words

The modern world is awash with words. Through our mastery of natural forces, human beings can send their thoughts in written form instantly across the planet. Words have great power and through them we conjure up realities, more or less imaginary, to believe in. We can often get so lost in these edifices created by language that they become seen as living, breathing things.

'Legal fictions' provide examples of this such as the corporation, which in many systems of law is considered to be a person. A strange kind of person indeed, born from the union of pen and paper, with no real existence outside the fabric of thought. Mental fictions can end up getting the better of philosophers too, when they are mistaken for being more real and more important than they actually are.

Philosophers have always relied on words. Yet they also have an uneasy relationship with language. The more abstract and highly refined their thought becomes, the bigger the disclaimer they must attach to their explanation of the truth. The philosopher often ends up trying to describe something which, to the five senses, is intangible. You and I have both seen a chair, so when I say the word 'chair' you immediately know what I am talking about. But as soon as I start talk about something like a moral obligation or a timeless eternity, a wall of misunderstanding is likely to appear. In trying to communicate this intangible thing to you I have to rely on terms with which we are both familiar. I can say it is like this or that, referring to what you already know about, but such imprecision is never going to exactly convey my personal understanding to you. Greater sophistication of philosophical discourse goes hand in hand with the heightened possibility of misunderstanding and confusion. This is why, as William Irwin (page 15) points out, to make philosophy more accessible to the wider public requires talking to people in their own language.

Perhaps those who call themselves 'philosophers' must share the blame for how far they have become alienated from the interests and concerns of the wider society. At its core, philosophy touches on issues that many, if not most, people find deeply interesting at some point in their lives: what is the good life? How can I be happy? Is there a higher power that guides human affairs? The problem is not so much that people fail to ask (or seek the answer to) philosophical questions, but that they become disillusioned by the lack of answers available within mainstream academic institutions. So they look elsewhere. The notion that someone can discover ‘the good life’ by pouring over screeds of obscure journals and debating super-fine analytical distinctions lacks credibility for many people.

If the world is to find philosophy appealing, then it should be practical. There are people genuinely seeking the answers to deeper questions in life who find so much of what is done at universities impractical and useless, failing to serve the seeking that leads one to search after truth. In a sense, academic philosophy has become a particularly insular breed of philosophical inquiry – holding itself up as superior to the rest, despite the fact that no Socrates or Confucius or Spinoza ever arose from a professional academic post.

Many young people do come to a philosophy course seeking answers to life's deepest questions, and they may find useful starting points in the survey courses which introduce the great thinkers who have grappled with such questions. But as they proceed up the academic ladder, the process of 'doing philosophy' is increasingly a process of familiarizing oneself with the canon of commentators and critics, potentially being diverted by endless belaboring over obscure and often dry points of analysis whose application to the real world, and to the real problems which gave rise to the original inquiry, have been lost and forgotten in the quest to prove one's superior scholastic credentials, or to publish something, anything that will make it through the hallowed gates of journaldom.

As someone who has done philosophy with both small children and young adults, the differences in outlook are illuminating. I have found children, particularly those around 7 or 8, to be more imaginative, spontaneous and daring when it comes to philosophical inquiry. Reading Margaret Mahay's Lion in the Meadow to 9 year olds has led to some surprisingly creative insights, whereas the discussion of more scholarly texts with uni students tends to be a lot more restrained and predictable. 'Philosophy for Children', as a specific technique developed by educators such as University of Auckland's Yanya Kovach, kids are not confronted by a boring litany of past problems and arguments, but by the wondrous mysteries of life in a fresh and engaging way. The teaching of philosophy for adults could benefit from such an approach.

Please enjoy this issue of Cafe Philosophy about language, philosophy and their often weird interactions.

Topics covered by our contributors include irony, small talk and other stuff that people do while stuck inside a café during the pouring rain.
TEACHING PHILOSOPHY VS TEACHING PHILOSOPHIE

Pablo Cevallos Estarellas reviews the developments that caused professional to triumph over amateur philosophy in education, and proposes a way forward.

If to do philosophy is to ask questions of a special kind about central human problems and then to grapple with them in a rigorous way, most people can in principle learn how to philosophize. This means that unlike most academic disciplines, philosophy has two legitimate manifestations: the professional practice of philosophical inquiry, with reference to the canon of historical philosophical works, and the amateur practice of philosophical inquiry, without reference to previous philosophy. In this article I’ll distinguish between these two expressions of philosophical practice and explore their educational applications.

— TWO MANIFESTATIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE —

We need to begin with a definition of philosophy. At present, philosophers are quite as many conceptions of philosophy as there are philosophers. However, many philosophers work with a shared view on what philosophy is, even if it is often left unarticulated.

Many philosophers conceive philosophy as an activity or a process, more than an accumulation of contents or products.

This sketchy conceptualization of philosophy has at least two properties that are relevant to this discussion. The first is that philosophy is defined mainly in procedural terms, identifying it with the activity of philosophizing (what philosophers do, ie, the method) rather than with the products of philosophy (what philosophers have accomplished, ie, the results). The second is that it describes the philosophical method as the combination of two basic elements:

(A) a specific kind of thinking (reflective, critical, creative, striving for understanding, etc)
(B) a specific kind of questions or problems (fundamental or conceptual ones, which cannot be solved by mere observation or calculation).

If this ‘procedural’ definition of philosophy is accepted, then one important implication that follows is that, as hinted, anybody can in principle practice it without having studied it at an academic level. This sets philosophy apart from many other academic disciplines, which can hardly be practiced in any meaningful sense without having a substantive knowledge of the discipline’s canon and without one keeping abreast with the knowledge produced in the field. For example, it is very difficult to conceive somebody who practices sociology nowadays and does not know anything about the works of, say, Max Weber or C. Wright Mills, or somebody who practices biology and ignores Darwin’s theory of evolution by means of natural selection, and Stephen J. Gould’s corollary of punctuated equilibrium. By contrast, philosophy can be practiced without knowledge of the academic tradition that exists behind it.

— PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY —

Philosophy can indeed be practiced without knowledge of its academic tradition, but can do not imply must. There is an extensive written record of the ways in which past philosophers have dealt with philosophical questions, and how successive generations of philosophers commented on their answers. Knowing that rich tradition has an intrinsic intellectual value, for as one English philosopher, Nigel Warburton has remarked, “without some knowledge of history philosophers would never progress: they would keep making the same mistakes, unaware that they had been made before” (Philosophy The Basics). Thus, within the realms of academia, to philosophize means more than just grappling with philosophical questions from scratch; it involves arguing with the answers given to philosophical problems by other philosophers, in what can be seen as a conversation spanning many generations. According to this narrow view, a (Western) philosopher is somebody who continues the tradition started by the ancient Greek philosophers. Since universities are more or less the only institutions which pay people to philosophize, it follows that a professional philosopher is nearly always a university teacher of philosophy.

— ‘AMATEUR’ PHILOSOPHY —

While the professional model of philosophizing has undeniable merits, the fact remains that the rich tradition of philosophical texts needs not be known (let alone mastered) in order to be able to use it. People who have no acquaintance with the philosophical tradition naturally struggle with philosophical problems. This is probably because these problems are grounded in everyday experience. As Thomas Nagel puts it in “the philosophical raw material comes directly and can relate to it, not from writings of the past” (What Does It All Mean?). According to him this explains why is it that philosophical issues “come up again, in the heads of people who haven’t read about them” (By the way, I use the adjective ‘amateur’ simply as the antonym of professional, i.e., as the activity engaged in by those who philosophize without necessarily referring to the canon of philosophical works).

The professional (academic) practice of philosophy has become the dominant and by far the most prestigious one. This might be due to the fact that at least since the late Middle Ages professional philosophy monopolized universities and other academic centres, where it eventually acquired, according to Kwame Anthony Appiah, “the highest-status label of Western humanism” (In My Father’s House). In the contemporary world, philosophy as a professional practice enjoys great health, at least within the boundaries of universities. In his article “What is philosophy?” BarryStroud argues that this is good because it protects the existence of philosophy as a relatively free activity, by isolating philosophers from the restrictive controls of society and government. But at the same time this this is bad for philosophy, because the more it becomes professionalised, the more it becomes an esoteric activity to which amateur practitioners of philosophy have no access.

Philosophy’s increasing professionalization has had at least two lamentable consequences. The first is that as philosophy grows apart from society, philosophers’ interests (and their publications) become increasingly abstract and less applicable to the real problems of regular people and societies. The second is that as society grows apart from philosophy, it becomes less philosophical, fostering an attitude that Martha Nussbaum has fittingly dubbed ‘philosophical recalcitrance’, which encourages simplistic answers to real life problems.

One possible antidote against the increasing public image of philosophy as an esoteric and elitist activity is to reestablish the relationship between the amateur practice of philosophy. And yet, paradoxically, one consequence of the dominance of professional philosophy has been, precisely, the impairment and weakening of the amateur tradition. It follows that a philosophy dedicated on the non-elitist assumption that everybody could learn to philosophize, an assumption that came under attack by professional philosophers especially during the heyday of philosophical professionalization (which in the English-speaking world coincided with the dominance of the analytic movement during the 1950s and 1960s), some academic philosophers openly ruled out the possibility that the regular folk could practice philosophy – a contemporary equivalent of Plato’s snobbish conclusion that only a tiny minority of intellectually advantaged individuals are able to philosophize.

However, there have always been dissenting voices among academic philosophers who questioned and severely criticized the ‘elitist’ tradition. For example, Arthur Schopenhauer publicly ridiculed the “book-philosophers” who dedicate most of their time to the study of what other philosophers said instead of thinking for themselves. Later, John Dewey argued that philosophy had become a rarefied discipline inflated with a quest for certainty, and thus he proposed a reconstruction of it. In his classic Democracy and Education, he says that although philosophical problems arise in everyday life, most people do not identify them as philosophical because philosophers have developed a specialized vocabulary that makes it difficult for many who belong to the guild, to speak. A more recent critic of the elitist tradition is Bryan Magee, a renowned populariser of philosophy. Following the observation that only those who have studied philosophy at a university can philosophize is on par with the notion that only those who have studied the study of literature can “read a classic novel” (Confessions of a Philosopher). What unites all these criticisms of the exclusively professional (and elitist) tradition of philosophical practice is the conviction that, given the opportunity, laypeople are likely to philosophize. That takes us directly to the next topic, namely, the educational implications of philosophy.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE TWO TRADITIONS OF DOING PHILOSOPHY

When thinking about the educational implications of philosophy, the above distinction between the professional and the amateur traditions becomes extremely important. Under the predominance of professional practice, philosophy as a school discipline has become a quasi-arcane subject dedicated to the study and interpretation of texts written by famous philosophers of the past (or secondary sources referring to them), instead of engagement with pressing philosophical problems relevant to students’ own lives. The use of this educational approach, which I will term ‘didactic’, has the practical result of alienating many people from philosophy, not because they are incapable of studying it, but simply because they lose interest.
When academic philosophy is included in high school or university courses, it usually takes the didactic approach. Perhaps with the commendable purpose of having students learn to philosophise from being exposed to the inspiring ideas of academic philosophers, or perhaps with the less commendable one of making it easier for instructors to test students, these courses as a norm are limited to the teaching of the history of philosophy, and the chronological stages or according to the traditional problems of philosophy in so doing, they fail to teach students how to philosophise, instead merely teaching them what the philosophers of the past said. This is a problem for two reasons.

The first is that even when executed well, the didactic approach is likely to fail to have students understand the world and themselves better only rarely are students new to philosophy in a position to fully appreciate what others have written about philosophical problems until they've engaged with those problems on their own. A similar criticism, expressed in stronger terms, is Schopenhauer's tirade in his essay ‘On Thinking for yourself’.

‘The man who thinks for himself becomes acquainted with the authorities for his opinions only after he has acquired them and thereby as a confirmation of them, while the book-philosopher starts with his authorities, in that he constructs his thoughts according to the opinions of others; his mind then compares with that of the former as a automaton compared with a living man. … This is what determines the difference between a thinker and a mere scholar.’

The second problem is that in many cases the didactic approach is not applied well, and then fails even to help students understand the philosophical ideas of famous philosophers, instead making them parrot ideas they do not understand. It also confirms students’ prejudice that philosophy is an inert subject, completely disconnected from their lives. When this happens – and unfortunately it happens a lot – not only is the original purpose of teaching philosophy absolutely nullified, but students are also likely to develop strong feelings against it.

In response to the elitist professional tradition and its ‘didactic’ educational approach, advocates of amateur philosophical practice have drawn on the tradition of dialogical interaction aimed at helping people understand the world and themselves better using the opinions of others; their mind then compares with that of the former as a automaton compared with a living man. … This is what determines the difference between a thinker and a mere scholar.’

A philosophical dialogue, then, is a collaborative exchange of ideas and arguments among people, usually for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the problem at hand. The dialogical nature of philosophy derives from the simple fact that, as the Spanish philosopher Savater explains, “philosophy does not occur as a revelation made by someone who knows everything to someone who knows nothing.” On the contrary, philosophy ideally occurs when two or more people who see themselves as equals, to quote Savater again, “become accomplices in their mutual submission to the force of reasons and their mutual rejection of the reasons of force” (The Questions of Life).

To the extent that dialogue aims not at persuasion at any cost, but at understanding, it will take the form of philosophical investigation or inquiry. And because it presupposes fallibility of the interlocutors, who are nevertheless willing to go wherever arguments take them, philosophical dialogue is also a form of critical discussion. The term ‘critical discussion’ was coined by Karl Popper to refer to a model of dialogical interaction aimed at the resolution of disputes governed by what he called ‘critical rationalism.’ Under the influence of Popper and also of Jurgen Habermas’ notion of the ‘ideal speech situation’, Frans van Eemen and R. Grootendorst defined a ‘critical discussion’ as an ideal communicative context in which arguments are used to main philosophically correct truth to say, differences of opinion. They explain that disputes can be either settled or resolved. To settle a dispute means setting it aside to go on with life. On the other hand, to resolve a dispute means that one or more of the participants in the discussion retracts her/his standpoint in the light of the other party’s arguments.

Building on the tradition of Socrates, it is possible to offer a theory of philosophy as educational. In the Greek cradle of Western philosophy, dialogue was the communicative context in which both the practice and the teaching of philosophy took place, as illustrated by the interactions between Socrates and his interlocutors in Plato’s dialogues. Thus, it is often called, is a misleading term because it seems to suggest that Socrates had just one method. A closer study of Socrates’ behaviour in Plato’s dialogues shows a more complex picture. David H. Calhoun has made such a study published in his article “Which Socratic Method?” and he concludes that the general opinion which identifies the Socratic method with a pedagogy “in which the teacher coaches and cajoles students to take an active role in the learning process by asking probing, leading questions and strategically guiding discussion”, is incorrect. Plato’s Socrates, as Calhoun explains, showed a range of pedagogical strategies, which makes it more accurate to speak about Socratic methods, in the plural. Calhoun identifies at least two main styles of teaching or pedagogical modes into which all Socrates’ acts can be categorized: transmission and inquiry. By the transmission mode, Calhoun refers to the act of “communicating a body of information... to another person in a straightforward and unambiguous fashion”. By the inquiry mode, Calhoun refers to a pedagogical relationship that “focuses on active learning by the student, and thus requires the teacher to structure the learning process in such a way that the student is engaged in a heightened degree of responsibility for learning.”

The transmission mode has a more authoritarian dynamic than the inquiry mode, but there are important similarities underlying them. What these two styles have in common, as Calhoun argues, is that both aim at the same ultimate goal: a deeper understanding of the things that are most important for human life. … The same holds true for Socratic extermination, which реминтеракцией of the stakes of inquiry, and thus makes the student’s responsibility in the dialogical context very high. The student is the one who must make the questions difficult and the answers difficult to come by, and the teacher who must make the student active and engaged in the learning process. The student is the one who must engage with the material and the teacher is the one who must guide the student through the process of inquiry.”

“Is there some identifiable object to which all of Socrates’ activities are aimed? To what, if anything, does Socrates seek to convert his interlocutors? The answer to this question begins with the recognition that there are two main strategies, which makes it more accurate to speak about Socratic methods, in the plural. Calhoun identifies at least two main styles of teaching or pedagogical modes into which all Socrates’ acts can be categorized: transmission and inquiry. By the transmission mode, Calhoun refers to the act of “communicating a body of information... to another person in a straightforward and unambiguous fashion”. By the inquiry mode, Calhoun refers to a pedagogical relationship that “focuses on active learning by the student, and thus requires the teacher to structure the learning process in such a way that the student is engaged in a heightened degree of responsibility for learning.”

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In other words, the final educational goal of all Socrates’ methods is to persuade students of the importance of philosophical inquiry. As Calhoun reminds us, however, this does not mean that Socrates is valuing inquiry for its sake, irrespectively of the contribution to clarifying how human beings ought to

"The man who thinks for himself becomes acquainted with the authorities for his opinions only after he has acquired them and thereby as a confirmation of them, while the book-philosopher starts with his authorities, in that he constructs his thoughts according to the opinions of others; his mind then compares with that of the former as an automaton compares with a living man. ... This is what determines the difference between a thinker and a mere scholar.”
I recently found myself sitting across a table from a stranger, chewing awkwardly in silence. It was a familiar experience. We engaged in that endless coffee shop exchange with not enough tables and me sitting alone, assenting readily when an older woman asked if I could share my premium slice of real estate. She sat down and we both began to eat, eyes studiously averted—quickly, the silence became unbearable. Lovely day out, isn’t it, it ventured. Oh yes, I agreed enthusiastically. Perfect temperature, and sunny too. Just beautiful. This was talk, yes, a verbal exchange between two interlocutors—but it was small talk.

The weather has a long-standing monopoly on the small talk market, and it’s not hard to see why. What we’re searching for in this kind of conversation is linguistic grease to oil the gears of social interaction. With acquaintances we can assume a certain shared pool from which to draw conversational topics, but with strangers about whom we know nothing, the weather is our old faithful, always ready to be enlisted in action. Of course, the perfect obviousness of the weather is why it’s also the ultimate sign of banality. Samuel Johnson famously observed in 1738 that “when two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather; they are in haste to tell each other what each one already knows, but with a bright or cloudy, windy or calm.” And for the German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, “rational language is a conversation in which everyone else is just as, if not more, eloquent as he is.”

The Oxford English Dictionary dates the first appearance of the term “small talk” to eighteenth-century British Parliamentary Lord Chesterfield’s Letters to his Son, a collection of pedagogical nuggets dispensed by the Prince of Scribblers in a range of topics, as befits a book with the subtitle “On the Fine Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman.”

Yet, if small talk is just talk that’s idle, insignificant and without stated purpose, then surely a substantial portion of the chatter that goes on between couples, friends, colleagues, and strangers seems to be small talk. Banality, however, need not always be insignificant. There’s nothing earth-shattering, usually, about missing the bus, what you ate for lunch or the new dress you just bought, these are just the mundane tidbits that make up so much of the talk between intimates. In fact, such conversations about trivials can arguably happen only with those close to us—only the members of our inner circle do we presume to burden with the minutiae of our lives.

“Ideally talk about inconsequential matters between friends may be broken into several varieties. There’s a notable species, for instance, that goes by the name “chewing the fat” or “shooting the breeze” (in that latter for the more scatologically inclined). This type of non-purposeful conversation, made up mostly of freewheeling banter, relies less on its subject matter than what you can do with it, and, usually, how amusing you can be while doing it. A kind of conversational scatting, the best breeze-shooters and fat-chewers can riff on anything; the smaller the better—their virtuosity is displayed in the irrelevance of the subject matter to the rapport of the about “nothing” said the great talker Oscar Wilde. “It is the only thing I know anything about.”

Of course, as in all forms of speech, more is being communicated than just what is said. However, inconsequential the things spoken, we’re also sizing each other up in the act of speaking. Gestures, facial expressions, postural shifts and places of pause are just a few of the examples Erving Goffman cites as communicative non-linguistic aspects of conversation. There is no doubt that we distinguish ourselves from other species by the manner of our talking as by its content.

It’s unsurprising, then, that the phenomenon of small talk seems to receive interest today primarily from linguists interested in discourse analysis or pragmatics, and secondarily in improving your networking skills. The readership of the first camp, if you can believe it, is not large. The latter group is doing a little better: the go-to tome in this genre seems to be The Fine Art of Small Talk, by the conveniently named Debra Fine. She provides a helpful list of icebreakers you can memorize (but at your own peril, I have to note, since they include prompts like, “If you could replay any moment in your life, what would it be?”—a question that must surely count as at least “muddling” talk). Another source of wisdom on this matter, a networking expert named Susan RoKne who, according to her website, is a Mingling Maven and can do anything you want, too, adhering to the maxim “Be bright. Be brief. Be gone.” The talent of ready utterance has long been a virtue, and in a way it is one of the best—like a line sloping downward, for a number of reasons—from Lord Chesterfield’s epistolary advice to latter-day “conversation consultants” like the author of Goodbye
By Doris Zhang

To Shy, Leil Lovwide; who promises breezily to turn you from a "shy" to a "sure."

Although a sometime topic of instruction, small talk, as a clear social skill, possesses no great stature among the arts of conversation. No one, after all, aspires to banality. So we wold our scorn for any particular form of small talk: not for the contaminating musk of inauthenticity. The allegiance to high-mindedness and substance that most of us have carefully displayed at one time or another was summited up in a recent New Yorker cartoon depicting a dinner table in ancient Greece, where a father admonishes his son: "If you don't have anything profound to say, don't say anything at all." It's no coincidence that this cartoon is set in antiquity, at the birth of the city-state, for a group, philosophers have been the most vocal critics of empty chatter. It wouldn't be hard, in particular, to imagine that dinner table scene taking place chez Martin Heidegger. His 1937 Being and Time offers an analysis of Gerede, translated as "idle talk," which forms probably the best-known philosophical critique of this phenomenon.

Heidegger's remarks arise in the context of an investigation into our everyday way of being. Let me report the results upfront: our everyday being is resoundingly inauthentic. Instead of a genuine self-relation, we allow ourselves in daily minutiae (together with others, in a group) to imagine that dinner table scene taking place. By his own logic, then, we stop self-consciously, almost guiltily, as if each of us wants to reassure the other that our friendship hasn't come to naught when we fall silent. As we realize this, we stop self-consciously, almost guiltily, as if each of us wants to reassure the other that our friendship hasn't come to naught when we fall silent. As we realize this, we stop self-consciously, almost guiltily, as if each of us wants to reassure the other that our friendship hasn't come to naught when we fall silent. 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If this truth has any profundity, it has at least as much banality, and double the amount of self-evidence. Is it any wonder that we are constantly communicating it to each other not by weighty argument or the authentic mode of keeping silent, but by the inconsequential chatter of the everyday? In making observations about “what is perfectly obvious” with strangers, or idly shooting the breeze with friends, we simply employ the appropriate tool for the job. It may be hard, living in such close proximity to one another, to find reprieve from unsought or unwanted talk of all kinds—cell phones, for one, have made imposed eavesdropping a fact of modern life—but if we restrict speech to the profound, the serious or even the meaningful, we impoverish it.

Any defense of small talk is difficult to mount today because we are obviously undergoing an erosion of big talk—serious discussion of complicated ideas and events—in our public discourse. But if much of what masquerades as big talk turns out to be small, it doesn’t follow that small talk is the enemy. If talking is a fundamental human propensity, we should attend to its different forms, taking care to distinguish between them, serving as do they such different functions. There should be more real, big talk. But perhaps there should also be more small talk. It is, after all, the first means by which we herd animals paw the ground around each other and tentatively join our solitude.

Throughout the Western world it is agreed that people must meet frequently, and that it is not only agreeable to do so but that it is a matter of common courtesy to say something even when there is hardly anything to say—this is C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards in The Meaning of Meaning, cited by Malinowski in his essay. A similar sentiment is expressed in a defence of gossip from 1821: “Why do men associate? Some it is owing to our weakness, and our wants, but it would be more correct to attribute it to the delights afforded us by the sound of the human voice.” And a half later, talking about her observations of chat-rooms dedicated to the Furby, the electronic pet that swept the late Nineties, MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle speculates that “the extraordinary popularity of the seemingly extraordinarily banal chats has to do with people experiencing the pleasures of the feel of talk.”

The delights of the human voice, the pleasures of the feel of talk—it seems there’s something to be said for talking for the sake of talking. Small talk may be speech when there is nothing to say, but what we’re expressing is our need to talk regardless. Which reminds me: lovely day out, isn’t it?

Dora Zhang
Dora Zhang specializes in modernist fiction and philosophy, and generalizes in being interested in just about everything

Shall We Dance?—Japanese Style

Masayuki Subo: the director of the popular movie, “Shall We Dance?” explains about the difficulties of bringing his Japanese movie to American audiences, in spite of the communication differences between the two cultures. Subo says that, when he had finished making the movie, he had no idea how popular it would become world-wide.

A married man (Koji Yakusho) is attracted to a woman (Tamiyo Kusakari) and is drawn towards her through their mutual interest in ballroom dancing. The movie displays a balanced combination of Japanese culture with a universal theme of middle age life and love of dance and music.

Definitely an enjoyable, humorous and convincing film about the power of human desire and the inter-relationships and needs of men and women and the way love affairs transcend all of our cultural diversity.

Shall We Dance: available now on DVD

For a detailed review of this award winning film visit: http://www.academia.edu/381165/CROSS-CULTURAL_STUDY_OF_A-MOVIE_SHALL_WE_DANCE.

Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting

Sianne considers how those feelings help us form judgments about the aesthetic world, how we know to describe something as “interesting” or adorable (or, worse yet, “adorable”). What does our critical vocabulary say about our present time? Is there a broader context for the conversational readymade “That’s interesting.”?

At first, talking about aesthetic experiences can seem like a dreamy, specialized kind of thing. But these conversations are always about so much more than describing pretty or pleasurable things. For instance, what is the difference between beauty and the sublime? While this distinction might not strike us as particularly pressing, the two categories are suggestive of radically different ways of understanding the world, and the question—one wrestled with by figures like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant—contains the anxieties of its time. Beauty is recognition, mastery, a scale that we can comprehend; the sublime remains mysterious, metaphysical, difficult to take in all at once. To speak of beauty and the sublime, then, is to have a conversation on rational judgment and faith.

Our Aesthetic Categories, though, argues on behalf of aesthetic experiences that aren’t quite so awe-inspiring or rare. Sitting before your computers or walking the streets of your town, you don’t encounter beautiful things as frequently as you do interesting, momentarily arresting ones—and as for the sublime, when was the last time you experienced catharsis? Instead, Ngai considers our “minor” aesthetic experiences, the ones that make up our day. The zany, cute, and interesting won’t stir us to tears or action or a belief in the creator. Rather, these are dashed-off assessments that feel like second nature, given the speed at which things circulate. But these are judgments as rich for unpacking the beautiful or the sublime—and, in our time and place, more important than ever. Advertising doesn’t want to be beautiful or sublime; it wants to be everywhere at once, remembered but not necessarily judged. Hello Kitty and Sonic the Hedgehog don’t aspire to high art and seem perfectly disposable. And yet their cuteness survives the market, feeding into a persistent yearning to be able to hold and cuddle and cherish these images that don’t actually exist in the real, hyper-fluid world.

In Our Aesthetic Categories, Ngai unpacks these seemingly simple judgments and finds a great deal hidden within. For example, judging something “cute” often infantilizes the beholder, as we melt into a puddle of oohs and aahs at the sight of a baby bunny eating a baby carrot. But just as a child might love a doll to tatters, our absorption with “cuteness” is born of both tenderness and aggression. Something cute is something we condescend to, even as we desire to touch and ruffle and hold and possess it.

The category of zaniness is something we recognize in performance—imagine Lucille Ball at her most frazzled, Jim Carrey at the height of his hyper-elasticity. Ngai’s is the most historical, as she describes zaniness as a flustered, exaggerated response to the all-at-once
to the “interesting” is to promise to return to the future conversation. But more often than not, it’s just conversational filler, something dropped in when you don’t feel like judging at all.

So—what does any of this mean? There have always been things that have struck people as zany, cute, or interesting. The question becomes why these kinds of judgments predominate nowadays—what historical and cultural developments point to, how the world around us might begin to draw on our unexamined comfort in such categories. 

Our Aesthetic Categories isn’t exactly light reading—it’s certainly not as gib as a book on cuteness and Zaniness, one that juxtaposes Kant, modernist Abstract poetry, Yoshimoto Nara, and The Cable Guy, might suggest. It’s almost comparatively thick with references. But it’s the type of book that contains ideas that are broadly provocative, even for the “merely interested.” It’s one of the most useful guides to the present I’ve read in a while, almost despite itself. It offers a way of thinking about so many forms of present-day self-expression, from the prevalence of first-person writing on the internet to the “Like/Share” this-cheer of social networks. It helps explain a certain style of art (Tao Lin, for example) that advances on muted, subdued, contingent feelings.

Ngai’s book prepares us to think about these new ways we might feel about these relationships—how, for example, our categories for judgment seem to suggest a different, uncertain, ironic feeling about life and its possibilities. Does anyone ever mean it when they say something is “interesting”—or do we all, in art and conversation, merely aspire to be interesting enough? We usually ponder the present condition by considering our consumer choices or modes of self-presentation. But perhaps the line around our imagination starts elsewhere, in those aesthetic experiences that happen on the edge of comprehension. Before we are inventories of symbols and things, we are thinking, feeling people navigating a fluid, ever-changing world—a world where everything is interesting but not much more, where cuteness and zaniness are the only scales available to us when confronted with global vastness.

The Pop Culture Manifesto

By William Irwin

Philosophy is not popular culture not an artifact or subject of mass interest and appreciation but it could be. At various times in the past indeed it was. Arguably rocketry and the space program were also elements of popular culture for a time in America, as dinosaurs and the internet are now. Astronomy and computer programming clearly could become popular culture. So could philosophy. Freud and Einstein were among the People/VH-1 top two hundred popular idols, according to Seinfeld and Sartre.

Consider books such as The Tao of Pooh, The Conslations of Philosophy, Wittgenstein’s


Cafe Philosophy 14

Cafe Philosophy 15

Poker, Sophie’s World, Socrates Cafe, Pluto not Prozac, If Aristotle Ran General Motors, and The Metaphysical Club. Arguably, none of them is either philosophy or popular culture, but their very existence shows some popular interest in philosophy. So how can we get people further interested in philosophy? The answer, to paraphrase a popular British philosopher, is we need “a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down.”

We can loosely define popular culture as artifacts and subjects of mass interest and appreciation. Popular culture does not exclude people from appreciating it on the basis of class or formal education. This is perhaps a necessary, though not a sufficient condition for popular culture. “Mass interest and appreciation” is definitely indeterminate, though hopefully not troublesome. How popular does popular have to be? No fixed answer can be given: One size does not fit all. The British sense of “pop” sheds light on the issue. In this sense Ozzy Osborne and the Grateful Dead, for example, can be considered pop stars, even though they have cult followings. Cult followings may be large or small, but they are still part of popular culture as we conceive it. As long as we have a general idea of the coverage of “popular culture,” this definition will be enough to begin.

Philosophy as Popular Culture

Part of the difficulty in interesting people in philosophy is that it deals in abstractions. Of course, we do physics and mathematics; but people more readily see the payoff for studying math or physics, with their clear applications to technology that makes life easier and supposedly, better. The value of the living the examined life through the pursuit of philosophy is much more difficult to demonstrate than the technological and pecuniary payoff of studying science. Still, for the benefit of the individual, although not everyone needs to be a scientist, ideally everyone should be scientifically literate. Similarly, though not everyone needs to make a vocation of formal philosophical study, ideally everyone should be philosophically literate, having a sense of the history and questions of philosophy. Citizens of a democracy would be better citizens for having a knowledge of philosophy, as it teaches them to think critically and encourages them to dissent.

Is there any harm in people knowing a lot about popular culture and relatively little about philosophy? Yes: People hungry for knowledge and wisdom have turned to sources such as astrology, motivational speakers, and self-help books. While these sources are of varying value, none matches what philosophy has to offer. Philosophy needs to replace pseudo-science (crystals, Tarot Cards) as science must replace pseudo-science often surrounding things such as Big Foot, Loch Ness, UFOs, and other paranormal phenomena. If a book on pseudo-science, like pseudo-science, is attractively packaged and readily available, so philosophy needs similar packaging and availability if it is to compete successfully.
resolutely Unenlightened elected officials will never see it as their best interest to encourage the popular study of philosophy, so philosophers must take the message to the people. To sample Chuck D of Public Enemy, we have to rock the bourgeoisie and the boulevard. Philosophy as popular culture would be of tremendous service in this regard, and such a democratization of philosophy need not be dumbing down. Popular science is not necessarily pseudo-science. In fact, it rarely is, as magazines such as Popular Science demonstrate. Most popular science simply explains scientific theories and discoveries sans mathematics. Of course popular science risks oversimplifying and misrepresenting the science, but that is a much lesser risk than depriving the public of a comprehensible account. Similarly, popular popular culture does not have to be pseudo-philosophy, as Philosophy Now attests, for instance. To democratize philosophy is not necessarily to dumb it down, but to make it available in some form for all. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the lives of Socrates and Buddha, or the thoughts of Aristotle and Descartes, were better known as a result of being related in pop cultural forms? Though not a panacea, such sources would not only inspire philosophical musings but would foster skeptical, critical thinking. And by starting with children we have a greater chance of interesting future generations of adults in philosophy. The increased interest in Philosophy Cafés is a good sign.

The fact is that currently neither popular science nor popular philosophy is popular culture – not a subject of interest to the masses – and we may not realistically hope for this. But we may not need philosophy as popular culture. We might be satisfied with increased and increasing popular awareness of and interest in philosophy. And all that may be necessary for that is the successful combination of popular culture and philosophy.

**PHILOSOPHY AND POPULAR CULTURE**

The most neglected part of Plato’s celebrated allegory of the cave is the escaped prisoner’s return. Once he has come to true knowledge in and of the higher world outside the cave of illusions, he is not to remain there, but to return from whence he came to “share the knowledge.” This is the duty of the philosophically educated Guardian in Plato’s Republic; it is the way of Socrates, and it is the duty of philosophers generally. Plato tells us that the returning ex-prisoner must be prepared to be mocked and persecuted, for he will be talking of a strange and unlikely world. What’s worse, he will appear to be psychologically damaged, as he will no longer be able to see the shadows on the wall as clearly and significantly as he once did. How then is he to succeed in conveying his message? Plato offers little hope that he will. For a more hopeful answer we must turn to Socrates, who, despite losing his life to the cave-dwellers, was able to communicate with some of them.

Did Socrates start off talking about a higher level of reality? Of course not. He met his interlocutors where they were, often using agricultural analogies, and references to Greek culture – commonly known at the time, the stuff of scholars today. He then gradually led them from what they knew or thought they knew to higher knowledge.

Socrates’ example makes clear that one must not only return to the cave, but learn to see the shadows again, in order to tell the prisoners about the world outside in terms of the shadows the prisoners see. They are unlikely to understand or even listen if the message is delivered any other way. Those who criticize people for being immersed in popular culture but show them no way out and provide no motivation to seek one, are like escaped prisoners who simply sneer at those still stuck in the cave, haranguing and ridiculing them. Why would they listen?

Jeremias aside, popular culture and philosophy is like a bike with training wheels. The idea is to become comfortable enough to no longer need the support. We kick away the ladder once we have ascended. Popular culture and philosophy is akin to a philharmonic orchestra performing Beatles songs. People will come to the philharmonic who might not otherwise: they’ll enjoy it, and some, who would not have done so otherwise, will come back to hear Beethoven.

Another example is Shakespeare’s play, Much Ado About Nothing, recently adapted by Joss Whedon for the silver screen. In the Black and white version the costumes, the sets and the voices anchor the play in a pop-cultural dimension where it sparkles effortlessly.

**THERE IS A PRAGMATIC, AMERICAN SPIRIT IN USING POPULAR CULTURE TO SPREAD PHILOSOPHY.**

It is not just that we can or may, but that we should and must bring philosophy to the public in terms they will know and find attractive and interesting – not for the sake of joining the crowd in the cave, but for the sake of showing them the way out. Willie Sutton was a criminal mastermind, a genius of sorts. Once asked, “Willie, why do you rob banks?” he replied pragmatically, “Because that’s where the money is.” Why should a philosopher write about popular culture? Because that’s where the people are. As and the goal is to bring the prisoners from the shadows to the light, so the goal is to bring the public from popular culture to philosophy. In his controversial book Cultural Literacy, E.D. Hirsch contends that there are certain pieces of cultural information that “Every American needs to know” to communicate effectively and comprehend others. I contend that this can be extended to the realm of pop culture. The idea of adding pop cultural literacy to cultural literacy may seem contrary to the intentions of the father of intentionalism, but it is not: Hirsch never intended cultural literacy to be a conservative notion, despite its embrace by political conservatives. Hirsch duly recognizes and accepts that the shared body of knowledge is not stable, but changing.

Like it or not, good or bad, popular culture is the common language. The shared body of knowledge of popular culture has become necessary for effective communication.

Assuming that like politicians, philosophers have a vested interest in using popular culture to reach the public, what is the proper use of popular culture for this purpose? Is it the same as the proper use of literature, which is to open the imagination and aid philosophical reflection by providing vivid examples, as Peter Jones argues well in Philosophy and the Novel? Martha Nussbaum has argued for the importance of literature in theorizing ethics. Good literature may be more helpful than bad literature or shallow pop culture in displaying the intricacy of moral problems and moral reasoning, but not always and not necessarily. There is a virtue in appealing to what is commonly known, what is not great literature or fiction can still be a great example. Metaphysics, epistemology, and other areas of philosophy have been generally neglected, but they too benefit from the use of literature – particularly science fiction and the Silver Screen. In these fraught experiments they have long been valued in philosophy, and popular culture can supply us with thought experiments that are sometimes less contrived than those cooked up by philosophers. Certainly they tend at least to be more entertaining and better known, sparking thought and argument. People are often very knowledgeable in very sophisticated ways about their favorite aspect of popular culture, whether it be comic books or rugby. This can be used to lead them to sophisticated thinking about philosophy.

Dictionaries and encyclopedias of philosophy and aesthetics have no entry under ‘philosophy of popular culture’. Although ‘philosophy and popular culture’ may some day be worthy of an entry, the addition of ‘philosophy of popular culture’ will be necessary. We could for practical purposes have a ‘philosophy of popular culture’, but that would likely have the undesirable consequence of perpetuating the distinction between the high and the popular. There are questions for the study of popular art that might come under the heading of ‘philosophy of popular culture’, such as the nature of fictional worlds, or of expression and interpretation, but these are just the same methodological questions and issues raised by aesthetics generally and by the philosophy of literature, painting, theater, film, music, etc. More specific questions raised by pop cultural non-artistic phenomena, such as rugby and fast food, can be studied under the headings of philosophy of sport or philosophy of food.
Let’s close with a note of caution: a “philosophy of” is not for the public but for the academic. The surest way to lose a comedy fan is to discuss the philosophy of comedy. So too the surest way to lose the general populace’s attention is to talk about philosophy of popular culture, if there even is such a thing. And if there is, I suspect its only unique question is the one we began with: What is popular culture?

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# June Issue 2013# June Issue 2013

**SHORT STORY**

I can’t really explain it myself, why I find myself sitting more and more often in the most un-alluring café in Brussels, in the “Berlaymont” building, on the ground floor of the headquarters of the European Commission. Not that there aren’t any other eateries in the city. There are even very good ones. Brussels’ gastronomy can’t be praised highly enough.

But I sit more and more often in this cafeteria, from which it’s not possible to carve out a coffee house essay to save one’s life. No table service, the visit begins standing in the queue at the bar. The employees of the outsourced operating company cash in uneven sums at the till. A 1,50 Euro for a cappuccino. A little poster pricks the conscience of the guest on each visit, this time for the “EU Sustainable Energy Week”.

The cafeteria’s clientele is pedigree. EU officialdom meets here, very formally dressed and conducting a restrained rational discourse. So I was pretty excited when I once observed an encounter which looked like jiggery-pokery to me. It even had a little of the smell of sex about it.

In general, the café chat is of a kind one would gladly ignore. “Basically, what the commission does,” I hear in front of me. From behind, “Communicating with the citizens” reaches my ears.

The one time I eavesdropped with curiosity, I was sitting by the terminating glass front. I was looking into the crook of the Berlaymont building’s arm, into an empty, paved courtyard, with bare little trees and light shafts. In the background the LEX glass palace terminated, grey sky. The only breath of fresh air in the grey glass, silvery prospect was the outline of the neoclassical “Résidence” palace: lacerated, threadbare, brown.

Perhaps I sit more and more in this café because its totality appeals to me. However much you strain, you see nothing but EU.

It was about three, the cafetena was half empty. I had often seen my hero there. He was a small, rotund spectacle-wearer in a suit, over 50. He looked a bit like Elton John, but without the accessories.

The heroine was under 30 and quite pretty. She had braided her blonde hair, she was wearing numerous silvery bangles and her fingernails were painted red. I had never seen a woman with red nails in the Commission cafeteria before. The fingernails alone had the look of sin itself in the midst of the orderly office folk.

He and she, they were both British. The young woman spoke in a moderate cockney accent. Her frivolous shopping-mall style didn’t fit in this place. Did she want to fit in somehow?

The young woman laughed darkly and gutturally. While he sat in front of her like an acolyte, she turned in her revolving chair and put her black-stockinged legs on show. “What about my shoes?” she asked and raised a boot. I was agog. What could she want from the official?

She was drinking cola light through a straw. The can must have been long empty by now. By degrees I discovered the trick. She sucked the cola through the white straw, wetted her lips at best and then let the liquid flow back into the can. She probably did it unconsciously. But the game with the liquid increased the older man’s attention.

The gentleman finally got down to the girlie’s concerns: “A good CV will get you a foot in the door”, he said, “It’s all presentation”. He also advised her to choose italics, font size 14 for the rest. It was no more corrupt than that, not in front of me anyway. And yet it was incredibly hot for relations in that cafeteria.

The more corrupt than that, not in front of me anyway. And yet it was incredibly hot for relations in that cafeteria.


**EU CAFE**

**THE FINAL IRONY**

Isn’t it ironic?

You hear it all the time - and, most of the time, actually no, it isn’t. It’s more likely to be hypocritical, cynical, lazy or coincidental. But what is irony and why did pundits think it would die two years ago, after September 11? Zoe Williams meticulously, sincerely, unironically, hunts it down.

Taking its name from the Greek eireneia (dissimulation), irony consists of purporting a meaning of an utterance or a situation that is different, often opposite, to the literal one.

Maike Oergel, Encyclopaedia of German Literature

Irony is a state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects and is often amusing as a result.

The New Oxford English Dictionary

Pretty much everything is ironic these days. Irony is used as a synonym for cool, for cynicism, for detachment, for intelligence; it’s cited as the end of civilisation, as well as its salvation. Irony is used as a synonym for intelligence; it’s cited as the end of civilisation, as well as its salvation.

Pretty much every form of culture claims to be shot through with it, even (especially) the ones that conspicuously aren’t. I read last week that Bruce Forsyth hosting: ‘Have I Got News For You,’ was an “ironic statement”, as if you could ascend into irony just by being old, as you used to with wisdom. I read, too, that it was ironic for Alan Millburn (British Secretary of State for Health) to leave his job to spend more time with his family, when the doctors and nurses under his care don’t have that facility. Well, it’s not ironic, it’s just standard-issue self-interest, with maybe a smattering of hypocrisy. I’ve read claims of an “ironic” interest in Big Brother - nope. Lazy, maybe. Possibly postmodern. Not ironic.
The final irony - by Zoe Williams

We have a grave problem with this world (well, in fact, it’s not really ‘problem’ - it’s just being ironic when I call it that, I’m being hyperbolic (overstatement or plausible exaggeration), although the two can amount to the same thing in some instances) ... look at the definitions, the confusion is understandable.

In the first instance, rhetorical irony expands to cover any disjunction at all between language and meaning, with a couple of key exceptions (allegory also entails a disconnection between sign and meaning, and obviously isn’t synonymous with irony, and irony, clearly, leaves that gap, but relies for its efficacy on an ignorant audience, where irony relies on a knowing one) still, even with the riders, it’s quite an umbrella, no.

In the second instance, situational irony (also known as cosmic irony) occurs when it seems that “God or fate is manipulating events so as to inspire false hopes, which are inevitably dashed”(1). While this looks like the more straightforward usage, it opens the door to confusion between irony, bad luck and inconvenience.

Most pressingly, though, there are a number of misperceptions about irony that are peculiar to recent times.

The first is that September 11 spelled the end of irony.

The second is that the end of irony would be the one good thing to come out of September 11.

The third is that irony characterizes our age to a greater degree than it has done any other.

The fourth is that Americans can’t do irony, and we can.

The fifth is that the Germans can’t do irony, either (and we still call).

The sixth is that irony and cynicism are interchangeable.

The seventh is that it’s a mistake to attempt irony in emails and text messages, even while irony characterizes our age, and so do emails.

And the eighth is that “post-ironic” is an acceptable term - it’s very modish to use this, as if to suggest one of three things:

i) that irony has ended,

ii) that postmodernism and irony are interchangeable, and can be conflated into one handy word,

iii) that we are more ironic than we used to be, and therefore need to add a prefix suggesting even greater ironic distance than irony on its own can supply. None of these things is true.

Now, after all that effort numbering and sub-numbering these things, I’m not going to deal with them in the wrong order. That isn’t ironic, it’s just a bit sloppy. There are four important epics of irony (unless you count Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but do that, I would need to have read them)

Phase one Socratic irony is simply part of a can of not really gravel - the devised distance people from the fact that they’ve been sitting still listening to hard talk for an awfully long time. The technique demonstrated in the Platonic dialogues, was to pretend ignorance and, more sneakily, to feign credence in your opponent’s power of thought, in order to tickle him in knots. It’s amazingly prevalent in contemporary social intercourse - every one of us, I’d guess, has a friend who engages in an argument, waiting patiently until you’ve said something really trenchant and probably wrong, then cocks his (or her) head to one side and says, “Do you think that’s true?”

Phase two Romantic irony was framed by Schlegel(1) the German philosopher. Here, it became a much more complex philosophical tool, of which the nuts and bolts were that you simultaneously occupied two opposite positions (what you say versus what is real). There were problems with this as a direct path to truth later on, but it’s not a more Socratic grasp of how not to be boring before I could go into them. The point with Schlegel was that irony would give you a divided self, which you could use to play a multiplicity of perspectives, which is the only way you will unlock the truth of the whole. This romantic (or “philosophical”) irony had a great influence on the English Romantic poets - Coleridge’s Rime Of The Ancient Mariner, with its commentary running alongside the narrative, divides the perspective (plus, he read Schlegel, so I’m not just making that up)

But irony as part of the British literary tradition doesn’t, generally speaking, commensurate with Romantic irony, but rather with the directness that is the root of Socrates, viz, saying the opposite of what is true in order to underline the truth. So, from this you’d trace a line from Chaucer, through More, Sidney and Spenser, on to the present, where you can see a pleasing bifurcation of irony’s literary use. Austen uses irony as a means of being understated (Swift, by contrast, uses irony for polemical purposes, conjuring grotesque images ironically (babies being eaten, mankind enslaved to the morally superior) in order to state the bare, unvarnished, bloody, starving, that humanity was going to the dogs) ever since. Once you’ve got one of those, then a) the act of seeking the truth through irony is pointless, because it’s truth is truthing you in the face, and b) the postmodern irony that eschews concepts like “good” and “evil” has been trounced. Naturally, irony was back within a few days, not least because of the myriad ironies contained within the attack itself (America having funded Al-Qa’ida is ironic; America raining bombs and peanut butter on Afghanistan is ironic, but even without those ironic features, irony would have resurfaced pretty soon - only a very fresh tragedy can silence it.

The end of irony would be a disaster for the world - the liberal polemicists and those at fault would allways attempt to cover themselves up with emotional and overblown language: If their opponents have to explain what they’re doing, it’s basically looking for battle of wills, and the winner will be the person who can beat their breast the hardest without getting embarrassed. Irony allows you to launch a challenge without being dragged into this orbit of self-regarding sentiment that you get from Tony Blair, say, when he

September 11 and the end of irony

Politicians especially (but serious minds of all sorts) dislike this newswish twist of irony, since political rhetoric relies on moral framework - they may be spinning, they may be seeixing up their evidence, they may be lying straight to our faces as we beseech them not to kill innocent Iraqis for no good reason (as an example), but at least old-fashioned protest fails, until it knows it has been lied to before it unleashes its irony. Modern irony ridicules politicians regardless, for their sheer anti-ironic-ness in holding a position in the first place.

So, upon the giant disaster, many people were glad to declare irony’s end. Gerry Howard, editorial director of Broadway World, “I think somebody should do a marker that says irony died on 9-11.” Roger Rosenblatt claimed, in an essay in Time Magazine, that “one of the only things that could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony”(5).

This is striking as the kind of American self-importance that leads people to think they are an absolute and clear dichotomy between good and evil. Once you’ve got one of those, then a) the act of seeking the truth through irony is pointless, because it’s truth is truthing you in the face, and b) the postmodern irony that eschews concepts like “good” and “evil” has been trounced. Naturally, irony was back within a few days, not least because of the myriad ironies contained within the attack itself (America having funded Al-Qa’ida is ironic; America raining bombs and peanut butter on Afghanistan is ironic, but even without those ironic features, irony would have resurfaced pretty soon - only a very fresh tragedy can silence it.

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The End of Irony - by Steven Berg

Phase four: Our age has not so much redefined irony, as focused on just one of its aspects. Irony has had a great influence on the English and French poets - Coleridge’s Rime Of The Ancient Mariner, with its commentary running alongside the narrative, divides the perspective (plus, he read Schlegel, so I’m not just making that up)

But irony as part of the British literary tradition doesn’t, generally speaking, commensurate with Romantic irony, but rather with the directness that is the root of Socrates, viz, saying the opposite of what is true in order to underline the truth. So, from this you’d trace a line from Chaucer, through More, Sidney and Spenser, on to the present, where you can see a pleasing bifurcation of irony’s literary use. Austen uses irony as a means of being understated (Swift, by contrast, uses irony for polemical purposes, conjuring grotesque images ironically (babies being eaten, mankind enslaved to the morally superior) in order to state the bare, unvarnished, bloody, starving, that humanity was going to the dogs) ever since. Once you’ve got one of those, then a) the act of seeking the truth through irony is pointless, because it’s truth is truthing you in the face, and b) the postmodern irony that eschews concepts like “good” and “evil” has been trounced. Naturally, irony was back within a few days, not least because of the myriad ironies contained within the attack itself (America having funded Al-Qa’ida is ironic; America raining bombs and peanut butter on Afghanistan is ironic, but even without those ironic features, irony would have resurfaced pretty soon - only a very fresh tragedy can silence it.

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GERMANS AND IRONY

Not speaking German, nor watching much German TV, nor having read any German literature apart from Bernard Schlink who, let me tell you, is as about ironic as a dog chasing a squirrel, it's difficult to tell whether or not there's any truth in the rumour that they have no sense of irony. However, since they invented it (well, they invented Schlegel), it's more than likely that they've got plenty. To anyone who thinks I'm insufficiently bigoted, I have serious doubts about the French.

IRONY AND AMERICA

There are a few reasons why we think the Americans have no sense of irony. First, there's this optimistic culture, full of love of country and dew-eyed self-belief and all the things that Europe's lost going through the war spin-dryer for the thousandth time. This is all faith-based - faith in God, faith in the goodness of humanity, etc. - and irony can never coexist with faith, since the mere act of questioning causes the faith fairy to disappear. Second, they have a very giving register that, with a sense of irony, would be unsustainable (how can you wish a stranger a nice day with a straight face?). Third, because we think Canadian Alanis Morissette is American, and she proved some time ago, with her song Ironic, that she didn't know what irony meant (this is so ironic - first, because we think we're the more sophisticated and yet don't know the difference between America and Canada, second because America sees Canada as such a tedious sleeping partner, and yet Canada is subversively sending idiots into the global marketplace with American accents. Of course, I'm being ironic. Canadian accents are not the same as American ones.)

In fact, this is absolute moonshine, since the consummate and well-documented superiority of US telly over British telly is largely due to their superior grasp of irony (as well as the fact that they have more cash). Take, for instance, the opening sequences of Six Feet Under versus the opening sequences of Casualty - they both start every episode with a vignette in which a stranger dies a horrible death or suffers a hideous accident. In Six Feet Under, this will never be straightforward - the porn star will never die because her silicon implants explode; she will die in some way that could happen to anyone, the wheezing, scared-looking sportsman will turn out to have been just a bit thirsty, while his amazingly strong team-mate will be dying in the background from heat stroke. There's always some cosmic irony, swiftly followed by ironic dialogue: in Casualty, on the other hand - man leaves pub in middle of day, commences dangerous-looking welding job, burns own eye out in drunk accident. But blindness, and therefore isn't ironic at all. Furthermore, where rhetorical irony can be as simple as saying the opposite of what you mean, cosmic irony is not simply experiencing the opposite of what you thought was going to happen. For instance, if I was having a party, and thought my dad was going to come, and he didn't, that wouldn't be ironic. If, on the other hand, I was having a party and I didn't want my dad to come, and I spent three weeks working on a brilliant cover story for why he couldn't come, and then my sister accidentally blew my cover, so I had to invite him anyway, and then, on the way here, he got run over and died - that's ironic.

I hope he realizes that example was, well, not ironic, but certainly meant with no ill will.

But, whatever (here, with ludic irony), I'm trying to get out of writing a conclusion by affecting the jargon of the clofftoned teenager. Obviously, I don't mean "whatever" - I don't share the disaffected carelessness of the standard "whatever" user. But I'm still getting out of writing a conclusion. To know inauthenticity isn't the same as being authentic. Or even, just because you ironically know you're wrong doesn't make you right.

1. Jack Lynch, Literary Terms I would strongly urge you not to read any more footnotes, they are only here to make sure I don't get in trouble for plagiarizing.

2. ‘In it [irony] everything should be all jest and all serious-ness, everything guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It contains and arouses a sense of the indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is the freest of all license, because through it one transcends oneself, but at the same time it is the most prescribed, because [it is] absolutely necessary.”

3. This is obviously debatable, but Paul Fusel in The Great War And Modern Memory made the case compellingly. Truthfully, British irony's political usage has to be deemed to have started with Swift, alongside Addison and Steele. Oh, go on, disagree with me if you like, see if I care.

4. Paul de Man, The Rhetoric Of Temporality

5. Both these quotes are from Michiko Kakutani, Critic's Notebook The Age Of Irony Isn't Over After All, Assertions of Cynicism's Demise Belie History
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121 Ponsonby Road

ESQUIRES
Auckland Central Library,
Lorne Street, Auckland

MEZZE BAR
9 Durham Street East

POD ESPRESSO
Auckland University
Student Commons, Lvl 2
(outside), 9 Symond St,
Auckland Central.

RELAX LOUNGE
30-38 Princess Street, Auckland
(Auckland University).

ROASTED ADDICTION
487 New North Road, Kingsland,
Auckland
ph: 815 0913

SLURP CAFE
2 Alfred Street, Auckland CBD
Auckland University

THE COUNTER
AUT Tower

VOLCANIC CAFE
450 Mt Eden Road,
Auckland

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CAFFE MODE
86A Upland Road,
Kelburn, Wellington
ph: 04 4755500

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