

Review of Roger Kreuz. *Irony and Sarcasm*. MIT Press, 2020, pp. xv + 207. 15.95 \$.

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The Essential Knowledge series of MIT Press has recently contributed to humor studies a small volume on irony, which psycholinguist Roger Kreuz couples with sarcasm. He argues that we do not understand well the question, “Isn't it ironic?” and we often do not know how to answer it; nor is “Never mind, I'm just being sarcastic,” clearer, especially since I may not be sarcastic. Thus, two of “the most misused, misapplied, and misunderstood words in our conversational lexicon,” irony and sarcasm, are in need of clarification. In this short monograph, Kreuz offers a concise overview of their life and times, which maps their evolution from Greek philosophy and Roman rhetoric to modern literary criticism to emojis.

Proceeding from Socratic to dramatic to cosmic irony, Kreuz describes eight different ways in which irony has been used through the centuries. The association with sarcasm is as follows: irony as traditionally understood he defines as verbal irony; this kind of irony refers to statements that mean something different, often the opposite, of what is literally intended; sarcasm is in turn defined by Kreuz as a type of verbal irony.

By outlining the prerequisites for irony and sarcasm, clarifying what irony is not and what it can be, recounting ways that people can signal their ironic intentions and considering the difficulties of online irony, Kreuz gives a clear and compelling account of that vexing topic. One of the prerequisites he outlines is a shared frame of reference; the difference he draws between coincidence, paradox, satire, on one hand, and irony, on the other, is helpful for disengaging the antagonism that is proper to irony. Thus, Kreuz diagnoses irony as a socially acceptable way to express hostility.

The most original part of Kreuz's account is his questioning of irony's fate: because irony refers to a variety of phenomena, people may gradually stop using the word, he argues, leaving the verbal duties it carries to sarcasm alone. I find Kreuz's approach refreshing and his list of

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contemporary studies which rebuke irony enlightening. Kreuz shows that irony is vanishing from contemporary discourse especially after September 11, but also before the event he notes disenchantment with the notion despite *Seinfeld*'s immense success.

As most psychologists, Kreuz does not dwell on philosophy. In what follows, I attempt to strengthen his argument by showing that the contemporary cultural concerns about irony were part of philosophy since irony appeared on the philosophic scene through its ascription to the arch-teacher of philosophy and its martyr, Socrates.

Contrary to what is generally assumed, the majority of philosophers were wary of irony because of its hidden hostility, which they considered unbecoming and unmanly. Opposition to its use was common immediately after Socrates's age, beginning with Aristotle and his student Theophrastus, but also in the Platonic skeptical academy, followed by the Epicureans and even by the Stoics, who venerated Socrates yet objected to irony.² The Cynics rejected irony yet for other reasons: it was too soft, its indirectness unnecessarily intellectual for the message they wished to convey.

Socrates himself is portrayed as ironic only by Plato, he is humorous and jocular in other accounts, such as Xenophon's, and described as comical in *The Clouds*, Aristophanes's play. It is because we have come to value irony in Romanticism that we prefer Plato's account over others' (Nehamas 1999, 94). In Plato's account, however, Plato's dark irony should be differentiated from Socrates's humorous irony.³ The former lies in revealing the self-deception we all partake in; as readers of Plato's dialogues, we believe that we are exempt of the faults that plague Socrates's interlocutors: in the same conditions, we like to think that we would have recognized our self-ignorance; while we smugly enjoy their fate in Socrates's hands (they had it coming!), Plato revels in our bad faith.

Irony was praised in the rhetorical tradition, by Cicero, for example; however, philosophy distances itself from rhetoric. Romanticism and post-modernism cherished additional forms of

² Irony was not associated with the comical in the debates of ancient or medieval philosophers, but rather with truth and falsity.

³ The kind of humor that Socrates used is still the object of contemporary debate amongst distinguished scholars, such as Alexander Nehamas, Gregory Vlastos, Paul Woodruff... even Karl Popper has his own opinion. See the chapter "Irony" in *The Philosophy of Humor Handbook*. Palgrave Macmillan. Forthcoming.

irony, but the Romantics were mostly poets and the post-modern litterateurs. Those who were also philosophers either shunned irony (Nietzsche) or relegated it to an inferior place in the stages in one's life (Kierkegaard); Hegel was highly critical of Romantic irony (Amir 2014). Much the same can be said about post-modern philosophers.

It is post-modern writers, like Paul de Man, and literature professors who endorsed irony and ascribed it to post-modern philosophers, who protested. As did all philosophers of the last hundred years (see Amir 2021), including the French and the German be they Nietzschean or not, deconstructionist (Derrida) or not (Adorno, but also Bataille and Deleuze, who defines his project as anti-ironic, Lyotard, Rosset, Comte-Sponville, Jankélévitch, etc....). Except for the American Richard Rorty, who uses irony in an idiosyncratic way (he takes irony to mean a personal approach to philosophy which you uphold at the same time that you partake in the public sphere), no philosopher endorses irony: Plato uses it yet does not theorize it.

Thus, irony turns out to be inconsequential for philosophy. That Kreuz shows that it is vanishing from contemporary discourse strikes me as important. That sarcasm will take over irony, as Kreuz prophesizes, seems appropriate. After all, the Cynics rejected irony in favor of sarcasm, and Diogenes, portrayed as Socrates gone mad, managed to convey his message much more effectively than did either Socrates or Plato.

References

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