Debating irony and the ironic as a social phenomenon and a human capacity

Nigel Rapport and Ronald Stade

What follows is a set of paired articles, followed by a statement by both authors where they debate their distinct positions. Both articles treat irony, but while Rapport looks to it as a possible liberal virtue, a means of dealing with radical difference in a modern democracy, including the illiberal, Stade approaches irony from an ontological position that considers social relationships and cultural contingencies to be but one facet of human existence and irony and alienation to have an existential depth, the study of which can facilitate a rapprochement between sociocultural and philosophical anthropology. The paired articles are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, perhaps: irony as world-mocking as well as world-tolerant.

More precisely, Nigel Rapport asks himself a specific question. How does a liberal society—a society based on the rights of individual citizens freely to author for themselves their world-views, identities and life-projects, a society based on tolerance towards such individual difference—defend itself against illiberal 'communitarian' discourses that insist on categorizing individuals first and foremost as members of particular cultures, ethnicities, religions, races, genders, classes, nationalities and other forms of ascriptive community? How, in short, does a liberal society defend itself against the unfreedom of *category-thinking*, of collectivist essentialism? Evans-Pritchard, in his Aquinas Lecture of 1959, praised collectivist societies (religious in particular) for their 'efficiency' and 'vitality' (1962:41). Contrariwise, how and to what extent might a society of individual citizens be effective—efficient and vital—in defending

1

their sameness-in-difference? The law is one resort: a constitution that regulates 'cultural' expression, such that entrapment in norms whose authority is, in Weber's terms, traditional rather than rational, and conditioning individuals in their acceptance, is illegal. But can irony be another resort, considered to be both a habit of mind and a manner of public engagement? Irony might operate as a kind of politeness, informal and yet effective, which has the benefit of cognitively removing people from their world-views, identities and life-projects, including their cultural and community memberships, so that, for moments at least, they place their differences aside and stand together as human beings who recognize one another as being *alike in their chosen individual differences*. These ironic moments are key moments of social being, and recognized as practicing a foundational social virtue. Here is irony as a form of cosmopolitan politesse (Rapport 2012a). The article is offered, too, as a critique of versions of cultural essentialism that gain purchase in anthropology: that the foundational ontology of one human cosmos—a single human species—is merely a perspectival claim (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Latour 2004); that a diversity of cultural constructions of personhood entails there being no single human individuality since human beings come to consciousness by virtue of cultural symbologies (Geertz 1973; Appadurai 2013); and that the constitutive units of a modern society are cultural communities in which citizens are inevitably and essentially anchored (Tully 1995; Parekh 1998).

Ronald Stade also takes irony to be a human capacity for alienation and self-distancing, only that he extends this capacity beyond the social and political to the existential. Human beings are capable of taking an external, detached view of themselves not just in relation to their social, cultural and political environment. They are able to think of themselves (and others) as mortals, as earthlings, as insignificant in cosmic perspective, as tragic or ridiculous figures etc.

Such an alienated perspective resembles the ethnographic experience of encountering unfamiliar ways of being in the world and the creative process of inventing strange tales. Existential alienation can spawn existential irony, which bears greater similarity with gallows humour than with a liberal virtue. The two ironies, liberal and existential, are both mutually exclusive and complementary: they are alternatives insofar as liberal irony is a value and existential irony lends itself to doubting the value of any value; they complement each other in that they address two aspects of the human capacity for irony.

The implications of these distinct understandings are taken up in the co-authored reflection that follows the two articles (which itself is an elaboration of the 'debate' on cosmopolitanism which appeared in *Social Anthropology* volume 15 (Rapport and Stade 2007)).

WHIM OF IRON?

IRONY AS COLLECTIVE VIRTUE AND DEFENCE AGAINST ESSENTIALISM

Nigel Rapport

Abstract

Irony is to be understood as a human capacity for self-distancing: for reflecting on the self, its social position, its world-views, values and designs on life, and for standing intellectually and emotionally apart from these—for moments at least. It is argued that this human capacity might be recruited in the service of a liberal solidarity: irony is a tricksterish figure but it might also be 'educated' to serve a social role. A liberal society might deal with the illiberal and achieve a working commensuration between radical difference—claims to different cosmologies, different ontologies, to a multicultural universe, to gendered alterity, to fundamentalistic religious division—if irony were exercised as a universal social practice. The ironizing individual maintains: 'I endorse my self, my world-views and life-project (my fundamentalistic religion, my ethnic community, my class, my nation, my football team)—but I also recognise that *I might be otherwise*'. Such self-distancing can serve as a kind of cosmopolitan politeness or *politesse*: all members of a society might meet in possessing vocabularies of sense and value that operate in individual lives as both absolutes *and* as world-views that are politely, ironically put aside.

Tolerance is not the same as weakness. Putting up with people

does not mean giving in to them.

E. M. Forster (1972:57)

Liberalism must, in the end, be ready to be a fighting creed

Kwame Anthony Appiah (1994:159)

Introduction: Cosmopolitanism and the Phantasy of Groupness

A cosmopolitan vision

Cosmopolitanism is a science and also an ethical programme which situates itself, as the word

suggests ('cosmos'/'polis'), in a field of tension between two poles of human reality: the reality

of species sameness and the reality of individual difference (Rapport 2012a). All humans are in

a way the same and all humans are in a way different: cosmopolitanism works on this dialectic:

'What do local individual manifestations of a human life reveal of universal human capabilities

and liabilities?'; and 'How might knowledge of universal human capabilities and liabilities

inform moral insights concerning what is needed for any human individual to be able fully to

fulfil themselves?' Cosmopolitanism is a form of humanism and of liberal universalism: it

would know the singularity of the human condition and put this knowledge into practice to

improve human circumstances: it would recognise the individual as everywhere the constituent

unit of humanity, whose freedom is to be safeguarded and whose care is to be ultimately valued.

It is also the cosmopolitan insistence that the host of symbolic constructions and classifications that may be construed as identifying and affiliating individual human actors—nations, ethnicities, classes, genders, religions, football teams—are matters of historical contingency which should not be allowed to obscure the ontological nature of the human/individual (cosmo/political) dialectic. 'Individual' and 'species' are the ontological nodes of the human condition. Cultural rhetorics and social institutions are epiphenomenal upon the reality of individual-cum-species. Whatever the social relations, the cultural traditions and the community memberships in which the individual participates (which he or she appropriates, interprets and deploys) and which mediate his or her sense of self, conferring context on his or her personae, world-views and life-projects, it is nevertheless the case that life is individual. In Michael Jackson's (2003:xii) words:

> Unless we are to fall into the pathetic fallacy of assigning to abstractions like
> history and society the will, consciousness, and determining power of persons, we
> must accept that vitality exists nowhere but in individual lives, and that it is through
> the ways individuals decide and construe their destinies that all forms of collective
> life are possible. To be sure, the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a
> nightmare on the mind of the living, as Marx famously put it, and antecedent
> circumstances—historical, genetic, social, or cultural—foreshadow and shape our
> lives, but the individual is where life is actually lived, endured, decided, denied,
> suffered, imagined and reimagined. And it is individuals—not society or history or
> circumstance—who make and unmake the world.

To partake in a 'phantasy of groupness' (Laing 1968:81) concerning the extent to which one's identity, ontological security, consciousness and embodiment owe their character and nature to an essential and determining collective—a history, a tradition, a culture, a religious or ethnic community—is something that individuals may certainly imagine, but it is nonetheless a *phantasy* which each individual will be responsible for effecting (and continuing to effect) for themselves, and which each will effect differently, even if in conjunction with others.

To phrase this differently: How an individual imagines that he or she belongs to a group, a community, a congregation, is, according to cosmopolitanism, a matter of their practice and also their rights *as a human being*. Belonging is a construct—symbolic, rhetorical, emotional, practical. The way in which and the extent to which the individual determines to abide by such constructs as part of his or her world-view and his or her life-project should be a matter of choice, of personal consciousness and creativity. Cosmopolitanism will always see the real individual within the phantasy of groupness and will endeavour to ensure that the ways in which groupness is being lived are so far as possible direct reflections of ongoing individual choice (Rapport 2012b). In Martha Nussbaum's (1996:133,136) succinct summary:

> The accident of being born a Sri Lankan, or a Jew, or a female, or an African-American, or a poor person, is just that—an accident of birth. It is not and should not be taken as a determinant of moral worth. (…) Make liberty of choice the benchmark of any just constitutional order, and refuse to compromise this principle in favour of any particular tradition or religion.

'Liberty of choice', to extend Nussbaum's final sentence, entails the individual's universal right to experience culture, to animate (create, adopt and adapt) its symbolic forms, in his or her own way. and not necessarily in accordance with others' judgement of propriety, of tradition or of classificatory ascription. Cosmopolitanism is a global liberal vision.

A defendable vision?

It should be clear that the 'liberalism' addressed here is a moral philosophy such as has been enshrined in the work of John Stuart Mill (1963), and not an economic one. Liberalism has concern for the liberties of the universal human individual—'Anyone'—and has no narrow implications for economic arrangements; 'liberal' advocates may occupy the spectrum from social democracy to liaissez-faire.

But, what of the 'illiberal' notion that groupness is primary and not an epiphenomenon: that the ontological is folded into the cultural, and that 'cultures are not options' (Parekh 1998:212). How does a cosmopolitan project deal with 'communitarian' claims which would insist that the constituent units of human reality are not individuals but communities to which they belong, inevitably and inexorably, and that values and rights and sovereignties inhere in collective traditions not individual lives? There is a major divergence here: between a view of the human condition being a polar, inclusive and universal one (human species—human individual), and a view of the human condition as being a mosaic, fundamentally mediated by exclusive communities and cultural traditions, and intrinsically plural and relative.

This is not simply an academic concern. To be immersed in a so-called 'war on terror' is to find the discourse of Enlightenment rationality and morality—the individuality and humanity that should by rights be beyond issues of cultural rhetoric and belonging—become a political

football. Liberal humanism is drawn into a belligerent contest with 'post-colonialism', and the ontological discourse of Enlightenment science and morality demeaned as if no more than a matter of communitarian identification and boundary-marking. The one-time prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, is thus able to proclaim that 'human rights and democracy' are 'the new Christianity'; also spurious 'Jewish' inventions which merely give European countries the right to invade, subvert local traditions and values, and convert and subjugate. According to Osama bin Laden, Enlightenment modernity threatened Islam with corruption: the project of piety was to redress past grievances and the present disrespect that Islam suffered by implementing a non-Western post-modernity (Sasson and bin Laden 2009). This project would be successfully effected, according to bin Laden, because the West was decadent. Its affluence had led to debauched weakness and an inability either to recognise its own usurpatory practice or to be sufficiently motivated to defend it. Such Western decadence portended a final end to the modern 'imperialist' project.

Whether or not bin Laden's judgement was accurate concerning 'the West', it does point up a significant issue in liberal society which is of long standing and which can be subject to anthropological treatment. Namely: Can a liberal world constituted by the nature and value of individual lives, world-views and life-projects, and constituted for the furtherance and fulfilment of such individual lives, *know itself* as a singularity and *defend itself* as a whole? Can individuality become an efficient collective programme, not only of personal freedom but also of self-defence against illiberal adversaries whose vision of the world is fundamentalistic and totalitarian? Cosmopolitanism claims its liberal vision to possess a global relevance: it posits liberalism to be a rationally and morally justifiable 'export', and deems itself to be dealing with ontologies not cultural constructions. How might one go about promoting cosmopolitanism as a

rational and a moral (and an anthropological) project in a global arena when language and behaviour is so easily diverted into and corrupted by partisan, 'post-colonial' interpretation and rhetoric? I am concerned in this article with how a cosmopolitan project deals with illiberal or 'communitarian' claims both as a matter of discursive strategy and for purposes of practical defence.

Accommodation and appeasement

Some cosmopolitan commentators, such as Craig Calhoun (2009), have argued for a rapprochement with illiberalism. It is impolitic for cosmopolitanism to conceptualise the world solely in terms of individualities, according to Calhoun, and it must provide collective projects with their own starting points inside its moral project. The cosmopolitan hope, with the end of the Cold War, that global citizenship—the rights and responsibilities of universal individual citizens—might be a moral accompaniment to 'the end of history' has proved over-optimistic and naïve; instead we have on the one hand deregulated global capitalism and on the other a resurgence of strategic essentialisms (the renascent particularisms of nation, ethnicity and religion). The solution, for Calhoun, is to recognise cultural identities and communal solidarities less as non-rational hang-overs than as strategic responses forged amid processes of globalisation. A full or 'thick' conception of social life, commitment and belonging would accept that difference will manifest itself not only in individuality but also in ongoing collective projects, and that these latter will be claimed by their members to be more than merely aesthetic matters of lifestyle and choice. If cosmopolitanism is not going to appear like a neo-civilizing mission of colonial imposition, Calhoun concludes, then its project and vision—rationalising and moralising—must emerge locally, and empower people in the context of actual conditions:

assist people amid their traditions and as members of communities. Cosmopolitanism must recognise that a universal appeal to sovereign individuality might even disempower those without personal or organizational resources.

My fear is that such a concession is unwise: untrue and weak. It confuses rhetoric with ontology—individual difference may never be conflated with cultural or group difference—and it does not defend the hard-won truths and freedoms which Enlightenment insights have secured humanity over recent centuries (Rapport 2011). To play politics with identity in the way Calhoun suggests, above, is to surrender to what Michael Jackson termed the 'pathetic fallacy': assigning to abstractions like culture and society, history and tradition, the will, consciousness, and determining power of individual human beings. If 'vitality exists nowhere but in individual lives and it is through the ways individuals decide and construe their destinies that all forms of collective life are possible' (après Jackson), then it is by way of individuals, not collectivities, that the illiberal must be faced, and faced-down. To compromise with illiberal conceptions of the human condition—failing to insist on the basic truths of individuals being more than their membership of particular groups, classes or categories, and of individuals existing beyond any particular set of social relations or customary norms—is to remove the logical and the moral means by which illiberalism can be discredited.

My argument is that cosmopolitanism must confront the illiberal in terms of the universal individual human being *as fact and as value*. 'The self becomes the governing armature of everything', as Uday Mehta (2009:107) sums up a Gandhian morality. Or: 'The individual must transcend the state. The state and the law are made for man; that through them he may achieve a higher purpose, a greater dignity', as Chief British Prosecutor, William Shawcross, phrased it at the Nuremberg Trials. It is because of individual capacities that cultures

may flourish, communities be maintained and traditions extended; and it is because one values the individual and his or her capacity for self-fulfilment that (the phantasy of) groupness and may be of value.

It is with one particular human-individual capacity that I concern myself, and that is *irony*. Besides its literary meaning, of certain figures of speech (antiphrasis, litotes, meiosis) where there is an inconsistency or contradiction between what is said and what is meant or apparent, irony can be understood more broadly as entailing a detachment, a self-displacement: it entails the person detaching himself or herself, cognitively and emotionally, from the world as is, looking askance at what is—at both fact and value—and recognizing that it could easily, and perhaps just as well, be other. More than a literary device irony is 'a mode of vision' (Rix 2006:312). Jack Goody (1977:20) writes that always and everywhere it is possible to find 'individuals engaged in the creative exploration of culture', intellectually distancing themselves from existing conceptual universes and looking at them askance. Such 'ironic' engagement can be understood both as a universal human capacity and a ubiquitous individual practice (Rapport 2003: 42-50). By virtue of an ironic engagement, individuals remove themselves cognitively from seemingly pre-ordained and pre-determining schema of cultural classification and social structuration. Indeed, perceiving ironically, individuals may appreciate the malleability and the mutability of social rules and realities, the contingency and ambiguity of cultural values and truths.

It is for this reason that the fact of an ironic engagement with human life also lends itself to being deployed as an effective liberal-cosmopolitan virtue. Irony is to be valued as a means to mediate between the ontology of individuality on the one hand and the phantasy of groupness on the other: as a regular individual practice and habitual stance, cultural traditions and

12

communitarian solidarities may be both enjoyed and enjoined *and* 'put in their place' as the fictions of global liberal subjects.

Irony as a liberal virtue

Let me change register.

Antal Szerb published his last novel, *Oliver VII*, in 1942. He was 41 years old. In the novel, the eponymous young royal hero, Oliver VII, plots a coup against his own throne in a small, poor Central European kingdom, 'Alturia', because he feels oppressed by fate: by the impossibility of the kingdom's parlous state, and by the convention that he should know how to deal wisely with it. He goes into exile, assumes a false name ('Oscar') and enjoys the 'real life' of being a nobody in Venice. By a set of accidental circumstances he becomes a confidence trickster who is asked to impersonate himself (Oliver VII) in a sting operation. The gang of crooks who plan to use the 'passing resemblance' they find between the dreamy lost youth, Oscar, and the lost exiled king Oliver VII in order to swindle money from an enormously wealthy Central-European financier, do not realise that 'Oscar' is indeed Oliver. In setting up a situation in which Oliver is called upon to pass as himself, or rather in which Oliver/Oscar the individual passes as Oliver VII the exiled king, Szerb writes a novel about identity, personal authenticity and social duty. Szerb prefaces his novel with an epigram from the thirteenth-century Provençal troubadour, Guilhem de Montanhagol: 'Duty is not a bed of roses', and the end of the novel sees Oliver returning from the excitement and fullness of Italian life to his own life in the kingdom of Alturia, as 'himself'. Playing other roles has taught him insights he will never forget, he admits, but he now wishes to assume a duty he feels he has fled: to play the role of Alturia's king.

Antal Szerb's authorial style has been described by his translator, Len Rix (2007:205), as 'neo-frivolism': a touch which is light and amused, casually detached but not cynical. Szerb has a humane rather than an ideological cast of mind, Rix suggests, which inspires his readers' trust: his art is 'too benign for satire, too shrewd for sentimentality' (2007:206). *Oliver VII* also exemplifies how Szerb positions himself between the tragic and the comedic: the seriousness of life, the brute materiality of the present, does not determine or deny the capacity and the practice of refusing the absolute limits of this present. Beyond this present exists the imaginative: the capacity to imagine past and future as well as alternative presents; the capacity to remove oneself from the conventional structuring of the world, the capacity to look askance at one's self, one's life, and to know oneself as at once wholly involved in present practice *and* wholly distinct from it. Antal Szerb's fellow Hungarian academician, Károly Kerényi, meant it as a compliment when he concluded that Szerb 'never took himself seriously'. The word I would use in this connection is 'irony'. One knows oneself as an occupant of social roles but also as a 'role-player', the individual who 'passes' through roles (Rapport 2010)

Szerb was elected President of the Hungarian Literary Academy in 1933—aged 32—and became Professor of Literature at the University of Szeged in 1937. He wrote novels, anthologised poems, and composed studies of literary history and theory. But then his *History of Hungarian Literature* and *History of World Literature* were banned, with the onset of the Second World War, due to his Jewish ethnic origins. Hungary's 'Quisling' governments collaborated with the Nazis in many ways, including the promulgation of anti-Semitic legislation (although Jewish deportations to death camps did not take place until 1944-5 following the direct German occupation of the country). The circumstances surrounding Antal Szerb's writing and publishing of *Oliver VII* became dire. Even though a practising Catholic,

Szerb was, in October 1942, officially classified as 'Jewish', which meant he could no longer hold an academic position. Instead, he was conscripted to hard-labour battalions, forced to wear the yellow star and to reside in the ghetto. Since no 'Jewish' work could any longer be printed, *Oliver VII* could appear (in 1942) only due to it being passed off as a translation from English of a work by (an invented) 'A. H. Redcliff'.

Szerb chose to remain in Hungary, nevertheless, despite being given opportunities as late as 1944 to escape the anti-Semitic persecution (such as through an academic position at Columbia University). Rix suggests a sense of duty played a large part in this decision: a commitment to Hungary and his work there, and a loyalty to loved ones (family and friends) whom the Hungarian fascists (the Arrow Cross Party) had threatened with reprisals were he to flee. Finally, following the Nazi invasion of Budapest on March 19th 1944, Szerb's 'conscription' was made permanent. He came to be worked, starved and beaten to death in the Nazi labour camp of Balf, western Hungary, dying in January 1945.

It is clear that much in Szerb's circumstances echoes those in *Oliver VII*. Antal Szerb comes to be reclassified as an alien in his homeland while Oliver VII goes into exile from his own kingdom by staging a coup that reclassifies his position. Szerb is led to pass as a Jew: Oliver VII is led to pass as Oscar the con-man. Oliver VII decides to return to what he sees as a duty to assume a conventional leadership role: Szerb deems it his duty to maintain the role of 'Jew' in Quisling Hungary and resigns himself to not going into exile. 'The real test of life was uncertainty', Szerb has Oliver VII say at one point in the novel (2007:81), and Szerb's final dark years more than match Oliver's testing of himself in self-imposed exile in Italy.

It is, however, Szerb's (and Oliver's) ironic practice that I wish to focus centrally upon. I mean the standing aside from, and looking askance at, the seriousness of present circumstances

and their brute materiality in such a way that their absolute provenance, and sovereignty, is parenthesized and transcended. Szerb and Oliver pass as particular kinds of people, as conventionally classified ('Jew' and 'King'), but this dutiful appearance in a role does not go to the heart of who they are or what they see, or even the values they uphold.

The ironic stance, I have argued, is an ability and a practice, enduring and ubiquitous, by which individuals may loose themselves from the fixity of what is, or appears to be, and creatively explore what might be (Rapport 2003:42-50). Always and everywhere, individuals may detach themselves, cognitively, and call into question the value and justification of the roles and practices in which they are currently implicated, envisioning themselves with different relationships and preferences. Here is an appreciation, even celebration, of the fictive nature of all human sociocultural inheritances, and the imagining of them as other. By virtue of the practice of irony, human beings may render even the most cherished of their values, beliefs and desires open to question, parody and replacement.

This is not to say that the ironic stance is universally welcomed, or even openly admitted. Indeed, the 'open' social milieux in which the cognitive freedom (scepticism, creativity, idiosyncrasy) that irony flags is welcomed are likely to be historically outnumbered by kinds of 'closedness', to borrow Karl Popper's terms (1980; cf. Rapport 2005). Traditionalism, fundamentalism and autocracy are predominant, outside the Western Enlightenment, with the substance of inherited verities not being open to question, and custom alone being publicly validated. But whether accepted or negated on the level of public convention and exchange, one recognizes the existence of irony as human proclivity and individual practice, a universal capacity and cognitive resort. The individual reflects upon the customary and distinguishes himself or herself imaginatively from it. But more than a practice, I

am keen to signal irony as a value: to recognize its being resorted to as an ethical habit, indeed a supreme liberal virtue. It is virtuous habitually to adopt an ironic stance with regard to the world as it customarily and conventionally appears, in cultural traditions and social structures.

In his writing and seemingly in his living, it has been suggested, Antal Szerb continued to practice irony even in desperate circumstances. Another novelist, E. M. Forster, was described by his biographer-critic, Lionel Trilling (1951:11), as having a 'whim of iron', and the phrase might apply equally to Szerb. Trilling explained that he was signalling Forster's refusal to take anything too conclusively, too fixedly, too seriously—except the very serious habit of always reflecting upon and considering what was, always being prepared to change and to move on. In being 'whimsical' as his habitual mode of being and living with the displacement this might effect, Forster refused to accept any customarily held truth as necessarily absolute and free from revaluation. Such existentialist phrasings may sound dated but the human truth to which it adverts is, I would contend, beyond fashion. There is an individual capacity to transcend present epistemologies, present appearances and conventions, and insist on the reality of its own being and becoming. Irony is part-and-parcel of this individual force which 'insists on itself' and proceeds continually to create and to live its own truth (Rapport 2010). In this capacity and force to revalue what is conventional, moreover, exists not only an intrinsic human freedom but also an instantiation of individual virtue, of something supremely valuable to contemporary liberal politics. Free from the 'despotism of custom' (Mill 1963:194), the liberal ironist recognises culture to be a matter of taste and of subjective judgement. What is important in and for liberalism is to enjoy these cultural tastes, and to go on exercising the capacity and the freedom to make them, but not to insist (whether for oneself or for others) on the value or truth of any one cultural version in particular. Ironism gives on to a recognition of cultural

17

communities as ideological constructs—open and voluntary communities just as much as closed, autocratic ones. However much such communities may present an essentialistic, singular and homogeneous face to the outside world—or to themselves—they are none the less composed of and constituted by diversity: by the intrinsic particularity of those individuals who work to accommodate their diverse interpretations of the world and motivations to live within it in the format of a common set of symbols and behaviours (Amit and Rapport 2002). Such *rhetoric* of homogeneity should never be confused with the reality of individual difference, however.

Let me sum up my argument for irony thus far: Irony entails a kind of cognitive and emotional displacement, or doubling. The ironizing individual knows himself or herself both to be their own person and to be a role-player in relation to others: he or he both belongs—to collective solidarities and cultural traditions—and does not. The ironizing individual locates himself or herself in a true appreciation of the constructed nature of communities. Even his or her own (religious, ethnic, gendered) are fictions: historically contingent and 'accidental' in their discourses, practices and beliefs. The ironizing individual also appreciates others for what *they* truly are: role-players who may do their conventional duty in passing as members of (other) communities but also individuals who can be expected equally to see through and beyond community rhetorics, and who exist beyond all such memberships. Beyond the rhetorics of community ascription, exclusiveness and closure—of so-called 'British' people, 'Muslims', 'the working-class', and 'Blacks'—are individual human beings living in accidental communities—or in none.

Tricksterish irony

Irony is nevertheless a tricksterish figure. Brenda Austin-Smith (1990:51-2) captures this quality when she defines irony as, 'never having to say you really mean it'. Irony can intimate a lack of commitment, an effeteness, a scepticism, cleverness and superiority. Irony can suggest a vanishing figure: a refusal of presence, whether out of weakness or a fearfulness to admit a serious depth to things; it can seem to accompany a social setting and cultural milieu and era where one does not possess the energy to commit, where ennui replaces conviction, and where insisting on the truth of things is a vulgar embarrassment, to be replaced by a celebration of ambiguity and clever cynicism. And hence one returns to the likes of Osama bin Laden and the accusation of decadence.

I admit that a paradoxical request is being made of the ironic. The tricksterish or displaced figure is being asked to bear a heavy moral weight and to effect a complex and continuing work. Irony as an act of self-distancing, of non-belonging, is being asked to serve as a major defence of the *right* not to belong: not to commit absolutely or singly to a community, a culture, a tradition, a religion; indeed, not to belong or believe at all, as an instantiation of existential freedom. Irony is being asked to identify with and to defend that liberal society that does not classify its members according to what are deemed to be their *private* tastes—their communitarian belongings and affiliations—and does not wish to know these, knowing only that its citizen-members are human individuals living amid and alongside other human individuals. Even if not effete and decadent, irony is a kind of self-effacement from the social scene, a *passing through* relationships, a kind of civility and politeness, too, in opposition to a direct confrontation. *Can irony ultimately work to defend liberal society and serve as a practice that virtuously undermines the illiberal?*

In his inviting phrase, Trilling recognised in E. M. Forster, a noted moralist as well as novelist, a 'whim of iron', as we have heard (cf. Rapport 1994). May this phrasing operate as a more general description of habitual individual practice and of a social ethos? Two ways forward suggest themselves. The first concerns 'educating for democratic individuality'; and the second the recognition of a particular kind of 'good life': an ethos of 'self-governance and becoming'. The phrases are from political theorist George Kateb, for whom: 'Every individual is equally a world, an infinity, a being who is irreplaceable' (1992:5). It is to Kateb's work that I now turn.

Educating for democratic individuality

A liberal democracy contains certain arrangements which conduce to people's ability to see beyond the merely conventional nature of conventions, Kateb (1984:338) begins. The electoral procedure, for instance, is a key to liberating individuals from servility to conventions insofar as it calls political authority into question. If all significant political offices are filled only for a limited term, after scrutiny and appraisal and contested elections, and by way of rules that are changeable, then individuals can no longer see themselves as enclosed within any single political system, even the one they currently espouse. A liberal democracy encourages a kind of self-consciousness in which the individual is distanced from the present and current in all its manifestations, official and informal, personal and impersonal.

Kateb elaborates (1981). When political authority is conjoined with the electoral system of a representative democracy, it is demystified and desacralised since its artificial nature is continually being asserted: political authority is something that must regularly be recreated (at elections). The spirit of democracy, one might say, is to make ruling and being ruled—the State

and its sovereignty—something alien and artificial. Political authority is mediated by a sense of its being loaned (grudgingly) to representatives: a temporary and conditional grant. This radically chastens the domain of collective institutions' power and authority. To the outside this might seem as if political authority in a democracy is always on the verge of crisis. But inside, individual citizens experience a healthy scepticism, and tend to disperse such authority whenever possible.

The form of government in a liberal democracy also nurtures a certain moral ambience, Kateb ventures: an independence of spirit or autonomy among the citizenry spreads from political affairs to whole lives. Since political authority is chastened, individuals become less fearful of authority figures or institutions as such: there is a significant 'alienation' from institutional structures. Not only is it electoral processes and the ceding of political authority to representatives that become temporary, voluntary and contingent procedures, but other relations and belongings too. Moreover, the fact that after an election part of the political community (a set of representatives; a political party) is sanctioned temporarily to stand for the whole promotes a sense of moral multiplicity and complexity: the partisan must now work towards inclusivity. This moral complexity translates into a kind of democratic indeterminacy: difference of opinion is anticipated, and contest normative. In short, the constitutional arrangements of liberal governance help foster certain traits of character and ways of being in the world, Kateb argues. These may exist elsewhere—as human capacities and proclivities—but they are sponsored, rewarded, and publicly enlisted in a liberal democracy as never before. The moral distinctiveness of modern democracy is that it enshrines the individual self as *public* bearer of certain rights and duties, *publicly* recognised as owner of himself or herself: freely granting

political authority and denying it, freely associating and contracting with others first for political purposes in political domains and relations but then more broadly in other areas of social life.

But the situation is not foolproof. The trait of autonomy can be a temporary achievement, even in democracy, prey both to forgetfulness and laziness, to a lack of vigilance and to all manner of 'anti-social' drives: authoritarian, controlling, totalising. Moreover, the processes and the moral climate of liberal democracy are not without their critics and their enemies, both doctrinaire and relativistic. It is for these reasons that educational processes also play such a special part in liberal democracy, Kateb urges. There is a kind of ideal public actor that a liberal education sets out to encourage: the abstract individual, voided of any definite cultural identity or inheritance, transcendent above any one communitarian belonging, any set of social relations, any traditional classification of the world, any final vocabulary and any timeless verities, *excepting the human-individual ability to keep on creating and experimenting with these latter*.

Education in and for a liberal democracy sets out to achieve a number of key things, Kateb elaborates. It seeks to place the individual in a position where he or she is able to criticise and choose between different values, rules and practices. In the same way that the liberal society bases itself on a set of extra- or trans-cultural procedures which would ensure and regulate the diverse expression of a variety of substantive cultures, so a liberal education seeks to provide each individual citizen with a transcultural method and knowledge, a rationality—an 'anthropology'—whereby each can subject those cultural expressions to searching and ongoing scrutiny. Education endeavours to obviate the 'tyranny' of an individual consciousness constrained by a lack of knowledge of variety, process and choice. The aim of a liberal education is not the maintenance of distinct cultural traditions but the fulfilment of individual

citizens: citizens free to choose a form of life—or a variety of forms at once or over time—and thus to develop their own intellectual and emotional capabilities; individuals free to practice forms of life, and invent their own, with as much ironic self-determination as does not interfere with the freedom of others.

A good life

Three elements of character, in particular, mark Kateb's democratic ironist: *free-thinking*, *self-reliance* and *attention*.

Every individual human being equally has a life to live, Kateb (1992:188) asserts. This recognition translates into a particular ethos, of rights and duties. Everyone has the right to live their own life: to say and do their own things, and to be like others only after some thought and as a matter of choice, and as a matter of his or her own judgement. Furthermore, what an individual claims for himself or herself he or she must concede to others; the duty that accompanies rights to one's own life entails abstaining from infringing on others. This mutual recognition is the greatest—and the only 'liberal'—human mutuality. The version of the 'good life' in liberal democracy is that of lives that are not 'bad' insofar as they are their individuals' own: voluntarily achieved and not ascribed; not enclosed by a suffocating network of traditional statuses, classes, localities, ethnicities, religiosities, even genders.

If liberal democracy makes the life of ironic contemplation and thought and doubt possible, so that it is 'everyone's vocation (...) to philosophize' (Kateb 1995:170), then this should also give rise to a strength of character and a habit of free-thinking which leads the individual to resist the oppressive exercise of power, whether directed against oneself or others. Beginning with oneself but extending to others, democratic individuality embodies a recognition

of the right of everyone to practice an independence of thought and identification, and for this right to be protected. Accordance with custom and convention tends to condition one to accept oppressive practices, Kateb suggests, while the practice of government tends to induce and reward conformity. *Free-thinking*, however, conduces towards a rejection of conventionalism and from a herd mentality; involving as it does the interminable chastening of authority, free-thinking carries with it the hopes of a liberal democracy.

Taking others seriously as individuals, moreover—respecting their rights to their own free-thinking—gives onto a particular form of connectedness. It is a kind of generous receptivity or *attention*: of preparedness to take what is different on its own terms, coupled with an empathetic attempt to imagine that difference. Democratic individuality is therefore not egotism, Kateb insists, and while self-reliance and free-thinking effect a certain distance between people: distance as something mutually respected can give rise to a higher form of connectedness. Hence, while individuals in a liberal democracy will not live for or as others, they will live alongside others, and seek to react responsively to their differences.

Self-reliance is an enunciation of that alienation one feels not only between convention and practice but also between habit and selfhood. Inasmuch as one is distinct from one's roles, one's relations and the conventions that effect a civil and polite social life, so one is also distinct from one's own current modus vivendi—from any current version of oneself. One recognises and celebrates one's individual ability (and necessity) to shape and reshape one's own life, continually to achieve a sense of self, 'to be reborn as oneself' (Kateb 1991:190). Self-reliance encompasses the individual desire to be different, experimental, unique; to be secret, undefined and mysterious, and not part of someone else's system; to think, interpret and judge for oneself and be unbeholden to others; to live fluidly and diversely in many roles. 'When I am my best

24

self, nothing social, not even intimate or domestic love, can be allowed to interpose itself as supreme' (Kateb 1991:196). A restlessness is implied, an improvisational attachment to existence whereby one is at home in movement, never allowing oneself to be ascribed a role or to be seen as its function.

The strain to be oneself may be almost as much as that to conform, Kateb concludes. Dignity is not without its costs. It is also the case that an ethos of democratic individuality does not make for routinized and rehearsed social lives. Community remains episodic, with group 'memberships' recognized as accidental aggregations of free agents connected temporarily by intention, rather than fixedly by the past, blood or faith. Nonetheless, the deliberate self-possession of the liberal ironist embodies a democratic moral vision of expressiveness, responsiveness and resistance.

Discussion: Irony as a self-regarding *and* social ethos

The premise of this article has been that liberalism, a recognition of the freedom of the individual human being vis-à-vis the group, must defend itself against illiberal forms of communitarianism that would fold the individual life into collectivist versions of common good. Cosmopolitanism I have described as a version of liberalism on a global scale: liberalism face to face with all manner of classificatory difference, from nationality to religiosity, from 'refugee' status to 'indigeneity'. The cosmopolitan project is to distinguish, in both scientific terms and moral terms, between the difference that makes us human beings—our innate individuality—and other voluntarily achieved and contingent differences.

The key aspect of our human-individual phenomenology that I have focused upon has been a capacity for irony and the practice of irony. By virtue of such displacement or self-

distancing, cognitive and emotional, all communitarian attachments, all communities, cultures, traditions, religions, are seen to be symbolic constructs that could be other—that were and will be other. All memberships are seen to be accidental or contingent matters—accidents of birth, or choices that could, perhaps will, perhaps should, be other. In this way irony becomes a supreme liberal virtue.

But are not irony, ironists and ironism tricksterish propositions? Is not a continual passing through roles and a standing beyond conventions also an absolving of the self of presence and of commitment? There is a seeming decadence and fickleness in irony: can it really work as key armament in liberalism as a 'fighting creed' (Appiah) that does not 'give in' (Forster) to absolutism? Western liberalism is itself derided by its enemies as a decadent, tired and weak social movement. To co-opt irony as a key means of defence might be seen as itself an effete, decadent act: a spent culture not knowing how to defend itself. Yet, a confidence in irony is not misplaced, I have argued. Liberalism defends itself by being most like itself: putting its faith in a free-thinking individual to recognise that his or her subjectivity is equivalent to that of any other human being; and that therefore there is an objectivity to subjectivity whose guarantor is the commonality of the human species (cf. Rapport 2009).

However, one can further support a free-thinking irony with specific social arrangements. The procedures of a liberal democracy and of representative government can serve as key encouragements. There is a kind of educating for irony in liberal political process; and there is a guaranteeing of the space for irony in human rights legislation that sees the human individual as an abstract figure who is transcendent of community attachments. The individual is known not in terms of his or her particular attachments and affiliations—as 'Welsh' or 'Jewish' or 'male' or an 'Arsenal Football Club fan'—but as Anyone: the global human-individual actor

26

with the potentiality, in his or her 'existential power', always to become (Rapport 2003, 2013). The procedures of a liberal democracy seek to enshrine the capacity of the human individual to make themselves, their world-views and life-projects, and to go on doing so—thus embodying their intrinsic freedom. The ethos of individual self-reliance adds to the procedures of a liberal democracy to make a serviceable defensive armoury.

If irony has been urged as a virtue in this argument, then it is virtue of a particular kind: self-regarding. Rather than fundamentally concerning what people should and should not do *to others*, virtue is seen here to concern what individuals should do as and for themselves. 'What is my life—my world-views, my life-project—and how might I fulfil it, become it, *alongside other individuals doing likewise*?' In recollection of Craig Calhoun, I say that this is also a collective project: cosmopolitanism as also lending itself to collectivist discourse. The succouring of an individual by himself and herself is a liberal version of collectivity: promoting those conditions whereby individuals might *together* focus on their self-development, and *together* maintain that normative environment whereby individuals are at liberty to fulfil themselves. Self-regard and self-centredness, in the form of self-knowledge and self-alienation, may be construed as enabling ethical *social* relations. In Alan Gewirth's (1998) formulation, 'self-fulfilment' can be seen to possess an inherent moral respectability inasmuch as the endorsement of one's own rights to a prospective and purposive agency—to developing one's potentialities and satisfying one's desires free from arbitrary restriction—entail endorsing the rights of others and committing oneself to universalist standards. Plainly put: reflecting ironically upon the project of one's life—both respecting oneself and controlling oneself—is what provides the possibility of forming intentionally reciprocal (as distinct from merely habitual, traditional or rote) relations with others.

Ronald Stade

TWO ANTHROPOLOGIES, ONE *ANTHROPOS*:

TOWARDS AN EMANCIPATION OF DISSONANCE

Abstract

The relationship between philosophical and sociocultural anthropology has been dissonant. Sociocultural anthropologists have been in the habit of suspecting philosophical anthropologists to be concerned only with human nature and to not pay attention to the kind of social, cultural and historical differences between societies and cultures that in the opinion of many or most sociocultural anthropologists invalidates any notion of an unchanging human nature. The recent ontological turn in sociocultural anthropology, however, seems to facilitate a rapprochement between the two anthropologies, as interest in both anthropologies turns to issues like 'the human' (as opposed, e.g., to the non-human) and human capacities. This turn reawakens perpetual questions of what is special about human beings, for example in terms of self-awareness. A uniquely human capacity seems to be that of self-alienation, which can take the shape of irony, nihilism and cynicism, but also of cosmopolitan self-transcendence. To appreciate the capacity for alienation, particular instances of irony and cosmopolitanism are compared in an attempt to demonstrate the common origin of critical cosmopolitanism and existential irony. The purpose is to emancipate the dissonance between philosophical and sociocultural anthropology from its consonant context and to create a new sonorous context for both anthropologies.

Two anthropologies

In endless space countless luminous spheres, round each of which some dozen

smaller illuminated ones revolve, hot at the core and covered over with a hard cold

crust; on this crust a mouldy film has produced living and knowing beings…Yet for

a being who thinks, it is a precarious position to stand on one of those numberless

spheres freely floating in boundless space, without knowing whence or whither, and

to be only one of innumerable similar beings that throng, press and toil, restlessly

and rapidly arising and passing away in beginningless and endless time.

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The world as will and representation*, II: 3

Two kinds of anthropology were incompatible with, even antithetical to, one another:

philosophical anthropology and sociocultural anthropology. The former is a branch of

philosophy that traditionally deals with the essence of what it is to be human, with human nature

and with the position of human beings vis-à-vis the non-human (creation, nature, other species,

the universe etc.). Today, philosophical anthropology often focuses on the latter, that is, the

difference between the human and the non-human. Sociocultural anthropology, by comparison,

has been about differences among human groups. The mainstay of sociocultural anthropology

was, and largely continues to be, differences between cultural and social patterns. With some

notable exceptions—not least various forms of materialism, like the kind of ecological

anthropology that was popular in the 1960s—sociocultural anthropology has concerned itself

with intra-human issues. Increasingly, however, sociocultural anthropologists turn their attention

to the relationship between the human and the non-human. A sign of the time is the current

ontological turn, which often also assumes the shape of a materialist turn. The source of this

ontological-materialist turn is Martin Heidegger rather than Karl Marx. The double turn is an engagement with the question of how 'in itself' relates to 'for itself': a lump of coal simply *is*, it is *in* itself; a human being rarely if ever simply *is*, she is concerned with her being, she is *for* herself. The difference is one of consciousness. The new ontologically informed materialism addresses this question by introducing redefinitions. What if the supposedly passive matter that exists in itself actually has agency? What if the apparently conscious human being, who is for herself, is an assembly of various matters that are in themselves and therefore, in essence, are non-human?

In the wake of the ontological turn, a rapprochement between the two anthropologies— philosophical and sociocultural—seems possible. A Schopenhauer quote like the one above, which during the cultural turn in sociocultural anthropology might have been considered far too essentialist, lends itself to translation into ontological and materialist terms: human beings are earthlings who evolved from 'a mouldy film' on the crust of their home planet and who need to recreate earth-like conditions as soon as they leave it. The human organism is delicately in tune with the physical conditions of its home planet. Part of this organism is the brain and both brain scientists and philosophers ask if it too is in tune with its environment and if this can explain why nature is intelligible to human beings, for example in terms of mathematics. The vulnerability that Schopenhauer has in mind, when he writes that human beings are in a precarious position, issues from this specific organ, which provides the earthlings with the ability to know and reflect. Human beings are equipped with a certain kind of consciousness, a capacity to be aware of and reflect on their own place in life and in the world.

In the 1970s and 1980s, sociocultural anthropologists were concerned with the issue of reflection. In the end, however, the reflexive turn in anthropology was about the need for

anthropologists to reflect on their research methods, not about the human capacity for reflection more generally. Perhaps the time has come for a second reflexive turn, which, as part of a wider ontological turn, will explore the human capacity to reflect.

Embedded in the capacity for reflection is the human capacity for alienation. Circumstances, situations and other people can seem peculiar and strange. As Nigel Rapport writes in his contribution to our current conversation, one's social ties, sense of belonging and political affiliations can be regarded with some distance, making them appear unfamiliar and contingent, which he thinks harbours public benefit. In my view, the fact that human existence is historically, culturally and politically contingent—in other words, that earthlings also are historical, cultural and political beings—means that social and political alienation can amount to existential alienation. Historical traces of this kind of alienation can be found in descriptions of the world as a vale of tears and the universe as indifferent to the suffering of the living: 'Heaven and earth are ruthless; treating the myriad of creatures like straw dogs'.[i] In antiquity, reflections on the human condition gave rise to the genre of tragedy—but also to the genre of comedy and the rhetorical style of irony, with which we will concern ourselves momentarily.

The ontological turn once again breathes life into the conundrums of realism and nominalism, objectivity and subjectivity, essentialism and constructivism, universalism and relativism etc. The kind of radical materialism that promises to provide a final answer to these questions—for example by introducing a metaphysics of actants—tends to rely on linear models of cause and effect and pay no attention to issues of subjectivity and reflection. A more productive approach will consider the distinctions between realism and nominalism, objectivity and subjectivity, in itself and for itself, materiality and consciousness etc. to be dissonances. Rather than to treat dissonance as noise, as a disturbance, it may be constructive to listen and

pay closer attention to it. To paraphrase the composer Arnold Schönberg: as our ears become

used to dissonance, it is emancipated from its consonant context, giving rise to a new sonorous

context. I hope that the ontological turn will create a new sonorous context for the two

anthropologies. The following is an attempt to combine the two anthropologies and to thus

deliberately create what to many ears will sound like a dissonance.

Dissonance

The dissonance between the human and the non-human can be seen as a dissonance between the

presence and the absence of consciousness. Within consciousness exists another dissonance, the

dissonance between appearance and actuality: human beings know not to always trust their ears

and eyes. Not everything is what it seems. A particular type of this kind of dissonance is irony.

Conventionally, irony is defined as the dissonance between an intended meaning and the words,

tone of voice or gestures used to express it. A serious comment can be accompanied by a

mischievous wink; derision can be couched in polite language; a sense of superiority can be

concealed with self-deprecating phrases etc. We call this kind of irony Socratic because Socrates

is said to have used it as a rhetorical device, as in this example:

> Socrates: Why, my wonderful friend, I have myself been guessing ever so long that
>
> you meant something of this sort by 'superior',[ii] and if I repeat my questions it is
>
> because I am so keen to know definitely what your meaning may be. For I presume
>
> you do not consider that two are better than one, or that your slaves are better than
>
> yourself, just because they are stronger than you are. Come now, tell me again from
>
> the beginning what it is you mean by the better, since you do not mean the stronger

only, admirable sir, do be more gentle with me over my first lessons, or I shall cease attending your school. (Plato, *Gorgias* 489d)

The excerpt is from Socrates' discussion with Callicles, an Athenian politician, who argues that might makes right. It illustrates Socrates' ironic strategy of pretending to be ignorant and asking seemingly naive questions in order to reveal the folly of his interlocutor. It is this kind of dissimulation which later became known as Socratic irony.[iii] In Socrates' days, however, the word εἰρωνεία (*ironía*) was used as a synonym for shamming and dishonesty. And so, in another Socratic dialogue, Thrasymachus, a paid teacher of philosophy and rhetoric, accuses Socrates of being a fraud by pretending not to know the answer to the questions he puts to others when in fact he most certainly does. Thrasymachus' point is relevant when comparing different types of irony: Socratic irony is characterised by its conviction that there is a truth, which irony can serve to uncover. Socratic questioning, in other words, is not an expression of genuine doubt but a rhetorical tactic to arrive at the only truth there is and which the ironist is in possession of.

Socrates inspired generations of philosophers. His most famous student, Plato, belonged to one of Athens' noble and wealthy families, which made him eligible to be a citizen (citizenship was a privilege, not a general entitlement). Plato had a detractor, who also had been inspired by Socrates. His name was Diogenes of Sinope, a poor immigrant and the best-known representative of the philosophical school of Cynicism (not to be confused with what we nowadays mean by cynicism). Diogenes could not become an Athenian citizen, so, asked where his home was, he is said to have replied, 'I am a citizen of everything'. In the Greek original Diogenes called himself a cosmopolitan (*kosmopolítes*). This neologism combines two unrelated words: *kósmos* and *polítes*. The meaning of the former, in ancient Greek, was 'order', in

particular the ordered and harmonious system of nature, the universe, the divine creation—in short, of everything. The latter referred to the human order of society, the *pólis*. The expression 'cosmopolitan' is thus an oxymoron that was meant as an ironic commentary. By contrasting the human and divine orders, Diogenes tried to expose the insignificance and pettiness of the human order (see Stade 2007 and 2014). Diogenes of Sinope gave expression to an existential perspective in which irony and cosmopolitanism coincide, as can be seen in the following diagram:

	Type of irony		
	Socratic irony		
Type of cosmopolitanism	*Existential irony / cosmopolitanism*	Political cosmopolitanism	Social cosmopolitanism
	Nihilistic irony		
	Romantic irony		
	Liberal irony		

The boxes in the above diagram stand for different versions of cosmopolitanism (the horizontal row) and irony (the vertical row). Both rows of boxes are ordered in roughly chronological fashion. The three types of cosmopolitanism are the subject of a forthcoming book and will here only be outlined. As mentioned, existential cosmopolitanism is of the kind first suggested by Diogenes of Sinope. It refers to the relationship between an individual and the entirety of the world she inhabits. The second type of cosmopolitanism, here called political, is associated with the name of Immanuel Kant, who contended that actually existing property relations and territorial divisions stood in the way of realising an ideal cosmopolitan order, in which all of humanity would have equal access and right to every place on earth. Given this constraint, he

thought that a global federation of democratic states guaranteeing the free—but non-invasive—movement of each individual and the peaceful global interaction of all would be the best solution to pervasive problems of violent conflict and illiberalism. The result is a political form of cosmopolitanism in which something akin to global citizenship serves as a key metaphor. The third type of cosmopolitanism derives from early sociology, in particular from the sociology of Georg Simmel, who pioneered the sociology of the city. Simmel wrote that the individual is confronted by the forces of the environment she lives in, which, in the city, become so overwhelming—for example, in terms of a sensory and cognitive overload—that she must defend her sanity by resorting to dispassion and jadedness, even to unsociability and hostility. Intellectual detachment and existential strangeness become common character traits among city dwellers (Simmel 1903). The loosening of local bonds and dissolution of taken-for-granted affiliations can turn urbanites into cosmopolitans in the sense of them being not just alienated but also broad-minded, outward-oriented and anti-parochial. Simmel's writings inspired sociologists like Robert Merton (1968: 441–74) and Alvin Gouldner (1957 and 1958) to develop the categories of cosmopolitans and locals: cosmopolitans are out-group oriented, locals are in-group oriented; cosmopolitans are internationally and translocally connected, locals are nationally, regionally or locally connected; etc. Extending this argument to an anthropological concept of cultural diversity, Ulf Hannerz (1990) argues that cosmopolitans, as a sociological type, appreciate and are able to navigate cultural differences in a way that locals, again as a sociological type, do and are not.

The three types of cosmopolitanism—existential, political and social—represent an historical and conceptual dimension that in at least one point intersects with the historical and conceptual dimension of irony. Diogenes of Sinope, in the anecdotes that are told about him,

used a style of speech that was known as seriocomic.[iv] To juxtapose the words for all-encompassing order and privileged citizen, as Diogenes does in the expression 'cosmopolitan', at one level, is meant to taunt and ridicule those who enjoyed the entitlements that came with Athenian citizenship. At another level, it is a serious statement about the human place in the cosmos.

In what follows, a section will be devoted to each of the remaining boxes in the vertical row, that is, nihilistic, romantic and liberal irony. The objective is to conclude that existential irony and existential cosmopolitanism, more than other types of irony and cosmopolitanism, lend themselves to emancipate dissonance from its consonant context and give rise to a new sonorous context.

Nihilistic irony

The liberation movement known as the European Enlightenment was summarised in Immanuel Kant's (1784: 481) motto that the Enlightenment is 'man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity'. Self-reliance and self-knowledge is the path towards liberation, argued Kant. Three types of irony emanated from this liberation movement: nihilistic, romantic and liberal irony.

Nihilistic irony begins with the question, 'what if one takes Kant's invitation literally and opts for unfettered selfhood?' Is it the libertine Donatien Alphonse François, Count of Sade, better known as the Marquis de Sade, who most perfectly embodies the spirit of the European Enlightenment? What if the sort of emergence from self-incurred immaturity, which Kant wrote about, leads to the ruthless instrumentalization of all others? One of Sade's more outrageous literary incarnations is Juliette, the cruel, criminal, sexually indiscriminating heroine of the novel that bears her name (the original title of the novel is *Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités*

du vice). Sade had already published a novel entitled, *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu* ('Justine or the misfortunes of virtue'). Justine and Juliette are sisters and one another's opposites. While Justine tries to remain virtuous, which only brings her ill luck, Juliette wallows in vice, which earns her ample rewards and success. Early on, Juliette is taught that she must follow the principle, 'de s'amuser sans se soucier, aux dépens de quiconque' ('to have a good time without a care, at the expense of whomever'). She witnesses and takes part in everything from sexual orgies and torture to murder and cannibalism. She inflicts pain on and victimises others in a spirit of *l'art pour l'art*: long enough have human beings killed one another out of rage and necessity; it is time to kill for pure enjoyment and with a sense of taste.

Of course, Sade's literary characters are contrived. His protagonists are preposterously impervious to physical and mental change: whatever is done to virtuous Justine she seems invulnerable and completely incapable of learning. Despite repeated abuse, her body remains intact and her mind fixed in an original state of ignorance and innocence. Sade must gloss over the materiality of Justine's character; her corporeality must be ignored as long as possible to prolong the pleasure of pain. Similarly, Juliette, the mirror image of virtuous Justine, must become totally unscrupulous, shameless and self-controlled. Justine and Juliette are ironic characters. Their unrealistic bodies and minds are commentaries: everything, even the laws of materiality, must be subordinated to the principle of pleasure. In a chapter entitled *Juliette oder Aufklärung und Moral* ('Juliette or enlightenment and morality'), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1988) refuse to see Juliette in Freudian terms as a victim of an unsublimated or regressed libido. Instead they take her appreciation of cruelty to be purely intellectual: *amor intellectualis diaboli*, the joy of defeating civilization with its own weapons. Juliette, on this view, acts in the spirit of enlightened self-mastery. By freely choosing to act upon and enact her

inclinations, Juliette demonstrates how the autocratic subject that is the ideal of the Enlightenment subjugates nature and how this may not lead to morality in the conventional sense, but to immoral cynicism. Are Kant and Sade twins?

Jacques Lacan (1966) commented on the connection between Sade and Kant. As Lacan's exegete Žižek (1999) explains: 'the Kantian Law is a superego agency that sadistically enjoys the subject's deadlock, his inability to meet its inexorable demands'. At the core of Kant's sadism we find his deliberate separation of 'the good' as principle and quasi-object from subjective emotions of 'feeling good'. It is only if we perform good acts out of principle that they are morally good. If we perform the same acts because they make us *feel* good they are not moral, according to most readings of Kant. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that cruelty is—or, at least, can be—a conscious choice, as in the case of Juliette, and that Kant offers no reason (at least no non-metaphysical reason) why the enlightened individual should not choose cruelty. With Horkheimer and Adorno, cynicism is a quintessential version of rationality. With Lacan and Žižek, by contrast, the entire issue of morality and cruelty belongs to the realm of the unconscious.

According to Marx and Freud, the unconscious and the rational are not mere opposites: they are connected, for example because the unconscious can spawn ideas that seem rational. The unconscious can trick consciousness, thus producing the curious phenomenon called 'false consciousness' (a phrase that Karl Marx apparently never used himself). In a letter to Franz Mehring, Friedrich Engels writes: 'Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, but this is a false consciousness. The real motivating forces impelling him remain unknown to him, or it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or specious motives' (Engels 1968: 97). Elusive forces create conscious thoughts that very well can

turn out to be false. Leaving aside the question of which criteria are used to determine if a thought or motive is false, the cure for false consciousness (and ideology more generally) is to awaken the sleepwalkers. The truth will set them free. True to their European Enlightenment heritage, Engels and other Marxists believed in the liberating force of reason.

But what if the sufferers of false consciousness are wide awake, yet refuse to make any changes? What if they are fully aware of their motives, their own false consciousness and the ideological process, yet cynically continue to act in accordance with all of them? Cynicism—by which here is meant not Diogenes' philosophy but the attitude of 'realism' common among 'decision-makers'—according to Peter Sloterdijk (1984: 192), is 'enlightened false consciousness'. It is a consciousness that 'no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology' and whose falseness is 'already reflexively buffered' (ibid: 193). Reason, which ever since Socrates, and again since the Enlightenment, has been considered the panacea for false consciousness, no longer takes. Instead, reason is digested into 'a reflexively buffered false consciousness' (ibid). The cynic, a 'borderline melancholic' who exhibits a 'certain elegant bitterness' (ibid: 192), can indulge in the kind of nihilistic irony that treats with contempt anyone who believes in reform and progress.

In her book on secularism and public life in Turkey, Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002) combines Sloterdijk's discussion of cynicism with Lacan's concept of 'fantasy' (*fantasme*), which refers to a subject's relationship to his or her objects of desire. Fantasies are defensive. They shield the subject from traumas, rejections, failures etc. in that they mask the emptiness of the object of desire and the impossibility of ever attaining fulfilment through this object. Navaro-Yashin (ibid) points out that an awareness of the phantasmic nature of fantasies does nothing to decrease the subject's attachment to them. Not only that: as Lacan argues, fantasies are

constitutive of reality and subjectivities. Navaro-Yashin takes the relationship of Turkish

citizens to the Turkish state to be a case in point. Although Turkish citizens, be they secularists

or Islamists, profess to have no illusions about the corrupt nature of Turkish politics, their

attachment to the political game remains passionate. Enlightened false consciousness à la

Sloterdijk and fantasy à la Lacan are paradoxical fusions of insight and denial, of futility and

activity.

Excursus: consciousness and the absurd

The difference between Sloterdijk's and Lacan's concepts is that the former rides high on the

back of the conscious and rational—the subject knows but does anyway—while the latter clings

to the dark underbelly of the unconscious and irrational (a difference that Navaro-Yashin does

not engage with). Only the former, that is Sloterdijk's enlightened false consciousness, can

produce nihilistic irony because, for nihilistic irony to materialize, there must be intention, at

least if we define irony, as we did earlier, as the dissonance between intended and ostensible

meanings. And intention is commonly thought of as a matter of conscious premeditation.

But is this a plausible description of intention? A radical materialist ontology, which relies

entirely on the results of brain research, will question the idea that there is such a thing as

deliberate intention. Consciousness, reflection, intentions etc. are functions of the matter that is

our brain, only a small part of which, however, ever enters our consciousness. Even less is

turned into declarative knowledge, that is, knowledge that can be recalled in the form of

episodes, meanings and statements. Various factors determine what we are conscious of:

attention, pre-existing patterns of recognition, dynamic interactions within the brain, non-linear

outcomes of such interactions etc. (see, e.g., Singer 2005). Ought we conclude that the rational

40

self is just a figment of our imagination and that there can be no such thing as an *enlightened* false consciousness? Radical materialism dissolves the dissonance between, on one hand, consciousness and the unconscious, and, on the other, materiality and consciousness: human beings are matter existing in the unconscious.

But consider Sisyphus, who received the divine punishment of eternal life filled with everlasting, ceaseless effort. Bracing himself with hands and feet, Sisyphus raises a monstrous stone to the top of a hill, but just before he can heave it over onto the other side, it becomes too heavy for him and comes rolling down again and Sisyphus, sweating and covered in dust, has to start over with the never-ending task of pushing the boulder uphill. In *The myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus takes a closer look at Sisyphus. He sees how every grain of the stone, every mineral flake of the hill, is a world to Sisyphus, how his fate and his rock belong to him. Camus asks us to imagine Sisyphus happy. But Camus also watches Sisyphus, 'the proletarian of the gods', as he climbs down the hill, having time to think about the pointlessness of his task and the meaninglessness of his life. Sisyphus knows what awaits him. He knows that his fate is sealed, that his existence is absurd. The tragedy of Sisyphus lies in his self-awareness, in his being conscious. Would Sisyphus, who, according to Camus, is anyone, be better off if he lacked consciousness? Ought we take as our motto the conclusion drawn by Fyodor Dostoevsky's (2010: 10) underground man that 'consciousness is a disease'? Should we embrace Emil Cioran's (1973: 31) point of view: 'Better to be an animal than a man, an insect than an animal, a plant than an insect, and so on. Salvation? Whatever diminishes the kingdom of consciousness and compromises its supremacy'?

The absurdity of the human condition is born from a collision between the human longing for things to make sense and 'the unreasonable silence of the world', writes Camus (1955: 28).

The absurd resides neither in human beings nor in the world but arises from their juxtaposition. More specifically, the absurd emerges from the insight that the contradiction between the human quest for meaning, clarity and security, on one side, and the meaninglessness, obscurity and insecurity of the world, on the other, will never be resolved. The ultimate absurdity manifests itself when it becomes clear that humanity itself is part of an indifferent universe. Being becomes unbearably light (to use Milan Kundera's phrase).

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel (1971: 720) introduces an alternative definition of absurdity: 'when we take this view and recognise what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded'. Nagel suggests that the absurd is a human capacity: 'By feigning a nebula's-eye view, we illustrate the capacity to see ourselves without presuppositions, as arbitrary, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants of the world, one of countless possible forms of life' (Nagel 1971: 725). As such, 'humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand […] the view is at once sobering and comical' (ibid: 720).

Romantic irony

What Camus and Nagel call the absurd bears a family resemblance to what Immanuel Kant called 'transcendental'. Kant defined the transcendental as a perspective that considers objective reality and the subjective construction of reality together, as one. Kant's definition of the transcendental was picked up by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, only that he thought of the

transcendental as the realization that the relationship between self and world in fact is a relationship that the self has to itself, because both that which is real and that which is subjective are housed in the self. Another German thinker, Friedrich Schlegel, applied to aesthetic theory Fichte's rendition of transcendence as a relationship within the self. The transcendental was now the conflict between creativity and criticism, which takes place inside the creator (the poet, the philosopher, the artist etc.): creation, including self-creation, is limited by criticism, including self-criticism. But rather than viewing criticism as crippling and discouraging, Schlegel saw in criticism—and especially in self-criticism—a process of liberation. Through self-criticism, the self achieves freedom from its creations and from itself. This freedom, this distance, is what Schlegel called irony. Furthermore, to be ironic, the work of art needs to make the creator, his or her self-criticism and the process of creation part of the finished product.

When, in the 1970s and 1980s, the genre of ethnography turned ironic in Schlegel's sense, Clifford Geertz (1988: 71) lamented that anthropologists suffered from 'epistemological hypochondria'. He diagnosed this condition as being caused by a loss of confidence in facticity. A century and a half earlier, Søren Kierkegaard, in his master's thesis, had complained that Schlegel's irony signalled a loss of confidence in any sort of commitment. The Danish thinker saw in irony a loss of principles, purpose and meaningfulness. Kierkegaard wrote that 'the ironist is a person without values. Everything is equally valid, i.e. without difference, and therefore indifferent. The ironist is a person who takes no stance, no responsibility and has no sense of community—in short: he is a person who suffers from world-weariness because he really has nothing to live for' (Kierkegaard 1841: 291; my translation). What Kierkegaard finds appalling in Schlegel's romantic ironism is its moral relativism and non-committalism.

Schlegelian irony, however, is not just relativist. It is about a particular conflict, namely the conflict between creative engagement and critical detachment, between commitment and, what we nowadays call, relativism. A modern ironist, Richard Rorty, spun his political philosophy around this conflict. Rorty valued anything that provides critical detachment and fuels relativism. Yet Rorty was committed to liberalism, which, he argued, depends on our creative engagement with it. Rorty wrote (1989: 61) that liberal ironists like himself are aware that the language of their moral deliberation is contingent, that their morality is Freudian (that is, conditional) in nature, that they are entangled in the webs of a cultural community and that their commitment to this community is contingent. The ironist is at heart relativist, nominalist and historicist. She will never be able to shake the doubts about her commitments: 'The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe' (ibid: 75). One way of addressing this worry is by getting around, by making new acquaintances, by meeting strange people (ibid: 80), for which the best media are novels and ethnographies (ibid: 94). If the ironist, on top of everything, is an intellectual, she will cherish her doubts and stay clear of metaphysical solutions.

How then does Rorty make sense of his commitment to liberalism? He offers a single motive for committing to liberalism: liberals abhor cruelty. This definition of liberalism Rorty borrows from Judith Shklar (1982), who uses the example of Montaigne as a critic of Machiavelli. The latter advised that it might be prudent to commit cruel acts for the sake of public benefit, thus disconnecting political reason from private morality. Montaigne rejected the separation of public and private morality. What Montaigne, Shklar and Rorty, but not Machiavelli, object to is using cruelty as a political instrument when cruelty is unacceptable in private life. Why then is cruelty unacceptable in the first place? This is Rorty's (1989: xv) reply:

'For liberal ironists, there is no answer to the question "Why not be cruel?"' In the absence of an answer, the case for liberalism and ironism seems thus to depend on individual inclinations and proclivities: either one finds pleasure in or is unmoved by cruelty or one finds no pleasure in and is appalled by it. Cruelty, on this view, is a matter of individual dispositions. While the intuition that cruelty must not be tolerated may be valuable, as ultimate argument for liberalism it seems rather limited.

Liberal irony

Rorty tried to relax the tension between his commitment to liberalism, on one hand, and to relativism (ironism), on the other, by admitting to being ethnocentrically entangled in the webs of his own culture and to simultaneously oppose normative ethnocentrism. The accident of his birth had made him part of a certain tradition and culture. This tradition and culture—luckily for him, one can assume—also includes ironic relativism. To clarify Rorty's argument it is helpful to read his contribution to a debate with Geertz. In this debate, Rorty (1986) explains that liberal society employs and empowers two kinds of agents: agents of love and agents of social justice. Agents of love—anthropologists and other connoisseurs of diversity—sympathise with, learn from and sometimes even love those who are excluded from full citizenship. By placing their behaviour in the context of unfamiliar beliefs and desires the agents of love make it hard for those who enjoy full citizenship to ignore these not-yet-citizens. Once those who had been excluded are included, however, the agents of social justice—guardians of universality like medical professionals, policemen, judges etc.—must treat them like everyone else, that is with total impartiality (or, as one, in accordance with Rorty's choice of words, could put it, without love). Ironic relativism did not figure in Rorty's debate with Geertz, but in his book

Contingency, irony and solidarity (1989) Rorty explains that irony and relativism are a private matter of aesthetics that cannot be allowed to spill into the public domain of the polis. As private subjects, and as citizens, we are all encouraged to learn from the agents of love. As public agents of social justice we must adhere to universal values and apply rules even-handedly. Rorty obviously reiterates Kant's (1784) differentiation between the public and private use of reason. As a scholar, for example, my right to criticise and relativize should be unlimited. As a public servant, on the other hand, my freedom of expression, according to Kant, is necessarily limited by the rules I must follow in the common interest of the citizenry.[v] Declaring irony and relativism to be a private matter, which, if nothing goes wrong, will inspire the powerful in liberal society to grant full citizenship to previously marginalised groups of people, arguably lessens the political significance of ironic relativism. Another conceptual context must be found for irony to play a key role in liberal society.

Rorty may be the best-known advocate of ironic liberalism but he is not the only one. Nigel Rapport, in the preceding article, also argues for ironic liberalism; only that Rapport, instead of turning his back on essentialist or ultimate justifications for liberalism, as Rorty claims to do, develops an ontologically sustained defence for ironic liberalism. Rapport insists that only the individual human organism and the sum total of these organisms, i.e. the human species, are ontological nodes of the human condition. Only they are 'real' (*verum est ens*). Human groups, by contrast, are culturally constructed and thus not real in the ontological sense (*verum quia factum*). Rapport does not deny that individuals can and do partake in fantasies of community; he just wants to refute that such fantasies are ontologically or morally relevant. In particular, Rapport focuses his critique on the fantasy that individual value derives from group

identity. He quotes Martha Nussbaum (1996: 133) to voice his objection to this kind of collective fantasy:

> The accident of being born a Sri Lankan, or a Jew, or a female, or an African-American, or a poor person, is just that—an accident of birth. It is not and should not be taken as a determinant of moral worth. Human personhood, by which I mean the possession of practical reason and other basic moral capacities, is the source of our moral worth, and this worth is equal.

An anthropological reflex, if by 'anthropology' we mean social and cultural anthropology, is to point out the tremendous importance and profound consequences that the accident of birth has for the individual. We are thrown into the midst of the world without deciding when and where to come into being. We learn one or more languages and dialects. We learn to differentiate between that which is pleasing and that which is revolting and between what to condone and what to condemn. What kind of languages and dialects we learn, what we find agreeable and repulsive and what we condone and condemn is a matter of temporal and spatial contingency. This when and where of our existence is as much part of our facticity as the viscosity of our body fluids and the density of our bones. Acknowledging the importance of our thrownness will not deter most anthropologists from agreeing with the normative statement that however significant the accident of birth may be it ought not determine the moral worth of a person. The project of social and cultural anthropology is after all humanist inasmuch as its practitioners try to find humanity even in what they themselves acknowledge to be inhumane attitudes and practices. Nothing human is (in principle) alien to them. Anthropologists often ensure their

students that this is just a matter of methodological, not of moral, relativism—as if methodology and morality are separate spheres of truth production.

Rapport has no patience for relativism, at least not if it involves references to collective identities and institutions. His focus lies on universal morality, which he takes to emerge from the connection between the individual human being and the human species. Matters of historical contingency like imagined communities should not be allowed to obscure this cosmopolitan morality, a key feature of which is the right not to belong. Human beings are separate from one another and they have the capacity and should have the right to distance themselves from their context. It is here irony comes into play: irony is a process of alienation, including self-alienation, according to Rapport. Because he places irony in a political, and not like Rorty in an aesthetic, context, Rapport also considers irony to be a liberal virtue in the immediate sense of citizens' ability to critically reflect on collective identities and the political process. Private alienation brings public benefit.

Excursus: alienation and the absurd

So what is alienation? For alienation to occur there must be a relation, for example between self and other or between self and world. Alienation is a type of relation rather than a non-relation. It is the kind of relationship between self and world that Diogenes of Sinope referred to when he coined the expression 'cosmopolitan': instead of striving for the privilege of being a citizen of a polis like Athens he declared himself a citizen of the universe or of nature (see Stade 2007 and Rapport and Stade 2007). Diogenes was alienated *from* and hence *in relation to* others. Kant addressed the double bind of relation and alienation in terms of *ungesellige Geselligkeit*, unsociable sociability. Human beings, thought Kant, cannot stand each other but are also not

able to let each other be. They are sociable by will but unsociable by nature: 'Man wants harmony; but nature knows better what is good for a species: she wants discord' (Kant, *Idea for a general history*, A 395). Jean-Paul Sartre devoted a theatre play, usually called *No exit* in English, to this existential condition. Two women and a man have to spend eternity in a room together. In perpetuity, they will live in the gaze of the others, and with the awareness of that gaze, be suspended in unsociable sociability: *l'enfer, c'est les autres* ('hell is other people'). Even when a door to the room opens unexpectedly, none of the three protagonists trusts the sudden freedom. So nobody leaves.

The type of small-scale social settings that anthropologists used to conduct their field studies in often resembles the existentially closed space in Sartre's play. In such settings, the gaze of the other can constitute a form of 'ocular aggression', which, if powerful enough, can turn into the evil eye (Gilmore 1982: 197f). 'Simply to be "seen" in these societies conveys powerful erotic overtones', sight itself becomes libidinized (ibid). Hiding from sight, seclusion and concealment libidinizes exposure. The sociable and the unsociable, both of which emanate from the presence of the other, are a source of both terror and desire. As in Sartre's play, there seems to be no escape from this condition and even when a door suddenly opens—in the case of small-scale social settings towards, say, self-chosen social exclusion or escape into urban anonymity—many hesitate to walk through it.

Large-scale societies also know closed rooms and situations. Such situations often seem 'Kafkaesque': an individual finds herself in a situation in which impartial and dispassionate actors, like Kant's public servants and Rorty's agents of social justice, appear as obscure and indifferent as the universe which, according to Camus, collides with our search for meaning. Kafkaesque situations, however, are not just absurd in Camus' sense. Kafka's protagonists are

49

accused of being guilty of something; it is unclear of what. Their sense of absurdity and alienation is imbued with a feeling of guilt. Can irony bring relief?

World-mocking irony and existential cosmopolitanism

Rapport and Rorty ask us to abandon ourselves to the benign indifference of the liberal state. Rapport addresses the individual as citizen, who has the capacity to be alienated from a communal sense of belonging and from the political process. Rorty treats the individual either as agent and citizen or as non-citizen waiting for an agent of love to speak up on her behalf. Agents of love—anthropologists, historians, novelists, artists etc.—are in a position to use irony for the sake of promoting relativism. But Rorty's lovers of diversity are unable to protect anyone from being subjected to a Kafkaesque farce orchestrated by agents of universalism. Rapport would seem to have a more immediate access to the question of Kafkaesque absurdity because he reckons with alienation and self-alienation, which can be said to be both a potential gateway to and a possible outcome of absurdity. But his argument remains entangled in the social: alienation is the right of the individual not to belong to a group and to declare his or her solidarity with humankind. Missing is the existential dimension of the Kafkaesque, that is, the clash between the human quest for meaning and the silence of the cosmic and human orders.

The relationship between on one hand, meaning and appearances and, on the other, reality and absurdity is, according to Joyce Carol Oates (1972: 14), the great theme of Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida*, which shows 'the annihilation of appearances by reality, but the "reality" achieved is a nihilistic vision' (ibid: 12). The play is set in the Trojan War and the cast includes most of the Illiad's main characters. But instead of retelling Homer's heroic story, Shakespeare turns it into 'the modern, ironic, nihilistic spectacle of man diminished, not exalted'

(ibid). The play defies classification. 'That it can be a comical satire to one person, a dark comedy to another, a tragedy to another, and a heroic farce to yet another makes clear the fundamental ambiguity of the work' (ibid: 33). It ends without anyone being redeemed, any ideal left unmocked and any hope remaining unscathed—which is why it was Heinrich Heine's favourite play by Shakespeare. Heine (1993: 29), the nineteenth-century virtuoso of irony, called *Troilus and Cressida* a tragedy full of 'jubilant bitterness' and 'world-mocking irony'. He compared it to us seeing the muse of tragedy dancing 'pert laughter on her pale lips and death in her heart' (ibid). The dissonance that is contained in expressions like 'jubilant bitterness' and 'world-mocking irony' take us beyond the Enlightenment and cynicism. The pert laughter on the pale lips of the muse is not that of Socratic, nihilistic or liberal irony. It is absurd in Camus' and Nagel's sense of the word: life goes on without deliverance from absurdity.

The coincidence of existential irony and existential cosmopolitanism in the mythical figure of Diogenes of Sinope—and the question of irony and cosmopolitanism more generally—calls attention to the contradictions between realism and nominalism, objectivity and subjectivity, essentialism and constructivism, universalism and relativism, consciousness and unconsciousness, the human and non-human etc. The ontological turn in anthropology is as unlikely to dissolve these contradictions as previous centuries of human reflection. A dissonant approach to ontology, on the other hand, is well suited to facilitate the reconciliation of the two anthropologies. The human capacity for existential irony and existential cosmopolitanism, which involves the dissonances of alienation and absurdity, directs the gaze of social and cultural anthropologists beyond the social and cultural, at the same time as it alerts philosophical anthropologists to the social and cultural contexts from which irony and cosmopolitanism are born. We have to think of reflection and being, and of the view from nowhere and the view from

51

somewhere, as two pitches that create a dissonance we need to emancipate with further

exploration.

Discussion

NIGEL RAPPORT responds to RONALD STADE:

Our understandings of irony lead us emphasize different qualities, Ronald: your emphasis is existential and how irony detaches, while mine is political and how irony might engage. Your argument also runs on two planes, the ironic and the cosmopolitan, and urges an understanding of how they cross-cut at the point of existentialism.

You begin by distinguishing between sociocultural anthropology and philosophical anthropology: while the former is concerned with a comparison of cultural traditions and social institutionalism, the latter concerns itself with the human as a singular unifying concept and how the diversities of everyday lives may play out sub specie aeternitatis. I think we agree that we would like our anthropologies to break down any such distance, between the so-called sociocultural and philosophical. It is time, as you put it, for 'a second reflexive turn, which, as part of a wider ontological turn, will explore the human capacity to reflect'. Irony instantiates this capacity to reflect, and its study will be a beginning on a road that returns questions of human being to empirical studies of social and cultural differences. The objective, as you see it, Ronald, is to arrive at an appreciation of the way in which, more than other types, 'existential irony' (as with 'existential cosmopolitanism') lends itself to an 'emancipatory dissonance' that may give rise to new 'sonorous' contexts of human being.

I think I am more distrusting of contexts. They give off the whiff of ghettoes, inviting a gaze that limits and coerces what exists within. It is as when Bhikhu Parekh (1998:206) urges that 'human beings are culturally embedded' and that 'cultures are not options', and therefore a policy of multiculturalism must define (read 'confine') individuals in terms of the group (ethnic,

religious) in which they were born. I feel nauseous at this 'contextualization'. This would also seem to be at the core of the dispute that would distance the sociocultural and the philosophical as against drawing them together: On the one hand there is Thomas Nagel's recognition of a human capacity to 'feign a nebula's-eye view', to 'see ourselves without presuppositions', and to 'step back and survey ourselves, and the lives to which we are committed, with detached (sobering) amazement, at their arbitrariness and idiosyncrasy as one of possibly countless forms of life'. On the other hand there is Yael Navaro-Yashin pointing out that an awareness of the phantasmic nature of (Turkish) cultural constructions does nothing to decrease our subjects' attachment to them: fantasies shield us from traumas, rejections, failures, from the emptiness of human desire, and are thus significantly constitutive of our social realities and individual subjectivities. Is this an insuperable theoretical barrier (between a purported human capacity and an observed sociocultural habituality)?

In your careful argument, Ronald, you typologize irony as a means of disentangling the human impulses to embrace arbitrariness or absurdity or dissonance as against embracing phantasy and habitude. *Socratic* irony is strategic: pretending to be ignorant and asking seemingly naive questions in order to reveal the folly of an interlocutor and to demonstrate one's possession of superior knowledge. Out of this grew the *existential* irony of Diogenes who undercut a Socratic participation in dialogic exchange that is forbidden to outsiders (barbarians, slaves, women) by insisting that the individual who is alienated from a sociocultural environment is conscious nevertheless of the entirety of the world s/he inhabits: nature, the planet, the universe. *Nihilistic* irony dismisses all notions of order and knowledge in the human life, however, except the knowledge that life is brief, death inevitable, and all interim projects and claims are 'therefore' meaningless. This enabled the Marquis de Sade to imagine a space of

54

intellectual, emotional and moral invulnerability or autocracy beyond quotidian engagements and commitments where anything was possible including indiscriminate cruelty and 'criminality'. *Romantic* irony accepts that between objective reality and subjective construction lies an abyss, that any absolute knowledge is impossible, but also urges recognition of the body as the site at which any notion of either resides: what is real (or transcendent) and what is subjective are both lodged in the self—and hence must both be lived as kinds of knowledge (Fichte). At the very least this reveals a human potential and even proclivity to act critically towards the worlds and selves we create, to distance ourselves from our creations and engagements; such criticism is a liberation, whereby we might free ourselves from our commitment even to our passions (Schlegel). *Liberal* irony (according to Rorty) is, then, an awareness of the contingent, relative nature of any discursive claim, whether to scientific knowledge or moral. However such an awareness is also a doubt: 'Why is *this* my tribe?'. Hence, the liberal ironist hopes to eschew ethnocentrism in a society whose normative arrangements predispose towards tolerance and diversity.

There is an historical development between Socratic, existential, nihilistic, romantic and liberal ironies, you argue, just as there is between existential, political and social cosmopolitanisms, and yet something key inhabits that existential moment that overlaps both irony and cosmopolitanism. Here is the insight, shared by Nagel as well as Diogenes, that while cultural normativity is arbitrary and exclusionary, and all claims to 'meaning', 'clarity' and 'security' made from within a particular community are situated and contingent, still one does not, cannot, disengage from life. Absurdly, one goes on living an arbitrary life, albeit that one's strivings are meaningless. This insight is at once both 'philosophical' and 'sociocultural', and demonstrates the shortsightedness of that distinction. It also calls into question the place of

culture as foundational. *Everything is absurd*, including culture, including liberalism, cynicism, nihilism, romanticism and notions of the transcendent and the future. All human meaning— including embracing meaninglessness—and all imagination, anticipation and aspiration is negated by the intractable, 'unreasonable silence of the universe' (Camus). I understand you as saying, Ronald, that the 'dissonance' of such irony is at the same time a place to begin a truer appreciation of the human-in-the-cultural.

My beginning also concerns the limits of culture: 'Culture and reason are antithetical', as Ernest Gellner affirmed (1992:2). He elaborated:

> 'A collectivity united in a belief is a culture. That is what the term means.
> More particularly, a collectivity united in a false belief is a culture. Truths,
> especially demonstrable truths, are available to all and sundry, and do not
> define any continuity of faith. But errors, especially dramatic errors, are
> culture-specific. They do tend to be the badges of community and loyalty.
> Assent to an absurdity is an intellectual rite de passage, a gateway to the
> community defined by that commitment to that conviction' (Gellner 1995:6).

This is the reason, too, why there is no community that is 'not worth resigning from'. These are not Gellner's words but George Steiner's (1997:237): 'There is no community of love, no family, no interest, caste, profession or social class not worth resigning from'. I find Steiner's reasoning to be commensurate with Gellner's. 'A true thinker, a truth-thinker, a scholar', Steiner explains, 'must know that no nation, no body politic, no creed, no moral ideal and necessity, be it that of human survival, *is worth a falsehood*, a willed self-deception or the manipulation of a

text' (1997:321, my emphasis). And yet, this is *entailed* by community. Belonging entails an abstention from free thought and a disinterested pursuit of justice because of the myths on which cultural community is founded: community belonging embodies the sleep of reason, and mystique and mendacity, and the use of force to establish its internal normativity and its continuing external boundedness. Every community will end up behaving unacceptably towards both truth and the truth-seeker, Steiner concludes (1997:322), and hence 'the locus of truth' will always remain 'extraterritorial'. And compare Gellner:

> 'Cognitive relativism is nonsense, moral relativism is tragic. (…) Valid knowledge ignores and does not engender frontiers. One simply cannot understand our shared social condition unless one starts from the indisputable fact that genuine knowledge of nature is possible and has occurred, and has totally transformed the terms of reference in which human societies operate' (1995:8).

This is the beginning of my anthropology. True knowledge, scientific knowledge, provides life with meaning.

I recognise that this last statement can appear paradoxical since the link between knowledge and meaning is not a necessary one. Let me unpack it a little. True knowledge of the universe and of humanity's place within it brings with it extra measures of control. The effectiveness of science and its global diffusion—the central facts of our time, in Gellner's estimation (1973:72)—thus bring in their wake not only our potential liberation from material want but also the possibility of morally decent behaviour—our liberation from tyranny.

'Mobility, egalitarianism and free choice of identity have better prospects in the modern world than they had in the past', as Gellner asserts (1993:3). We are able to exert control not only on the brute facts of our material universe—how a field might be made more fertile; how a bacterium can be rendered less harmful—but also upon the 'facts' of our constructed, symbolic universe—our codes of propriety, exchange, affiliation, differentiation, socialization, correction, even our codes of worship and aesthetic appreciation. *We can regulate culture and we can regulate ecology alike, once we know their true workings*.

This application of scientific knowledge and this regulation is for the sake of the betterment of our species, our humanity, and the manifestation of that humanity in individual human beings. Humanity exists in individuality. Knowledge allows us the better to control the environing conditions of an individual human life. Beyond humanity, we might also extend our beneficence—our knowledge and control, our sympathy—to other species and their individual instantiations, as enjoying equally the right to existence within the universal ecosystem that is our own.

What can be understood as 'control over the environing conditions of an individual human life' is increasing the space for free expression. *Knowledge assists in making the world safe for the free play of individual expression, for the fulfilment of the innate capacities that an individual embodiment hosts.* This includes freedom from ignorance, from nescience (from exterior claims to knowledge and authority on the basis of revelation or received tradition), and also freedom from the 'despotism of custom': from cultural conventions of arbitrary classification and categorization (say, concerning what is 'feminine', 'pure', 'pious' or 'shameful'); and freedom, too, from community entrapment: from belongings that are not the voluntary affiliations of an adult who knows always where the exits lie. I would wish my

58

anthropology to contribute to a world of personal freedom of this kind: free from the contingencies of poverty and disease, and free from the accident of birth that throws the individual into a life-world of its parents' choosing and, perhaps, a particular regime of communitarian norms. More knowledge means more potential control both over ignorance of how the material world works and over the social and cultural environment that might hinder the individual's free authorship of an identity.

But why is knowledge, control, health and opportunity *meaningful*? Or a benefit? Even if knowledge means control, why find this meaningful? What is powerful about your article, Ronald, is that you point out the ways in which this is not necessarily the case. One may still take a 'nebula's-eye view' (Thomas Nagel) and decide, with E. M. Cioran, that consciousness is an affliction and that only its diminished manifestations (in animals, insects and plants) are forms of salvation. We might take a 'nebula's-eye view' and decide to be sadistic, cruel, selfish, tyrannical, mendacious or simply contrarian and bloody-minded. Equally, there is no necessity to embrace freedom. An individual may prefer to abandon himself or her self to ignorance or to apathy, or to a 'phantasy of groupness', to a herd morality.

This was of course the topic of Nietzsche's (1993) discussion concerning the so-called slavish orientation of the religious believer, the member of an institutionalized congregation. But the theme is also touched upon by John Stuart Mill in his essay *On Liberty*, and I find his discussion instructive here. Liberty consists in doing what one desires, Mill begins (1963:221), and each individual is the proper guardian of his or her own health, whether bodily or mental or spiritual. Indeed, 'the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it' (Mill 1963:138). The domains of human freedom, Mill elaborates, are three. First,

inward consciousness: liberty of conscience, liberty of thought and feeling, freedom of opinion on all subjects. Second, tastes and pursuits: liberty to frame the plan of our life to suit our own characters and doing what we like so long as we do not harm others—never minding how foolish others see us. Third, combining with other individuals into groups and associations, if not forced or deceived, and of 'full' age. (Organised religion, Mill observes, tends towards hierarchy.) And yet, Mill argues, the principle of freedom does *not* extend to someone having the power to sell himself into slavery: 'It is not freedom, to be allowed to alienate his freedom' (1963:227). I have always found this conclusion of Mill's to be a strange one and containing contradiction. For masochism or a refusing of a responsibility for one's life must lie in the domain of personal taste, however foolish it might seem to others. I can imagine how Mill might have reached his contrary conclusion, however. For it can be seen to be doing harm to others to abjure one's responsibility as an adult: a parent, a voter and citizen, a creative mind with the capacity to extend the general store of human knowledge and control of the universe. Nevertheless, I would adjust Mill and say that it *is* within an individual's rights to seek to alienate his or her freedom and become a slave; but it is not within the rights of others to treat that individual as a slave: one may not reciprocate the desire of another to abandon themselves to slavery because in doing so one stops treating them as an end in themselves. Slavery is impossible as a general condition in a liberal society not because an individual cannot rightfully endeavour to enslave themselves (or kill themselves, for that matter) but because slavery entails becoming a means to another's end: one puts a slave to work; one tells a slave how to be. And a just, free, liberal society is, in Kant's phrasing, a 'kingdom of ends': every individual member of such a society is ever to be deemed an end in themselves. And here is where I find an answer to the question of why knowledge, control, health and opportunity are meaningful. I take

meaningfulness to be a fulfilled life in which an individual becomes the most he or she can be, or rather determines to be; for what he or she will do with his or her innate human capacities, how he or she will author world-views, a life-project, an identity, is part-and-parcel of that self-fulfilment. A meaningful life is one where the individual fulfils, to the extent of their capacities, what they would wish themselves to become. This might include becoming as masochistic as they can. And appropriately, this is a point with which Mill *can* now be said to concur. It is, after all, in our *freedom* to be able to 'pursue our own good in our own way', and the masochist defines 'good' for themselves in terms of pursuing their self-abasement. Hence, Mill's celebrated conclusion:

> 'If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. (...) The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error' (Mill 1963:142).

In the meaningful individual life Mill neatly discerns an ultimate meaningfulness for humanity as a whole.

Where does this leave the absurd ironist, or the cynic or sadist or contrarian? For these might be construed as other forms of self-abandonment; not the same as slavery but commensurate. On the one hand, I would argue, the absurd ironist, or the cynic or sadist or contrarian are to be deemed free to be as they choose: to be the author of their own identities. They might not assist in the ironic project of liberal self-defence such as I have outlined in my article, and they may indeed come to be part of the problem: of the illiberal threat to individual freedom that I have sought to counter and neutralise. But even if they were to place themselves beyond the bounds of what George Kateb phrased a self-education in liberal democracy—and refuse the bounds of good taste or politesse—they are not beyond the reach of laws that would enshrine others' freedom. The cynic and nihilist, the sadist and Machiavellian, the religious fundamentalist and the totalitarian, all of whom may refuse the 'whimsical irony' I have promoted (where one's absolute beliefs and desires are not taken absolutely seriously in regard to others' rights to absolutes), *still find that the domain of their freedom is regulated by the liberal state*, so that their sadism, cynicism, nihilism, and so on, impinges as little as possible on the life-project and world-views of no one beyond themselves.

Not every irony is the liberal irony that I would advocate, certainly; but I still feel justified in arguing that the 'whimsical' self-consciousness, self-examination, self-reliance, self-control and self-displacement that I have outlined does nevertheless offer itself as a virtue for a liberal society, and as an important part of its self-defence.

RONALD STADE responds to NIGEL RAPPORT:

Nigel, the difference between our approaches to irony and anthropology hinges on our distinct interpretations of the Enlightenment. You commit to the Enlightenment tenets that 'genuine

knowledge of nature is possible', that this 'knowledge allows us the better to control the environing conditions of an individual human life' and that the accumulation and application of this kind of knowledge facilitates a particular kind of morality, which, in political terms, consists of liberal virtues. Critics of the Enlightenment project point out that scientific knowledge has been used for what most of us would consider evil and obscene purposes and that 'genuine knowledge of nature' and 'control of environing conditions' also has entailed objectifying human beings by viewing them as nothing but biochemical systems. Lethal experiments on human beings, conducted in German concentration camps and by the Japanese army's Unit 731, were not sadistic in the sense of inflicting harm for its own sake. They were rationally instrumental in that they were performed to study war-related health problems, like gangrene and venereal diseases, which killed more troops than deadly traumas in battle situations. Cruelty had a rational end and human beings were used for this end.

To sever the connection between the Enlightenment and cruelty, Immanuel Kant introduced the metaphysical principle of human beings as ends in themselves, which you, Nigel, adopt as one of your basic maxims. Kant argues that, as rational beings, humans have the capacity to autonomously determine their purpose and goals. Therefore, autonomy is the foundation of human dignity, according to Kant. The conclusion he draws is that rational beings must be treated as ends in themselves. To me this conclusion is neither stringent nor compelling. In part because I reject the idea that human dignity ought to depend on criteria like autonomy and rationality (what about human beings who, for example because of some disability, lack autonomy and rationality: do they also lack dignity?). An even more fundamental objection to Kant's metaphysics of morality is that modern science—what Ernest Gellner refers to as our 'genuine knowledge of nature'—suggests that our cultural belief in the autonomy and rationality

of the human subject is rather misguided. The more we learn about the functioning of the human brain, the less convincing is the Enlightenment story of autonomous, rational human beings.

Hence, I raise, on one hand, the issue of the unconscious and its entanglement with human consciousness and, on the other, the reality of nihilism and cynicism. Actually existing forms and practices of cynicism demonstrate that the Enlightenment project of morality through (metaphysical) knowledge is easily thwarted. The cynic knows very well that his or her decisions will cause harm, but takes them anyway. To be enlightened has no positive moral consequences in the case of cynicism. Actually existing 'liberal' societies—i.e. societies with a comparatively high degree of institutionalised individualism—are cynical as well. Every day, individuals are laid off, find themselves caught in the webs of bureaucratic rationality, are turned away at the border, are imprisoned etc. Just like metaphysical morality, institutionalised individualism does not put an end to power asymmetries. It alleviates; it does not cure (because power asymmetry, as Michel Foucault pointed out many times, is structural, producing order, and therefore ought not be thought of in moral terms).

Nigel, your arguments for the virtues of irony and politesse, but also for the freedom to not belong, are as metaphysical as Kant's categorical imperative. The connection of the virtues you endorse to objective knowledge is historical rather than necessary. The two fundamental ambitions of the Enlightenment—objective knowledge and liberty—do not follow from each other. Objective knowledge does not necessarily bring about liberty (see my discussion of sadism and cynicism).

An alternative approach, which both of us engage with, is that of addressing the issue of human subjectivities and the individual perspective. Concepts like irony, alienation and absurdity belong to this context. The alienated perspective that feigns a 'nebula-eye's view'

coexists with the 'inauthentic' perspective (to use Heidegger's word) of being absorbed by everyday concerns without much reflection. The human capacity for self-displacement does not preclude existential immersion. The detached perspective, however, does resonate with the anthropological attitude of deliberately suspending one's beliefs and values in order to understand an other and to engage with this other in a polite manner. (As anthropologists we do this in an exemplary manner when we talk respectfully to torturers and *génocidaires*.) It would not do justice to the subtleties of your thoughts to summarise them as you wanting everyone to become more like fieldworking anthropologists, but perhaps this could serve as an easy-to-grasp image: the world would be a better place if everyone had a degree in anthropology (Attention: Irony!).

Nigel, our mutual interest in anthropology, history and literature seems to place us in the category that Richard Rorty calls 'agents of love'. What Rorty failed to see, however, is that 'agents of love'—anthropologists, historians, novelists—do not limit themselves to giving voice to the powerless. Agents of love scrutinise the agents of universalism as well. Anthropologists like you and me, however, no longer want to do this just for the sake of turning the universal into the particular (science into laboratories and scientists; the law into courtrooms and prisons; humanity into practice and bodies etc.). The rapprochement between philosophical and sociocultural anthropology requires us to take seriously the universal, for example by reopening the cold file of Cartesian dualism. Big questions await us: is it reasonable to label our geological age the Anthropocene? Do the natural sciences provide an exhaustive explanation for the phenomenon of human consciousness? If Enlightenment thinkers were correct and, as Gellner put it, 'a genuine knowledge of nature is possible and has occurred', what is the nature of the intelligibility of nature, for instance in mathematical terms? What is the relationship between

human evolution and human history? Need we find non-metaphysical moorings for morality and justice? Can we write ethnographies of institutionalised individualism? And so on. Knowing that I will be able to discuss anthropological topics of this kind with you, Nigel, gives me joy and sustains me.

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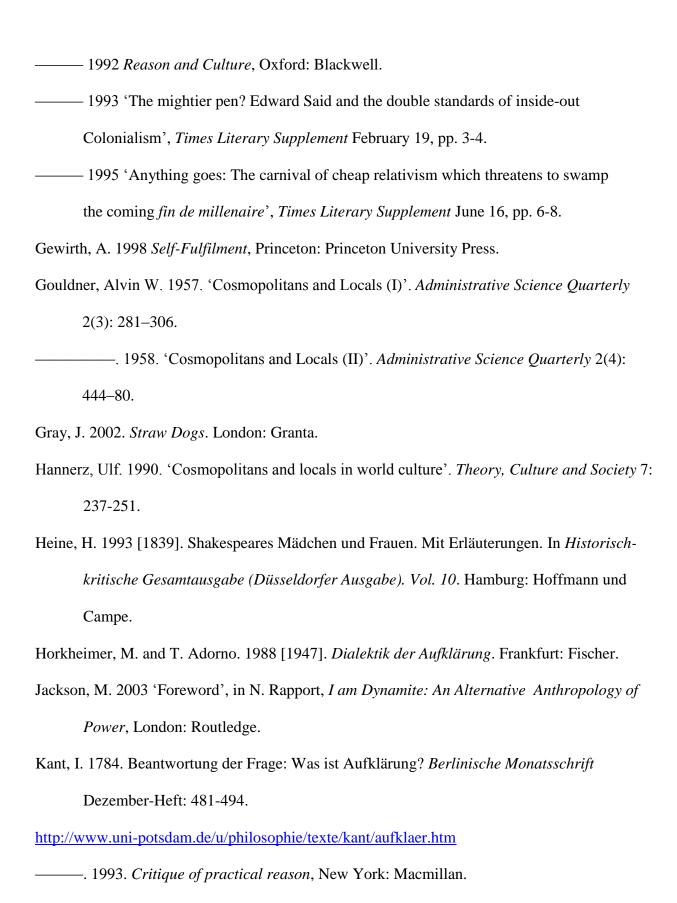
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[i] Quote from the *Dàodéjīng*, the founding text of Daoism. In ancient China, dogs made of grass (straw) were used as ritual objects. They were first adorned and then discarded and destroyed to

protect against epidemics and the heat. See Gray (2002) for an elaboration of the metaphorical description of human beings as straw dogs.

[ii] κρείττων; stronger, mightier, more excellent etc.

[iii] See Ribbeck (1876) and Vlastos (1987) on the original meaning and context of Socratic irony.

[iv] In Greek σπουδαιογέλοιον, *spoudaiogéloion*, a compound of spoudaîon, 'serious', and geloîon, 'laughable'. See Kindstrand, 1976: 47–8, on the concept of *spoudaiogéloion*.

[v] European university professors are most often both scholars and public servants, which keeps alive chronic dilemmas of, and conflicts over, academic freedom. At this point in history, the corporate logic of capitalism and ideology of public management requires European university professors to be public servants first and foremost—only that public servants now are supposed to be obedient, loyal and answerable to the leadership of the military- or Vatican-like organisation of the new university. The proposed privatisation of European universities is likely to make matters only worse.