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Ph.D. Dissertation Summary

Philosophical Irony: a metaphilosophical study

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Abstract

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This dissertation tries to examine the concept of philosophical irony as a metaphilosophical one. It is divided in four chapters. The first one is dedicated to Socratic irony and argues for a proto-irony that connects irony in Socrates and the tragic sort, as a reaction to the Sophists. The second chapter examines irony in modernity and especially the early romantic irony of Schlegel, in connection with Hegel's treatment and with Kierkegaard's approach. The third chapter examines postmodern irony and centers in the works of both anglo-american and continental philosophy. In the concluding chapter, the potentiality of metaphilosophical irony in various problems and areas of philosophy is examined.

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Introduction

The present study aims at providing an account of philosophical irony as a metaphilosophy. We will try to survey the concept of irony, from its first philosophical appearance in Socrates to the most recent uses of it, namely the deconstructionist approach. Between these historical points lies a middle point of irony that was more forcefully expressed in the work of Friedrich Schlegel and that of Søren Kierkegaard, who also in a sense are to be found in the beginning and the end of Hegelianism within what is called the classical German Philosophy. The problems that irony was invoked to address within philosophy are still pertinent today: the problem of reason, the problem of philosophical system, the limits of human knowledge, the constitution of the subject, the relation between power and truth and, finally, the conception of what is to be a human.

There are many attempts to provide a history of irony as a concept; most of them follow a specific pattern, namely starting from Socrates and then passing through early romanticism, and especially Schlegel, to Kierkegaard and leading to postmodernism of the 20th century. Although we roughly follow this general line, we diverge in two aspects; first we are trying to contextualize it in a different way, claiming openly for a metaphilosophical nature of irony. That would roughly mean that we are treating irony as a way of doing philosophy, not just as an art of living, as most thinkers would have it. Furthermore, we will try to apply the conclusions of our survey on the concept of irony

on genuine metaphilosophical problems, such as philosophical progress and the use of the ironic mode in more specific contexts of human knowledge.

Metaphilosophy is usually defined as “...inquiry into, or theory about, the nature of philosophy”¹. We will follow this widely accepted definition and try to ask throughout the study how irony contributes to these stated aims. Should we take irony as a theoretical inquiry on philosophy as this definition suggests or are we to conclude that irony is only a witty way of expressing someone’s disbelief on theory as a whole? This second option is provided by the conception of irony as an art of living. Irony as Metaphilosophy then is primarily distinguished from this notion. Of course, to be an ironist is to be true to oneself and to the way that someone chooses to lead her life, to be ready to take on all the practical challenges this decision amounts to. But the primacy of practical philosophy is not exclusively ironic; one can think of many other practical examples that do not employ irony, such as the Stoics for example. On the other hand, irony we will argue does say something about what is philosophy and how one is to make it. In the Socratic instantiation philosophy came to be distinguished from the Sophists and their progressivist, natural philosophical approach. But Socratic thinking came down to us primarily through Plato and was already engulfed in the latter’s systematic philosophical program. Irony’s methodological opposition to systematic philosophy is more overtly shown in the case of Early German Romanticism and especially Friedrich Schlegel. His opposition to systematicity is well documented and influenced both his philosophical as well as his stylistic choices. Hegel’s attack on Schlegelian irony can also be seen under the light of the opposition of systematicity and fragmentation as two different ways of

¹ Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 350.

approaching the nature of philosophy. The same can be extended backwards and the Socratic irony can be taken as a way of doing philosophy that is equally unmatched both to the Sophist but also to the system of ideas brought forward by Plato. This system of ideas was named metaphysics by Aristotle. It becomes clear then that the overcoming of metaphysics, that becomes a philosophical aim since Heidegger, is closely related to the ironical philosophizing. But maybe irony purports to show that we are never able to fully overcome metaphysics, because of our reliance on language as Derrida would point, that we are in a sense prompted to organize our thinking into overarching systems and that is where both the irony and the tragic element can be found. Then irony becomes a distinct way of philosophizing both from the grand narratives of idealism and the relativism of the postmodernism of the type of Lyotard. It also makes a unique claim on the nature of philosophy: philosophy is a theoretical activity that always tends to provide a systematic closure of thinking, but it is exactly in our resistance to such a closure, our denial of ultimate grounds and foundations that this activity should always aim. This tendency is structural and not a result of an error of mistaken judgment, although these terms should be understood in a commonsensical meaning and not a philosophical one. Furthermore, it can be stated that philosophy, as far as irony is concerned, is a historical enterprise and that certain of these overarching, systematic structures might prevail in a certain historical context; this historical perspective is apparent in Schlegel but not in Socrates, a fact that instead of suggesting a disruption to irony, it can be better accounted for as a difference in the concept of history. In Schlegel's time the conception of history is necessarily more progressivist and messianic than the tragic thinking of Socrates' time. We shall argue that the invocation of Socrates as a paradigmatic thinker from Schlegel,

but also from previous thinkers as Giambattista Vico and Johann Georg Hamann, is also a reaction to this view of history. Nevertheless, irony as metaphilosophy states that philosophical thinking is also part of history and not outside of that realm. But it understands the realm of history under a tragic light, not a messianic one. Therefore, throughout our survey we will keep referring to the problems of philosophical systematicity, philosophical relativism and the intermediary position that is irony.

In the first chapter, starting with Socrates, the aim will be to produce a genealogy that would allow irony to be exhibited as a force within a prevailing philosophical system, but always opposing and evading the canonization in that system. For example, Socrates must be viewed in his complex relation to the sophistry movement of ancient Greek philosophy, because his irony can make sense as opposing an overtly naturalistic, rational and relativistic philosophical system such as the one put forward by Protagoras, a main sophist. Following Vlastos (1991), it can be argued that the difference between Socrates and Plato was a real one and that Plato's idealism comes as an accommodating response to Socratic irony, because it can be argued that one of the main characteristics of irony is to be in constant – but not always overt – relation to a transcendental, foundational system such as the one of Ideas posited by Plato. Irony can be said to be accommodated as a force by the dialectical movement.

In the next chapter, our genealogy will continue with the second advent of irony, namely within the Romantic Movement, focusing specifically on the irony of Friedrich Schlegel. Again irony can be seen as a force in opposition with the modern mechanical naturalistic philosophy of Descartes and the Enlightenment period that was systematized in philosophy by Kant, as can first be exemplified by thinkers such as Vico and Hamann,

romantic irony's precursors. It will also be argued that Hegel's idealistic philosophy can be seen as trying to accommodate philosophical irony by means of dialectics, thus preserving it as a negative force. Through the exposition of irony in art and poetry with its association with the most philosophical of all genres, tragedy, we will try to address the aesthetical side of the phenomenon. Through the connection between irony and dialectics we shall try not only to address irony's purely philosophical importance but also to explore the necessary, structural link that it might have with the systems of idealistic philosophy. Kierkegaard's rejection of Hegel's philosophy and his invocation of Socratic irony should not make us miss the above point. Rather it can be argued that Kierkegaard show a problem in Hegelianism that has to do with absolute spirit, a concept that he substituted with absolute faith, or rather faith in the absolute. Kierkegaard's objection on the rationality and logic of Hegel was also crucial in the development of his idea of existence, which influenced existentialism.

The third stage of irony's genealogy can be argued that starts with Friedrich Nietzsche and, running through postmodernism (or deconstruction) and philosophers such as Richard Rorty, comes until our time. Nietzsche didn't use the term irony but his perspectivalism, dissimulation and anti-foundationalism can be considered as ironic traits. But Nietzsche's most direct influences on philosophical irony have to do with his overcoming of metaphysics and his renegade figure against western thought of his time. This opposition to metaphysics influenced Martin Heidegger who deemed Nietzsche as the last metaphysician, whose effort was not successful in producing the overcoming in question; instead, Heidegger claims to be the first non-metaphysical philosopher, the first to address the problem of Being. This claim has been disputed by both Jacques Derrida

and deconstruction on the one hand and Gilles Deleuze and his specific branch of postmodern thinking on the other. While Derrida thinks that we are necessarily confined within language and metaphysics and thus we need to address the difference generated within them as a binary opposition of presence and absence, Deleuze argues that such a division is not necessary and that the pervasiveness of difference amounts to positivity and not negativity or resentment, as it would have in a case of mere opposition. Thus deconstruction, understanding the limitations of our linguistic confinement, salvages the notion of irony both in the works of Derrida and also in those of Paul de Man. On the other hand, and also influenced in some extent by both the ancient ironic tradition of Socrates but also from deconstruction, developed by Rorty is a kind of irony that tries to parallel the one in the continental side. Rorty's irony is characteristically close to the conception of Alexander Nehamas of irony as an art of living. Though this conception of irony has obvious merits, the clear-cut division between the practical and theoretical aspects of philosophy that it is based at is never met and the genealogy that they propose between philosophers of different times seems coincidental and not structural, like the metaphilosophical account wants to argue for.

CHAPTER 1: SOCRATIC IRONY

In discussing the philosophical use of irony, one cannot argue against Socrates and his method as the obvious starting point. All the ancient sources, both Greek and Latin, agree on this point², and we shall be taking Socrates as the initiator of the use of irony in philosophy. There is a classic problem about the historical figure of Socrates, who did not leave us any written work and can be disentangled with difficulty – if at all – from the writers that made him into a literary persona, above all Plato. Recent scholarship tends to distinguish between platonic dialogues of the earlier, middle and later period, with the first ones to be taken as exemplifying Socrates' original ideas while the two other bunches are using Socrates as a mouthpiece for Plato's own ideas³.

We will generally follow Nehamas' view that "Socrates ironic gaze is turned toward...his interpreters as well"⁴ and will generally take the interpretations offered of his irony as milestones for this metaphilosophical concept. We will try to look to the times before Socrates and will try to find affinities of his philosophical irony to other

² In general, it is considered that we have four reliable ancient sources about Socrates as a historical figure, namely Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle and Aristophanes (I follow W.K.C. Guthrie, *Socrates*, (Cambridge University Press 1971), 13-39. Vlastos (Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991) and Nehamas (Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) also refer to Cicero and Quintillian as two Latin authors that have ascribed the notion of "ironia" to the traditional western perception of Socrates.

³Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46-47. For the opposite view see Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The philosophical use of a literary form*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

⁴Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 98.

types of irony that might have existed before him. It is our hypothesis that such a device existed before in other forms of verbal and even non-verbal manifestations to be unnoticed by Socrates who used it in his discussional exchanges with others and gave irony a distinctive philosophical flavor. Taking the threefold of tragedy- Socratic oral discussion - platonic dialogue as performative acts, we will try to show that irony is exemplified in all three due to their construction and ultimately to their genealogy.

Let us see first how the audience functions in tragedy, regarding tragic irony. Myth was the common ground of tragedies and, although there was also some degree of innovation, at the level of fate of the tragic hero the audience already knew the ending⁵. This knowledge provides the soil out of which irony can spring, because as the plot of the play advances the hero, ignorant of the truth that both god and audience share, states further his own version of the unfolding events becoming more and more susceptible of committing hubris.

Furthermore there is still another factor of Greek tragedy that allows for another level of irony. The satirical plays were using the same myth as the tragedies and the audience knew that they had to anticipate another take of the events to be presented in them⁶. So how is irony exemplified through the satirical play? According to one theory “Tragedy poses fundamental questions about the relations between mortals and gods, or it reflects on such serious issues as sacrifice, war, marriage and law. Satyric drama, by contrast, plays with culture first by distancing it and then reconstructing it through its antitypes, the satyrs. It does not seek to settle a controversy, nor to bring man face to face with his

⁵ Peter Burian, “Myth into mythos: the shaping of tragic plot”, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, edited by P.E. Easterling, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 186.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

fate, or the gods. It plays in a different key, with the displacement, distortion and reversal of what constitutes the world and the culture of men; it reintroduces distance and reinserts Dionysos in the center of the Theatre”⁷. Satirical drama was the last reversal of the knowledge that the audience possessed, or thought of possessed, about the events depicted before, a reversal that has to do with bringing back god into the reigning position, that he is the one that has the last say as far as it goes to knowledge. This is an interesting point of convergence with Socrates who thought that the Delphic maxim “Know thyself” points to knowledge of someone’s self-limitations⁸.

One of Socrates’ most well-known tenets is his disavowal of knowledge for himself, one position that Vlastos treats as a complex irony from his part. Vlastos refers to a passage of the *Apology* where Socrates claims that knowledge is “human wisdom” and concludes that: “Socrates is avowing that “*human wisdom*”, which, he believes, may be claimed by a man determined to stay inside the limits of the “mortal thoughts” (θνητά φρονεῖν) which befit the human condition”⁹. This way of treating knowledge has striking similarities with the way knowledge is treated in Greek tragedy as we saw above. Even more when Vlastos himself points in the footnote that the formulation of “human wisdom” (κατ’ἄνθρωπον) that Socrates uses in the *Apology* is the same with the one Sophocles use in *Ajax*¹⁰.

In his small book entitled “*Socrates and the Greek Tragedy*” (1871) Friedrich Nietzsche blames both Euripides and Socrates for the death of Greek tragedy, because ultimately they were alien to the spirit of Dionysus which is the real spirit of tragedy. Why is Nietzsche’s view of Socrates so different in respect to tragedy to the one sketched above?

⁷ Ibid., 41-42.

⁸ Alexander Nehamas, *ibid.*, 107.

⁹ Ibid., 239.

¹⁰ Ibid., 239 fn. 15.

One answer lies for sure in the fact that Nietzsche was more concerned in providing a theory of tragedy and its spirit, in the famous sense of the confluence of the Dionysian and the Apollonian spirits. In this sense he finds that Socrates and his poetical alter-ego, Euripides, were far to the one of the two extremes, namely the Apollonian element. The principle of Socratic aestheticism is what guides Euripides to become a tragic dialectician, to make the dialogical scenes the center of his plays, taking the mind of his audience away from the musical parts of the chorus that are exemplifying par excellence the Dionysian spirit. This change of attention makes the pessimistic life view, the main characteristic of the tragic age of the Greeks, to fade before the rational, optimistic age of Socrates. Nietzsche claims that "...for the first time with Socrates appears this profound chimera, the unshaken faith that thinking, having causality as its guide, can penetrate in the deepest abyss of Being, that thinking not only is in a position to know Being, but also to correct it"¹¹.

It is evident that Nietzsche's view, although powerful and plausible, exacerbates the connection between Socrates and Euripides and makes use of a specific image of Socrates, overlooking other aspects of him, a position towards him that is not exclusively Nietzschean. The exacerbation is well documented by Christian Wildberg (2006), where he presents various facts and evidence that point to the fact that, although the two contemporary Athenians must have knew each other and perhaps even being influenced by each other, Euripides was by no means a mouthpiece of Socratic philosophy. According to Wildberg the absence of core Socratic beliefs, as the care for one's soul¹², is a more substantial proof about the independence of Euripidean tragedies from Socratic thinking, at least at the extend Nietzsche argues for.

¹¹Friedrich Nietzsche, *Socrates and Greek Tragedy*, translated (in modern Greek) by Dimitris Ifantis, (Athens: Roes Press, 2018), 103.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30.

Nietzsche acknowledges many other characteristics of Socrates, including his supreme irony and also “demonic, mad (“Socrates mainomenos”), Dionysian, music making”¹³. Porter (2006) makes also the claim that Nietzsche’s conception of Socrates as an anti-Dionysian element, is undermined by his own claim that both Dionysicism and Socratism are rooted in “...a prototypical Greek idealism”¹⁴. There is a famous note on Socrates from Nietzsche that reveals both the complexity of the former and the grasp of that complexity by the latter: “I believe that the magic of Socrates was this: that he had one soul, and behind that another, and behind that another. Xenophon lay down to sleep in the foremost one, Plato in the second, and then again in the third, only here Plato went to bed with his own, second soul. Plato is himself somebody with many recesses and foregrounds”¹⁵. We can be certain that Nietzsche understood that complexity but also interpreted Socrates in ways that were more fitting to his own philosophical views, treating him perhaps as a “semiotic” as did Plato¹⁶.

Can there really be a distinction between Socratic irony as it is depicted in the platonic dialogues, especially the ones of the early period which are taken to portray the views of the historic Socrates, and irony as a distinctive feature of Plato himself, as a writer and philosopher? There are two other types of irony that can be found in the dialogues, the examination of which might reveal more elements concerning our discussion on the genealogical lineage of irony. The first one concerns the interpretation of Nehamas and specifically the fact that Plato puts us, the readers of the dialogues, in the same spot as Euthyphro in the dialogue of the same name. Nehamas’ example tries to exemplify Plato’s irony from the point of view of its literary use but there is at least one example where Plato’s irony can be both literary and philosophical. We are referring to the interlude between Socrates and Anytus (90a-95a and also 100a and 100c) in the

¹³James I. Porter, “Nietzsche and the “Problem of Socrates”, in *A Companion to Socrates*, Edited by Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 412.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 428.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 412.

dialogue “*Meno*”. Plato here is using a formalism that can be descended from tragedy, since his readers know something that Socrates and Meno could not, namely that Anytus would become one of the prosecutors against Socrates in his trial and thus one of the responsible parties for the killing of Socrates. After a fierce refutation of the Sophists, Anytus loses his temper with Socrates and accuses him of slandering the great men of Athens and warns him to be careful (ἐὐλαβεῖσθαι 94e). But Plato does not let this episode to slip from his reader’s mind because at the end of the dialogue (100e) Anytus’ presence is again referred at, although he is not to speak since 95a.

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 possibility¹⁷. 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.

¹⁷ Michael Frede, “Plato’s Argument and the Dialogue Form”, in *Ancient Greek Philosophy: Historical and Historiographical Aspects*, edited by Chloe Balla and translated (in modern Greek) by Lambros Spiliopoulos, (Athens: Ekkremes Press, 2008), 201-219.

We will try now to focus on the reasons which might have prompted Socrates to use irony in a philosophical way because of the intellectual environment he found himself in, while living and teaching in Athens of the 5th century. Prominent in this environment were the sophists, a catch-all word used to pile up not only a certain class of intellectuals but also to demur intellectualism in general. W.K.C. Guthrie in the third volume of his seminal “*A History of Greek Philosophy*” takes their views as contrasted with the ones articulated by Plato to be a mirror of the empiricist – rationalist debate of modern philosophy¹⁸. Although the Sophists have some kinship with the Ionian philosophers they are said to be more interested in human affairs by the latter. Woodruff (2006) in his attempt to restore an image of the Sophists closer to textual evidence that is also away from the classical view provided by Guthrie (1971), compiles a list of nine characteristics. Where Socrates differed from the Sophists the most was on the matter of the teaching of virtue. Both the views of Guthrie and Woodruff agree that the Sophists were keen on teaching virtue and getting paid for imparting their knowledge; for Socrates on the other hand teaching virtue is the third complex irony as identified by Vlastos¹⁹.

Socrates’ philosophical reasons for using irony in the matter of teaching of virtue has to do with the fact that his whole art of living, his all existence would constitute a model of virtuous life. For Nehamas that constitutes the real paradox of Socrates, that he says he lacks the knowledge of what virtue is and on the other hand he is the most virtuous person in every occasion, at least at the eyes of his students, Plato most preeminent amongst them²⁰. Plato, according to this view, struggled to make sense of this paradox of his teacher. So for Nehamas the ironic mode of living, in its uniqueness, is the only virtuous and what we are left with is only interpretations of why is that. While we are not necessarily disagreeing with such an approach, we would like to point the theoretical and metaphilosophical points that it raises. Following

¹⁸ W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Sophists*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 3-4.

¹⁹ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher*, *ibid.*, 241-2.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 85.

Werner Stegmaier (1997) who points to the Nietzschean characterization of Socrates as the one that does not write and concludes that he didn't write anything because he thought of writing as the way to keep the meaning constant and intact²¹, we can agree with him that irony was the perfect medium to keep off of him the threat of authority, that he despised so much.

The other point to make is the interchangeability of knowledge and virtue, a position that point to the famous intellectualism of Socrates, present at the principle that no one errs knowingly. This is a problem for the view that Socrates was a mere ironist, having no specific beliefs about virtue and its nature, and if the doctrine of intellectualism is to be upheld could create serious trouble. Indeed that seemed to also be the position of Plato - and Kahn is right in pointing that Plato's approach in the Republic that takes knowledge to be "in the super-strong sense of genuine knowledge of the good- the case just referred to as philosophic virtue"²²- and he seemed to try to combine in his academy the teaching of science, especially mathematics, with the teaching of political virtue, as we saw already. We concede that Socrates speaks about this kind of knowledge rather than the faculty or rational judgment or even true belief; but we think that Socrates never thought that this kind of knowledge was attainable. His *aporia* – literally meaning no passage, no way through, a deadlock – seems to be indeed genuine and he does not commit himself to any written theory of how such a condition could be overcome. Indeed he is silent on the matter.

²¹ Werner Stegmaier, "Plato and Nietzsche: dialogue and aphorism", in *Nietzsche and the Greeks*, edited by Teresa Pentzopoulou-Valala and translated by I. Christodoulou, (Thessaloniki: Zitros Press, 1997), 73-96.

²² *Ibid.*, 229.

CHAPTER 2: MODERN IRONY

From the earlier period, irony retains the characteristic of silence – Kierkegaard being the first to attribute this noun for Socratic irony – and also the characteristic of being against a notion of progress, somehow in the same way that Socrates refused to impart his teaching for a virtuous living since he didn't share the Sophists' belief in a uniform human progress, which would be attained if someone followed virtue. Both the early Romantic period and German idealism coincided with the enlightenment ideas and in an important respect were answering to their definition of progress, through education and other civil institutions. Of course especially the Romantics were not simply opposing enlightenment, but even taken to radicalize its social progressive program²³. Especially the notion of “infinite becoming” that Friedrich Schlegel develops will be examined as to its compatibility with the ideas of progress in the Socratic sense. Also one more time we come across the idea of a limit to human understanding that gives rise to the concept of irony, which is taken by Rush “...as the expression from within subjective agency of regulative principles and ideas in one”²⁴. The idea of limit is thus shown to become one of the most important and salient characteristics of irony, at least in the way it was being conceived at the early and modern period; but will also play an important role in the theorizing about irony at later thinkers.

²³ Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel and the emergence of romantic philosophy*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

It is within the context of poetic language and transitioning between different phases of human history, always instantiated by the Divine Providence, that Giambattista Vico treats irony. In paragraph 408 of his chapter on poetic tropes we read “Irony certainly could not have begun until the period of reflection, because it is fashioned of falsehood by dint of a reflection that wears the mask of truth. Here emerges a great principle of human things, confirming the origin of poetry disclosed in this work: that since the first men of the gentile world had the simplicity of children, who are truthful by nature, the first fables could not feign anything false; they must therefore have been, as they have been defined above, true fables”²⁵.

Irony is only possible at the era of reflection, only when a distinction between truth and falsehood can be made. Verene notes likewise “Truth and falsehood can be introduced only through judgment, when what is sensed is thought, that is, reflected upon”²⁶. Rather than being an element of reification for reason and reflection, irony is the necessary element of instability that will not allow reason to claim truth, in the same manner that mythos was claiming it through a simplicity of correspondence. Vico is able to point to this important fact through his conception of human history as recurrent and his epistemological innovations, against the rationalism of his age.

Johann Georg Hamann, our second precursor of modern philosophical irony, is also using the figure of Socrates to attack the prevalent rationalism of his time, though here the target is not Descartes but rather Kant, who was also a friend of Hamann’s. For our purposes we need to concentrate on Hamann’s first published book, *Socratic Memorabilia*. As Beiser notes, Hamann in *Socratic Memorabilia* “...envisaged ‘a higher form of knowledge’ that provided a pure insight

²⁵ Ibid., 118.

²⁶ Ibid.

into existence. Such knowledge would be purely immediate, avoiding all pale abstractions of reason, which cannot apprehend the richness, diversity and particularity of experience”²⁷.

One of the most important periods for the philosophical concept of irony is considered the period of early German romanticism and especially the work of Friedrich Schlegel. This period had certain dichotomies that one needs to see in order to grasp irony like: fragment and the system, *symphilosophie* and the individual thinker, the absolute and the subject and at the end romanticism and idealism. The unity between philosophy and literature was a characteristic of all of Schlegel’s work, a characteristic that impels us to examine his concept of irony in these two fields, the literary or poetic and the philosophical. In these two domains we need also to remember that irony exemplifies the same characteristic, one that can be summarized neatly by the word of paradox as we read in Schlegel’s Critical Fragment 48 “Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is everything simultaneously good and great”²⁸.

The preoccupation of Friedrich Schlegel with antiquity is well documented. But so is his affinity with tragic thinking. We read in the now classic text of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy the following: “What comes to light is well known: a previously imperceptible hiatus in Greek ‘classicism,’ the traces of a savage prehistory and terrifying religion, the hidden, nocturnal, mysterious and mystical face of the Greek ‘serenity’, an equivocal art barely detached from madness and ‘orgiastic’ (one of Schlegel’s pet words) fury. *In sum tragic Greece*. Like Hölderling during the same period but differently, although Schelling ensures the transition, and in a ‘dialectizing’ mode that will follow a well-known course from Hegel to the young Nietzsche the Schlegels invent what becomes known (under various names) as the opposition of the

²⁷ Beiser, *ibid.*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

Apollonian and the Dionysian”²⁹. This is a very important remark not only because of the claim that the Schlegel brothers, through the Athenaeum, invented the dialectical opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian element, which was arduous in many respects for modern thought, but also because it establishes a link between them and tragic thought in a way that leaves few doubts that Friedrich Schlegel had come across that kind of irony.

Schlegel’s insistence on Socratic irony and its characterization as something paradoxical, at the same time involuntary and deliberate³⁰, can be seen in the light of the above as an attempt to differentiate irony from specific literary genres, most precisely tragedy. As Schlegel gradually moves away from his belief in the superiority of the classical world with respect to the modern era, he also shifts his opinion on the literary genres, now favoring the epic, or the novel as it is now called, to be in the position of synthesis. According to fragment 332 Schlegel accepts that in his own romantic times genres of the antiquity can still persist, but the feeling of the era can be captured only by the new comedy (the one of Tieck probably) and the epic that can be metamorphosed into a novel.

The concept of irony appears to be a stable reference for his literary theory and his metaphysical concerns as well. And in the field of literature, it seems that many scholars were baffled with the character of Schlegel’s irony taking it to be in essence subjective and only destructive. This debate is well addressed especially in Miller (1997) where we read that from Hegel through to De Man “Schlegel’s irony has been equated with the reflexive subjectivity of the human mind, particularly in its critical-destructive capacity as unmasker of surface deceptions and revealer of hidden agendas”³¹. Immerwahr himself claims that this division is merely

²⁹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The literary absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, translated by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, (New York: SUNY Press, 1988), 10. Emphasis added.

³⁰ See fragment 108.

³¹ Eric Miller, “Masks of Negation: Greek eironeia and Schlegel's Ironie”, *European Romantic Review* 8, no.4 (1999): 360.

semantic and that when we examine Schlegelian irony from a more philosophical, rather than literary, point of view “...the question of subjectivity or objectivity quickly resolves itself into one of nomenclature and emphasis”³².

The philosophical approach of Schlegel and the early Romantics was primarily influenced by Fichte’s attempt to surpass the dualisms of Kantian philosophy, positing the I as the unifying principle; when this attempt came to insurmountable difficulties, the early Romantics doubted the very need of a philosophical first principle in philosophy, but not returning to Kant without objections. This incompleteness is one of the most basic characteristics of Schlegel’s philosophy and his choice of the fragmentary style, his aversion to the closeness of the system and his irony help towards this end. All of them are also correlated with his antifoundationalism. In this vein Rush proposes the term bifurcated global regulativism to show both the influence and the divergence of Schlegel from his Kantian heritage. According to Kant we have two kinds of concepts, the concepts of the understanding, which he calls categories, and the concepts of reason which he calls ideas. The ideas of the pure reason are regulative, but Kant needed the ones of the practical reason to be constitutive, to accommodate the idea of freedom. He tried to solve this demand of his, that ideas become immanent and constitutive, developing his theory of schematism and the Typic, according to Firchow.

In Rush’s reading Schlegel took parts with this Kantian conclusion and tried to radicalize it, making regulativism global. Rush writes: “Bifurcated global regulativism is the view that: (1) one should always for purposes of constant criticism attempt to extend the ambit of the claim that all there is are merely regulative principles, even in these domains that seem well-settled as to their constitutive principles and (2) within the target domains structured by concepts that emerge from historical processes and involve practical evaluation, it is settled that all possible principles are

³² Ibid., 177.

merely regulative”³³. This can also be supported by the Athenaeum fragment 121, which links ideas with irony, and in the beginning reads “An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual interchange of two conflicting thoughts”³⁴. As Firchow claims Schlegel has a more Kantian than Platonic conception of idea. Rush’s definition also highlights the importance of historicism for Schlegel and his interest primarily in the “domain of human values”³⁵.

The subject is also taken to be a regulative and not a constitutive principle for our experience according to the Romantics. Schlegel’s position is expressed in his view that Fichte’s subjectivist philosophy was not in a position to account for the objectivity of the real world. On the contrary Schlegel pushed for a philosophical unity of the realism of Spinoza and the idealism of Fichte considering consciousness and the infinite to be the two poles of reality³⁶. This unity is represented by the absolute and it is never achieved by human reason but only, infinitely, approximated. But the absolute is not to be formulated as a Kantian thing-in-itself, one that we cannot know anything about. Instead we can always try to know it, albeit not always via our reasoning abilities but, as the Romantics had it, through the works of art. According to Frank (2014) this absolute unity can be taken to refer to Being in its existential and not its predicative sense, something that was already implied from Hölderlin when he referred to self-consciousness as a divisive act, therefore not allowing reflectivity to have access to the absolute. The absolute can be taken to be the unconditioned, the unity that remains above all restraints and conditions of Knowledge. Because of its basically non-discursive structure it is easy to find non-linguistic ways to address it and to approximate it. But Schlegel’s irony is an attempt of discursive approximation to the absolute. We can say that this paradoxical form of a discursivity

³³ Ibid., 53.

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Ibid., 53.

³⁶ Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel and the emergence of Romantic Philosophy*, *ibid.*, 82.

that undermines language, speech, at the same time as it is articulated in it is very important and indeed ubiquitous for Schlegel.

Another interesting and similar aspect is the ambiguity that Schlegel had towards the notion of philosophical system. This attitude can be best captured by the Athenaeum fragment 53 that reads as follows: “It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to combine the two”³⁷. Firchow characteristically notes “Fragmentation is the concept by which Schlegel tried to conceive of this inevitable individualization or singularization in the becoming real of the absolute”³⁸. So we can see here that the reasons for which Schlegel opts for the fragmentary genre are not exclusive and perhaps not primarily aesthetic, but rather of a metaphysical nature, pertaining to his understanding of the absolute and its correct representation. Schlegel’s own conception of a philosophical system is rather away of being a standard definition of the system, since, trying to move away from the first principles, he accepts the term system only if it fulfills one basic condition to be an organic totality; this condition is the reciprocal proof (*wechselerweis*).

Schlegel was preoccupied by the fear that philosophy might have been assumed to be a timeless and lifeless subject, reduced only to mathematics and logic. We can approach this issue also as an attempt to further radicalize the Kantian critique as we show above; in his allotted primacy to regulative reason, we show Schlegel’s metaphysical presuppositions of anti-foundationalism. But his anti-foundationalism has two more expressions, the historical and the social one. It is documented that Schlegel’s aversion both to Kantianism and Fichte was partly because their systems were unhistorical or not historical enough, in the case of Kant. Instead, Schlegel’s desire to provide a critique of the critical philosophy prompts him to adopt a historical framework in order to understand the philosophical systems of his time. Rush notes that for

³⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, op. cit. 24.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xxix.

Schlegel “Language need not be a vehicle of information or be standardly communicative”³⁹ but rather there is a surge of social meaning that can never be fully exhaustible at the conscious level, but operates at the subconscious, pre-discursive one.

Frederic writes “...Schlegel’s program closely approximates Socrates”⁴⁰ but also radicalizes it since “Ignorance turn over into the highest wisdom...This radicalization involves not just declaring ignorance, but actively cultivating a state of ‘unknowing’ (*Nichtwissen*) by – in a manner similar to a Zen koan – confronting us with incomprehensibility”⁴¹. This ignorance demarcates our human limitations, an idea that Socrates was also putting out as we show in the first chapter, and produces a feeling of “astonishment in the face of the infinite...”⁴² as Frederick puts it. Schlegel ultimately continued the line of thinking that we find in the Socratic irony, distinctive as it emerges through the platonic texts, of which Schlegel was an ardent reader; he also as we saw adjusted it to the philosophical problems of post-Kantianism, arriving to his own post-Kantian ironic philosophy.

One of the clearest expositions of Hegel’s ideas on the matter of irony is provided in his *Aesthetics*, where he devotes a chapter on the issue. He is clear to attribute irony to and a lot of the conceptions that were formed and surrounded irony come from these remarks of Hegel. First of all, the attribution of irony to a Fichtean philosophical basis has as a consequence the view that irony is highly subjectivistic, and from there the road to characterize it as whimsical is not far away. Indeed, Hegel goes on to say that the ego in irony is creating its own world and denies any objective reality to anything in it, having the power to assert and destroy by its own will. When considering the phenomenon of irony turning against itself, Hegel finds that it borders with the comic, for which he has a more positive opinion, but claims that we, nevertheless, need to

³⁹ Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel and Kierkegaard*, *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁰ Samuel Frederick, “Astonished thought: Friedrich Schlegel’s appropriation of Socratic Irony”, in *Brill’s companion to the reception of Socrates*, edited by Christopher Moore, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 744.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 745.

distinguish between the two. Whereas the nullity in irony extends to the personal character itself, indeed it is the ironist herself that absolutely negates everything, in the comic it is restricted to the matter at hand.

Frederic Beiser has long argued for the view that Hegel and the Romantics should be examined under the same group of objective idealism as opposed to the subjective idealism of Kant and Fichte. This view is most fully challenged by Manfred Frank (2003) who states the clear distinction between the Romantics and Hegel. One of the most salient differences between Schlegel and Hegel, taken here to be the two most important philosophical figures of Romanticism and Idealism respectively, has to do with the transparency of the Absolute. Regarding the concept of irony, one needs to highlight the discursive character that it has, a character that turns it mostly into a rational concept rather than an intuitive one. Nevertheless of course irony retains the possibility and the necessity of intuition, since it always leaves some non-discursive residue to be wanted.

In terms of irony then, the more fruitful way to approach the similarities and differences of Hegel and Schlegel in particular is through their respective use of dialectics. As Fred Rush brushstrokes correctly the main difference between the two, “Hegelian dialectic dictates conditions for its own systematic closure; Schlegel’s ironic dialectic does precisely the opposite, specifying systematically constrains on non-closure”⁴³. The ironic dialectic of Schlegel hinges on the fact that is an intersubjective form, closely to the Socratic kind and the dialogical form, whereas Hegel’s dialectic are foremost an intrasubjective form, centered around consciousness and self-consciousness, and thus exceeding the Platonic variant and diminishing thus the importance of irony within it.

⁴³ Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel and Kierkegaard*, *ibid.*, 10.

. Both the experiential aspect of *Phenomenology* and the need of the Spirit to progress and to overcome (*aufheben*) the contradiction elevate for Hegel the assertoric element in the dialectics. Rush notes "...while it is true that the terms in a dialectical contradiction for Hegel are not determinate enough when judged against the background of the entire progression of such terms given by the complete series of forms of consciousness or Concepts to stand in a classically conceived relation of logical contradiction, the striving for determination in the local context of a form of consciousness (and the *relative* determination of the terms internal to that domain) is an indispensable part of Hegel's conception of *Geist's* experience of its dialectical path"⁴⁴. And it is exactly this determination that Hegel denies to the ironic dialectics claiming that it is solely focused on negation and therefore irony is absolute negativity and not able to account for the progression of the Spirit. In other words, the overcoming of determination, which for Hegel also involves not only the notion of abolish but also the notion of preserve⁴⁵, cannot be served by irony, because it is solely focused on the destruction side of the process.

Through logic reason does not need to wait for the maturity of reality to grasp its rational essence, rather it can see it from a vantage point that is not offered to the *Phenomenology* and to consciousness that strive within history for their realization. These two points in Hegel's system, the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*, although they are intrinsically connected, they nevertheless provide the necessary tension that results in contradiction and the sublation of it. They also resemble the affirming and the distancing points in the ironic dialectics, since through logic a kind of eternal affirmation is guaranteed and through the experiential dimension of being in the world, of *phenomenology*, the distancing of contradiction will always be the case. Yet there is one main point of difference, namely that Hegel's conception of reason provides us with insight of the workings of the Spirit and at the end with Absolute knowledge, whereas in the ironic case

⁴⁴ Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel and Kierkegaard*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 160.

⁴⁵ Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1992), 283.

we are left only with an intuitive approximation of the Absolute, since we can never grasp it completely.

Hegel understands Socrates as a union of the naturally objective and the subjective and he sees his *daimonion* as a form of unconsciousness. He notes “The daimon is still the unconscious, the external that decides; yet it is also something subjective”⁴⁶. That picture of Socratic dialogue as not yet fully self-conscious attempt of Spirit to know itself is consistent with the historical progression that Hegel is describing of course but leaves on the other hand irony as a mere means and not ends of Socrates. It is consistent only if the perfect knowability of the infinite is possible, only if the Absolute is transparent as Hegel of course claims. It requires a move to a positive dialectics one that moves away from the negative side and as Hegel complains in his *Logic* if someone is fixated on the negative side “... the result is only the commonplace that reason is incapable of knowing the infinite – a peculiar result indeed, for it says that, since the infinite is what is rational, reason is not capable of cognizing the rational”⁴⁷.

Søren Kierkegaard is considered a prominent figure in the history of irony, not only because his dissertation – *The Concept of Irony, with continual reference to Socrates* – is a fundamental text in the history of the concept, but because his overall work is usually taken to be indebted to irony and to see it more positively than Hegel used to do. Of course his first book is in a way also detached from Hegel, but it still deploys Hegelian terminology, ironically or not is an open question in scholarship. Kierkegaard’s dissertation is usually disregarded as a work that doesn’t have much relevance with his later writings. According to Ulrika Carlsson (2021), the reasons for disregarding the CI are many but the most important is that “...the master himself is taken to have

⁴⁶ Quoted in Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with continual reference to Socrates*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 164.

⁴⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, edited and translated by George di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), 35.

disavowed the work by excluding it, in *the Point of View for My Work as an Author*, from a list of books comprising what he there called, with official overtones ‘my authorship’⁴⁸.

The existential aspect of Kierkegaard’s thought was already apparent in the CI. In his dissertation he distinguishes, as many other authors on irony have done before or after him, between verbal irony and another kind that has been called either standpoint of irony (Muecke 2009) or existential irony (Cross 2006), and he notes “Irony *sensu eminentiori* is directed not against this or that particular existing entity but against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions...It is not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence that it contemplates *sub specie ironiae* [under the aspect of irony]. To this extent we see the correctness of Hegel’s view of irony as infinite absolute negativity”⁴⁹. Kierkegaard refers in the *Postscript* to three spheres of existence and as Kevin Newmark(2012) notes in relation to these and to Hegel “...[Kierkegaard] also understood, if we can still use that word in this sense, that there was something else – that he called existence – that always prevented the systematic thrust of the Hegelian dialectic from fulfilling itself and achieving closure without remainder...he also insisted upon the subjective truth that was a necessary corollary of actual existence, for even objective truth has to enter existence, if it is to occur at all. The vehicle by which truth enters existence, Kierkegaard called the subject”⁵⁰. Indeed, this existential vein managed to reinvigorate irony within philosophy after Hegel.

Passion is also to be found at the core of another imminent existential concept that of authenticity. Jacob Golomb formulates this relation as follows “His [Kierkegaard’s] formula is simple: passion + sincerity = authenticity”⁵¹ and goes on to link indirect communication as a

⁴⁸ Urlika Carlsson, *Kierkegaard and Philosophical Eros: between Ironic Reflection and Aesthetic Meaning*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2021), 4.

⁴⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with continual reference to Socrates*, *ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁰ Kevin Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: from Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 70. Emphasis in the original

⁵¹ Jacob Golomb, “Kierkegaard’s ironic ladder to authentic faith”, *Philosophy of Religion* 32, (1991): 66.

means that Kierkegaard employed to entice his readers into being more passionate and sincere and thus authentic. Indirect communication can be taken as a genus that also involves irony as a species, as it also does the pseudonymous writings of Kierkegaard's work. Golomb states that indirect communication for Kierkegaard is neither only semantic, meaning that his faith cannot be stated explicitly therefore his meaning must be indirect, nor just pragmatic, in the sense that his aim is not an interpretation from the part of the reader but an action, but rather "For Kierkegaard the 'what' (semantics) and the 'what for' (pragmatics) are dialectically related, eliminating such a dichotomy"⁵². Such a conclusion seems to do justice not just to Kierkegaard's intentions but also to his conception of irony being not only verbal (semantics) but also a standpoint (pragmatics).

The spheres of existence are the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious, and between them can be found two border zones, irony and humor, which designate a certain lingering between spheres and can also accommodate the existence of particular persons within them. Irony is taken more usually as a border zone between the aesthetic and the ethical spheres. The aesthetic sphere is characterized also as the sphere of immediacy, where the person that lies in it relies only on his sensual experiences. The reflective aesthete is not then an ironist because, whereas he can achieve a sort of reflective distance from the world around him, he does not distance himself from himself and does not take responsibility for his actions, succumbing to a form of despair. On the other hand, the characteristic of the ethical sphere is exactly the responsibility one needs to take towards himself. The place of the ironist is between the two spheres, she distances herself enough from her own subjectivity to be able to see that nothing is important and substantive to her but at the same time she also sees the ethical commitment, but does not want, she does not choose one might say, to participate in it. What differentiates controlled or mastered irony is its relation to actuality, is the fact that it is focused on the actual and not the possible, these terms meaning in Kierkegaard that emphasis should be put in existence over speculative thinking. The ethical

⁵² Ibid., 65.

sphere which is taken to be modeled along the lines of the universalistic categorical imperative of Kant ends up not allowing for a degree of authenticity and that is why it is transcended to the religious one.

The importance of Kierkegaard's existential philosophy for the genealogy of irony that this thesis is surveying cannot be overstated. His initial closeness to Hegelianism helped to underlie 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, and reached well into the twentieth century thinking, up until the poststructuralists, who we will concentrate on in the next chapter. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's project remains distinct from the early romantics, although he might have come to appreciate some aspects of their thought, concerning irony, especially when he declares a grave danger in universal abstraction. The main point of difference with them is the fact that Kierkegaard sees the possibility of a relation with the Absolute that is constitutive, in opposition to the infinite longing of the Absolute of the romantics. His main point of difference with Hegel is that his relation of the absolute is not rational, but existential.

CHAPTER 3: POSTMODERN IRONY

In the third chapter we will examine what might be as a third instantiation of philosophical irony, namely the one in the postmodernist era. There are of course some preliminary distinctions that need to be made, since postmodernism as both a concept that demarcates a certain period and as a properly philosophical current is not well defined. The first to import the, until then to be found in the arts, term of postmodernism in philosophy was François Lyotard with his 1979 book “*The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*”. We will concentrate in two major figures of the movement, namely Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, although for the latter’s case a needed examination of the positions of Deleuze and Lyotard will need to take place as well. Richard Rorty is one of the few philosophers of that period to use explicitly the term irony to describe one of the main interests of his philosophy. As the main figure to advance deconstructive reading of texts, in the broader definition as a structure of difference, Derrida is also very close to Paul de Man who uses irony explicitly and for the latter, as we read in Behler, “Irony practically coincides with his notion of deconstruction...”⁵³, but at the same time he also emphasizes the philosophy of difference, which is a major locus for French postmodern philosophy.

Relativism is one of the biggest problems, if not so much for the postmodern thinkers that would perhaps be fast to reject it as a nonsensical accusation, then surely for the idea of irony. As

⁵³ Ibid., 102.

the example of tragic irony has shown, through these acts of mimesis irony points in a real, existing difference between forces that are conceived as opposites and create a contradiction. The common way of the philosophers of the modern period to address the issue of contradiction was by means of the dialectics. In the postmodern period and especially through the reading Deleuze offers on Nietzsche, dialectics are no longer considered appropriate to deal with these forces. As Deleuze notes “Nietzsche’s speculative teaching is as follows: becoming, multiplicity and chance do not contain any negation; difference is pure affirmation; return is the being of difference excluding the whole of the negative”⁵⁴. The meaning of these terms in Deleuze’s thought signify mostly his opposition to Hegelian abstractness rather than a dismissal of a play of force, and it is within such a play that irony can still find a place, albeit in a form less abstract and therefore more diffused.

Richard Rorty’s position in the metaphilosophical account of irony that we are trying to sketch out here is unique, not only because of the kind of irony that he defends, but mostly because of his philosophical tradition, that of the analytic school of philosophy, that puts him in this place. Rorty’s project is representative of his own intellectual development, as a naturalist and fascinated by the enlightenment philosopher that retains his ideals while he rejects representationalism that usually comes with the more common essentialist view of naturalist philosophers. Rorty’s emancipatory vision consists in freeing the humans from their need to be humbled in the face of a non-human Other, whether that would be a divine Other to be found in religion, or Nature or the thing-in-itself as other to be found in the natural sciences. But Rorty does not reject science, but rather takes it to be one vocabulary among others to describe reality, albeit the more effective one in current standards. Rorty is a neopragmatist, 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. As Brandom says, “Our relations to our

⁵⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson, (London: Continuum, 1983), 190.

environment are for Rorty purely causal ones, not relations of being *responsible* for the correctness of our claims to how things really are, or how things really are having *authority* over the correctness of our beliefs...In taking this line, Rorty insists that he is being more resolutely naturalistic than the fans of natural science among analytic philosophers”⁵⁵.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty is arguing that epistemology has become the first philosophy in the modern era and to achieve that, philosophers such as Locke, Descartes and Kant resorted to representationalism. For allowing philosophy to have as its new role edification rather than the old role as a judge of other cultural fields that was supported by epistemology, Rorty is relying on hermeneutics. He takes this field in a broad sense and not limited only to humanities or soft sciences, but rather juxtaposing it completely to epistemology he concludes that “Thus epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable. Hermeneutics is largely the struggle against this assumption”⁵⁶. To make his uses of the terms commensurable and incommensurable discourse more wide, Rorty is also taking support from the ideas of Thomas Kuhn about the periods of normal and abnormal science. In Rorty’s regard, “...hermeneutics is the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of a normal discourse – the attempt to make some sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it, and thereby to begin an epistemological account of it”⁵⁷. But he also claims that edification is “the inverse of hermeneutics”, a statement that according to Robert Piercey is baffling as it seems to juxtapose hermeneutics and edifying philosophy⁵⁸. This apparent contradiction in Rorty’s statement concerning hermeneutics and edification on the one and points to a more relaxed way of using the discipline of hermeneutics by him; on the other

⁵⁵ Robert Brandom, Introduction to *Rorty and his Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), xiv.

⁵⁶ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 316.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁵⁸ Robert Piercey, “Richard Rorty”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, edited by Niall Keane and Chris Lawn, (Chichester: Blackwell, 2016), 446-450.

hand though, it might be taken to signal a more ironic vein in which we should read edification, a view that is supported by the publication of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* a decade later.

His view is based in these three conceptions and shares the ideas of postmodern philosophers, especially regarding truth. 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 time⁵⁹. 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. The person that understands and accepts the contingency of his own final vocabulary is called ironist by Rorty⁶⁰. From this basic contingency, he goes on to argue, stems the contingency of the self as provided by the works of Freud, Nietzsche and Bloom, and also the contingency of liberal communities. Also, important and particular in Rorty's version is the strict divide between the private and the public spheres, a strictness that in fact allows him to endorse both liberalism and irony. For him irony is opposed to common sense, is an exclusively private matter and is based on the ability to redescribe, an ability that is commonly shared by novelists and theorists alike.

Rorty's irony faces various other critiques. One of this has to do with his appropriation and reading of other philosophers and methods and especially hermeneutics. The distinction between the private and public sphere also draws a lot of criticism and its defense on the face of this criticism is crucial for the liberal irony to be a philosophically viable option. Rorty's commitment in finishing the work of Enlightenment is another problematic point. On the one hand we have

⁵⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

seen that irony is in a certain respect coextensive with reason in the modernist formulation of at least the early German romantics, who also undertook as their task to defend enlightenment ideas from a blind leap of faith. On the other hand, such a commitment proves to be always in danger of closeness with a certain optimistic view of history. 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”⁶¹; 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.

These problems, the relationship between literature and philosophy, the legitimization of discourses, the paradoxical thinking of a decentered center, lie at the heart of the postmodernist project, and more specifically at the heart of Derrida’s thinking. 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. Derrida’s position is the crux of the matter: he cannot escape the culmination of metaphysics that the Hegelian system represents in the thought of Heidegger, but nevertheless he seeks to displace it radically through his conception of force and differ^{ance}. This displacement is happening with deconstructive reading of the texts with the aim to reveal the trace of the other in that reading, the other that is suppressed in the Hegelian system of “restricted economy”, as Derrida puts it, and which prompts Behler to make a first direct comparison with the Schlegelian fragment that states that is equally fatal for the mind to have and to not have a system.

⁶¹ibid., 90.

Karel Thein notes “In this sense, Derrida’s Socratic streak prevails...because the Socratic voice – not unlike the elenctic activity as such – cannot be appropriated to Plato’s, or any other, metaphysics”⁶². Metaphilosophical irony has as a salient characteristic the inability of a system to offer a complete closure, just as the need for such a system to always strive for one. According to Thein, Derrida is interesting not so much in the history as in the structure of philosophy and one of the principal aims of his theorizing is to understand the necessity of system building and of reason’s attempt to self-closure. He puts the point as such “...granted that Plato’s step beyond the historical Socrates is not *necessary* for making intelligible the latter’s insistence for the priority of definition or his search for self-knowledge, in what sense it is still a non-contingent that is *natural* for the human mind? Is this step not revelatory of the general structure of philosophy, where a Plato will lurk behind each Socrates”⁶³? And indeed in the case of Socrates and Plato this infinite striving towards the absolute, towards the limits of philosophy as Thein has it, might be explained in terms of a philosophical couple, how else is it to be explained in Hegel if not with the early German Romantics? Derrida on the other hand seems more self-conscious about these limits and their transgression. We also know that Derrida is not the first philosopher that took odds with the notion of sublation; Solger, who was in contact with Hegel, and before him Schlegel envisaged an ironic dialectics that was open and never closing, never allowing for the contradiction to be overcome. We can thus conclude that in respect with difference, Derrida shows more affinities with the ironic tradition, both in terms of his attitude towards the system and in his appreciation of the negative as an element that cannot be escaped but can also generate a positive result.

The topic of metaphor is important for Derrida and it might offer another point of convergence with the ironic tradition. According to Cliveux (2007) “One of the aims of deconstruction is to demonstrate the extent to which philosophical argument is organized and

⁶²Karel Thein, “Socratic Voices in Derrida’s Writing”, in *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Socrates*, edited by Christopher Moore, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 959-960.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 951. Emphasis in the original.

sometimes swayed or redirected by the aesthetic dimensions of language in which it is set...⁶⁴. But if one had to point to a rhetorical trope, a figure of speech, that can most evidently point to such an abstract negativity, it would be irony and not metaphor, at least in the Hegelian reading. What Derrida tries to show is that there is a certain such reading of metaphor, but there is also another meaning that renders metaphor as dangerous to philosophy as irony was taken to be by Hegel.

Derrida takes on the themes of negativity and silence, among others, in his paper on negative theology, where he is speaking about the connection between deconstruction and that field. 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.

We will try to expose further the relationship that deconstruction in general and also in the specific use of Derrida might have with romantic irony through the work of Christoph Menke and Paul de Man. Menke's main point is that art is the discourse par excellence to produce negativity. Deconstruction provides thus the realm of art with a sovereign power over all other discourses, in particular the metaphysical discourse of philosophy. What is important for us here is that the romantic reversal of Derrida – a reversal in terms of modernity – constitutes a position of continuity in terms of irony, from the romantics to Derrida and deconstruction more generally.

⁶⁴ Clive Cazeaux, *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy: From Kant to Derrida*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 49.

And secondly, the genealogical, more modern account of aesthetic negativity provided here by Menke, constitutes from its part a hermeneutic attempt to account for negativity and irony.

Paul de Man argued on irony in two of his essays the one called “The rhetoric of temporality” and the other one called “The concept of irony”. Both essays are concerned not just irony as a trope, but with the Schlegelian ‘irony of irony’, and they are apart from each other for some years which shows a progression of de Man’s thinking on the subject. De Man connects allegory with irony on the basis of a distancing temporality. The key for de Man lies in this conception of the self as a narration, one that although contains many negative moments it has nevertheless a systematic outlook that is guaranteed by the fact that it can be understood as a system of tropes. Irony enters into the picture through the image of the “*buffo*” that Schlegel uses, and it is taken to be the disruption of this narration of the self. In this aspect de Man differentiates himself from previous scholarship on irony – including his own paper - and meets one of the important topics of postmodernist thinkers, the death of the subject, or to put it less dramatically the self as a narration.

There is a nuanced critique of relativism that was advanced mainly from Christopher Norris and has as its prime target not deconstruction as such but other philosophers of postmodernism, as Rorty, Lyotard and Foucault. His main preoccupation is to save deconstruction as Derrida and de Man exercise it from the relativism accusation and also to address the origins of relativism in other thinkers. Norris takes both Derrida and de Man to address the aporias of the various discourses under a common, ironic, framework as opposed to the irony produced by incommensurability and relativism. The relationship between hermeneutics and deconstruction is more complicated in regard to irony, because of the ambiguity, the open possibility that both understanding and its opposite can also be the case. although hermeneutics can accommodate irony within their framework, nevertheless their emphasis falls on unity of meaning, community and conversation.

CHAPTER 4: Conclusions

The two concepts of subjectivity and irony are not coextensive, and to show this was 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.

But one does not need to opt for that option, because although it is viable up to a certain point, we do not need to coerce all opinions to conform to the philosophically ironic point of view. The philosophical concept of irony can act metaphilosophically because of certain presuppositions that it holds, presuppositions that are not addressed by the practical, art of living, approach: limit of knowledge and infinite striving for it; the acceptance of a limit of human knowledge, whereas at the same time to always try to

achieve more of it. The necessity of systems but acknowledgment of their historical contingency; this presupposition is connected to the first, since it postulates that no philosophical system can be final or exhaust all knowledge. On the same time, it takes for granted that philosophers will attempt at various times to provide an overarching construction of their ideas. The use of discursive reason to formulate what we intuit; irony accepts reason as a means of expression but at the same time stresses it to its limits and points to the residue of intuition that it leaves behind. Nevertheless, it does not lapse into a form of intuitive mysticism. Realism in terms of ontology of nature but acceptance of the subjectivist point of view; the ironist accepts the reality of natural entities, but also postulates that any entrance point to the being of these entities is constrained by his subjectivist point of view. And finally, the need for transcendence towards the absolute but also the necessity in remaining within human bounds. The necessity of taking a stance and also of subversion of that stance; when these necessities are conceptualized *simultaneously* and exemplified by the same person, then we can speak of an ironist, and when this is happening for a philosophical stance then we can speak for an ironist philosopher. These are metaphilosophical presuppositions that can act as traits for any philosophy to be ironic and to follow a tragical way of thinking.

We can now turn to another more specific problem, that of the question of progress in philosophy, which is a genuine metaphilosophical issue mainly posed by the analytical tradition. We tried to show that tragic thinking is akin to the ironic one and is well summarized by Menke as follows “Reason is dialectical because it makes mistakes it

cannot learn from”⁶⁵. The reason for this fact, Menke attributes it to Kant’s “deeply concealed sources in human reason”⁶⁶, a necessarily silent fountain of human knowledge that is also the source of irony. But if reason cannot learn from its own mistakes, then progress is actually unattainable. Indeed, metaphilosophical irony should claim that the possibility or not of progress in philosophy is a pseudo-problem, and the best we can achieve is a certain redescription, in the sense of Rorty, of the main problems in a different era. Rorty does not provide a structural reason for our limitation to redescription, since he does away with metaphysics altogether, but a metaphilosophical account of irony provides such an account, the opaque and silent absolute of knowledge that we always strive for but never reach. Thus, for a metaphilosophical, theoretical sort of irony, the notion of progress will be always nuanced. One possible such interpretation of progress is given by Rush who argues, contrasting the views of Hegel and Schlegel on the matter, that “Progress, in Schlegel’s terms, consists in bringing more and more of the conceptual background required for the meaning of claims into ironic purview; it is the growth of *the ironic ambit*”⁶⁷. This ironic notion of progress, however, does not necessarily amount to an eradication of the source of reason’s inability to learn, but only to an indefinite retreat of it from our view. The limit of human knowledge that plays a significant role from Socrates to Derrida, is the main reason why progress in the sense of closure cannot be accommodated within the metaphilosophical, ironic framework that we are surveying here.

⁶⁵ Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, transl. by Neil Solomon, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 102.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism: rereading Schlegel, Hegel and Kierkegaard*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 166.

A metaphilosophical irony should be in place to inform other fields, for example the philosophy of mental health. On that particular field many of our themes, such as the subject and language, are concentrated and they can be approached from two differing points of irony. The first would be the point of irony as an art of living approach, especially through the work of Richard Rorty and Jonathan Lear. Rorty's ironic pragmatism would compel him to take philosophy of mental health not as judge of the science itself, as he takes absolute distance from this epistemological thesis; consequently, it would welcome or even pave the way to approaches to mental health that are more humanistic as hermeneutical psychiatry, where he points in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. As far as Lear is concerned, his views on the practical side of irony are important for mental health studies. As he notes, based on the examples of Kierkegaard and Socrates, "What if this little disrupter [i.e., irony] is crucial to the human condition? in my opinion, irony is revealed neither by a majority vote nor by a glimpse of a transcendent idea, but by a grasp of what should matter when it comes to living a distinctively human life"⁶⁸. The distinctively humanistic vein in both these approaches needs to be mentioned and is of course related to the subjectivist approaches to irony.

But in the field of mental health there is also space for the more theoretical approach to irony, as mostly exemplified by Derrida's "Cogito and the History of Madness", which is a critical approach to Foucault's work on the same subject. The core disagreement of Derrida is that he deems impossible Foucault's try to articulate the history of madness outside of reason and language; impossible at least philosophically, if not historically. Derrida's argumentation follows the familiar lie that we surveyed in the

⁶⁸ Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), ix.

relevant chapter to conclude with the following “Due to this, crisis or oblivion perhaps is not an accident, but rather the destiny of speaking philosophy – the philosophy which lives only by imprisoning(sic) madness, but which would die as thought, and by a still worse violence, if a new speech did not at every instant liberate previous madness while enclosing, within itself, in its present existence, the madman of the day...one could say that the reign of finite thought can be established only on the basis of the more or less disguised internment, humiliation, fettering and mockery of the madman within us, of the madman who can the fool of the logos which is the father, master, king”⁶⁹. In this passage one can detect the, almost structural, modality of necessity that compels logos to violence in order to speak, a necessity that brings within it the realization of contingency, that is irony in historical terms, as it is necessity in philosophical ones.

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. It can both be constituted as an autonomous concept beyond subjectivity and language, while at the same time, can nourish relevant thinking on these subjects; and it can also provide meaningful insights to other fields of philosophy of particular sciences, such as prominently the philosophy of psychiatry or mental health.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: The university of Chicago Press, 1978), 61.

Principal contributions

- 1) This dissertation deviates from the standard reading of Socratic irony as a high, witty form of rationalism and instead takes his use of irony to be a way of undermining the era of reason that was prevalent in classical Athens, as exhibited by the presence of the Sophists and Socrates' relationship with them.
- 2) This dissertation also points to the structural necessities that might occur between ironic thinking and speculative thinking, situating therefore philosophical irony as a valid methodology of doing philosophy.
- 3) The dissertation makes the case that irony is opposed to relativism, in the same degree as it is opposed to overarching, foundational thinking.
- 4) The most fundamental contribution of the dissertation is that it treats irony as a metaphilosophical concept that might have implications in other, more specific, areas of philosophy. Furthermore, the dissertation examines the value of a metaphilosophy of irony to philosophical problems such as the system, progress, subjectivity and knowledge and areas as ethics, metaphysics, ontology and aesthetics.

Publications

Kalfopoulos Evangelos, “Socrates and Tragedy in respect to irony”, *Sofia Philosophical Review* xv, 1:2022

Kalfopoulos Evangelos, “Irony, fragmentation and urbanity”, *Sofia Philosophical Review*, forthcoming

Kalfopoulos Evangelos, “The possibility of the tragic”, *Filosofski Alternativi*, forthcoming

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