

# The Ironic Experience of Richard J. Bernstein

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October 14, 2022 – the day of the conference to commemorate Dick – was the first time I entered the New School without that thought that Dick was there, 'watching over' the Philosophy Department. I couldn't help but feel somewhat orphaned, and have a certain sense of dizziness. Allow me a quick personal note. I had just finished my doctorate on Hannah Arendt when Dick Bernstein and Reiner Schürmann asked me if I was interested in staying at the New School and possibly continuing my career there. I declined and returned to Italy for family reasons.

Dick realized after some time that my return to Italy, far from being an obvious decision, had opened a wound in me, a wound from which I had never fully healed. Without ever telling me explicitly, he treated my wound, convincing me that mine was not a loss but still a belonging, a being 'at home' that I would never lose, despite being far away. This is how he taught me the value of being present even while physically absent. More generally, and certainly not only for my personal life, he taught me the importance of the interplay between closeness and distance. For me this was a defining feature of his life, his philosophical posture. Answering not only the eternal questions of philosophy, but also, with Hegel, apprehending our own time in thought and, with Socrates, revoking with doubt every certainty. Yet Dick did this without being devoured by the present, without ending up being crushed by it and remaining without perspective. There are many evidences in his books of his understanding of philosophical wisdom that I would like to call "ironic."

Always ready to acknowledge his own theoretical debts, careful not to fall into the vices of narcissistic protagonism, Dick talked about his own philosophical choices, often giving the floor to others. He also does so in his book *Ironic Life*, published in 2016. I believe that this book represents an indirect statement of how Richard J. Bernstein understood his life in relation to philosophy. Bernstein devotes interesting pages to those contemporary authors who have brought Socratic irony to the forefront, taking it seriously, indeed giving it philosophical prominence within what makes a life worth living. The theses of Gregory Vlastos and Alexander Nehamas find their place there. But it is especially to the entanglement played out between Jonathan Lear and Søren Kierkegaard on the one hand and Lear and Richard Rorty on the other that we must look to grasp the value of irony for Bernstein. These few pages of mine, however, are not meant to be a review of Dick's 2016 text. Instead, I am interested in deciphering the message in the bottle that the book, in my opinion, wants to deliver to us. And I believe that such a message can be found by picking up several clues scattered throughout the text. Particularly if we read the story of Rorty's philosophical

turn through the idea of irony advanced by Jonathan Lear in his book *A Case for Irony*, written in 2011.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, one of these clues can already be found in the introduction of Dick's *Ironic Life* where we read: "Anglo-American philosophers have not been – for the most part – concerned with irony."<sup>2</sup> For many of them, Bernstein argues, the theme of irony—as well as other themes that are the subject of continental philosophy—does not really belong to "serious' philosophy."<sup>3</sup> But how is it possible, Bernstein wonders, to underestimate in this way the philosophical, "serious" scope of irony if, with Socrates, philosophy and irony are born together? Is it not then a philosophical problem this very partition between philosophers who believe they practice a "professional philosophy" and philosophers who are instead deemed unserious, and lowered to the rank of novel writers?

Perhaps an ironic perception of this contrast between the philosophical and the literary would be needed. In this perspective, the views of Richard Rorty and Jonathan Lear become crucial. Both are well versed in the characteristic approaches of contemporary analytic and linguistic philosophy, but both have much broader intellectual interests in subjects that, for the professionals of analytic philosophy, would not be serious. First and foremost: irony. Lear, like Bernstein, deals with ancient philosophers not only from a historical perspective or from the point of view of a reactivation of a character in the history of philosophy per se. Rather, he, together with Pierre Hadot and with Bernstein again, sees in Socrates the possibility to build an alternative forcing the difference between a conception of philosophy as a way of life (represented especially by ancient wisdom) and a conception that sees the end of philosophy in knowledge that is certain and progressive.

Being ironic does not mean being sarcastic or telling intentionally the opposite of what one thinks. The ironic experience is not even a simple moment of freedom, opened up by the act of stepping back and pondering. As Kierkegaard would claim, stepping back and pondering is only making a further move within the realm we are already involved in. Bernstein agrees with Lear, and before that with Hannah Arendt, in asserting that the first characteristic of Socratic irony is to dismantle the solidity of the identities on which one thinks one has built one's life. Irony shatters the settled social normativity. It brings about a "disturbing sense" that things do not make sense; disturbing thoughts about finitude and contingency. Behind this reading is surely the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *Ironic Life* (New York: Polity, 2016) 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

young Kierkegaard's Socrates and his "infinite negativity," and in general the idea of irony as at the same time deconstructive and transformative, far from ordinary conceptions. Irony and earnestness go hand in hand. The moment of ironic experience is a moment of uncanniness and disruption.

Irony inaugurates an ethical experience. All the qualifications that identify me, all the social qualifications that anchor my sense of being somebody, lose their meaning. Or rather, I lose all my bearings, my banisters (as Arendt says). It is in some way repeating the philosophical experience of being struck by an idea as a disruptive, disorienting experience. In these ironic moments, you cannot but feel contempt for all the accepted standards, for the norms of social practice. This does not mean that an ironic existence separates one from the world and leads to an obstinate struggle against all norms and social roles. Producing an ironic experience, letting the awe of irony traverse you, means also not knowing how to proceed, not knowing what to choose in that moment. An alternative ironic normativity does not exist. Nor is irony the incessant movement of those who throw up in the air one after the other all social ties and identities. It rather means, without code and decalogue, being able to disassemble one's practical, usual, and assumed identity to interrogate oneself about the deep meaning of that identity. In the wake of Kierkegaard, who wondered whether in all of Christianity there were any Christians, Lear brings the example of a physician, who, struck by an ironic experience, cannot continue to operate as he had always done before because he is suddenly struck by the idea of health or 'being well.' As Bernstein points out, by questioning the value of your practical identity, you are led to a breakdown in carrying on business as usual.

While Bernstein basically agrees with the meaning of irony put forward by Lear, he does not agree at all with Lear's criticism of Rorty. According to Bernstein, Lear fails to recognize how Rorty exemplifies many of the key points that Lear himself emphasizes in his account of irony. Even more than the writings, it is Rorty's life that embodies what Lear claims for the ironic experience. Rorty – Bernstein tells us – experienced something like the uncanny disruption brought about by irony. He aspired to be – writes Bernstein – a first-rate professional, "respectable," analytically oriented philosopher. He was remarkably successful. He was appointed to Princeton, one of the leading academic philosophy departments in the world. At 47 he was elected president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association; he was among the very few philosophers to be awarded a MacArthur "genius" award.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty received a MacArthur Genius award in 1981, at the age of 50.

Before this, in the 1970s, however, something unsettled his life. He was disoriented. He was experiencing the type of uncanny ironic disruption that Lear describes so well. He radically questioned the very idea of philosophy as an academic discipline. And he acted on it. He resigned from Princeton and joined the faculty of the University of Virginia as a Professor of Humanities in 1982. And he never again joined a philosophy department.

If in irony there is a disruption of one's practical identity, there also remains a form of loyalty to the idea that had inspired that identity. Lear and Bernstein speak of an "itch for direction" and call this experience "erotic Uncanniness." This is what, according to Dick, happened to Rorty. It is as if he had painfully and disorientingly questioned his own identity as a professional. The question was: What does it mean to be a philosopher today? When Rorty began to ironically critique analytical philosophy, he never abandoned philosophy. He certainly continued to exhibit his sophisticated knowledge of contemporary analytic discussions of the mind-body problem, the theory of reference, and the debates about realism and antirealism. But, increasingly, it became apparent that what he was really doing was undermining the project of analytic philosophy.

The point here—for Dick and for us—is not so much to discuss the positions Rorty reaches, but to emphasize the power of an ironic experience, the very experience that lies at the origin of Socratic questioning, in the transformation of one's identity. Every thinker who practices philosophy as a way of life cultivates Socratic eros in herself, in the sense that she cannot help but feel at some point in time that everything is strange (things which, to others and to herself, seem obvious and familiar). She becomes the merciless critic of all those who think they possess truth and justice, and most of all, she is the one who bestows irony on those who presume to be able to deduce absolute norms from doxa, from common opinion.

I don't know what happened to Dick during the period of that resounding refusal to grant him tenure at Yale. I do know for sure, however, that his concern that philosophy was becoming increasingly specialized and professionalized became more and more a disturbing thought. His Socratic reaction to the ironic experience was to practice philosophy, in his texts and institutions, as a sort of 'cross-examination', not only and not so much to bring the different schools of thought to confront each other and eventually to dialogue, but as a way to dismantle conformism of both traditional philosophy and that which presented itself as radical and deconstructive. For while the rigor of professional philosophy is necessary, the connection of philosophy to the troubles of the world and to our troubled way of being in the world is vital. His

wisdom will be missed, all the more in these times when almost no one wants to train the ear to the call of such an intended irony.