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## A/In (Further) Defense of Irony

Valerie R. Renegar and Charles E. Goehring

In Ryan Weber's recent article "Ironically, We Dwell," he makes the case that "not all ironic acts are destructive, or hollow, or suspicious. Instead, irony can promote care and concern for the world" (467). He explains that irony has the potential "to enhance human dwelling as it deepens our relationship with language, with things, with the nonhuman" (443). His analysis is centered on two artifacts: the magazine and website *Found*, and a mock-exorcism performed on an ice-tunneling machine in Antarctica. These examples both serve as convincing evidence that irony is often present in the process of human dwelling. These examples also serve to call into question Jedediah Purdy's belief that irony cannot dwell. Weber uses Heidegger's sense of dwelling to underlie his argument and draws parallels between Heidegger's farmhouse in the Black Forest and Purdy's farmhouse in West Virginia. Weber ultimately argues that "irony can reveal these aspects of dwelling in unique ways, drawing people and things together while leaving spaces for the ambiguous and the unspoken" (451). We second this idea, and believe that irony not only has positive attributes, but that it is an essential tool for navigating life in the twenty-first century and an important strategy for social change. In this essay, we join Ryan Weber's argument that irony is a valuable resource in the process of dwelling. In doing so, we argue that irony is a rhetorical tool that allows for contradictory elements to dwell together. We begin by investigating the meaning of irony, then we examine the role of irony in the creation of a comic frame, and finally we explore the utility of irony in the modern world.

Jedediah Purdy, in his book *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, names irony the enemy of civic engagement (see Weber 442). He chooses the comedian Jerry Seinfeld, as portrayed in the *Seinfeld* television series, as the exemplar of irony in practice. However, using the mediated fictionalized caricature of a stand-up comic's life as a basis for the cultural understanding of irony unfairly diminishes the rhetorical force of irony. In many ways, Purdy's choice of a program to represent a person's essence is ironic in and of itself. Jerry

Seinfeld the person is not the same as the Seinfeld character, and, as a representation, it is always and already a reduction. Other critics have noted that Purdy seems to confuse irony with sarcasm (Hodge 84). As M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham note, “Sarcasm in common parlance is sometimes used as an equivalent for all forms of irony, but it is far more useful to restrict it only to the crude and taunting use of apparent praise for dispraise” (167). If irony is simply sarcasm, it doesn’t take much to make the argument that irony is dark, self-defeating, and lacks the ability to contribute to the process of dwelling. By extension, Purdy’s ironist is suspicious, mean-spirited, jaded, disingenuous, and detached. However, Weber doesn’t challenge Purdy’s conception of irony other than arguing that irony has an important role in the work of dwelling.

Weber has a different understanding of irony, one that is more rooted in the rhetorical tradition. He uses irony to describe the process of encountering and accepting ambiguity. For him, irony is a strategy for navigating the uncertain. He argues that irony is “uniquely suited to recognize and protect such [profound] ambiguities” (446). We echo Weber in the belief that irony is a tool for living with ambiguity, but we have a much fuller sense of the meaning and potential of irony in the vein of theorists such as Richard Rorty, Donna Haraway, and Kenneth Burke. Following these theorists, we argue that irony is a rhetorical tool that allows for contradictory ideas to coexist, thus creating the discursive space for optimism and social change. While Purdy denies the ability for irony to create hope, we believe irony imbues individuals with the potential for activism and agency.

In developing an understanding of irony, it may be helpful to think of irony as an attitude, or a perspective on the world (that is, “being ironic”). In other words, irony as an attitude opens up the possibility of human emotion, even toward the inhuman objects that occupy our dwellings. Further, irony allows for the cultivation of an attitude of care and charity. Weber scratches the surface of these same elements in his analysis of the ironic exorcism, which “highlights the [broken] machine as an entity needing care and concern” (464). Weber explains: “The ironic approach offers a unique form of dwelling with machines and nature by acknowledging the independence and impenetrability of these forces”

(465). Weber's conclusions about this ironic practice have been discussed in far greater detail by other theorists who note not only this spirit of concern, but also see irony as intrinsic to the creation of hope.

Weber briefly notes some of Rorty's thoughts on irony, but a fuller reading of Rorty would enhance his essay. Rorty defines the ironist as someone who continually interrogates and reinvents her language. Rather than defending an essence of a final vocabulary, or the way things *are* as Purdy does, irony is the recognition of the contingent nature of descriptions. Ironists are "never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change" (Rorty 73–74). Rorty notes that "liberal ironists are people who include among those ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease" (xv). For Rorty, then, irony is tied to an attitude of kindness.

Rorty's sense of acknowledging contingencies allows for the emergence of contradiction. Multiplicities flourish when meanings or identities are destabilized. Similarly, Haraway argues that irony is a method for negotiating contradictory identities (see Renegar and Sowards, "Liberal" 331). She explains: "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play" (Haraway 190). An ironic perspective is the acknowledgment that individuals engage in serious work without taking themselves too seriously. In other words, the ironist recognizes the humor inherent in the human condition. As an attitude it helps bridge the distance between theory and practice (Renegar and Sowards, "Liberal" 341) and allows individuals to exist in a space where conflicting identities, theories, and artifacts reside together.

In regard to irony, Burke's thinking is in line with Haraway and Rorty. Burke names irony as one of four master tropes, as a "perspective of perspectives" (*Grammar* 512). Put another way, it is a perspective *on* perspectives, a way of revealing the limitations and possibilities inherent in all worldviews. It is the means by which individuals can move from the tragic to the comic frame. Weber correctly notes Joshua Gunn's argument that accepting the ambiguity inherent in all communication "requires the

embrace of irony and the comic frame” (qtd. in Weber 459). However, Weber moves quickly from this idea in order to pursue other avenues of his argument. This concept of the comic frame has the potential to dramatically enhance Weber’s argument about irony’s ability to dwell.

Although the comic frame can be fostered in a number of different ways, irony is one of the most common and effective rhetorical devices for enabling a comic perspective. In fact, irony is at the heart of perspective by incongruity, the juxtaposition of ideas not normally paired together (Renegar and Dionisopoulos 332). Even Burke’s description of the nature of the comic frame is ironic:

The comic frame is charitable, but at the same time it is not gullible. It keeps us alive to the ways in which people “cash in on” their moral assets, and even use moralistic euphemisms to conceal purely materialistic purposes—but it can recognize as much without feeling its disclosure to be the last word on human motivation. (*Attitudes* 107)

The comic frame is a perspective through which humans can understand the world and their actions within it; it provides tools for evaluating the choices of others and ourselves. Burke sums it up thus: “The comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*” (*Attitudes* 171). In addition, Burke’s comic frame encourages us to use irony in order to foster a comic posture where we treat ourselves more charitably and resist pushing ourselves toward rotten ends. Indeed, Burke argues that left to our own devices, humans will hurdle headlong toward tragedy in all that we do (*Language* 16–20). The comic frame allows for contingency, ambiguity, and contradiction, giving individuals the ability to pull back from their seriousness and see themselves and their choices in a wider scope. In doing so, it allows us to laugh at our tragic tendencies. For example, in our case, a comic posture is an important tool to deal with the worst of academic job requirements: grading. The use of the comic posture might serve to remind us that the huge stack of papers to be graded is a punishment that we created for ourselves when we wrote an assignment, or that when considered in a broader sense the onerous task of grading is quite a bit better, in our opinion, than a career that demands

heavy lifting, graveyard shifts, or uncomfortable high heels. The comic posture, then, is a perspective that injects humor and charity into our everyday lives. It encourages a wider view and a self-awareness that is useful to combat the human tendency to stretch even the smallest problem into a tragedy of epic proportions by giving it unnecessary time or attention. Given Burke's conception of the comic frame, it is no surprise that irony is the "master" of master tropes, since it plays a pivotal role in many of the rhetorical strategies he discusses throughout his body of work.

Perspective by incongruity and the comic frame allow individuals to have a wider view of their reality by contextualizing elements and recognizing contradiction. Through his analysis, Weber effectively demonstrates that irony is present in our dwellings. Readers of his essay are likely to agree that there is, in fact, room for irony in human dwelling. Purdy denies that irony dwelled in the farmhouse that was his childhood home, and Weber suggests that Heidegger's farmhouse was utterly without irony as well. Perhaps given Purdy's limited understanding of irony, this perspective rings true; however, we suspect that both of these houses had ironic elements. The entire notion of a house, a dwelling made from trees killed for wood, is at odds with its natural surroundings. Even a home created to work with the environment, as Weber explains of Heidegger's home (448–49), is necessarily a human intervention of artificiality into the natural world. Purdy idealizes his childhood home as one without irony, but houses don't grow from the ground. Houses aren't natural; they are constructed. This contradiction demands a sense of irony. Indeed, as a rhetorical device for allowing contradiction to exist, irony is essential. Purdy's mistake lies in believing that irony is without value. Instead, irony provides us with the tools for getting by, for making due, without being consumed with the nature of contradiction. In other words, irony allows for a both/and perspective to flourish in a world where either/or choices are often dissatisfying and overly limiting.

While convinced by Weber, we believe he could have gone one step further. Irony not only has the potential to dwell, but is often a necessary condition for dwelling in our contemporary culture. Simply put, there are too many contradictions, too many ambiguities, too many technologies,

and too many possibilities present in our lives for irony not to play an essential role. In fact, irony helps ease the prevalence of material conditions, which exert considerable influence in the lives of most individuals. For example, irony allows humans to dwell in places where there may be little opportunity to connect with the earth. A cubicle without a window fed with recirculated air is the daytime dwelling for millions of people who live a large percentage of their lives in offices. Irony allows them to cover their walls with photographs of nature and to enjoy the feelings the photographs create, without feeling trapped by their work environment. Whether in an apartment, an office, or a car during an hour-long commute, Weber reminds us of Heraclitus' claim that the gods are present here, too (446). Elevating certain kinds of dwellings, such as farmhouses, necessarily casts others as somehow lesser than. Irony allows us to evade these kinds of elitist evaluations.

Without irony, the presence of contradiction would be bothersome. An ironic posture recognizes that contradictions exist, and that their existence can be beneficial. Ironists are aware of contradiction, but they do not feel compelled to alleviate it. For those who eschew irony, contradiction is problematic, often leading individuals to deny contradictions, play language games to redefine them, or seek to eliminate their sources. For example, some political conservatives deny their contradictions ("I am against socialized medicine, but get your hands off my Medicare!"), some dogmatic extremists play language games to redefine their contradictions (pro-life activists who seek to murder abortion providers because they are "baby-killers"), and some perfectionists may attempt to eliminate contradictions (animal rights activists who cease eating honey out of respect for the bees). Irony provides the rhetorical tools to dwell and be comfortable with our myriad contradictions, a requirement in this postmodern age where so many of our axes of identity are at odds with one another. Asking anyone to make a list of their identity categories will inevitably reveal tension and contradiction. Rather than feeling the constant strain of attempting to eliminate contradiction or the cognitive dissonance it may create, irony is an important tool for letting contradictions peacefully coexist. For example, feminist scholars have argued that contemporary feminism must accommodate a wide range of contradictory identities and the differences that they foster (Heywood

and Drake 3). In other words, irony enables individuals to fully embrace all of their identities at once. Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards have argued that one solution to bridging these varying conceptions of feminist identity is to employ an ironic perspective that recognizes the contingency of language and the power of language in the creation of social change (“Liberal” 339–41). Indeed, scholars suggest that ironic use of contradiction, in and of itself, can be deliberately cultivated as a tool of individual agency (Renegar and Sowards, “Contradiction” 14–15).

Purdy argues that the presence of irony prevents civic engagement and is devoid of hope (Weber 442), but there are too many examples of social activism that undermine this assertion. In fact, the sense of charitability in the comic perspective created by irony encourages social activists despite the vast number of challenges before them. We are reminded that Elizabeth Cady Stanton employed ironic strategies throughout her quest for women’s rights. For instance, the *Declaration of Sentiments* is rife with irony and contradiction. Perhaps it was her ironic perspective that enabled her to fight for women’s suffrage endlessly for decades, almost the entirety of her adult life. Although she died well before the Nineteenth Amendment became a reality, she remained steadfast in her hope for social change even in the face of hostile opposition. Social activists, then, can use irony to help alleviate the enormity of their task. A comic perspective, fostered through irony, enables those who seek change to be hopeful about the future even as they are confronted with bleak situations in the present.

One of the hallmarks of irony is that it allows for contingency and ambiguity. Rorty argues that ironists capitalize on the contingent nature of language to actively create new vocabularies (73–80). Contemporary social movements, often profoundly invested in redefinition, tend to be highly ironic. For example, many gay rights proponents have claimed the term *queer* in an ironic nod to the ugly history of the term. The feminist magazines *Bitch* and *Bust* are similarly tongue-in-cheek. These language choices signal words that are being reclaimed and deployed in new, and often empowering, ways. Vocabularies of oppression can be dismantled and tossed aside when ironists have an understanding of the contingency of language, thus allowing new vocabularies of agency and liberation to emerge.



Irony also provides a mechanism for creating communities of people who share the same assumptions (Renegar and Dionisopoulos 16). As any liberal who watched *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* during the George W. Bush presidency can attest, an ironic take on what was perceived to be a tragic political era served important rhetorical functions. First, it afforded the ability to see the comic within the tragic. Even in the most dire of political and social moments individuals may be able to revel in the absurdity and humor of the situation. In this way, irony is not a mechanism for detachment, but rather provides critical distance that allows for a comic perspective. More importantly, perhaps, it served to constitute a virtual community of progressives who felt they had no voice. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, then, voiced the liberal perspective by means of an ironic stance. Irony often creates humor for those 'in on' the joke, which falls flat for those who do not share the assumptions of the ironic community. In many ways, this sums up Purdy's reaction to *Seinfeld's* irony. Theorists might pause to consider that irony is not typically present in the political conservative's rhetorical toolbox. Instead, political conservatives tend to eschew irony and its playful nature in favor of political realism, a vocabulary which is threatened by ambiguity (Rorty 89).

For social activists, irony provides a mechanism for living in the modern world, while simultaneously advocating for social change. Irony enables forward thinking and future planning, while still allowing us to go about the business of making lunch, paying bills, and getting the kids to school on time. As a perspective that refuses to take itself too seriously, irony allows the environmentalist to shake his head and roll his eyes at an ineffective campus recycling program, without necessarily becoming mired in the quest for a better program. In other words, irony enables us to choose our battles because it acknowledges the tensions and contradictions that always exist between idealistic theories and the complications of everyday practice. The burden of living in the world while simultaneously critiquing the world would be a much more difficult task without the hopeful optimism available through irony. Accepting Weber's premise that irony can dwell, then, allows theorists to consider the more important question of whether irony plays a role in real and sustained social change.

Building on Weber's argument, we seek to begin the conversation about the necessity of irony in contemporary culture. Our definition of irony greatly expands Weber's understanding of the word, but is well supported among rhetorical theorists. This larger understanding of irony as a strategy for recognizing and living with contradiction may help rehabilitate irony's reputation among those who have reduced it to the realm of sarcasm. We have only just begun to scratch the surface of irony's role in contemporary culture; however, the implications as a resource for social change are clear. Contrary to Purdy's argument, irony does not necessarily entail disengagement and self-absorption in the negative sense. Instead, we argue that irony creates discursive space that allows the individual to gain a comic perspective on a situation. In other words, adopting an ironic perspective allows for ambiguity and contradiction, engagement and detachment, caution and optimism. Irony, then, not only has the potential to dwell but is also a welcome and necessary addition to contemporary dwelling.

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