Fanaticism and E. M. Cioran’s “Lyrical Leprosy”

Timo Airaksinen

Department of Practical Philosophy, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finland; timo.airaksinen@helsinki.fi

Abstract: People harass people to defend and promote their fundamental beliefs, political ideologies, religious dogmas, and the Truth. They create these with marvelous lucidity and unnerving verve, spreading, guarding, and enforcing their convictions. Fanatical ideologies penetrate and pollute our life world like “lyrical leprosy”. We need a coping strategy. Conformists may want to go along and join the perpetrators, whomever they happen to be. Activists fight ideological pollution, a risky strategy. Indifference and apathy do not pollute others and are less dangerous than rebelling. Following E. M. Cioran, I discuss three defensive strategies: those of a skeptic, an idler, and an aesthete. I reject trivializing the third strategy; instead, I discuss an ironist’s options. A recommendable route to indifference is to read the Truth metaphorically and ironize it. This voids its contents, and the result is adiaphora. We can also start with irony and metaphorize it. Such linguistic–aesthetic methods thwart the viperous dogmas that otherwise harass us from the cradle to the grave. The Truth is a treacherous construct. How to avoid it? How to deflect ideologically motivated terror?

Keywords: Pessoa; Donskis; Hare; Rorty; dogma; indifference; violence; irony; metaphor

1. The Principle of Evil and Ideological Pollution

E. M. Cioran, in his A Short History of Decay, writes: “When we refuse to admit the interchangeable character of ideas, blood flows . . . firm resolves draw the dagger; fiery eyes presage slaughter”. He identifies a Principle of Evil: “Every faith practices some form of terror” until society becomes “an inferno of saviors”. “Here certitudes abound”: The result is fanaticism—a fundamental defect which gives the man the craving for effectiveness [power, influence], for prophecy, for terror—a lyrical leprosy by which he contaminates souls, subdues them, crushes or exalts them . . . Only the skeptics (or idlers or aesthetes) escape because they propose nothing, because they [. . .] undermine fanaticism’s purposes, analyze its frenzy.

The trick is done by “jesting wisdom”, which empties the Truth of its content (Cioran 2010; Aldana-Piñeros and Garzón-Pascagaza 2017; Leskanich 2021; Johnston 2009). Cioran writes as a nihilist and a cynic, but he is not a political nihilist in the original sense of the word; that is, he does not destroy it all so that you could build a better world on the ruins (Haynal et al. 1983). He is a radical relativist and values nihilist who rejects all abstract normativities as false truths (Booth 1974). “[A]ny arbitrary and fantastic aspiration is preferable the inflexible truths”. He is a cynic like Diogenes, the Celestial Dog—weaponized with sarcasm. Cioran writes admiringly about him. In his strikingly poetic style, Cioran presents the fundamental problem of mental hygiene (understood in the same sense as computer hygiene that seeks and shuns viruses). How to avoid contamination from false certainties and their destructive ideological consequences? How to avoid spreading the disease of “lyrical leprosy” and retain your mental health?

The pollution contaminates people who fail to resist but faithfully follow self-appointed prophets and saviors. They pull others into the maelstrom of groundless faith and blindly hostile action against nonbelievers. Nevertheless, their values and norms look ethically relevant because of their universalizable import in our eternal search for
paradise—this is the key to enforcing the Principle of Evil.\textsuperscript{5} But, says Cioran, if we all escaped and denied the dogmatic certainties, we would “recover paradise”.\textsuperscript{6} Notice the bitter irony of this idea because paradise is one of those false certainties that makes the “blood flow”. Yet, his main point looks valid: life without certainties is, indeed, worthy of effort, even without the empty promises of earthly—or celestial—paradise. Paradise is for fanatics only. We must avoid the polluting effect at any cost if we hope to stay healthy, protect our integrity, and live devoid of that particular type of guilt that action on doctrinaire certainty brings about. We should not terrorize others or help others harass our brethren.

However, we should be careful with such undefinable words as fanatic and fanaticism. They are pejorative: no one accepts de se ascriptions of fanaticism, except ironically. The term is essentially contested because your fanatics are my heroes and vice versa. If fanatics did not exist, whom would we worship? Moreover, the disciples of the dogma, our harriers, will do their best to hide their fanaticism. They use camouflaging rhetoric under which they fail to see themselves. In fact, harassment hides in everyday routines, except when it periodically flares up and reaches orgiastic heights of doom and destruction. Cioran uses hyperbole to emphasize violence and fanaticism, which works when the dogma’s grotesqueness is thinly camouflaged. Everything looks deceptively normal when the cover is thick, although the deadly danger is still there.

R. M. Hare once offered a useful idea of fanaticism by saying that a fanatic remains faithful to his adopted Truth and dogma, however abstract and harmful (Hare 1965; Fullenwider 1977). Poisoned by lyrical leprosy, fanatics are ready to suffer and die for the Truth and are certainly ready to maim and kill others. They sacrifice themselves—and you. And why would they refuse to maim others if they are willing to die for their sacred but abstract, absolute ideals, dogmas, and the Truth? Cioran agrees, “The fanatic is incorruptible: if he kills for an idea, he can just as well get himself killed for one; in either case, tyrant or martyr, he is a monster”.\textsuperscript{7} Fanaticism entails a reflexive relation: you kill them, and if you were one of them, you would get killed, too. Such an agreement is surprising since Hare and Cioran are opposite kinds of thinkers who would not read or appreciate each other’s work. Nevertheless, both agree on the validity of three propositions. The first is the heroic base rule of fanaticism. The second expresses the idea of the martyr, and the third is the counterfactual conditional of the tragic heroism of a tyrant:

(i) I must kill any enemy of the Truth,
(ii) even if I got killed, and
(iii) I accept that (i) applies universally, and therefore reflexively (If I were an enemy, you should kill me).

Hare’s example is an ardent Nazi with a Jewish background. A different example is warlike patriotism and one’s willingness to die for the motherland—an abstract principle that demands sacrifices and makes martyrs. Fanatics destroy themselves and their own (irony), which is a minor loss, given that they are fanatics (sarcasm). Fanatics are prepared to do anything for the Truth—such is the mania of lyrical leprosy.\textsuperscript{8}

Fanaticism has its twin roots. First, the Truth demands everybody’s full recognition—it is expansionistic and enslaving in its megalomania. It addresses everybody and, in this sense, is universalizable. The Truth is there to be followed; the Truth is normative. The second root is paranoia: apostates and heretics threaten us believers, people of the Truth; therefore, we must defend ourselves everywhere and by all means (Freud 2003; Canetti 1980). We never attack; our position is defensive. The result is paranoid megalomania, a grotesque parody of the reasonable defenses and a satire of egomania those acolytes themselves fail to see.\textsuperscript{9} They believe, and hence, they act. The Truth blinds them. A fanatic is a person who strongly (not prima facie) prefers abstract principles before utility calculus, deontology before utilitarianism, and Kant before Mill.
2. How to Escape

Two worries emerge: dogmatic dirt and danger, or sickness and death. How to avoid ideological pollution? How to avoid harassment? Such questions are interconnected because if they reveal themselves, the unpolluted look like enemies, which indicates vulnerability. What about the list of the healthy and the free: skeptics, idlers, and aesthetes? The role of the skeptics should be prima facie clear: Ancient skeptics were emancipated. But what about idlers and aesthetes? The latter I call ironists who recognize Richard Rorty’s call to discuss matters in alternate terms, refusing to bow to the metaphysics of absolute truth. He explains “the ironist’s ability to exploit the possibilities of massive re-description” as follows: “We ironists treat these people [literary authors] not as anonymous channels of truth but abbreviations for final vocabulary and the sorts of belief and desires typical of its users”, when final vocabulary means words that one cannot explain in a non-circular manner (Rorty 1989; also Airaksinen 2021). In Cioran’s terms, these are the foundations of metaphysics, the dogma, the Truth, and, as we may say, narrated fetishes. However, Rorty stays in his academic ivory tower, loaded with big words and a fine vocabulary irrelevant to motivated cruelty, violence, and paranoia. This is useless estheticism, which misses the point of practical metaphysics and its dogmatic ideology that motivates action like nothing else and leads straight to aggressive action directe. I will use Rorty’s idea of irony as a redescription of the dogma to empty it of its contents. The dogma is no longer what it was supposed to be, rich and inviting.

Cioran mocks the Truth in the most ingenuous and intriguing manner. Ironists are artists and aesthetes in this restricted sense. A broader definition of an aesthete exists too, but it is a dead-end. Most dictatorships look ugly, like Stalinism. Nazis developed and celebrated their aestheticism. Can you remain clear of Nazism if you are an ardent admirer, collector, and student of their aesthetics (Fowler 1992)? Some religions, like Catholicism, are aesthetically impressive, but Lutheranism neglects all bling. When tyranny offers something to admire in aesthetic terms, we may focus on that only, thus avoiding what it is and wants—is this what Cioran says? Perhaps, but it sounds unfeasible. Aestheticism has its positive and negative functions: to search for and appreciate beauty, or whatever the aesthetic value is, and provide reasons for rejecting kitsch. If the positive function is unrealizable, the negative function may mean fighting what is the dreadful and the ugly, but this entails a lack of indifference, and Cioran warns against this. What can aesthetes do? Difficult to say.

Idlers, like Cioran’s idealized self, include the late great Fernando Pessoa, who showed what to be idle means in his posthumous The Book of Disquiet. “Having a horror of any action”, Pessoa testifies, via Bernardo Soares (a heteronym), why the idler cannot believe in the obscenely fanatic calls of the Truth: “Everything around me is the naked, abstract universe, consisting of nocturnal negations” (Pessoa 2015). The world is a deep, dark abyss. At a more practical level, “[p]ostpone everything. Never do today what you can leave for tomorrow. In fact you need not do anything at all, tomorrow or today”. Only one’s everyday life, thoughts, and dreams exist. Everything is private and constrained—too intimate for dogmas and the Truth to make an impression. This leads to existential skepticism: “And if someone tells you this is false and absurd, don’t believe it. But don’t believe what I say either because one ought not to believe in anything.” Pessoa easily recognizes the need for reflexive double-aspect skepticism.

Only everyday life is true, especially one’s imagination and daydreaming, which entertains the richest set of ideas. They belong to one’s private world independently of social realities and their demands. Idlers stay committed only to their private fantasies that they do not act on. They have beliefs but no motivation. “The idle apprehend more things, are deeper than the industrious. [...] Sloth is a somatic skepticism, the way the flesh doubts”. Idlers are and remain in the Cave clean of ideological pollution and its Truth. Conversely, conformists have their beliefs and convictions that follow the currently dominant ideas, values, and norms, regardless of what they are. They are motivated to act and thus represent a dangerous social element as ideal henchmen of the Truth. They
are willing to realize the goals of others because they lack their own. They believe in and follow the leader (Bertolucci 1970). In this sense, their beliefs do not matter, yet they are motivated. Cioran identifies conformism and indifference: one “must endure its [dogma’s] changes with a despairing conformism”. However, conformism is not what we want; it is indifference, which does not entail the confusion of a conformist who must respond to the ever-changing ideological trends. The conformists’ commitments are momentary illusions, but they are committed. Conformism is a common form of false consciousness and entails action in bad faith.

What about a skeptical fighting attitude against the Truth, its doctrinaire interpretation, and its threat of fanaticism? Here tradition (dogmatism), modernism (skepticism), and postmodernism (indifference) clash. A good example is Lithuanian thinker Leonidas Donskis, who, inspired and motivated by the ever-present threat of antisemitism, discusses the “forms of hatred”. He argues against what he identifies as collective adiaphora or moral indifference, which he condemns, unlike Cioran.

Adiaphora means “not different or differentiable”, or insignificant and uninteresting. As the Stoics saw it, things are good (kalo), bad (kako), or indifferent (adiaphora). Cioran’s project of reaching indifference and apathy under the threat of fanaticism and violent harassment is, therefore, paradoxical. He argues that we should treat kako as adiaphora, which sounds cynical. Prima facie, to be indifferent to what is bad is bad. Donskis’ project aims to make his readers conscious of dogmatic hatred as kako, which does not allow adiaphora. His way is how we moderns tend to think.—Donskis writes:

[Adiaphora] rests on the withdrawal from the realms of what makes a human being a human being: moral values, sensitivity, a sense of human fellowship, sympathetic understanding of the Other, and compassion. The best example of moral adiaphora is the condition and behavior of a mob rejoicing over the public execution.

His dream of reconciliation sounds circular: “There should […] be some hope for the future, and this is precisely why forms of hatred can be replaced with forms of hope” (Donskis 2000, 2003, 2008). Donskis thinks that rational argumentation and civilized discussion can void the Principle of Evil and cure lyrical leprosy, which sounds improbable. What can soft words do to the iron core of a dogma? Why would a fanatic be interested? Public contemplation of the forms of hatred fortifies him because her megalomaniac paranoia now reacts to the new threat. When the trouble starts, writers like Donskis are the first victims. And Donskis’ mob example of adiaphora is misdirected: these people are far from treating the execution as an indifferent event. On the contrary, as an ironist would say, they participate in and rejoice over the perceived cruelty as if it were good—they love what cannot be loved. I fail to see how Donskis’ cultured words could fight such ironies. Cioran’s postmodernism is more radical. He is saying that emptying the Truth (kako) of its content makes it an adiaphoron, which justifies apathy. The contentless dogma vanishes as a non-entity, and an eviscerated soldier emerges as the postmodern icon.

From the existential point of view, Donskis remains a modernist bound by the fanatic’s dogma, from which he struggles to free us. He has rejected the Siren call of the Truth but is still fighting against it. He wants to enlighten and liberate others by revealing the truth about the Truth, but alas, his work has no interest to idlers and ironists. An idler does not bother, and the ironist glances over and says, Donskis plays with fanaticism by assuming its outlook—where is his freedom now? He still plays the truth game. I find Donskis’ direct fight a dead-end. If you cannot win, do not fight. Even if you fought, you might not be a fanatic in Hare’s sense, yet you come too close to its slippery slope of self-sacrifice.

Cioran himself cannot fully avoid the modernist temptation of fighting his enemies. He knows his postmodern “superhuman indifference” project is impossible to complete. No one can be fully indifferent and live:

When He penetrates us, we think we are elevated, but we descend lower and lower; having reached our end, He crowns our collapse, and so we are “saved”
I hate all gods; I am not healthy enough to scorn them. That is the indifferent man’s great humiliation.  

Cioran recognizes the difficulty: he hates gods and rebels against them. Therefore, he is polluted and remains unhealthy. Is he a modern skeptic who cannot liberate himself in the promised land of adiaphora? In the early parts of SHD, he writes like a winner, but in the end, he comes close to confessing his failure. However, as a postmodernist, he has shown us the path.

3. The Skeptical Way

An atheistic paradox illuminates Donskis’ predicament and more: scientific atheism, a form of skepticism, tracks the truth of religious beliefs, faith, and hopes as if they were propositional constructions, and only then does he try to refute them. However, the game will stay in the hands of the religious believer. We call her a believer, but this is misleading. Religion is not a truth game played with epistemic entities called rational beliefs. Instead, it is a matter of faith in myth; it entails trust in sacred rites and fetishes backed by taboos like “Do not mention my name in vain”. It narrates adored objects and supernatural events in various imaginative ways, intuitively, mystically, and magically. Hence, the terms and rules of the dialectics remain theirs; thus, the atheist cannot win. She discusses their gods, whose existence no one can prove, falsify, or even understand and, therefore, substantiate. Here is a dialectical abyss; therefore, atheism is and remains a derivative of religious belief. An atheist discusses what they discuss, unable to formulate her own approach. We may speak, paradoxically, of Christian atheists who desperately struggle to disprove the Biblical dogmas without understanding the threats of lyrical leprosy. Whatever the Christians believe—who can say?—Christian atheists are their truncated simulacra, the faithful devoid of faith.

A modern atheist’s problem is her failure as a skeptic. How naïve can you get? For instance, Christopher Hitchens disproves religion by science applying its logic and theories without understanding that such issues are irrelevant to religious believers (Hitchens 2008). They say God created the world in six days and then rested. How would the Big Bang theory shake such belief? If the Big Bang theory refutes the Bible, any other rational consideration would have done it hundreds of years before.

The postmodern solution is post-atheism, an idler’s dream that finds, without argument, religious commitments generally irrelevant, dogmas superfluous, faith indeterminate, magic ineffective, and sensibilities perverted. Yet, the believers are motivated to act, fight, and spill blood. Religions are the breeding grounds of fanaticism, megalomania, and the original “inferno of saviors”. Therefore, as imaginary entities, Gods are sleeping dogs; we should let them lie. Indifference is the only sustainable strategy, or religious dogmas are adiaphora. Yet, religions offer much to the playful mind; an ironist may treat religious thought, faith, and dogmas as bizarre language games. Religious truths are easy prey for an ironist. Concerning skeptics, their agnosticism disappoints. Deism may work better, as the Epicureans show by situating their gods infinitely far away from us. A post-atheist would not bother with the enigmas of gods.

How could skepticism produce indifference and apathy, or adiaphora? Arne Naess divides classical epistemologists into Dogmatists, Academicians, and Skeptics. The first claims that truth cannot be found (Cioran); the second that they have found at least one truth (Donskis); and the third “neither claim that they have found at least one truth, nor claim to know that truth cannot be found, but persists in their seeking” (Naess 1969). Naess’s ideal skeptic directs his critical gaze on the world and remains an optimist. However, as an ongoing quest for knowledge, skepticism is a double-edged or double-aspect epistemic position. Fanaticism and skepticism are structurally alike because they insist on reflexive relations. A fanatic destroys all enemies; therefore, if he is one of them, he destroys himself. A skeptic doubts all assertions and, therefore, also the assertions she entertains. The types
of skepticism are epistemic, scientific, and existential, which also apply to the dogmas of the ideological and political realm.\textsuperscript{18}

Think of George Orwell’s classic novel \textit{1984} and the sad case of Winston Smith. Winston is skeptical about the Party’s ideological belief system; in this sense, he remains mentally free. However, his skepticism does not make him indifferent; in this sense, he is not yet free. He wants to fight the system, which in the end, destroys him. He should have stayed in his Cave, instead he struggles to get out:

As he put his hand to the door-knob Winston saw that he had left the diary open on the table. \textit{DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER} was written all over it, in letters almost big enough to be legible across the room. It was an inconceivably stupid thing to have done. But, he realized, even in his panic he had not wanted to smudge the creamy paper by shutting the book while the ink was wet (Orwell 1949).

His motivation is confused and hence his actions are suicidal. He wants to keep the text legible in spite of its deadliness, or because of it. Winston’s case exemplifies the atheist’s paradox: the Truth pollutes him regardless of his disbelief because his mental landscape is still derivative of the Truth. He would need double-edged skepticism to reject both the questionable beliefs recommended by the authorities and those he instinctively and reactively tends to formulate and accept. We cannot prefer our own beliefs. Instead, we should bracket out all beliefs. A rebellion motivated by skepticism is dangerous if one is not skeptical about oneself. What do we learn? We learn that Winston has dangerous epistemic habits. He is too involved to avoid O’Brien.

Orwell’s \textit{1948} is of interest to us for two reasons. First, the book shows the limits and dangers of skepticism. Winston is skeptical about Big Brother, while Orwell takes the ironic way:

The Ministry of Truth—Minitrue, in Newspeak—was startlingly different from any other object in sight. It was an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete, soaring up, terrace after terrace, 300 m into the air. From where Winston stood, it was just possible to read, picked out on its white face in elegant lettering, the three slogans of the Party: \textit{WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.} The Ministry of Truth contained, it was said, three thousand rooms above ground level, and corresponding ramifications below.\textsuperscript{19}

After reading Orwell, no lyrical leprosy may hold us because the quotation is so ironic, starting from the highly symbolic structure of a pyramid signifying a trinity, which the Party’s three slogans repeat, all oxymorons. Father is war, Holy Ghost slavery, and the Son ignorance. The oldest form of an Egyptian pyramid is the step structure. And a pyramid is a tomb, in this case, of language and its ability to handle valid beliefs and sound ideas. The party celebrates Nitocris and her feast under the pyramid designed to drown the guests, and together with them, all criticism and dissent.

The idea of Newspeak is ironic because its logic makes falsehoods truths and vice versa; more specifically, it makes truth and falsehood, or truth-telling and lying, a metonymic pair. It does not matter whether you speak of knowledge or ignorance, truth or falsehood; in Newspeak, they are the same. We all know those three famous slogans, and now Winston wants to discover their alternatives, which is an impossible demand, considering the totalizing power of the pyramid. We have moved from Winston’s doomed skepticism to Orwell’s scathing irony. He ironizes Winston’s one-sided skepticism, thus proving the superiority of irony over skepticism. I agree. In the end, Winston has lost his critical abilities and realizes his skepticism had been misdirected. He should have doubted his beliefs, but he failed and now his situation is fully ironic: “‘O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast!’ Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right; everything was all right; the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother”\textsuperscript{20}.\textsuperscript{20}
4. The Ironic Way

The next route to indifference Cioran calls *aesthetic*. He is a cynical dog who sees the world through sarcasm. Irony differs from sarcasm because it has two main types, verbal and situational, whereas sarcasm is always verbal (Airaksinen 2020). We can view and describe our weird world differently (Rorty 1989), but the world cannot be dirty and mean in the way required by sarcasm. Sarcasm is always verbal and rests on a cynical attitude. I will give an example. My father was an infantryman in World War 2 for several years. He told me how scared the officers were before they went with their men against the enemy lines, knowing they would be targeted to die first. Their losses were, indeed, disproportional. But he said it smiling slyly as if the memory were delightful. I was upset by the cruelty of his attitude—he was not prone to cruelty. His mean amusement was cynical (attitude) and sarcastic (speech act), not ironic. Yet, the situation he recalled was also situationally ironic: the officers were visibly more afraid than the soldiers they should lead.

If he is not a cynic, the ironist avoids sarcasm. He wants to be free of all the motivational cruelty that comes with it. He does not need an attitude. He only wants to be indifferent and apathetic in a way that cynicism does not permit. A cynic, via his touches of sarcasm, has a stake in the matter, unlike an ironist who may not want to wallow in cynical images and sarcastic speech that would reveal his emotionally backed interests. He wants to bracket out all interests. How is he supposed to achieve this? The key is metaphorization, which accompanies verbal irony, or, he says, irony is in its metaphors. He sees the world ironically, through the relevant metaphors, until he need not distinguish between metaphor and irony—he will be indifferent, apathetic, and free. He has made himself the silent enemy of the Truth because martyrdom never was his goal. As I read Cioran, the sole goal is to avoid ideological pollution, a key element in his life plan.

*Metaphorizing irony.* We have two ways to develop the present theme: metaphorize irony and ironize metaphor. Let us start with the first. Can we reach indifference via metaphorized irony as an aesthetic attitude? To answer, we need an ironic case as a starting point. Cioran writes cynically, applying sarcasm, but also makes an ironic point concerning the religious life of monks:

This stagnation of the organs, this stupor of the faculties, this petrified smile—do they not often remind you of the ennui of the cloisters, hearts abandoned by God, the dryness and idiocy of the monks loathing themselves in the ecstatic transports of masturbation? You are merely a monk without divine hypotheses and without the pride of solitary vice. Doomed to the empty hours of eternity, to the periphery of shudders and the mildewed desires that rot at the approach of salvation.21

Coenobitic monks and their lives are dedicated to Christ and filled with the hope of salvation at the end of time (Agamben 2013).22 What are they doing, we ask? Their life is Ora et labora and nothing else until death comes and fulfills their ardent hopes. The ironies of all this are clear: the empty life in service of a rich future they know nothing of. No one can tell a sufficiently detailed and convincing story of heavenly life to motivate us. What is the monks’ motivation like? We cannot know.

They work like common peasants, their desires are rotten away, and their work is nothing but masturbation, and hence, for us, their work liberates by enslaving. As Aristotle, the Catholic Church’s original theorist, says in his *Politics*, agricultural work is so terrible that it must be left for slaves. Therefore, the monk’s work counts as self-immolation as a simile of Christ’s passion, and, as such, it is fodder for a cynical and ironist. The monks are fanatics who hurt themselves because of an abstract principle. Their Ora et labora means Per aspera ad astra, or more originally, Seneca’s Non est ad astra mollis e terris via. This is pure irony expressed via a star metaphor of heaven and paradise. Virgil wrote in his *Aeneid*: “Sic itur ad astra”. The star metaphor prevails. In this way, the work’s ironies acquire a starry metaphor garb: meaningless but sacred toil (irony) is the path to the stars (metaphor). It is like Sisyphus should transmogrify into Icarus. Icarus learned a lesson, but too late: to fly high is to fall hard. In this way, the metaphorized irony empties the
content of the dogma Ora et labora. Irony shakes its foundations and metaphorization makes it crash.

Do monks harass us? They do not, but their Truth and its divinely institutionalized power do “when heaven itself becomes authority”. The dull monks abandoned by their God are not supposed to think of the wild side of their church. Is it not ironic that behind all the symbols and fetishes that are the truth of the Church and the objects of veneration of the idiot monks lies something else? The Truth hides the truth:

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz Biskupi (1885–1939) does not believe in the power of the Church; or rather, he believes that it is a religiosity of the narrows who do not know how to appreciate the divine. He sees the summit of the Church in the fact that it is the only institution that can save us from the cold hells of the world.

Religions number in their ledgers more murders than the bloodiest tyrannies account for, and those whom humanity has called divine far surpass the most conscientious murderers in their thirst for slaughter.

Cioran fails to find room for his trademark metaphors, irony, and sarcasm; he is far too angry: J’accuse. But the context is ironic anyway: inside the monks’ solemn prayers and outside the bestial slaughter of infidels—prayer and murder, as bedfellows, rest uncomfortably together under heaven’s authority.

Ironizing metaphors. Think of Karl Marx’s idea of Communism after the state withered away. Now free, working-class people can fish in the morning, make hay in the afternoon, and read books in the evening. This is a positive utopia Marx, unlike some anarchists, never develops (Byrn 2011; Clark 2007). Jesus talks about paradise in Heaven, promising it all to the robber dying on the cross with him. The three crosses reaching toward the sky in Calvary are an ironic allusion to the Holy Trinity; ironic because on the cross hang convicted criminals. Anyway, here we find a metonymic pair, Communism and Heaven. Heaven, on its own, is, of course, a metaphoric expression: the celestial world of stars and the home of angels as far as possible from Hell in the earth’s bowels. A lover of the Truth lives again in heaven, and so God’s heaven is, at the same time, a metonym and an independent metaphor. Anyway, here the metonymic play of words is supremely ironic because the good communists in Communism hate the virtuous Christian entering Heaven and vice versa. A communist traitor should go to Heaven, his Hell. A Christian sinner should end up in the Communist utopia, her primary horror. If this is not ironic, what is? Heaven and Communism are, at the same time, the worst and best places. We have ironized metaphors.

Metonymy is a subtype of metaphor. To say, “Napoleon won the battle” becomes ironic when we mobilize its metonymic pair, “His army won the battle”, and ask, did he fight alone, or what? Suppose I worship Napoleon as a world-historical individual (Hegel). I know he won many great battles, but the ironist’s question, “You mean his army won?” wins the day. My great hero is no longer the winner but a part of a mighty war machine. My hero worship has been robbed of its content, and thus “every hero is a being without talent”. Hence, I am one small step closer to indifference and apathy. I have ironized a metonym (metaphor). And such a trope respects no dogma.

The key to ironizing metaphors is to focus on metonyms, of which Thomas Hobbes offers a nice example. God’s anger is a metaphor, or actually a metonym, for human anger:

Nor to ascribe to him (unless metaphorically, meaning not the passion but the effect) passions that partake of grief; as repentance, anger, mercy: or of want; as appetite, hope, desire; or of any passive faculty: for passion, is power limited by somewhat else. “The attributes, therefore, of God in the abstract, when they are put for God, are put metonymically, which is a common thing in Scripture” (Hobbes 1651; Rooks 2000, my italics).

Look for something in nature that may look like an effect of an affect and then ascribe it metaphorically to a supernatural agent. Alternatively, God’s anger and human anger are related metonymically, God’s passion being a metonym of the real, human anger. Why metonymically? Because the effects ascribed to God’s passions are so closely related to the effects of human anger, one can describe them in the same terms, such as suffering, death, and destruction. Here we use the same terms even if the causes are different.
God’s anger is not really, due to its metonymic characterization, like human anger; why should it interest us? To ask this is to ironize the metonym so essential to religion. Metaphors and a fortiori, metonyms, are ironic in Rorty’s sense because they describe the world differently and in novel terms. Perhaps we want more? We want to metaphorically describe the Truth and its canonical expressions, which ironizes them and empties them of content, and then we can proceed. This way, we eviscerate the dogma without criticism, argumentation, or mobilizing new beliefs. We do not fight the dogma because we only look at it, read it metaphorically, and explain it in novel terms. We are then clean of pollution without risking our lives, and equally importantly, we will not spread the disease of lyrical leprosy. For this, we need a three-step argument: first, metaphorize dogma; second, notice its inherent irony; and third, go deeper into its vain ironies.

When we follow Hobbes while speaking of dogmas, those of religion appear metonymic. God is good, which has nothing to do with human goodness because He allows such a hostile and unjust world of ours. The two “goods” are related metonymically. And we ascribe all the worldly evil/good to him metaphorically. Incidentally, this may work as a solution to the riddle of Leibnizian theodicy. God created the best possible word whose goodness is metaphoric. Omnipotence and omniscience are two properties we cannot understand, but they work well as metonyms of (human) power and wisdom. We know powerful and wise people, and God, without sharing any of human properties, is related to them—hence the metonymic description.

To take another example, the list of Nobel Peace Prize laureates offers much food for thought, for example, Henry Kissinger 1973, Mother Theresa 1979, and Barack Obama 2009. Kissinger is a mass murderer and war criminal. Mother Theresa was a religious fanatic with no medical credentials, and Obama was nominated, hoping, in vain, he would not kill as many people in developing countries as the US presidents usually do. He did. He bombed seven different countries. The idea of a Nobel Prize Laureate symbolizes world-class excellence, now ironized wholesale by the abovementioned choices. Alas, to focus on the claimed excellence of the winners above may ignite dangerous cynicism, in addition to the irony of the descriptions of their achievements; for instance, Obama “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples”. His greatest achievement was the murder of Osama bin Laden to avenge 9/11 (sarcasm). The bitter ironies of violent and evil political and religious metaphors and metonyms are evident. A leader starts a crazy, bloody war and wins after a prolonged struggle. Peace breaks out, and he is glorified as a peacemaker. Now, we will have peace.

5. Conclusions: Taxman’s Visit

Jesus Christ advises the faithful to turn their other cheek (Matthew 5:39) and love their enemies (Luke 6:35). The first demand sounds fanatical in Hare’s and Cioran’s sense because one is a happy victim who welcomes any suffering and injury. The second case is an oxymoron. In both situations, an agent, bound by the doctrine, proves her indifference to evil things by turning kako into adiaphora. She remains indifferent; hence, she will not suffer when attacked. Can skeptics, idlers, and ironists, who live without dogma, pass the test like a fanatic? As we have seen, they may handle pollution and remain healthy, but what about malicious attacks against their body and mind, integrity and privacy? Cioran’s analysis remains incomplete because we may suffer from attacks even if we remain unpolluted outsiders. Should we then reject our indifferent attitude and fight back? Should we turn into conformists to be safe? This sounds intolerable.

Cioran admits that even an indifferent person may be vulnerable to attacks. Hence, he writes: “Everything conspires, elements and actions alike, to harm you. Arm yourself in disdain, isolate yourself in a fortress of disgust, dream of superhuman indifference” 26 The key is “superhuman indifference”, an “indefinite horror which rejects everything”, something a skeptic, idler, and ironist can only dream of. A time will come when an indifferent person must transform everything good that she has into adiaphora—except indifference itself. Then she cannot be hurt, and she is safe. Indifference is a Janus-faced
position: Janus-faced, one rejects the call of the dogma, and second, one rejects everything. The second stage is a superhuman position, but nothing else can guarantee safety.

In “Unconscious Dogmas”, Cioran sketches the first false steps toward the Truth and, as I read it, the dogmatic person’s prodigious certainties. He says you must not believe that life without dogmas will be easy, free, and untainted. Cioran’s horror of life outside of the Cave, facing the Truth, meeting the representatives of the dogma, and suffering from their violent posturing suggests tragedy to him. He knows he cannot cure lyrical leprosy and contain the maelstroms of sick prophecy, as his chapter “Unconscious Dogmas” shows. The Truth brings about horror and harassment. The Dalai Lama said, I was there, religions only mean quarrels. Great dogmas are coercive and necessarily paranoid.

Let us face it; as alarming as it is, we are essentially dogmatic creatures. Cioran writes about human destiny, “the favorite word in the vocabulary of the vanquished”, in a prima facie fatalistic manner in his chapter on “Unconscious Dogmas”: “Even a skeptic, in love with his doubts, turns out to be a fanatic of his skepticism. Man is the dogmatic being par excellence, and his dogmas are all the deeper when he does not formulate them, when he is unaware of them, and when he follows them.”

Cioran says, “in the desert of lucidity”, we remain fanatical about our own existence and, thus, of ourselves—because we need a fixed point to see the world and ourselves. What does Cioran say here? Does he mean that an idler, skeptic, and ironist must fail? I do not think so. We can reach adiaphora because the dogma and its Truth will fail: “Man […] is a lucid nothingness encircling everything and encircled by nothing, who surveys all object and possesses none”. In this metaphysics, indifference is the ultimate position when the Truth collapses into untruth. All dogmas are but “retarded desires” whose artificiality is scary but nothing else. Man is a gorilla that lost its fur and replaced it with ideals and dogmas.

According to Julien de la Mettrie, “[t]he brain has its muscles for thinking, as the legs have muscles for walking” and excretes thoughts like the kidneys excrete urine (de la Mettrie 1912). These wonderful analogies must have amused Cioran. The thoughts invite groundless epistemic assent; thus, they become random beliefs. But what we believe must be true; otherwise, we would not believe it. And when truths gather in big heaps, we organize them into dogmas, and, voila, we have found a way out of the dark Cave into the bright lights of the Truth. However, at some point, this solipsistic narrative must turn social. Perhaps it happens when one utters “I think” because this captures the attention of others, just like Descartes did when he broke off his dreamy solipsism and uttered, “I think”. At that point, the Cartesian dogma of epistemic certainty of individual existence became a Truth and apodictic certainty accepted by us all. The primordial dogma is now public, organized, and enforced. Next, in the inferno of saviors, it expands and defends itself and its lyrical leprosy. It gives birth to those paranoid megalomaniacs who will rule the world, followed by their fanatical acolytes. They are there to harass us and shed blood, as Cioran says.

Skeptics cannot survive in Cioran’s hands if they form schools to celebrate their dogmas—yet a skeptical dogma is an oxymoron. As I said, a skeptic may also bracket out beliefs concerning his skepticism and its results. An idler like Pessoa invents his fictional personas who deny the author’s original and privileged standpoint and disperse his views until Pessoa vanishes. Sören Kierkegaard did something similar. And for an ironist, all dogmas are playthings until they turn unrecognizable and vanish—and no ironist takes herself seriously. How could he do that?

But how do we ironists stifle the passions that surely trouble anyone who avoids the consequences of doctrinaire fights? We can be indifferent because we know the way to ataraxia, but to be indifferent is not necessarily the same as being apathetic. Some sympathetic emotions and vicarious affects may still linger, like traces and symptoms of the pollution that is no longer. We pity the casualties and share the sorrows of the victims. Vicarious passions die hard. And we may not tolerate the idea of ironizing other people’s sorrows and sufferings. Such raw emotions are disturbing and tempt us away from our
precious indifference. We tolerate them as reminders that we are still human and, thus, we care.

Here is an existential dilemma: we should mind the suffering of the innocent in the hands of those who have the Truth; but if we suffer, we are not indifferent, apathetic, and free from ideological and doctrinal pollution. Any such sympathetic emotion is a motive to act against the polluters, which goes against the wish to become clean like skeptics, idlers, and ironists. Our suffering will implicate us, but we may not be fully human without empathy and suffering.

I can only suggest a tragic possibility, reinforcing Leonidas Donskis’ main point: we indeed lose an important part of our humanity with adiaphora. An indifferent person is not fully human. This is an unavoidable, regrettable, and even tragic result when we struggle against ideological pollution. Our only consolation is that blame does not lie upon us. We may be responsible but not guilty because, de facto, we are victims. Therefore, we should not succumb to the temptation to believe that we could be clear of pollution and complete and perfect human beings in a society that is an “inferno of saviors” permeated by false demands of lyrical leprosy and the ever-expansive call to gather around the Truth. Violence, in its varying, omnipresent forms, together with our vicarious affects works like a greedy taxman who takes all he can, either part of our soul or all of it. To be indifferent is not to be a whole human being. We must be grateful if we stay uncontaminated, in this seriously limited sense, despite the regrets of our imperfect human and social existence. We are prone to pollution and, thus, doomed to remain incomplete. Social life sometimes, normally, does not allow one to be a full human being. Utopian socialism and Christian paradise are not for us.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. SHD, pp. 115, 118. “Here axioms and frenzies are interchangeable”, SHD, p. 123.
2. SHD, p. 37.
5. SHD, p. 150: Earthly paradise is incompatible with history, and “[e]nui—the natural name for happiness”.
6. SDH, p. 4.
7. SDH, pp. 5, 9.
8. SHD, p. 75: to take things seriously is the first step toward fanaticism; only dilettantes have “no taste for blood”. Perhaps Cioran means idlers.
10. SHD, p. 15. See also “Skeetcs and Whores”, p. 44.
11. “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”, pp. 78–79”.
12. SHD on irony and frivolity, in chapter “Civilization and Frivolity”, pp. 8–9, also pp. 10, 14.
15. SHD, p. 24, also pp. 27, 55; a skeptic as a renegade, SDH, pp. 63–4, p. 65.
16. SHD, p. 41.
17. SHD, p. 139.
18. See (Booth 1974, chps. 2 and 3), who dissolves some popular dogmas.
19. (Orwell 1949), Part One, chp. 1.
(Orwell 1949), Part Three, chp. 6.

SHD, p. 74.

For the full story, see (Agamben 2013).

Marx and utopia, see (Byrn 2011; Clark 2007).

SHD, pp. 52, 5

SHD, pp. 60, 30.

SHD, pp. 40, 61.

SHD, p. 89.

SHD; “The Coming of Consciousness”, p. 89.

Scholastics asked how a blessed person in Heaven could be happy when she knows her best friends rot in Hell. She would be unworthy if she did not suffer, but Heaven is not a perfectly happy place if she suffered.

I thank David Berman (Trinity College, Dublin) for unintentionally inspiring my main embryonic ideas. I dedicate this article to the memory of my late friend Leonidas Donskis (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas).

References


Airaksinen, Timo. 2020. Irony and Sarcasm in Ethical Perspective. Open Philosophy 3: 358–68. [CrossRef]

Airaksinen, Timo. 2021. Metaphysics, Universal Irony, and Richard Rorty’s ‘We Ironists’. Humanities 10: 106. [CrossRef]


de la Mettrie, Julien Offray. 1912. Man-a-Machine. La Salle: Open Court, p. 132.


Fulweider, Robin K. 1977. Fanatism and Hare’s Moral Theory. Ethics 87: 165–73. [CrossRef]


Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.