

JONATHAN SWIFT
AND PHILOSOPHY



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Chapter Two

How Socratic Is Swift's Irony?

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Was Swift correct that "reasoning will never make a man correct an ill opinion, which by reasoning he never acquired"?¹ If so, what recourse is there to change attitudes especially among those who continue to fervently believe unjustified claims and act upon them in a way that affects other people? I will answer the first question with a qualified yes, and the second I will follow Swift's implicit proposal to rely upon humor, satire, playful ridicule, and especially irony to unsettle the certainties of those who have not appealed to reason or epistemic justification to maintain their cherished opinions. In the bulk of the chapter, I will then assess what sort of irony Swift employs: is his irony primarily a trope in the service of a particular idea? Or is he truly Socratic in his irony, the sort Kierkegaard admired that transcends the mere rhetorical device and can be viewed as a stance on life in general? The answer to the latter question, in typical Aristotelian fashion, will be yes and no. My account of Socratic Irony will be informed primarily by the works of Alexander Nehamas, Jorge Portilla, and Jonathan Lear's interpretation of Kierkegaard on Socrates' irony.

WHY IRONY AND "RAILLERY"?

In *A Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Entered into Holy Orders*, Jonathan Swift instructs the apprentice with the following advice: "*Reasoning* will never make a Man correct an ill Opinion, which by *Reasoning* he never acquired."² Another way of putting this is to say that it is difficult to reason someone out of that which was not reasoned in. Unfortunately for logic professors who appeal to syllogisms to persuade, this includes most of the beliefs most people possess. In addition, if asked, most would purport that