Irony, Dissociation and the Self

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Introduction

Within the philosophy of language, irony is not a terribly popular topic. For the most part its status is that of a peripheral and derivative oddity, and when it has been discussed, it has tended to be as an aside to a discussion of its more popular purported cousin, metaphor. My major goal here is to help drag irony towards the centre of attention, in two ways. First, in the course of sorting through the account of verbal irony I want to show how this phenomenon, to the extent that it is a communicative-interactive phenomenon, challenges a supposed centrality for literal assertion in our accounts of meaning, communication and interaction. Second, I want to show how the ironic process, as a psychological process and as an interactive process ought sit at the forefront of attempts to give an account of the self.

1. Verbal Irony as a Trope

While there is no one 'traditional' theory of irony, it seems, nevertheless, that two assumptions have, until recently, been common to most discussions. First, verbal irony is taken to be a figure of speech that carries figurative meaning; and second, this figurative meaning is taken to be in some sense the 'opposite' of the literal meaning of what is said. These assumptions are accepted by the two most significant, albeit brief, attempts to provide an account of irony within pragmatics, by H. P. Grice and John Searle.

Grice regards irony as a case of non-conventional implicature, and groups it with metaphor, meiosis, and hyperbole. Non-conventional implicature is the third kind of implicature identified by Grice, and covers situations in which the implicature depends on a blatant violation, or flouting, of the maxim of Quality: that in being conversationally cooperative one should not say that which one believes to be false, or for which one lacks sufficient evidence.

Suppose, adapting an example of Grice's (1967, p. 34), S and A leave a meeting in which X (until then, a friend of S's) has betrayed S. S says to A:

1. *X is a fine friend*

Suppose that it is common ground[1] to speaker and audience that what S has said, 'or made as if to say', is something S does not believe. The audience thus reasons (and is expected by the speaker to reason) that unless the utterance is pointless (so, unless the speaker is failing to be conversationally cooperative), the speaker's violation of the maxim of Quality must be a case of flouting; so the speaker must be trying to get across some proposition other than the one he purports to be putting forward; and 'the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the of the one he purports to be putting forward' (1967, p. 34). Presumably, this is:

2. *X is not a fine friend*

So (2) gives the figurative meaning of (1), and that meaning is the contradictory of the literal meaning of (1).

Searle's approach is essentially the same. He appends his discussion of irony to a broader account of metaphor and indirect speech acts, and he thinks that there is ironic meaning, and that it is the opposite of what is said. However, Searle seems to offer a subtler account than Grice of the mechanism by which understanding of irony is generated.

Searle says that the problem of metaphor, and implicitly of irony, is the relation between word and sentence meaning on the one hand, and speaker's meaning or utterance meaning on the other. This means that we should not try to locate figurative meaning in the word or sentence as a second kind of word or sentence meaning; instead, we should see figurative uses of language as cases where word or sentence meaning on the one hand, and speaker's utterance meaning on the other, come apart (1977, pp. 77 & 81).

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[1] I take 'common ground' from Gibbs (2000). It here does duty for Grice's 'It is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience' (1967, p. 34).

So for metaphor, irony and indirect speech, we will have the literal utterance, and then a paraphrase that expresses the speaker's utterance meaning.[2]

Whereas Grice saw the mechanism by which figurative meaning is recognized as the flouting of a maxim of Quality (truthfulness), Searle has a more general feature in mind, and refers to an utterance being defective or inappropriate, in the circumstances, given background information common to speaker and audience (1977, pp. 105 & 113). Searle does say that there can be other ways that non-literal usage is recognized, but all he adds is the comment that with some speakers and writers we are on the lookout for metaphorical usage (1977, p. 105).

Adapting Searle's example, suppose S and X (two philosophers) have just left a meeting in which X allowed one of Philosophy's positions to be given to Sociology. S says,

> 3. *That was a brilliant move*

> The utterance, if taken literally, is obviously inappropriate to the situation. Since it is grossly inappropriate, the hearer is compelled to reinterpret it in such a way as to render it appropriate, and the most natural way to interpret it is as meaning the *opposite* of its literal form. (Searle, 1979, p. 113)

As in Grice's account, the audience here engages in a three-step process: grasping the literal meaning of what is said; working out that the literal meaning is not the speaker's intended meaning; and deriving the intended non-literal meaning as the 'opposite' of the literal meaning (see Gibbs, 1986, p. 3).

The first and perhaps most obvious problem with this sort of approach is that it excludes many cases of verbal irony. Consider the following cases (again suppose that S and A have just left a meeting):

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[2] Searle treats metaphor, irony, and indirect speech acts under the same general account, and he suggests that the model of comprehension for one applies to the others. Thus, I take it that what he says of metaphor at this point applies similarly to irony and indirect speech. In this context, see also his discussion in 'Indirect Speech Acts' of the way a speaker's utterance meaning that is different from the sentence meaning is communicated (1975, pp. 31-2).

4. *S: that was a bit difficult* – ironic understatement
5. *S: I think we should be able to work through the agenda pretty quickly* – ironic quotation (of the Chair)
6. *S: I do like a Chair who understands appropriate process* – ironic truth
7. *S: and another meeting ends!* – ironic interjection

It seems that in none of these examples of irony could an ironic meaning be generated as the opposite of what is said.[3] The account is thus at least too narrow.

The second problem is that even with apparently appropriate cases, approaches that see irony as a figurative meaning pragmatically generated out of the literal meaning of what is said seem both superfluous and insufficient. First, the notion of 'opposite', or 'contradictory' that is invoked is extremely vague. Grice can't mean 'contradictory' in a technical sense, as (1) isn't a standard form categorical, but he gives no idea of how we generate the intended meaning ((2) was *my* presumption). Similarly, Searle doesn't tell us what the 'opposite' of (3) is. Clearly, we can, against a background, understand the ironic utterance of (1) and (3), but the question is whether we can reliably generate a meaning that matches this understanding by simply finding the contradiction or opposite of the original. The appropriate understanding of (3) is, I assume, (8), rather than (9).

8. *That was a stupid move*

9. *That was not a brilliant move*

But which is more obviously the 'opposite' of (3)? I suggest that we can get the right answer because we already understand the speaker, and thus, when pressed to apply the pragmatic mechanism, know how to get the right answer.[4] But then, the mechanism does no real work.

Yet, even if we accept the mechanism, the results that it predicts are always going to be wooden. If someone utters (1) ironically it seems at least inadequate, if not false,

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[3]   For similar counterexamples, see Wilson & Sperber (1992, pp. 36-38), Sperber & Wilson (1986, pp. 240-242), Wilson (2006, pp. 1726-1727).

[4]   Compare Martin (1992, p.78).

to say that they *mean* 'X is not a fine friend'. What they do implies that they no longer *believe* that X is a fine friend, but it seems wrong to say that this is what they mean. At the very least, they are not *just* saying figuratively that X is not a fine friend.[5] Similarly for Searle, (3) plus background and context is supposed to generate the opposite of (3).

I suggest, however, that there is something more, and different, going on, and Grice and Searle have to ignore that something, because they need to treat irony as a meaning that is calculable by speaker and audience. I think that the broader point is that to the extent that 'opposite' is appropriate at all, its focus is on something other than the literal meaning of what is said. I will return to this point later.

The third problem that arises is that this sort of account gives no explanation of *why* anyone would use irony. One might think that this is unfair, that surely Grice or Searle could say things, in addition, about the role of irony, even if they don't much bother.[6] But the point is that if irony is a type of (figurative) meaning, and it is the opposite of the literal meaning of what is said, then that's what irony is. If it's the case that when I say 'that was a brilliant move', in context and against a background, I mean 'that was a stupid move', and I know it and my audience knows it, we are left wondering why I bothered. It begins to look like a question of why someone chooses one rather than the other of a pair of synonyms.[7]

The fourth issue I want to raise here is perhaps not as obviously significant, but it is relevant to the later discussion. In her 2006 paper, Wilson raises the question of whether saying something amounts simply to expressing a proposition, or asserting a proposition with a commitment to its truth.

> If saying something is simply expressing a proposition, then the first maxim of Quality is certainly violated in Grice's own ironical examples …. However, if saying something is asserting a proposition, with a commitment to its truth, then

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[5]   When Grice revisited irony in 1987 he showed that he was aware of this sort of problem for the original account (Grice, 1967/1987, pp. 53-4).

[6]   See brief comments by Searle on indirect speech acts and politeness (1975, pp. 47-48), and Grice's later comments in the interactive motivations of irony (1967/1987, pp. 53-4).

[7]   This suggestion would annoy Searle (e.g., 1979, p. 77), but it seems to be the direction in which his approach leads.

> the first maxim of Quality is not violated [in his examples], since the speaker is patently not committing herself to the truth of the propositions literally expressed. (Wilson, 2006, p. 1726) [8]

She suggests that Grice is unclear in his discussion of tropes which reading he supports, since he says both that an ironist violates the first maxim of Quality, and thus says something, *and* that someone using metaphor (and by implication an ironist) 'has made as if to say' something (Grice, 1967/1987, p. 34), supporting the second reading. Sperber and Wilson note that elsewhere in 'Logic and Conversation' Grice seems to assume that to say something is to assert (Wilson & Sperber, 2002, p. 590), and they claim that the problem with this stronger interpretation is that if nothing is strictly said in a trope, then Grice's analysis fails to go through.

Now, Sperber and Wilson aren't quite fair to Grice. He doesn't say that the ironist *violates* the first maxim of Quality; he says that an ironist *flouts* it. Someone who violates a maxim 'quietly and unostentatiously' fails to fulfil it; someone who flouts a maxim 'blatantly' fails to fulfil it (Grice, 1967/1987, p. 30). So Grice's mechanism isn't quite the one Sperber and Wilson identify (i.e., strictly saying something and violating a maxim, and getting the audience to decode that). It has to be a mechanism that operates through someone not strictly saying something, but instead 'making as if to say' something. Hence, Grice is not ambiguous in the way Sperber and Wilson claim.

Yet this is no escape for Grice. First, all the figurative work is being done by the notion of flouting, and if that is the case, then Grice ought provide an explanation of how flouting is irony-generating (or irony-indicating); but he does not give such an explanation. Second, the mechanism thus understood gives no account of ironic meaning, since nothing is actually said, and thus there is no literal meaning to be transformed (given Grice's mechanism) into the figurative meaning.[9]

2. Verbal Irony as Echo

If, on the basis of these problems, we reject the project of explaining irony as the

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[8]   See also Wilson & Sperber, 2002, pp. 589-591.

[9]   It is worth mentioning that some empirical work suggests that there is no evidence of greater processing effort in the understanding of ironic utterances, as is seemingly predicted by the pragmatic model. See, e.g., Gibbs (1986).

communication of a figurative meaning via a pragmatic mechanism, one way of responding is to treat verbal irony primarily as an expressive phenomenon – as, we might say, a showing, rather than a saying.

Sperber and Wilson say that the initial mistake in approaches such as Grice's is to think that the ironist *uses* an utterance. They say initially that the ironist *mentions* a proposition in order to express an attitude towards the proposition.

> The speaker mentions a proposition in such a way as to make clear that he rejects it as ludicrously false, inappropriate, or irrelevant. For the hearer, understanding such an utterance involves both realizing that it is a case of mention rather than use, and also recognizing the speaker's attitude to the proposition mentioned. (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, p. 557)

So what is expressed is an attitude, and the attitude is to be understood or recognized by the audience, but it is not the (figurative) meaning of what is said. We might say, with only apparent paradox, that verbal irony is not an essentially linguistic phenomenon.

It seems, however, that there are clear cases of irony (for example, parodic irony) in which there is no explicit mention. Instead, the relation between the ironical utterance and the proposition, thought, or norm towards which irony is being expressed is more one of resemblance (Wilson & Sperber, 1992, p. 43). Thus, Sperber and Wilson dropped 'mention' and instead said that the ironist produces an 'echoic interpretation' of an utterance, thought or norm.[10] So irony is seen as a type of free indirect quotation. Thus we get the following account of the point of verbal irony.

> The main point in typical cases of verbal irony … is to express the speaker's dissociative attitude to a tacitly attributed utterance or thought (or, more generally, a representation with conceptual content, for instance, a moral or cultural norm), based on some perceived discrepancy between the way it represents the world and the way things actually are. (Wilson 2006, p. 1724)

For Wilson, then, irony focuses on a discrepancy between a representation of the world and the way the ironist takes things to be, and it is a means by which the ironist expresses a dissociative attitude towards that representation. The derivative target of the irony is a real or imagined person who adopts that representation (see Sperber,

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[10]   The change first occurred in *Relevance* (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, pp. 237-243).

1984, p. 130).

3. Verbal Irony as Pretence

The main contemporary alternative to the echoic theory is the pretence theory of verbal irony, according to which an ironist is pretending to be an injudicious person holding a defective perspective.

When initially formulated (in its contemporary version[11]), it was claimed to be superior to the echoic theory because, while pretence could equally well account for all examples covered by the echoic theory, Sperber and Wilson could not account for cases such as Swift's 'A Modest Proposal', which is not plausibly an *echo* of the utterances, thoughts, or norms of the British ruling class, but rather a *parody* of them (Clark & Gerrig, 1984, p. 29).

This sort of objection (even prior to Sperber and Wilson's switch from 'mention' to 'interpretation') seems to depend on an unfair treatment of the mention involved in irony as explicit mention of an utterance or proposition (see Sperber, 1984, p. 132). However, there appear to be other, more cogent motives for favouring pretence over echo.

First, in acts of verbal irony there is often a performance aspect (tone of voice, facial expression etc.), and the echoic theory, while it allows for this, seems not to account for it. That is, if an ironist is echoing an utterance or thought, and expressing her attitude toward the utterance or thought, those performance aspects that are arguably present in the majority of cases of verbal irony, and significant by their absence in others, seem to be irrelevant. They are an additional device by which an attitude is expressed, but they are not integral to the practice. A pretence theory, on the other hand, places performance in the centre of its account.

Second, a pretence theory seems to adopt a more intuitively plausible account of the primary target of verbal irony. For echoic theory the primary target is a representation,

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[11]   It is arguable that aspects of a pretence theory can be found in traditional accounts of irony, and also in Grice's theory (see Clark & Gerrig, 1984, pp. 25-27), however, I will not discuss that issue here.

whereas for pretence theory the primary target is a real or imagined person.

> The pretence one engages in with irony is partly one of behaviour; one pretends to be doing something which one is not doing: speaking seriously and assertively, seriously asking a question, seriously expressing distaste. But the pretence that is fundamental to irony is not a pretence of doing; it is a pretence of being. In pretending to assert or whatever, one pretends to be a certain kind of person – a person with a restricted or otherwise defective view of the world or some part of it. (Currie, 2006, p. 116)

On this sort of account, consistent with the echoic theory, verbal irony is not an essentially linguistic phenomenon. Neither, for pretence theory, is it an essentially communicative phenomenon. As Currie puts it, 'irony is a form of expression.'

> In speaking ironically, one expresses an attitude. This may be intended as a form of communication as well …. But what is essential is the expression, not the communication. (Currie, 2006, p. 115)

We have thus moved very far from a pragmatic theory of irony. Irony is now seen as expressive and dissociative, and not essentially as the communication of meaning. I will argue in the next section that his sort of perspective provides the basis for a clearer understanding of why we are ironic. First, however, I want to introduce some doubts about the comprehensiveness of the pretence account.

There are certain examples that seem at least on the surface not to fit this approach. Imagine that our colleague walks out of the meeting and cheerfully and seriously says:

> 10. *That was a great meeting!*

After he walks off, you turn to me and say:

> 11. *That was a great meeting!*

Or,

> 12. *He thinks that was a great meeting.*

Or,

13. [You raise your eyebrows (ironically)]

Now it seems that (11) fits the pretence story. You are pretending to occupy a defective position. But it is implausible to say that in uttering (12) you are pretending to be our colleague, or pretending at all; yet it appears also to be a candidate instance of irony. Here you draw attention to a point of view, and dissociate from it, but you do not do so by pretending to occupy that point of view. Currie deals with a related example (first offered by Sperber (1984)), in which someone says,

14. I am a very patient person.

They then behave impatiently, and someone else says,

15. He's a very patient person.

Currie says that while it's true that the speaker in (15) is not pretending to be the speaker of (14), she is nevertheless pretending to occupy a perspective according to which the speaker of (14) is a patient person (Currie, 2006, p. 119). This seems right, and helps clarify Currie's position, but granting that to Currie doesn't help with (12), or with a similar version of (15):

16. He says that he's a very patient person.

I include (13) because Currie allows ironic gestures:

> There are ironic assertions, questions, orders, and insults, as well as ironic gestures and facial expressions. Anything that serves to indicate that one is pretending to a point of view will do. (Currie, 2006, p. 119)

However, he would thus be forced to rule out (13), as well as (12) and (16), because (13) isn't a pretence. It's not like the sorts of ironic gestures and facial expressions Currie is thinking of when he imagines them as ironic vehicles, in which we pretend concern, shock, and so on.

So while pretence is operative in many cases of irony, it is not in all. What is more, the notion is too broad, for if we see irony as pretence we are unable to distinguish it from lying, since when I lie I also pretend. The pretence in irony must be more open, in some ways closer to bald-faced lying (Sorensen, 2007), but especially to the pretence that occurs in acting and play. In ironic pretence it is made mutually obvious

(between insiders) that the utterance isn't made seriously, but without this being said.

Wilson's 'dissociation' is an appropriate term for the dual affective force of irony. She does not say much about dissociation, but I treat it here as a practice that is both subjective and interpersonal. In its subjective dimension, dissociation involves an emotional disengagement from a perspective. In its interpersonal dimension, dissociation involves the display of a withdrawal or absence of commitment to a perspective.

Verbal irony is a gesture that both draws attention to a perspective, and dissociates from it, but this performance, while open, is not explicit. This point highlights a problem for the echoic theory.

We can, for example, fit (12) into Sperber and Wilson's approach. For them irony is merely one type of echoic interpretation. As Wilson says, according to her account 'irony is not a natural kind, and belongs together with other forms of echoic, attributive and interpretive use, which must all be treated in the same way' (Wilson 2006, p. 1732). This seems right, but given that we identify irony, we want to know what makes an echoic interpretation *ironic*. Wilson (2006, p. 1732) says that in verbal irony we are dealing with more or less explicit encodings of attribution and attitude. But that is surely wrong. It seems clear that verbal irony cannot be indicated by an 'open' marker – anything like, or playing the role of, 'Speaking ironically …' – for that would stop it being irony.

Irony must be indicated by, and identified through, features that are not explicit encodings.[12] Rather than being explicitly marked, it needs to be shown through a performance. We show others that we are being ironic by the *way* we say what we do: by the way we perform the saying, and by the way we insert our saying into a common ground. But this, the feature that shows and thus expresses our irony, is not part of Sperber and Wilson's account.[13]

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[12] On the other hand, it is appropriate to explicitly refer to a situation as ironic, as in 'Isn't it ironic that …' (Barbe,1993). This point seems to be yet another reason not to lump irony and metaphor together, since we can say 'Speaking metaphorically …' without awkwardness.

[13] This is not to say that it is not allowed by such an account. So Wilson, for example, prepares a list of examples of irony with 'Mary turns to her friend and says, wryly, one of the following'

My 'solution' is to say that irony involves an echoic interpretation, and that this echoic interpretation in many (but not all) cases takes the form of a pretence that the ironist has a certain perspective. The echo is a reminder (see Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989) or an *invocation* of a perspective. *That* this invocation is dissociative, and therefore ironic, is shown (when the irony is interactive) by the mode of expression and/or the relationship between, on the one hand, the invoked perspective, and on the other hand the common ground of speaker and audience.

I have not actually explained what makes irony ironic, and I claim that as a virtue. For although most of us can recognize and perform irony, and do so constantly, it is best seen (in recognition and performance) as an embodied skill, rather than an aspect of our interactive behaviour that we attain through learning a set of communicative rules such that a rhetorician might be able to record.

4. Why be ironic?

In criticising Grice's account of irony, I objected that he doesn't explain why we would utter 'X is a fine friend' in order to communicate 'X is not a fine friend', and I also objected that 'X is not a fine friend' is inadequate as an account of the irony in the utterance of (1). The challenge is to explain why we would engage in this activity, especially given that it is an activity that we engage in constantly, and why the glosses provided by 'meaning' theories are inadequate. We are now better able to address these two concerns.

Irony is partly (but not wholly) an interactive phenomenon, and involves an interesting relation to a double audience, which is well captured by Fowler.

> Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsider's incomprehension. (Fowler, 1965, p. 305)

Yet while irony is partly interactive, it is not strictly a communicative phenomenon,

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(Wilson, 2006, p. 1733). 'Wryly' here stands in for 'ironically', and makes it clear that the work of irony is taking place outside her account. With appropriate common ground we don't need a wry or ironic mode of presentation, but in either case, irony stands outside, even though it depends upon, the echoed perspective.

inasmuch as it is not about the communication of meaning, but rather the establishment and expression of dissociation. Irony is a way of not saying, and this helps explain the role it plays for us.

Irony allows us to express attitudes rather than state propositions. I do *not* mean that it allows us to express the ineffable, as the Romantics would have it. Rather, it allows us to avoid commitment to a representational content. Irony allows us merely to dissociate. Our knowing audience does not grasp propositional content; rather it grasps an attitude. If necessary (if the speaker is challenged, or the audience is quizzed), ideas that are provoked by this grasped attitude can be glossed, but the adequacy of a gloss is not measured against a content. The gloss is a way of saying something about the irony, not a way of rendering the irony back to its meaning.[14]

This feature of irony in turn helps explain its interactive importance. We use irony because of the impact it has on interpersonal dynamics. When used with Fowler's double audience, irony is on the one hand exclusionary (of those that hearing shall hear and shall not understand). On the other hand, irony implicitly embraces the knowing audience in a shared stance, and the audience, in making sense of and acknowledging the act, accepts the embrace, and stands with us against the person (or institution, or perspective) that is our target.

Often, however, and sometimes simultaneously, the audience that is the target of our irony is meant to recognize the irony. Irony when used in this way is powerful because of the way its 'not saying' works. When used with compassion, it allows us to draw attention to a failing without an explicit criticism having been placed on the table. We draw attention to an issue, but allow our friend to work on it in private. When used without compassion (as ironic sarcasm), irony allows us to attack without having to provide content. This means that our targets have to try to fill in the significance themselves; and it also means that the attack may be to some extent

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[14]   This point is similar to Davidson's in his 'use' theory of metaphor. '[T]here is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character. When we try to say what a metaphor 'means', we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention' (Davidson 1978, p. 263).

defeasible or revisable ('I didn't say that').[15]

Yet while irony is in part interactive, there is a significant role for irony in which the audience is private. One way this can work is that there is no external knowing audience. Following the passage quoted above, Fowler notes that 'there are dealers in irony for whom the initiated circle is not of outside hearers, but is an *alter ego* dwelling in their own breasts' (Fowler, 1965, p. 306). While this is true, I am more interested here in those aspects of our ironizing in which we dissociate from our own perspectives. The inner play of irony does important emotional work. It is a way of stepping aside from a perspective, so that we can 'manage' it (in loss, for example), or so that we can distance our self from it. It seems to be effective in this way because in such dissociation we are able to step out of a perspective, on the one hand, without us needing to be able to take a reasoned stance regarding that perspective – we don't have to 'face up to it' – and on the hand, the dissociative negation that is involved in irony does not involve an explicit rejection of a perspective. It is a distancing from, but not of itself a denial of, the perspective. Irony can thus play an important role in our emotional negotiation.

5. Irony as a tool

Much more could be said about the role of irony, but for now, and with these rationales for irony in mind, we can begin to think of irony as a tool. I take the notion of irony as a tool to be a special case of the idea of language as a tool, associated with Wittgenstein, for example, and more recently Clark (1997, Ch. 10), and others.

We needn't deny that language is a medium for communication, but we ought also emphasise that it is a tool. It is a tool in part because of the ways it allows us to manipulate our environment. But it is also a tool that allows us to manipulate ourselves. Clark refers at one point refers to Vygotsky's discussion of private speech, and comments that,

> In such cases, the role of language is to guide and shape our own behavior—it is a tool for structuring and controlling action, not merely a medium of information transfer between agents. (Clark, 1997, p. 195)

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[15]   The discussion by Dews *et al* (1995) of the social functions of irony is useful in this context.

As Clark goes on to say, language, like tools in general, enables us to extend our capacities, and thus better enables us to change our environment.

The change to the environment in turn changes us. If I have an axe, I can cut down trees, split timber, etc., and ultimately provide myself with shelter and warmth and cleared land for agriculture. These changes then change me, because they change the way I live: with agriculture I have time for other pursuits, for example. If I have the tool of language, I can change my social environment and indirectly my physical environment, and I can improve my capacity to plan, and remember, and *our* capacity to work, plan, and remember collectively and cooperatively.

Not only does the use of a tool change us through changing our environment. The actual *use* of the tool changes us, and I think that this is one aspect of tools to which Clark pays too little attention. He is right to note the way tools (including language) guide and shape our own behaviour, but they also shape and reshape the self. The use of tools doesn't just extend our capacities in the sense of extending our reach; the use of tools extends our capacities because they work on us. Clark wants to distance himself from Dennett's idea that the use of language changes the brain, and says that he wants to see public language as in essence just a tool (1997, p. 198). I think that we can see it as 'just a tool', but claim also that tools change their wielders. I have my axe, and in the process of changing my environment I change my musculature, and I develop my motor skills, which modifies the capacity of my body in various ways, and enables me to engage in (and to imagine) a further range of practices which would otherwise not have been possible.

I think this is something that we are familiar with. I might go to the gym, not directly because I want to move machines around, but because doing this changes me in various ways, thereby widening my range of possible actions, modifying my self-conception, and perhaps modifying my social interactions.

Consider what we do with young children. We introduce them to toys and games (which are tools) not simply because we want to keep them out of the way, but because we hope, with these introductory tools, to develop skills and capacities which will be the basis for further learning in other areas – for example, writing, reasoning and interaction.

Perhaps this point reflects a limitation of the 'tool' analogy, inasmuch as it suggests that the self is distinct from the instrument. In contrast, I want to emphasize that the tool of language becomes bound up in the self that 'uses' it.

Irony, I suggest, is a special case of this. It enables a range of sophisticated engagements with others, some of which may otherwise be impossible, and involves a critical distancing from the way things are presented to us. Furthermore, and in some ways more importantly, irony is also a process that involves a profound engagement with the self. This second aspect in turn reiterates the claim that we ought not regard irony as a device that is contained within the tool of language, but rather as an emotional and interactive process that can be deployed by language.

6. Conclusion: Irony and the self

The self that takes no reflexive relation to itself, and that is wholly 'present', occupying no critical distance from its environment, is a Humean 'no-self'. Such an infantile self can engage in no projects in its environment, and no projects in relation to itself. It looks only out to a world in which it is entirely bound up, but with which it cannot critically engage. This is the antithesis of the ironist. I am not suggesting that it is irony that moves us from the no self to the critically and reflexively engaged self. I am suggesting, however, that irony, both as a capacity and as a practice, occupies an important place in this journey.

Recent work has presented a convincing case that the self ought to be thought of as primarily embodied, *and* that this embodiment grounds both the self's narrative and intersubjectivity.[16] The account of irony I have offered here gels, I think, with these sorts of approach, for two reasons.

First, in Section 3, after criticizing echoic and pretence account for not explaining what makes ironic utterance or performance ironic, I refused to give a convention- or rule-based account of my own. This was not because the task is difficult, but because the attempt would be wrongheaded. Irony is a subjective and intersubjective phenomenon that is affective-emotional in its operation. It involves an orienting of the

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[16]   See Menary in this volume, Zlatev (2008), Gallagher (2005), Gallagher & Hutto (2008).

self, and an orienting of the self to others, that works *because* it does not depend on any sort of 'indicating device'. This suggests that irony rests with those emotional, sensory-motor, perceptual, and nonconceptual embodied practices described by Gallagher and Hutto (2008) that enable children's human interaction and continue to 'provide a primary access for understanding others' (Gallagher, 2001, p. 85).

Second, I think that we can see that irony is a part of the process by which the self takes a narrative relation to itself and others through the dissociation that irony involves. Without a primary process of dissociation the self remains bound up in itself and the world, unable to take a stance as a self. The actual practice of ironic dissociation seems to be (at least part) of the process in which the reflexive self arises and sustains itself.

I cannot here hope to offer an account of how this process originates. It seems that an inherited capacity for mimicry will be important for any fully-fledge account, as will consideration of the role of adult-infant play.

Some recent studies suggest that irony recognition doesn't really arise until the age of about 6 or 8, and that the earliest form of irony that is produced and recognized is sarcasm.[17] I don't doubt that there can be a full-blown ironist only when we have the representational and dissociative possibilities provided by language. However, those studies – reflecting accounts of irony that I think we ought reject – test recognitional and performative capacities on the assumption that irony is just a relatively sophisticated linguistic-pragmatic skill.

If, on the other hand, we acknowledge the relationship between irony and emotion, between irony and play, and between irony and mimicry, we can focus our attention on familiar aspects of adult-infant interaction that suggest that it is something that begins very early in the development of the self and its relation to the world and others. We can see irony as both childish and sophisticated.[18]

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[17]   For experimental work supporting these claims, see Creusere (2000), Hancock *et al* (2000), and Glenwright & Pexman (2003).

[18]   Early versions of this paper were presented at the 'Towards a Science of Consciousness' conference, in Budapest, 2007, and in a Monash University Philosophy seminar. I would like to thank the audience on both occasions for provocative questions. I would also like to thank

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