

REVIEW

Richard J. Bernstein. *Ironic Life* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 2016), 184 pp. ISBN: 978-1-509-50572-2

“Irony” may evoke for many a literary device defined by Quintilian as “that figure of speech or tropes in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood.”¹ So understood, irony has been the topic of literary debates, but has been little attended to in the mainstream Anglo-American philosophical sphere – or so Richard J. Bernstein contends in *Ironic Life* (2016). His contribution to addressing philosophy’s neglect of irony, however, takes as its concern not a rhetorical trope but, more intriguing, the notion of irony as a *way of living a human life*. In exploring “ironic life” from its two major historical advocates and exemplars, Socrates and Kierkegaard, through to four modern philosophers who address the topic, Bernstein engages with the question of not just what irony is, but what philosophy and human life itself can be.

Ironic Life is structured over four chapters: the first three focus on the work of specific thinkers, while the fourth functions as a conclusion, integrating and synthesizing what has gone before. Each chapter provides a selective exegesis of the philosophers under consideration before moving to an evaluative and analytic concluding portion. The first chapter addresses what Jonathan Lear and Richard Rorty have written about irony, presenting them as sharing more common ground than they acknowledge yet also pointing to their differences and weaknesses. Chapter 2, titled “What is Socratic Irony?” addresses that question as answered by the great Socratic scholars Gregory Vlastos and Alexander Nehamas. Bernstein turns his attention in Chapter 3 to Kierkegaard, reviewing what Lear, Rorty, Vlastos and Nehamas have to say about this “specter haunting our discussion of irony”² and continuing with an investigation of Kierkegaard’s own interpretation of and response to Socratic irony. Finally, “Irony, Philosophy, and Living a Human Life” moves beyond the exegesis and analysis of other philosophers, gesturing towards Bernstein’s own conviction that “the turn to a philosophical investigation of irony as it relates to living a human life is ... important and relevant today.”³ Thus *Ironic Life* aims to marry an analysis of what philosophers have said *about* ironic living with a normative call to arms. The central thread which Bernstein draws from all the philosophers under consideration is an emphasis on irony,

¹ Richard J. Bernstein, *Ironic Life* (2016), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 74.

³ *Ibid.*, 125.

and philosophy itself, as a mode of human existence. The disparate thinkers may have differing conceptions of what “irony” really is, but all are concerned to some degree with retrieving a philosophical tradition which goes beyond theoretical argument and incorporates lived experience at its heart. By pulling out this thread, Bernstein skilfully provides coherence to his study of a varied selection of thinkers.

Ironic Life is clearly written, with particular credit due for Bernstein’s straightforward sign-posting of the book’s contents at multiple instances. The reader is kept oriented throughout, with chapter subheadings also mobilized to useful effect and listed in the contents. The paratext is comprehensive and useful, with extensive, thoughtful endnotes and two indices enabling the reader to find material by name or subject. There are a small number of misprints, but these do not mar the effect of a well-produced text oriented towards assisting the reader’s ability to find and comprehend material of interest.

Bernstein’s exegesis of his chosen philosophers is excellent, and he provides interesting and innovative interpretations of their thought. His material is skillfully mobilized, setting the different thinkers’ arguments in juxtaposition with clarity and deftness. *Ironic Life* could benefit from going further beyond exegesis, however. Lengthy block quotes are frequent throughout, which, in conjunction with phrases such as “Rorty seeks to describe,”⁴ “Vlastos draws an analogy,”⁵ and “Kierkegaard swerves away from Hegel,”⁶ sometimes gives the impression of an excellently presented literature review for a larger project. While Bernstein is clearly convinced of the value of ironic living and practical philosophy, directly expressing his “worry that academic philosophy today is doing everything it can to kill the romantic erotic impulse in students,”⁷ *Ironic Life* lacks a strong sense of his *own* stance on irony or lived philosophy. In this it stands in contrast to Alexander Nehamas’s *The Art of Living* (1998) – discussed in detail in *Ironic Life* – which compellingly presents itself as *one of the art of living’s “many guises”*⁸ and openly expresses Nehamas’s hope that “my own reflection on Socrates ... may have resulted in a slightly different manner of doing things.”⁹ Nehamas’s book self-consciously enacts the mode of philosophy with which it is concerned, and his authorial voice is clearly heard. Bernstein, on the other hand, repeatedly falls back on the words and thoughts of others, even concluding *Ironic Life* with a quote from the *Republic*: “It is not *any* question we are dealing with, but rather *how should one live?*” I was left wondering what, exactly, Bernstein’s own answer to this question is and how he conceives of ironic living in today’s world.

Ironic Life adds to a growing conversation about the distinction between theoretical philosophy – in which we “want to know whether the theses advanced are correct, and

⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁸ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (1998), 188.

⁹ Ibid.

... seek to evaluate the reasons offered in support of the theses"¹⁰ – and what Nehamas has termed practical philosophy. Practical philosophy, “especially prominent in the Hellenistic period,”¹¹ is concerned with the practice or art of living. The recent resurgence of interest in philosophy so conceived is largely due to the scholarship of Pierre Hadot, who influentially demonstrated the way in which ancient Western philosophy “involved a vision and specific *practices* required for a certain way of living in the world.”¹² Another major contribution to the interpretation of philosophy as a practical activity can be found in Martha Nussbaum’s *The Therapy of Desire: theory and practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994), while more recently Costica Bradatan argued for the recognition of certain ways of *dying* as a philosophical art in *Dying for Ideas: The Dangerous Lives of the Philosophers* (2015). By focusing his attention on the role *irony* can (and perhaps must) play in a lived philosophical life, Bernstein adds a valuable voice to a developing conversation which takes “philosophy” beyond its now-conventional academic instantiations. Identifying irony as a component to philosophical living takes us towards more specific analyses of different aspects of practical philosophy, which have perhaps been absent hitherto.

Readers familiar with Foucault’s later body of work will recognize this conversation as continuous with Foucault’s interest – inspired partly by Hadot – in practices of the self in ancient philosophy, the relationship between spirituality and philosophy, and his own advocacy and instantiation of a modern art of living. Indeed, Nehamas’s *The Art of Living* identifies Foucault as a key figure of the art of living and self-creation through writing. Although Bernstein refers to Foucault almost solely in this context, it is not hard to identify multiple points of connection between issues raised in *Ironic Life* and Foucault’s work. Discussing Kierkegaard, for instance, Bernstein refers to his “swerve to ethical passion: freely choosing what we are to become. ... it is possible for each of us as ‘single individuals’ to *freely* actualize ourselves as ethical human beings.”¹³ The language used recalls Foucault’s analysis of ethics as “the conscious [*reflechie*] practice of freedom,”¹⁴ in which “extensive work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape.”¹⁵ The notion of free self-creation as an ethical act is profoundly Foucauldian, and it is intriguing to consider how Bernstein’s work on different understandings of ironic life might contribute to developing Foucauldian ethics.

While *Ironic Life* is somewhat limited in its scope, confining itself largely to the synthesis of others’ thought, it is a valuable contribution to several philosophical conversations. Those interested in irony, philosophy as a way of life, Socrates, or any of the philosophers whose work Bernstein addresses, will be likely to find useful and

¹⁰ *Ironic Life*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 284.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

stimulating material in this book. Its mass of citations and quotes may not lend it much appeal beyond an academic readership, however – a shame, since the subject could be of much interest to a wider audience seeking for ways to live their lives. However, perhaps we should best read Bernstein’s book as a very worthwhile propaedeutic to further work on the potential and desirability of that very thing its title proclaims: an ironic life.

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