Competing Pretenses: Using Irony to Move Beyond Aporia

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Socratic dialogues have long been read as foundational texts in the pursuit of wisdom, the origin for discovery of philosophy, and a framework for teaching inquiry to children. Socrates's method is imitated in countless classrooms, while the paradoxes and questions raised have continued to puzzle thinkers.[1] Amid this popularity rests another surprising contradiction: Socrates and his method are popular teaching tools, even though most of the dialogues end in a stalemate— in doubt, confusion, and less clarity about an issue than when they began. The dialogues represent a strange pedagogical tool, whether one is interested in teaching new knowledge to students, or working with students' own innate knowledges, because they represent neither new learning nor pulling out students' own understanding. Instead, they risk alienating students from the view they hold, and causing them to be discouraged about the possibility of coming to know anything.

To help avoid potential alienation and nihilism, I will apply a framework of ironic disruption developed by Jonathan Lear to a reading of Socratic aporia. In particular, I will draw attention to how irony "manifests passion" for direction as a way to change student outcomes from doubt to recommitment and increased understanding.[2] In the first section of this paper, I will explicate Lear's discussion of ironic disruption, focusing on one's actions as pretenses, which are oriented towards one's aspirations. Using elements of Socratic dialogues and an example of a teacher in irony, I will explore how irony might come about from a moment of aporia and demonstrate how this perspective on irony can shape pedagogical methods that follow Socrates's example.

JONATHAN LEAR ON IRONY

Lear's irony – a process of disruption and uncanniness followed by

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a re-commitment to one's way of life – is a sort of reflection, but not in the normal sense of critically examining one's reasons, rationalities, or values. Ironic reflection involves what one feels and believes, and not what one can represent through arguments, reasons, or rationales. Ironic reflection is deeper than rational reflection because it is personal – it concerns *my* self, *my* actions. These aren't separate concerns – when we think upon our actions, we consider them in terms of "who we are," through the roles we "identify with." Lear cites Christine Korsgaard, who argues that our actions are meaningful to us in the light of "practical identities."[3]

Practical identities are those socially available roles that provide us with personal meaning, be it teacher, mother, politician, or Christian. The actions we choose to take – the way we dress, the things we say – are actions that fulfill our identities, because we reference the norms of these identities in the choices we make. Without these roles, the actions would be unoriented and meaningless – in a sequence, but not strung together in a coherent pattern of meaning.[4] Lear describes these actions as *pretenses,* following Kierkegaard's usage: not in the sense of 'pretending' or 'deceiving,' but as a way "putting oneself forward," or making a claim about the type of person one is.[5]

Our actions derive their meaning from a relationship to the ideal of a role. If I am a Christian, it makes sense for me to give money to the poor because I am called to treat my neighbors with love – it's part of what makes up the ideal of Christianity.[6] Thus, one's pretenses invoke one's *aspirations*, how one wants to be a good version of both their self and their chosen role. In Lear's account, the potential for ironic disruption occurs when one notices a gap between the pretenses and the aspirations; all of one's actions seem insufficient to meet this ideal from which they are supposedly derived. They may say, 'I am a good Christian because I often give money to the poor.' But the ideals are bigger than any social practice, because the mere act of giving money does not make one into a good Christian.

Noticing the gap between pretenses and aspirations can lead to reflection; first, rational reflection could arise here – I can consider how well giving to the poor allows me to fulfill my role or analyze whether I'm selfishly being a good

person for my own self-image. But I can also have an ironic form of reflection – this type of reflection calls into question the very tenets upon which I would be rationally reflecting. We begin to question how exactly we could ever really love our neighbors – giving money, or any other action, seems unable to fulfill what it would really mean to love one's neighbor, or to be a Christian at all. No action, nor even an amalgamation of actions, can fulfill the ideals embedded in one's practical identities. There's something about the ideal that transcends one's abilities to reach it.

The first moment of the experience of ironic reflection is an acute sense of disorientation, or uncanniness, from our practical identities. In this moment of ironic disruption, one is unable to recognize how their actions relate to the ideal that is supposed to guide those actions; one's practical identity has become unfamiliar. This disruption leaves one momentarily stuck, unable to move forward because they lack a self-understanding of their aspiration and can therefore no longer pick the correct action. It's not just that the Christian cannot decide whether to give money to someone on the street – this Christian is stuck trying to figure how it is even possible to love one's neighbors, and what does the act of money have to do with it? Or with being a Christian?

But irony, as Lear describes it, doesn't leave one stuck in this state of confusion and inaction; because of one's commitment to a practical identity, irony "manifests passion for a certain direction."[7] These practical identities are not merely things that one puts on and can take off; rather, these roles represent the myriad ways one identifies oneself, and are responsible for how they understands their actions, and for providing them with agency. One has come into this ironic disruption because of the commitments they hold to a practical identity, and the same commitments pull them out of irony, to continue striving towards the aspiration embedded in that practical identity.

Lear writes, "we seem to be called to an ideal that transcends our ordinary understanding."[8] In other words, we can no longer recognize towards what we are aiming, but we have a sense that it is *really* important that we aim towards it, as part of the practical identity that we still take as part of our way of life. The understanding that we have of our ideals, the understanding of their

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importance, allows us to come to a better self-knowledge, a better knowledge of our own practical identities, and a better knowledge of the pretenses and aspirations that make up those practical identities.

WHAT BRINGS ABOUT THIS GAP?

To examine irony more closely, I will now turn to an example Lear provides of a teacher during an ironic disruption, manifested by a concern over a typical teaching activity: grading. This teacher has a widely shared wonder about the role of grading in teaching and reflects on its value for her students in a rational way: writing down benefits and drawbacks, researching grading systems, or participating in staff discussions.

In an ironic experience, in contrast to her rational reflection, she must become aware of the gap between her pretense, the act of grading, and her aspiration, being a good teacher, in such a way that she no longer understands her identity; she is unable to take *any* action. The inability to understand her practical identity has consequences for her potential actions: if they were oriented towards the aspirations of her identity as teacher, and she can no longer put herself forward as a teacher, then there is *no* action she can take. It would be disingenuous to grade her students' papers because she can no longer see that action as fulfilling her role. No action she could take would serve as a personal justification for fulfilling her role.

This teacher now has been disrupted in such a way that the activity of teaching itself has become uncanny. She holds onto teaching as an ideal, as well as a commitment to fulfilling the pretense of grading her students. Still, even with these commitments, she no longer understands what the role of teaching is trying to accomplish. Even returning to some established goal, the education of students is unsuccessful. The words themselves no longer seem to correspond to any knowable course of action; the words "education," "students," and "classrooms" are now unattached from any concrete understandings.[9]

SOCRATIC IRONY AND CONTRADICTORY PRETENSES

While Lear leaves the moments that lead to ironic disruption unexamined, I see a clue in the connections between the irony Lear describes and Socratic Irony. The Socratic Dialogues, just as irony, are concerned with attempts to live well in one's practical identity and attempts to interrogate those identities to the point that they become unfamiliar to one's self. In addition, the ways that these identities are interrogated help to illuminate the moment of ironic disruption. I will follow *Laches,* the dialogue on courage, to demonstrate what I find salient about Socrates's method.

The first salient point is that the discussants in the dialogues are concerned with knowledge because it was meant to help guide their actions. For Socrates and his interlocutors, the knowledge of virtue is not divorced from their practical identities; their inquiries are personal. Socrates speaks of courage with distinguished generals in *Laches*, and they in turn speak with Socrates as a courageous soldier. They seek virtue to know how to live their lives.

The first definition that Laches provides is an example, which Socrates is quick to refute, and serves almost as a foil for the definitions to come, but which also points out that Laches knows of virtues, or aspirations, as they are embedded in their pretenses. Laches then generalizes his definition: "courage is a sort of endurance of the soul," to which Socrates adds 'wise.'[10]

Socrates leads them to reject this claim by showing that courage, as a virtue, isn't something that can be foolish, while simultaneously showing that foolish endurance seems to actually be more courageous. The interlocutors are forced to admit that it is a flawed definition of courage because foolish endurance is not virtuous. The definition has now been dealt what seems to be a fatal blow: the interlocutor Laches has said that courage was "a sort of endurance of the soul" (p), but now must agree that courage is not endurance of the soul ($\sim p$).

In this position, one may be stuck; they know that it can be true that courage involves wisdom, but also that the opposite can be true, that courage may consist of foolishness, or acting against one's knowledge. Perhaps at this moment one wishes to consider that there must be something else about cour-

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age that makes wise or foolish endurance or non-endurance truly courageous; Nicias attempts to offer a definition of courage as a type of knowledge, but it is significant that this attempt also ends in negation and aporia. When Socrates shows that Nicias cannot know courage without knowing all virtue, it seems as if courage can never be known, and the dialogue ends in this doubt. But would Nicias (or Socrates) really submit to the claim that one can never in fact act with a knowledge of hope and fear?

Instead, I claim that it is possible for them to consider both claims to be true, that they would agree that one can act, courageously, with the knowledge of hope and fear, while also agreeing that such knowledge is impossible because it implies knowing something that one cannot know. If it is possible to see both sides, to see the value in the competing claims, then there is something about courage that one understands but is unable to fully articulate, even to oneself.

I see this inarticulable understanding as a moment in which the gap between one's pretenses and one's aspirations may arise. In these moments of aporia, one cannot say all the things that one needs to say to make one's practical identity work. One's rational knowledge is flawed, but not missing; it is not large enough to fulfill all the claims being made of it, nor able to hold all the pretenses with which one seeks to fill it. It is possible in these moments to reject one's theses as false, to say, 'I must have been wrong to posit that courage is endurance of the soul, or a type of knowledge, and therefore I abandon that thesis.'

If someone is committed to their pretenses, as legitimate manifestations of their aspirations, then they open the possibility of noticing a gap between their pretenses and aspirations. The pretense, acting with the knowledge of what is to be feared and what is to be hoped, cannot reach the aspiration, because the knowledge of fear and hope only comes about with the knowledge of all goodness, a logical impossibility.

THE TEACHER IN APORIA

Following the idea of competing premises, we return to Lear's example of the teacher experiencing a disruption. The teacher amidst aporia may also

deal with competing premises, leading to a gap between pretense and aspiration. To demonstrate this claim, I expand on Lear's example of the teacher in the ironic moment with possible claims about the pretense of grading, namely:

> Pretense 1. Grading my students facilitates their education.
>
> Pretense 2. Grading my students stifles their voice and prevents their education.

What I propose is that the teacher comes upon these pretenses and considers them to be in conflict, but also considers them both as valid pretenses aimed at the same aspiration of teaching. In the first pretense, the teacher wants to give grades on an essay because they think that providing measurable feedback is essential to student learning. In the second pretense, the teacher believes that teachers have a duty to hear the voices of their students, and that the way a student writes is, in some sense, not open to criticism from a teacher who is exerting power over their students.

When faced with these competing pretenses, this teacher is stuck because they provide contradictory prescriptions for action, either to apply evaluative grades or validating what students write, both types of action which seem necessary for the aspiration of being a teacher. There is no path forward; which action do they take? What makes the teacher stop, what makes the moment so remarkably first-personal, what makes it impossible to consider their actions from a strictly rational point of view is the strong commitment the teacher feels for both positions, a commitment that cannot be assuaged by reflection or reorientation. This commitment, to multiple action-pretenses, and simultaneously, to the aspiration that is supposed to contain them both and seemingly cannot, is where the gap between the pretenses and aspirations opens. One can no longer just see grading as a necessary and fitting aspect of their identity as teacher.

But this also reveals something about our concepts: they are inherently vulnerable to this type of risk. It can happen in the course of our lives with these concepts that they fall short of containing everything *we know* they should

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contain. Further, this unshakeable knowledge that our concepts should contain both pretenses and aspirations demonstrates that we have a level of understanding concepts that "transcends our ordinary understanding."[11] The reason we are committed to both values is because we see both values as essential aspects of our practical identities. This commitment demonstrates that we know our concepts better than we can possibly articulate, as we understand our concepts better than their limitations should allow.

Our ironic disruptions give us partial access to a new type of understanding. Once we realize that these commitments, while they seem to be contradicting, are both necessary, fitting, and good, and we act in light of our understanding of the practical identity-concept-aspiration that accounts for this feature, then we have recommitted to a course of action that adopts both values and allows us to teach in light of all our values. No external change needs to be seen, aside from perhaps a greater comfort with the practice of grading. There was a teacher who graded papers, a teacher who then came to question why grading was necessary (even to the point of annoying fellow teachers with their seeming absurdities), and then a teacher who again grades.[12]

But what has now been articulated for this teacher is that the action, grading, that she already employs, can also adhere to her emphasis on student voice. Potentially, the teacher may have already been subconsciously grading in this way, but their ironic disruption allows for a more genuine understanding of what it is they are doing, and the teacher can now act in full cognizance of what was once only an unconscious director of action.

This same process can happen as well through rational reflection, and I think this demonstrates the difficulties of providing examples for Lear's conception of ironic experiences. What I hope to emphasize is the first-personal commitment to pretenses that moves this experience beyond the realm of reflection or looking for solutions from outside one's society. It *only* happens because of one's commitments, and because one fully buys into them.

In the ironic experience as I have described it, a person's conception cannot be so easily changed by adopting whichever understanding they discover,

nor can they act as if no ideal provides a source of meaning. When a person is committed to their values, not just as social constructions, but as autonomously internalized social norms and practices, then they are convinced of the importance of maintaining these competing pretenses and ideals, and irony provides a way to live well with what seems at first to be a contradiction.

THE TEACHER IN SOCRATES

It is difficult to see just how irony could be possible in these moments of aporia; it seems that one is encouraged instead to give up on the theses that Socrates has so effectively refuted. But I think an example of Socrates encountering this irony a little more closely to his person will help demonstrate that this moment of aporia brings about a potential moment of ironic disruption. Socrates claims that he is not a teacher, but still he teaches. This seems to be Socrates's perspective on teaching:

Pretense 1.	You must know something to teach it.
Pretense 2.	I don't know anything.
Conclusion.	Therefore, I cannot be a teacher.[13]

It is very difficult to convince oneself that Socrates is not a teacher, or that he did not teach anyone, and it can seem as if he is just being disingenuous. But Lear posits Socratic ironic questioning as resting on three premises:

i. Questioning a practical identity.

ii. Living that practical identity.

iii. Professing ignorance of that practical identity.[14]

Socrates questions what being a teacher means, while at the same time existing as a teacher in Athens, all the while claiming that he cannot be a teacher. But we know that Socrates did in fact teach, and thus we know that he lived the practical identity he claimed he could not fulfill due to his ignorance. Instead, I want to put forth a different set of premises, which I think more accurately describes Socrates's situation:

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Pretense 1. You must know something to teach it.

Pretense 2. I don't know anything.

Pretense 3. But I teach anyway.

In this case, one's conception of teacher rests on values that seem to contradict: the necessity of a teacher's expertise on a subject, and the impossibility of truly achieving expertise on a subject, in the sense that one must be open to the idea of learning one is wrong. We know that these two positions—first, a teacher must know, and second, a teacher must learn—make sense to teachers, and are seen not to contradict. I argue this represents an overarching understanding of what it means to be a teacher, an understanding that unconsciously guides the way a teacher acts.

When pressed, a teacher may come face to face with these competing pretenses, in a way that places her within aporia, and it is not immediately clear what direction is to be taken. In contrast to the discussion of courage above, it is less convincing to give up on our premises. I want to hold on to the idea that teachers should be experts, and I think it to be true that teachers with a deep knowledge of their subjects are better than teachers with a shallow knowledge, and teachers that demonstrate knowledge with clarity and thoughtfulness are praiseworthy. But I also want to hold onto the other claim, that a teacher must remain open to the possibility, and likelihood, of learning from her students, of learning that she is wrong.

And so, a teacher may be faced with a dilemma: "I must teach, and must do so in such a way that presents knowledge to my students, while acknowledging that such knowledge shouldn't be taken as ultimately true, or closed to questioning." The teacher's actions, because of commitments to those values, must incorporate both positions. The teacher can only genuinely act by incorporating both positions, even if she cannot articulate how she does so. She does not genuinely act as a teacher by giving up on claims to know a subject, nor by giving up on remaining open to new knowledge, nor by giving up on teaching. Instead, she acts genuinely with the tensions that have arisen between the pretenses of being a teacher and the aspirations of being a teacher.

CONCLUSION

By using Lear's conception of irony in connection with a reading of Plato's *Laches,* I've shown that aporia and irony involve questioning what one thinks is true, but more importantly involves remaining committed to those beliefs, to their values, and to the possibility of understanding the world. With this in mind, Socratic dialogues can be facilitated in a way that leads students to these moments of aporia, and therefore to the complexity of their concepts, without coming out of the experience believing that they know less than when they went in, or that they can't trust the things they know, or the things they believe in.

Socratic dialogues can often lead students to think that they do not know what they already think they know. In fact, it is often all that these discussions do. Through inquiry, educators can teach students to shed their misconceptions and socially-derived, but ultimately false, understandings. But that is not the whole point of engaging with students in a Socratic way. Instead, these discussions should be based out of students' knowledges and should value those as significant, important sources of information. Students must learn that the concepts and understandings they bring into a classroom are not wrong, but rather incomplete, ready to be flushed out by thinking through contradictions and complexities. They must gain nuance, alternative perspectives, and begin to incorporate criticism, all while maintaining their commitments.

A fundamental aspect of teaching with the Socratic Method is that students and teachers act in accordance with the idea that they must say what they believe. This is the foundational claim of teaching with the Socratic method in classrooms; more is to be gained by inquiry into what we believe than any attempt to provide facts or argue for positions for the mere sake of it. However, students can become discouraged with this method if all they learn is that what they know is wrong. To combat this, it should be demonstrated to students that what they already know, or believe, is valuable.

Part of living well is living well within one's situation, within their local, historical context. If this is true, then it will be true that our intuitions, our beliefs,

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have great pedagogical value, because they are instilled in us, in part, by parents, family, teachers, and society. Operating within this system, it becomes important to question these assumptions about virtue; indeed, it seems imperative in the face of oppression and inequality, but questioning must begin in the students' understandings, and, through inquiry and reflection, grow, expand, and deepen those understandings.

Socratic dialogues can seem to leave their participants in moments of doubt, inaction, and confusion. But if we focus on certain elements of these dialogues, we can see a way out of these moments of doubt that can turn into moments of education. Using Lear's framework of ironic disruption, it is evident that Socratic dialogues involve interlocutors who care deeply about using knowledge to inform their everyday lives, attempting to better understand the aspirations towards which they work. Although their discussions end in doubt, it is not simply because of the insufficiency of their attempted definitions, but because they remain convinced of the importance of both pretenses, even when they conflict, and aspirations, as gaps arise between them. Using the perspective of ironic disruption, it is possible to increase one's understanding of their own actions and ideals, and act well in accordance with one's aspirations despite, perhaps because of, those shortcomings.

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1 The concept of irony, including Socratic irony, has a substantial discussion in philosophic literature, as does the use of the "Socratic Method" in classrooms. For an overview of some of these questions, including a summary and sympathetic critique of Lear's conception of irony, see Richard J. Bernstein, *Ironic Life* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016).

2 Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 19. *A Case for Irony* is based on Jonathan Lear's *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, delivered at Harvard in 2009 and published with responses from Christine M. Korsgaard, Richard Moran, and Cora Diamond.

3 Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 4; Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 100-101.

4 In *Radical Hope,* Lear explores the connections between practical identities and *the possibility* of action through a limit case involving the Crow Nation. Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

5 Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 10.
6 Here I follow Lear, who develops an example of a Christian passing a beggar on the street, as an extension of what Lear considers Kierkegaard's "fundamental ironic question … In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?"; Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 12-14.
7 Ibid., 19.
8 Ibid., 15.
9 Ibid.,17.
10 Plato, "Laches," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York, NY: Random House, 1937), 192.
11 Lear, *A Case for Irony,* 15.
12 Ibid., 30.
13 Plato, "Alcibiades," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper: "Don't you see that somebody who is going to teach anything must first know it himself?"
14 Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 24.

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