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The Post-ecologist Condition: Irony as Symptom and Cure

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ABSTRACT *Resources for an authentic response to the 'post-ecologist condition' as described by Ingolfur Blühdorn can be found in a cultural modernism which emphasises the contradictory nature of the human condition and whose master trope is irony. The concept of irony can help us both diagnose and respond to the crisis in public meaning which helps sustain unsustainable behaviour. Forms of dispositional irony, in which private and public meaning are disconnected from each other, are symptomatic of the post-ecologist condition; in response, forms of communicative irony are used by environmental movements to expose such dispositions and strategies. However, such tactics can only serve as partial and limited responses to the problem of unsustainability, unless they are embedded within and shaped by a generalised ironic stance towards the world and oneself. The contribution concludes by sketching elements of an environmentalism informed by this ironic 'world relation'.*

Introduction

> I'm washing out Marmite pots and they're digging for oil in Alaska. (Sean Locke)

At the heart of contemporary western culture there seems to be a constitutive tension between ecological awareness and ecocidal behaviour. On the one hand, we are confronted by mounting evidence of a host of interconnected ecological problems, ranging from resource depletion, through climate change and biodiversity loss, to the growing effects that chemical pollution is having on basic life processes. On the other hand, advanced capitalist societies seem irreversibly locked into a societal form of life that involves not just a

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continuation but an intensification of the very activities which are producing these problems in the first place. Thus, despite over three decades of policy attention and civil society action, global, international and national indicators show little evidence of any fundamental shift towards more 'sustainable' trajectories (United Nations Environment Programme, 2002; Sustainable Development Commission, 2004; European Commission, 2005). States and corporations increasingly adopt forms of environmental responsibility which seem to focus more on self-presentation than on impact reduction – British Petroleum's 1989 'greening' and its 2000 rebranding as 'beyond petroleum' being perhaps the most infamous example (Beder, 2002). Against such a background, any individual act of environmental responsibility can feel *ir*responsible, an act of complicity in a collective dance of self-delusion.

So what can be done? How can we properly diagnose this situation, and then move towards identifying a remedy? Ingolfur Blühdorn has argued elsewhere (e.g. Blühdorn, 2004 and this volume) that in the contemporary political context it is naïve to imagine that political responsibility consists in countering empty, symbolic politics with real, authentic politics. Such is the pervasiveness of the Baudriallardian hyperreality into which we have wandered, a forest of mirrors in which signs merely reflect other signs rather than anything real, that the contrast between symbolic and authentic politics can no longer confidently be made. Indeed, rather than 'symbolic politics', Blühdorn suggests, what is endemic is a 'simulative politics' in which contemporary culture and the meanings through which it is reproduced have become self-referential, detached from any obligation to material referents or effects. And rather than simulative politics being merely a particular strategy adopted by particular actors, it is a pervasive syndrome in which even social movement activity is trapped.

I agree with Blühdorn that a meaningful response to our situation is not to be found in the mere castigation of ecological vice in others and the ensuring of ecological virtue in oneself. The persistence of unsustainability is due not simply to the ignorance or duplicity of individuals, or even to the mere logic of the capitalist system, but also to a *crisis in political meaning* in which we are all implicated. I also agree that the solution to this crisis is not to be found in a simple restoration of political language's reference to a reality outside language, as if language is a flapping sail that can simply be re-secured to its mast. It was the cul-de-sac of modernity's 'correspondence' theory of truth – the idea that language and the world are separate, and that language can be judged by how it more or less accurately corresponds to the world – that led to the crisis of representation in the first place. Nevertheless, I do not share Blühdorn's pessimism about the impossibility of an authentic political response in these circumstances, one that that does not bind us further in illusion. In this paper I want to suggest where we might find the cultural and intellectual resources for such a response.

To date, environmentalist thought has been largely dominated by two epistemological strategies, each grounded in a different current of modern thought. The first is that, broadly speaking, of the 18th-century Enlightenment.

According to this tradition of thought, with its guiding metaphors of illumination, uncovering and exposure, the light of reason can be used to banish the shadows from the world. Then, no longer under the thrall of ignorance, superstition or deception, human beings will be able to bring their destiny under their own collective control. While this cultural trope has been frequently castigated by environmentalists as underlying the domination of nature by industrial capitalism and techno-science, in subtler forms it has also been used to underpin environmentalism itself. The prominence of this trope in environmentalism can only partly be explained by reference to the latter's debt to ecological science. Environmental politics also draws on an Enlightenment meta-narrative, more widely culturally available, in order to present ecological destruction as the result of a rationality deficit: if only we had more knowledge about how nature works, the story goes, and if only we allowed our actions to be guided by it, then we would live in harmony with nature.

A second important epistemological strategy in environmental politics, intertwined with the first, has been the *rejection* of reason, a call to return to nature and tradition, with roots in the Romantic reaction against industrialism in the 19th century. According to this current of thought, the ills of the world cannot be banished by reason, since it is reason – and specifically a form of disembedded, instrumental reason which alienates people from nature – that is their ultimate cause. Rather than humanity saving nature through the operation of scientific reason, it is nature that can save humanity; if only human societies can reject the artificialities and strictures of modern life, can reconnect with both internal and external nature, then both their own spiritual impoverishment and the associated despoliation of nature would be reversed. While this cultural current often invokes and extols traditional societies, it is in many ways as modern as the Enlightenment current described above, in its valorisation of the autonomy and power of individual human subjectivity, and its faith in the idea that the human interaction with nature can in principle be cleansed of uncertainty, contingency and struggle.

But in this contribution I want to draw attention to a *third* cultural current of modernity, one equally as modern as either of the others, but with a very different tenor. This current, which I will refer to as 'cultural' modernism, has, I suggest, been an important source of the environmentalist *sensibility*, but has heretofore not been as influential on the way that environmentalism has been formally expressed. According to this current, the human condition is full of shadows, paradoxes and absurdities. Like techno-scientific modernism, this rather different modernist current constitutes itself through a break from tradition and organised religion, but rather than stressing the power of human reason is more likely to emphasise its limits. This strand of modernism can be seen in Nietzsche's notion of the death of God and of the universe as meaningless, and in Freud's insight that most of what shapes our thoughts and actions is opaque to human consciousness. It even colours the ideas of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx that the real motor of history lies outside human hands, in the operation of blind material forces, conflict, structures and

accident. It finds expression in the very *form* of the modern novel, with its exploration of the multiple, incommensurable points of view that constitute any human situation. And it found one of its most sophisticated articulations in the work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

I want to suggest that, were we to ground environmental politics in *this* cultural current, we would be in a better position to diagnose the contemporary situation of unsustainability described above, and to find an authentic response. I want to develop this claim by exploring the relevance of the polyvalent concept of 'irony' to the contemporary condition of unsustainability. After introducing the concept of irony in the next section, I then discuss how it can help us in the task of understanding the character of cultural phenomena that are symptomatic of the post-ecologist condition, phenomena such as dissimulation and apolitical disengagement. However, I then go on to suggest that, if irony is a cultural *symptom* of our situation of systemic unsustainability, in other forms it can also serve as a *cure* for this syndrome. I point out that the modes of irony typically deployed by environmental groups take a 'corrective' form, in that they draw attention to the gap between appearance and reality, or between stated intentions and behaviour, in order to try to overcome it – for example, by forcing corporations to act in conformity with their stated pro-environmental objectives. While recognising the value of such tactics, I draw attention to the dangers involved in corrective forms of irony, in particular the way that they seek to establish a stable triangular relationship between appearance, reality and a privileged observer able to clearly perceive the relationship between the two. In another twist of irony, the apparently privileged observer in such corrective forms of irony can *themselves* be accused of self-deception and bad faith. I will argue that it is only by adopting a stance of generalised, philosophical irony, one which recognises the impossibility of the subject escaping the contradictions of finite existence, that an authentic response to our predicament might be found. In so doing I will be arguing that the most appropriate philosophical foundation for ecological politics is neither techno-scientific modernism, nor a counter-modern reaction to techno-science, but a cultural modernism of which a generalised irony is the master trope.

What is Irony?

> ...where wit enables a man to see 'occult resemblances in things apparently unlike', to use Johnson's words, a sense of irony enables a man to see occult incompatibilities within a total situation and to see a 'victim' confidently unaware of them. (Muecke, 1969: 94)

As D. C. Muecke's masterful study makes clear, irony is a complex concept, one whose changing meaning over the last two millennia reveals much about wider changes in European culture (Muecke, 1969). Most accounts of irony focus on two main classes of ironic phenomena, which we might call

communicative irony and situational irony respectively. Firstly, instances of *communicative irony*, whether verbal, visual or musical, involve a communication in which the overt, surface meaning of the communication is in tension with the actual meaning intended to be communicated. One of the most famous extended examples of communicative irony is Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), which seemingly advocates as a solution to the Irish potato famine the idea that rich Anglo-Irish should buy and eat the children of poor Catholics; Swift's *real* intention, we would say, was that the tract be read as an indictment of the attitudes of the English and the Anglo-Irish to the Irish poor. Secondly, in *situational irony*, by contrast, it is not acts of communication but situations that might be seen as ironic, when the understanding of a situation possessed by one or more actors acting within that situation is in dramatic tension with the reality of it as perceived by an outside observer. For example, a character in a story might seek to evade a threat, not knowing that the very choices they have made in order to save themselves are leading them more firmly into its clutches – a device employed perhaps most famously in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (1994). Thirdly, however, for the purposes of my discussion, we must also consider examples of *dispositional* irony, in which it is a person – or more exactly their character, comportment or sensibility – that might be judged ironic. This class of irony will be relevant in the diagnostic portion of my paper; here it will help us to identify and characterise two of what we might, following MacIntyre (1985), call the typical 'character types' of the post-ecologist condition, characteristic ways of conducting oneself which at once are fostered by and help to reproduce the crisis of public meaning described in the introduction to this paper, and in Ingolfur Blühdorn's contribution to this collection. But it will also find a new kind of relevance at the end of the paper, in which a particular form of dispositional irony, one in which we might say that an ironic sensibility is followed through to its logical conclusion, is offered as a model for environmental politics.

But given such a wide range of cultural phenomena that can be classified as ironic, what do they all have in common? What makes them 'ironic'? From his survey of 'the compass of irony', Muecke identifies three main criteria for a communication or situation to be meaningfully labelled as ironic. Firstly, there must be at least two layers of meaning within the phenomenon. 'At the lower level is the situation either as it appears to the victim of irony (where there is a victim) or as it is deceptively presented by the ironist (where there is an ironist) . . . At the upper level is the situation as it appears to the observer or the ironist'. Secondly, there has to be some contradiction or incongruity between the two levels. 'What is said may be contradicted by what is meant . . .; what the victim thinks may be contradicted by what the observer knows'. Thirdly, most forms of irony also contain 'an element of ''innocence'': either a victim is confidently unaware of the very possibility of there being an upper level or point of view that invalidates his own, or an ironist pretends not to be aware of it' (1969: 19–20).

Muecke's criteria can be illustrated with the help of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Firstly, then, the pamphlet contains both a literal meaning (that the rich should eat the children of the poor) and a hidden, intended meaning (that the attitude of the (English) rich towards the (Irish) poor is morally reprehensible). Secondly, it achieves its effect through the dramatic tension between the literal meaning and the intended meaning. Thirdly, it is written with an exaggerated sincerity that gives the impression that the author is wholly unaware of the horrific nature of what he is advocating.

However, the *way* that any example of irony might meet these criteria will vary from case to case, so that it is not possible to specify hard and fast rules for what is ironic and why it is ironic. This is partly due to the organic way that the concept and practice of irony have evolved across history, leading to a fairly loose 'family' of cultural phenomena that have been gathered together under the term. But it is also because the phenomenon of irony has an irreducibly *subjective* component. As Muecke observes, even if a remark or event has the formal features identified above, we would not be likely to call it ironic if the author of a remark did not *intend* it as such, or if an observer of a situation did not *feel* it as such. Put in the terms above, communicative irony implies the existence of an ironist, and situational irony the existence of an observer of the irony. For example, we would not call *A Modest Proposal* irony if Swift had actually meant it literally. Similarly, the audience of a performance of *Oedipus the King* does not simply 'discover' the dramatic irony that lies in Oedipus fleeing Corinth in order to avoid the fate predicted for him, and by that very act helping to bring it about; the presence of situational irony *requires* there to be an observer which can see the partial vision of the innocent protagonist, the wider dramatic picture and the awful tension between them. This subjective aspect to irony brings it close to the aesthetic in its logic. On the one hand, what is ironic to one person might not be to another; on the other, we can nevertheless argue about whether something is ironic or not – and indeed we can use aesthetic criteria to judge whether it is *good* irony or not – whether it is laboured or mistimed, or by contrast artful or poetic (Muecke, 1969: 14–15).

How can we apply the concept of irony to the politics of unsustainability? In the sections that follow, I will deploy the concept of irony to capture a range of specific aspects of the contemporary politics of unsustainability. Irony, I will first argue, can be used to describe the disconnection between private belief and public behaviour that can occur in individuals, states, corporations and even environmental organisations, whether in the form of an apolitical retreat from collective language and endeavours, or in that of outright cynical dissimulation. Secondly, irony can also refer to the rhetorical tactics that are used by environmental protest movements in order to draw attention to that disconnection – when they highlight the gap between 'is' and 'ought', or between appearance and reality, in the behaviour of individuals and organisations. In the terms used by Muecke in the quotation at the beginning of this section, an ironic sensibility can help identify and draw attention to the

'occult incompatibilities' in the contemporary world – tensions, inconsistencies and absurdities which are rendered invisible by the dominant symbolic codes through which contemporary society is reproduced (Melucci, 1996). But, thirdly, I suggest that such tactics are always themselves vulnerable to being ironised, and that it is only in a generalised, philosophical irony that a meaningful political response can be developed.

Irony as Comportment

Given that modern understandings of irony are dominated by the first two categories discussed above, communicative and situational irony, it may seem strange to start by discussing dispositional irony. However, Muecke points out that the term *eironeia* did not come to mean verbal irony until Aristotle (although there were examples of what we would now call irony or mockery in early writers like Homer), and that what I have called 'situational' irony was not called irony until the late 18th century. With its earliest appearances, *eironeia* was applied to phenomena which later writers would not call properly ironic at all – those involving the behaviour or disposition of an individual or group. For classical Greek thinkers such as Theophrastus, an *eiron* is simply a deceptive person, someone who is 'evasive and non-committal, concealing his enmities, pretending friendship, misrepresenting his acts, never giving a straight answer' (Muecke, 1970: 14). In this reading, then, 'ironic' is a predicate that can be applied not just to certain *messages*, or to certain *situations*, but to certain *persons*, by virtue of their whole mode of behaviour in the world.

Such an irony of comportment, a radical disjuncture between outward behaviour and inner intention, is a key symptom of the crisis of political meaning that Blühdorn describes in terms of simulative politics. The case studies presented in other papers in this volume provide many examples of states and corporations behaving with what we might call a Theophrastian irony of spin and manipulation.[1] But perhaps more characteristic of our era is a slightly different form of irony-as-comportment – one we might loosely call 'postmodern irony'.[2] The Theophrastian *eiron* instrumentally manipulates his or her appearance and communications in order to bring about certain effects in the world (in Trilling's (1972) terms, he or she is neither authentic nor sincere); the postmodern ironist is simply detached from the world. The postmodern 'liberal ironist' lauded by the political philosopher Richard Rorty (1989) accepts the contingency of all of his or her final vocabularies, and recognises the impossibility of reconciling the inner demands of ironic self-creation with the outer demands of human solidarity. As such, the postmodern ironist strongly resembles the pseudonymous author, 'A', of Part I of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1992a). The very freedom of A's aestheticised existence, his self-absorbed pursuit of sheer experience, is predicated on his disdainful self-distancing from the ordinary, immediate, shared world of existence. As Alex Callinicos rather disdainfully puts it, postmodern irony is 'the knowing and detached appropriation of experiences by an elite that

regards itself as too sophisticated for simple pleasures and unqualified commitments' (Callinicos, 1995: 205).[3]

Using de Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategy and tactic, this is irony as *strategy*, as a ruse of power. Following Muecke's analysis, these cultural phenomena exhibit their ironic duality as a tension (Theophrastus) or simple disconnection (Rorty) between inner intention and outer behaviour. In the Theophrastian irony of dissimulation, the disconnection of outer behaviour from inner intention is a device to generate power. Words and gestures are no longer in debt to the demands of a shared hermeneutic project of common understanding; instead, they become mere *tools* of power, instruments to bring about desired effects in the world (Habermas, 1979). By contrast, Rorty's postmodern irony can be seen as an *effect* of power, a device to hoard power that has already been amassed by a given social group. The disconnection of the project of developing a vocabulary through which one understands oneself, from that of developing a common understanding of our obligations to others, represents a hoarding of power. Thus, in the contemporary politics of unsustainability we can see *both* of these ruses. For example, we see the *symbolic politics* of companies cynically exploiting the goodwill of customers by (dubiously) claiming ecological virtues for their products. But, in Blühdorn's terms, we also see a more widespread and culturally complex *simulative politics*, in which contemporary culture and the meanings through which it is reproduced become self-referential, detached from any obligation to material referents or effects. Political commentators indulge in whimsical 'comic nihilism' about the likely effects of global warming ('Oh, bugger it and open another bottle!' (Ereaut & Segnit, 2006: 15)). And states and corporations collude in the self-delusions of an ecologism that has been reformulated along neo-liberal lines, in which any meaningful aspiration to robust monitoring and regulation has been replaced by systems of self-regulation and environmental management that are frequently little more than forms of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959).

But if this is irony as strategy, what of irony as *tactic*? Perhaps, in the communicative irony deployed by social movements can be found a counter-response to the *eironia* of dissimulation, to the illusioning of other and of self that the ironic comportment of the powerful seems to involve. Through such communicative irony, can the disjunctures in meaning that lie at the heart of this irony of comportment be made visible and called to account, and political language restored to some kind of integrity? In sum, in communicative irony can we find irony as *cure* for unsustainability?

Irony as Tactic

The dominant understanding of the history of irony since classical Greece has not been as a classification of persons, dispositions or behaviours. At least since its codification by Aristotle as a form of rhetoric, 'irony' as a term has been largely applied to forms of communication in which the surface meaning of the

language used is in tension with the meaning intended by the speaker. For Cicero, irony could be just a transient rhetorical figure, 'saying the contrary of what one means'; by contrast, for Socrates it could be a general pattern of discourse (Muecke, 1970: 15–16). But for the last two millennia the term 'irony' has been largely applied to instances of communication that exploit with varying degrees of sophistication the recursive character of language – its ability to have nested meanings, one inside another.

Muecke (1969: 64–98) distinguishes a number of variants of this 'communicative' irony. For example, 'impersonal irony', like that practised by Swift in *A Modest Proposal*, is characterised by a dryness of tone, in which the ironist absents themselves, simply presenting their words, and not indicating overtly to the listener that the communication is meant as ironic or sarcastic. By contrast, in 'self-disparaging irony' such as that practised by Socrates, the ironist's personality and feelings are to the fore, but in a disguised form: he or she presents him or herself as ignorant or naïve, but intends the audience to penetrate the disguise so as to discern the intended meaning.

Of course, both of these forms of communicative irony have long been deployed in political argumentation and invective. But of more significance for environmental politics is a mode of communicative irony which Muecke calls 'dramatised irony' (1969: 92–8). Thus, a common device in environmental protests is the use of framing devices to draw out and thematise the ironic tensions within the situation being protested about – typically, between truth claims or normative ideals on the one hand, and actual states of affairs on the other. Here, the rhetorical, persuasive effect is grounded less in the *presentation* than in what is *presented* – less in the artfulness of the ironist in creating an ironic communication, and more in the contrasts and tensions being 'revealed' in the world, tensions that have provoked, and are being exposed by, the protest in question. As such, presentations of dramatised irony draw on the logic of another set of ironic phenomena, not communications but meaningful situations, that are the topic of *situational irony*.

As mentioned above, Muecke identifies four features that a situation must possess to be judged ironic: the existence of two or more interpretations of the situation; a tension or incompatibility between these; a victim who remains unaware that the situation might be other than he or she perceives it; and an observer with a sense of irony (Muecke, 1969: 99–100). Yet many examples of irony in environmental protest draw attention to that most minimal form of situational irony, the 'irony of simple incongruity' (Muecke, 1969: 100–2), in which the ironic observer simply recognises the jarring juxtaposition of contradictory elements, such as great wealth and great poverty – or the coexistence noted in the first sentence of this contribution of both ecological awareness and anti-ecological behaviour. Much of the framing activity of social movements can be seen as dramatising such incongruities (Snow & Benford, 1988; Benford & Hunt, 1992).

Sometimes this dramatisation is not overt, and the cultural labour performed by the ironist in presenting the ironies not particularly foregrounded. In such

cases, environmental movements typically just draw attention to or heighten the ironies – the 'occult incompatibilities' – latent within a given situation. Many protests achieve this by making visible the 'backstage' (Goffman, 1959; Meyrowitz, 1985) of industrial behaviour. For example, Friends of the Earth UK did this in their first direct action in May 1971, when they deposited 2000 non-returnable glass bottles on the doorsteps of Cadbury-Schweppes's London headquarters (Finch, 1992: 8). Greenpeace are even more famous for this kind of protest, carefully designing actions in order to produce dramatic, media-friendly images at sites of 'backstage' industrial operations, such as nuclear reprocessing plant outflow pipes or deep-sea oil platforms (Dale, 1996).

However, in other forms of political intervention this dramatisation is made overt, with situational ironies and aporias being taken out of their natural context and re-presented within 'fictional' cultural genres, such as satire or morality play. This kind of ethico-political practice has a long tradition, and itself draws on a simpler species of communicative irony – that of mocking quotation, where an idea, belief, way of speaking or behaving, style of music or dress is quoted in an exaggerated way in order to poke fun at it. A key opportunity for such mockery in early modern times was Carnival, a time of misrule when established mores and customs of behaviour were overturned in favour of licence, and figures of authority were subjected to mimicry and mockery (Bristol, 1985). Such carnivalesque visual rhetorics have enjoyed a revival in political practice in the last few decades, and have frequently been deployed during environmental and anti-capitalist protests. For example, in December 1999 the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle provoked a Carnival against Capital, during which protesters in costumes and controlling giant puppets were used to dramatise issues and satirise authority figures (Leclair, 2003).

Some recent dramatised interventions by groups such as the Yes Men, the Critical Art Ensemble and PLATFORM have involved more complex forms of communicative irony. For example, in 2000, members of the Critical Art Ensemble sought to render visible the appropriation of messianic rhetoric by biotechnology corporations by inventing a fictitious scientific cult, the Cult of the New Eve, which proceeded to evangelise members of the public.[4] In another action carried out in April 2004, one of the group known as the Yes Men posed as 'Erastus Hamm', of the Dow Corporation, and addressed a London banking conference, describing several lucrative industrial crimes as 'golden skeletons'. In character he then proceeded to introduce the 'Acceptable Risk Calculator', which promised to determine how many deaths are acceptable when achieving large profits, and managed to get many bankers, unaware of the theatrical nature of the event, to sign up for licences for the calculator – and even to pose for photos with the Acceptable Risk mascot, 'Gilda, the golden skeleton in the closet'.[5]

The use of irony in these actions is more sophisticated in a number of ways. Compared with the carnivalesque mockery above, the irony in these actions is *concealed*, the theatricality less obvious; observers have to work harder to

recognise that there is a hidden meaning beneath, and in stark tension with, the overt meaning, thus making the final rhetorical effect even more powerful. But the irony is also *layered* – a double irony, at least. Firstly, there is the ironic tension between the ideas and values being presented by the characters within the theatrical frame, and those that suddenly come to the fore when the audience recognises the existence of that frame, and that the intended meaning is quite different. Secondly, there is an ironic tension *within* the theatrical framing, what Muecke (1969: 107–12) calls an 'irony of self-betrayal', in which the fictional characters played by the activists, and even the genuine bankers drawn unknowingly into the Yes Men's theatre, are made unconsciously to expose their lack of moral reflexivity.

This, then, is irony being deployed as tactic against the ruses of Theophrastian or postmodern irony. In the previous section we saw above how such forms of ironic comportment were symptomatic of the culture of unsustainability. Strategies of dissimulation or denial rely on a deliberate or unconscious disconnecting of public language and conduct from private belief and intention. There I suggested that such forms of irony-as-comportment are largely deployed by the already powerful as strategies to hoard power and avoid responsibility. Then, in this section, we have seen how irony can be used as a tactic *against* such ruses and self-deceptions. Social movements use various forms of communicative irony to make visible such ruses of power, and in particular a dramatising irony which draws attention to the situational ironies inherent within unsustainable and unjust cultural practices. As such, these tactics can be seen as attempts to restore the referential and normative power of language, to resist the attempts by powerful elites to turn language into a mere tool to be deployed to further their own projects, rather than a shared 'house of Being' (Heidegger, 1977: 193), to which we are all responsible and which makes responsibility possible.

However, such tactics can only serve as partial and limited responses to the problem of unsustainability, unless they are embedded within and shaped by a wider ironic stance towards the world – what I would call, borrowing a term from phenomenology, an ironic 'world relation' (*Weltbezug*). In a sense, then, the limits of such tactical forms of irony lie in the fact that they are not ironic *enough*. Using Kierkegaard's terms, they only use a 'quantitative' irony, setting up ironic relations with finite, particular features of the world, rather than a 'qualitative' irony, a distinctive stance towards the totality of existence (Kierkegaard, 1989). In particular, the irony generally deployed in environmental and alternative globalisation protests is a 'corrective' irony, Firstly, it operates by setting up the tension between two levels of meaning, only in order to more resolutely effect a resolution onto one of them. Movements reveal situational ironies in order to shame their targets into repentance (Szerszynski, 2002: 56): Schweppes, Shell or British Nuclear Fuels, for example, present themselves as responsible corporate citizens, but are revealed to be otherwise. Secondly, it positions the ironist as an outside observer of the irony, on the moral high ground looking down, rather than implicated in it. Such a positing

of the ethical actor seems inadequate for an age in which the logic of politics is that of Baudrillardian simulation, and in which even social movements get caught up in this logic (Blühdorn, 2006).

It is significant that the dominant form of irony used by environmental groups is one that was characteristic of the pre-modern, or at least the early modern, period. Before the late 18th century, irony, when it was employed, was generally expected to be subordinate to other, morally instructive communicative goals: it was 'irony with a purpose'. But gradually, as part of a wider cultural development in which literature and other artistic endeavours became understood as autonomous activities, driven by their own internal logic rather than as servants of religious or state power, irony too came to be understood as containing its own intrinsic virtues (Muecke, 1969: 94). Irony became not just rhetorical *form* but philosophical *content*; not just an indirect way of conveying messages that could have been communicated directly, without irony, but an all-embracing sensibility, developed with greatest intensity in the arts, perhaps most famously in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne, 1983).[6]

It is to this wider ironic sensibility that I now want to turn. For it is here, if anywhere, that we will find a differently modern philosophical grounding for environmentalism, one that recognises the contingency of existence and the limits of human knowledge, and that thus avoids the hubris and lack of reflexivity inherent in the first two epistemological strategies outlined in the introduction, those of techno-scientific modernism and romanticist immediacy.

Irony as World Relation

The irony-as-world-relation that I describe and advocate in this section as an alternative epistemological strategy for environmentalism is one which took shape in the current of 'cultural modernism' referred to in the introduction. In 19th-century Europe, a sensitivity to situational irony was often elaborated into what Muecke calls 'general irony', a metaphysical position in which the human condition is understood as riven with fundamental contradictions, such as those between freedom and determinism, intention and outcome, the infinite universe and finite existence. Unlike verbal irony, here there are no separate groups of perpetrators and victims; unlike conventional situational irony, there is no distanced observer, aloof from the folly and blindness they perceive being played out in front of them. Here, irony embraces even the observer, the identifier of the irony, within its grasp (Muecke, 1969: 119–58).

As I also suggested in the introduction, this deeply ironic cultural current of modernity has been highly influential on the environmentalist sensibility. It lurks behind Hardin's Law, the idea that 'we can never do merely one thing' (Hardin, 1963), with its reminder of the way that increased understanding of ecological interconnectedness seems to diminish rather than exalt humanity's mastery over its destiny. It permeates James O'Connor's (1988) idea of the second contradiction of capitalism: that capitalism, through its operation, undermines the natural and societal conditions necessary for its own

reproduction. It informs the growing awareness of the tendency for the side-effects of new technologies to crowd out their intended effects in a generalised irony of events (Szerszynski, 2006). Such insights in different ways all reflect a stance of what Muecke (1969: 137–47) calls 'general dramatic irony', in which serene, but only temporarily blissful, ignorance of the real state of affairs is seen as the general human condition.

It is not insignificant that in considering irony as world relation, as an overall stance towards the world, we are returning to that class of irony I termed *dispositional* irony, which involves the application of the term 'ironic', not to communications or to situations, but to persons and their comportment towards the world. For, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, the dispositional ironies, discussed above as symptomatic of the contemporary culture of unsustainability, do in fact contain a partial truth. For what the Theophrastian and postmodern ironists both recognise in their way is that freedom and autonomy require the negation of concrete existence. Kierkegaard formulated this insight in *The Concept of Irony* (1989) in his discussion of the life of Socrates. The life of 'immediacy', simply living within the moral horizon of one's own culture (or, indeed, one might say, subculture) is inconsistent with the genuinely ethical life. For Kierkegaard, Socrates' ironic self-distancing from the culture into which he had happened to be born, and indeed from the concrete details of his own life, was the awakening of subjectivity itself, without which there can be no genuine moral responsibility.

However, as Andrew Collins (1998: 148–9) points out, a simple negation of concrete existence, a severing of private meaning from the shared, public world, can by itself only offer a *negative* freedom, not a positive form of life. Kierkegaard himself recognised this; in *Either/Or* he carries out a caustically perceptive critique of the constantly ironic Romantic aesthete in his depiction of the character 'A' – egotistical, bored and incapable of engagement (Kierkegaard, 1992a). And the very inadequacy of A's existence is connected to the fact that, with this conception of irony-as-world-relation as the simple negation of immediacy, the ironic attitude is not fully carried through. Similarly, the problem with both Theophrastian and postmodern ironists lies not in their irony, but in the *weakness* of their irony. Theophrastian ironists, who use communication and self-presentation cynically as instruments to advance their goals, take an ironic stance towards the public world of shared meaning and their participation in it, but they fail to similarly ironise themselves and their projects. Postmodern ironists are more consistent, in that even their own projects and values are only ironically committed to – yet here, the ironic attitude itself is the one thing that is unironised. The postmodern ironist is thus not free but captured by their own alienation from the public world, by an ironic attitude that becomes a new immediacy, a new and equally constraining horizon of thought.

In a later work, Kierkegaard (1992b), writing under the pseudonym Climacus, suggests a way out of this trap. For Climacus's ironist, the ironic distancing from immediacy is only a transitional stage to the fully ethical life of

responsible choice. Climacus's ironist identifies *neither* with the finite, empirical self of his immediate, conditioned existence, *nor* with the infinite, unconditioned ironic self of pure choice, but with the contradiction between the two. From the vantage point of his unconditioned, ironic distance, he thus regards his conditioned, finite existence not as a set of constraints to be rejected, but as 'a home in which he chooses to dwell' (Collins, 1998: 150). The ironist does not abandon, but *returns* to his finite, worldly existence, and takes *responsibility* for it. As John Evan Seery rather similarly puts it, the spirit of irony requires one 'to return to the finite world of politics, to act in and for such a world, even in the face of knowledge that puts the world and that activity into perspective' (Seery, 1990: 139).

A thoroughgoingly ironic environmentalism would involve a reflexive awareness of the limited and provisional nature of human understanding, while at the same time not lapsing into cynicism or quietism. An ironic self-distancing from the shared world of public meanings – if it is followed by the return gesture of re-entering it with a new sense of reflexivity towards and responsibility for the propositional and normative claims which one uses – does not have to erode the power of that shared world of meaning. On the contrary, it is only through the ironic negation of received meanings that our common language can become a fit dwelling place for ethical responsibility.

Conclusion: For an Ironic Ecology

The main thrust of this contribution has been to argue that environmentalist practice should acknowledge the debt it owes to aesthetic modernism, and more wholeheartedly align itself with that cultural current. I am aware that this might seem a rather counter-intuitive argument. Environmentalism, a critic might argue, is if anything a *rejection* of the attitude of general irony characteristic of cultural modernism. If metaphysical, general irony was made possible by the retreat of religious certainties from European culture, it could be argued that environmentalism arose in the late 20th century as a cultural movement that offered a new, secular antidote to this cultural development. Instead of accepting the Gnostic vision of a humanity set adrift in a meaningless universe, environmentalism seemed to offer a way of reorienting human behaviour to an idea of cosmic order. By attending to natural processes and limits, environmentalists seemed to be saying, we can maybe leave behind mere species self-assertion as the model of human action, and once again know how we should live by locating ourselves within a meaningful cosmic horizon (Szerszynski, 1996). As refracted through the first two epistemological strategies described in the introduction, this has indeed been the dominant way that the environmentalist critique of modernity has been articulated.

Yet, as Bruno Latour has recently argued (Latour, 2004), it may well be that the environmentalist *theory* we have is not best suited for understanding and realising the civilisational potential of environmentalist *practice*. Certainly, an ironic environmentalism, one which rejected the hope of a harmonisation of

human affairs through a harmonisation with nature, but instead understood the human condition as intrinsically paradoxical and aporetic, would likely be a rather different sort of environmentalism than that offered by most accounts of environmental politics. But, I want to argue, it is in the embrace of general irony, rather than in its rejection, that the most clear-sighted antidote to the condition of unsustainability will be found.

What would a thoroughgoing ironic environmentalism look like? As I argued above, the environmentalist sensibility is already partially informed by the cultural current of generalised irony; it follows that the task of imagining an ironic ecology does not mean starting from scratch, but instead will involve gathering together a range of existing elements in environmentalist practice, in both civil society and public policy, and rearticulating them in terms of a more fundamental ironic world relation.

Firstly, ironic ecology would involve the recognition of the inevitability of failure and error, and at the same time the need to act, with due care, in the very face of that recognition. As Bob Jessop argues, the political ironist:

> ... accepts incompleteness and failure as essential features of social life but continues to act as if completeness and success were possible ... The only possibility open for a political ironist ... [is] to stand apart from her political practice and at the same time incorporate this awareness of her ironic position into the practice itself. (Jessop, 2003)

This would be a politics which emphasised the limits of human understanding, the growing significance in human affairs of what Ulrich Beck (1992) calls 'non-knowledge' and the likelihood of being surprised by events, and which took a precautionary stance towards projects involving radical and irreversible environmental and technological change.

Secondly, however, an ironic ecology does not entail the withdrawal from engagement and creative experimentation with nature. Far from it: it would imply the celebration and exploration of the mutual implication of nature and culture, but in a way which would emphasise the everyday, the aesthetic and the creative. Both techno-scientific modernism and romanticism have tended to reify a sublime nature outside and preceding human meanings – the former as an object of knowledge and intervention, the latter as one of contemplative appreciation. An ironic ecology informed by what I have been calling cultural modernism, rather than either dominating or venerating nature, would instead be more likely to value and proliferate 'impure' and vernacular mixings of nature and culture, new shared meanings and practices, new ways of dwelling with non-humans, new 'naturecultures' (Haraway, 2003). Its defining legacy would be neither the nuclear power station, nor the nature reserve, but a living, evolving plurality of shared forms of life.

Thirdly, a thoroughly ironic stance would involve a greater reflexivity about the provisional character not just of propositional but also of normative claims. Environmental politics has arguably been dominated by a moral

earnestness that has gone hand in hand with its over-estimation of the epistemic power of science, and by a neglect of the way that meanings and values about nature are not just socially situated and partial but also shot through with ironies and aporias. A reflexive stance towards one's own beliefs and values which does not collapse into manipulative or quietistic cynicism requires a truly ironic world relation – an irony not just towards particular things but towards the world's totality, including oneself and one's irony. And such a stance would necessitate a less moralistic and self-satisfied political style, one which acknowledges that no one can know political truths perfectly or live blamelessly, especially under current circumstances. Thus, although it would doubtless employ many of the ironic tactics analysed above, it would do so in a way that was less crudely 'corrective', and which was honed by a more general ironic sensibility in order to produce more effective calls to genuine personal responsibility (see, for example, the tactics employed by the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA).[7]

Fourthly, ironic ecology would imply forms of political intervention (for example slogans, maxims, eco-labels and protests) that were more 'knowing' in their representational practice. Kierkegaard himself used Socratic irony and pseudonymous voices in his writings. He felt that the knowledge 'possessed' by people can act as a barrier to the apprehension of more fundamental truths, and used such literary devices to undermine the assumptions of knowledge and understanding amongst his readers, in order to force them to take existential responsibility for their own readings. Ironic ecology would similarly favour what Roland Barthes (1975) calls 'writerly' texts, ones which do not impose fixed meanings on readers, but treat them as co-producers of meaning. In the case of eco-labels, for example, dominant forms of product labelling have generally involved 'simple' forms of transparency which depend on agreed framings and high levels of trust. An ironic environmentalism would encourage forms of labelling which involved more complex modes of transparency, ones which encourage critical reflection about the limits and assumptions of any given frame. The 'green electricity' label in Sweden has done this inadvertently, by provoking public debates which have made a much broader range of issues and options visible than the original frame of 'cleanliness' entailed; ironic ecology would involve the development of forms of communications and labels which deliberately provoked such reflexive forms of 'inter-frame transparency' (Klintman & Boström, 2007).

Late capitalist society faces a profound cultural challenge, one grounded in the material contradiction between a form of life and its self-undermining consequences, and in the rational contradiction between the knowledge of impending environmental disaster and the resistance to change. But any remedy to this predicament will only be as subtle and effective as the diagnosis. If we operate with a simple conception of irony, then the cure will seem simple too – to replace 'mere rhetoric' with 'truth'; to replace symbolic, token action with 'genuine' action; to imagine the dividedness of finite being against itself can be healed; to erase the political, always grounded in plurality and

difference, through moving too quickly to a clear and simple truth. If instead we recognise that our predicament is *itself* ironic, maybe we can be more clear-sighted about our problem and its solution. If we see that irony is not just evasion and dissimulation, but identifies themes that lie at the heart of the human condition, we can see it not as an enemy but as an ally in the quest for a more honest and sustainable form of society.

Notes

1. And even environmental and development non-governmental organisations have been accused of what Jean-Paul Sartre (1958) calls 'bad faith', of being driven less by the realities of environmental problems than by their own organisational interests (for example, see Eyerman & Jamison, 1989).
2. I do not thereby mean to imply that *all* postmodern thought exhibits this kind of irony.
3. Of course, Rorty himself believes that private irony can and should co-exist with public solidarity, but he then proceeds to ground that solidarity in the power of individuals to forge an 'imaginative identification with the details of others' lives' (Rorty, 1989: 190). Rorty seems to assume that the rejection of the positivist understanding of truth as a correspondence between words and things requires a view of language as wholly private, and thus reduces even the moral demand of solidarity with the other to an aesthetic act of imagination in the subject.
4. http://www.critical-art.net/biotech/cone, accessed 2 December 2006.
5. http://www.theyesmen.org. For other protest actions in a broadly similar vein, see http://www.thevacuumcleaner.co.uk and http://www.banksy.co.uk, all accessed 2 December 2006.
6. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, first published in the 1760s, is presented as the autobiography of the fictional Shandy, but any pretence to realism is overwhelmed by a constant series of digressions, culs-de-sac and a playful undermining of storytelling conventions.
7. http://www.clownarmy.org, accessed 2 December 2006.

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