

Jonathan Lear. *A Case for Irony*. With commentary by Cora Diamond, Christine M. Korsgaard, Richard Moran, and Robert A. Paul. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011. ISBN 9780674061453. Pp. xiv + 210. \$29.95.

You're likely to think of irony as a literary conceit, and perhaps also as a pathological trait of hyper-intellectual élites. This book, if you take it seriously and attend to it closely, has a good chance of overturning such views by convincing you that irony is, rather, an essential constituent of a life well-lived, a good proper to human flourishing.

A Case for Irony contains Jonathan Lear's two Tanner Lectures in Human Values, given at Harvard University in 2009, together with comments on those lectures by the four scholars named, together with Lear's responses to those comments. Reading the lectures together with their consequent back-and-forth provides a window into the means by which philosophical thought proceeds: challenge, response, request for clarification, suggestion of new distinctions, and so on. The Tanner lecture series was established in the late 1970s to "advance and reflect upon ... scholarly and scientific learning relating to human values," and it is prestigious, having been given by some of the most prominent humanists of the last three decades. Lear certainly belongs in their company: he teaches at the University of Chicago, and has written a great deal on broadly ethical topics in philosophy, and on the theory and practice of psychoanalysis.

What unifies Lear's work over the past twenty years is a concern with what we are and how we can learn to flourish. He thinks, following Kierkegaard, that becoming human is a difficult skill, and that each of us needs a good deal of help in learning it. Catholics should agree, and even though Lear is no Christian (he emphasizes that fact in this book), he has a deep understanding of the grammar of Christian thought, and deploys it to good effect in these lectures.

Lear's argument is that cultivating a capacity for irony and living the kind of irony-threaded life consequent upon such cultivation are essential to human flourishing, and are elements of its constitution. We are creatures, Lear thinks, aimed at irony, and if we fail to move along that track we lose an excellence appropriate to us and required for our flourishing. Everything depends here, of course, upon how irony is understood, and about this there is a special difficulty for Catholics aware of the history of Christian thought, because it is normal for us to classify irony (or, anyway, *ironia*) as a vice. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, understands it as one of the vices opposed to truth, and categorizes it with such things as lying, pretense, hypocrisy, and boasting. He defines the vicious kind of *ironia* as a belittling of oneself in a way opposed to truth, as, for example, if I were to write that I find it difficult to utter a lucid sentence in English. Boasting is the opposite of irony in this sense, and it is vicious for the same reason; I would practice it if I were to write that lucid sentences in English are always effortless for me.

Lear has none of this in mind. Neither does he have in mind the ordinary dictionary definition of irony, as, for example, a figure of speech in which the meaning expressed contradicts, or stands in some other kind of tension with, the meaning intended. (Lear, apparently motivated by a deep and puzzling passion for the rectification of names, has some stinging words to say about historical and literary treatments of irony, and, partly as a result doesn't worry about the fact that his understanding of irony sits very loose to many of the threads prominent in the fabric of its use.) Rather, 'irony' is for him a term of art, and the most important elements in the picture he paints of its meaning are a certain construal of Socrates as ironist, and consideration of Kierkegaard's work on irony, both *ex professo* and implied. What then does he mean?

Ironic experience, for Lear, is indexed to our practical identities, which is to say to our sense of ourselves as being such that we can put ourselves forward in the world as such-and-such -- a teacher, say, or a mechanic, or a Christian, or an American, or a spouse, or a parent. Those practical identities carry with them, indeed are largely constituted by, a sense that we know how to go on with this, that we know the next steps in being such-and-such. I teach a class, and have some sense that I know how to, that I know what it is to do this; I instruct or cuddle or chastise

my child, with the same senses; I perform political speech as an American, similarly. But these practical identities are not only a matter of know-how; they are also, usually, aspirational, which is to say that they carry with them a sense that we have as yet more to learn about how to perform them. I am not the perfect parent or the perfect teacher, and my knowledge of how to go on as either carries this sense with it along with an aspiration to improve. And not only that. Many of our practical identities contain moments or strands of self-reflection: part (though a relatively small part) of what it is to be an American or a Christian is reflection on those identities, reflection that often includes puzzlement about what comes next.

All that, for Lear, belongs to the sphere of practical identity and the habitation of various available social roles. It is good and normal, but not enough for flourishing. Ironic experience, as it relates to any one of our practical identities (or, I suppose, to some range of them at once), is what moves these identities toward what they should be. It does so by radically disrupting practical knowledge: when it occurs, it has the form, "I now find myself utterly committed to going on with something that I have no idea whatever how to go on with." Or, to put the same matter a little differently, the ironized practical identity is confronted by the unrealizability of its own aspiration, and so, "in the ironic moment, I am called to a halt." I don't know how to go on; what to do next escapes me utterly.

That, for Lear, is what ironic experience is. It is uncanny (we don't know what to make of it); it is erotic (it calls us, with longing, to something whose shape we cannot see -- *Sehnsucht* seems a better word than any English I can think of for this unrealizable longing); and it breaks apart whichever practical identity it pertains to, showing the repertoire of that identity to be essentially inadequate to its own aspirations. Lear takes all this to be good because it is a form of truthfulness and thus a form of self-knowledge: this is in fact what our most deep-going practical identities are like: their repertoires are vulnerable, opaque, and inadequate to their own purposes, and ironic experience shows us this, without of course providing a solution to it. It shows us something with which we must live, something that binds the fabric of our existence. Augustine knew this: *mihi magna quaestio factus sum*, I am become a great [and unanswerable] question to myself.

Lear also thinks that ironic experience can be cultivated and integrated into a life. It need not bring the action proper to some practical identity to a halt for good. He takes the example of Alcibiades' Socrates, puzzle-struck for a whole night on the eve of battle, a man who, halted by ironic experience, does not know how to go on. But that same Socrates fights the next day, with bravery and dispatch, his action irony-supported. And Lear offers the following elegant formulation: "The practical knowledge that is human excellence contains a moment of [ironized] ignorance internal to it." Note the "moment": we can go on as Lear-like ironists, but our goings-on now know themselves to be inadequate and opaque to their own purposes and aspirations.

Lear is interested in the psychoanalytic applications of this understanding of ironic experience and of the cultivation of irony, the irony-threaded life. Those, mostly, are what his second lecture treats (what I've written above deals mostly with the first). I'm not the least interested in the psychoanalytic mode of thinking and practice. But I am interested in the uses of Lear's analysis for Catholic theology, and these, I think, are real and important. Lear sees some of them himself, because of the place that Kierkegaard has as his interlocutor. It seems to me that the liturgy, especially the liturgy of the Mass, already represents an ironic understanding of what it performs, and that such an understanding is essential to the Christian life considered more broadly. Consider, to take just one example, the *non sum dignus* said after the climax of the consecration of the elements. This is a deeply ironic moment. Something of great importance has just happened, and I, its participant, am now about to be incorporated into it. But I am constitutively and definitionally incapable of deploying concepts adequate to what has just happened; and, still more important, I am constitutively and definitionally incapable of receiving the gift that is being given in the events now in train. That's just what the *non sum dignus* says: saying it disrupts, beyond comprehension or repair, the form of activity to which it belongs and leaves me on my knees with no idea how to go on. And this moment is the heart of the Christian life here below: the identification of an aspiration that can neither be adequately understood nor acted upon in such a way as to realize it. This is the liturgical correlate of the Augustinian *mihi*

magna quaestio.

That, at least, is the grammar of the practical identity called being a Christian, and of its principal activity, which is worship. That activity can of course be performed, and that life be lived, non-ironically; but that, if done, as Lear's analysis very usefully indicates, is to attenuate a truth by partial refusal of a gift.

Lear's book provides intellectual pleasure of a very high order: its distinctions are careful, its prose lucid and elegant, and its examples suggestive and well chosen. It's a pity that he hasn't thought more than he seems to have done about the extent to which a life ordered by the liturgy is and must be an ironic one, or about the place that irony ought have in the Christian life. But that is no reason to hesitate: you should read this book.