

I shall argue in this paper that the irony of Lucian is not designed to promote a dogmatic skepticism but a tentative and intuitive approach to belief and conduct which can be understood through modern parallels. Lucian is the most prolific exponent of the dialogue form in an age when both rhetorical and philosophical discourse were more apt to take the form of magisterial speeches or a symposium of consecutive orations. As Kierkegaard observed, one can distinguish a negative and a positive purpose of irony in Plato's dialogues. The negative, or Socratic, kind aims only to undermine the positions advanced by an opponent. The positive use of irony, characteristic of the Platonic or middle dialogues, is to hint at the existence of a world contrapuntal to ours in its eternity, invisibility and freedom from all contingency. At first sight it would seem that Lucian's goals are entirely negative: in his dialogues one speaker is often a deft exploder of platitudes, the other a helpless mouthpiece of convention, and even where both are subject to ridicule, there is no doubt that the opinions which are attacked are irredeemably absurd. His works, in short, proclaim the inferiority of philosophy to rhetoric. Nor does he appear to share Plato's hope that the antidote to deficiency in the present world can be found in the works and character of God, since, while he satirises both popular religion and such novel superstitions as Christianity, he does not offer any sketch of an alternative. At the same time, Lucian's writings on the Cynics do suggest that he saw something to admire in their frugality and freedom from convention. The *Cynicus* (which Macleod takes to be genuine) is one of his more aporetic dialogues, but it is clear that his mouthpiece Lycinus is by no means contemptuous of his interlocutor. Yet even of the Cynics there is serious critique: in the *Death of Peregrinus* his accentuation (or maybe invention) of the Christian interlude in the protagonist's career is meant to expose the hollowness of his cynicism, and the same point is made expressly in the *Runaways*. The figure of Menippus in other dialogues is not free from humbug and charlatanry, and Lucian does not seem to approve of all his liberties. Likewise his noble savage Anacharsis is not always profound or astute in his observations of Greek culture, whereas Lucian's own commitment to the elegant norms rejected by both Cynics and barbarians is evident from his jealous defence of the purity of his style, along with his evocation of poetry, statuary and other heirlooms of the Greek tradition.

A more typical thinker would have aligned himself either with the worldly and sensuous culture of the sophists against philosophy, or with the philosophers against demotic errors in morality and religion. Lucian does neither: he questions what is generally deemed to mark the summit of wisdom in his own tradition, while at the same time refusing to throw in his lot with those whose wisdom resides in nothing but the desecration of what is held dear by others. Hence his particular animus against Christians, who, in contrast to the Cynics, had no place in the recognized taxonomy of philosophies. His humour is itself of a sufficiently traditional kind to serve as a testimony to the durability of the practices and conventions that it challenges; the versatility of his prose is an indication that it is only the mind of the cultivated Greek (in contrast to that of the Cynic, the Christian or the barbarian) which is capable of pronouncing a critique of its own limitations. His diffidence and his radical sincerity were well understood (for example) by Erasmus, whose *Praise of Folly* may be read as a manifesto for a purer conception of Christianity, yet threatens by its scoffing to undo even the ideals that it opposes to the chicanery of custom. Montaigne's appeal from academic certitude to the "undulation" of his own sensibility is typically Lucianic; still more so is the elusiveness of Nietzsche, whose disparagement of civilization presents itself as the natural climax of civilised reflection, and remains compatible with a qualified admiration for Jesus, an ascetic personal regimen, compassion for human suffering and conscious study of literary effect. As in Nietzsche, so in Lucian, the polemic against Christianity is at the heart of his philosophical enterprise.