

*“To Become Human Does Not  
Come That Easily”*

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“To become human does not come that easily.” So wrote Søren Kierkegaard in his journal on December 3, 1854, and by now the claim would seem to be either familiar or ridiculous.<sup>1</sup> Ridiculous in the sense that for those of us who are human, becoming human was not up to us and was thus unavoidable; for those creatures who are not human, becoming human is out of the question. There is, of course, a distinguished philosophical tradition that conceives of humanity as a task. This is the familiar sense in which being human involves not just being a member of the species but living up to an ideal. Being human is thus linked to a conception of human excellence, and thus becoming human requires getting good at being human. We see this thought reflected in such ordinary expressions as “that was a humane thing to do”: in doing the humane thing, a person might be performing an act that almost all members of the biological species would evade.<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard’s entry could then be understood as meaning that becoming human requires that one become humane, and that is a difficult task. Of course, if one wants to treat this as more than an uplifting metaphor, one needs an argument. And philosophers from Plato to the present have taken up the challenge arguing that self-constitution is indeed an achievement.<sup>3</sup> Rather than contribute to that discussion

I have been in conversation *for years* with Gabriel Lear and Candace Vogler on the topic of these lectures. There is no thought expressed here that has not been influenced by them. Obviously, and as per usual, only I am responsible for them. James Conant and I taught a series of courses on Kierkegaard together in 2001–2, and I am incredibly grateful to him not only for stimulating conversations inside and outside the classroom, but also for encouraging me to think about irony. I would like to thank Agnes Gellen Callard, David Finkelstein, Anton Ford, Michael Forster, Jonathan Galassi, Ross Harrison, Jim Hopkins, Irad Kimhi, Michael Kremer, Jennifer Lockhart, Christopher Peacocke, Jonny Thakkar, and Katharine Withy for valuable comments on a previous draft, and the King’s College Cambridge Research Centre for inviting me to present work in progress. I would also like to thank the Franke Institute for the Humanities at the University of Chicago, its director, Jim Chandler, and Dean Mark Hansen for making a Research Fellowship possible at a crucial time, and to the Fellows for a great conversation. I am especially grateful to my students at the University of Chicago: in countless conversations in many seminars over the past decade, they have taught me how to read a Kierkegaardian text. Over the past few years, I have spoken on the subject of irony to the Philosophy Departments at Berkeley, Michigan State, Notre Dame, NYU, Purdue, UCLA, and the University of South Carolina as well as to the Chicago Psychoanalytic Society and the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis. I am grateful for the many questions that continued to resonate as I wrote these lectures.

1. *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 2, *F–K*, ed. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 278.

2. See Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

3. Plato, *Platonis Rempublicam*, ed. S. R. Slings (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003); Plato, *Republic* (many translations); Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

directly, I would like to take an oblique turn. For I suspect that this claim has become too familiar. Kierkegaard is getting at something unfamiliar: it has less to do with the arduousness of a task than with the difficulty of getting the hang of it. It is not that easy to get the hang of being human—and becoming human requires that we do so. In this lecture, I would like to render this familiar claim—that becoming human does not come that easily—unfamiliar.

#### EXCAVATING KIERKEGAARDIAN IRONY

Christine Korsgaard, the contemporary philosopher who argues most thoroughly for the task-oriented nature of self-constitution, claims that our difficulty arises out of two fundamental features of our condition: the structure of human self-consciousness and the fact that we constitute ourselves via a practical identity. Given any item that enters self-conscious awareness—a temptation, desire, thought, “incentive”—we have the capacity to step back from it in reflective consciousness and ask whether it gives us reason to act (or to believe).<sup>4</sup> And for self-constitution to be a genuine possibility, Korsgaard argues, we must ask this question from the perspective of our practical identity: “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.” My practical identity commits me to norms that I must adhere to in the face of temptations and other incentives that might lead me astray. “Our ordinary ways of talking about obligation reflect this connection to identity. A century ago a European could admonish another to civilized behavior by telling him to act like a Christian. It is still true in many quarters that courage is urged on males by the injunction ‘be a man!’ Duties more obviously connected with social roles are of course enforced in this way. ‘A psychiatrist doesn’t violate the confidence of her patients.’ No ought is needed here because the normativity is built right into the role.”<sup>5</sup>

If we accept that becoming human requires that we inhabit a practical identity well, and that doing so requires both that we reflectively endorse (or criticize) the various incentives presented to consciousness and actually live by our judgment, then we can see how becoming human might

4. See, for example, Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 90–130, and *Self-Constitution*, 72, 104–5, 109, 119–20, 125–26. See also Thomas Nagel, “Universality and the Reflective Self,” in *The Sources of Normativity*, 200–209. In these lectures, when I talk about a *standard* form or model of reflective self-consciousness, I use that as a shorthand expression for the form of reflection described in these passages.

5. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 101.

be an arduous task. It can be tough work fending off those temptations that would undo our claim to be the person we are; it is, on occasion, tough work to live up to the demands that, given our practical identity, are required; and it can be tough work to hold the apparently competing demands of life together. Fidelity to oneself is not for the fainthearted. Thus, we do have here an interpretation of what it might mean for becoming human of being not that easy.

However, this does not seem to be the difficulty Kierkegaard is talking about. In that journal entry he writes:

In what did Socrates' irony really lie? In expressions and turns of speech, etc.? No, such trivialities, even his virtuosity in talking ironically, such things do not make a Socrates. No, his whole existence is and was irony; whereas the entire contemporary population of farm hands and business men and so on, all those thousands, were perfectly sure of being human and knowing what it means to be a human being, Socrates was beneath them (ironically) and occupied himself with the problem—what does it mean to be a human being? He thereby expressed that actually the *Trieben* of those thousands was a hallucination, tomfoolery, a ruckus, a hubbub, busyness. . . . Socrates doubted that one is a human being by birth; to become human or to learn what it means to be human does not come that easily.<sup>6</sup>

The suggestion here is *not* that if only we would reflect on what our practical identity already commits us to, then we would be taking on the difficult task of becoming human. The contrast Kierkegaard is drawing is not between unreflective and reflective life. Rather, it is between "the entire contemporary population" and Socrates—and to understand the depth of Kierkegaard's point, it is crucial not to caricature the population.

There is plenty of reflection in the contemporary population's goings-on. Ordinary life is constituted by people assuming practical identities and then, in reflection, asking what is required of them. And Plato dramatizes the reflectiveness of ordinary life when, at the beginning of the *Republic*, Socrates goes to the home of Cephalus, a wealthy businessman who enjoys conversation. Cephalus makes it clear that not only does he have a practical identity as a businessman, but he has been careful in life to stick to its norms. His grandfather had been wealthy, through inheritance

6. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals*, 278.

and business acumen, but his father had lost the fortune. Cephalus has spent his life rebuilding the family fortune back up (1.330a–b). And when Socrates asks him, in reflective conversation, “What do you think is the greatest good you’ve received from being very wealthy?” Cephalus has a remarkable answer, clearly an outcome of reflective self-questioning (1.330d–331b). Cephalus is a man with a practical identity, a person who has had to stick to its norms in the face of challenges, and someone who has thought about what it all means. Yet, as he leaves the conversation to make a religious sacrifice, it is clear that this is part of the “hubbub, busyness” that Socrates’ life exposes.

The contrast Kierkegaard is drawing is between Socrates, whose “whole existence is and was irony,” and everyone else. We caricature everyone else if we think of them all as unreflectively going through automatic routines. Obviously, we do not yet know what Socrates’ irony consists in. But Kierkegaard is explicit that it is not—as the contemporary world would have it—about witty turns of speech, or even about saying the opposite of what one means. Irony is a form of existence. The contrast Kierkegaard draws is with everyone else who is “*perfectly sure* of being human and knowing what it means to be a human being.” So irony would seem to be a form of not being perfectly sure—an insecurity about being human that is at once constitutive of becoming human and so remarkable that, in all of Athens, only Socrates embodied it. The important point for now is that the perfectly sure versus not perfectly sure divide does not coincide with the division between unreflective and reflective life. At least some of those who are perfectly sure are quite capable of reflecting on the demands of their practical identity. Indeed, that very reflection may manifest their confidence. So the mere fact of reflection on the basis of one’s practical identity is not sufficient to take one out of the “hubbub, busyness” that Kierkegaard describes.

It would seem then that the route out of this busyness is not a trivial matter. Kierkegaard names it irony, and he ascribes it to himself as well as to Socrates:

My entire existence is really the deepest irony.

To travel to South America, to descend into subterranean caves to excavate the remains of extinct animal types and antediluvian fossils—in this there is nothing ironic, for the animals extant there now do not pretend to be the same animals.

But to excavate in the middle of “Christendom” the types of being a Christian, which in relation to present Christians are somewhat like

the bones of extinct animals to animals living now—this is the most intense irony—the irony of assuming Christianity exists at the same time that there are one thousand preachers robed in velvet and silk and millions of Christians who beget Christians, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

Irony does seem to arise here from some feature of practical identity—in this case, from being a Christian. One can easily read this passage as a complaint about historical transmission—that long ago there were Christians, something got lost, and now there are only impostors—but one thereby misses the irony. One can make that complaint in the flat-footed way I just did. Rather, the occasion for irony arises from trying to figure out the types of being a Christian by excavating “*in the middle of Christendom.*” Kierkegaard used *Christendom* to refer to socially established institutions of Christianity, the ways in which understandings of Christianity are embedded in social rituals, customs, and practices.<sup>8</sup> The picture here is of me trying to reflect on the types of being a Christian by consulting available church histories, the received accounts of the division of the church into sects, and available accounts in sermons, books, editorials, and articles about Christian life. Again, it is easy enough to caricature my activity—choosing which church to join as though I were inspecting different species in the Galápagos—but the power of irony emerges when one portrays me as a more serious figure. So, I am engaged in what I take to be the practical task of living up to the demands of a practical identity—being a Christian—but I am doing so by working my way through Christendom. Note that this activity is essentially reflective—I am stepping back from ordinary life and asking what a properly Christian life consists in—and it may be undertaken in a genuine mood of sincerity and with intellectual sophistication. The problem is that, however thoughtful and sincere the questioning is, the reflection itself is a manifestation of the assumption that Christianity exists. It is a form of being “perfectly sure.” This shows itself in my reliance on Christendom to give me the materials for my reflection. But what if Christianity does not exist? What if nothing in the world—including this activity of reflection—answers to the call of Christian life? Then my reflection on my practical identity via an excavation of Christendom would be mere hubbub, busyness.

7. *Ibid.*, 277.

8. This would include what Charles Taylor has called the social imaginary of Christianity: shared images, fantasies, and myths that are embedded in and elaborate those rituals and customs. See Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

The Christendom of Kierkegaard's Europe no longer exists; and I expect this audience to be largely secular, and those that do live a religious life will do so in different ways. Thus, *we* can step back from that Christendom and treat it as an object for reflective consideration of the standard type. But if *we were* inhabitants of that Christendom, reflection would be possible, reflection on our practical identity as Christians would be possible, reflection on Christianity would be possible—but all of this would be further acts within Christendom. Christendom aims to be (and when it is vibrant, it for the most part is) *closed under reflection*: for its inhabitants, reflection is possible, even encouraged, but is not itself sufficient to get one outside it.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere Kierkegaard called Christendom a “dreadful illusion,” and I take it he is talking not only about its degree of falsity but its all-encompassing nature.<sup>10</sup> The illusion of Christendom is that it is the world of Christianity—that when it comes to Christianity, there is no outside—and its success as illusion thus depends on its ability to metabolize and contain reflection on Christian life. One can thus easily see that when a culture is in the grip of a vibrant illusion, philosophical discourse about our ability to step back in reflection can function as ideology, reinforcing our confinement in the name of liberating us from it.

And I see no reason for assuming that for any illusion there will always be discrepancies, disagreements, contradictions within it such that reflecting on them will be sufficient to get us out of them. When Christendom was vibrant there were plenty of discrepancies, disagreements, and contradictions—and reflecting on them was the stuff of Christendom. I suspect that the thought that reflective consciousness ought in principle to be able to recognize an illusion from the inside derives not only from the well-known narratives of Hegel and Marx but also from the plausible thought that if we are to give content to the idea of something's being an illusion, we need to give content to the idea of our coming to recognize it as illusion. However, one can accept that thought and nevertheless be skeptical that reflection is the mode of recognition. On occasion we fall in love, then we fall out of love, and then we give ourselves reasons for why our loved failed. On occasion we fall into illusion, and over time illusions

9. The claim then is not that it is absolutely impossible to use reflection to break out of, say, Christendom, but there are practices and institutions that contain and metabolize reflections upon them, so that the thought that, in reflection, one is thereby stepping back from the practice itself may itself be illusion.

10. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View on My Work as an Author*, ed. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 41–44. He also calls it an enormous illusion, a delusion (48–49).

may lose their grip and then we can see contradictions, discrepancies, and disagreements as reasons for giving it up. What grounds our confidence that it is reflection that leads us to give up the illusion, rather than the illusion's fading that leads us to formulate (self-deceptive) rationalizations?

However that may be, it is precisely the moment when reflective consciousness unwittingly participates in the illusion that is the occasion for "the most intense irony"—at least, in Kierkegaard's opinion. The instance that concerned him was the one he took to be of greatest practical importance, to himself and his neighbors: trying to figure out how to be a Christian. Notice that the occasion for irony arises not merely for the vain and the hypocritical, the shallow and the silly; even if I am smart and sincerely want to think about how to be a Christian, if I do so by excavating Christendom—that is, engaging in reflection within Christendom—that too is an occasion for irony. And this at least suggests that when a person is misleading himself about the point of his own reflective engagement, irony may be of help. Thus, it behooves us to understand what Kierkegaard took irony to be.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF IRONY

To get clear on what irony is, I want to distinguish *the experience of irony* from the development of a *capacity for irony*, and to distinguish those from what Kierkegaard calls *ironic existence*. In a nutshell, the experience of irony is a peculiar experience that is essentially first-personal: not simply in the sense that all experience is the experience of some I, but that in having an experience of irony I experience myself as confronted by that very experience. Developing the capacity for irony is developing the capacity to occasion an experience of irony (in oneself or in another).

11. A reader might wonder: why start an inquiry into irony with a single journal entry rather than a historical or critical survey of all the various interpretations? I do not think the latter strategy works, for it tends to flatten an understanding of irony's possibilities. And by now *irony* has been used for pretty much everything. To take one example, the distinguished literary critic Cleanth Brooks said that irony is "the most general term we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context." Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), 191. And in "Irony as a Principle of Structure," he says, "The obvious warping of a statement by the context we characterize as 'ironical.'" <http://74.125.155.132/scholar?q=cache:xfe718hSgoJ:scholar.google.com/+Irony+as+a+principle+of+structure&hl=en>. One would be better off never to have read these sentences, but, if one does, they should be in a footnote surrounded with warnings and lamentations. For those who do want a survey, among the best are D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969); Norman Knox, *The Word "Irony" and Its Context, 1500–1755* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1961); Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); and Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

We tend to think casually of “the ironist” as someone who is able to make certain forms of witty remarks, perhaps saying the opposite of what he means, of remaining detached by undercutting any manifestation of seriousness. This, I shall argue, is a derivative form, and the deeper form of ironist is one who has the capacity to occasion an experience of irony. Ironic existence is whatever it is that is involved in turning this capacity for irony into a human excellence: the capacity for deploying irony in the right way at the right time in the living of a distinctively human life. It is ironic existence that is the not-that-easy of becoming human. In this section, I want to focus on the experience of irony.

To bring the idea to light, Kierkegaard makes a constitutive contrast using an archaeological metaphor; but we do not need to go on an imagined trip or even carry out an imagined dig. If, say, a duck is waddling across the courtyard, it does not matter whether there are bones of its ancient ancestors buried in the ground. The reason is that the duck, in its waddle, is not thereby pretending to be the same as its ancestors. Here is the pivot point of irony: it becomes possible when one encounters animals who pretend.

When Kierkegaard says that other animals do not pretend, he is not making a point about make-believe. Rather, he is using *pretend* in the older sense of *put oneself forward* or *make a claim*.<sup>12</sup> Think of the pretender to a throne: she is someone putting herself forward as the legitimate heir. Now in the most elemental sense, pretense goes to the heart of human agency. Even in our simplest acts, pretense is there, at least as a potentiality. You see me bent over and ask, “What are you doing?” and I say, “Tying my shoes.” Right there in that simple answer I am making a claim about what I am up to, in this case one in which I have nonobservational first-person authority.<sup>13</sup> Human self-consciousness is constituted by our capacity to pretend in this literal and nonpejorative sense: in general we can say what we are doing, and in doing *that* we are making a claim about what we are up to. Of course, the capacity for pretense opens out in myriad ways: in occupying social roles, maintaining a sense of identity, declaring our beliefs, and so on. And so, practical identity as Korsgaard understands it is a species of pretense in Kierkegaard’s sense.

12. *Oxford English Dictionary* online. The Danish is *udgive sig . . . for*, literally “give themselves out to be.” On its own *udgive* is “publish,” “to put something out there.” With *for* the meaning is “present themselves as.” Thus, *udgive sig for* is not normally predicated of animals. My thanks to David Possen for help with the Danish.

13. Elizabeth Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), esp. 8–9.

It is a regular feature of pretense that, as we put ourselves forward in one way or another, we tend to do so in terms of established social understandings and practices.<sup>14</sup> Our practical identities tend to be formulated as variations of available social roles.

Social roles provide historically determinate, culturally local accounts of various ways in which one might be good at being a human being. So, for instance, given that humans are essentially social animals, who spend a comparatively long time developing, who are born largely in ignorance of the world into which they are born, it is at least plausible that the category of *teacher* should provide one route of human well-being. A teacher, broadly construed, would be someone who can help his neighbors learn. This is at least a plausible candidate for one way of being good at being human, and thus one way of becoming human. A social role would be a socially available way of putting oneself forward as a teacher. So, for instance, one way of being a teacher would be to be a *professor*. In the United States and Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century there is a fairly well-established range of teaching styles—in seminar, tutorial, and lecture course—and a fairly well-established range of evaluative techniques, such as grades. There is even a range of dress you can expect a professor to wear, a way of being in front of a lectern and delivering a paper. And there are socially acceptable ways of demurring from the role: special ways of not wearing the right clothes, not giving a standard talk. That, too, can be part of the social pretense. But in this variety of socially recognized ways, I put myself forward *as* a professor. In this way a whole range of activity—including dress, mannerisms, a sense of pride and shame—can all count as pretense in that they are all ways of putting oneself forward *as* a professor. Since even our simplest acts are regularly embedded in our sense of who we are, the possibility of irony is pervasive. Note that putting oneself forward does not on any given occasion require that I say anything: I may put myself forward as professor in the way I hunch my shoulders, order a glass of wine, in my choice of shoes, socks, and glasses. Conversely, when I do put myself forward verbally, it need not be in any explicit statement to that effect. It is right there is such ordinary statements as "I've switched to a Mac."

The possibility of irony arises when a gap opens between pretense as it is made available in a social practice and an aspiration or ideal that, on the one hand, is embedded in the pretense—indeed, expresses what the

14. See Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

pretense is all about—but that, on the other hand, seems to transcend the life and the social practice in which that pretense is made. The pretense seems at once to capture and miss the aspiration. That is, in putting myself forward as a teacher—or, whatever the relevant practical identity—I simultaneously instantiate a determinate way of embodying the identity and fall dramatically short of the very ideals that I have, until now, assumed to constitute the identity. Note that thus far we have only captured a condition that makes the experience of irony possible. The cases that primarily concerned Kierkegaard were not of individual hypocrisy, but ones in which the individual was an able representative of a social practice that itself fell short. As we have seen before, to grasp the power of Kierkegaard's critique, it is crucial not to caricature Christendom. Obviously, there were vain priests within Christendom who cut a ridiculous figure, and the spiritless bourgeois who went to church on Sunday in order to be seen. And Kierkegaard did lampoon them. But Christendom also included self-conscious and disputed histories of the church, conflicts about what it is to be Christian, and disputes about practices, rituals, ceremonies as well as about how to interpret them. Christendom contained the Reformation and division into sects. And thus there are people within Christendom asking tough questions about what it is to be Christian. So Christendom itself contains a discomfort, disagreement, and reflection on its own practice. It is thus a mistake—and it diminishes Kierkegaard's point—to think of Christendom as unreflective or unself-critical. Christendom is the social pretense of Christianity, the *myriad* ways in which the social world and its inhabitants put themselves forward as Christian. The problem would not be so difficult and irony would not be so important if reflection and criticism were not already part of the social practice, in this case Christendom. What we need to understand is how Kierkegaardian irony is not captured by any of these myriad forms or calls to self-consciousness.

Kierkegaard's fundamental ironic question is: "In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?" Or, to put it more bluntly, "Among all Christians, is there a Christian?" It is a striking fact about us that we can immediately hear that there is a question being asked, rather than a meaningless repetition. The form of the question is a tautology, yet we do not hear it *as* a tautology, and it is, I think, a revealing fact about us that this should be so. The question asks of a purported totality whether *any* of its members live up to the aspirations that purportedly characterize the totality. In this case, the question asks whether among all who understand themselves

as Christian there is anyone who is living up to the requirements of Christian life.

If, by contrast, we were to ask, "Among all the ducks, is there a duck?" it is not clear what, if anything, is being asked. Unlike human life, duck life does not involve pretense: ducks do not make claims for themselves; they do not put themselves forward *as* anything at all. Of course, *we* may make claims for the ducks: a master chef standing in front of a pond and planning this evening's *canard à l'orange* may utter just such a sentence, but it would not be based on any claims the ducks were making. Thus, there is no room for a gap opening between their pretense and aspiration.<sup>15</sup> And that is why, though we can provide an unusual context in which the sentence does make sense, on first hearing it strikes us as strange. Duckly life does not have a place in it for practical reflection, and thus there is no place for irony to take hold. Notice that ducks are social animals, and, in their sociality, they do adhere to norms. On occasion a duck will fail in the social requirements of duckly life. Still, none of this opens up ducks to the possibility of irony, because none of this involves making a claim about what they are up to. By contrast, it is characteristic of human life, either explicitly or in our behavior, that we do make claims about who we are and the shape of our lives. This quintessentially human activity of putting oneself forward as a certain kind of person can, in certain circumstances, set us up for the fall: this can occur when the pretense simultaneously expresses and falls short of its own aspiration. Irony, for Kierkegaard, is the activity of bringing this falling short to light *in a way that is meant to grab us*.

It is this way of being grabbed (when we are) that is so tricky to capture, yet is crucial to the experience of irony. The ironic question on its own is neither necessary nor sufficient to generate an experience of irony—and, as we shall see, it is important that this should be so. If, for example, Christendom were fairly obviously a run-down institution, then

15. To be sure, one can imagine circumstances in which this form of question does make sense in nonhuman animal life. For instance, if all the remaining tigers in the world existed in captivity, one might ask, "Among all tigers, is there a tiger?" One would be asking whether the actually existing tigers were able to live a life appropriate to their species. In this case there would be no pretense, but captivity would impose conditions about which it would make sense to ask whether it was any longer possible to live a tiger's life. A gap would have opened between mere biological life and the possibility of flourishing as a tiger. But the extraordinary conditions needed for this question to make sense show that, in general, it does not make sense to think of nonhuman animals as falling short in their own lives. This is because the identity of other species does not depend on their making claims about their identity; it does not depend on their making any claims at all. (I am indebted to Professor Marian David of Notre Dame for asking me the question to which this is my response.)

one might use a sentence like “In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?” in an absolutely straightforward reflection in which one steps back from the practices and questions them in the familiar way. One might even call this reflection “ironic”—but, philosophically speaking, one would be using the term in a derivative sense. That is, one would be missing the philosophically significant sense of irony that (I think) Kierkegaard is trying to capture and provoke. And, by calling that turn of phrase irony, one might thereby hide from oneself that anything is missing.

So, how might a question like the previous one be an occasion for an experience of irony? Let us develop Kierkegaard’s example. A hallmark of Christian life is loving one’s neighbor as oneself. The difficult part, the reason irony is needed, is that Christendom ostensibly already contains this teaching—*as well as* an understanding of what it is to fall short. Indeed, there are *within Christendom* many opportunities to reflect on what it means to love one’s neighbor, reflect on how well or poorly one is living up to the ideal, and so on. This is a crucial part of the problem: reflection is a process that can be used in the service of keeping one firmly ensconced within Christendom. Christendom even contains its own (restricted) version of irony. I spend Sunday morning listening to a sermon about ways we fail to live up to that ideal. I leave the church and pass a beggar on the street; he irritates me; then I remember the priest’s sermon. I turn around and give the beggar a dollar. He says, “You must be listening to your priest.” What is he saying? We will never know. But I may understand him in a number of different ways. I may, first, take him simply to be remarking that it is a memory of the priest’s words that pricked my conscience. Or I may take him to be speaking ironically in the familiar sense of exuding sarcasm about the paltry nature of my donation. He is telling me in his “ironic” way—saying the opposite of what he means in a way that I can recognize—that I should have given him a twenty. So far, we have not left Christendom: my sense of falling short of the ideal and my sense of his “irony” both fall within received social understandings. But suppose now that it occurs to me that I *have* learned from my priest *and that is my problem!*

Here, the manner of this occurring is all-important: I am shaken. It is not merely that I have a sincere propositional thought with this content; it is that the having of this thought is the occasion for disruption and disorientation. It is as though Christianity has *come back* to show me that *everything* I have hitherto taken a Christian life to be is ersatz, a shadow. Even when I am pricked by conscience and experience myself

falling short—that *entire package* I learned in Christendom bears at best a comical relation to what it would actually be to follow Jesus's teaching. Notice, I use the same terms as I used before, but I am disoriented with respect to them; they seem strange yet compelling.

I may not yet know in any detail what the requirements of loving one's neighbor are; I may have only the barest inkling of the transformations I would have to undergo to be someone capable of such love; but at the same time I vividly recognize that the range of possibilities that Christendom has put forward as the field of loving one's neighbor is wildly inadequate to the task. In that sense, irony breaks open a false world of possibilities by confronting one with a practical necessity. The form of this confrontation is disruption: disruption of my practical identity as a Christian, disruption of my practical knowledge of how to live as a Christian.

So when I get to an ironic question like "Among all those who love their neighbors, does anyone love his neighbor?" for it to function as a genuine occasion for irony, it must shed its ordinary garb of a tame Sunday sermon, must lose its familiar sense of an appeal to a standard act of reflection. Indeed, when the question reaches its target, it shows our standard activities of reflection to be ways of avoiding what (we now realize) the ideal calls us to. It is as though an abyss opens between our previous understanding and our dawning sense of an ideal to which we take ourselves already to be committed. This is the strangeness of irony: we seem to be called to an ideal that transcends our ordinary understanding, yet to which we now experience ourselves as already committed.

The experience of irony thus seems to be a peculiar species of uncanniness—in the sense that something that has been familiar returns to me as strange and unfamiliar.<sup>16</sup> And in its return it disrupts my world, for part of what it is to inhabit a world is to be able to locate familiar things in familiar places. Encountering strange things per se need not be world disrupting, but coming to experience what has been familiar as utterly unfamiliar is a sign that one no longer knows one's way about. And the experience of uncanniness is enhanced dramatically when what

16. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 17:219–52; Ernst Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," pts. 1 and 2, *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wöchenschrift* 8, no. 22 (1906): 195–98; 8, no. 23: 203–5. Translated by Roy Sellars as "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," [http://www.cpmg.org.br/artigos/on\\_the\\_psychology\\_of\\_the\\_uncanny.pdf](http://www.cpmg.org.br/artigos/on_the_psychology_of_the_uncanny.pdf). For an insightful account of Heidegger's treatment of uncanniness, see Katharine Withy, "Heidegger on Being Uncanny" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 2009).

is returning to me as unfamiliar is what, until now, I have taken to be my practical identity.

This is what makes irony compelling. It is the mirror image of an oracle. An oracle begins with an outside source telling a person who he is in terms he at first finds alien and enigmatic. Then there is an unsettling process of familiarization: the person comes to understand what the oracle means as he comes to recognize that he is its embodiment. And, of course, the recognition of the meaning of the oracle represents more than an increase in propositional knowledge—for example, that I am the one who murdered his father and married his mother. It is the occasion for a more or less massive disruption of my sense of who I am, and a disorientation in a world that, until now, had been familiar. With this robust form of irony, the movement is in the opposite direction: a person gives a familiar designation to himself. He takes on a practical identity. As the irony unfolds, not only does the designation become weirdly unfamiliar: one suddenly experiences oneself as called to one-knows-not-what, though one would use the same language as before, to loving one's neighbor as oneself.

Oracles regularly depend for their power on the structure and ambiguity of their wording, so it is worth noting that the basic form of the ironic question has the structure of uncanniness. The first occurrence of the term in the sentence "Among all Christians . . ." gives us the pretense, the familiar. But the second occurrence that gives the aspiration, ". . . is there a Christian?" is also the repetition and return of Christianity, this time as strange, enigmatic, unfamiliar. Of course, the ironic question on its own does not guarantee ironic uptake—the experience of irony. But when the experience does occur, it has the structure of uncanniness.

#### TEACHING

I have been using Kierkegaard's example of Christendom, but the possibility for irony does not depend on the religious nature of the example. So let me give a secular example. We have already seen that the experience of irony has basically two moments: First, there is the bringing out of a gap between pretense and pretense-transcending aspiration. Second, there is an experience of ironic uptake that, I have suggested, is a peculiar species of uncanniness. And it is time to bring into relief a crucial feature of irony that has been in the background: namely, that in the paradigm case, it is radically first-personal, present tense. Of course, conversation with another—say, with Socrates—might be an occasion for an ironic experience, just as reading Descartes' *Meditations* might be an occasion to

go through the cogito. But just as no one else can go through the cogito for me, similarly with irony: in the paradigm case, for each I, irony is something *that disrupts me now*. The fact that ironic experience is paradigmatically first person, present tense may at first seem strange because the basic form of the ironic question does not explicitly have the first-person pronoun in it. However, for the question to hit its target—for it to occasion ironic uptake—for some particular I, there must be a peculiar first-personal disruption.

So, I am sitting at home in the evening grading papers, and I begin to wonder what this has to do with actually teaching my students. For a while, this is a normal reflection in which I step back and wonder about the value of my activity. I still have a sense of what the ideal is; I am just reflecting on how well the activity of grading contributes to it. I decide to talk this over with my colleagues at a department meeting: perhaps we can figure out a better way to evaluate students, one more in line with our core function of teaching. This sort of reflection is part and parcel of inhabiting a practical identity. Thus far I am at the level of reflection that might lead me to engage in educational reform. But then things get out of hand. I am *struck* by teaching in a way that disrupts my normal self-understanding of what it is to teach (which includes normal reflection on teaching). This is not a continuation of my practical reasoning; it is a disruption of it. It is more like vertigo than a process of stepping back to reflect. When it comes to previous received understandings of teaching—even those that have been reflectively questioned and adjusted in the normal ways—*all bets are off*. No doubt, I can still use general phrases like “helping my students to develop”: but such phrases have become enigmatic, open-ended, oracular. They have become signifiers whose content I no longer grasp in any but the most open-ended way. I no longer know who my “students” are, let alone what it would be to “help them develop.” Are my students the individuals coming into my classroom at the appointed time . . . or are they to be located elsewhere? Are they in the younger generation . . . or are they my age or older? Might they come along in a different generation altogether . . . maybe in the next century? And if my classroom is where my students are, where is my classroom? What am I to make of the room I actually do walk into now? Where should I be to encounter my students? What would it be to *encounter* them? And if I were to encounter them, what would it be to help them, rather than harm them? What is development? Already I have enough questions to last a lifetime, and I do not even know where to begin.

This is a different order of concern from something that might at first look a lot like it. In a different mode, a normal mode, I consider myself a serious teacher. It might take me a lifetime of practice before I really get good at it. I am dedicated to this practical identity. I treat teaching as a master craft, an arduous but noble calling, and even after all these years, I still think of myself as an apprentice, en route. On occasion I do wonder about those around me who assume that teaching is easy, or even those who find it difficult, but assume they know what it is: what *are* they up to? Nevertheless, in this reflective and questioning mode, I still have a fairly determinate sense of the path I am on. Of course, the path essentially involves reflective questioning of what I am doing, and as a result of the questioning I may alter my direction one way or another. Yet I know what to do today and tomorrow, and I trust that if I keep practicing and developing my skills, I will get better at it. Maybe I will even get good at it. In this mode, I act as though I have practical knowledge of how to go about acquiring the skill, even if, in my view, true mastery lies off in the future.

By contrast, in the ironic moment, my *practical knowledge* is disrupted: I can no longer say in any detail what the requirements of teaching consist in, nor do I have any idea what to do next. I am also living through a breakdown in *practical intelligibility*: I can no longer make sense of myself (to myself, and thus can no longer put myself forward to others) in terms of my practical identity. That I have lost a sense of *what it means* to be a teacher is revealed by the fact that I can now no longer make sense of what I have been up to. That is, I can certainly see that in the past I was adhering to established norms of teaching—or standing back and questioning them in recognized ways. In *that* sense, my past continues to be intelligible to me. But I now have this question: what does *any of that* have to do with *teaching*? And if I cannot answer that question, my previous activities now look like hubbub, busyness, confusion. I have lost a sense of how my understanding of my past gives me any basis for what to do next. That is why, in the ironic moment, I am called to a halt. Nothing any longer makes sense to me as the next step I might take *as a teacher*. Until this moment of ironic disruption, I had taken various activities to be unproblematic manifestations of my practical identity. Even in this moment, I might have no difficulty understanding what my practical identity requires, just so long as practical identity is equated with social pretense, or some reflected-upon variant. My problem is that I no longer understand what practical identity so construed has to do with my practical identity (properly understood).

Ironic disruption is thus a species of uncanniness: it is an *unheimlich* maneuver. The life and identity that I have hitherto taken as familiar have suddenly become unfamiliar. However, there is this difference: in an ordinary experience of the uncanny, there is mere disruption; the familiar is suddenly and disruptively experienced as unfamiliar. What is peculiar to irony is that it manifests passion for a certain direction. It is because I care about teaching that I have come to a halt as a teacher. Coming to a halt in a moment of ironic uncanniness is how I manifest—in that moment—that teaching matters to me. I have a strong desire to be moving in a certain direction—that is, in the direction of becoming and being a teacher—but I lack orientation. Thus, the experience of irony is an experience of *would-be-directed* uncanniness. That is, an experience of standard-issue uncanniness may give us goose bumps or churn our stomachs; the experience of ironic uncanniness, by contrast, is more like losing the ground beneath one's feet: one longs to go in a certain direction, but one no longer knows where one is standing, if one is standing, or which direction is the right direction. In this paradigm example, ironic uncanniness is a manifestation of utter seriousness and commitment (in this case, to teaching), not its opposite.<sup>17</sup> As Johannes Climacus, one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors, puts it, "From the fact that irony is

17. It is worth comparing this experience to the illusions that Wittgenstein diagnosed, especially as that issue has been taken up in contemporary philosophical literature. See Cora Diamond, "Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*," in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 179–204, esp. 184–85; John McDowell, "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 198–218; Alice Crary, introduction to *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 1–26; and James Conant, "Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism," in *ibid.*, 31–142. As Crary sums up Diamond's interpretation: "Her point in speaking of illusion here is that Wittgenstein should be understood as saying that, when we envision ourselves occupying a transcendent perspective on language, we do not wind up saying anything coherent about the way things stand. . . . Rather, he wishes us to see that we do not succeed in articulating any thoughts and that the idea of a perspective is properly characterized as creating the illusion of understanding words we want to utter in philosophy" (5). That is, the illusion is an illusion of understanding derived from an implicit, unexamined fantasy of being able to adopt a transcendent perspective on language, logic, or life. By contrast, the moment of ironic experience could function as a moment of disruption of such an illusion. The version "What does any of this have to do with *teaching*?" that is genuinely uncanny and ironic is not the adoption of any perspective—certainly not the fantasy of adopting a transcendent perspective on the Platonic form of teaching—but, rather, the experience of breakdown in the perspective one has hitherto taken oneself to have. Now the moment of ironic disruption might be followed by anything at all—including the creation of an illusion of a transcendent perspective, say, on teaching. This would be a paradigmatic instance of an intellectual defense. It should not be conflated with the experience of irony itself.

present, it does not follow that earnestness is excluded. That is something only assistant professors assume.”<sup>18</sup>

It is often assumed that irony is a form of detachment. From the perspective of those who are embedded in the social pretense—who just do not get what is going on with me—it may well *appear* that irony is a form of detachment, a lack of commitment or seriousness. After all, it is a peculiar form of detachment *from the social pretense*. And, as we shall see, it may be the occasion for a peculiar form of reattachment. But if, in one’s blinkered view, social pretense is all there is, then it is easy to view irony as it regularly is viewed. “Lear hasn’t handed in his grades—typical; and now he’s jabbering on about not knowing how to grade. *Of course* he knows how to grade; he’s just being ironic. It would be better if we had a colleague who was committed to teaching.” To the socially embedded, it is precisely this manifestation of commitment that will appear as lack of commitment—perhaps as dissembling or as sarcasm. (That is, of course, precisely how Socrates seemed to some of his interlocutors.)

If we get away from misleading appearance, and try to capture what is really going on with me, the language that suggests itself is that of Platonic Eros: I am *struck* by teaching—by an intimation of its goodness, its fundamental significance—and am filled with longing to grasp what it is and incorporate it into my life. I can no longer simply live with the available social understandings of teaching; if I am to return to them, it must be in a different way. Thus, the initial intuition is that there must be something more to teaching than what is available in social pretense. Irony is thus an outbreak (or initiation) of pretense-transcending aspiring. The experience of ironic uncanniness is the form that pretense-transcending aspiring takes. Because there is embodied in this experience an itch for direction—an experience of uncanny, enigmatic longing—it is appropriate to conceive the experience of irony as an experience of *erotic uncanniness*.

Plato gave this experience a mythical and metaphysical interpretation. A person is struck by beauty here on earth and is driven out of his mind because he is reminded of the true beauty of the transcendent forms. This is the “greatest of goods,” Socrates tells us: “God-sent madness is a finer thing than man-made sanity” (*Phaedrus* 244a–d, 245b–c, 249d–e). Platonic metaphysics has been out of fashion, and thus there is a tendency

18. Johannes Climacus (pseudonymous author of Søren Kierkegaard), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Søren Kierkegaard and trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 277n.

to treat Plato’s account of this experience as though it were at best an intriguing moment in the history of philosophy. Plato emphasizes the importance of the disruptive, disorienting experience as that from which philosophical activity emerges.<sup>19</sup> I think he is right that such moments of disruption are philosophically significant: thus, if we are not willing (or not ready) to accept his metaphysical account, it is incumbent upon us to find another. Though Socrates is describing an intense moment of god-sent madness—and thus his language is dramatic—the structure of the experience fits the ironic uncanniness I have been trying to isolate. Those who are struck in this way “do not know what has happened to them for lack of clear perception” (250a–b). They are troubled by “the strangeness (*atopia*) of their condition” (251e), but they also show “contempt for all the accepted standards of propriety and good taste”—that is, for the norms of social pretense. Yet all along “they follow the scent from within themselves to the discovery of the nature of their own god” (252e–253a). If we demythologize this point and put it in the context of the example I have been developing, it looks like this: I have already taken on the practical identity of a teacher. I have internalized its values. Its principles are to some extent within me. This is the “scent from within”—and precisely by following the values of my practical identity, reflection on its norms, and on how well or badly I live up to them, I am led to a breakdown in these normal goings-on. There is something uncanny about, of all things, teaching. It *seems* as though there is something about teaching that transcends (what now seems like) the dross of social practice. And there is something about my practical identity that breaks my practical identity apart: it seems larger than, disruptive of, itself. This is the experience of irony.

Call this an existential crisis if you will, but this is not how the expression is normally used. In—forgive the expression—a normal existential crisis, life comes to seem empty, and I throw it all overboard in order to do something dramatically different. Perhaps I move to the Arctic to take up the life of a hunter-gatherer.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, in the ironic experience, it is my *fidelity* to teaching that has brought my teacherly activities into question. For a similar reason, irony also differs from the experience of

19. See, for example, Socrates’ account of how the prisoners in the Cave break their bonds (*Republic* VII, 515c–d). The prisoner is *suddenly* (ἐξαφνης) compelled to stand up (515c6) and is pained and puzzled (ἀπορεῖν) to turn around (d6). And see Alcibiades’ description of Socrates’ disruptive effect upon him in *Symposium*, 215d–216d.

20. See Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers, and the Shaping of the World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

absurdity that Thomas Nagel describes.<sup>21</sup> It is not an experience of the meaninglessness of life so much as of its value: it is because my life as a teacher matters to me that I am disrupted. Nagel argues that the experience of absurdity arises from an inherent feature of the standard form of reflective self-consciousness: that we are able to step back from daily life and view it “with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand.”<sup>22</sup> On this view, reflective consciousness itself has no commitments; it is just a detached observer of commitment. I suspect there is idealization in this picture of reflection: that in seeing ourselves in the humble position of an ant, we thereby give ourselves a God’s-eye perspective. In any case, ironic experience, by contrast, is a peculiar form of *committed* reflection.

I have been describing a dramatic moment to bring the large-scale structure of irony into view, but I believe there are petite moments of ironic uncanniness that are over almost as soon as they begin. These moments happen to us, and we get over them quickly and move on, remembering at best a shadow of their occurrence. This is of more than psychological significance. It is not peculiar to me that such an ironic moment could occur—and there is more to be learned from this moment than that at any moment any one of us could go nuts. There is a question of the philosophical significance of the possibility of such a moment. The weakest claim one might make is that this moment shows that practical identity has a certain instability built into it. It seems internal to the concept of *teacher*, for example, that, on the one hand, it must be realized and realizable in social practices that establish and maintain its norms (including revisions based on reflective criticism), but, on the other hand, there is also the possibility of disrupting one’s sense of the validity of that practice in the name of the very norms the practice was meant to establish. But, as I shall argue, a stronger claim is warranted: namely, developing a capacity for ironic disruption may be a manifestation of seriousness about one’s practical identity. It is not merely a disruption of one’s practical identity; it is a form of loyalty to it. So, my ironic experience with teaching manifests an inchoate intimation that there is something valuable about teaching—something excellent as a way of being human—that is not quite caught in contemporary social pretense or in normal forms of questioning that pretense. This is not social critique. No doubt, a social critic with good rhetorical skills might deploy irony to shake his listeners up

21. Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 11–23.

22. *Ibid.*, 15.

in the name of the cause she wishes to advance. But it is a mistake to think that if we just got our social practice—say, of teaching—into good shape, there would no longer be room for ironic disruption of practical identity. It is constitutive of our life with the concepts with which we understand ourselves that they are subject to ironic disruption.

#### PLATO'S SOCRATES ON PRACTICAL IDENTITY

Kierkegaard took inspiration from Plato's Socrates, and we can certainly see this form of ironic questioning of practical identity in the dialogues. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates asks, "Among all politicians (in Athens) is there a single politician?" (513e–521e). His answer is that no one in the entire cohort of those who put themselves forward as politicians qualifies, nor do those whom we standardly take to have been great politicians, like Pericles, for none of them has genuinely been concerned with making the citizens better. "I am one of the few Athenians—not to say the only one—who understands the real political craft and practice politics—the only one among people now" (521d).

Similarly with rhetoric, Socrates asks "Among all rhetoricians is there a single rhetorician?" (502d–504a). His answer again is that no one who puts himself forward, or anyone so reputed from earlier times, has been engaged in anything more than shameful flattery and gratification (503a–d). The true rhetorician looks to the structure and form of the soul and crafts his speech so as to lead souls toward virtue and away from vice (504d–e, 503e–504a). Plato's implication is that if there is a single rhetorician in all of Athens, it is Socrates.

And again: "Among all doctors, is there a doctor?" (*Charmides* 156e–157b, 170e–171c; *Gorgias* 521a; *Republic* 3.405a–408e, 409e–410e, 8.563e–564c, 10.599b–c). Plato's answer: there is Socrates, for he is the one genuinely concerned with promoting health. Those who put themselves forward as doctors are in effect gratifiers and drug dealers: helping those who are addicted to an unhealthy life extend their sick lives.

"Among all shepherds, is there a shepherd?" Plato: there is Socrates, because only he understands that a true shepherd looks to the good of his flock, not to those who feed off of them (*Republic* 1.345b–e).<sup>23</sup>

"Among all the wise, is there a wise person?" There is Socrates, for he alone knows that he does not know (*Apology* 23a–b).

23. For an excellent article on Socrates as shepherd, see Rachel Barney, "Socrates' Refutation of Thrasymachus," in *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's "Republic,"* ed. G. Santas (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 44–62.

And so on. These questions all have the same form—and in each case the possibility for irony arises by showing that the pretense falls short of its own aspiration. That is, a social pretense already contains a pretense-laden understanding of its aspiration, but irony facilitates a process by which the aspiration seems to break free of these bounds. In each case a purported totality is interrogated as to whether *any* of its members actually fits the bill. So, irony interrogates a totality not for its alleged inclusiveness, but for whether it has anything at all to do with the totality it purports to be. It is a movement that exposes a pretense in the nonpejorative sense to be pretense in the pejorative sense.

But we misunderstand the ironic movement if we think of Socrates as simply providing a revised set of criteria—for example, as arguing that a true doctor does not prescribe diet pills, but rather puts his patients on an exercise regimen. If this were all that was going on, then the standard model of reflective endorsement would be adequate both for established practice and for the proposed Socratic revision. And this would be what was going on if Socrates had been an Aristotelian. That is, we begin with a practical identity such as *doctor*, and Socrates quickly links it to human excellence. Why doctoring matters is that it is the capacity for and activity of promoting health in humans. Now if Socrates were an Aristotelian, the next step would be simply to determine the marks and features of human health. Socrates, by contrast, repeatedly and insistently declares his ignorance of what human excellence consists in. I do not think we can understand the movement of Socratic irony until we understand Socrates' profession of ignorance—and I shall turn to this topic later in this lecture. But, for the moment, notice that Socrates' ironic questioning seems to maintain a weird balancing act: simultaneously (1) calling into question a practical identity (as socially understood), (2) living that identity, and (3) declaring ignorance of what it consists in. If becoming human requires holding all of that together, no wonder Kierkegaard thinks it is not that easy to get the hang of it.

Note that this account of Socratic irony provides an overarching unity to Socrates' method that would otherwise go unnoticed. The Socratic method is usually identified as refutation, the *elenchus*, which is then characterized formally as an attempt to elicit a contradiction—*p* and not *p*—from an interlocutor. When the figure of Socrates in the dialogues abandons the *elenchus*, he is portrayed as having given up on his own method. There is then the famous charge that he has just become a mouthpiece

for Plato.<sup>24</sup> But if one thinks of Socratic irony in terms of this broader form of activity—exposing the gap between pretense and aspiration—then the elenchus can be seen as one species of this method. Often the interlocutor is someone who puts himself forward, as knowing, say, what justice or piety is. On occasion, the interlocutor is puzzled as well, but he ends up speaking on behalf of a social pretense. The interlocutor is then shown either to fall short of aspirations he himself espouses or to speak for a social pretense he can no longer make sense of. By concentrating on the formal feature of contradiction, commentators have ignored an essential nonformal feature: that it brings out the gap between pretense and aspiration. Thus, when Socrates shifts from the elenchus to other ways of bringing out this gap, he need not be seen as giving up on the Socratic method, nor as having become a mouthpiece for Plato; rather, he is taking up myriad forms of one method, Socratic irony.<sup>25</sup>

#### IRONIC PRETENSE-TRANSCENDING ACTIVITY

The point then is not about leaving the social world behind, but about a peculiar way of living in relation to it. When irony hits its mark, the person who is its target has an uncanny experience that the demands of an ideal, value, or identity to which he takes himself to be already committed dramatically transcend the received social understandings. The experience is uncanny in the sense that what had been a familiar demand suddenly feels unfamiliar, calling one to an unfamiliar way of life, yet the unfamiliarity also has a weird sense of familiarity, as though we can recognize that this is our commitment. The important point right now is that the transcendence at issue is of available social pretenses, and this is a possibility that can be realized in human life. We are not talking about transcendence of the human realm altogether. For Kierkegaard, whatever the difficulties, it was possible to become (and be) a Christian; for Socrates, whatever the difficulties, it was possible to become (and be) a doctor (properly understood). For each of them, these were ways of becoming human.

These genuine human possibilities of pretense-transcending activity tend to escape our notice. In part this is because the social pretense puts itself forward as an adequate understanding of what, say, medicine

24. See Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. 46–80.

25. I discuss this further in “Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis,” in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 442–62.

consists in. But it is also true that the social sciences tend to overlook this possibility of pretense-transcending aspiration. This is because, in general, the social sciences want to collect data that are measurable, repeatable, and statistically analyzable. Irony escapes such measurement. If we look at the ironic questions, we can see they establish two columns:

Christian	Christian
politician	politician
rhetorician	rhetorician
doctor	doctor
shepherd	shepherd
sage	sage
...	...
...	...
[LEFT]	[RIGHT]

The left-hand column is formed from the first occurrence of the relevant term that expresses the social pretense; in the right-hand column, there is the second occurrence of the same term, which invokes the aspiration. Roughly speaking, the left-hand column gives us the domain of the social sciences. It gives us the domain that is accessible when it comes to collecting data that are measurable. The perennial challenge for social scientists is to figure out ways to operationalize a question, and that task will inevitably tend one's research in the direction of the left-hand column. So, for example, if one wanted to understand religion in America, one might try to establish reliable statistics for what percentage of the population attends church each week, what percentage self-describe as religious, and so on. These are all data that come from the left-hand column. Though a life exemplifying any of the categories in the right-hand column is neither ineffable nor supernatural, it does not lend itself to straightforward data collection or measurement. There is no statistically reliable way to answer the ironic question, "Among the millions who pray on Sunday, does anyone pray?"

#### TWO STUDENTS

So what, then, is the transcendence of the right-hand column? It is difficult to say, not because it is supernatural or an ineffable mystery, but, first, because everything one wants to say admits of interpretation that is appropriate to the left-hand column. Second, what one needs to grasp

is the evanescence of the right-hand column. It has all the substantiality of the Cheshire cat's smile. It is as though one already has to have some capacity for irony to grasp what it is about. Let us use an example that is close to home, the category of student. The left-hand column is easy enough to establish: a *student* is someone who is enrolled in a recognized school. Now we might be tempted to think that if we add on a few conditions, we can move on over to the right. But, as we shall see, the right-hand column is not the sort of thing that can be captured simply by trying to add necessary and sufficient conditions. *Everything is going to depend on how those conditions are themselves understood.*<sup>26</sup> That is, one needs an ironic ear to hear the conditions in the right sort of way. So, imagine trying to add conditions to the practical identity of student: a student in this deeper sense would be someone who takes on the life task of becoming a person who is open to the lessons that the world, nature, others have to teach her. In so doing, she recognizes that the task is as never-ending as it is voracious. She may in fact direct her studies to this or that established area of research, but her identity as student is not exhausted by that commitment. Thus, being/becoming a student in this sense is what contemporary philosophers call an infinite end.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, satisfying these conditions takes one well beyond the run-of-the-mill student, but there are ways of doing it that remain within received understandings. Ditto if one tries to nail it down by adding that one needs to take individual responsibility for what all this consists in. These statements need not take one out of the realm of social pretense. Indeed, this is the language of social pretense when it comes to describing a serious and dedicated student. Yet they also seem to me to be the right sort of statements to make.

One might think one could nail it down by adding more radical conditions. For example: the ideal of openness must include an openness to the possibility that all previously received understandings of what openness consists in themselves fall short of what openness really demands. And taking responsibility must consist in a willingness to orient oneself according to this revised understanding, regardless of what the social pretense recognizes or demands. But even these claims are open

26. Of course, in some sense that is always true: in a moment of philosophical reflection one can always imagine a weird case in which someone systematically misinterprets conditions. The point here, by contrast, is that normal participants in an established form of life laying down conditions in a way that they take to be an instance of standard reflection will thereby miss the distinction they are purportedly attempting to capture.

27. Sebastian Rödl, *Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 34–42, 81–83, 173–75.

to left-handed interpretations. Thus, one cannot capture the right-hand column *simply* by listing more conditions, no matter how right thinking they may sound.

To see more clearly what this difficulty is, it is helpful to consider a provocative example offered by Christine Korsgaard:

You are visiting some other department, not your own, and fall into conversation with a graduate student. You discover that he is taking a course in some highly advanced form of calculus, and you ask him why. With great earnestness, he begins to lay out an elaborate set of reasons. "Philosophers since the time of Plato," he says, "have taken mathematics to be a model for knowledge: elegant, certain, perfect, beautiful and utterly a priori. But you can't really understand either the power of the model or its limits if you have an outsider's view of mathematics. You must really get in there and do mathematics if you are to fully appreciate all this . . ." And just when you are about to be really impressed by the young man's commitment and seriousness, another student comes along smiling and says "and anyway, calculus is required in our department."<sup>28</sup>

The first student, Korsgaard says, "seems like a phony. Since he had *that* motive for taking the course, all the rest seems a little irrelevant." As she puts it, "Although the student might appreciate the reasons why it is a good idea that the course should be required, it would be a little odd to say that that is his motive, since he has a decisive reason for taking the course whether he understands those reasons or not."<sup>29</sup>

Korsgaard admits that if the course had not been required and the first student took it for the reasons he gave, then "in one sense" he would be more autonomous than the student who merely takes it because it is required.

He would be guided by his own mind, not that of another. But if he is required to take it, the reasons he gives should not be his motive. This may seem odd, since in a sense they are better reasons. But even if he understands them, they are excluded by his practical identity. Because his practical identity in this case is being a student. And this has two

28. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 105.

29. *Ibid.*

implications. First, to the extent that you identify yourself as a student, you *do* act autonomously in taking a course that is required. And second, it is an essential part of the idea of being a student that you place the right to make some of the decisions about what you will study in the hands of your teachers. And that means that when one of those decisions is in question, you are not free to act on your own private reasons any more, no matter how good those reasons are in themselves.<sup>30</sup>

Korsgaard is aware that the example may at first “seem odd,” but she thinks that it lends insight into the relation of practical identity and autonomy. And it does—*if* one is considering practical identity as a left-hand phenomenon. Korsgaard says, “To the extent that you identify yourself as a student, you *do* act autonomously in taking a course that is required.” One thus inhabits a practical identity by committing to the norms of the established social practice. In effect, Korsgaard has established one left-hand meaning for “autonomous.”

But the important point right now is to see that even the student as social critic does not thereby make it to the right-hand lane of life. Let us develop Korsgaard’s vignette. If we think of the first student, the one who is giving all his reasons for taking the required course, there are three salient possibilities of who he might be. He might be the phony Korsgaard takes him to be. Or he might be a more serious figure trying to think through what the requirements of a graduate education in philosophy ought to be. Let us imagine that last year, in his role as committed student, he led a successful campaign to have the department abolish the foreign-language requirement and argued that first-order logic should count as a “foreign language.” This person has a practical identity of student that is richer than either the phony or the second student who simply says, “It’s required.” On occasion it requires him to invite his teachers to rethink what the educational requirements should be. He thus might be an interesting and challenging figure. But as yet we have no evidence of any irony that would move him over to the right-hand column. This may at first seem odd because he is spending his time challenging a social pretense, an established practical identity. But this form of challenge is itself a social pretense: it is a socially available way of putting oneself forward as a student. That is why it is important not to caricature the left-hand column of social pretense.

30. *Ibid.*, 106.

Allow me now to play fast and loose with space, time, and historical fact. Imagine that Korsgaard's conversation occurred in the Philosophy Department at the Pontifical University centuries ago and that her first interlocutor was the young Martin Luther. Apparently, just before their meeting, young man Luther had been haranguing the faculty on the entire curriculum of Christian education. The only course that survived his withering scrutiny was the course on calculus. (Never mind that calculus had not yet been invented.) Now imagine this outcome: as a result of his harangues, there is a social transformation throughout Europe that results in the establishment of churches and the reorganization of nation-states and society. If Luther were just an extreme version of the previous example—a student protester on steroids—then this would be a magnificent outcome. But if Luther were an ironist, this would be a disaster. What we have here, for all its social momentousness, is the establishment of the version of Christendom that Kierkegaard ironized. On this imagined example, we have not yet left the realm of social pretense; we have only envisaged its transformation. And though Christendom *mark one* and Christendom *mark two* differ on doctrinal issues, modes of ritual, and forms of hierarchy, they partake of a shared social pretense: they each put themselves forward as adequate to embody and express ideals that, when ironized, break their bounds. That is, they put themselves forward as though irony were not among their possibilities.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, if Luther had been an ironist, the only Lutheran in all of Christendom would have been Kierkegaard, who devoted his life to imploding the pretense of Lutheran Christendom.

#### IRONIC EXISTENCE

I have thus far been trying to capture the experience of irony. I would like to conclude with a preliminary account of ironic existence. Ironic existence is a form of life in which one develops a capacity for irony—that is, a capacity for occasioning an experience of irony (in oneself or another)—into a human excellence. That is, one has the ability to deploy irony in the right sort of way at the right time in the living of one's life. This gives us the basis for asking the ironic question: "Among all ironists, is there an ironist?"

One aim of this lecture has been to argue that there are at least two, Socrates and Kierkegaard. But what does this ironic existence consist in?

31. That is, *genuine* irony, not the tame, left-hand version Christendom contains.

Let us start by marking out what it is not. First, ironic existence does not entail that one act in one particular way rather than another with respect to established social practices. One may abandon the established social forms, finding them thin, hollowed out, hypocritical, but, conversely, to take Kierkegaard's example, one may return to the church one had been attending and participate in established rituals. Ironic existence need not show up in any particular behavioral manifestation—though how one inhabits the social pretense will nevertheless be transformed. Second, ironic existence does not imply that one is occasioning ironic experiences all the time. Ironic existence is, rather, the ability to live well all the time with the *possibility* of ironic experience. This requires practical wisdom about when it is appropriate to deploy irony. More important, it requires practical understanding that irony is a possibility in life. We need to capture a more robust sense of what this means. Third, ironic existence does not require alienation from established social practice. It is true that irony involves opening a gap between pretense and pretense-transcending aspiration—and in this sense, irony takes off from established social understandings—but that is compatible with passionate engagement in social life.

To understand ironic existence, consider the modal structure of practical identity. To have a practical identity is in part to have a capacity for facing life's possibilities. As a teacher, to continue with the example, I have the capacity to face what comes my way *as a teacher would*. In particular, I can rule out as impossible acts that would be incompatible with being a teacher. Thus, I have internalized an implicit sense of life's possibilities and have developed a capacity for responding to them in appropriate ways. This is what it is to inhabit a world from the perspective of a practical identity. In normal circumstances, this capacity for dealing with life's possibilities is an inheritance from, an internalization of, available social practices. I learn how to be a teacher from people I take to be teachers, and, in the first instance, I take society's word for who the teachers are. Obviously, as I develop, I may subject various norms to reflective criticism: that is part of my normal development as a teacher. Ironic experience is, as we have seen, a peculiar disruption of this inherited way of facing life's possibilities. This is not one more possibility one can simply add to the established repertoire. It is a disruption of the repertoire—and, in the disruption, brings to light that the established repertoire is just that.

In ironic existence, I would have the capacity both to live out my practical identity as a teacher—which includes calling it into question in

standard forms of reflective criticism—*and* to call all of that questioning into question, not via another reflective question, but rather via an ironic disruption of the whole process. In this twofold movement I would both be manifesting my best understanding of what it is about teaching that makes it a human excellence *and* be giving myself a reminder that this best understanding itself contains the possibility of ironic disruption. No wonder that getting the hang of it does not come that easily. Done well, this would be a manifestation of a practical understanding of one aspect of the finiteness of human life: that the concepts with which we understand ourselves and live our lives have a certain vulnerability built into them. Ironic existence thus has a claim to be a human excellence because it is a form of truthfulness. It is also a form of self-knowledge: a practical acknowledgment of the kind of knowing that is available to creatures like us.

If we take seriously the thought that ironic existence is a form of human excellence—peculiar, to be sure—then there are certain lessons we can learn from Plato and Aristotle. First, we should not expect to be able to explain in any detail what the appropriate ironic thing to do is in any particular circumstances. We learn how to live with irony appropriately by learning from those who already are living an ironic existence. Our most notable exemplar is Socrates. Second, we can think of ironic existence as lying in a mean between excess and defect: the defect would be the familiar “ironic” wit who forever remains detached from committed life; the excess would be the perpetual disrupter of social norms, lacking good judgment about appropriateness.

To grasp the peculiar ironic mean, it is helpful to return to Socrates. What is so astonishing about Socrates’ life, and one that tends to escape the notice of commentators, is how effortlessly he blends positive and negative aspects of ironic existence. People tend to associate Socrates with the so-called method of refutation, the *elenchus*. Of course, the *elenchus* is structured so that a sincere interlocutor, in the midst of his pretense, is brought to a halt. But in terms of the shape of Socrates’ life, what is most striking about the *elenchus* is not any formal or informal feature of the argument considered in isolation, but rather how Socrates deployed it: *in enthusiastic, endless repetition*. He takes it as his divine task to cross-examine everyone he meets who has a pretense to knowledge of virtue—and thus he is not simply undermining interlocutors but honoring the god. He takes up a god-given task, and thereby tends to, reminds us of, the boundary between knowledge that is accessible to humans and the

transcendent-divine.<sup>32</sup> His interlocutors are not simply defending their own beliefs: they are trying to put into words and defend a common social understanding of a virtue. Thus, in questioning them he is questioning an aspect of social pretense. When they come up short, they manifest that this attempt to ground a social practice has fallen apart. And Socrates never relents. He is in the *endless* task of undoing any particular claim to know. And if there is life after death, Socrates plans to go on cross-examining everyone he meets in Hades *without end*.

The young Kierkegaard could see only the negative side of this activity, and that is why he said that irony is "infinite negativity."<sup>33</sup> The late (and marvelous) Gregory Vlastos poured scorn over this expression: "fished out of Hegel," as he put it, it renders Kierkegaard's interpretation "hopelessly perplexed by this dazzling mystification." For Vlastos, "what irony means is simply expressing what we mean by saying something contrary to it."<sup>34</sup> Of course, that is what irony would look like if we had to make sense of it solely in terms of the left-hand column of meanings. Vlastos missed what Kierkegaard was getting at, as has the Anglo-American tradition that followed him.<sup>35</sup> Funnily enough, though, the mature Kierkegaard himself came to pour scorn on the young author of the expression "infinite negativity." In a later work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus criticizes "Magister Kierkegaard" for bringing out "only the one side" of irony. "As can be inferred from his dissertation," Climacus tells us, "Magister Kierkegaard" has "scarcely understood" Socrates' "teasing manner."<sup>36</sup> I take the mature Kierkegaard

32. See Climacus (Kierkegaard), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 501–4. And see Plato, *Apology*, 21e, 23b, 30a–b, 38a, 41a–c.

33. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 279.

34. Vlastos, *Socrates*, 43.

35. Even Alexander Nehamas, who argues forcefully against Vlastos's interpretation of Socrates, follows Vlastos in his interpretation of Kierkegaard: "Vlastos cannot possibly accept Kierkegaard's position, and in this strong version, neither can I. Truth is much more important to Socrates than Kierkegaard allows, both as a means and as a goal." Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 52; cf. 71. But this view looks plausible only if, following Vlastos, one regards *The Concept of Irony* as providing Kierkegaard's settled view of irony. In fact, one needs to look at the entire pseudonymous authorship, but, in particular, to Johannes Climacus's hilarious critique of *The Concept of Irony*. Nehamas valuably distinguishes Platonic irony from Socratic irony, and he makes apt criticisms of Vlastos's interpretation. However, in following Vlastos in this misplaced interpretation of Kierkegaard, Nehamas misses what, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, makes irony such a philosophically and ethically powerful phenomenon.

36. Climacus (Kierkegaard), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 503, 90n.

to be making fun of himself as a young man: *The Concept of Irony*, his *Magister's* thesis, was written too much under the influence of Hegel, and thus focused one-sidedly on the negativity of irony. What we need to understand is how ironic activity can be as affirming as it is negating. Certainly, we need a better understanding of how it could be that, though he spends his life undermining each particular pretense to virtue, Socrates never falls into nihilism, questioning the reality of human virtue. Indeed, he takes his activity to be one of protecting virtue from the false masks that would be put upon it. Nor does his elenctic questioning necessarily pull him out of the related social practices.

So, consider Alcibiades' wonderful depiction of Socrates on the battlefield. What does Socrates do during the campaign for Potidaea? Well, for one thing, he stands still:

One day, at dawn, he started thinking about some problem or other; he just stood outside trying to figure it out. He couldn't resolve it, but he wouldn't give up. He simply stood there, glued to the same spot. By midday, many soldiers had seen him and, quite mystified, they told everyone that Socrates had been standing there all day, thinking about something. He was still there when evening came, and after dinner some Ionians moved their bedding outside, where it was cooler and more comfortable (all this took place in the summer), but mainly in order to watch if Socrates was going to stay out there all night. And so he did; he stood on the very same spot until dawn! He only left next morning, when the sun came out, and he made his prayers to the new day. (*Symposium* 220c–d)<sup>37</sup>

Does Alcibiades suppose that Socrates cannot think and walk at the same time? In portraying Socrates as thinking about “some problem or other”—perhaps the proof of an especially difficult geometrical theorem!—Alcibiades shows that he just doesn't get it. Socrates is standing still, not because he is too busy thinking, but because he *cannot walk*, not knowing what his next step should be. I take this to be a moment of erotic uncanniness: *longing* to move in the right direction, but not knowing what that direction is. He is uprooted only by the conventional religious demands of a new day. Yet when the actual battle comes, Socrates behaves

37. I here use the translation of Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

with extraordinary bravery—by *the standard lights* of accepted social behavior. As Alcibiades says, "During that very battle, Socrates single-handedly saved my life! He absolutely did! He just refused to leave me behind when I was wounded, and he rescued not only me but my armor as well. For my part, Socrates, I told them right then that the decoration really belonged to you" (220d–e).

It is as though the moment of standing still invigorates him, at the right moment, to perform *extraordinary acts of conventional bravery*. And rather than their being two disparate moments in a disunified life, Alcibiades has an intimation that they form some kind of unity. In describing how Socrates bravely helped Laches in the retreat from Delium, Alcibiades says, "In the midst of battle he was making his way *exactly as he does around town*, 'with swaggering gait and roving eye.' He was observing everything quite calmly, looking out for friendly troops and keeping an eye on the enemy. Even from a great distance it was obvious that this was a very brave man, who would put up a terrific fight if anyone approached him. That is what saved both of them" (221b; emphasis added).

Yet Alcibiades also says that Socrates' bravery cannot be compared to Achilles' or anyone else's (221c–d). Why ever not, if all we are talking about is battlefield bravery? The answer must be that Socratic ignorance (in this case, about courage), far from being a distinct moment in Socrates' life (in the study, as it were), and far from sapping confidence in the ordinary demands of bravery, can, in certain circumstances, invigorate the enactment of the ordinary requirements. The irony must be *right there*, in the obviously brave acts—otherwise, Socrates' bravery would be comparable with Achilles'. This is what makes Socrates, in Alcibiades' words, "unique": "He is like no one else in the past and no one in the present—this is by far the most amazing thing about him." He is able to act bravely (according to the lights of social pretense), all the while holding firm to his ignorance. This is not just negativity; it is a peculiar way of *obviously* contributing to polis life. Socrates is not merely a gadfly: he is a gadfly who, on appropriate occasions, is willing to fight to the death in conventional battle.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly with Socrates' classic examination of courage in the *Laches*. To be sure, by the end of the dialogue Socrates declares the shared ignorance of all the interlocutors: "We have not discovered what courage is"

38. It is this balance that is lost on his ersatz followers—for example, Apollodorus (*Symposium*, 172–74)—as though what it is to follow Socrates is literally to follow him around.

(199e). However, he is able to enter the conversation to begin with only because his interlocutors trust him as a worthy interlocutor—and they trust him because he is well known for having lived courageously, according to the received norms of courage. Lysimachus says to Socrates that he keeps up his father's good reputation, and that he was the best of men. And Laches elaborates, "I have seen him elsewhere keeping up not only his father's reputation but that of his country. He marched with me in the retreat from Delium and I can tell you that if the rest had been willing to behave in the same manner, our city would be safe and would not then have suffered a disaster of that kind" (181a–b). So Socratic ignorance is compatible with behaving with outstanding courage *as socially understood*. It is not a way of withdrawing from battle on behalf of the polis, but a way of participating in it. Even the inquiry into the nature of courage is not an abstract "philosophical" inquiry (as that term is often used), but a response to an impassioned, urgent plea for help. Lysimachus and Melisius—two of the interlocutors—are the undistinguished sons of great men who are now worried about transmitting virtue to *their* sons (178c–d). No culture is stronger than its ability to pass on its values to the next generation, so this is a conversation born of social anxiety. Anxious representatives of the social practice are turning to Socrates for help, and Socratic examination is his response. It does not leave them empty-handed. Rather, they are convinced that they need to find a proper teacher *for themselves*. "I like what you say, Socrates," Lysimachus says, "and the fact that I am the oldest makes me most eager to go to school along with the boys." Socrates agrees to meet again tomorrow so they can *all* begin to search for the best possible teacher (201a–c). Do I have any takers for the bet that should they find that teacher, not only will he not know what courage is, but he will not know what teaching is, either? The point of Socratic irony is not simply to destroy pretenses but to inject a certain form of not knowing into polis life. This is his way of teaching virtue. And it shows the difficulty of becoming human: not just the arduousness of maintaining a practical identity in the face of temptation, but the difficulty of getting the hang of a certain kind of playful, disrupting existence that is as affirming as it is negating. It is constitutive of human excellence to understand—that is, to grasp practically—the limits of human understanding of such excellence. Socratic ignorance is thus an embrace of human open-endedness.

The height of his irony comes when, convicted of corrupting the youth and introducing new gods, Socrates proposes his own punishment. As absolutely conventional as he was in courageously defending

the polis from external attack, he is absolutely unconventional in defending the polis from its own internal disease. It is one and the same virtue that is a manifestation of both. And he faces death in both cases with the same equanimity. If the appropriate punishment is what he deserves, "Nothing is more suitable, gentlemen, than for such a man to be fed in the Prytaneum—much more suitable for him than for any one of you who has won a victory at Olympia with a pair or a team of horses. The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy; I make you be happy" (*Apology* 36d–e). The irony is utter earnestness: this *is* what he deserves. And it is an occasion for disruption—to vote for this proposal the Athenians would have had to disrupt the world of social expectations. In the extreme moment of facing death, Socrates does not deviate an iota from ironic existence. If the Athenians had accepted Socrates' proposal, I am confident he would not have missed a beat—continuing his conversations while enjoying dinner at public expense. That Socrates got the hang of it is attested to by Vlastos's astute observation: "In the whole of the Platonic corpus, in the whole of our corpus of Greek prose or verse, no happier life than his may be found."<sup>39</sup>

#### GETTING THE HANG OF IT

In the diary entry with which I began, Kierkegaard says, "Becoming human or learning what it means to be human is not that easy." If one takes this claim with ontological seriousness, it turns out that these disjuncts are equivalent. Human being would be understood in terms of human excellence. So being human would be a matter of becoming human—the practical task of achieving human excellence—and this would be learning

39. Vlastos, *Socrates*, 234. Johannes Climacus uses the phrase "movement of infinity" to characterize ironic activity—a phrase that has shed any particular emphasis on negativity—and he says that the ironist inhabits a border area between aesthetic and ethical forms of existence. This intermediate zone is a play space with an ethical dimension. The aesthetic—taken from the Greek word for perception, *aisthesis*—is a life organized around appearances: how things appear, seem, are given to one. It is the world of social pretense, the world of practical identity understood in terms of social role. And because social pretense is as rich and variegated as we have seen, one does not leave it simply by reflecting on its terms. Thus, aesthetic existence can include attempts to ground the ethical in terms of such practical identities. The issue would depend on the basis on which reflective judgment is made: for example, if one *finds* one's identity meaningful and thus sticks with its requirements, one has a reflective judgment that, in Kierkegaard's terms, would remain within the aesthetic. The problem with the aesthetic is that when one is living that form of life, it feels like a world that itself encompasses the distinction between aesthetic and ethical. The ironic "movement of infinity" is the disruption of that world—a disruption of the sense that we have grasped the ethical. We cannot tell, Climacus tells us, whether the ironist is actually living an ethical life, but he does open up the possibility of ethical life by disrupting the ersatz totalities of social pretense. See, for example, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 500–502.

what it means to be human. But the practical knowledge that is human excellence contains a moment of ignorance internal to it. Part of what it is to be, say, courageous is to recognize that one's practical understanding of courage is susceptible to ironic disruption. Part of what it is to be courageous is courageously to face the fact that living courageously will inevitably entangle one in practices and pretenses and possible acts, all of which are susceptible to the question, "What does *any of that* have to do *with courage?*" Ironic existence is the ability to live well with that insight.

Kierkegaard says that "no genuinely human life is possible without irony."<sup>40</sup> On the interpretation I have been developing this would mean: it is constitutive of human excellence that one develop a capacity for appropriately disrupting one's understanding of what such excellence consists in. Human flourishing would then partially consist in cultivating an experience of oneself as uncanny, out of joint. This is what it would mean to get the hang of it, the erotic uncanniness of human existence.

#### APPENDIX I:

##### COMMENT ON RICHARD RORTY'S INTERPRETATION OF IRONY

Richard Rorty, who is well known for having articulated a contemporary philosophical conception of irony, defines an ironist as someone who, first, "has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies or books she has encountered." (A final vocabulary is that which one uses to formulate basic projects, important hopes, doubts, praise, and blame.) Second, she has "realized that the arguments phrased in her current vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts," and, third, "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."<sup>41</sup> This seems to me a thin conception of irony and its possibilities, and it is worth noting how different it is from Kierkegaard's conception. For Kierkegaard, irony is a way of achieving a deeper understanding of—and ultimately a more earnest commitment to—what comes to emerge as one's final vocabulary.

Note that Rorty's ironist need never leave the left-hand lane of life. To continue with an example we have been using, imagine an inhabitant of

40. Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, 326. See also thesis 15: "Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony" (6).

41. Richard Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

Christendom who starts to have doubts about the institutionalized practices. Something about it she experiences as routine, hollowed out. She then *looks sideways* over at other final vocabularies. So, she reads books about Judaism and Islam, reads about Confucianism and Buddhism, even tries out some New Age spirituality. Perhaps she visits temples, mosques, and other shrines. The temptation to caricature her is enormous, but let us refrain from doing so. The point is that in investigating these other final vocabularies, there is no pressure thereby generated to question the various social pretenses other than in terms of other pretenses. From Kierkegaard's perspective, Rorty's ironist is not an ironist at all, but someone confined to the left-hand meanings of social pretense, misleading himself about his freedom via the plethora of meanings at his disposal and his lack of commitment to any of them. Different final vocabularies are treated as though they were objects of disinterested choice: one could choose them on the basis of being struck by doubt with one's own final vocabulary.<sup>42</sup> In a Kierkegaardian vein, this looks like a weariness that does not recognize itself as such.<sup>43</sup>

But the point here is not to criticize Rorty. In fact, Rorty's irony is what irony would look like if there were no right-hand resonances in life. Then there would only be the disenchantment with a given social pretense (and its final vocabulary) while the only alternatives on offer were other social pretenses (and their final vocabularies). That is why there is reason to think that there are not simply two different uses of the word *irony*, but that contemporary use is a diminished version of what Kierkegaard meant. If our ears suddenly became deaf to the uncanny disruptions of would-be directedness, irony would inevitably come to seem an expression of detachment and lack of commitment rather than an expression of earnestness and commitment. One might think of Kierkegaardian and Socratic irony as a two-part movement of detachment and attachment: detachment from the social pretense in order to facilitate attachment to the more robust version of the ideal. But if one obliterates the second part of the two-part movement, all that remains is irony as a form of

42. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss this in detail, but Kierkegaard would treat this as ultimately an aesthetic phenomenon. Rorty's ironist is living according to what "strikes" him as interesting, "strikes" him as an occasion for doubt, and so on. These are for Kierkegaard aesthetic phenomena: and Kierkegaard considered a life organized by such phenomena an aesthetic form of existence.

43. As Judge William writes to A, "There is something treacherous in wishing to be merely an observer." See W. Lowrie, trans., *Either/Or* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 2:7; and see Judge William's advice to A to choose despair, esp. 175–81.

detachment. And it would make sense to experience the ironist as saying something other than he means.<sup>44</sup> It seems to me that Rorty's account of irony is symptomatic of something that has happened in modernity that has made it difficult to hear the resonances of the right-hand column.<sup>45</sup>

APPENDIX 2:  
COMMENT ON JAMES CONANT'S INTERPRETATION  
OF KIERKEGAARD'S METHOD IN THE  
PSEUDONYMOUS AUTHORSHIP

The subtle and deep work of James Conant on Kierkegaard's method deserves an essay of its own.<sup>46</sup> This is obviously beyond the scope of these lectures, but let me at least indicate in brief outline why I am not persuaded by his interpretation. I suspect that the key problems with Conant's interpretation flow from a mischaracterization of the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus. Conant tells us that "Kierkegaard refers to the entire pseudonymous authorship as an aesthetic production."<sup>47</sup> And he thus treats Climacus as an aesthetic author. However, Kierkegaard distinguishes the "aesthetic productivity" of *almost* all of the pseudonymous works from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, of which Climacus is the

44. To put it in a nutshell: Socrates' accusers do accuse him of deception, but that is because they are deaf to the right-hand meanings with which he is speaking.

45. There are many strands to the story of how the resonance of the right-hand column got lost. But one strand flows from the historical use to which concepts of identity have been put over the past few centuries. Our contemporary paradigms of identity have arisen out of histories of discrimination, oppression, and victimization. In the waves of immigration to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people were labeled as *Italian*, *Irish*, *Jew* in part to tag them and keep them separate from dominant culture. There would then be little social room for an ironic question of whether anyone fitted the category. The point of the tag was to keep people inside the category and not let them out. Another route has been where the identity has been formed in conscious response to a history of oppression. Prime examples are *black* and *African American*—formed in response to pejorative terms that had previously been used. Another would be *gay*, a term self-consciously dignified by homosexuals themselves, as in "gay pride." These formulations are self-consciously part of a process aimed at encouraging self-esteem in a group that historically has been demeaned by the dominant culture. It would run counter to one of the aims of such formulations if, in the conceptualization, it left open the possibility that almost no one in the hitherto oppressed group lived up to the demands of the category. Of course, it is possible to formulate an ironic question in any of these cases. And there have certainly been debates within each of these groups as to what their central ideals should be and how they should be understood. However, given the various histories of discrimination and oppression, the focus has been on how the social pretense should be understood. And this has provided a paradigm for our contemporary conception of identity.

46. See, as a paradigm, D. Z. Phillips, "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Point of View of Their Work as Authors," in *The Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

47. *Ibid.*, 258.

pseudonymous author and which Kierkegaard, in his own voice, calls a "turning point" between the aesthetic works and the exclusively religious works. Kierkegaard continues, "The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is not an aesthetic work, but neither is it in the strictest sense religious. Hence it is by a pseudonym, though I add my name as editor."<sup>48</sup> That is, the pseudonym appears in this case because the work is not *in the strictest sense* religious. Thus, it would seem open to regard the work as, *loosely* speaking, religious, or at the boundary of the religious. The pseudonymous author would then have to be someone capable of at least that level of religious seriousness.

The thought that Climacus is not an aesthetic author opens up serious challenges to Conant's interpretation as a whole. To give one example, Conant moves from "Johannes Climacus tells us he is not a Christian," which is true, to "Indeed, he is not even interested in becoming a Christian."<sup>49</sup> This inference would be valid if Climacus were an aesthetic author and if, as Conant thinks, the aesthetic is characterized by disinterestedness. But if Climacus is not an aesthetic author—or if the aesthetic is not characterized by disinterestedness—then the inference is invalid. And I do not see any independent textual support for the claim that Climacus is not even interested in becoming a Christian. This matters because Conant wants to trap Climacus in a "performative contradiction" between his disinterested, objective consideration of Christianity and the essentially interested and subjective Christianity that he is investigating. It is that performative contradiction we are then supposed to see in ourselves—and *that* is purportedly the key to Kierkegaard's method. Conant refers to this method as holding up a mirror by which the reader can recognize his own confusions.<sup>50</sup> However, if Climacus is not an aesthetic author, then the performative contradiction, *if there is one*, is not as Conant describes. A further problem, but in the same vein, is that Climacus describes himself as a humorist, and gives an account of a humorist as one who tends to the boundary between the ethical and the religious.<sup>51</sup> That is, the humorist is not an aesthetic figure. Indeed, Climacus seems to leave open the possibility of a religious humorist, one who might protect his religiousness by *saying* that he is not a Christian:

48. Kierkegaard, *Point of View of My Work as an Author*, 31 (emphasis added).

49. Conant, "Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism," 262.

50. *Ibid.*, 249, 274–75.

51. Climacus (Kierkegaard), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 502, 505–7.

“The religious person does the same [as the humorist]. . . . Therefore religiousness *with humor as the incognito* is the unity of absolute religious passion . . . and spiritual maturity.”<sup>52</sup> Either way—Climacus as mere humorist . . . or Climacus as religious person with humor as his incognito—he is not an aesthetic author. Thus, I do not think one can find here a performative contradiction of an aesthetic author’s disinterested objectivity with the subjectivity of Christianity.<sup>53</sup>

It therefore becomes difficult to see what the efficacy of Kierkegaard’s method consists in. We no longer have evidence that Climacus is engaged in performative contradiction. But even if there were performative contradiction and recognition, why should this make a difference? How does it make the difference it purportedly does make? Conant argues that the method achieves its efficacy via reflection: “If forced to reflect upon their lives, Kierkegaard thinks his readers can be brought to see that, if pressed, they would be at a loss to say what licenses the claim that they are Christians (unless the claim is based on something like their citizenship).”<sup>54</sup> I am concerned that Conant is here zeroing in on too narrow a field of readers. He gives us an image of the efficacy of the method by assuming that it targets relatively unreflective people who are nevertheless willing or forced on this occasion to reflect. They quickly come to see that they are at a loss, or they state some objective criterion that can then be dialectically undermined. Kierkegaard did diagnose—and lampoon—such figures. But if such relatively unreflective people are the ultimate targets, then Kierkegaard’s method looks unambitious in scope. As I have argued in this lecture, we do not get to the real power of Christendom as illusion unless we also recognize that there were serious, reflective figures who nevertheless remained bound by the illusion. That is why irony is so important: because being forced to reflect further on one’s life is often not sufficient to break out of illusion. In a similar vein, it is possible to see practical contradiction in others, and through mirroring to see it in oneself, and nevertheless remain in illusion. I take it that this is what happened in serious sermons heard by serious people who, while provoked

52. *Ibid.*, 505–6.

53. The issue of what Climacus’s humor consists in is itself a difficult interpretive problem. Climacus describes the humorist as bringing out the contradiction between God and anything else. That a humorist brings out a contradiction does not, of course, imply that he is involved in his own performative contradiction. It is perhaps conceivable that Climacus *stages* a performative contradiction, but in such a case we would not have a performative contraction but a humorous, mimetic enactment of one. All this, of course, needs further elaboration.

54. Conant, “Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism,” 275.

and disturbed in various ways by the sermons, were nevertheless *qua inhabitants of Christendom* undisturbed.

As a result, I do not see how Conant can be right when he claims that *all* the confusions that Kierkegaard’s method brings to light are ultimately grammatical (in Wittgenstein’s sense of that term).<sup>55</sup> No doubt, Conant has isolated a significant class of confusions and correctly diagnosed them as grammatical. This is an important contribution, for Conant is able to bring to light how confusion arises from trying to apply objective judgments to essentially subjective categories. But it is also important that Kierkegaard’s irony is capable of hitting a target that eludes this characterization.<sup>56</sup> As I have argued in the lecture, there might be someone who grasps that Christianity is a matter of subjective commitment (in some nontrivial understanding of that term), grasps that it is not to be understood in aesthetic or objective terms, who even manifests a certain seriousness about his subjective commitment—yet is *still* vulnerable to ironic disruption. (See my remarks on teaching, and on the two students, above.) Irony matters, at least in part, because even people who are grammatically unconfused are nevertheless susceptible to its disruptive, uncanny powers.

55. Ibid., 281.

56. On occasion Kierkegaard distinguishes irony from humor—the one working at the border of the aesthetic and the ethical spheres, the other working at the border of the ethical and the religious—but on other occasions Kierkegaard uses *irony* as a more general term to encompass both irony (strictly distinguished) and humor. I am using *irony* in the broad sense. (By way of analogy, on many occasions Aristotle distinguishes *energeia* from *kinēsis*, but on some occasions he uses *energeia* as a broad term for activities—which include both *energeia* [strictly distinguished] and *kinēsis*.)