

What Moral Virtues are Required to Recognize Irony?

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The *Onion*, a widely known satirical newspaper, frequently finds its articles taken as the literal truth. One article from May 2011, “Planned Parenthood Opens \$8 Billion Abortionplex,” featured teenage girls gushing over the amusement park amenities like a ten-screen theater, nightclub and “lazy river” and a fake PR representative touting, “Whether she’s a high school junior who doesn’t want to go to prom pregnant, a go-getter professional who can’t be bothered with the time commitment of raising a child, or a prostitute who knows getting an abortion is the easiest form of birth control—all are welcome” and “Our hope is for this facility to become a regular destination where a woman in her second trimester can whoop it up at karaoke and then kick back while we vacuum out the contents of her uterus.”¹ Given the extremity and arguable tastelessness of this joke, it is nearly impossible to imagine this as anything other than a satire of the abortion debate and of accusations that abortion rights advocates are breezily immoral. Nevertheless, U.S. Representative John Fleming of Louisiana was outraged that Planned Parenthood would do such a thing.² Similarly, the official newspaper of the Chinese government, the *People’s Daily*, repeated the *Onion*’s report that Kim Jong Un had been named *People Magazine*’s “Sexiest Man Alive,” and it was not the first time that they had been fooled.³ It is a sad sign that Facebook recently decided to protect the public

¹ *The Onion*, “Planned Parenthood Opens \$8 Billion Abortionplex” (May 18, 2011).

² Brett Smiley, “Congressman Alerts Facebook Followers to *Onion* Story about \$8 Billion Abortionplex” *U.S. News and World Report* (February 6, 2012).

³ *The Onion*, “Kim Jong-Un Named *The Onion*’s Sexiest Man Alive for 2012” (November 4, 2012); Seth Cline, “The Onion Fools Top Chinese Newspaper” *U.S. News and World Report* (November 27, 2012).

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from confusion by including a [Satire] warning on articles posted from *The Onion*.⁴ This failure to recognize irony is certainly not a new problem. Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, at the very birth of comedy, was so misunderstood as praising immorality that he had to insert a deadly serious scene directly criticizing an earlier audience for not catching the satire and making it clear that comedy is a vehicle of moral education.

Anyone who has told a joke over Thanksgiving dinner and then been required to explain that it was a joke to an outraged relative knows that this occurs. Poe's Law, an informal law like "Murphy's Law," holds that "Without a blatant display of humor, it is impossible to create a parody of extremism or fundamentalism that someone won't mistake for the real thing." An earlier version of Poe's Law was presented online in a Usenet newsgroup discussing internet etiquette in 1983. There, it was advised that without some clear indication of irony, such as a "winking" emoticon, "no matter how obvious the satire is to you, do not be surprised if people take it seriously." It seems that no irony is so extreme that it will not be taken literally by someone. The question is why this is so.

I argue here that, in addition the need for shared knowledge and certain cognitive requirements, recognition of irony requires certain moral virtues. Irony has been the object of moral reflection since the beginning of western ethics. However, that has focused on the morality of how and when to use irony, or the capacity of irony to spur moral reflection. My concern here is with the moral requirements, on the part of the audience, even to recognize that someone is speaking ironically. As we will see, recent scientific work has attempted to determine the cognitive prerequisites for the recognition of irony. However, there has been no treatment of the moral prerequisites, despite the fact that cognitive explanations alone are ultimately insufficient and we are left searching for a ground for our moral disapproval of those who fail to "get it." To help fill this gap, I begin by clarifying the object of analysis and by distinguishing cognitive from moral prerequisites. I then present the criticisms that the ironist is either sincerely offensive or viciously insincere. After defending against both charges, I propose that the twin qualities of charity of interpretation and moderation of self-seriousness are required to recognize irony. I conclude that one has a positive moral obligation to develop a sense of irony, but that it must be joined to the wisdom to know how to react appropriately.

1 Humorous Irony and Moral Offense

Irony is "the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect."⁵ To take a mild example, I might shamble from bed in the morning and be met by a loved one's "Well, hello beautiful." Were I to take this literally, I would think that they believe I am

⁴ Arwa Mahdawi, "Satire is Dead because the Internet is Killing It" *The Guardian* (August 19, 2014).

⁵ *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, Retrieved November 15th, 2013 from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/irony; For the purposes of this article, "irony" will refer to verbal irony rather than Socratic, dramatic, situational or any other type of irony.

beautiful. Unless I have unsinkable self-esteem, this is likely to be confusing, since that is often when I look the least beautiful. As a result, I might take them to be lying, deluded, near-sighted or unable to grasp the meaning of certain words. However, ironic statements are not intended to deceive nor do they indicate any other failing. Irony is not deceit or obfuscation, but indirect expression of meaning.⁶ The speaker does not attempt to make me believe something false or nonsensical, but is relying on me to understand their intended meaning despite their roundabout way of expressing it. The intended meaning is a non-literal one—in this case, one of affection or humor at how I look in the morning. Similarly, the *Onion's* Abortionplex satire is intended to expose humorously the poor state of public debate or the hollowness of accusations made against pro-choice advocates, while the Sexiest Man Alive article is meant to expose the silliness of the award, particularly when applied to a totalitarian leader, or merely to be absurd. Irony is then distinct from lying or being willfully uncommunicative, which are typically moral failings.

It is helpful to identify a typical case when irony is not only unrecognized, but also dismissed as immoral. Let us use the most famous case of satirical irony, Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burden to their Parents or Country, and for making them Beneficial to the Publick," in which he proposed that Irish children be converted into food and industrial materials for the rich and that poor mothers be used as broodstock.⁷ Let us reduce this tract to a simple proposition: "For the good of the nation, we should eat children." Swift has made a proposition that, if taken literally, is obviously morally offensive. Whatever position one takes on the morality of capitalism or the rightness of poverty prevention programs, it is morally offensive actually to eat children. And were poverty advocates actually to propose such horrific acts sincerely, they would be immoral people. In fact, the imaginary speaker's earnest concern for the poor and their love of Britain heightens the humor and the cutting edge. However, despite the clear extremity of his proposals, "A Modest Proposal" has been taken by many even today as literal and morally outrageous.

It is no coincidence that failure to recognize irony was joined with moral outrage. Three intertwined observations bear this out. First, as a rule, we are less likely to recognize irony when our moral beliefs are violated. Our immediate reaction is more likely to be defensive and to conclude that the speaker is sincerely vicious. Second, we are less likely to be offended when the irony reaffirms our moral beliefs and criticizes others'. In those cases, we recognize it as satire with an appropriate target. Third, when we like the ironist and want to believe their literal statements, we are also more likely to attribute a secret sincerity. One study of viewers of *The Colbert Report*—a parody of conservative pundits such as Bill O'Reilly and shows on the Fox News network generally—found that conservative viewers believe that

⁶ For more on irony and indirect communication, particularly in the thought of Kierkegaard, see John Lippitt, *Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

⁷ Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal and Other Satirical Works* (Dover Publishing, 1996 (1729)), pp. 52–60.

Colbert is secretly sincere in his presentation of outrageous positions from the Right.⁸

In short, the exemplary case for the present discussion is when a speaker has ironically expressed a belief, causing the audience to take offense at the literal content and to attribute a vicious character to the speaker. In addition, throughout this article I will use humorous irony, as in satire, as the typical case. There are non-ironic cases of humor. Likewise, though irony is frequently meant to be humorous, it is not always so. Nevertheless, issues of the moral requisites for recognizing irony are best discussed in the case of humorous irony, particularly when it offends. The moral requisites to recognize humorous irony are the same as those for non-humorous irony but, given that these moral requisites are most commonly called upon in the context of humorous irony, it provides the best opportunity for analysis.

2 Cognitive Requirements for Recognizing Irony

A second clarification is needed before proceeding to the vices and virtues of irony; namely, that the virtues sought after are moral rather than cognitive. Recognition of irony requires certain knowledge and cognitive skills on the part of the audience. They must have some awareness of the situation and the facts of the matter. They must be able to recognize when statements do not correspond with the facts of the matter, which in turn involves reading contextual clues. The shift in context allows the audience to understand that the content is not meant seriously; thus signaling playfulness, which is a central element of humor. For example, in joke telling, the ironist often uses a series of clues to let the audience know that they are in fact telling a joke, such as a unusual tone, laughing, or even asking “Did you hear the one about...?”⁹ These are general cognitive skills necessary to negotiate the natural and social world.

This may explain the difficulty of recognizing irony across cultural or linguistic divides, as in the case of the *People’s Daily’s* failure to see the irony of naming a pudgy dictator the Sexiest Man Alive. The audience may lack the shared background knowledge that the speaker assumes for the disparity to work. A word’s particular subtleties or connotations may also be lost when the ironist and their audience do not speak the same language. Further, some cultures may prime individuals to be more likely to recognize irony. It is reasonable to believe that some cultures are more literal than others. However, failures of knowledge or culture do not explain all or even most cases. Members of the same culture who speak the same language frequently fail to see irony.

Recent psychological research speculates that recognizing irony, among many other social interactions, requires a “Theory of Mind.”¹⁰ Put simply, this refers to

⁸ Heather LaMarre, et al. “The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in The Colbert Report” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14(2) (2009): 212–231.

⁹ Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humor Seriously* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 103–110.

¹⁰ M. Shibata, et al., “Neural substrates of irony comprehension: A functional MRI study” *Brain Research* 1308 (2010): 114–123; Nicola Spotorno, et al., “Neural evidence that utterance-processing entails mentalizing: the case of irony” *Neuroimage* 63(1) (2012): 25–39.

the fact that we attribute intentions and emotions to others. We experience another mind with its own internal states and motivations. Recognition of irony requires that the audience first be able to recognize that the speaker, despite saying something that does not accord with fact, is not lying or delusional but communicating their meaning through a non-literal statement. They must be able to understand that the ironist has internal states of their own, their own perspective on the world, and that their intended meaning is not necessarily being expressed literally but they expect me to understand nevertheless. Likewise, the ironist must understand that the audience too have minds of their own with internal states and assume that they have what is required to grasp the intended meaning. When irony is used, a complex set of assumptions regarding the cognitive capacities of the other is in play. This is a difficult cognitive task, though most adults do it constantly.

Despite it being common, not all have the cognitive capacity to recognize irony. First, children may not grasp that others have their own internal states. Studies of humor in children reveal that irony begins to develop at roughly six years old.¹¹ Prior to the development of a theory of mind, a child cannot distinguish between an ironic statement and a simple lie. That is, assuming the child does not simply take the ironic statement as literal truth, they take incongruity as deceit. Second, as cognitive degeneration takes place due to disease or age, there are corresponding declines in ability to recognize both irony and humor that relies on incongruity. For example, appreciation of irony and humor decline with Parkinson's patients' degradation of the area of the brain associated with theory of mind.¹² In another study, elderly participants lagged behind the young in their ability to identify the appropriate punch line for completing jokes.¹³ An appreciation of irony seems to rise and fall with our cognitive capacities.

However, the purpose of the present argument is not to establish the cognitive capacities required to recognize irony, but to claim that certain moral virtues are also required if one is to grasp that a statement is meant non-literally and inoffensively. Admittedly, these are not radically separate. Study of children's cognitive capacities also informs the moral requirements for appreciating irony. For example, irony softens the blow of criticism and smooths social interactions. We say things without literally saying them, which may be less hurtful. In the case of jokes or joshing, irony is not critical, but intended to amuse or show affection. I may call someone an "idiot" when they do something foolish to show that I sympathize or I find them charming. Appreciation of the muting function of irony develops in children at around six years of age, as they begin to develop the cognitive capacity and to appreciate that ironic criticisms are less mean than literal ones. Further, more

¹¹ M. A. Creusere, "A Developmental Test of Theoretical Perspectives on the Understanding of Verbal Irony: Children's Recognition of Allusion and Pragmatic Insincerity" *Metaphor & Symbol* 15(1–2) (2000): 29–45; E. Winner, et al., "Making Sense of Literal and Nonliteral Falsehood" *Metaphor & Symbolic Activity* 2(1) (1987): 13–32; A. De Groot, et al., "Understanding versus Discriminating Nonliteral Utterances: Evidence for a Dissociation" *Metaphor & Symbol* 10(4) (1995): 255–273.

¹² Laura Moneta, et al., "Irony comprehension and theory of mind deficits in patients with Parkinson's disease" *Cortex* 45 (2009): 972–981.

¹³ P. Shammi and D. T. Stuss, "The Effects of Normal Aging on Humor Appreciation" *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* 9(6) (2003): 855–863.

subtle expressions of irony were taken to be more mean than more obvious ones.¹⁴ As our cognitive capacities develop, we learn that non-literal statements are not necessarily deceptive or malicious. Therefore, the ability to morally evaluate irony presumes certain cognitive abilities.

Cognitive explanations alone do not suffice. Two people of sound mind and who both possess the background information necessary to recognize the incongruity of the literal statement with the truth may still differ over whether a statement was literal. Given the ubiquity of those who fail to recognize irony, it is not reasonable to conclude that, because of that failure, they must all have diminished mental capacity or are ignorant. The rest of the argument will concern those possessing sound mind and sufficient knowledge, but who still fail to grasp irony because they are lacking in certain moral virtues.

3 Defending the Ironist

To arrive at the moral virtues required to recognize irony, let us start from the other side with the charge that the character of the ironist is vicious. Why have some rejected irony as a sign of a poor character? Grouped loosely, two common criticisms of the ironic character are that (a) offensive “ironic” comments actually express the sincere offensive beliefs of the speaker and (b) ironists are insincere. Ironically, the ironist is accused of speaking both sincerely and insincerely.

The best known philosophical expression of the first criticism is Ronald de Sousa’s “When is it Wrong to Laugh?”¹⁵ De Sousa contends that it is wrong to laugh at humor that is racist, sexist or otherwise offensive because a necessary condition for such appreciation is that one endorse the racist, sexist or otherwise offensive attitude that underlies the joke. For example, a racist joke may rely on the assumption that a certain ethnic group is lazy. For the joke to land, the audience must first be aware of that assumption. Even if the audience is aware of the assumption, merely understanding a joke does not entail that one finds it funny. If they have negative attitudes toward the assumptions, then they will not find it funny. Importantly for the matter of irony, De Sousa asserts that it is not possible to merely entertain the assumption in a way that would allow the audience to find it funny. Those who find it funny genuinely do agree with the offensive assumption, even if they deny it. Therefore, the difference between merely understanding a joke and actually finding it funny is having a positive attitude toward the assumptions required to understand it. They must endorse the offensive assumption. Therefore, if one finds racist or sexist jokes funny, then one has a racist or sexist attitudes; that is, one is a racist or sexist. This includes the joke-teller. They may claim to be speaking ironically, but the sheer act of finding their own racist joke funny reveals there is no irony and the joke-teller is a literal-speaking racist.

¹⁴ S. Dews, et al., “Children’s Understanding of the Meaning and Functions of Verbal Irony” *Child Development* 67(6) (1996): 3071–3085.

¹⁵ Ronald De Sousa, “When is it Wrong to Laugh?” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. John Morreall, ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), pp. 226–249.

There is a second complementary criticism of the ironist. In this case, the problem is not that their expression has offensive content that reveals an offensive character. Rather, the use of irony alone reveals a poor character. In this argument, excellence requires genuine commitment and simple statement of belief. The problem with the ironist is that they do not say what they mean, and they do not treat important things with the respect they deserve. Irony is indicative of insincerity or a lack of moral seriousness.

In popular culture, there have been calls for a “New Sincerity” to counter the prevalent caustic hipsterism. It is said that we live in a postmodern world of irony in which people wear kitschy clothes and lifestyles with the implicit understanding that they don’t *really* like them, or anything else for that matter. As a counter, the late David Foster Wallace imagined “some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue.”¹⁶

Beyond popular culture, there are also philosophical critiques of irony. Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Humor and Faith” provided a classic argument for sincerity. Niebuhr held that both humor and religion address the incongruities of human existence. However, only faith addresses the ultimate incongruities, those profound discrepancies between the infinitesimal smallness and infinite greatness of human life. Laughter is ultimately harsh and judges without mercy. As its Latin root (*ridis*) reveals, laughter is ultimately ridicule. Further, it cannot confront injustice, but only comfort the oppressed. Only faith reconciles judgment with mercy and turns the cutting edge of humor against the judger, deflating their pretensions. Humor is a form of wisdom, as it teaches that we should not get invested too much in this world. However, it is inadequate. It is only a prelude to true contrition. The joy of reconciliation with God is beyond humor, but from a contrite acceptance of God’s judgment. Laughter in the face of sin is irresponsible and cynical. We cannot laugh off death, which is to reduce life to nothingness. Faith is then the assertion of meaningfulness in the face of ultimate incongruity.¹⁷ There must be a foundation outside the self that must be accepted without ironic distance. One cannot then be ironic without also having contempt, which is vicious.

John Morreall offers a complementary warning of the dangers of humorous disengagement. He argues that distancing oneself from the world and from one’s assertions can lead one to laugh off genuine problems, block one’s compassion and promote callousness toward others, and promotes an indifference to the truth that sustains harmful prejudices which is privilege of only the socially powerful.¹⁸ Therefore, even if the ironist does not sincerely hold offensive beliefs, their ironic

¹⁶ David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Back Bay Books, 1997), p. 81; see also Christy Wampole, “How to Live without Irony” *New York Times* (November 18, 2012).

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humor and Faith” in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: Seabrook Press, 1969), pp. 134–149.

¹⁸ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

distance is itself a danger. Irony expresses a vicious unwillingness to take things as they are.

The ironist is then said to be both sincerely offensive and offensive in their insincerity. Let us address each in turn. First, ironists are not necessarily sincerely offensive. As noted, irony is least likely to be recognized when the literal meaning is found morally offensive to the audience and, therefore, the inoffensive intended meaning is more likely to be missed. Upon hearing the proposition, “For the good of the nation, we should eat children,” the audience reacts to the offensive literal content and concludes that Swift must be a monster.

Of course, many seemingly offensive expressions of irony are not actually racist, sexist or otherwise immoral. Others have responded to De Sousa’s argument and we need not spend much time refuting it.¹⁹ One of De Sousa’s premises is that attitudinal endorsement of offensive assumptions is necessary for a joke to work. However, this is not true. The laughter need only be aware of the assumption or be able to entertain it as if it were true for the purposes of the joke. The earliest known joke book, the Greek *Philogelos*, contains jokes predicated upon the stupidity of the Abderites that are strikingly similar to today’s ethnic jokes. If one does not know that the Abderites were stereotyped in ancient Greece as stupid, then the jokes do not work. However, it is not necessary to actually believe them to be stupid to appreciate the humor, only to be made aware of the stereotype. Similarly, one need not endorse the paternalistic and callous attitude of Swift’s advocate in order to get the satire. One need only know of this attitude toward the Irish and of current government policy toward them. The ironist need not surreptitiously believe what they literally say in order to see the cutting humor in it. They need only to be aware of the underlying assumptions, to entertain them and to assume that their audience is also aware of those assumptions *and how offensive they are*. Satire simply does not work if the satirist actually endorses the attitudes they are satirizing. Of course, a person may find an offensive joke funny because they literally endorse offensive assumptions. But irony works precisely because the ironist and their audience *reject* the offensive assumptions.

Even if it is true that the ironist does not sincerely endorse offensive attitudes, the charge remains that irony is a form of insincerity, and therefore an undesirable quality of character. As typified by Niebuhr’s critique, a frequent charge brought against the ironist is that they do not care or that everything is ultimately ridiculous. There are no shared truths, natural or moral. However, irony is not necessarily skeptical or cynical. As already noted, the ironist does not attempt to deceive, but to express meaning non-literally. Irony relies on a shared set of background assumptions. The meaning arises out of the clear incongruity between the statement and the background. Were there no facts of the matter, it would not be possible to use the incongruity between the statement and the audience’s knowledge of the facts to reveal the genuine meaning. Swift assumed that people knew that the Irish poor were in dire straits and that using infants as food was deeply offensive. The blatant

¹⁹ Berys Gaut, “Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor” *Philosophy and Literature* 22(1) (1998): 51–68; Aaron Smuts, “The Ethics of Humor” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13 (2010): 333–347; Noel Carroll, “On Jokes” in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 317–335.

incongruity between his proposal and widely shared—if not universal—moral principles was intended to force the audience to reflect on current attitudes and policies. Even in less inflammatory cases, as in the “Hello beautiful” greeting in the morning, the ironist assumes that the audience knows that they probably do not look beautiful, making the statement literally false, but also that it is offensive to lie to a loved one, so they should seek out the intended meaning. A solipsist, skeptic or cynic could not then effectively engage in irony because they deny the existence of widely shared, stable epistemic and moral beliefs.

For this reason, use of irony does not entail that the ironist is insincere. Particularly in the case of satire, there is an inescapable sense of moral outrage. Swift’s sympathies are clearly on the part of those abused by the policies of the Walpole administration and the widespread indifference of the English people. Contemporary satirical programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are similarly fueled by moral outrage at the failures of democratic politics and of the genuine news media to provide the information and critique needed by a democratic public. And, of course, at the birth of philosophy Socrates unified irony with a commitment to moral integrity.²⁰ An underlying sincerity makes irony possible. One could make the weaker criticism that the ironist is wicked because they do not sincerely believe the dogma on my community, that they do not share *my* beliefs. However, this is not sufficient to prove the ironist’s insincerity. My community’s beliefs may be unworthy of sincere belief. The fact that a person speaks ironically about faith or some other profound matter does not mean that they mock the very notion of faith or moral rightness.

4 Ironic Virtues

So far, I have largely defined concepts and provided a rearguard defense of irony. Let us finally turn to the positive argument for the moral virtues necessary to recognize irony. In this section, I will argue that certain qualities of character are necessary. A sense of irony requires that a person be able to extend the generous assumption that the speaker is a morally decent person and to moderate their own reaction to statements that offend their moral beliefs or, put differently, to take themselves less seriously. I propose that appreciating irony requires that a person have two characteristics: one akin to the classical virtue of charity and the other somewhere between two other classical virtues, moderation and wittiness.²¹ The former regards the attitude we have toward the ironist while the latter regards the relation we have to ourselves. Implicitly in this section and then explicitly in the next, I will defend the claim that these qualities of character are, in fact, virtues.

First, appreciation of irony requires that we have a certain attitude toward the ironist. Imagine reading “A Modest Proposal” for the first time, as many of us did in high school. Swift has proposed that “For the good of the nation, we should eat

²⁰ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

²¹ I should emphasize that these virtues are “akin” to those of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition. I am not claiming that they are exact replicas, but only approximations.

children.” Assuming that we share the effectively universal moral belief that children are innocents deserving of moral consideration, we will feel revulsion. The proposal is incongruous with foundational moral beliefs. We might conclude that we did not understand the proposal, that Swift was delusional, that he is lying to us for reasons unknown, or that he is a sincere monster who believes that children should be farmed. We might also, like many people do upon hearing something they take to be so wrong as to boggle the mind, angrily ask “Are you joking?!” or exclaim “You have got to be kidding me!”. Last, we could grasp Swift’s intended meaning, reflect on how the Irish were being treated and transfer our moral outrage to its proper target.

While asking if the author is joking opens the possibility that the meaning might be non-literal, only the last of these options is truly charitable to Swift. When confronted with the incongruity between a statement and moral belief, the most charitable option is to consider that the statement is not meant literally and that the speaker is actually a morally decent person. When confronted by a statement that, if taken literally, would indicate that the speaker is immoral, they infer that the speaker is not speaking literally. Those who can recognize irony work from the assumption that the speaker and their intentions are good unless given further evidence otherwise. The literalist, however, upon hearing an untruthful or offensive statement, infers that it must reflect the character of the speaker and condemns them as deceitful or malicious.

In this, the charity of interpretation required to recognize irony is an addendum to the principle of charity best known from the work of Donald Davidson.²² Countering the related dangers of conceptual relativity and radical untranslatability, Davidson and others have proposed that we must make certain assumptions regarding the speaker—that they are largely rational and most of their beliefs about the world is true. When they say something we do not understand, we should presume that it is a failing of our understanding, not of their rationality. In the case of irony, the problem is not because of radical untranslatability but, ironically, arises from the presumption of clear and obvious communication. The audience mistakenly believes that the stated, literal meaning is to be taken at face value and thereby gets offended because of false assumptions about the speaker. The failure of charity occurs because they fail to assume that the speaker is not only rational, but also morally decent. The audience presumes immorality, not irrationality.

It is then more trying to recognize irony. The audience has to extend a charity of interpretation to the ironist that does not come naturally. It is easier to be offended and dismiss them as immoral. It spares the audience from the reflection and critique that the ironist hopes to provoke. The appreciation of the Onion’s Abortionplex joke requires an assumption that the editors of that newspaper are not horrible people and imposes on the reader the obligation to ask why they would write such a thing. Thankfully, there was no call for the execution of the editors from Representative Fleming’s office which, one imagines, is a sign of moral progress. However, outside

²² Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

of liberal democracies this charity is by no means guaranteed, as evidenced by the treatment of satirists under authoritarian regimes and, at times, democratic ones.²³

Even in cases of non-satirical irony, there is an implicit charity of interpretation at work. The audience ultimately must make an initial assumption whether the ironist is a liar or not, even if the ironic statement is as benign as “Nice weather we’re having” on a dreary day. Upon hearing a non-literal statement that is clearly incongruous with fact, whether that statement is morally offensive or not, they must be able to consider the possibility that the ironist is not a liar. There is an opportunity to attribute the virtue of honesty, despite initial evidence.

In sum, irony requires a tendency to assume virtue in others, whether that virtue be honesty, compassion or rationality. The contention that irony is charitable may seem counter-intuitive, given that so much irony is cutting. The ironist may sarcastically criticize or ridicule their target. After all, Swift’s modest proposal does not show much sympathy for those responsible for the plight of the Irish poor. However, it is important to note that the charity discussed here is that extended to the ironist, not to the target. The issue is whether the ironist is horrible, not whether the politicians being satirized are. If the audience cannot charitably interpret Swift’s words as those of a decent man, then they cannot appreciate his satire. They need not assume the virtue of the target to understand the intended meaning. But let us consider that the audience *is* the target of the satire, that Swift intended the public to be made aware of their own complicity and indifference. Even here, despite the fact that the usual response to criticism is defensiveness and it is therefore more difficult to do, the audience should assume that Swift is not speaking literally if they are to recognize what he means and if they are to be goaded into moral reflection. If the audience is to recognize the irony, they must develop a certain relation to themselves and their subjective reactions.

With that, we may turn to the second proposed ironic virtue. Complementing this tendency to attribute virtues to others when faced with an offending ironic statement is another inward tendency to resist angry or prideful reactions to statements that offend us, or even those that target us. If the first ironic virtue is akin to the classical virtue of *caritas*, the second echoes something between moderation and wittiness.

Once again considering Swift’s proposition that we should eat children for the good of the country, we might have an initially negative reaction at the outrageous notion that children be cannibalized. If we are to be able to recognize that his proposal is morally upright satire, we must hold that initial reaction in abeyance. Anger and righteousness come naturally and are pleasurable to indulge in, but the appreciative audience does not take so much pleasure in being righteous that they are unwilling to interpret the ironist’s words with kindness, to consider that they are a good person despite the literal meaning of their statement. Likewise, the ironist charitably assumes that the audience will have the capacity to resist this immediate reaction, to mitigate the intensity of emotion upon being offended, and to grasp the intended meaning. Consider jokes that cause the audience to pause in a moment of discomfort before laughing heartily, sometimes laughing even more precisely

²³ Leonard Freedman, *The Offensive Art: Political Satire and Its Censorship around the World* (Westport: Prager Publishers, 2009).

because they are laughing about their own shocked reaction. This moment of shock, though not a part of every joke, reveals the ability to recognize that one's immediate reaction was offense, only to suspend that reaction and thereby grasp the humor. Even in less humorous cases of irony, there must be a similar ability, if offended, to step back from their initial reaction to perceived deceit or malice. Therefore, insofar as irony requires that we be able to exercise control over our relation to our emotions, then it is a form of moderation.

In addition to moderation, another similar classical virtue helps to understand what is required to recognize irony. Though courage, truthfulness, moderation and justice have received far more attention, Aristotle also counted wittiness or pleasantness in conversation (*eutrapelia*) among the virtues. Unfortunately, translating *eutrapelia* as “wittiness” is a bit misleading. It might seem that the virtue is the sheer ability to amuse others or engage in wordplay. *Eutrapelia* regards the relation between the desire to please others and one's regard for them and oneself. From its root *eutropos*, it carries the sense of being versatile or nimble. Witty people are able to make others laugh without hurting the object of their laughter and to enjoy the humor of others without feeling hurt. At the same time, their desire to please others does not lead them to compromise their own self-respect nor, at the opposed extreme, does their concern for their dignity prevent them from taking pleasure from enjoying others' company.

The virtue becomes more clear when we see it as the mean between the extremes of buffoonery and boorishness. The buffoon “cannot resist any temptation to be funny, and spare neither himself nor others for a laugh” while the boor “contributes nothing and takes offense at everything.”²⁴ The former cares too much about the happiness of those around him and the latter too little. Or put another way, the boor is too serious about themselves while the buffoon is so willing to please others that they make a fool of themselves and their audience. It is not that being serious about one's dignity is vicious—certainly not—but that a misplaced seriousness is.

It is then virtuous to be able to “get over myself” or not take myself so seriously that I cannot be sociable and amuse others, while at the same time not sacrificing my basic self-respect. The person who is willing to compromise their dignity at all times to get a laugh or reward others' humor is missing the mark as much as the prig whose self-regard prevents them from being sociable. There is a difference between someone who can, say, laugh that their deeply-held ethical environmentalism makes them a “tree-hugger” while still not allowing their carnivorous family to belittle them out of a desire to please.

Recognition when one's dignity is truly being violated by what others say, as opposed to when they are merely using irony to amuse, educate or critique, requires that I be able to consider that my threatened reaction is not appropriate. The person who is unable to suspend their fear of being made a fool will not be able to appreciate irony, as their reaction to a non-literal and offending statement will be defensive rather than amused or goaded to think. Recognition of irony requires that the audience be able to recognize that their offense is not necessarily to be accepted at face value. They may be genuinely offended at what they take to be a deceitful or

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 108.

morally offensive statement, but they must also recognize that their desire to take themselves and their subjective reactions seriously can also be unsocial or unpleasant to others. Self-respect is a virtue, *ceretis paribus*, but particularly in contexts where the ironist is presumed to entertain their audience—say, when among friends or when reading a satirical newspaper—offense caused by self-seriousness is inappropriate. Of course, they offending statement may actually be literal or offensive, but the audience must first be able to consider the possibility that their offense may be a vicious self-seriousness.

Joined with the sketch of moderation above, wittiness shows that irony requires that I be able to distance myself from my subjective responses if I am to see that the ironist did not intend primarily to offend, but perhaps to amuse or educate.²⁵ If I find myself swelling with righteous indignation upon hearing that we should eat Irish children, then I have an obligation to get over myself and ask if it is the appropriate response to Swift's proposal. Of course, he may be serious and I may have had the appropriate response, but the ability to judge requires that I first have the capacity to hold my reactions in abeyance and reflect upon them.

5 A Sense of Irony as a Moral Obligation

Recognition of irony then has certain cognitive and character prerequisites. Beyond the cognitive preconditions that make it possible to infer intended meaning in the face of its expressed contradiction, the audience's character must be so constituted as to (a) assume charitably that the ironist is morally decent and (b) to moderate their own reaction when offended and thereby to refrain from taking themselves too seriously. However, it is one thing to argue that certain qualities of character are necessary for one to recognize irony, and another to argue that those qualities are moral virtues. More is required to establish that individuals have a positive moral obligation to cultivate these qualities of character.

To prove definitively that these characteristics are virtues, I would have to ground them in a comprehensive account of human excellence or flourishing. However, that is beyond the scope of this article. A far less demanding strategy would be to simply assert that these characteristics, like courage or honesty, are inherently admirable and ask the reader to consider their own confirming intuitions. However, given the tendency of so many to find irony offensive, it is clear that there would not be wide agreement on the admirability of the ironic character. The best approach, the one taken implicitly in the argument so far, is to show that these characteristics are similar to widely accepted virtues. Given the resemblance of the ironic characteristics to the classical virtues of charity, moderation and wittiness, there is reason to name these characteristics virtues. Beyond what has already been implicitly argued

²⁵ In humor, though I believe it applies to discussion of irony generally, Robert C. Roberts argues that the ability to laugh at oneself contains an element of self-transcendence, and "character transcendence is basic to the very concept of moral virtue" in "Humor and the Virtues" *Inquiry* 31(2) (1988): 127–149. For more on the intersection of humor, virtue and self-transcendence, see John Lippett's reply to Roberts, "Is a Sense of Humour a Virtue?" *The Monist* 88(1) (2005): 72–92.

in the previous section, there are additional reasons for believing that the ironic characteristics are like acknowledged virtues.

First, let us focus on the classical virtue of *caritas*. Insofar as *caritas* is an admirable quality and part of the good life, and insofar the charitable assumption of goodness on the part of those who offend resemble *caritas*, it follows that one ought to aspire to be charitable in this way and that those who lack this quality are lacking in excellence. *Caritas* is traditionally that loving friendship which binds us to God and to our neighbor as ourselves. Though the charity required to recognize irony assumes no theological background, it shares the essential commitment to one's neighbor and to presume their decency. Speaking directly to the religious role of humorous irony and against Niebuhr's above criticisms that irony entails ridicule, Conrad Hyers defended the role of humorous irony to counter the dangerous sincerity of religious faith. Literalism in religion produces fundamentalism and severity. With Erasmus, Hyers argued that Christianity contains an element of folly, reminding us that the things of this world are fleeting and attachment to them is idolatry. Citing examples of medieval festivals like Holy Innocent's Day and the feast of fools, or the Haitian parodic "catechism of the Guede," he argued that faith relaxes taboos and undercuts religion's tendency to absoluteness.²⁶ The opposed extreme of cynical ironism is a sincere literalism that leaves no room for critical thought against political-ecclesiastical authority. If the ironist must worry about being corrosive of faith, then the literalist must worry about being authoritarian. Humorous irony is then quite virtuous, as it opens a space to care for our neighbors as moral equals—a space that is closed off by an unwillingness to be charitable toward others or suspend our outrage.

Simple commitment and acceptance of received or apparent meanings is then not inherently virtuous. As many harms follow from sincerity as from insincerity, if not more so. In addition to the argument that recognizing irony requires charity toward others, the argument was made in the previous section that recognition of irony requires that the audience be able to suspend their initial offense distance themselves from their self-seriousness. At its core, irony distances us from our immediate reactions and from given meaning. Insofar as it involves an ability to reflect on and moderate our emotional reactions, it resembles moderation; insofar as it involves the ability to "get over ourselves," it resembles wittiness.

In this, irony is particularly suited for the liberal-democratic character. There is a fine line between irony and the central liberal virtue of toleration.²⁷ Given sufficient size and sufficient liberty within a society, there will be reasonable disagreement over the nature of the good life, moral belief and what is sacred. If they are to be stable, free societies need citizens to be willing to distance themselves from their statements and to assume a certain distance between others' statements and their sincere beliefs. Though citizens might not want politicians to be ironic, particularly on matters of great public importance, both the citizenry itself and politicians must

²⁶ Conrad Hyers, "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred" in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: Seabrook Press, 1969), pp. 9–27.

²⁷ John Morreall, "Humour and the Conduct of Politics" in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humor*. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, eds. (Palgrave Publishing, 2005), pp. 63–78; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

be generous to one another and forebear from angry reactions when offended. Further, satire also plays a vital role in critiquing social and political elites. Irony therefore both undercuts the claims of elites and buffers the relations between the rest.

Outside the political sphere, the ability to appreciate irony also breeds openness to others and new experience. Simon Critchley and Bryan Turner have argued that the distancing function of irony is an essential component of cosmopolitan virtue. Using phenomenological language, Critchley argues that irony requires that we “bracket” our natural attitude toward experience. The ironist asks their audience to consider that their basic assumptions and those of their community are not being taken at face value, that they may be untrue or playfully tweaked. Parochialism and irony do not sit well together, perhaps explaining why ironists such as Socrates get into such trouble. There is then a cosmopolitan impulse in irony.²⁸ By providing distance from one’s local culture, irony promotes sympathy with other cultures and a desire to learn. There is something dangerous in the demand that we take the notion that the U.S.A. is “God’s Country” literally.²⁹ The ironist’s ability to get over themselves is then not necessarily corrosive or cynical, but allows for a broader caring. The contrary of a vicious provincialism is a virtuous open-mindedness. There is an openness to experience and to others that comes with a willingness to take things not at face value, particularly when their appearance is deceitful or malicious. Irony can produce epistemic and moral humility. If charity, moderation, wittiness, political toleration and interpersonal openness are virtues, then those characteristics that make the recognition of irony possible are virtuous as well.³⁰

Wittiness is a more controversial virtue in biblical interpretation. It appears only once at Ephesians 5:4—translated alternately as “coarse jesting,” “coarse joking” and “crude joking”—and is set alongside obscenity and foolishness as forms of improper speech. This would seem to weaken the argument that ironic virtues are in fact virtues insofar as they reflect *eutrapelia*, at least for certain Christian audiences. However, this is not a terminal objection. First, this need not be a concern for non-Christians or for liberals who prioritize their status as citizens or cosmopolitans. Second, even devout Christians may find room for overcoming self-seriousness, as Hyers’ argument showed. Third, the grouping of wittiness with obscenity and foolishness arguably reveals a vicious severity of the sort Hyers rejects. It certainly fails to understand Aristotelian wittiness as a mean opposed to the extreme of boorishness.

²⁸ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Routledge Press, 2002), pp. 80–82, 87–88.

²⁹ Bryan Turner, “Cosmopolitan Virtue, Globalization and Patriotism” *Theory, Culture and Society* 19(1–2) (2002): 45–63, especially 55–60.

³⁰ Of course, one could object that the virtues of charity, moderation, wittiness and liberal toleration are (liberal or Judeo-Christian) tradition-specific virtues rather than universal and, therefore, a member of another tradition of virtues is not compelled to accept the characteristic required to recognize irony as virtues. This is a substantial argument, but one that involves an examination of an entire tradition of moral thought, which cannot be done here. For the sake of the present argument, it is enough that they are widely acknowledged virtues.

6 Finding the Mean

So far, I have argued that in order to recognize irony one must possess the capacities to consider that others are morally decent even if their literal statements are not and to moderate one's self-serious reactions to what people say and, further, that the exercise of these capacities are signs of an excellent character. If ironic virtues are aspects of human excellence, it would follow that a person with a sense of irony is then morally superior to the literalist who does not extend charity to the ironist, fails to moderate their outraged reactions and takes themselves, and others too seriously. However, even if these are virtues that we have an obligation to cultivate, it does not follow that irony is always appropriate.

There is some truth to the criticisms above that irony can be dismissive or corrosive, that it can lead a person to overlook sincere offensive statements, or that it comes at the price of either the ironist's or the audience's dignity. I have provided examples of the extreme literalist throughout this article, of those who fail to appreciate *The Onion*, Swift's "A Modest Proposal" or Aristophanes' *The Clouds*. But it is also possible to imagine a sincere racist telling a joke predicated upon the assumption that every member of a group is lazy or stupid, while their audience assumes that the racist is being ironic and laughs it off. If the listener has a strong sense of irony and therefore a tendency to be charitable to others and to moderate their reaction when something offends their moral beliefs, then they would be inclined to assume that the joke-teller may be tasteless, but not sincerely racist. They might think, "There is no way they actually believe that, so they must be joking." But Michael Billig has analyzed racist humor on KKK websites to refute the assumption that offensive humor is necessarily ironic.³¹ As John Morreall noted above, humorous irony can lead people, particularly socially privileged people, to overlook genuine moral wrongs. The audience might take literal offensive statements as insincere jokes when, sadly and all-too-frequently, they are expressions of sincere immorality. In this case, charity and moderation-wittiness in the presence of sincere vice itself is wrong. There are times when condemnation and outrage are appropriate.

The fact that irony and decency will be misattributed may provide an argument against using it, even by those who "get it," because the inevitable literalist misunderstanding furthers offensive beliefs.³² However, it does not follow that these ironic virtues are in fact vices simply because they may not be appropriate in all situations. This would obliterate the idea of a virtuous mean. The correct response to cases of misplaced irony is not to abandon irony, but to develop the practical wisdom to judge when it is appropriate to react ironically to others' seemingly offensive statements. It is a matter of reading the situation at hand and responding appropriately. The person who responds to every case with ironic distance has failed

³¹ Michael Billig, "Comic Racism and Violence" in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humor*. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, eds. (Palgrave Publishing, 2005), pp. 25–44.

³² A critic of irony could also argue that the ironist's intended meaning is not what matters, but only the consequences. Therefore, people should refrain from saying things they do not literally mean when it runs the reasonable risk of doing harm. I will only acknowledge this criticism and not rally a counter-argument, since it is beyond the scope of this article on moral character.

to show wise judgment as much as the unrelenting literalist. The former attributes decency to others and distances themselves from their emotional reactions too easily while the latter does the opposite.

This is easier when the audience knows something of the character of the speaker. We extend charity of interpretation and moderate our reactions more easily when we know the person to be virtuous generally and withhold it if we have independent reason to believe they are vicious. For example, it is proper to find an offensive joke told by our friend who works at the soup kitchen ironic and funny but improper if we know that the speaker is the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. The difficult cases, as always, are in the middle when we are unsure of the character of the potential ironist. In cases when the character of the speaker is unknown, the morally superior option is to err on the side of charity, as it is better to act charitably as a matter of habit than otherwise, and so too for moderation and wittiness. Of course, we may disagree in a particular case over whether a reaction is the mean between extremes, but that is again a matter of judgment and of concrete circumstances. Analogous to the virtue of courage, in which the mean is not the mathematical average but tends more toward foolhardiness than cowardice, the mean of the ironic virtues tends toward being overly charitable, moderate and witty than the other extreme. The practically wise person is morally superior to both the caustic ironist and the dour literalist. Neither has the wisdom to determine whether the speaker genuinely meant something offensive as their only options are, respectively, to accept the surface meaning or to reject it.

7 Conclusion

The common inability to recognize when a person is being ironic is then a function of epistemological, cognitive and moral weaknesses. As typified in cases of humorous satire, the inclination to be offended by what is taken to be a literal statement reveals a failure both to assume charitably that the ironist is a decent person and to moderate one's self-seriousness. An ironic response is not appropriate in all situations, as it may be callous or may miss genuinely offensive statements. However, it is better to err on the side of irony unless there is compelling reason to do otherwise. Having a sense of irony is virtuous.

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