

Episode 16 Bischalach

In season seven of the television series *The Simpsons*—perhaps you’ve heard of it—there is an episode entitled “Homerpalooza.” In this episode, Homer Simpson becomes famous for his beer belly. Because of his beer belly, he can have a cannonball shot into his belly, and live to tell the tale. This talent of Homer’s gets him hired with the traveling musical festival, popular in the nineties, known as *Lollapalooza*. Homer becomes the kind of “opening act” for the bands which will perform, bands like the Smashing Pumpkins, REM, and Sonic Youth. Homer walks on stage, lifts up his shirt, and a cannon hurls a cannonball into his belly. Homer raises his arms in victory, and the crowd cheers.

At one of these performances, the camera cuts away to two audience members who are about to watch Homer’s cannonball performance. These two audience members are what we might call stereotypical nineties teenagers, stereotypical generation Xers. They have nose piercings, one of them isn’t wearing a shirt, the other one has on a backwards hat, and the sides of their head are shaved. Most important is their facial expression: their look combines irritation and cynicism, perhaps better described as a scowl.

They are standing in the audience, and Homer is about to come on stage. Here is the short conversation between the two teenagers. The first one says, when he sees Homer Simpson: “Oh, here comes that cannonball guy. *He’s cool.*” To which the second one replies: “Are you being sarcastic, dude?” The generation Xer lowers his head and his face becomes sad. He replies in a defeated voice: “I don’t even know anymore.”

This eight-second clip from *the Simpsons* masterfully encapsulates a phenomenon which may not have existed until our modern age. In just eight seconds, *The Simpsons* diagnoses a perhaps toxic *Weltanschauung* of our times. It brilliantly shows how, in a way, our method of thinking has become so warped that it has the power to turn against itself. What is this phenomenon? This is the phenomenon of *post-modern irony*.

Now, before we can analyze *post-modern irony*, we need to first figure out what normal, traditional irony is. There are, in fact, three forms of traditional irony. There is dramatic irony, situational irony, and verbal irony. Dramatic irony occurs when an audience is watching a performance, and the audience knows something which the character does not know. Shakespeare was constantly using dramatic irony in his plays. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Juliet has taken poison such that she appears dead, but will wake up in twenty-four hours or so. But Romeo sees her and thinks she is actually dead. The audience watches in horror as Romeo takes *real* poison so as to join Juliet in death. This is dramatic irony. Situational irony occurs when our expectations of what should occur are thwarted. The opposite of what we would expect is what actually happens. Some basic examples of these would be: if a fire station burns down or if an expert on punctuality is running late to a conference in which he will be giving tips on how to be more punctual. Let’s say a couple is getting married and they are worried it will rain during their wedding, so they make the difficult decision to hold the wedding indoors. Then, during the wedding, something sets off the fire alarm and the sprinklers turn on, soaking all of the guests. That is situational irony. (And note that this is rather different from Alanis Morissette’s lyric, “it’s like rain on your wedding day,” which isn’t ironic, merely unfortunate.)

The third form is verbal irony, and that is the form on which I would like to focus. Verbal irony is, quite simply, when you say something which is different than what you really *mean* to express. Let’s say it’s raining, and you remark to your friend, “Wow, *lovely* weather we’re

having today, huh?” This is verbal irony, because you say the weather is lovely, but it’s obvious that what you really mean is that the weather is bad. Or if a student, say, gets a bad grade on an exam, and remarks to himself, “great, that’s just great.” This would be verbal irony, because he finds this bad grade anything *but* great. These are classic, straightforward examples of verbal irony. But in real life, verbal irony can be much more subtle and crafty. I am constantly using verbal irony on *The Schrift*. At the beginning of the episode, I brought up *The Simpsons* and then I said: perhaps you’ve heard of it. *The Simpsons* is perhaps the most famous television show to ever exist. But I didn’t say: *The Simpsons* is *surely* a television show you know, because it’s one of the most famous shows ever. Instead, I said: perhaps you’ve heard of it. This is a kind of understatement. You know what I *meant* by saying “perhaps you’ve heard of it” but I didn’t have to spell it out for you, so to speak. That is verbal irony. There may even be a bit of verbal irony when I used to say in the intro to the Schrift that “I’m not a rabbi. I don’t even have a PhD yet.” I say this in a way which suggests that I don’t really see these qualifications as entirely necessary to make these lectures. That these are just “titles.” But I don’t come right out and tell the listeners of the Schrift: I believe I am qualified to give these lectures even though I haven’t yet gotten my doctoral or rabbinical degree. I am being mysterious and cryptic as to what I really wish to convey, perhaps even to myself.

But the short conversation in *The Simpsons* actually takes irony one step further. The irony now seems to be existing only for its own sake. The ironic comment is being fired randomly into the wind without any clear target. The first concertgoer says: “Here comes that cannonball guy. *He’s cool.*” Let’s say some dorky, computer nerd had walked on the stage. Then, this would just be basic verbal irony, because obviously the computer nerd is obviously *not* cool. “Here comes that computer nerd. *He’s cool.*” But, here, it’s unclear if Homer as the “cannonball guy” is cool or not. So, when the teenager says, “Here comes that cannonball guy. *He’s cool,*” we don’t know whether to take him seriously or ironically. His friend asks him, “Uh, are you being sarcastic, dude?” To which the teenager replies, disheartened, “I don’t even know anymore.” Very quick footnote: sarcasm is a form of verbal irony, so we could easily replace “are you being sarcastic, dude?” with “are you speaking ironically, dude?” This is post-modern irony, because it is irony *for its own sake*. It is an ironic comment which does not try to elucidate *anything* about the outside world. It is just made gratuitously and haphazardly.

Now, let’s say it wasn’t Homer Simpson who walked across the stage, who could or could not be “cool.” Let’s say, instead, that it was James Dean who walked across the stage. Now, say what you will about James Dean, there’s pretty much a consensus that he was a cool guy. And please, spare me the contrarian arguments about how James Dean was so cool that he wasn’t cool and so on. He was cool, let’s just leave it at that for now. So, James Dean walks across the stage, and the Gen-Xer says to his friend: “Oh, here comes James Dean, *he’s cool.*” What kind of irony is this? Because here, he is making an ironic statement about that which he actually believes to be true. This would be an example of *meta*-irony. The Gen-Xer is being *ironic* about *irony* itself. He is, we might say, *mocking* the very idea of speaking ironically. The irony is functioning on a *meta* level.

Let’s return to the weather example for a moment so I can hammer home this point. It is an absolutely beautiful day outside. The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, everyone’s wearing shorts and sandals and so forth. You step outside with your friend, let’s call him Lou. Lou says to you: “Wow, what gorgeous weather we have today.” This would be a non-ironical statement. It’s just stating the truth. Nothing is being hidden or disguised in this statement. Now, this time, let’s replace Lou with another friend of yours, named Larry. You walk outside with

Larry into the beautiful weather. Larry then says with a smile: “Wow, *terrible* weather today, huh?” This statement would, of course, be classic, 101, verbal irony. When Larry says the weather is *terrible*, he really means that it is *amazing*. Finally, this time, let’s change Larry to Logan. You walk outside with Logan into the beautiful weather. Logan smiles, or maybe he doesn’t smile, and says to you: “Wow, the weather sure is *beautiful* today. You couldn’t ask for a more gorgeous day. Makes me want to put on sandals and shorts and go for a walk in the park.” Logan’s comments would be examples of meta-irony. Everything he says *confirms* the great weather. But he says it in a tone which normally would indicate that he means the *opposite* of what he says. Put another way, Logan is mocking the irony of Larry. Logan is being *ironic* about irony. He is being meta-ironic.

Why did I choose the names Lou, Larry, and Logan? Each of these names fits a certain generation. Have you ever met an old person named Logan? How many Larrys do you know who are about to retire and whose favorite band is the Grateful Dead? And when’s the last time you followed someone named “Lou” on Instagram? Lou is from the World War II or the greatest generation. This generation tended to speak more straightforwardly and to mean what they said and to say what they meant. Larry comes from the baby boomer generation. This generation was absolutely drowning in irony, but in a way that was still classical irony—obviously with many exceptions. Finally, Logan comes from the millennial generation—my generation—which now has presumed to speak *ironically* about the “old-fashioned” ironic statements of the previous generation.

Indeed, irony—or lack thereof—is so powerful that it can almost *define* a society, it can become a *Zeitgeist*, it can represent the worldview of a people. If I say those three phrases to myself, I almost immediately conjure up the image of the prototypical person from that generation. “Beautiful weather today!” Greatest generation. “Terrible weather today.” Baby Boomer. “Great weather today.” Millennial. Now, perhaps, take a moment to ask yourself how it would be if these three guys were forced to spend a day together. I would imagine—quite awkward. Then take a moment to ask yourself which of these three guys—Lou, Larry, or Logan—you’d most prefer to hang out with, to spend a day with. Lou, who is beaming with positivity, always stating the obvious, never wanting to get bogged down by cryptic remarks or strange turns of phrase? Or Larry, who is perceptive enough to play with his language, to affirm by denying, to be a bit humorous through being a bit dark. Or Logan, who is confused about the meaning of life, who believes in nothing, but who has the rebelliousness to challenge and question everything, even irony itself. Or you could spend the day with someone like me, who likes to overanalyze irony and place people in ironic boxes. But I wouldn’t suggest you do that.

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard had quite a few things to say about irony. In 1841, he completed his master’s thesis, entitled *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Irony, Kierkegaard pointed out, functions *negatively*. It functions by *denying*, not by affirming. When the weather is beautiful and you say sarcastically, “terrible weather, eh?”, you still indicating the weather is beautiful but through negative means. Attached to every ironic statement is a kind of question mark, where the audience is not really sure what the speaker intends to say. In the introduction to *The Schrift* on some earlier episodes, I start out by saying, “I’m not a rabbi. I don’t even have a PhD yet.” These are ironic statements. What does this mean? I could have just said, I am a well-read individual and I have some creative ideas. Instead, I chose to define myself *negatively*, by stating what I am not—a rabbi or a PhD. This leaves open the question of *what I am* instead.

Kierkegaard makes this point over and over again in his master's thesis. Kierkegaard says that irony first came into the world with Socrates. Do you remember Socrates? He was that old man walking around ancient Athens, getting into arguments with the locals about all kinds of trivialities. In episode 12 of *The Schrift*, I mentioned how our society can't mention the names of the patriarchs and matriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, and so forth—without heaping on them hyperbolic praise. The same is true with Socrates and our society. We hear the name Socrates and immediately prostrate ourselves. The founder of philosophy, the great pursuer of truth, the martyr for an idea. Kierkegaard wants to say: not so fast. Was Socrates really so great? Or was he actually a bit villainous.

Socrates actually made his way in the world by making other people look stupid and confused. His great mission was to show that people don't actually know anything. Socrates engages local Athenians in dialogues. At the beginning of the dialogue, the Athenian boasts himself to be an expert on a given subject. Socrates *pretends* to be ignorant on the subject, in order to get the Athenian to explain it to him. This feigned ignorance is known as Socratic irony, precisely because it is *pretended*. Socrates then hurls perplexing questions at the Athenian and leads him by the nose in all kinds of directions of thought. Yet, Socrates does so deceptively, as though he is really interested in the Athenian's answers. In fact, Socrates is just laying a trap for the Athenian to fall into so that, at the end of the conversation, Socrates can prove to the Athenian that he has no idea what he's talking about.

Now, here you might think, so what? What's wrong with showing people they are ignorant through ironic statements? Here, Kierkegaard distinguishes between ironic statements and between ironic *people*. Ironic statements are isolated comments that we all make. *Ironic people* are those whose reason-for-being is *irony*. These are people for whom, we might say, nothing in life is to be taken seriously, for whom everything is a game. Finally, who *watch with pleasure* as *other people* take life seriously, secretly knowing how foolish these people are for, in short, not being more ironic.

If it is beautiful weather and someone says, "terrible weather, eh?", this is an ironic statement. But it has a purpose behind it. Its purpose is actually to *emphasize* the beauty of the weather. The speaker of this statement is not necessarily an ironic person or, as Kierkegaard would say, an *ironist*, but rather just someone who likes to speak creatively and cleverly. But for Kierkegaard, Socrates did not only constantly speak ironically, but rather his entire attitude toward life was *ironic*. His goal was nihilistic. He wanted to steal from people their belief in something. He wanted to show that all of life was just a façade. But he did so in a furtive and deceptive way. He pretended and behaved as though he were just a regular Athenian. He paid his taxes, he served in the army, he went to parties. But deep down, in his heart of hearts, he was ridiculing all of these social norms, he was mocking them, he was laughing at them. Or put another way, he was *negating* them. He was *negating* everything.

Now, being a contrarian and aiming to disprove things is, in and of itself, not necessarily a bad thing. It is not necessarily an ironic thing. But Kierkegaard emphasizes that, for Socrates, there was no backup plan. There was no alternative to give these people after he had crushed their worldview. Socrates did not have a better way to live which he wanted to show people. He just wanted to destroy without also wanting to create. This is a nihilist, par excellence. All Socrates had behind the curtain, we might say, was just more irony. His entire life was a kind of scorched earth campaign, in which every ironic attack only allowed for further ironic attacks, until all "illusions" of the outside world had been destroyed. For Socrates, even death did not

bother him. He simply took the hemlock without protest, enjoying to the last the ability to mock that which other people take seriously.

Why would Socrates do this? What is the motivation for being an ironist? Kierkegaard has a term for it: negative absolute freedom. The ironist negates and disproves and turns serious things into trifles, so that he can feel more free. It allows the ironist to float above society and feel himself superior. Every time you treat a matter ironically, you are, in a sense, rebelling against it. You are asserting your freedom and your subjectivity.

Yet, Kierkegaard points out, there is just one problem. With irony, the subject is continually *retreating*. Yet, eventually you reach the point where *retreat* is no longer possible. Where is this point? This point is when irony itself becomes ironic. What happens when the ironic person turns his irony against himself? He then finds himself in a catch-22 and a paradox. If he takes *himself* seriously, then he has betrayed his ironic cause. He now finds himself attaching importance to something *other than* irony. He is then nothing more than a hypocrite. Yet, if he treats himself ironically, then he cancels himself out, as it were. All of his joy of mocking others is itself negated by the fact that he must now mock himself.

In Kierkegaard's later work, he would develop a solution to this paradox. But that solution goes beyond the scope of this episode, and will have to hopefully be covered in a future episode of *The Schrift*.

But here is a little clue of what's to come. I've said before that, often, opposite concepts are nearly identical. This is quite ironic. But let's leave that irony aside for now. Kierkegaard would later show how the ironist and the religious person are, in a way, on nearly the same mission. Like the ironist, the religious person also does not take the affairs of the world with great seriousness. Because the religious person knows that all of these matters pale in comparison with God. Moreover, for the religious person, it is actually good to *negate* the world, as it allows one to connect more fully with the Infinite and the All-Knowing, which stands behind everything. The ironist undergoes the same process, but all that stands behind each negation is another negation. The religious person is negating so as to expand, whereas the ironic person is negating so as to contract. The infinite awaits the religious person, whereas a big number "zero" awaits the ironist, we might say. Yet, both are undergoing a process in which they are continually depriving the outer world of importance.

Maybe that's why ultra-orthodox Jews and far-left elitist Marxists live side-by-side in Brooklyn.

I began this podcast with the idea that Moshe achieved the eternal by always being in a state of striving toward the Promised Land. But in episode 12, I talked about how there can be upward striving, and downward striving. Josef K. from Kafka's *The Trial* was also pursuing a goal with as much tenacity as Moshe. But Josef K.'s goal of proving himself *innocent* was a downward striving, a negative striving, in which he was closing in on himself, in which he was retreating. Moshe's upward striving was expansive and positive, always moving forward. Moshe's striving represents a kind of eternal heaven, whereas Josef K.'s or Socrates' was a kind of eternal hell.

In the parsha for this week, Bischalach, something very special occurs. The Torah gives us its first joke, and this is an ironic joke. I remember I once asked a friend of mine, who actually is a rabbi, Yehoshua Lewis of Highland Park, if there's ever any humor in the Torah. He answered immediately: of course! Exodus 14 verse 11. "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the desert?"

The Hebrews have just left Egypt and they are already complaining. And to top it off, they are doing so ironically. The Hebrews are fleeing for the Red Sea, where God will soon part the waters so that they can walk across into safety. But the Hebrews don't know that yet. They see the Egyptian army on the horizon, hunting them down. They think they are going to be killed. So, they say to Moses: "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the desert?" This is ironic because it is a bitter statement whose meaning can only be inferred indirectly. What they really want to say is: "Moses: You are an idiot. Why did you lead us out here to die? We should have stayed in Egypt." This is an ironic comment. But we know that, fortunately, the Hebrews are not full-blown ironic people like Socrates was. In the very next sentence, they return to speaking sincerely. They say: "What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?" The irony doesn't last long. But it's there. Also, perhaps without realizing it, they are pointing out an example of situational irony. They escaped Egypt to be free, and now they are about to die in the desert. The Hebrews are using verbal irony to explain to Moshe a bitter example of situational irony.

Now, the Torah is one of the least *ironic* books out there. It is a book in which all matters are taken seriously, in which the figures speak with dignity and with sincerity, in which the teenagers from *The Simpsons* would never make an appearance. Indeed, for many people, reading the Torah is refreshing, as it is nice to return to a world which seems more solemn and more consequential and more authentic than the one in which we currently live. As the example from *The Simpsons* has shown, our age is saturated with irony. We are drowning in irony today. It can become a bit sickening. We have already read through the Book of Genesis and a significant portion of Exodus. So far, no irony, as far as I can tell. Would Abraham or Jacob ever speak this way: "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you brought us out to die in the desert?"

Irony, then, is beginning to rear its ugly head, just when the Hebrew slaves are entering the story. As we will see throughout the remainder of the Torah, these Hebrew slaves are not depicted positively. They are depicted as complainers, whiners, traitors. With this line from Exodus 14 verse 11, we get the first—but by no means the last—statement from this group of Hebrew slaves. And first thing they will ever say is something *ironic*. Hmm, what might the Torah be hinting to us here about the *kind of people* who speak ironically?

In episode 0, I talked about the early German Romantics from the turn of the nineteenth century. One of their intellectual missions was to capture the infinite in a work of art. I compared their work with that of Moshe's death on Mount Moab. By dying on Mount Moab, just before entering the Land of Israel, Moshe remained in a state of eternal becoming. By not reaching his goal of salvation in the Promised Land, he, paradoxically, became all the more infinite. The German Romantics had a similar idea. The leader of this group of German Romantics was named Friedrich Schlegel. Schlegel decided that the *fragment* is the most perfect work of art, because a fragment is eternally in a state of motion; it is in a continual state of becoming; it is forever closing itself and interrupting itself at the same point.

But let's take a step back for a moment and think about Schlegel's fragment as the perfect work of art. A poem which is a fragment is doing something rather peculiar. It is a poem which is commenting on itself. It is a poem which is self-reflective. It is a poem about poetry as art. Its purpose is not just to be poetry, but also to comment on poetry. If you think about it, this is highly ironic. Like Socrates *negating* his fellow Athenians, this poem is, in a sense, *negating* itself, challenging itself, reflecting on itself. It is mocking itself. And, in fact, there is actually a sophisticated term for this phenomenon. That term is: romantic irony. Yet Schlegel did not see

irony, like Kierkegaard did, as negative and restrictive. For Schlegel, irony was the key to the infinite. Schlegel said that, "Irony is, as it were, the demonstration of infinity, of universality, of the feeling for the universe." And on that note, we might ask whether Kierkegaard, in railing against irony, was perhaps doing so *ironically*.

How did Schlegel come to this conclusion? Now, I have been saying that irony is when you say one thing but mean something else. When the motive behind what you say is hidden, maybe even to yourself. This is the classical, 101 definition of irony. But irony can be more complex and subtle. Schlegel had a more expansive conception of irony. For Schlegel, irony occurs when opposites meet and cannot be reconciled. This is supreme irony. If you think about it, when Socrates spoke to his fellow Athenians, there may have at least been a *chance* that they would understand him or see through his ironic statements. But with two opposites being simultaneously true, this is the ultimate deception. Not even the most clever of us will be able to see through the irony to the truth. Or put another way, a paradox is the most airtight form of irony. For Schlegel, this moment of clashing of two simultaneous truths was a chance to glimpse the infinite, a chance to achieve transcendence. For Schlegel, a fragmentary poem did not cancel itself out, but rather transcended itself.

Now, if you don't find Schlegel's conception of fragmentary art convincing, you are not alone. Hegel, who we talked about last week, despised Schlegel's theory. Hegel called ironic art "the absolutely inaesthetic thing." He condemned ironic art as seeking "only to enjoy itself," only to "play." Hegel thought that art should affirm something ethical and positive, not just get lost within itself.

When the Hebrews cross the Red Sea, they are immediately instructed by Moses to sing a long song to God in tribute and gratitude. This is the kind of song which probably would have pleased Hegel. It is not playful. It is not ironic. It is not clever. Rather, it is militant, celebratory, and triumphant, with lines like, "The lord will reign for ever and ever," and "You made Your wind blow, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the majestic waters."

Why does Moses insist on singing the Hebrew slaves this long anthem the moment after they cross the Red Sea? It is almost as though Moses has figured out: I am dealing with an ironic people. I need to snap them out of their ironic view of the world. I need to indoctrinate them a bit, get them in line, get them to stop questioning me and doubting me. But, just a few lines after the song, the Hebrew slaves take up their complaining again—this time about the water's being too bitter to drink. Once irony has been released into the world, it has a tendency to take root and multiply. It is not so easy to put the ironic genie back in the bottle.