

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Irony As Ethical Argumentation In Kierkegaard



## 1. *Scope of the investigation*

Irony is a type of stylistic argument that, because of the great variety of its forms, is particularly resistant to analysis. In this essay, therefore, I propose to focus the discussion on the use of irony in:

1. ethical argumentation,
2. within rhetorical contexts,
3. especially as practiced and interpreted by philosophers, and
4. specifically by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. My reasons for limiting the topic of stylistic irony are the following four.

### 1.1 *Ethical argumentation*

Irony is frequently found within ethical argumentation, perhaps more distinctively than in any other context. The association of irony with ethics stems from the evaluative character of irony, since irony often encourages the listener to make a judgment that an implied idea or state of affairs is better, somehow or another, than the one the ironist explicitly puts into words. Not all irony is ethical argumentation, of course, not even all evaluative irony; for example, irony also occurs in aesthetic argumentation. Some of what is called irony is not argumentation at all, such as “tragic” or “dramatic” irony, where the irony lies in what happens and not in what is said. Moreover, much of what goes under the name of irony seems too trivial to be called ethical argumentation, or indeed argumentation in any usual sense. It seems, rather, to be mere playfulness, a way of having a bit of fun with the vagaries of words and typical human dilemmas. Still, if someone identifies some pages as a paradigm case of sustained irony, the passage is apt to turn out to be a piece of ethical argumentation - perhaps as used in personal invective or social critique - in such works as Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* or *A Tale of a Tub*.

### 1.2 *Importance of the rhetorical context*

Each case of irony needs to be appreciated in its specific rhetorical context - in

terms of the situation, at that time, of the particular ironists and listeners, their emotional states, their personal histories, and even the very intonation of the words they speak. The words by themselves and their sentential structure do not identify a passage as ironical, since just the same words, with a slightly different inflection or under other circumstances, may be utterly devoid of irony.

Toward the end of the twentieth century several rhetoricians wrote interpretations of the concept of irony that continue to be significant for the study of irony and its place in argumentation. Three writers laid the foundation: Norman Knox, with his book *The Word Irony and its Context, 1500-1755* (1961), D. C. Muecke, with *The Compass of Irony* (1969), and, above all, Wayne Booth, with his influential study, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974). David Kaufer then applied their insights specifically to the study of irony's place in argumentation, with a series of three articles, in 1977, 1981, and (with Christine M. Neuwirth) 1982. Their work, in turn, was followed by that of a pair of informal logicians, Christopher W. Tindale and James Gough, in 1987.

### 1.3 *Interpretation and practice of irony by the Romantic philosophers*

Although looking to philosophers to interpret literary irony may seem strange, the explanation is simple. Near the beginning of the nineteenth century a group of philosophers, led by Friedrich Schlegel and his brother August, but including many of the leading philosophers and poets of the day, greatly expanded the concept of irony and made irony central both to philosophy and to literature, both for their own time and up to the present. To call them philosophers, however, does not mean that they were not also literary figures, since for them literature and philosophy - like poetry and prose, the novel and philosophical dialogue, and irony and the non-ironical - are all false dichotomies.

### 1.4 *Kierkegaard's contributions*

Kierkegaard plays a twofold role in the history of the concept of irony, for one of which he is famous, but for the other, virtually unknown. On the one hand, Kierkegaard's dissertation, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1984), is a central text for the interpretation of irony, both as an exploration of Romantic irony's potential uses for argument and also as a critique of the self-defeating character of some of the Romantic ironists' more extreme claims. Thus Muecke describes Kierkegaard's work as the "most thorough-going presentation of the self-defeat of the ironical man" (1969, p. 242). Similarly, Booth is at pains to insist that he can only lay out how irony functions in rhetorical

argumentation with continual reference to Kierkegaard (1974, p. xii). More recently, even some postmodernists have appropriated, or on occasion misappropriated, the dissertation's ideas on Romantic irony, and one, Paul de Man, has described Kierkegaard's dissertation as "the best book on irony that's available" (cited by Norris 1989, p. 199).

On the other hand, Kierkegaard's other writings, after the dissertation, have attracted relatively little attention from students of argumentation. Yet these writings, too, contain many insightful reflections about argumentation, often strikingly different from any he had envisioned earlier. Here he works out of a different portrayal of Socrates, together with a new and broader understanding of irony, than before.

## *2. Defining Ironic Ethical Argumentation in Terms of Contradiction and Self-canceling*

Since the concept of irony includes many and diverse ideas, putting it into practice in ethical argumentation involves identifying irony's main features. In fact, it would probably be impossible to draw up a list of irony's central characteristics that would satisfy all, or even most, critics.

What I am looking for, in any case, is not a specifically Kierkegaardian account, but instead the sort of consensus he shares with such figures as Muecke, Booth, Burke, and Kaufer. The common ground I have in mind is represented in the irony Muecke calls "rhetorical irony," and which Booth calls "stable irony - part of which Kierkegaard, within his dissertation, associates with practices in oratory (Muecke 1969, p. 51; Booth 1974, pp. 5-7; Kierkegaard 1989, p. 247).

Here I will confine myself to four such features, a list modeled, roughly, on the set Kierkegaard's dissertation uses. They are: contradiction, self-canceling, creativity, and exclusivity or inclusivity. The next section discusses the first two, which characterize all irony, and the following section will take up the other two, which are interpreted in controversial ways in Romantic irony.

### *2.1 Contradiction*

The first and most obvious sign of any sort of irony is the presence of contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility. This feature can be defined in various ways. In keeping with the deliberately Hegelian cast of the dissertation, for example, Kierkegaard spells out the kind of incongruity in highly abstract terms: because "the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence," he says, the "words" are in conflict with the "meaning" (1989, p. 247).

The point, however, can be put much more plainly than that. Muecke, for example, describes the incongruity involved as a “two storey phenomenon” (1969, p. 19). At the lower level stands the situation as it appears, whereas at the upper level stands the situation as it actually is. The person making the irony does not, of course, have to say explicitly what the upper level is. Instead the ironist merely hints at it and lets the reader or listener find it for oneself. Booth makes a similar point to Muecke when he describes the direction in which the ironist wants to draw the listener as “upward,” that is to say, toward a “superior” viewpoint (1974, p. 38), which is “wiser, wittier, more compassionate, subtler, truer, more moral,” and the like (p. 36). That is to say, the ironist invites the listener or reader to reach a higher level than before.

From his 1981 essay on “ironical evaluations,” it is only a short step for Kaufer to apply that notion in a way especially appropriate for ethical argumentation, and that is what he, working with Neuwirth, does in an essay entitled “Foregrounding Norms and Ironic Communication.” By the term “foregrounding” they understand that the ironist highlights the norms a person has, not by emphasizing their *presence* but rather by calling attention to their *absence*; “the ironist foregrounds norms, intending to apply them, by pretending to violate them” (p. 30). They use the term “norms” very broadly, to include any “personal standards, social norms, social regularities, social standards, practices, rules, role standards, group standards, and so on” (p. 31). As applied to the concept of irony, this means that the apparent violation of the person’s norms shocks the reader or listener, and the contradiction, or incongruity, draws much more attention than before to the moral gap between a person’s norms and daily life.

## 2.2 *Self-canceling*

A second general feature of all irony is that some aspect of an ironical statement has to indicate that it is not to be taken at face value. Following Kierkegaard’s terminology (1989, p. 248), I shall call this feature of irony “self-canceling.” What this term means is simply that the literal statement by the ironist “cancels” itself, requiring the reader or listener to substitute some other statement, in most cases the opposite, or even the contradiction, of what the ironist says. If there is no such indication that the ironist’s statement does not mean what it says, then the statement may be indistinguishable from a lie or even from mere babble.

But just how is this self-canceling supposed to work? The self-canceling cannot simply be a matter of logical relationships among the terms used. In a 1987 essay, “The Use of Irony in Argumentation,” a pair of informal logicians, Tindale and

Gough, help to demonstrate this point by comparing the logical patterns in an ironical argument with that of its most plausible logical analogue, a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. The similarity, they point out, is that in both cases the argument “involves an absurd suggestion or claim.” But that’s it. In every other respect the two kinds of argument are different. For Tindale and Gough, a *reductio* is judged good or bad on the basis of “the nature of the relationship of contradiction,” and it “involves a straight, literal reading”; whereas irony “relies not on a straight literal meaning but on its tonal implications” (p. 11).

The contradiction functions in very different ways in the two cases. With everyday cases of irony, for example, the falsity of the ironist’s statement is often blatant. “Great shot!” the opposing fans jeer, as the ball goes far wide of the goal. If there needed to be a line of reasoning for someone to decide whether the shot was good, the force of the irony might be lost completely. With a *reductio ad absurdum*, on the other hand, the line of reasoning is how one gets to the contradiction; that is, reasoning conducts the “reduction” by which the “absurdity” is uncovered.

For ironical argument rhetorical considerations, or what Tindale and Gough call “tonal implications” (p. 11), are much more important than the logical relationships of the terms used. In fact, for the word “tonal” to do the work that they make it do here, the word has to include not just the tone of voice, but much, much more, including every other rhetorical feature of what is spoken or written, such as the character of the speaker and the emotional backdrop against which the speaker delivers the message. As Quintilian notes, irony “is made evident to the understanding either by the delivery, the character of the speaker, or the nature of the subject” (*Institutio oratoria*, 8. 6. 54). The *reductio* is different in this respect. To identify a *reductio* all one needs to understand is the words used and how they apply to the world, but to do the same with a piece of ironical argumentation requires attention to a statement’s full rhetorical situation.

In some respects even the expression “self-canceling” may be misleading, since irony does not actually cancel itself. Nor does the ironist cancel it, except by offering a few, often ambiguous clues. The canceling has to be done by the reader or listener. This is an aspect of irony on which Booth is especially helpful. Booth calls the work of the reader or listener the “reconstruction” of the ironical message (1974, pp. 37-43).

### 3. Creativity and Exclusivity/Inclusivity in Romantic Irony

By themselves the features of contradiction and self-canceling do not give an adequate account of what irony is and does, nor does Booth, nor any of the others mentioned here, suppose that they do. A statement might, for example, be “contradictory,” and “self-canceling,” in the sense that it plainly conflicts with what people would normally say is the case, but that would not by itself make it ironic. The person making the statement might simply be wrong headed and the statement transparently false. The reason why I have started with these two features is that they are features that students of irony are likely to accept as characterizing irony as a whole.

With the coming of Romantic irony in the early nineteenth century, however, the concept of irony greatly expanded, and with that expansion grew also the possibilities for argumentation. Romantic irony can be identified in many ways. Muecke relates it to “General Irony” (1969, p. 159), and Booth classes as a kind of “infinitely unstable irony” (1974, pp. 267-68). Romantic irony carries the practice of irony further than before, and in some of its proponents proposes to extend irony to all statements whatsoever. This is the movement of which Kierkegaard’s dissertation was a part and to which it provided a critique that remains of interest today.

The following section will focus on two features of irony that are contested between scholars who favor, or do not favor, Romantic irony. I will use the terms “creativity” and “exclusivity/inclusivity,” because they seem to provide a relatively neutral ground from which to explore some disputed issues.

### 3.1 *Creativity*

Creativity is the contribution of the ironist, the speaker or the writer. If irony were merely a matter of contradictions that canceled themselves, it would require no creativity, but that is not the case. Irony takes creativity, and at its best it calls for artistry of the highest order. As Booth notes, irony has to be intentional (1974, pp. 52-53). Of course, there is also a kind of irony – dramatic or tragic irony – that arises out of events rather than from human artistry, but such irony is not argumentation and thus not a matter of concern for this essay.

The Romantic ironists, such as Friedrich Schlegel, who pushed the limits of irony furthest, also had a high ideal for the ironic artist. Life itself, they tended to think, could become a work of art. Above all, the Romantic poets and philosophers prized freedom – freedom, not only from old ways of using words but also from conventional, middle class morality. And the way to achieve this freedom, they

maintained, was through irony, an irony not just in one's poetry but in one's life. In his novel *Lucinde* (1971) Schlegel celebrated just this kind of artistic freedom, and the work became a signature song for the whole movement of which he was a part.

In the critique of Romantic irony within Kierkegaard's dissertation, therefore, irony's creativity is characterized by what Kierkegaard calls "negative freedom," that is, freedom *from* conventional meanings. The ironist, Kierkegaard says, is "free" by not meaning, literally, what he says, and thus he is not bound by his own words. Kierkegaard puts it this way: since "what I said is not my meaning or the opposite of my meaning, then I am free in relation to others and to myself" (1989, pp. 247-48).

But is this true? Can a person really achieve such absolute freedom? If it is, it would seem to be so just for a moment. When someone speaks ironically, the words are not literally binding; but just as soon as the other person sees through the irony the two will be mutually "bound" to the meaning they now share in common. Thus the ironist may be at first only committed by the literal words, and in that sense is "negatively free." On the other hand, during that moment while the ironist is negatively free there is of course no real communication taking place either.

Evidently Kierkegaard highlights negative freedom here because his dissertation has "Romantic irony" specifically in mind. The Romantic poets and philosophers of the early nineteenth century prize such freedom highly, partly because, since words make sense only within the context of social norms and conventions, verbal freedom implies freedom from conventional bourgeois society too. Moreover, the kind of "negative freedom" that this kind of irony promises has the advantage over other kinds of irony that it does not have to be limited to the moment. Under some circumstances it might last on and on. Romantic irony, as Kierkegaard understands it, claims never to have to resolve itself into a mutual understanding between the ironist and the other person, because, as soon as someone sees through the initial irony, the ironist is right there ready to raise further irony, over and over again, indefinitely. In this way the Romantic ironist could in principle remain negatively free forever.

In the end, however, Kierkegaard's dissertation rejects the ideal of infinite Romantic irony as well as the complete negative freedom that is supposed to go with it (1989, p. 275). Infinite irony is self-defeating, because it destroys the very basis from which it ironizes. It is, he says, "like that old witch," who "continually

makes the very tantalizing attempt to eat up everything first of all and thereupon to eat up itself" (1989, p. 56). For this reason Romantic irony, in its extreme form, is bad argumentation, and *a fortiori*, bad ethical argumentation as well. The ravenous irony that gobbles up all the premises, and then gobbles up itself, will have the same problem with ethics, since, as such irony expands to infinity, it will destroy any individual and social norms on which ethical reasoning could be based.

Of course, this does not mean that irony cannot go a long way. Kierkegaard himself is sympathetic to Romanticism in many respects, not only for the ironic techniques themselves, but also for irony's positive effects as it sends "a shiver down the backs of the philistines" (1989, p. 304). The problem with Romantic irony emerges when a person imagines that the irony could possibly be made infinite, that is, unlimited. Somehow, Kierkegaard thinks, irony must be "controlled" (1989, p. 324); it must retain at least a few premises that do not themselves get ironized away. Indeed, no one has ever really managed to practice infinite Romantic irony; but even when it is merely proclaimed as an impossible ideal it can be logically confusing and ethically demoralizing.

### 3.2 *Exclusivity and Inclusivity*

A fourth main feature of irony is that irony implies an ironist, who sees through the irony, as well as readers or listeners, who may not. How this feature is interpreted, however, differs among the classical practitioners of irony and the Romantic ironists.

Kierkegaard's dissertation represents Romantic irony in terms of what I call an "exclusivist" approach. Implicit in irony, he writes, is a "certain superiority" which "looks down pityingly on ordinary, prosaic talk" (1989, p. 248). That attitude of superiority also carries over to the cases in which the ironist condescends to share his irony with a selected group of others. The latter, he says, is the merely "secondary form of the ironic vanity that desires witnesses in order to assure and reassure itself of itself" (p. 249).

Again, as above with his treatment of what he calls "negative freedom," Kierkegaard is here describing this characteristic feature of irony especially as it appears in Romantic irony. The problem he sees for the Romantic ironist is that the attempt by the ironist to communicate irony, even to an elite community, is bound to fail, since there can be no true communication between the ironist and anyone else as long as the meanings of the words uttered are forever being subverted by deeper and deeper irony. The result is that, as Kierkegaard remarks,



“there is just as little true social unity in a coterie of ironists as there is real honesty in a band of thieves” (1989, p. 249).

The main representative of this sort of exclusivist irony in Kierkegaard’s dissertation is Socrates – not, however, primarily the familiar Socrates of Plato’s dialogues, but instead the Socrates of Aristophanes’ comic play, *The Clouds*, which shows Socrates hanging in a blanket suspended over everyone else in the city. This Socrates, the real, historical Socrates (Kierkegaard ironically insists), “stood ironically above every relationship... suspended high above all this in ironic contentment” (1989, p. 182).

Although Kierkegaard’s characterizing of Romantic irony in this way is plainly polemical, the feature of exclusivism does highlight a common feature in irony. The ironist is implicitly addressing two possible communities: the first, of the elite – that is, of those who can see through the irony – and the second, of the slow-witted, who can not. Thus Muecke describes the listeners and readers as typically “victims” (1969, pp. 19, 34-39), and Booth also admits the possibility of victimization (1974, p. 29). Moreover, the characterization of irony as elitist does fit much of Romantic irony itself and, as Kenneth Burke notes, the movement of Romantic irony “did, as a matter of fact, arise as an aesthetic opposition to cultural philistinism” (1969, p. 514).

Kaufer’s 1977 essay goes into detail to describe the rhetorical function of irony, not just in terms of ironist and audience, but in terms of a “bifurcation of audiences,” that is, between “victims,” who associate with the literal meaning of the ironist’s words, and “confederates,” who associate with the implicit, ironic meaning, on the other. “One audience identifies with the ironist’s literal meaning, the other with the ironic meaning” (p. 96). Some approaches the ironist may take are to use irony to promote group cohesion, either for him to share some irony with confederates or else to let all the audience identify with the same victim (pp. 100-101). Alternatively, the ironist might use irony to prevent part of the audience from knowing what was going on, or perhaps even use it to keep both parts of the audience unaware of the real issue (pp. 102-103).

But is the exclusivist interpretation of irony the only one? As Kaufer points out, the elitist strategy in Kierkegaard’s dissertation, which is “to loosen the speaker from responsibility over his immediate situation” (p. 99), is not the only approach the ironist may take, nor is it necessarily the best one for most purposes. The “fun of feeling superior” is “highly important,” Booth agrees, but “the building of amiable communities is often far more important than the exclusion of naive

victims" (1974, p. 28).

Both the exclusivist and the inclusivist approaches of irony have roles to play. Indeed in *A Grammar of Motives* Kenneth Burke argues that, despite the historical importance of elitist Romantic irony, the irony that he calls "true irony" is the humble irony that does not claim any kind of superiority of the ironist over the listener or reader. "True irony," he says, "humble irony, is based on a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him" (1969, p. 514; italics in original). This is the kind of irony he finds in much great literature, including T. S. Eliot, Gustav Flaubert, Thomas Mann, Shakespeare's Falstaff, and Plato's Socrates. And this is the humble sort of irony, I will argue, that one finds in Kierkegaard's writings after his dissertation.

#### 4. *Kierkegaard's Later Writings*

What scholar would want to be judged solely upon a dissertation? Often that is Kierkegaard's fate when the topic of irony is discussed. Even though he refused to republish his dissertation, did not list it among the writings in his authorship, and wrote more than three dozen other works, many of them ironic in one way or another, his dissertation on irony is often the only source used for his views on that topic. And it is a great book. In my opinion, the high praise he receives for it is well deserved. But the neglect of his other writings that use irony or discuss the concept is still astonishing.

Part of the reason for this neglect may be the major differences of his later views about irony, not only from how he views irony in the dissertation, but also from any of the other accounts of irony I have been discussing. Even the Socrates appealed to by the late works is not the same as before, since they draw their Socrates figure from the works of Plato, rather than from Aristophanes' comedy, in order to portray ethical argumentation.

Since the material to be discussed is extensive, and each Kierkegaard writing is different from the others, often even by different pseudonymous authors, I shall merely sketch the situation in three pseudonymous works from the period immediately following the publication of Kierkegaard's dissertation:

- (1) irony in a somewhat traditional sense of the term, in the pseudonymous "Seducer's Diary" from the first volume of *Either/Or*;
- (2) Socratic irony, enlivened by irony in a more usual sense, in the pseudonymous book *Philosophical Fragments*;

(3) Socratic irony in another sense in the long “postscript” to *Fragments*.

#### 4.1 Irony in the “Seducer’s Diary”

Much of the first volume of *Either/Or* (1987, 1:301-445) – Kierkegaard’s first writing after his dissertation – is made up of a diary of a cold-blooded seduction, written in a recognizably Romantic ironist style. The seducer, Johannes, carries through his plans for his victim Cordelia with all the detachment a scientist might have in dissecting a new species of butterfly, producing an effect far more shocking than anything in Schlegel’s novel *Lucinde*. Although the editor describes seducer as an “aesthete,” the irony is mainly a matter for ethics, not aesthetics, since what Johannes proposes is to make his life into a work of art.

The diary fits well into the model of “humble” irony outlined by Kenneth Burke. (a) For virtually all readers the “contradiction” results in a sharp “foregrounding” of personal and societal norms. (b) The “self-canceling” of the diary is carried on through an elaborate set of devices. The manuscript is allegedly found by accident in an old desk, and the unknown author (called simply “Mr. A”) denies he wrote the diary, even though the editor, “Victor Eremita,” who found the manuscript in an old desk, thinks he did; and, to complete the masquerade, Kierkegaard even published an article asking who the author of the book was. Moreover, the style and the viewpoint are completely contrary to what the reader would know as Kierkegaard’s own. (c) Unlike Romantic irony, but like humble irony, the reader discovers the truth on one’s own. What is involved in “positive” rather than “negative” freedom, a freedom *for*, rather than a freedom *from*. (d) The irony is inclusionary, helping readers discover their common norms, especially since virtually all readers will share the same effect.

#### 4.2 Irony and Humor in *Philosophical Fragments*

The initial chapter of *Philosophical Fragments*, called “A Project of Thought,” is the first book that can be, with some confidence, called “humorous,” since the pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, is specifically identified in that way in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1992, 1: 501, 617). The category of humor, however, “is not essentially different from irony” (1992, 1: 271), only that, unlike irony, it is a specifically ethical-religious concept. Irony works with incongruities in the realm of the norms Kaufer and Neuwirth speak of, of “personal standards, social norms, social regularities,” and the like (1982, p. 31). Humor, on the other hand, “expresses man’s existential experience in actualizing the eternal norms of the ethical” (Malantschuk, notes to

*Kierkegaard's Journals*, 1970, 2: 585. In any case, the designation of the author as a humorist does not prevent the book from being described elsewhere as written with "the indefatigable energy of irony" (1992, 1: 275). In this first chapter of *Philosophical Fragments* Climacus sets out to try to derive the main teachings of Christianity from the teachings of Socrates, and, ironically, it looks at first sight as if he has almost made it.

Far from following the dissertation's definition of irony, however, *Fragments* turns it completely around. The key change is in the figure of Socrates, which here is derived from Plato's rather than Aristophanes' portrayal. I will follow the same list of features of irony as before, but this time in reverse order: (d) The Socrates in *Fragments* is an "inclusionist." Unlike the supremely aloof Socrates in Aristophanes, this Socrates spends his time out in the market place. He has no teaching to sell and can only humbly encourage people to recollect what they already know. There is no decisive difference among those whom this Socrates teaches - for example, between his "confederates," who grasp his teaching, and his "victims," who cannot. Everyone is in the same boat: the boy Lysis with the old man Cephalus, and the untutored slave in the *Meno* with the renowned sophists. All the people have the same given ethical norms available to them. (c) That, in turn, leaves Socrates' students "positively free" to find the truth within themselves. (b) *Fragments* provides an abundance of clues to show that the chapter is "self-canceling"; for example, the tone of the approach Climacus takes mocks the approach taken by speculative thinkers, because it takes it further than they would ever have dared to do. (a) The "contradiction" involved in the chapter is essentially an ethical, Socratic one, between the pretentiousness of the speculative method with which the chapter deduces so many doctrines and in such a rapid-fire fashion, on the one hand, and the modesty of simple faith, on the other. The implied parallel is to Socrates' critique of the grandiose approach of the Athenian sophists, for example in the opening scene of Plato's *Protagoras*.

#### 4.3 *Humor in Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*

Even though it is projected as a postscript to *Fragments*, and is assigned the same pseudonymous author, the concept of irony in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* differs markedly from the earlier work: (d) the Socrates in *Postscript* differs from the one in *Fragments* by exemplifying his teaching in his life (1:206-07); (c) the positive freedom of the listener, or "subject," already implicit in *Fragments*, is here made explicit by the explication of the "subjective" ethical task that subject faces. (b) Climacus carries the "self-canceling" even further than before and in

the end even “revokes” everything he has said in the whole book (1:619). (a) The “contradiction” involved is not only an ethical but also (in “religiousness B”) a “dialectical” contradiction in the terminology itself.

Is this rhetoric? Strangely, the argument in *Postscript*, as well as in the other pseudonymous works of the period, seems at least as much concerned to dissuade as to persuade. These works provide, as Tim Hagermann puts it, an “antipersuasive Rhetorik” (2001, p. 12), which turns Aristotle’s rhetoric on its head, recommending Christianity not because it is *probable* but precisely because it is *improbable* (Kierkegaard, 1993, pp.110-111). Still, this is not to say that *Postscript* cannot be rhetoric in any sense at all. Peter L. Hagen argues, in fact, that Kenneth Burke’s “pure persuasion” is a sort of “non-rhetorical rhetoric,” a “persuasion that seeks not to persuade” (1995, p. 47), and he presents the irony in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* as an example of just such pure persuasion (p. 49). Whether Hagen’s interpretation does justice to Burke, however, has been questioned (K. M. Olson & C. D. Olson, 2004, pp. 27-28), and in any case it would be a daunting task to try to trace the complexly intersecting lines of these two elusive concepts.

Where Burke and Kierkegaard are clearly allied is on the principle of inclusivity. Despite their considerable differences, the “Seducer’s Diary,” *Fragments*, and *Postscript* take a common inclusive attitude toward their readers. The figure of Socrates stands throughout Kierkegaard’s post-dissertation writings, and especially in the Climacus works, as a guarantee that many of the truths that matter most are in principle accessible to all.

What is most striking to me about the three pseudonymous works from Kierkegaard’s early period is his literary mastery of the art of irony. All three of the books are gems, but each in a completely different way. Philosophers are more often than not bad writers, some of them even worse than others, so that no one should expect them to be awarded any literary prizes. Still, I think that, if Kenneth Burke had rechecked his book shelves and looked again at the selections of philosophical argument written by Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms “Johannes the Seducer” and “Johannes Climacus,” he might well have agreed that these three pieces of extended irony belong on his honor roll for humble irony, along with Shakespeare, Socrates, and all the rest.

## 5. Conclusion

The concept of irony in Kierkegaard’s 1841 dissertation fits solidly within present

day argumentation theory, partly because it emerged in a period that was just assimilating Romantic irony, and partly because of the influence it has had on the history of the development of that concept. Even a brief examination of three representative examples of his treatment of the concept after that dissertation shows a far richer and more complex development of the concept than one could have anticipated from the dissertation itself. Further treatment of the concept of irony in these later works would, however, require more space than can be allotted here, since the concept of irony is by this point in Kierkegaard's development deeply embedded, in various ways, in the particular problematic of each of the works.

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