Three Types of Dramatic Irony

Timo Airaksinen

1 The Definitions of Dramatic Irony

Peter Goldie provides two examples of dramatic irony:

> In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, there is a scene that involves a very powerful use of dramatic irony. Gloucester, who has recently been cruelly blinded, wants to die. He asks Edgar to take him to the "very brim" of the cliffs of Dover, to "a cliff whose high and pending head / Looks fearfully in the confined deep" (Act IV Scene i). Edgar misleads him into thinking that he has done just that. […] The audience knows that what Gloucester does not know: that, contrary to what he thinks, he is not on the edge of the cliffs of Dover, and thus not able with one step to cast himself over the edge to his certain death. This is dramatic irony.[1]

Compare this with Goldie's second example: "[I]n Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the audience *knows* that Oedipus killed his father at the crossroads, but Oedipus *thinks* he killed a stranger."[2] *Macmillan Dictionary* agrees: dramatic irony occurs in "a situation in which an audience *knows* more about what is happening in a play or film than the characters do." *Britannica* adds to this: "the words and actions of the characters […] take on a different—often contradictory—*meaning* for the audience than they have for the work's characters." Richard Nordquist mentions both the idea of different meanings and the doxastic gap.[3] *Dictionary.com* says: Dramatic irony entails "*irony* that is inherent in speeches or a situation of a drama and is understood by the audience but not grasped by the characters in the play" (my italics).

[1] Goldie (2014), p. 27.

[2] Goldie (2014), pp. 26–27.

[3] Nordquist (2020).

T. Airaksinen (✉)
Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Practical Philosophy, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsingin yliopisto, Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: timo.airaksinen@helsinki.fi

M. A. Leroch and F. Rupp (eds.), *Power and Responsibility*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23015-8_2

These definitions focus on (1) a doxastic asymmetry between the characters on stage and the audience, (2) the characters' interpretation of relevant situational meanings, and (3) the characters' missed ironies on stage. How are these three definitions related? We also need an intuitive notion of dramatic irony: what happens on stage and how the audience understands it is somehow problematic and unsettling. Hence, the audience finds the situation ironic. Therefore, the theory of dramatic irony must explain the emerging irony. I argue that (3) entails (2) and (2) entails (1), but not vice versa. Dramatic irony always displays (1), which may not explain or exemplify situational irony, unlike (2) and especially (3). In other words, when the audience recognizes (1), they must use (2) and (3) to explain the resulting ironies. But they cannot use (2) and (3) without (1).

In what follows, I understand irony in the usual manner.[4] Verbal irony entails a discrepancy between a speaker's surface meaning and real meaning, or what she says and does not say, given that the context is not metaphoric.[5] A big and robust person begs a little man not to hurt him. What he says (surface meaning) does not fit what the audience thinks he should say (real meaning). This is *verbal irony* that the speaker freely creates.[6] It emerges via describing a given social situation in a twisted manner, regardless of the situation. The speaker *makes* it look strange. *Situational irony* is what one *finds* in a twisted social situation. The example above turns into situational irony when we refuse to understand the big man's utterance as verbal irony; we think he is afraid of the little man. If the big man is not afraid when he speaks, the irony is of the verbal kind; if he is afraid, this is situational irony. A minimalist criterion of an utterance or a social situation being ironic follows: the case entails irony if and only if we can detect two mutually inconsistent but related interpretations of it. All three definitions of dramatic irony satisfy this criterion: the audience and the characters see the case on stage differently. The question to ask is, when is the issue significant enough to earn the epithet "dramatic irony"?

Dramatic irony posits characters on stage, a scripted scene, and an audience. We assume that the audience can perceive, understand, and interpret the scene on stage. Sometimes the relevant cues are subtle and ambiguous, and the audience members may disagree and perceive the scene differently. Therefore, we must assume an intelligent, well-informed, and attentive audience, which is not always the case. It has its idealized features. The audience is an idealized doxastic agent who does not miss obvious information as the characters do. The real audience may miss and misread information, unlike the ideal audience that reliably acquires the relevant beliefs. We are interested in an ideal audience when discussing dramatic irony. When we focus on real audiences, they may miss the ironies of a scene. In this case, ironies go unnoticed, but the unnoticed irony is not irony.[7] The idea of a stage may be *als*

[4] See my (2020a) and (2020b).

[5] Such an elementary definition does not distinguish between irony and metaphor; see Dynel (2016).

[6] Richard Rorty seems to think that any situation can be read ironically by an "ironist." See Rorty (1989), p. 73. Also Inkpin (2013), and my (2021a).

[7] The idea of audience is problematic here, in rhetoric, and in argumentation theory. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971) introduced universal audience that "provides shared standards of

ob. Sometimes the characters are on a theater stage, but they may also act in other stage-like situations. The roles and scenes follow a script, or we can read them as if they did: without the script, no characters exist. Characters exist because the script defines them, and they act on stage in front of an audience.

2 The Limits of Doxastic Theory

Dramatic irony may entail a doxastic asymmetry between the audience and the dramatic characters on stage. The audience knows more than the characters who stay ignorant, mistaken, or misguided. The doxastic supremacy of the audience comes about in two ways. The audience may be independently informed, or they acquire their beliefs from the unfolding events on stage. Suppose they read the script beforehand and then see the play. Or they see the play many times over. Like a powerful divinity, they now possess complete knowledge of future events. Does this mean they must now watch the whole play ironically? Everything that happens in every scene is now supposed to be ironic, which is hardly true.

Moreover, the audience will lose the enjoyment based on the naïve viewing that permits immersion into the events as they progress on stage. We may not want to adopt such an independently informed standpoint, even if we could. The doxastic theory looks too general to be viable. It finds irony where it may not exist.

Popular artistic conventions create scenes that look dramatically ironic in the doxastic sense when they are not. They are evident in popular cultures, such as Hollywood films. Conventions indeed offer the audience a chance to ironize their experiences, but this is not dramatic irony, as I will show. Classic Westerns, even the best ones, are so conventional that they may look ludicrous today. An example is Fred Zinneman's *High Noon* (1952). Bad men arrive in town, but the audience realizes they must die as scary as they may look. The contrast between their appearance and predictable fate is ridiculous—it is pure comedy. As the audience predicts, the good guy, sheriff Will Kane, will win the ensuing gun battle. If a gunshot hit him, the wound should be on the shoulder. And bullet wounds are never too painful. They extract the bullet, give him some whiskey, and the wounded man is healthy again. The audience knows all this beforehand. Yet, they cannot predict *how* the bad men die, and thus the viewing is stress-free and enjoyable. This type of foreknowledge aims at stress reduction.

Conventions also rule Hollywood sex. After making love, the woman wraps herself in white bedsheets to her neck, and her bare-chested man used to smoke a cigarette (it is no longer permitted). The audience may skip these conventional ironies because they are so familiar. Technically, such scenes exemplify doxastic dramatic irony, but

---

agreement by which to measure argumentation"—and we can add, the level of observation (p. 133). See Tindale (2004), p. 133. Aikin tries to save the much-criticized idea that is much too vague (Aikin, 2008). See also my (2022), where the idea of audience is central.

only in a trivial sense. Films need their conventions, which entail no irony in any interesting sense. We do not want to force irony on everything.

Will Kane is not Will Kane but Gary Cooper. The audience knows this, but this hardly qualifies as an example of dramatic irony. The case of John Wayne is subtler: he always plays John Wayne even when he plays Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956), and of course, sheriff John T. Chance in *Rio Bravo* (1959). Isn't it dramatically ironic that John Wayne is John T. Chance, who is John Wayne? John Wayne does not act out because he is who he is on stage? He always is the same invincible hero. The audience may realize this as situational irony, but it hardly qualifies as dramatic irony.

The audience often witnesses events on stage of which some characters remain ignorant. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) is an example. The audience sees a murder of which some characters initially know nothing. Rupert (James Stewart) solves the case, and then they all know. Here the audience possesses information that is internal to the script. An independently and externally informed audience reads the script beforehand or leans on the relevant conventions. The Gloucester case exemplifies internal information because the audience knows what happens simply by watching the play.

Sometimes a character knows more than the audience. In Kafka's *The Castle*, K. knows, contrary to what he says, that he is not a land surveyor—a naïve reader may miss this. It is not easy to see through K.'s lies.[8] Should we call the beginning of *The Castle* dramatically ironic because of its inverted doxastic asymmetry? K. knows more than the audience. Agatha Christie's character Hercule Poirot always knows the name of the murderer before the audience does—and the audience wants to be surprised by him. Is this dramatic irony according to the doxastic theory? Hercule Poirot and the murderer cannot know they know more than their audience, for obvious reasons. The audience knows that they know less, and they try to overcome this deficiency through guesswork and logical reasoning. This inverted case is dramatically ironic in the doxastic sense if the only thing that matters is the doxastic asymmetry and not its direction. We may call such a case an extension of dramatic irony.

What about Kafka's K.? The case is obviously ironic. Perhaps the ambiguity of K.'s position is the key: he insists he is a land surveyor and invited by the castle, but a critical audience need not accept this. The castle does not recognize him, and most importantly, he can find no way to enter there. What we see here exemplifies situational irony and, perhaps dramatic irony, if possible, in a stronger sense than in the case of Hercule Poirot. K.'s situation is radically less convention-bound than Poirot's—K-'s lies are hard to detect, and in the end, the case remains controversial and unsettling.

In some cases, the inverted doxastic asymmetry indeed creates dramatic irony, at least intuitively. The inverted asymmetry is dramatically meaningful to the audience. The script ridicules the audience, who cannot say whether K. tells a lie. Or he may be honest, but the audience has a hard time deciding. All this entails dramatic irony in the internal but non-standard sense.

[8] Kafka (2019). See Steinberg (1965), and my (2017)

The following key example shows that the idea of the dramatic irony of doxastic cases is too general to be viable as a definition. Suppose we have a scene on stage where a person sits in a large armchair facing away from the door. The door is open, and two persons emerge at the door. They discuss something, and the third person hears them without revealing her presence in the room. In such a situation, the audience knows more than the discussants, namely, that a third person is in the room and can hear all they say. The discussants disappear from the door. This example works equally well when the person in the armchair does not know about the two persons at the doorway. The audience learns about them, unlike the third person. As we'll see, the problem is the meaninglessness of the knowledge here.

First, let us suppose the discussion was trivial and did not interest the third person; second, the conversation was relevant to her—perhaps it was insulting. According to the doxastic theory, the first case is ironic. It is not. The trivial fact that the characters did not know about each other is meaningless. Suppose the discussion was meaningful to the person in the armchair who heard it. The dramatic irony follows because of the doxastic gap and the meaningfulness of the issue. Someone will be in trouble later on, as the audience now knows. The scene was meaningful, but unlike the audience, the characters do not know it yet.

If the topic was of interest to the third person and she heard it, the case is dramatically ironic. However, the doxastic theory cannot distinguish between the first and second versions. This theory only talks about beliefs and knowledge, but in the first and second cases, these remain the same: the third person is in the room, and the audience, unlike the two discussants, knows it. But the two cases differ in the meaningfulness of the discussion at the door. The dramatic irony requires that the third person hears something she should not hear. Unlike the discussants, the audience can see how the play's plot depends on this event. The third person is now meaningful to the subsequent events, which the characters at the door fail to anticipate.[9]

This simple argument shows that the doxastic theory alone fails to explain dramatic irony. The idea of dramatic irony depends on the meaningfulness of the events on stage, but it also presupposes doxastic asymmetries. The audience knows more of the scene's features that are meaningful to the characters—the script makes them unable to realize it.

3 The Meaning Theory of Dramatic Irony: Sophocles' *Ajax*

The audience and the characters on stage sometimes attach a different meaning to dramatic events so that the characters will miss something. This is different from the doxastic theory. When Oedipus kills his father at the crossroads, he does not know what he is doing. He knows that he kills but not whom he kills. What is the meaning, for him, of this critical event? It is unimportant, but knowledgeable audiences know better. Their beliefs are accurate. Think of Sophocles' *Ajax*, where the great warrior

[9] I am grateful to Dr. Heta Gylling for the basic idea of this example.

Ajax falls raging mad and kills a flock of sheep that he thinks are enemy soldiers.[10] He initially assigns a significant but mistaken meaning to his act: he sees valor in it. He kills himself when he realizes what happened and understands the situational irony and the sarcastic import of the event. What else could he do when he faces his comrades in arms?

The scene is situationally ironic because of Ajax's interpretation; the surface meaning differs from the true meaning. The surface meaning is heroic, but the real meaning is ridiculous and humiliating. He deserves the ridicule. Here the situational irony transforms into dramatic irony in front of a knowledgeable audience. A brave hero killing sheep sounds ludicrous, which the audience realizes well before the hero comes to his senses and understands the real meaning of his actions. Here the ancient moral context is different from the modern one. We think Ajax's madness and Oedipus' ignorance excuse them, which is not what the ancient audiences believed. Ajax and Oedipus are guilty, and both punish themselves cruelly.

Tecmessa, Ajax's concubine, explains the scene and the different perspectives of Ajax and his audience. Ajax fails to interpret his actions correctly, and his madness explains this:

> TECMESSA: Yonder man, while his spirit was diseased, / Himself had joy in his own evil plight, / Though to us, who were sane, he brought distress. / But now, since he has respite from his plague, / He with sore grief is utterly cast down, / And we likewise, no less than heretofore. / Are there not here two woes instead of one?

Indeed, we recognize "two woes instead of one" in this scene. The audience saw the truth where the character could not.

The Ajax case also exemplifies the doxastic theory. Ajax does not know what he is doing, unlike the audience. But the more profound point focuses on Ajax's pride in what he did. A great warrior attacking sheep is paradigmatically ironic—a sheep is a metaphor for defenseless vulnerability. When Ajax finally understands what happened, he commits suicide. The relevant ironies are there to explain the events. The scene's logic depends on Ajax's misreading of the facts, that is, of the false meaning he assigned to them. He does not commit suicide because now he knows what he did—he killed sheep; he must die because he knows the *meaning* of his action. His behavior was ridiculous. And the audience understands all this before Ajax does: a sheep killer warrior is an oxymoron. Ajax's new identity as a warrior and fool is hopelessly confused and no longer allows a consistent description. We can read the sheep killing scene according to the second theory of dramatic irony.

[10] Sophocles (1919) This translation does not provide line numbers.

4 The Irony of Missed Ironies in Euripides

In his oft-quoted article, Gareth Williams refers to "the privileged position of the reader of *Heroides 11* who, through access to the *Odyssey*, is alive to ironies which Ovid's Penelope cannot realize." Hence, he says, we find the third type of dramatic irony here.[11] The critical point is the missed situational irony that turns into dramatic irony when the audience understands it. But Williams does not hold this position self-consciously or consistently, as shown when he discusses the following example:

> She is right to equate Aeolus with the winds, but she does not know enough to appreciate the full force and accuracy of the comparison. Her father's change of heart enables the privileged reader to realize the full potential of the comparison which is impossible for Canace herself.[12]

Along with the idea of "accuracy of comparison," he may return to the doxastic theory of dramatic irony. This wavering is typical when one works with an unanalyzed notion of dramatic irony. And the following hints at the priority of the meaning theory to the doxastic one: "The true comparison between Aeolus and the winds now lies not in their shared ferocity, but in their common changeability."[13] The meanings of the relevant metaphors have changed, but Canace, unlike the audience, does not realize it.

Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae* provides examples of the dramatic irony of the third kind. It also illustrates verbal irony in dramatic settings. The characters miss ironies *de se* on stage, that is, ironies concerning them personally.[14] Dionysus, also called Bacchus and Bromius, arrives at Thebes as a human being and announces himself to the court of king Pentheus as a god who insists on his rites.[15] The king rejects the stranger's divine status, which is a mistake and leads to tragic consequences. The audience knows that Dionysus is a godhead born to Zeus and Semele, a human woman. The audience also knows the conventions of tragedy: Pentheus must perish together with his house. They realize that Pentheus should understand and yield to the god.

Bacchants are already reveling in the nearby hills and woods, but this does not convince Pentheus; it makes him curious, and he wants to see them. Pentheus should and could have known better. Therefore, his royal arrogance is misplaced, and Dionysius mocks him in a threatening manner, promising him a quick death. For him, one's name is an omen, or *Nomen est omen*:

> DIONYSUS: You're quite ignorant of why you live, what you do, and who you are.
>
> PENTHEUS: I am Pentheus, son of Agave and Echion.

---

[11] Williams (1992), p. 201. Tragic Irony is just another word for dramatic irony; see Casali (1995), p. 509f.— Huson (1998) argues that, according to Hegel, "[t]ragic irony is constituted by the self-destruction of a historical subject in whose downfall a *higher objective value is revealed*." (p. 123). This idea is not related to dramatic irony. Also Phillips (2009).

[12] Williams (1992), p. 209.

[13] Idem.

[14] *De se* means "concerning the person". See Torre (2016).

[15] Euripides (2017). See Segal (1997).

> DIONYSUS: A suitable name. It suggests misfortune.
>
> (Lines 630–640)

This sarcasm turns into situational irony when Pentheus threatens to punish the god as if a mortal human being could do that—again, the audience knows better. Dionysus puts the situational irony into words:

> DIONYSUS: What punishment am I to suffer? What harsh penalties will you inflict? (615–616)

The situational irony is evident when the god dresses the king in women's clothes to smuggle him to the orgies of the female Bacchants. But before this happens, the citizens of the *polis* can see their king in a humiliating position dressed as a woman. Again, the audience knows more than Pentheus, which entails dramatic irony. But most importantly, Pentheus misses the situational irony: someone leads the king through his city wearing women's clothes. The audience cannot ignore this irony: the surface is a person walking through the city, and the real concern is a humiliated king. The walk is not what it looks, but Pentheus fails to see its ironies.

An additional source of irony is that the early Christian tradition sometimes confused Jesus Christ and Dionysus.[16] Both are upstart Eastern gods, both born of a woman conceived by a godhead, and they assume the human form, yet insisting on their novel rites. Moreover, their identity is a trinity. Both have three names, and in this sense, they are polymorphic beings, or they are one person in different simultaneous guises.[17] Their names form two triune metonymic groups: Dionysus, Bacchus, and Bromius; God, Spirit, and Son.

Jesus, like Dionysus, uses verbal irony and sarcasm, for instance:

> The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?" (John 10:31–32)
>
> Just at that time some Pharisees approached, saying to Him, "Go away, leave here, for Herod wants to kill You." And He said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach My goal.' Nevertheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day; for it cannot be that a prophet would perish outside of Jerusalem." (Luke 13:33)

These exchanges emphasize that the audience should know better, that is, Jesus indeed is a divine being. He derides them: you do not believe in me although you should—and in the end, you must! The point is: you threaten to kill me, but instead, you will kill yourself. His irony is a warning of a threatening tragedy. This entails the third kind of dramatic irony: both Jesus and Dionysus speak like gods, or sons of a god, although their listeners do not know and understand it, unlike their audiences. Their listeners may not appreciate these ironies, but to miss irony is ironic.

As we see, in addition to verbal play, the Biblical narrative contains dramatic irony. Jesus has his audiences, the readers of the Bible and his contemporary listeners to

---

[16] See Friesen (2014). István Czachesz (2014) argues that Christ was confused with Apollo, Asclepius, Dionysus, Hercules, and Helios etc. (p. 212).

[17] Czachesz (2014), Ch. 7.

whom he announces his divinity, promising life to the believers and sinners death.[18] This is what Dionysus, that cruel Eastern upstart godhead, says, too. Jesus may have provided his contemporary audiences sufficient evidence of his true nature and offered them a chance to show their devotion, yet they failed. The characters in this great religious drama should have known better, which is the foundation of the situational irony that culminates in dramatic irony.

Notice an additional similarity between Jesus and Dionysus: they are ambiguous figures, human beings, and gods. Dionysus says:

> DIONYSUS: Yes, I've changed my form from god to human, / appearing here at these streams of Dirce, / the waters of Ismarus. I see my mother's tomb— / for she was wiped out by that lightning bolt. / It's there, by the palace, with that rubble, / the remnants of her house, still smoldering / from Zeus's living fire—Hera's undying outrage / against my mother. (5–12)

He says he is godly, this is his assertion of identity, yet in other places, he says the god sent him to act as his messenger. Both Jesus and Dionysus are both human and divine.

The king and the god discuss, Pentheus trying to be ironic:

> DIONYSUS: I'm from there. My home land is Lydia.
>
> PENTHEUS: Why do you bring these rituals to Greece?
>
> DIONYSUS: Dionysus sent me—the son of Zeus.
>
> PENTHEUS: Is there some Zeus there who creates new gods?
>
> DIONYSUS: No. It's the same Zeus who wed Semele right here.
>
> (570–580)

Dionysus is indeed a god, but the person Pentheus is now addressing is no longer identical to the god. He is a messenger, although he has divine powers. Jesus was like this, but his final words betray him: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). The question mark here is problematic—the speech act is an accusation that forces dramatic irony into the situation: suddenly, he fails to see what his audience is seeing.

The similarities between Jesus and Dionysus are evident. We learn that their listeners should believe in them, offer them their rites, and worship them—the alternative is death. In both dramas, human characters should know that they must suffer now and forever if they fail. Both plays are cruel because the script dictates that their audiences do not know and believe, although they should. The script condemns them. Should we feel a genuine temptation to warn the characters who listen to these two cruel Eastern gods, namely, "Please, have faith in these two; they are going to humiliate and kill you"? They fail, and this is where the dramatic irony starts: unlike

[18] Kenneth Burke (1970) writes: "The Bible […] teaches us that tragedy is ever in the offering. […] Let us be on guard ever, as regards the subtleties of sacrifice, in the fundamental relationship to governance" (p. 235).

the ideal audience, the characters miss the situational irony inherent in mistreating gods.

When Dionysus leads Pentheus in woman's clothes through the streets of Thebes to his doom in the hands of the raving Bacchae, the audience feels not only that Pentheus should know, but he could know better. His arrogance costs him dearly in the hands of the god who feels Pentheus has betrayed him and caused him unduly unruly harm and pain. However, the ultimate situational irony here results from the strange vulnerability of the god: how can a humble human being cause so much damage to a noble god, or why does he so desperately need his rites? Dionysus never tells, nor does Jesus. Indeed, this entails dramatic irony. It is based on situational ironies that neither the king nor the god can see. The audience realizes that Dionysus fails to appreciate the *de se* ironies of being such a needy god. The mighty god is weak. Or, the powerful are weak without making the weak mighty. Here is another example of the third type of irony:

> DIONYSUS: You've heard what I had to say, / Pentheus, but still you're not convinced. / Though *I'm suffering badly at your hands*, / I say you shouldn't go to war against a god. / You should stay calm. Bromius will not let you / move his Bacchae from their mountains. (My italics.) (963–968)

Perhaps the god speaks ironically. Suppose he does. It does not change the ironies of being dependent on mere mortals. However, if he does *not* speak ironically, the third type of dramatic irony arises. In this case, the god misses the ironies of being a needy and vulnerable god.

5 The Two Functions of Dramatic Irony

Irony is a pragmatic trope, and thus dramatic irony affects the audience. Nordquist writes:

> The function of dramatic irony is to sustain the reader's interest, pique curiosity, and create a contrast between the situation of the characters and the episode that ultimately unfolds. This leads to the audience waiting in fear, anticipation, and hope, waiting for the moment when the character learns the truth behind the events of the story.[19]

He continues, "Readers end up sympathizing with the main characters, hence the irony."[20] How does ironic treatment create such an S-effect (sympathetic effect)? Irony typically entails alienation and a Brechtian V-effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*)[21];

[19] Nordquist (2020).

[20] This irony is not dramatic irony because the dramatic irony focuses on what happens to the characters. Nordquist (2020) focuses on what happens with the audience. It is situational irony *simpliciter*, if it is irony at all.

[21] Berthold Brecht suggested that evil characters should wear a mask or even a crocodile oufit on stage to eliminate any threatening S-effect; see Brecht (1987, p. iv). See also my (2021b). How to stop the audience from liking the evil characters like Puntila on stage? Dramatic irony may bring about the S-effect but other factors do the same.

now dramatic irony should make an S-effect, which is the opposite of alienation; why call dramatic irony "irony" if this is the case? The possibility of the S-effect alone may not refute the idea that irony entails alienation and estrangement.[22] S- and V-effects are mutually incompatible, and irony loves the V-effect. If the audience only recognizes an S-effect, they miss the ironies entailed by the V-effect. Without it, ironic games hardly are worthwhile. Think of Gloucester. The audience may miss the irony of the scene. Thus, they feel pity and sympathize with him directly. Or, they see the irony, which entails the V-effect. They indeed may also feel pity and sympathy, but as well, they may stay at the ironic level and focus on his gullibility.

The V-effect comes first, and S-effect bypasses the irony. In the Oedipus case, it is easy to miss the irony and pay attention merely to the dire consequences of his actions. Hence, the V-effect is an essential element of irony, whereas the S-effect is contingent and often irrelevant. The lesson to learn is: we must pay careful attention to the ironic effects of a dramatic scene.

The general problem of dramatic irony is this: The definition may be clear and straightforward, but audiences may have difficulties seeing the irony, especially when the S-effect is strong or the plot is too exciting and engaging. The invisible irony is an oxymoron: in a scene on stage, dramatic irony rules, but the audience may not notice it. I said above that the idea of an audience is an idealization, and an ideal audience can see and feel the irony wherever it occurs. How satisfying such an ideal solution is hard to say. Dramatic irony is a strange type of irony if the audience tends to miss it on a regular and predictable basis. To use a term borrowed from the philosophy of science, dramatic irony is then a theoretical term.

As I said, if the audience pities Gloucester, they have missed or bypassed the ironies of the case. However, the artistic value of such a scene depends on the ambiguity between its ironic and compassionate readings. The audience may react in two opposite ways. They feel the tension, and thus their experience becomes aesthetically significant. But this presupposes that the audience can first see the scene's ironies.

An ironic speech act plays with falsehoods and twisted language. Thus, it appears as prima facie dishonest. This alienates the audience from the ironic target. They must start thinking from a new perspective, as if from the outside. Also, in the case of verbal irony, the audience must ask what the speaker means. He says something he does not really mean, which creates a communication gap. The audience may try to solve the problem before reacting emotionally. The same applies to ironic situations: they all look somehow strange. But when you listen to an ironist, you may empathize with her target; you may pity him, which entails the opposite of

[22] I agree with Bennett (2016): "It is well estabished that irony is more than just saying one thing and meaning opposite [. . .] It involves what we might see as degree of detachment" (p. 234). See Dynel (2008).—Renegar and Goehring (2013) write: "[In] other words, irony allows for a both/and perspective to flourish in a world where either/or choices are often dissatisfyingly limiting" (p. 319); I call this an Eldorado View of Irony: irony gives us all the good things one may imagine—to put the point ironically.

alienation. Therefore, irony may prompt an S-effect, yet it is not irony if it initially fails to alienate its audience.[23]

Irony itself deserves a sarcastic smile, but not compassion and pity. Irony entails a V-effect but not its derivative S-effect. Situational irony may bring about, say, the feeling of vicarious shame, which indicates an S-effect. A nasty sarcasm is always verbal and may bring about well-founded empathy toward an undeserving victim. Still, as I said, this means reaction formation: the inherently alienating effect backfires.[24] An audience member may want to save the hero on stage by standing up and shouting, "Stop, please don't enter—he's got a gun." She feels the S-effect and thus misses both the V-effect and the irony of the situation. I conclude that S- and V-effects are independent of each other yet often occur together in dramatic contexts and create artistically relevant tensions. The V-effect sometimes brings about the S-effect but not necessarily. The V-effect entails alienation and S-effect togetherness.

6 The Roots of Dramatic Irony

A scene must be meaningful and engaging to create dramatic irony. Goldie's example satisfies this condition. Gloucester's situation is miserable, yet Edgar is cruelly deceiving him; thus, the audience cares. And the case is situationally ironic: the audience knows Edgar's help is a travesty. The audience may sympathize with Gloucester and condemn Edgar or laugh with Edgar, which entails a cynical attitude toward Gloucester's predicament.

The scene is charged. What is the explanation? The audience does not merely record the facts but ponders their alternatives. They see something going wrong, but what are Gloucester's alternatives? Can they say that Gloucester *should* know what is happening to him? Indeed, he should. This is the *practical should of exhortation*, which expresses the need to react and act in a particular manner. He should know and act; otherwise, he must suffer from humiliation and ridicule. Hence, he should respond: it would be beneficial for Gloucester to react now.

Suppose a teacher says to her pupil: you have already read the book; you *should* know the answer. Here is a new sense of should: Gloucester should realize the deception because he has the relevant evidence. His current location cannot feel like the cliffs of Dover. We can call this an *epistemic should*.

The should of exhortation is *practical* as it focuses on something we do and achieve:

> You should know the route, otherwise you cannot find your way home.
> You should act, or otherwise you miss a good opportunity.

[23] Golding (2012) realizes that his idea of dramatic irony is a strange one and "oddly out of place here" (p. 27).

[24] See the examples in my (2020b): Mocking, or evil mimesis, is a good example because it may create first alienation and then reactive sympathy towards the victim. Sarcasm works in the same way.

The *epistemic* should concerns evidence-based inferences:

You should know, as you possess all the relevant evidence.
As a mathematician, you should understand this proof of the theorem.

Certain situational irony in *King Lear* follows from Edgar's clumsy attempt to mislead Gloucester, as the audience must realize. Think of a person on a high ledge over the ocean and its unique sensory offerings, the sound and echo of seabirds and waves, the sweet smell of sea salt and rotten seaweed, and that whirling, moist ocean wind. The scene may work on stage, but at the same time, it fails to feel convincing. One finds much too much theater here. Does it justify the suggestion that Gloucester *epistemically should* discover Edgard's deception? If he should, this scene exemplifies the second type of dramatic irony. We can see the ironic meaning of the situation emerging when we think about its epistemic should.

Suppose the audience knows the relevant conventions that define the scene. In that case, they also know more than the characters who cannot know them, and therefore any "should know" becomes irrelevant. The characters cannot know the relevant conventions, and consequently, no "should" applies here—the scene may not allow dramatic irony. Therefore, to ask "should they know" is essential. Suppose the characters should know, and the idea of dramatic irony emerges. The audience may now genuinely expect something from the characters and not only watch them acting. We also can distinguish between internal and external dramatic irony in a novel way. The first requires that the characters can and should know. The second treats this as an irrelevant requirement. *High Noon* represents the external and Gloucester vs. Edgar the internal theory. Will Kane cannot know what will happen, but Gloucester can and should know where he is and what to do. Will Kane possesses no evidence for his final winning position. Gloucester has evidence for seeing through Edgar's evil plan. It makes no sense to say Will Kane should know (practically), unlike Gloucester, who should know to avoid humiliation.

Plato says noble lies are permissible: for instance, the lies of the prince and the doctor.[25] They may be necessary because, by lying, one can avoid significant harm. Such lies are examples of something one should not know—that is why the lies are prudentially justifiable. Machiavelli, of course, is the master of this black art. Think of this princely display of deception and cruelty, which anyhow is a justifiable political move:

> And because he knew that the past severity had caused some hatred against himself, so, to clear himself in the minds of the people, and gain them entirely to himself, he desired to show that, if any cruelty had been practiced, it had not originated with him, but in the natural sternness of the minister. Under this pretense he took Ramiro, and one morning caused him to be executed and left on the piazza at Cesena with the block and a bloody knife at his side. The barbarity of this spectacle caused the people to be at once satisfied and dismayed.[26]

The citizens praise the prince; they do not know better—although they could and should. The survival of the city state requires regal deception; without it, the prince's

[25] See Plato (2007), Book 3, 414e–15c. But see Morrisey (2020).

[26] Machiavelli (2005).

realm is in danger, which is why, as the prince thinks, the citizens should not know. Yet, they should know in another sense: the evidence for exposing the lie is available to them. We witness both the practical and epistemic should here.

Machiavelli's prince must be aware of the relevant ironies of the scene. He has a good reason to laugh; his citizens fail, as they should, to see through his plot. Here is the primary source of situational irony: the citizens falsely construe the meaning of the event, which was the plan and purpose of the prince, and hence, they call a crime and conspiracy a blessing. The prince thinks as follows: I killed the police chief, but you do not know the truth, which is just as it should be, a good thing. He has created a situation where bad looks good—a paradigmatic case of irony.[27] The prince may muse: You served me well, I mean by spilling your guts on my piazza.

In this sense, the dramatic characters, the citizens, should and should not know, making this play of ironies on stage so fascinating. The irony of it entails the bivalent use of "should." The characters epistemically should know the truth, which interests the audience (S-effect). But the characters as citizens should not know from the practical political point of view (V-effect). The plot is cruel and the prince is cynical anyway. The Machiavellian example plays with the idea that citizens should not come to know for prudential political reasons. But we can also develop the dramatic plot so that the characters practically, not only epistemically, should come to know.

Example: In Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, K. tries to find his way to the castle on the hill, which he does not know is impossible. He has no relevant evidence. Yet, he practically should know the road because, otherwise, he cannot go there. A critical gap exists between the knowledge possessed by the characters and the audience. K. does not see the ironies of the situation, unlike the audience. K.'s efforts are doomed from the beginning; it is all a wild goose chase. As Kafka develops the drama, K. cannot come to know, and the audience realizes this. The situation is like this:

> K. does not know the road; K. does not know that he cannot know the road; yet he should know it because he wants to go to the castle.
>
> The audience knows that K. cannot come to know the road, and thus he cannot go to the castle.

Such ignorance is crucial from K.'s point of view, yet he misses the irony of his situation. The audience may not miss it, which is the source of dramatic irony. The complex play of "should" and "can" makes the case interesting and worthwhile; without this dialectic, we do not have a claim to think about. The two senses of the expression "should know" provide significance to the scene, and thus motivate us to consider the issue, see its ironies and feel its dramatic weight.

Joanna Garmendia argues that irony is critical.[28] We can express this intuition as follows. Dramatic irony requires that the audience can say the characters *should* act or come to know, which they fail to do. Without this should, we have no dramatic irony. Conventional and other external cases do not satisfy this requirement—they

---

[27] In my (2020a) this idea is central.

[28] See Garmendia (2010). We can also say that irony has its cost and comes with a price; also my (2021a).

do not adequately represent dramatical irony. However, when the audience realizes and says that the characters should know or act, they criticize them. They may pity or sympathize with the characters, but first, they blame. To tell you you *should* react when you do not is criticism. When the audience thinks Gloucester should understand where he is, the audience blames him for needlessly failing. After this, they may pity the man and introduce the soothing S-effect.

References

Aikin, S. (2008). Perelmanian universal audience and the epistemic aspirations of argument. *Philosophy & Rhetoric, 4*, 238–259.

Airaksinen, T. (2017). Nowhere to go Kafka, a philosophical study. *Munich Social Science Review (New Series), 1*, 91–110.

Airaksinen, T. (2020a). Irony and sarcasm in ethical perspective. *Open Philosophy, 3*, 358–368.

Airaksinen, T. (2020b). Mimetic evil: A conceptual and ethical study. *Problemos, 98,* 58–70.

Airaksinen, T. (2021a). Metaphysics, universal irony, and Richard Rorty's "We Ironists". *Humanities, 10*, 1–13.

Airaksinen, T. (2021b). Socrates meets the crocodile, or the ironies of Brecht's and Wuolijoki's Her Puntila und sein Knecht Matti. In T. Airaksinen, M. J. Holler & H. Nurmi (Eds.), *Finnish-German yearbook of political economy, Vol. 3* (pp. 77–96). Verlag Holler.

Airaksinen, T. (2022). Socratic irony and argumentation. *Argumentation, 36*, 85–100.

Bennett, J. (2016). The critical problem of cynical irony *meaning what you say* and ideologies of class and gender. *Social Semiotics, 26*, 250–264.

Brecht, B. (1987). *Mr. Puntila and his man Matti* (J. Willett, Trans.). Methuen Drama.

Burke, K. (1970). *The rhetoric of religion.* University of California Press.

Casali, S. (1995). Tragic irony in Ovid, Heroides 9 and 11. *Classical Quarterly, 45*, 505–511.

Czachesz, I. (2014). *The grotesque body in early Christian discourse*. Routledge.

Dynel, M. (2008). No aggression, only teasing: The pragmatics of teasing and banter. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics, 4*, 241–261.

Dynel, M. (2016). Comparing and combining covert and overt untruthfulness: On lying, deception, irony and metaphor. *Pragmatics and Cognition, 23*, 174–208.

Euripides. (2017). *Bacchae* (I. Johnston, Trans.). Retrieved from http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/euripides/bacchaehtml.html

Friesen, C. J. P. (2014). Dionysus as Jesus: The incongruity of a love feast in Achilles Tatius's Leucippe and Clitophon 2.2. *Harvard Theological Review, 107*, 222–240.

Garmendia, J. (2010). Irony is critical. *Pragmatics and Cognition, 18*, 397–421.

Goldie, P. (2014). *The mess inside: Narrative, emotion, and the mind*. Oxford University Press.

Huson, T. C. (1998). Hegel and the concept of 'tragic irony.' *Southwest Philosophy Review, 14*, 123–130.

Inkpin, A. (2013). Taking Rorty's irony seriously. *Humanities, 2*, 292–312.

Kafka, F. (2019). *The castle (J. R. Underwood, Trans.).* Penguin Modern Classics. Penguin.

Machiavelli, N. (2005). *The prince (Peter Bondanella, Trans.).* Oxford World's Classics. OUP.

Morrisey, C. S. (2020). The truth about Plato's noble lie. Retrieved from https://voegelinview.com/the-truth-about-platos-noble-lie/

Nordquist, R. (2020). Definition and examples of dramatic irony. Retrieved from https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-dramatic-irony-1690-483

Perelman, C. & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1971). *The new rhetoric*. University of Notre Dame Press.

Phillips, J. (Ed.). (2009). *Tragic play: Irony and theater from Sophocles to Beckett*. Cambridge University Press.

Plato. (2007), *The republic (Desmond Lee, Trans.). Penguin Classic*s. Penguin.
Renegar, V. R., & Goehring, C. E. (2013). A/In (further) defense of irony. *JAC, 33*, 315–324.
Rorty, R. (1989). Private irony and liberal hope. In *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (pp. 73–95). Cambridge University Press.
Segal, C. (1997). Chorus and community in Euripides' Bacchae. In L. Edmunds & R. W. Wallace (Eds.), *Poet, public, and performance in ancient Greece* (pp. 65–86). Johns Hopkins University Press.
Sophocles. (1919). *Ajax. (R. C. Trevelyan, Trans.).* Retrieved from https://www.classsics.mit.edu/Sophocles/ajax.html
Steinberg, E. R. (1965). K. of the castle: Ostensible land-surveyor. *College English, 27*, 185–189. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/373105
Torre, S. (2016). De se thought and communication: An introduction. In M. Garcia-Carpintero & S. Torre (Eds.), *About Oneself: De se thought and communication* (pp. 1–12). Oxford University Press.
Tindale, C. W. (2004). *Rhetorical argumentation: Principles of theory and practice.* Sage.
Williams, G. (1992). Ovid's Canace: Dramatic irony in Heroides 11. *The Classical Quarterly, 42*, 201–209.