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PRZEMYSŁAW BURSZTYKA
ORCID: 0000-0003-4978-198X
University of Warsaw

RANDALL E. AUXIER
ORCID: 0000-0003-1121-1471
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

"A Necessary Shadow of Being": Irony, Imagination, and Personal Identity

Abstract: This is the second of the essays on the existential-ontological ground of otherness, in which we see this ground as essentially entwined with our personhood and our personal identities. We analyze irony as both a "mechanism" of constituting these very identities and as an act revealing their self-altering nature. Irony in our view — informed by Kierkegaard, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis — is a subtle existential strategy by means of which subjectiv*ity* (not "the subject") not only asserts itself, but also, and much more importantly, initiates an open-ended process of self-actualization and self-formation. Irony, as we present it, is at once a form of defensive response against the "absolute" character of reality and comparably "absolutist" aspirations of an individual. Such responses open up a space of negotiation between and among these forces, in their creative interplay. In doing so the responses can be as constitutive for subjectivity as they can be disruptive. The disruption does not only undermine the (apparently) unshakeable forms of our self-understanding. More radically, the disruption puts on the stage our "alternative identities," those with which we have to confront ourselves, whether in the negative mode of repression, or in the acts of positive, or even playful, recognition. In this way irony reveals and articulates otherness in the very heart of subjectivity.

Keywords: irony, imagination, subjectivity, personal identity, otherness, possibility, subjunction, Kierkegaard, psychoanalysis

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Introduction

The aim of our paper is to provide a preliminary answer to the following question: what role does irony play, and what role can it play, in the constituting of an (at least relatively unified) individual identity? And how, while playing this role, is such an identity related to imagination? May we create it by some imaginative process? Can it be created apart from such? If we may create identity in this way, what is its mode of existing? The leading motive of our investigation is the dubious character of human identity (or to put it in a slightly different idiom, of a unified Selfhood), which is always, it seems, accompanied by and related to some dark, shadowy sphere.[1] It is precisely this highly ambiguous accompaniment which at the same time can play the crucial role in the process of constitution of human self-identity, and can as well disrupt it, leading to its disintegration.

Irony and History

As is well known, the term "irony" is derived from the ancient Greek *eirōneia* and *eirōn* which usually are translated as deception, dissembling, dissimulation. It comes into our philosophical thinking from a moment, somewhat incidental to Aristotle's thinking, when he defines irony as an extreme in contrast to the truthful person (ἀληθευτικὸς). In contrasting truthfulness with irony, Aristotle says, "Mock-modest people, who understate things, seem more attractive in character

[1] This idea has, of course, a rich literary history. Many authors, ancient and modern, have posited "the double" (which has the same route a "doubt" and "dubious") or even "the twin." The latter is important and requires a slight elaboration — why this deep-rooted mythology of twinning? The notion reaching into pre-history of the "Age of Gemini" in the Great Year of ancient astrology, the sidereal cycle of the precession of the earth's axes in cycles of 25,800 years, was certainly known and widely written about among the ancient Greeks (Hipparchus documented the phenomenon), but how far back humans understood the precession in some form is widely debated. Many reputable scholars believe that humans had noticed and had begun to create stories about the zenith and decline of Gemini (4500 BC) long before the rise of the bull religions associated with the dawning of the "Age of Taurus" came to near eastern religion. The Epic of Gilgamesh may be read as a story of twins, a theme found in the imaginative creations of human culture from the earliest times. The survival of the twin theme through the Ages of Taurus and Aries (Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus, Castor and Polux, Jacob and Esau), and into the Age of Pisces, includes stories of Jesus of Nazareth as a twin and even appears in the New Testament in the identification of the disciple Thomas as "the twin." The theme is picked up and elaborated in a number of gnostic Christian writings. There is an entire ancient literature of Jesus as a twin and the same urge toward a development holds in imagination for nearly every intense identity form in imaginative literature of our time, from Poe and Dostoevsky and Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde, to Thomas Tryon's "other" and up to Umberto Eco, whose Simone Simonini suspects he has a double, and *has* one, which is identical with himself. Intense identity invites doubling. The duplication of the self is a permanent and structural feature of imagining identity, as a matter of history, and perhaps of necessity, as we shall show. The doubling even reaches to the "counter-earth" postulate of Philolaus, the shadow of the spheric self of our "world soul" in ancient cosmology. Our concern is not whether any such beings ever existed or were well-founded empirically, but with a predictable and ineradicable structure of imagination as it encounters self and identity. What comes here almost immediately to one's mind is the Freudian account of "the uncanny" — see our brief remark in note 24.

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[than boastful people]; for they are thought to speak not for gain but to avoid parade; and here too it is qualities which bring reputation that they disclaim, as Socrates used to do."[2] This quick example was the origin of what we now call "Socratic irony," and it attests not only that Plato portrayed Socrates as an ironist, but that he really was so (since Aristotle would know by more than just Plato's depictions).[3] Is this irony duplicity? Does it threaten identity?

This is only the beginning of the poor reputation irony suffers at the hands of the philosophical tradition. We might prefer the ironist to the boaster, but Aristotle prefers appropriate self-valuation to such irony. For Aristotle's writings, the term is usually translated straightforwardly as "irony," when used in relation to rhetoric. In speaking of which things make an audience angry, he says, for example, "And [the audience is angry] with those who employ irony, when they themselves are in earnest; [25] for irony shows contempt."[4] Whether we moderns would be so angered is a fair question, but the fact that ancient audiences were, reportedly, helps us understand Socrates's ultimate end. Here we have an important qualification, however, since Aristotle leaves open whether one might use irony constructively when earnestness is not *expected* by one's audience.

The Modern Take on Irony

Some philosophers who have been sympathetic to irony have seized upon this opening and have elevated irony to a constructive role in both ethics and ontology. Such was the view of Vico, who allowed only four constructive tropes at the base of human consciousness (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, from which the whole human world is built).[5] He places metaphor at the basis, and then metonymy and synecdoche are tropes of substitution, something "stands for" something else, *non*-identical. These three, Vico says, may be either consciously or unconsciously employed in our constructive thought and action, especially the problematic metonymy of cause and effect, which leads so many scientists and other rationalists to dogmatism. But *irony*, according to Vico, is the trope that can be employed only with the aid of reflection. As he says, "irony certainly could not have begun until the [historical] period of reflection, because it is fashioned

[2] Artistotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. W.D. Ross, Book 4, ch. 7 (1127b24–29), https://www.mikrosapoplous.gr/aristotle/nicom4e.htm (accessed: 9.07.2018).

[3] See also P.W. Gooch, "Socratic Irony and Aristotle's *Eiron*: Some Puzzles," *Phoenix* 41 [2] (Summer 1987), pp. 95–104.

[4] Aristotle, "Rhetoric," Book 2, ch. 2, [in:] *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 22, transl. J.H. Freese, Cambridge-London 1926, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0060:book=2:chapter=2 (accessed: 23.09.2022).

[5] The term "trope" is derived from the Greek noun *tropos* — "turn, direction, way or shape" and verb *trepein* — "to turn, to direct, to alter, to change." Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* states that irony is *nothing but* a trope; it is "a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning," N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton 1957, p. 40. One wonders whether Frye's idea may imply that irony really could be unconscious.

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of falsehood by dint of a reflection which wears the mask of truth."[6] There is no *un*reflective irony, for Vico, since the *distance* from a commitment to telling the truth is a principle (that is, starting place) of its kind of construction.[7]

Hegel and His Age

This defense of irony (if such it is) really begins the modern discussion in which we are mainly interested. Some philosophers, such as Hegel, vigorously oppose a view like Vico's. Hegel says, "insofar as irony is treated as a form of art, it does not content itself with conferring artistic shape upon the life and particular individuality of the artist. [...] The ironical, as 'genial' individuality, consists in the self-annihilation of what is noble, great, and excellent."[8] For the noble or elevated imagination, irony is a cheap trick, a duplicity of mind destined to be eliminated and nullified in the journey of self-consciousness to absolute truth. Irony does not merit even the status of a usefully labouring negation. It is a nullity in its form, not a productive antithesis.

This complicated assertion really poses a version of the problem in which we are interested here. *Irony*, in Hegel's sense (which subsumes Vico's idea) has a bad habit of not knowing when enough is enough. If we bring what is genuinely noble under an ironic gaze, we actually reduce both the object *and ourselves* to a less humane condition. We bring to naught *all we have*, in terms of time or meaning. When we are being *merely* ironical, using reflection as a wasteful economy of surplus meaning, we deny to others, as well as those who came before us in history and who will come later, any opportunity of reading our viewpoint as a maturing expression of Objective spirit, as contributors to what is noble and best in us, or so a Hegelian will insist. This view clearly reinforces and deepens the problem Aristotle noticed about contextual expectation of earnestness. Hegel has brought Aristotle's objection into a deep relation with self, others, history, the future, and Objective spirit. There are matters about which we really must be in earnest, Hegel is asserting.

But, as Hegel says, that failure of earnestness is just the problem with irony. It is not *comedy*, which *can* ennoble us. He continues:

> The comic must be limited to bringing to naught what is in itself null, a false and self-contradictory phenomenon; for instance, a whim, a perversity, a particular caprice, set over against a mighty passion; or even a supposed reliable principle or rigid maxim may be shown to be null. But it is quite another thing when what is in reality moral and true... exhibits itself as null in an individual and by his means. [...] In this distinction between the ironical and the comic it is therefore an essential question of what import is that which is brought to nothing.[9]

So, anything is *susceptible* to ironic treatment, no matter how solemn, which might even be done artfully, but *not* everything is comic — that is, can really be

[6] G. Vico, *The New Science*, transl. T.G. Bergin, M. Fisch, Ithaca 1968, para. 408.

[7] See G. Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, transl. G.W. Pinton, A.W. Shippee, Amsterdam 1996, chs. 39–46, pp. 137–150.

[8] G.W.F. Hegel, *G.W.F. Hegel on Art, Religion, Philosophy*, J.G. Gray (ed.), New York 1970, p. 100.

[9] Ibidem, p. 101.

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made into comedy. Genuine comedy, on this view, aims only at what is already a nullity, even when many people may *think* it is important. Obviously Kierkegaard will have a different view, as we shall see. But for Hegel, this failure of earnestness might be concealed, as well as being a form of bad infinity, that is, it presents itself as comedy but is actually a hidden annihilation of the possibility of truth. It is worth noting that Hegel's account does not require an individual or even collective intention to turn away from truth or to dissemble. Duplicity, conscious doubleness, is not a requirement of irony. Hence, we may be unconsciously ironic, for Hegel, in apparent tension with Vico's insistence that irony must be reflective. So which one of them is right? Perhaps both, in a way, with the Vichian ironist building on figural meaning, while the Hegelian ironist is collapsed into literal opposition to the possibility of truth. Thus do we seek to put a point on our problem.

The Meaning of Irony in General

Irony would be, then, at a minimum, a turning away, a distance, perhaps even a deviation between literal and figural meaning. Such a divergence may also be discerned between our intentions and their articulation.[10] One can also say that the etymology of the word "irony," as well as its meaning, seems to suggest that the essence of irony is concealment and secretiveness, either from others or from ourselves, but can it be both? Either way it is a permanent movement of (self-) transcending, perhaps also of hubris, according to its critics. Vico by contrast regards it as something divine.[11] But in any case, it cannot be *explained*. Nor can we easily halt ourselves in the midst of being ironic, becoming suddenly earnest, and explain our "true" meaning and its distance from truth. Nothing is further from genuine irony than the explained irony, and the distance is perhaps the measure of our initial failure of earnestness. Nothing is further from irony itself than talking about or lecturing on irony. The premonition of this difficulty was had by Friedrich Schlegel while stating: "To a person who hasn't got [irony], it will remain a riddle even after it is openly confessed."[12]

We find ourselves neither Hegelian nor Vichian in considering irony. Perhaps our view benefits from the experience of an extra century or two. When irony is understood and explained, at the same moment it ceases to be itself, it opposes itself, nullifies itself. This far (at least) we will travel with Hegel. But irony, literal or figurative, does not articulate *itself*, as we have said. It also does not articulate anything else, in spite of formal intention. (This deficiency will make a phenomenology difficult, but not impossible; we will provide an account of such formal intention later in this essay.) It has no positive content, according to its critics, and

[10] The term "articulation" is not used technically here, but it might be honed in the sense found in, for example, the adaptation of image to meaning through articulation in R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, transl. A. Lavers, C. Smith, New York 1967, pp. 38–39.

[11] G. Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 145.

[12] F. Schlegel, *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, transl. and with intro. by P. Firchow, Minneapolis 1971, p. 155.

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its form is duplicitous, even to its defenders (for example, Rorty). Yet still, it is, at a minimum, *about* something. Intention remains a formal requirement.

Irony arises as (or in) the fundamental tension: between sense and nonsense, between order and chaos, between rationality and madness. It is the moment of disruption of the flow of understanding, the moment of suspension of any meaning, where the latter appears as no longer transparent and self-justified, no longer reliable. Irony disrupts the course of understanding by confronting subjectivity with the possibility of understanding and experiencing *otherwise*. This "otherwise" does not indicate a simple change of perspective but rather of confrontation, a confrontation with what belongs to the field of experience and what is somehow alien to that field. In the sphere of subjective (or intersubjective) possession, the content of our understanding now appears alien and strange or even chaotic and meaningless. We are not ourselves in the moment of irony, at least not in any simple way.

The Necessary Shadow

As such, the ironic situation is at one and the same time liberating and marked by not just a distanciation, but by an irremediable sort of distance, extending even to a radical alienation or de-familiarization. And as such irony cannot be assimilated or appropriated by means of what is simply at hand, always already available categories — to which it appears either in purely negative form, as nothing representable, as no-thing, or in the form of mere, ephemeral possibilities of which one can obviously make no particular use.[13] Perhaps this characteristic is what led Vico to believe that such an act as that of being ironic must be reflective, but his suggestion that it is divine might be closer to the sort of radical and uncrossable distance that we have in mind. In other words, a genuine irony is always a disruption of understanding, but being so, it points at the *possibility* of understanding. The form of irony intends something possible but (as yet) non-actual. If that is so, one should not leave irony solely within the field of rhetoric. The real existence of irony in human experience points at some "essential" features of the human being, at the modes of his/her self-understanding, which always already coincides with the understanding of reality.[14] In short, the category or the idea of irony, first and foremost, should be located on the level of existential ontology. Its *form*, intentional possibility, exists, even when there is no *determinate* content.[15] Kant suggested

[13] We recognize that the term "use" raises problems. We cannot resolve them within our present scope, but we trace the problem from Bergson's extreme emphasis on use as the sole motive of action (in all of his major works) through Georges Bataille's critique of use as the desacralization of life or vital energy. See G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, transl. R. Hurley, New York 1988, pp. 34–41.

[14] We also recognize the problem with "essence" in this inquiry. Our position is not far from Heidegger's well-known subversion of Hegel and his alternative in "On the Essence of Truth," but we will also set this aside for this essay. If ours is a Husserlian "essence," it is a chastened one (as we will discuss near the end of this essay).

[15] Our point in this paper will be limited to a phenomenological description of the relation between imagination and possibility. For a detailed discussion of the way we are thinking about possibility in

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that the human power of imagination may have an unmediated relation to possibility. Yet, he left the idea undeveloped.[16]

The Polish poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid had a profound insight into the nature of irony when he called it "a necessary shadow of being."[17] In order to understand what this enigmatic phrase means we can refer to a reformulation of the logic of modalities which is phenomenological in character. From this perspective, while "being" indicates the sphere of actuality in its objective (and petrified) form, in its factuality, "irony," in turn, refers to the broader sphere of possibility. In other words, irony has the power of transcending (or otherwise moving beyond) the reality principle and unfolding the "shadowy" sphere of possibilities, the sphere in which being "non-actual" paradoxically serves as the condition (even if only logically) for every given actuality. This kind of priority may, as we have already strongly suggested, be more than logical. But it certainly includes a logic of some sort.[18] In accordance with the well-known phenomenological statement, we affirm that "higher than actuality stands possibility."[19] It means that the latter reveals the former, that possibility lets actuality be shaped and re-shaped. In other words, actuality, even when seen as the sphere of the most radical and mechanistic determinations is marked by "essential" indeterminacy or under-determinacy, by its permanent relation to the possible. Necessity, in this perspective, would be nothing else but a *relation* between possibility and actuality.[20] And in this sense it would indicate the main characteristic of human experience, its facticity. This idea was described by Husserl as an "essential" mixture of actuality and possibility, of fact and fiction.[21]

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terms of the problem of nature and cosmology, see R.E. Auxier, G.L. Herstein, *The Quantum of Explanation: Whitehead's Radical Empiricism*, London 2017, chs. 7–9.

[16] See I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. W. Pluhar, Indianapolis 1987, pp. 284–287 (Ak 402–404).

[17] C.K. Norwid, "Ironia," [in:] C.K. Norwid, *Pisma wszystkie*, vol. 2: *Wiersze*, Warszawa 1971, p. 55.

[18] The claim that imagination has a logic different from and broader than the logic of active thinking and/or of reflection is at least as old as Vico, and the explanation of that logic occupies Book II of Vico's *New Science*. See especially Section II, "Poetic Logic," pp. 114–151. It is taken up by many others later, of course, including Kant, Schelling, Lotze, Cassirer, and Bachelard.

[19] M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie, D. Robinson, Oxford 2001, p. 63.

[20] This view has been explained and defended in detail by Auxier and Herstein in *The Quantum of Explanation*, chs. 7–9.

[21] The idea predated Husserl in the philosophy of Royce. Husserl came to the idea independently (as early as 1907), but "fictional ontology" is an interesting point of connection between Royce and Husserl. Husserl learned about Royce's views early enough to affect his thinking in *Ideas* (all three books — Winthrop Bell, Royce's student, arrived in Goettingen in 1911). See Book 2, especially sections one and three, covering constitution and personalism. The connection of Husserl and Royce to personalism colours their ways of getting at individual identity. Their assumptions on this topic are very far from those that haunt the Lockean and Vartesian backgrounds of the issue. For more, see the translators' introduction to E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book*, transl. R. Rojcewicz, A. Schuwer, Dordrecht 1989, pp. xi–xiii, where they document the years when these manuscripts were composed and rewritten (1911–1915). See also R.E. Auxier, *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Royce*, Chicago 2013, ch. 2, on Royce's "fictional ontology." A number of scholars are working on Husserl's reading of Royce, especially Jason M. Bell and George Lucas. See W.P. Bell, *Eine Kritische Untersuchung der*

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Unavoidable Metaphors

The metaphorical description of such necessity, understood in that manner, is described well by Milan Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*:

> Those who consider the Devil to be a partisan of Evil and angels to be warriors for Good accept the demagogy of the angels. Things are clearly more complicated. Angels are partisans not of Good, but of divine creation. The Devil, on the other hand, denies all rational meaning to God's world. World domination, as everyone knows, is divided between demons and angels. But the good of the world does not require the latter to gain precedence over the former (as I thought when I was young); all it needs is a certain equilibrium of power. If there is too much uncontested meaning on earth (the reign of the angels), man collapses under the burden; if the world loses all meaning (the reign of the demons), life is every bit as impossible. Things deprived suddenly of their putative meaning, the place assigned to them in the ostensible order of things, make us laugh. Initially, therefore, laughter is the province of the Devil. It has a certain malice to it (things have turned out differently from the way they tried to seem), but a certain beneficent relief as well (things are looser than they seemed, we have a greater latitude in living with them, their gravity does not oppress us).[22]

In the light of these quotations, irony appears as a rather ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, it provides the basic framework(s) within which any reflective understanding of reality is possible (recalling that irony is the trope of reflection). Moreover, irony can be seen as the basic reflex of subjective autonomy, by means of which subjectivity can keep reality at some distance, can suspend its objective (perhaps even absolute) character. But as Kundera seems to suggest the trope should be employed not in order to escape from being but rather in order to find a resonance in it, the better to mark an anonymous and strange world of brute facts with one's own imprint, to represent it in the light of possible subjective re-configurations. Irony, correctly understood, would be, then, (at least) a kind of existential strategy of controlled fictionalization, of possibilizing, which, far from the ordinary negation of reality, opens up a kind of mediatory space. The latter would be a space of the oscillation between facts and univocal meanings on the one hand and fictions and possibilities of experiencing "otherwise" on the other hand. If that is done, irony can also be seen as a means of creative negotiation with our primal, formative influences. And as such can serve as a medium of genuine self-realization and self-identification (in senses yet to be suggested).

Erkenntnistheorie Josiah Royces, mit Kommentarien und Änderungsvorschlägen von Edmund Husserl, J. Bell, T. Vongehr (eds.), Cham 2018. Husserl's English was not good enough to read Royce, but Winthrop Bell lent Husserl Royce's books with extensive German annotations (some of these books are in the special collections of Mt. Allison University). Husserl was also known to take in vast amounts of information in his generous sessions with his students like Bell. Husserl directed Bell's dissertation (in German obviously), completed in the main by 1914, but Bell was arrested as a (Canadian) spy and held in prison to the end of the war. The dissertation was defended after the war. During this stretch (1911–1922) Husserl would have been thinking along with Royce's phenomenological ideas, which may have provided some reprieve from his disappointments with James's psychologism.

[22] M. Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, transl. M.H. Heim, New York 1980, Part Four. This view of laughter is profitably expanded in Umberto Eco's works, both fictional and non-fictional. See Claudio Paolucci's interesting analysis in *Umberto Eco. Tra ordine e avventura*, Milano 2017.

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A Hellish Trope

On the other hand, metaphors used in both of these quotations (Norwid and Kundera) immediately suggest that irony is connected with the powers of the "underworld," and as such is capable of the complete disruption of any self-understanding, which obviously coincides with the loss (at least to some extent) of our sense of reality. Instead of being a mechanism of subjective self-revelation, irony replaces reality with an imaginative, phantasmatic unreality, the life-world of common meanings with the apparently idiosyncratic, non-transparent and incoherent structures of (quasi)experience. We experience an image of ourselves as an identity that we may (and usually do) take for our very subjectivity, and its experience becomes our experience. Rather than a transcendental ego, we have its evil twin. This is not the "they-self" of a Heideggerian ontic forgetfulness, it is closer to what Jung calls "shadow," except that in a twisted mockery of health, this necessary shadow is *individuated*.[23] We might also compare this experience to the "uncanny" as theorized by Heidegger or by Freud (admittedly differently).[24]

From this perspective (although not on our view) irony appears as a power of pure negativity, as the constant movement of deviation, where self-creation essentially coincides with self-destruction.[25] In the name of subjective autonomy and authenticity irony constitutes, as Friedrich Schlegel put it, "the strange (*das Sonder-*

[23] For the most extreme exposition of such idea, see H.C. Andersen, "Shadow," transl. J. Hersholt, http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheShadow_e.html (accessed: 3.03.2019). In the story the shadow not only gradually emancipates itself from its subject and then replaces it. Eventually it leads to the annihilation of his "owner."

[24] Heidegger famously described the "*unheimlich*" feeling — experienced in the fundamental mood of *Angst* — of being ontologically othered by *ec-stasis*, being outside of one's involvement with the world, or, as we might say, Dasein as being-in-the-world is visible in its estrangement. We watch ourselves as if freed from all obligations, deep emotional involvements or genuine relations — as if beyond or before any deep or serious self-identification. And together with that the world itself loses for us its whole significance. See M. Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," [in:] M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From* Being and Time *(1927) to* The Task of Thinking *(1964)*, revised and expanded edition, ed. and with intro. by D. Farrell Krell, San Francisco-New York 1993, pp. 100–101; see also M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §40. For the original interpretation of the Heideggerian understanding of subjectivity as not only experiencing uncanniness, but rather be*ing* uncanny, see K. Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, Cambridge 2015. The Freudian understanding of the "unheimlich" shares with the Heideggerian analysis at least one fundamental point: the uncanny or the experience of uncanniness has an essentially disruptive character. But whereas Heidegger stresses some kind of suspension of meaning and significance, Freud seems to underscore the ambivalent surplus of meaning inscribed into this experience. He claims — following Schelling — that even the word itself carries a double contradictory sense — denoting what is unfamiliar and unknown, it refers at the same time to what is "known of old and long familiar." In his psychoanalytical perspective this ambivalence indicates the process of repression of certain experiential contents (once known and familiar). The experience of the uncanny is the return of those contents but they do not return as our own, familiar, known and friendly. They already take on the form of imaginative, dreadful doubles which no longer come from within but unexpectedly loom up as if from behind, as externality beyond our control, as a "demonic" shadow. See S. Freud, "The Uncanny," [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. and transl. J.E. Strachey, London 1981, pp. 217–256.

[25] See S. Spielrein, "Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 39 (1994), pp. 155–186.

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bare), even the absurd (*das Widersinnige*), as well as a childlike yet sophisticated naiveté (*geistreiche* naiveté)." The latter is to be expressed by means of the authentic language, which is the language of "error, madness, and simpleminded stupidity." Instead of "the laws of rational thought" it offers "a beautiful confusion of fantasy."[26]

As such the necessary shadow would be, here, rather an effect of the escape from reality into the peculiar sphere of *as if*, or — as Donald Woods Winnicott would put it — into "the resting place of illusion." It is a kind of imaginative neutralization of reality, neutralization which always already comprises subjectivity itself. Here by "neutral," we have in mind an idea stemming from Sartre's discussion of the neutralization of our positional act that forms an image consciousness the sort of public achievement of "living degree zero," to adapt Barthes's phrase.[27] There is, in the image system, also a neutralization of oppositions such that life becomes merely there as opposed to not being there (not as opposed to death), and, if not wholly meaningless, an elimination of oppositions that leaves behind a sort of ungroundable "cipher-ex-nihilo," we move from the privations of modern subjectivity (Vichian reflective irony) to *de*privation.[28] In this way irony would lead to the fictionalization or derealization of subjectivity and its experiences, to replacement of the reality by arbitrary phantasy-worlds. In the very same way, our everyday commitments are replaced either by free play of phantasy and attraction (in more "joyful" theories: for example, Schlegel, De Man, Rorty), or by a kind of *ataraxia*. The latter is described in the most adequate way by means of the psychoanalytical category of the "as if personality,"[29] which is "identical" (in our new sense that it is an ironic identity) with the withdrawal from both external as well as internal reality. Freud described this phenomenon by using the metaphor of "blindness of the seeing eye."[30]

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[26] F. Schlegel, *Rede über die Mythologie*, as cited in: P. de Man, "The Concept of Irony," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. and with intro. by A. Warminski, Minneapolis-London 1996, pp. 180–181.

[27] See R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, pp. 71–80. Beginning with privative oppositions in the meaning of "terms" (images that include meaning generated by language but are not limited to that meaning), such as light and dark, in which light marks the absence of dark, and vice versa, Barthes moves to the problem of the "unmarked term": "It is called the *zero degree* of the opposition. The zero degree is therefore not a total absence (this is a common mistake), *it is a significant absence*. We have here a pure differential state; the zero degree testifies to the power held by any system of signs, of creating meaning 'out of nothing': the language can be content with an opposition of something and nothing" (ibidem, p. 77). Obviously Barthes made much of this insight in a number of books and essays, from *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) to his final lecture courses at the College de France (1977–1978), later published in 2002, and translated as *The Neutral*, transl. R. Krauss, D. Hollier, New York.

[28] See J.-P. Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of Imagination*, A. Elkaïm-Sartre (ed.), transl. J. Webber, London 2004 [1940], pp. 8–13. We take Sartre's idea of "quasi-observation" a step further, to what is quasi-unobserved, not because it cannot be observed, but because it "eclipses" the subject, syzygy of meaning, to use the Jungian language. For an illustration of this in the realm of poetry and music, see R.E. Auxier, "It's All Dark: The Eclipse of the Damaged Brain," [in:] R.E. Auxier, *Metaphysical Grafitti*, Chicago 2017, pp. 131–157.

[29] Here we use this category in a slightly arbitrary way, underscoring its one main paradoxical aspect, namely a peculiar form of completely detached participation in interpersonal relations. For a full account of the syndrome of "as if personality," see H. Deutsch, "Some Forms of Emotional Disturbance and Their Relationship to Schizophrenia," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 11 (1942), pp. 301–321.

[30] S. Freud, J. Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, ed. and transl. J. Strachey, New York 2000, p. 117 n. Freud refers here to "the strange state of mind in which one knows and does not know a thing at the

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The Double-Edged Sword

In this sense, irony appears as a double-edged sword, which should be used (since it always will be used anyway) in accordance with a certain proportionality. If it is completely loosed upon the world, whether natural or social, it appears as a solely negative power which *deprives* everything of stability and existence, including subjectivity itself. That is why one of the theoreticians of irony, Wayne Booth, states that the only way to avoid the danger of such deprivation in constitutive irony is to *deprive* such irony of its infinite character. This was Hegel's worry and also his solution, in the setting of the woes of objective spirit, but we do not have here a Hegelian consciousness in a Hegelian world. Booth claims that the genuine knowledge of how to use irony is equivalent with the knowledge of "where to stop,"[31] where a subjectivity should turn away from constant movement of deviation and in this way return into finiteness. It may sound simple, but as we see, it requires "knowledge." We will explain how this knowledge can be understood.

Ironists: Liberal and Illiberal

We want to offer another, though still disruptive, understanding of how irony appears and to answer *doubts* (coming around to where we began, in posing the problem) as to what it means to use irony in "the proper way." This relieving of doubt is not intended as an ethics or even a meta-ethics. We take the word "proper" in its etymological sense of ownership, and see our suggestion as an alternative to Heideggerian *Ereignis*. And that would coincide with the strong articulation of another dimension of irony, which not only both liberates and alienates, but it can take an essentially normative form. Although the latter is hardly definable, it is this form of irony which seems to be the most important and the most relevant for any reflection on human being. It should be noted that we have preserved an Aristotelian relation of *knowing* and *form* in framing our recommendation. The usage is closer to *erkennen* and *Bildung* than to the ancient Greek candidates, although παιδεία and δύναμις would be preferred to νοῦς or ἐπιστήμη and εἶδος.

Probably, the best-known theory of irony in the last decades is that set out by Richard Rorty. According to him, the ironist is the individual who is deeply aware of the contingent and thoroughly historical character of her own selfhood and of any theoretical constructs by means of which she tries to render ungraspable, by its very nature, "Reality." In short, the limitation on knowledge is that one cannot learn one's most basic commitments as more than images. Such a subject is fully aware that there is no neutral, objective language which could express universal truths. Here we see the application of the problem we have carefully set out above. But we would say that the liberal ironist of Rorty actually encounters no opposition in testing narratives of herself. The absence of a neutral, objective

same time." The truly paradoxical nature of this experience becomes visible when one realizes that from the phenomenological point of view this kind of experience is — as Freud insists — devoid of any sense of merely logical contradiction which supposed to be its inherent part.

[31] W.C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago-London 1974.

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language is actually the significant absence of opposition. It is living degree zero. But Rorty is almost inescapably correct. Even in a healthier life than the liberal ironist has, a life in community, the life in which it is possible to *learn* about one's subjectivity through the dynamisms of the life-world, we are faced with competing descriptions, and without any *present* ability to decide which of these descriptions is "right," "correct," or "better," with regard to normative or epistemological claims. The slightly healthier communitarian ironist can only "redescribe" the older theories in new languages and offer new, more attractive descriptions. And that is what she does.

The ironist, then, whether liberal or communitarian, is characterized by Rorty as follows: first, "She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies [...] taken as final by people or books she has encountered" — the final vocabulary is a set of words (note, words, not what we call "terms," as in Barthes, or more broadly, images or meanings) which express and justify one's basic hopes, beliefs, and projects. Second, Rorty continues, "she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts"; and finally, "insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself."[32]

Irony, here, is a constant activity of questioning, doubting and self-doubting, or, in our terms, of self-doubling, to infinity if need be. It provokes the drive for never-ending re-description and re-creation of one's self on the basis of a given cultural inventory. It is impossible to see how this could be a "good" situation, but it is easy to see that it satisfies the requirements of a Hegelian *bad* infinity, dialectic going nowhere. It is hard not to notice the weak points of this theory. First, Rorty's theory seems to *identify* irony with doubting, but the two are also different, somehow, even when sometimes hardly distinguishable. Second, irony appears to be exclusively private matter and as such it is nothing else than a means (self- imposed) of withdrawal and alienation. The Rortyan ironist is exclusively interested in the free imaginative reconfigurations of her own selfhood, while avoiding the imposition of her own fantasies on other people. The presence of a community is the occasion but not the reason for all this over-extension of reflection and its norms. The doubt is not existential, it is taken on as a reflective burden, a *faux*-necessary privatization of every social commitment. Third, if irony is based on constant doubts, it provokes questions about the meaning and value of everyday commitment. How can we act on the basis of concepts and values of which the only thing we *know* is that they are doubtful (in virtue of their form, since it doesn't matter in the least what these commitments are, only that their description is part of one's final vocabulary — this is a strange, or estranged formalism)? Can I quasi-observe "myself" (whatever that is) acting on such commitments at all? How would I "know" the meaning of what I was doing, or who was doing them? Eventually, if the basic form of an individual's self-experience is encircled within the never-ending process of re-description, if there is no room for a binding

[32] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge 1989, p. 73.

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normativity, irony cannot be a means of constituting any, relatively stable form of self-identity. It rather undermines the very notion of identity. Something similar may be said of other more persuasive versions of post-Hegelian irony, for example, Kenneth Burke's more grounded account.[33]

Communitarian Irony

We should pause over this other "communitarian" account, since we have made bold to say it is "better." Burke recognizes how the "master trope" of irony undermines identity and reconstructs it around a new account of identity which depends upon "identifying with," which makes his version a communitarian effort to rescue identity in a world without causes and effects, only metonymic and synecdochal substitutions. Burke shares Rorty's nominalism — formal identification is just naming. But his idea of "intransitive identification," identifying with, he admits, is a sort of ungrounded and ever-expanding social infinity. Every group is included in some broader group. We do not think this is enough, although we grant it is much to be preferred to Rorty's ironism. But "identifying with," carried into ever expanding circles, leaves identity as just the cipher we described in the first part of the paper.

Burke knows very well he has not answered the questions we have been stressing. Hence, he ends his masterwork with a discussion of "ultimate" identity in mystical experience, drawing on William James, which Burke insists we must seek to "naturalize." He says:

> Nature, society, language, and the division of labor — out of all or any of these the hierarchic motive inevitably develops. Anagogically, if you will, but at least "socio-anagogically," in hierarchy reside the conditions of the "divine," the goadings of "mystery." But since, for better or worse, the mystery of the hierarchic is forever with us, let us, as students of rhetoric, scrutinize its range of entrancements, both with dismay and delight. And finally let us observe, all about us, forever goading us, though it be in fragments, the motive that attains ultimate identification in the thought, not of the universal holocaust, but of the universal order — as with the rhetorical and dialectical symmetry of the Aristotelian metaphysics, whereby all classes of beings are hierarchically arranged in a chain or ladder or pyramid of mounting worth, each kind striving towards the *perfection* of its kind, and so towards the next kind above it, while the strivings of the entire series head in God as the beloved cynosure and sinecure, the end of all desire.[34]

So much, one must say, for naturalizing, or for overcoming Western metaphysics, or indeed, for saying anything new at all. Here is only the more honest version of the pragmatic wish for identity without commitment, with all due reverence to Aristotle, Hegel, teleology, and God. We should be dismayed and delighted so far as we are students of rhetoric, but as philosophers we seem to be set adrift by our admirable rhetorical colleagues. Endless narration and a shrug of their collective shoulders are what we are given. Yes, it looked like philosophy for a while, but

[33] See K. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1969 [1950], pp. 19–59 for the initial discussion and defense of such "identification."

[34] Ibidem, p. 333.

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then, when pressed hard, for Rorty and Burke it was either God or nothing, and they took nothing. And yet, there is a necessary shadow of being.

The Individual

The impulse for more developed and more creative reflection on the problems in which we are interested, one can find in the work of Søren Kierkegaard.[35] His starting point is the strong claim that there is no genuinely human life without irony. Irony itself is the *act* of self-revelation of subjectivity — "as the subjectivity asserts itself, irony emerges."[36] That means, irony *indicates* the very beginning of subjective life, and perhaps it is more than a simple indication — perhaps its mood is "subjunction," if we may give a new meaning to such a term. Irony indeed works as a kind of reduction, one which suspends "the natural attitude" — the unreflective conviction that we live in the world which is to be based on the objective and absolute laws, on the basis of which one is able to provide a set of ultimate determinations to human being. So far, Rorty, Burke, even Hegel, Vico, and Aristotle will agree. But for Kierkegaard, and from our view, what follows determines to-and-for every "individual" a concrete position within a given social-cultural reality. This is in contrast to what "defines" in-and-for every subject an abstract location within a given social reality.[37] In other words, subjectivity constitutes itself in, or rather *as* the movement of deviation from the reality in which it can no longer find its justification. To put it in the metaphorical manner, such movement of subjective immediacy makes it a stranger in its homeland. In this sense irony reveals a subjectivity which escapes the intra-worldly, objectifying determinations without sacrificing, as a condition, *the promise* of subjective unity, however deferred (not the unity but) the promise may be. As such, subjectivity is a fragile, ephemeral, indeterminate structure. The individual[38] does not have independent actuality. It

[35] For one of the best interpretations of Kierkegaard's accounts of subjectivity and irony, showing their relevance for our contemporary culture, see J. Stewart, *Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony, & the Crisis of Modernity*, Oxford 2015. For interesting comparative analysis of Rorty's and Kierkegaard's accounts of irony, see B. Frazier, *Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment: Philosophical and Theological Connections*, New York 2006 — where the author claims that even though Rorty's irony is much more defensible than we suggest, Kierkegaard's theory still has clear existential and ethical advantages over it. See also R.E. Auxier, "Ironic Wrong-Doing and the Arc of the Universe," [in:] *Rorty and Beyond*, R.E. Auxier, E. Kramer, Ch. Skowronski (eds.), Lanham 2020, pp. 271–283.

[36] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates together with Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, ed. and transl. H.V. Hong, E.H. Hong, Princeton 1989, p. 263.

[37] The shift in language here is not a simple rhetorical move, it is a move to a relational ontology of the act. For a detailed working out of this language, see Auxier and Herstein, *The Quantum of Explanation*, where each of these distinctions, for example, determination and definition, abstract and concrete, individual and subject, etc., receives a full treatment and re-situation in an ontology of the act. We take the meaning of "act" in this work to be fully in keeping with our interpretation of Kierkegaard here.

[38] Kierkegaard's understanding of the individual as well as the problem with which we are concerned here, namely that of individual/personal identity, are by no means univocal. It seems that the elaboration of their meaning(s) was one of his life-long, relentless tasks. The more or less developed investigations (along with more sketchy remarks) are spread in his whole *oeuvre* starting from *The Concept of Irony* and *The Concept of Anxiety* through *Fear and Trembling* and *Sickness unto Death*

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has to become in the acts of confrontation with every "given actuality." "Its actuality is only possibility."[39] In this sense subjectivity is the dynamic, open structure based on the constant effort of negotiation between its own negative freedom and influences which bind it to a given reality, and as such can never be fully negated. Reality might be denied, but as manifest possibility (everything actual is possible), it cannot be deleted or erased, metaphysically annihilated without a trace. And indeed, even possibility negated is still possibility, even where actuality makes it a "might-have-been."[40]

Kierkegaard is fully aware of the dangers inscribed into irony — the danger of falling into the illusion of omnipotence, of being lost in pure phantasy, of becoming a victim of the power of negativity. Because of that he writes that absolute "irony is the beginning, and yet no more than the beginning; it is and it is not [...]."[41] There is no positive content in the ironic experience. But there is much more than a "significant absence," we would add. This is not a nominalism of consciousness, language, or image. That is because, on a view like Kierkegaard's, irony in its pure form is first and foremost a power of "infinite absolute negativity."[42] Its trajectory (not its *telos*) is not to posit some experiential objectivity, but rather to reveal the complex field of subjective experience and the pure possibility of the latter, indifferent to any prospect of actualization. As such it is "the lightest and weakest indication of subjectivity."[43]

Subjectivity

Here we want to understand "indication" as a "symptom," something revealed and revealing, which is quite different from "interpreting a sign," whether that latter process depends on a neutralized image consciousness, a general semiosis, mysterious hierarchy, or an intentional self-doubt. Obviously, such a symptom is no creature of Aristotelian or Hegelian metaphysics. By means of such Kierkegaard*ian* irony not only can subjectivity reflectively respond to itself, since this is purely formal structure — subjectivity-existing-to/for-itself. We must have this and more.

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to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to *Philosophical Fragments* — just to point out a few most important works. For the secondary sources, see, for example, G. Connell, *To Be One Thing: Personal Unity in Kierkegaard's Thought*, Macon 1985; P. Bursztyka, "Spełniona subiektywność. Powtórzenie jako doświadczenie egzystencjalne w ujęciu Sørena Kierkegaarda," *Sztuka i Filozofia* 24 (2004), pp. 69–87; P. Bursztyka, "Rozważania o grzechu, lęku i samotności. Fenomenologia świadomości w ujęciu Sørena Kierkegaarda," [in:] *Miłość i samotność. Wokół myśli Sørena Kierkegaarda*, P. Bursztyka, M. Kaczyński, M. Sosnowski, G. Uzdański (eds.), Warszawa 2007, pp. 180–193. More recently an excellent analysis of the problem of personal identity in Kierkegaard's thought, confronting the classical puzzles and concerning the problem (and their possible solutions), was proposed by Patrick Stokes in his book *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, Oxford 2015.

[39] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 273.

[40] See R.E. Auxier, G.L. Herstein, *The Quantum of Explanation*, ch. 8: "The Problem of Possibility," pp. 143–174.

[41] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 214.

[42] Ibidem, p. 312.

[43] Ibidem, p. 6.

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Our "form" is a *dynamis* (*act* not actuality; that is, dynamic self-alteration, not full attainment of a *telos*) and the promise of an "education," if we may render *Bildung* that way. In other words, irony unfolds such a promise as pure possibility, as that available nothingness. The ironic subjectivity desperately tends to *find* itself, and surprised to have *made* itself, in ignorance and in the bliss of it, but the only means which is at its disposal cannot constitute any positive content. "[S]trictly speaking, irony actually is never able to advance a thesis, because irony is a qualification of the being-for-itself subject, who in incessant agility allows nothing to remain established and on account of this agility cannot focus on the total point of view that it allows nothing to remain established."[44]

Thus, subjectivity as perpetually perishing "act" is in a state of permanent contradiction between its own possible project and its prospects for actualization, between its infinitely open character and the ruthless reality principle which makes everything finite, and, as such, establishes limits to/for subjective freedom. It is because of this self-contradiction intrinsic to irony that its truth, something we can know, a combination of form as *dynamis* and outcome as *paideia*, lies behind it. We never really know how we have learned what we know, since it keeps requiring a re-assessment in retrospect, but in no way does this undermine the act by which we once knew what we once knew. Rather, this process ironizes the individual who knew that truth, without disjoining subjectivity and individual. It is what we earlier called "subjunction." The knowledge isn't satisfactory, but it definitely isn't the hypothetical possession or modification of a shadow, a deferred or doubted "as if."

Some Consequences of Subjunction

Granting this is our extrapolation of Kierkegaard, but we take ourselves to remain close to his idea. In order to clarify this kind of claim, Kierkegaard elaborates the concept of the so-called "controlled" irony (and here it is a "concept," but the sublation of Kant's and Hegel's "*Begriffe*" must be noted). It is a much subtler strategy. The individual no longer tries simply to negate or escape from the reality into which he/she is thrown, but rather tries to mark it by *its own* imprint, to find in it an immediate resonance, an echo, with audible overtones, of the possible, trailing *and* pursuing the actual as it perishes. The ironic individual neither tries to avoid the absolutization of the finite circumstances within which he/she is situated, since it will cast a shadow, nor does he/she constantly try to get something new and different from them, since that act empowers the shadow. Setting aside "new and different," the subjuncted individual settles for the novelty of its situation, as a perspective that may develop into a standpoint, not insisting these means and meanings be providential, but also not failing to learn from the possibility that it might have been.

Such controlled or mastered irony should be and should bring, and here we draw on our delicate sense of norm explained above, a double power of resistance — against both ruthless factuality and the risk of melting into pure phanta-

[44] Ibidem, p. 269.

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sy. *Human* life is thus impossible without irony, but the latter has to be a kind of self-limiting action, which is to be able to deprive the real of its cogent force and at the same moment to limit without *self*-limiting the apodictic free will of the individual. This is not a teleology of autonomy, nor is it an economy of idiosyncratic self-creation. It is a strategy for coping with a necessary shadow: "[...] no genuinely human life is possible without irony [...] Irony limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency."[45]

The controlled irony (and here we mean control, as we have said, in the sense of "mastery" as the outcome of "education," in the sense we have been explaining) reveals subjectivity which imprints the given reality with ideality, and limits the latter by the concrete content of its own factual existence, or process of existing. It is still the power of negativity but now it appears to be *deprived* of its absolute character, but not by a self seeking autonomy or by an empowered shadow/image/phantasy. Rather, one should say: it is negativity whose aim underwent a profound modification, becoming a subjuncted trajectory. Each act of distance from that concrete actuality — realized through irony — is the *form* of acknowledgement of this actuality. Hence, knowledge is acknowledgement.[46]

Each act of modification of the influence which springs from the world is, in fact, the confirmation of its reality. It is directed toward this very facticity in the constant and paradoxical twofold attempt of recognition and subjective reconfiguration, but without making the life-world an absurdity or a plague. The paradox is very real in our experience, and it gives rise to more superficial ironism in practice and in theory. The subtler situation of echo and overtone, of subjunction, means the individual takes on the cultural forms of self-understanding, norms and values, at the same time posing the constant question: how am I to understand my individuality on their basis? Are they able to provide the frameworks within which the forms of my existing, those that promise learning (*Bildung*), can be filled out? But could I escape from them if I am to fulfill this task, this "work"? How should they, themselves, be *properly* met? Furthermore, and above all: as they are always finite, are they able to express the ideal which seems to shine through them? That is why Kierkegaard claims that the controlled (mastered) irony "manifests itself in its truth precisely by teaching how to actualize actuality, by placing the appropriate emphasis on actuality."[47] It still casts a shadow, but only as necessary.

Obviously, this way of existing does not mean that irony loses its disruptive character — that would coincide with its complete disappearance. Rather, we are faced here with the radical change of its aim into a trajectory, which is no longer the simple act of self-revelation of subjectivity in its purely negative freedom, the act culminating in self-reflective, and therefore distanced, form of subjectivity. The controlled (mastered) irony implies a peculiar dialectics of distance and en-

[45] Ibidem, p. 326.

[46] A full epistemology of "acknowledgement" is worked out with reference to Royce's thought in R.E. Auxier, *Time, Will, and Purpose*, chs. 4–6, including an account of the relation between the "world of truth" and interpretation.

[47] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 328.

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gagement, of flight from the reality and serious commitment. The Rortyan ironist could not die for anything, the Burkean ironist might die for he-knows-not-what, but the Kierkegaardian ironist dies in every moment, and expects nothing else. And because of that outcome, there is surely some kind of uneasiness in the above-mentioned questions. They are admittedly as far as possible from the joyful Rorty-like manner of doubting, both in the formulation of the questions and in their educational results.

The Ironic Subject as Individual: Controlled Irony

There is also another fundamental dimension of this ironic recognition-reconfiguration of actuality. Subjectivity — Kierkegaard claims — is marked by an essential contradiction and split (for example, ideality and reality, necessity and possibility, bodily desires/wishes/impulses and rational spirit, and the list goes on). Irony unfolds the possibility of "synthesis," not Kantian or Hegelian, of becoming one thing, a unified and unifying subject that will never have a complete form (*dynamis*) simply because human existence has inevitably an open character. Thus, the *concept* of the controlled (mastered) irony, while it is a philosophy rather than a rhetoric, is based on the conviction that subjectivity comes down to the end-less (in the sense of having no determinate *telos*) process of finding itself within reality. In other words, there is no point of arrival in the process initiated and sustained by subjunction, by the irony. It rather reveals a way whose destination is hidden. Simply speaking, there is no stage at which subjectivity would reach its final, absolutely fulfilled form. Irony gives the beginning and, by transformation, trajectory to the individual and that means that even if such an individual is not able to give a final answer to the question about its complete form and identity, it is still able to shape *properly* these projects of identity and form by not allowing either to take always-already available solutions or to escape from this work. Kierkegaard expresses it by the claim that irony is the way but it is not the way which guarantees the result. We hope we have cast some light on this otherwise difficult passage:

> Irony [...] is the way; it is not the truth but the way. Anyone who has a result as such does not possess it, since he does not have the way. When irony now lends a hand, it brings the way, but not the way whereby someone fancying himself to have the achievement comes to possess it, but the way along which the achievement deserts him.[48]

We would like to conclude by making a few points in a slightly unorthodox manner, however with constant reference to Kierkegaard. Two features of "controlled" (mastered) irony seem to us of particular importance — its "punitive" aspect (which has arisen explicitly only late in our account) and its dynamic, open-ended character. The former indicates — in our opinion — the mode of *manifestation* of irony. In this sense it is not about "punitive" function of a certain mental type which would remind us of the Freudian super-ego. Rather, it is about the power, inherent to iro-

[48] Ibidem, pp. 327–328.

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ny, of undermining the set of always-already accessible *concepts* by means of which humans come to understand themselves, their role and place in the cultural reality.

If we are beaten up by our concepts (and we are — philosophers see to it), then those concepts deserve to be chastised. Such chastening points at their non-evident, limited, and because of that *still possible* character, but not in order to announce happily the contingency of subjectivity and of the whole cultural-historical reality. There is nothing further from the genuine irony than simpleminded joyfulness, and nothing morose about learning these limits in the shadows they cast. And there is nothing closer to it than the deepest existential seriousness, neither joyful nor morose.

Again, the way in which irony appears, the "how" of its manifestation (to recur to our initial barrage of questions), is disruptive and that would be the closest to the experience of tearing away from what is known and culturally accessible, of losing the sense of significance of the conceptual frameworks within which the existential project of the individual was to be realized, of standing in the void of ignorance, but without the bliss we have mentioned before. Above all it would be the experience of losing the *sense* of one's own identity (not to be confused with the reality of that loss) or at least of losing the deepest sense of confidence in and familiarity with one's own identity (which is closer to our idea about knowing and learning).

This experience can have (and in fact does have) a traumatizing and painful effect. One finds oneself in the state of vertigo, on the verge of madness. There is no primrose path to the unbidden revelation. But as we follow the Kierkegaardian way, it has nothing in common either with nihilism or with any kind of relativism or skepticism. This path recognizes, names, and tames the usual demons without calling them forth. Or so we believe. They are there, necessary and shadowed, but when properly recognized they seem to be unempowered by anything we have done in our education, or by anything we have intimately known.

Indeed, what is at stake here is, to repeat the Kierkegaardian phrase, "the appropriate emphasis on actuality." If that is so, it seems that the ironic disruption is not at all the simple negation of the finite circumstances into which the individual is thrown and by means of which he/she is to be determined. Irony rather points at the very possibility of the ideal which always eludes worldly determinations, and which, in turn, is available to our proper work, to enlighten the finite character of such determinations and their meaning, including their practical meaning. This irony is, then, a peculiar directedness toward the unknown which does not lead the individual to the contemplative form of escapism, but rather expresses the *desire* for ethical perfection, minus the ethical perfection itself.

The latter term we take in the broadest sense comprising not only moral obligations but first and foremost the efforts to be good at/within concrete ways of life, to be seriously committed to the *activity* of constituting one's own identity, but not as a possession or telos or demand. It is to be courageously engaged in searching for the answer to the question "What does it mean to be human?" and be consistently to/for the opportunities of realizing this life-long work. Irony would be, then, the always possible disruption of such efforts as culturally available apprehensions of the ideal which governs teleologically or mechanically these

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efforts until they appear no longer self-evident, no longer sufficient as a means of one's own self-understanding. Perhaps the point of attending school is neither to obtain a diploma or even some course of learning, but rather to come to know what it *might mean to learn in just that way.* Or even more radically, what it *might mean to learn at all.*

Irony would imply a kind of imagination understood as a radical openness to the dimension of the very same ideal as possible, but not with the strings and attachments that make it *possibly actual.* This imagination, in turn, would be articulated in the intention aimed at this ideal, but as transformed into a trajectory that engages possibility because they have meaning.[49] The work appears to be infinitely demanding but at the same time hardly conceivable, unknown. But the burden is surprisingly light, much lighter than nurturing a *telos* or serving a machine. The paradox of irony (as well as subjectivity itself) lies in the contradiction or a constantly repeatable movement between already constituted identity and those moments of disruption, realized as transformed to/for such individual work.

A Confession

And here we must confess something. The question remains and has been in the shadows of our inquiry: how is all of this is related to the category of the unconscious? We do not wish to prejudice the context of the question by using the word "category," but after all, we have been labouring with and against Aristotle all along (granting that the unconscious is hardly *his* category). And now it becomes apparent: how can the analysis inspired by Kierkegaard refer to this category at all?

To those questions we would answer in the following manner. It is trivial to state that every philosophy inspired by the thought of Kierkegaard simply cannot turn away from the problem of the complexity of human be*ing.* It seems that every ironic disruption of identity opens up the sphere of some more authentic, genuine understanding of one's self, which would comprise also its hidden and still unrecognized parts. We do not seek to deny that there are banalities in our guiding assumptions. Surely Kierkegaard does not deny them. What is at stake in the ironic experience (and actually that holds true for every theory concerned with the category of irony) is not so much the destiny of some fully unified, autonomous, self-transparent subject based on the paradigm of transcendental self-reflective structure. It is rather about leaving room for other voices, (and not necessarily human ones) for what appears as strange and alien but at the same time belonging to the subjectivity. Irony makes possible conceiving, that is, philosophizing, subjectivity in terms of singular-plural be*ing.*[50]

[49] We have discussed this in greater detail in the first article in this series; see "Strangers in the Hands of an Angry 'I': On the Immediacy of Other Persons," *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* 17 [1] (2022), pp. 7–27.

[50] To use the well-known phrase coined by Jean-Luc Nancy. See J.-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, transl. R. Richardson, A. O'Byrne, Stanford 2000. Again, please see our essay "Strangers in the Hands of an Angry 'I,'" cited above.

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We said earlier that irony is to be based on the re-configurative recognition of the facticity into which every individual is thrown. We further narrated this as a kind of actualizing the actual. Obviously one of the most vivid parts of that facticity, although operating as if from behind consciousness, is unconscious motivations, desires, passions, phantasies. The shadow doesn't disappear, even if the light sources are multiplied, from every direction, past, present, and future. It merely gets neutralized in any of its specific forms.[51] We think that "neutralization" in the sense we have in mind is closely comparable with "integrative recognition," in a sense we will fill out. The characteristic of being unconscious should not be understood in terms of the repressed contents — they always appear within the field of consciousness as something strange and alien, something disrupting the natural course of our experience, as a kind of negation or repression of consciousness. In fact, what they carry is not simply nonsensical, petrified content of previous experiences which can no longer be incorporated into the stream of our conscious life. Such contents are rather a projection of vague, distorted, and partial alternative self-understanding, or more broadly self-identities that are vulnerable to less promising ironies than our favored path and work. Furthermore, these partial systems can — and in fact often do — refer to the more complex unities we have called "proper." These latter have at least one basic advantage over the conscious *sense* (and a sense is all it can be) of self-identity: a more *intimate and intense* relation with the primal and formative powers, with a dynamic paideia, with a *Bildungskraft der Erkenntnis*, with a well-formed self-familiarity.

Yet, we affirm that sometimes (indeed, the most notable among our experiences) we will be obliged to include the sudden and unbidden arrival of a fully formed other, no longer a mere shadow, who seems possessed of a destiny, and therefore a will, contrary to our projections. Is this really the other? Is it really ours? We have difficulty accepting that we have produced this destiny and its concrete ideas within ourselves, and yet, there it is and there they are. It is not mirroring, it is self-encounter, we claim. And as such it is a moment of ironic disruption. This was not anticipatable, yet it is actual. The being before us, that is, the being we are, most intimately, is a stranger. The shadow becomes the stranger.[52]

It seems that irony can operate here, in two distinct ways. In the case of the resistance against those formations, it can follow a path of disintegrating of one's own identity. But there is also another possibility based on the act of recognition and creative confrontation, of the manifestation of a chastened self, where those unconscious formations can serve as supportive, alternative, or competing sources of the sense of identity. We do more than identify with Burkean others, we become what we are, to use Nietzsche's apt phrase. Obviously this scenario would require the previous creating of some "potential space" — to use the phrase from Donald Woods Winnicott[53] — where this confrontation could be carried out. It seems to us

[51] As we mentioned earlier, the sense of "neutral" we draw on here is that descending from Sartre's "Psychology of Imagination," and through Barthes's creative appropriation of that idea.

[52] See R.E. Auxier, P. Bursztyka, "Strangers in the Hands of an Angry 'I.'"

[53] See D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, New York-London 2005, especially chs. 3–4 and 7.

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that irony, when properly understood, at the same time indicates and constitutes this kind of space, the possibly creative interplay of the opposite factors of human *being*. The advantage of such a position would be the possibility of the more complex and plural, so to speak, identity which would avoid the risk of disintegration. Or at least an occurrence of disintegration would be much less likely, and should it come, it might be worth the sacrifice. There is far more to be said about this "sacrifice," but for now we must move on.

What we say here is consistent — we believe — with the spirit of Kierkegaardian thought, if not quite going the whole way to Kierkegaard's work of love. In a sense, we try to show that human identity and its integrity, its integration, is an open-ended process which has to comprise all the aspects of human be*ing*. Many of these ironic paths stand in radical opposition to each other, but to opt just for one of them is always a kind of exclusion and repression of the others. Irony, in our account, appears as a constant possibility of disruptive questioning of: who am I? And how can I live through this constant possibility of disruption while having in mind a guiding idea of personal integrity? For irony is not simply a disruption, but *as* disruption it is expressive of the main ethical impulse of subjectivity to be courageously confronted with its own complex, fragile, never fully actualized nature, without losing sight of the life-long task of becoming one thing.

Concluding Postscript: Being Leary

We should note here that while we were polishing this essay, our colleague Marcin Rychter (from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Warsaw) drew our attention to the excellent work by Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony*.[54] Surprisingly for us the main points of what is presented in the concluding parts of our essay can be seen as similar to Lear's account of irony. For Lear irony is first and foremost always the possible disruption of our practical identities and, more generally, a breakdown of practical intelligibility. It is the experience in which the concepts, values, practical possibilities by means of which we come to understand ourselves lose their self-evident and self-sufficient character and leave us in the midst of ignorance, with regard to who we actually are, while living out these practical identities. He connects the ironic experience with a peculiar kind of uncanniness, which is not a simple (though dreadful) disruption of the ordinary course of our life (when something familiar is suddenly experienced as unfamiliar), but is marked by certain pre-ethical passion, by a certain kind of being passionately directed toward we know-not-what (that's why Lear calls it "erotic uncanniness"), toward the unknown ideal, relative to which culturally elaborated concepts and principles often fall short. As such, irony is by no means a form of simple, or joyful detachment, but rather the most serious commitment to the life-long task of living a genuinely human life; the commitment finds its expression in transcending (in the moments of ironic outburst) all worldly determinations by means of which we orient ourselves in the socio-cultural reality.

[54] J. Lear, *A Case for Irony*, Cambridge 2011.

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Furthermore, Lear — as a distinguished Freudian and practicing psychotherapist — analyzes in great detail the always possible ironic disruption of our conscious identities by unconscious formations, which for him are (precisely as we claim) alternative forms of self-understanding. If one of the aims of human life is to achieve a psychic unity (otherwise we are prone to suffering), then we should — Lear claims — be aware that the only unity "genuinely available to us is [...] marked by disruption and division [...]." Lear explains that it is not equal to the already trivial point that our unity is vulnerable to disruption and he radicalizes his point — this unity "*partially consists* in certain forms of disruption. The aim of the unity should not be to overcome these disruptions, but to find ways to live well with them."[55]

Irony is identical here with these moments of disruption putting on the stage the formations which call into question all points of reference for our conscious identity. And yet, our task is "to live well with them." We obviously admit that Lear's analyses are much more detailed than those we present in this short paper. While seeing evident similarities as to many points (and maybe even to the type of sensitivity), we also see clear, though a bit nuanced, differences between our perspectives. Putting aside a formal difference — our insistence (in opposition to Lear who refers mainly to Kierkegaard's later works) that this account of irony can be built almost exclusively on the basis of *The Concept of Irony*, the main point of divergence would be the way we understand individual identity/unity.

While Lear stresses the need for living well with disruptions as an essential part of psychic unity (in the aforementioned sense), our perspective is rather based on an "integrative recognition." The latter should not be understood as, guided by a fully rational subject, a kind of reflective synthesis — which, in fact, would be a form of suspension of the importance, value and meaning of these disruptive elements or formations. Rather, this is the never-ending effort of finding room and a proper place for them within the field of our self-experience. In this sense they not only broaden and enrich that field, but without losing their disruptive, shadowy character, they are to be recognized as necessary moments of our becoming who *we* really are. In this sense, they are to be located on the plane — that is, confronted with and recognized within — of what we already know and who we already became. This open-ended process, as we have mentioned, is not teleological in nature. And yet it is guided by the idea of personal integrity, by a never completely fulfilled desire to become one thing. Also, and as a consequence, our understanding of the unconscious differs from that presented by Lear. Lear relies on a Freudian perspective (interpreted in his own original way). For the purposes of this essay, we were more implicit about how we use this category — as a somehow unavoidable consequence of understanding human being from a perspective inspired mainly by Kierkegaard's thought. If we were to point more directly at the, still implicit, source of inspiration — it would be rather the Jungian concept of an individual's shadow as the site of the unconscious. Of course, the question how (or whether at all) these two (Freudian unconscious, and Jungian individual shadow) differ is open to interpretation.

[55] Ibidem, p. 43.

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