

Interview: Jonathan Lear, The University of Chicago

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Jonathan Lear's latest book, A Case for Irony (Harvard University Press), explores the idea that irony, understood rightly, is essential to our lives as human beings. Drawing on his studies of Socrates, Kierkegaard, and psychoanalysis, Lear provides a compelling account for us to rethink irony today and commit ourselves to a different understanding of it. Lear is currently the John U. Nef Distinguished Service Professor at the Committee on Social Thought and the Department of Philosophy at The University of Chicago, where he teaches and writes about questions at the intersection of psychoanalysis and philosophy. I had the chance to talk with him about A Case for Irony in April 2012. What follows below is a transcript of that discussion.

Pichanick: What led you to write a book about irony? How did your interests in the subject grow out of previous interests and questions about the themes at the intersections of psychoanalysis and philosophy?

Lear: Well, you know as well as I do that at The University of Chicago we tend to teach single books as a course. Certainly I have done that and I spent a period of time teaching texts by Kierkegaard, really to learn him better than I thought I understood him. I wanted to come to grips with Kierkegaard's thinking, and in particular that grows from a long-standing work I have been doing on Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates. I knew that Kierkegaard was engaged significantly with Plato and Socrates. The figure of Socrates loomed very large for Kierkegaard and I wanted to get a deeper understanding of what that engagement was in particular because he was a modern figure, living in nineteenth-century Europe and reflecting, drawing upon the ancient world for a kind of moral sustenance. I wanted to have a better understanding of how he understood the legacy of the ancient world for his contemporary world. So that is how I started, as an open-ended inquiry into his thought and engagement with the figure of Socrates.

So I would teach a text in a term and the years went by. I mean I would work my way through a lot of material in the classroom and the more I got into the text the more I realized that what he was saying about irony didn't really fit all the dictionary definitions. I had been sort of taught about what irony meant and it's not they had nothing to do with it, but it seemed like a poor fit.

And as I read some of the later work, especially pseudonymous works by Johannes Climacus, I realized that Climacus was very critical of his own work on irony, the original book, *The Concept of Irony*,¹ so I also realized that if you read contemporary lit on Socrates and irony they would all refer to passages in [*The Concept of*] *Irony* and there were no references to the thought

that Kierkegaard had gone on to reject in significant ways that early work of his. Then I read these late diary entries, things he wrote just before his death about irony, and I realized that there had been a development of his thought. There was a puzzling and hard-to-understand ... and yet it was the hard-to-understand part of it that seemed to be the part that made it the most significant for Kierkegaard. So that was all in my mind. I mean it just sort of arose in the process that happens at The University of Chicago of reading books together in a seminar. Then I just happened to get an invitation from Harvard University to give the Tanner Lectures on Human Values and I just at that point thought, "Well, this would be an occasion to try to pull my thoughts together." I mean I had a lot of notes and thought on it but I hadn't really pulled them together and so the occasion came up and it was really sort of how it happened. It's not like I knew where I was going from the beginning.

But the more I got into it, the more intriguing I saw that it was. And also it came more and more ... I mean, I began to feel that I more and more understood why Kierkegaard thought this was so important to living a human life and I also thought that the standard reception of irony either as a kind of deception or as a kind of witty detachment is really missing the central issues about why irony matters for us as humans. So I thought I had a great topic to work with.

Pichanick: So, can I jump in?

Lear: The more I thought about it the more I came to see irony as a kind of anxious, uncanny disruption. I began to wonder how much of this is possible because my Freudian interests kicked in and I began to wonder how much more of this is possible for us because we are creatures with a sort of percolating unconscious.

Pichanick: So, could I ask about this misunderstanding of irony as deception, or as being detached? What is it about that that makes it a misunderstanding and how do you think we should correct that misunderstanding?

Lear: Well, I think that that's a really good question, because I mean in some sense it's not a misunderstanding. I think it is very important to grasp the sense in which it is not a misunderstanding before you grasp the sense in which it is. I mean, it is certainly right that if you go back to the ancient Greek, to the idea of *eirōneia* when Thrasymachus and Callicles and Gorgias and Alcibiades accuse Socrates of deploying his typical *eirōneia* I think that there is no doubt that they are accusing him of a kind of masking or deceptiveness or deviousness, so you know that that's not a mistake.

It's certainly not a mistake to make the accusation [of deceptiveness] and I also think that if the English word "irony" is used by speakers to mean that then that is one of the things irony means.

Pichanick: Right, right.

Lear: You know, a billion English speakers can't be wrong about what the English word means.

What I talk about is really something that I think is being poorly understood if that's what you think it all amounts to. What I think Kierkegaard did and I think this is a really interesting issue: how ironic are you going to be about irony itself? Or, how are you going to use the occasion of the discussion of irony to actually be ironic? Or, are you just going to be didactic about irony? As Kierkegaard matured, he became more and more ironic about irony and what he, I think, did was he sort of used the term for what he took Socrates to be doing at the moment that he was being accused of deploying his typical *eirōneía*, so that's what made it so important for him to explore the issue of Socrates. These very unreliable characters, I mean, each of these figures of Alcibiades, Thrasymachus, Gorgias, and Callicles, they're very brilliant people, all of them with very flawed characters, and so I think that Kierkegaard's thought was, well, at the moment it is true they are accusing him of being deceptive but what is Socrates actually doing?

In that moment, what illustrated that kind of criticism? From these kinds of people? I mean, basically Kierkegaard is treating them as unreliable – very smart, very brilliant very insightful – but ultimately unreliable narrators and with distorted visions of things. And so he then becomes quite playful with the concept of irony and says, “What is Socrates actually doing in these moments?” And what Kierkegaard sees, I think correctly, is that these are moments of intense earnestness; they are not deceptive at all although they appear like deception to people who can't really see what Socrates is doing.

So that's what you miss if you just stick with [the thought that] irony must be deception and that's the mistake there. The mistake is to think that it must be deception because that's what *eirōneía* means and that's what Callicles meant. I mean, that's all true, but to think that's the whole story, that's the place where the mistake comes. Because it's not the whole story and what's in addition to that part of it is Kierkegaard's point of view, why he took irony to be so important to the human condition.

Pichanick: Right. Could you say more about what we are being earnest about? In the book you analyze Kierkegaard's question, “Among all Christians, is there a Christian?” That seems to be the important ironic question, the question that generates an ironic experience. So why is that question the question for us to understand?

Lear: That's another really good question. I think firstly you can get a lot out of it if you really spend some time thinking with it. I think that lots of things can be occasions for irony and it doesn't have to look like that. And then you know the other point I make in the book is that a sentence like that is neither necessary nor, and this is the really important part, nor is it sufficient for irony. I think that the not sufficient part is really crucial to get because I think that a sentence like that can and for the most part is used totally un-ironically. This is a place where there is an occasion for irony; the structure of irony is especially clearly displayed. So the sentence “among all Christians, is there a Christian?” can be used in an extremely straightforward way where we immediately hear it as what I would say as sort of superego terms, raising the question, “Do

people who put themselves forward as Christians, do they really live up to Christian ideals or do they fall short?"

And just as such, I want to say there is no irony there at all, but what I want to say is that there are occasions where the issue has to be – it's got to be – in the first person. It could be either in the first person singular or first person plural. In this case I think the first person singular is the appropriate category. So you have to imagine that you yourself are that Christian asking the question. So that's Step One: you have to assume the first personal engagement with it, although the personal pronoun doesn't occur there. I am asking that question, and I am asking that question *qua* Christian, and I start to experience it. At first one of the features of it has got to be just the content of the question, the *what* of the question. But the *how* of the question, as I experienced it first personally as addressed to me or confronting me, has got to be an occasion for shaking me up, via my own sense of Christian engagement. Now the nature of the being shaken up when it's working, which I am happy to say is rare, but when it is working ironically, the nature of the shaking up takes the form of uncanny anxiousness. It's anxious longing and what's so great about the question is that it shows the uncanniness is in the formal structure of the sentence. The first occurrence of "Christian" is like picking me out in my self-understanding in general, an understanding of myself living a Christian life. But the second occurrence of "Christian," when the sentence is working ironically, is you might say the return of the familiar as unfamiliar and is disruptive in its familiar unfamiliarity. So its uncanniness is right there in the structure of the sentence.

Pichanick: So in the book you use the phrase – when this happens it's like you've lost the ground beneath your feet.

Lear: That's right. I think this is the experience of irony and the experience of irony is a particular species of anxiety. And that's what I am trying to capture, this particularity, the species nature of the genus anxiety is irony.

Pichanick: Right. So, why would I ever want this to happen to me? Somebody might say, "It sounds like you're falling into the abyss." Is somebody missing something when they ask that?

Lear: I think that's a moment of it. But, I think, "Why would I want this?" There are two different reasons. I think the experience of irony in itself is neither good nor bad.

It's an occasion that could have a deleterious effect on life. I mean, it doesn't have to be good. It might be neutral, but it does provide an answer to your question. I think it does provide an occasion you might say of calling oneself back to one's own best self. Calling oneself, shaking oneself up in the name of oneself.

Because in so far as the category Kierkegaard was working with – Christian, I mean – you don't have to be working with that one but we have been talking about it so we can go on with it, but whatever the categories are, [they are] the important ones in life. I focused on practical identity

because that's what Christine Korsgaard was talking about,² and others who I was engaging with. But it doesn't have to be your identity. It can be whatever central values there are to your life that you are already committed to as being what really matters to who you are and what you are going to be. And yet you are called back to them. Maybe you haven't been living quite as well with respect to them as you could. So it's a kind of – when it's working well, it's a kind of call of your own best self back to you, without it being a superego-voice just falling short of a well-established ideal. It's shaking up your sense of ideals as well as your sense of yourself.

Pichanick: Interesting. You mentioned your colleague – well, not your colleague but your dialog partner – Chris Korsgaard. So I wanted to ask you why you chose to write the book the way you did, where the first half is a presentation of your Tanner Lectures and the second half is presented as several dialogues between you and colleagues. Is that connected to the content of the book?

Lear: Yes. I thought there's always a question in writing philosophy of form and content and how they fit together. When I went up to give the lectures I was very impressed with the discussions. On the one hand they didn't agree with me and on the other hand I didn't agree with them but I really thought that this was... I knew philosophy becomes alive in living conversation and then I felt, "This is a living conversation," so it struck me that this might be a really good form for the book. Just as dialogues are really a good form in Plato for what he is doing, the places where Chris Korsgaard and I disagree are places where the reader can make up his or her own mind about where they stand and give me more of a chance to elaborate what I was thinking and also show how people can understand each other. So for me, it was the hope of presenting a living conversation to a reader as a way of engaging the reader and his or her own philosophical thinking about the subject. It is very much in my mind that this might be a very nice way to present an account of irony.

Pichanick: So would learning to read a Platonic dialogue the way Plato wanted or a pseudonymous work by Kierkegaard the way Kierkegaard wanted help us to understand irony better?

Lear: I think so but I think the issue – you used the word "understanding" and I want to make clear that the relevant understanding at issue is *practical* understanding, which is also taken by academic philosophers to be *theoretical* understanding. And I think that what Plato was trying to do and I think Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author was trying to do it in different ways was to shake us up as readers. It's not just about coming to a theoretical understanding of what irony – the concept of irony – is. But [it's also about] putting ourselves in a position where we can grasp in terms of living why there is something to be said for irony in the human experience.

Pichanick: That makes me want to ask, is irony something you hope both your students experience in the classroom and your patients in psychoanalysis? Do those two experiences compare?

Lear: I think it comes up in different ways, but yes. I think that in the philosophical case of students studying Plato or Socrates in class, I take it that coming to an understanding of, for instance, Socratic ignorance: what does Socratic ignorance amount to? I think there's a huge difference between grasping intellectually that Socrates was the guy who said he knew he didn't know and internally developing a sense of what that kind of ignorance consists in, why it's important to human life and how to integrate it into a human life. I am not saying that students should succeed in that, but if there's no practical understanding and no practical engagement – how does this kind of ignorance arise in my life? Then I think something has gone missing in the process, the engagement.

Pichanick: As a professor myself, I feel we teach under external pressures to show that students must acquire quantitatively measurable skills as a result of their education and one could wonder about patients in psycho-therapy here as well. So I want to ask what you think the prospects are for something like the ironic experience you're talking about as being a real goal of education. What do you think it would take for that kind of idea to sink in?

Lear: I don't think I can talk a lot about social movements but we have noticed that the humanities are under some kind of critique and attack and questioning why should there be humanities at all in a university setting. And I think people in the humanities ought to have some answers. From my point of view, you can't really come up with an answer that is going to satisfy unless you bring in an essential aspect of the humanities, whether it's literature or philosophy, that the humanities have value because when it's working, they are experienced as... they are addressed to us in the first person. There is a first-personal confrontation with the words of another, whether it be Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Homer, or Plato. It's not just that these writers were great writers; their greatness consists in an ability to strike you, the reader, and leave haunting words to which you are called upon somehow to react. And I see that kind of personal engagement is a constituent of the humanities when the humanities are working well. And from that point of view, irony is a specific example of this kind of first-personal address and confrontation.

Pichanick: That's interesting. Next week, you continue your dialogue with Alasdair MacIntyre. How do you compare his views to yours?

Lear: I'll know a lot better after... I guess we will have to find out. Alasdair MacIntyre is someone I very much admire and I have long admired him. I've been reading his work since I was a very young man and learning from him. I'm curious to hear what he has to say but I don't yet know. From my point of view, I use the example of being a Christian as an example because Kierkegaard used it, and just as an attempt to explicate Kierkegaard. I stuck with his own example for a while. I also talk about other things but the issue of the religious commitment and/or Christianity in particular is not my central interest. My central interest is the phenomena of irony and I think irony can occur in perfectly secular or atheist contexts as well and I deal with that in the book. But Kierkegaard was a Protestant and MacIntyre is a committed Catholic so I

would expect there to be some difference there between Kierkegaard and MacIntyre on the engagement and that might come up in his discussion of my book. I can't tell you what will happen but I'm looking forward to it.

Pichanick: Some people might label both you and Alasdair MacIntyre “public intellectuals.” What do you think about that label?

Lear: I'm not sure why. I don't think I've done as much of that as I used to do. Not that I'm against it, just that I have been busy with my own academic writing and research. And though I very much like my own book, I don't think of it as a best-seller. I knew in making the decision that the book should have the form it has – where I would receive responses by commentators and then my responses to their responses – I knew that it would sell many fewer books than if I had written a different kind of book, but I wanted it to have this form. I actually feel I have been so busy with my academic work I have not written as many [non-academic pieces]. I used to write more op-ed pieces and pieces for *The New Republic* and I haven't been doing that just because I have been so busy. So, what I try to do is write on topics that I hope are broad and deep philosophical interests and I try to write in a way that is clear as can be. I try to make my writing as open as possible to a readership. The previous book on *Radical Hope*³ which was about the Crow Indians – there are a lot of non-philosophers who have read that book. It's been read by anthropologists and Christians as well, Indians, Native Americans... It's been pretty widely read and I'm pretty glad about that but I'm not sure that would make me a public intellectual. It's just that I'm writing books of wider interest. About the specific question you asked about public intellectuals, I don't know what I think about the term but I do think that, I wish I was writing more, taking more of a stance. I do think I'm in favor of philosophers taking a role of a citizen in the *polis*, taking a stand on the important issues of the day. I haven't been doing it much but I am in favor of people doing it more than I am doing it.

Pichanick: I feel like there is a final question that must be asked. Our whole conversation between you and me about irony – a professor talking to his former student about irony, education, the soul – I think in your sense might not have been an experience of irony for either of us. So what would it be for us to have spoken ironically? I guess you talked about this in the beginning – to speak ironically about irony in your sense.

Lear: What do you think?

Pichanick: You're asking me? What do I think? Well, my response is now I feel like we have to start over and maybe that's the ironic part.

Lear: I'm going to leave that as an exercise for the listener.

Pichanick: Very good.

Notes

1. Kierkegaard, Søren. 1992. *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
2. Korsgaard, Christine. 2011. "Self-Constitution and Irony." In Jonathan Lear, *The Case for Irony (Tanner Lectures on Human Values)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 75–83.
3. Lear, Jonathan. 2008. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.