potencies of metaphilosophical irony in various other problems of philosophy.

He has summarized his conclusions in the final pages of the Autoreferential summary and from them the most important in my reading is:

... the purpose of postulating the existence of an Ur-irony. In the face of such a postulate, Socrates might have been in fact using irony to undo any self-certainties that his fellow citizens might have, to resist to any kind of instrumentalization of reason that might use it for the particular interests, as in the case of the sophists. Whereas they would have used any kind of rhetorical device to convince and win the argument, Socrates would use the rhetorical trope of irony to actually underscore the impossibility of discussion for philosophical aims. He would be using reason to point to the universal logos by refusing the particular discourses to win the argument. In order to do that, to attain the heights of logos, he needed to universalize subjectivity, firstly his own. ...

*The impression of the romantics being connected to subjectivity has two sources: their early affinity with Fichte and Hegel's stance against them, whose shadow is felt on the early Kierkegaard of the Concept of irony as well. **The philosophical concept of irony can act metaphilosophically because of certain presuppositions that it holds: limit of knowledge and infinite striving for it, necessity of systems but acknowledgment of their historical contingency, use of discursive reason to formulate what we intuit, realism in terms of ontology of nature but acceptance of the subjectivist point of view, need of transcendence towards the absolute but also necessity in remaining within human bounds.***

To conclude, we can say that the ironic metaphilosophical approach, which comes from Socrates until today, can constitute a fruitful strand of philosophy in the current century.

The Greek colleague correctly has formulated his principal interpretative contributions, summarizing them in 4 points.

The auto-referential summary fully and exactly presents the content of the text. The translation of it in Bulgarian has some shortcomings, but this is not Kalfopoulos' fault.

There are five titles in the list of publications; three of them are on the topic of the dissertation, two of which are forthcoming.

The best in the dissertation

In my reading **the strongest positives** of the dissertation are the following. There are three spectacular tasks, with which the colleague has coped successfully.

First, he has covered an *enormous time-span* in the history of the European philosophy, with the exclusion of the medieval and Renaissance period. He rethinks the philosophical irony since its birth in the time of the ancient Sophists and Socrates, and even earlier, to our contemporaries, as Rorty and Derrida. The chief concern of the colleague is respectable: to trace the development of a significant instrument for the shaping out of ideas and intuitions from its conception as Ur-irony in the satyr-dramas in antiquity to its brand new application and metaphilosophical usage in other spheres, as psychiatry, for instance.

Second, the colleague has had to analyze heterogeneous bunch of authors: exemplary philosophers, playwrights, Romantic writers, who have valued the fragment and the brevity of expression; systematic university professors as Hegel; scandalous figures as Nietzsche, talented personalities as Kierkegaard, who have created masterpieces of philosophy-in-a-brilliant-literary-form. The dissertation discusses tens of authors not only with different philosophical inclinations and paradigms of thought, but also thinkers and writers, who have completely divergent ways of expressing themselves: starting from Euripides, who was a playwright and Socrates, who hasn't written anything (with the exception of a hymn dedicated to Apollo) and finishing with the challenges of the latest deconstructivists.

The irony as a phenomenon is studied in dialogues, dramas, poetry, fragments, voluminous volumes of university lectures, various hybrid genres of philosophy-in-literary forms.

Third, he had tried (and succeeded) to present and evaluate the concepts of all of them through the lens of famous newer and newest theorists from the 20th and even from the 21st century.

Recommendations:

1. In the considerations, exposed above, I noted that some compositional solutions could be better resolved: some of the pages, which in my eyes seem as deviation in chapter two, could be more appropriate in chapter three.
2. An explanation could be added in the beginning of the first chapter: what does the verb εἶρω mean in ancient Greek and what are the main meanings of the noun εἰρωνεία?

3. It would be good to mention somewhere and include the book of Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, with a translation of Plato's *Theaetetus* by M. J. Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett 1990. It discusses the problem of knowledge, the ironic behavior of Socrates and the attitude of Plato to it.

Final assessment:

The result is excellent, Mr. Evangelos Kalfopoulos has submitted a text, which testifies that he deserves the degree Philosophy Doctor. If our university could confer the degree with the addition *maxima cum laude, with the highest possible praises*, I would have proposed it.

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