Kierkegaard As Incomplete Ironist

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Abstract
The prevalence of irony as both a rhetorical device and a boundary in the spheres of existence in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard raises the question of whether he can be considered an ironist according to his own understanding of what irony means. Kierkegaard was an ironist in that he used verbal irony and took a negative stance towards the religious and philosophical climate in which he wrote, and the methods and goals he embraced share similarities with those of the world-historical figure, an archetype manifested in Socrates. However, he was not an ironist according to his own criterion of infinite absolute negativity because he also had positive content to communicate and was motivated in his authorship by a life-view. His irony, ambiguous and paradoxical, was directed towards the sincere, non-ironic goal of communicating to the subjective individual. Therefore, he can be considered an ironist, if only an incomplete one.

For Søren Kierkegaard, irony is a crucial concept that appears at the beginning of his authorship and continues to find a place throughout it. More than a rhetorical device, irony becomes a way of life and a border between the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence. Kierkegaard regarded Socrates as an ironist, and Socrates’ understanding of his own spiritual calling establishes a paradigm that Kierkegaard’s sense of vocation echoes. Therefore, it is relevant to ask whether and to what extent he himself could be considered an ironist. I argue that although Kierkegaard exemplifies key characteristics of the ironist, he does not meet the criterion of infinite absolute negativity.

The Nature of Irony

Irony in Kierkegaard’s Writings
Kierkegaard uses the term “irony” to refer to multiple concepts: irony, in its most basic sense, is a rhetorical device; it also appears in his theory of the stages of existence as the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical spheres; and in its fullest meaning, irony is a way of life.
Irony as rhetorical device is ubiquitous in the authorship. At its core, irony is a contradiction between the internal and the external.\(^1\) “Ironic speech intends to convey the opposite of the literal meaning of what is said.”\(^2\) In his discussion of Kierkegaard’s irony, Andrew Cross uses the very basic example of a man in a rainstorm saying, “What lovely weather we’re having.”\(^3\) Obviously, the speaker’s inner intention contradicts the words he speaks to the outside world. While this sort of locution does meet the criteria for ironic speech, Kierkegaard regarded statements such as these as self-defeating and a weak form of irony. More truly ironic is the person who says something ambiguous and places the burden on the hearer to find meaning in the utterance. Kierkegaard noted that to speak in a direct, non-ironic way is to commit to what is said and become bound by one’s word. When speaking ironically, there is no such commitment and no risk to be taken in case the ideas one intends to communicate are inaccurate or misleading. For this reason, irony is liberating for the person who wants to introduce ideas and challenge others’ thoughts without actually being bound to one’s word.

Irony is not merely a rhetorical device; it is also part of the construct of the stages of existence. The realm of irony lies between the aesthetic and the ethical spheres. In this *confinium*—this boundary—one is no longer trapped in the aesthetic sphere with its limitations, but one has not entered the ethical sphere. In the first sphere, the aesthetic sphere, are those who are living immediately. The aesthete regards happiness and success in life as products of chance and has not taken steps to ratify her or his own agency and sense of self by making definite commitments to any of the possibilities she or he sees as available.\(^4\) Those in the ethical sphere have committed to the universally binding ethical code and affirmed their existence through making choices. Those living in between these spheres have recognized the futility of living in immediacy and may even intend to make a commitment but have not yet done so. Irony is a border, rather than a sphere itself, because the ironist has given up on her or his obsession with pleasure

\(^1\) Andrew Cross, “Neither Either Nor or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 127. Given Kierkegaard’s dislike of Hegel, it would be interesting to contrast irony, which implies that there is a contradiction between the internal and the external, with Hegel’s idea that the inner is the outer and vice versa.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid., 127.

\(^4\) See Cross’s analysis of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Ibid., 141-151.
and success according to society’s standards, standing in rejection of that sphere, but without replacing it or affirming anything. Thus, the ironist only negates. She or he does not have positive content to communicate. Kierkegaard uses the phrase “infinite absolute negativity” to communicate the totality of the ironic lifestyle. Nothing is exempt from the ironist’s disdain and detachment; nothing is done in earnest. Even the ironic lifestyle itself is recognized as a contradiction and is done without a sense of purpose.

Because irony is a confinium, it is not a place to stay forever and live one’s life. However, irony can become a way of life for those who persist in it and never advance to the ethical. An ironic person makes a habit of communicating through verbal irony and sets herself or himself up in opposition to society. She or he takes part in its practices and institutions, but not earnestly; it is all no more than a game. The same lack of sincerity and lack of commitment that characterize verbal irony characterize the ironist’s life as a whole.

The Person of the Ironist

The ironist, then, is a person who makes irony a way of life. Kierkegaard developed his ideas about such a character in The Concept of Irony; this type of person can play the role of world-historical figure and is typified by the quintessential ironist, Socrates. The world-historical figure’s place in history is analogous to the ironist’s place in the spheres, on the level of civilizations rather than individuals. The world-historical figure starts as an ironist, but instead of merely rejecting the aesthetic sphere in her or his own life without actually committing to the ethical, she or he rejects an entire society that exists in the aesthetic sphere and motivates change without being the one to introduce a new, superior system. Just as the ironist, on an individual level, realizes the despair endemic to the aesthetic sphere and can no longer live in immediacy, so the world-historical figure recognizes the futility of society’s current system and can no longer participate in it in earnest. Because of her or his efforts, society’s current system collapses in on itself—the logical end of its own dead-end principles—and a new system is introduced. However, the world-historical figure does not live to welcome the new system any more than the individual ironist welcomes the ethical; rather, the world-historical figure becomes a sacrifice that the old system consumes.

For Kierkegaard, the person of the world-historical figure found its most evident incarnation in Socrates. He understood the futility of his society in ancient Athens, but he did not attack it directly by either his words or his actions. Rather,
he set himself up as an ignorant inquirer and simply asked questions of those around him. His lines of questioning were supposed to help him discover the ethical, which he did not claim to know, and they exposed the inconsistencies and dead ends of his society. He did not have positive content to promote or teaching to introduce; he simply negated the presuppositions of those around him. Eventually, his city decided to put him to death and he allowed this because he was not in earnest about its institutions. Nonetheless, civilization was advanced because of his life and death. Because he rejected society—participating in it but not in earnest—because he negated the despair of society without claiming to know the ethical, and because he was sacrificed by his community, he exemplifies the character of the world-historical figure. Kierkegaard demonstrates a great deal of admiration for Socrates; therefore, it is relevant to ask to what degree he saw himself as following in his footsteps.

Kierkegaard as Ironist

Methods of Irony

Kierkegaard saw the effectiveness of the tools of irony and made use of them in his writings. Paradox and contradiction, and the curiosity and creativity they promote, feature prominently. His use of indirect communication, especially his wide collection of pseudonymous writings, demonstrates irony.

Kierkegaard loved paradoxes. The idea of a proposition and its apparent opposite working together to point to a greater truth is an intrinsically ironic one because of the ambiguity it creates. The “external”—the contradiction—is superseded by the “internal”—the truth or understanding to which it points. The reader knows she or he cannot accept both sides of the paradox, so a curiosity arises and she or he must undergo a struggle to arrive at the author’s meaning and attain understanding. This process engages the reader in a way that direct communication would not, emphasizing the subjective element of communication that Kierkegaard cherished and regarded as lacking in the philosophy of his day. The use of paradox and its attendant ambiguity is also ironic because for an author to make statements that seem to contradict is to stop short of committing to the meaning of either, just as any ambiguous statement removes the author’s commitment.

In the same way, the use of pseudonyms is an ironic device because the intended purpose and meaning is not identical to what is written: the internal and the external contradict. This effect is exaggerated by the development of
pseudonyms as entire characters, with separate thought patterns, desires, and levels of understanding distinct from those of Kierkegaard himself. Certainly, in the pseudonymous works he is not setting forth propositions for his readers to affirm (i.e., positive content) as much as forcing them to struggle with their own perspective on the way the world really is (i.e., negation).

*Purposes of Irony*

Kierkegaard chose to communicate with the tools of irony for several reasons. His goals included being a catalyst for change in the individual, adopting a stance of negativity towards prevalent philosophical systems, and provoking change in the contemporary social and religious culture. The single individual plays an important role in his thought process, and irony communicates to the individual. Because truth is something that must be chosen subjectively and appropriated existentially, it would have been ineffective to simply state his ideas directly and then let people examine or debate them as though they were an object to be handled. Rather, the use of paradox and pseudonyms engages the reader and dares her or him to come to a decision. Through the various voices, the reader learns about the same themes from a variety of angles and is forced to weigh the contradictory perspectives. One may even identify with one of the characters and thereby discover the futility of one’s own way of thinking and living. The contradiction between the internal and the external creates a highly nuanced, highly personal experience for the individual reader.

Kierkegaard’s communication is directed to the individual, but his purposes extend to the broader academic and theological climate in which he lived and wrote. Just as Socrates the world-historical figure was a midwife to the individual but a gadfly to Athens, so Kierkegaard became to Copenhagen. Having been educated in the theories of speculative philosophy and in the closely related theories of theology that were in vogue at the time, he rejected them as too objective and impersonal. That is, he adopted toward them a stance of negativity. In the style of the world-historical figure, he sought to show the futility inherent within the current system. He believed it had damaging effects on the individual and that it had done away with true Christianity. Just as Socrates did not claim to already live an ethical life, so Kierkegaard did not claim to be the only living example of true Christianity.
The Limits of Kierkegaard’s Irony

*Kierkegaard and the Ironic Confinium*

Since Kierkegaard borrowed irony’s tools and shared its purposes, was he an ironist? I argue that he was not an ironist in a complete sense. He did not exist in the ironic *confinium* and did not embrace infinite absolute negativity. The ironic *confinium* occurs early in the stages of existence, since the aesthetic is the starting sphere and irony succeeds it. Within Kierkegaard’s theory of the stages, those in the lower spheres have no knowledge of the higher spheres but those in the higher spheres understand the lower spheres better than those who are in them. For example, *Either/Or* is written from the contradictory perspectives of A the Aesthete and Judge William, who exemplifies the ethical. Judge William is ostensibly unaware of the religious sphere above him and does not seem to fully grasp the despair of his own ethical sphere, but he understands the aesthetic sphere better than A does and can warn him about its despair. If Kierkegaard had been in the ironic *confinium*, at a level of maturity surpassing that of A but beneath that of Judge William, he would not have understood the ethical and religious spheres and the humorous *confinium*, which would have been beyond him. However, even though he does not claim to have arrived at Religiousness B, the highest sphere, the fact that he wrote such highly articulate and nuanced works on the spheres from the viewpoints attained by those across the spectrum demonstrates that he did understand them. Therefore, he could not have been in the ironic *confinium* himself.

*Rejection of Infinite Absolute Negativity*

If Kierkegaard had been completely ironic, he would have embraced infinite absolute negativity. Some critics have argued that he did; Roger Poole argues that Kierkegaard worked out for himself theories of language that were not put into writing until over a century later by Derrida. He regards Kierkegaard not as communicating his own positive content, but as simply negating the Hegelians and others. According to Poole, Kierkegaard’s writing, while it does have meanings, does not have a meaning; it is nonreferential. Not only does it fail to communicate any one particular view, it is written deliberately to “make

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6. Ibid.
the establishment of a single interpretation impossible.” If Poole is correct, then Kierkegaard would epitomize the ironic: refraining from communicating any positive content, only negating in a satiric manner, and especially using words (in his case, Hegelian terms) in insincere ways to show their meaninglessness. These would be key features of the ironic way of life. However, other Kierkegaard scholars, such as C. Stephen Evans and Mark Tietjen, have criticized Poole for assuming that irony precludes an intended meaning; Evans points out that Poole “never considers the possibility that Kierkegaard could have communicated serious content and meaning through ironical and humorous literary form.” In From the Papers of One Still Living, Kierkegaard criticized his contemporary Hans Christian Andersen for having no life-view, and he emphasizes that an author must have a life-view and something worth communicating. This indicates that Kierkegaard valued having positive content and not mere negation, and it is only reasonable to infer that he would apply this standard to himself. As an author, he had a definite sense of purpose and calling motivated by positive beliefs; lack of a life-view is not an accurate criticism of him. In the works in which he explained the motivation and approaches behind his authorship, he demonstrated that he had positive content to communicate and certainly his own testimony counts for something. Because there were messages he intended to communicate, the negativity he did use did not amount to infinite absolute negativity; that is, his writing was done in the earnestness that precludes total negativity and irony.

Because Kierkegaard was not living in the ironic sphere and because he did not attain nor aspire to infinite absolute negativity, he cannot be considered an ironist in a complete sense. Nonetheless, he did make use of the tools of irony quite effectively and he did share some of the purposes of the world-historical figure and of his inspiration, Socrates. Therefore, he was an ironist, but only incompletely.

The role of Kierkegaard as incomplete ironist may have two implications for interpretation of his work. First, it points to his opposition to the cultural, religious, and philosophical climate in which he lived. Not only did the content of his authorship reject the ideas in vogue, its very form represents a quite different way of thinking and communicating, underscoring the contrast. Second, it in itself constitutes a paradox of which he himself was no doubt aware: he was ironically

7. Ibid., 7.

tearing down while also positively edifying or “up-building,” or wounding in order to heal. In his context, being an incomplete ironist is a very good role. He does not leave the reader in non-commitment or skepticism with a dismantled belief system; he imparts knowledge, meaning, and even spiritual change using unexpected methods. That he could both sharply dismantle and delicately cultivate the beliefs and hearts of his readers is evidence of the range of passions with which he wrote and lived. He would have had it no other way.

References


