

Irony and the Authenticity of Existence in the Works of Lucian of Samosata

Vefa Taşdelen*

Abstract

***Irony and the Authenticity of Existence in the works of Lucian of Samosata:** Besides all other aspects, irony has also a power that puts forth authenticity by ironising and rasping the weak, artificial and imperfect sides of life. In Lucian, irony, in addition to being a way of discourse, is also a method of eliminating and sorting. By the method of ironic denial, he examines the true values of time, daily passions, ambitions of men, and types of living, thinking and believing men have. However, as soon as we set sail towards nihilism, we start denying everything. Lucian's works also display nihilistic tendencies in patches. At this level, his ironic denial is at a turnout; while it can be evaluated as a method to sort existence from its features that artificialize it, it is also possible to consider it as a beginning for the road to nihilism. Unfortunately, taking one of these routes will require dismissing the other. Carrying Lucian's method of ironic denial forward in one of these routes rests with our own interpretation. In this study, we will take Lucian's ironic denial not as a nihilising attitude but as a sorting method and will try to develop this approach towards the authenticity of existence. We can infer the authentic values of existence from the texts of Lucian. In this respect, the value to be put-forth first is freedom. Freedom is not being enslaved to the wealth of the world, not being shackled by one's ambitions and passions, and not leaving the courage to live against the fear of death. In order for one to be able to get close to the authentic phase of life, one should discover transience and mortality in ones being. Wisdom, not as a babbling or fallacy but as a type of living and thinking that maturates the person and gives the authentic values of his own existence to himself, involves in the authentic phase of existence. Justice, austerity, gaiety, candidness, outspokenness and the like attitudes are also within the group of values that constitute the authentic phase of existence. Opposite the authentic values, there are attitudes that artificialize existence. Unauthenticity of existence is brought out by putting wealth, pleasure, babbling, and fallacy as the objective of life. In order to turn towards the authentic phase of existence, human beings tend to artificialize and ward it off from its base. Reality of death is usually ignored in this circle of artificialised existence. They would not shy away from enslaving others for their own concerns, pleasures and entertainment and turning them into means from individuals. During their journey in the world, they roam with the dream of a brilliant future, huge wealth, great happiness and gigantic entertainment within the possibilities that they might meet. By aiming his ironic arrows at people living such an unauthentic life, Lucian puts forth judgements and expressions about this worldly life not only from the point of living creatures but also from the point of the dead and superhuman beings; he gives an opportunity for us to think over the meaning and value of life against death.*

Keywords: Lucian, ironic denial, nihilism, authenticity of existence, artificiality of existence.

Introduction

Besides all other aspects, irony has also a power that puts forth authenticity by ironising, rasping the weak, artificial and imperfect sides of life. In Lucian's usage, in addition to being a type of discourse, irony is also a method of eliminating and sorting out things. By the method of ironic denial, he examines the current values of the time, daily passions and ambitions of men, types of living, thinking and believing that human beings have been busy with. However, as soon as we sat sail towards nihilism, we start denying everything. Thus, Lucianic texts display nihilistic tendencies in patches. Yet, Lucian not only uses irony as a method of denial against daily ambitions and baseless passions but also against the common understanding of philosophy, god and religion of his time. At this juncture, his ironic reductionist method is situated at a crossroad; while it can be evaluated as a method of sorting out authentic existence from its artificial features, it is also possible to consider it as the beginning of the road to nihilism. Carrying Lucian's method of ironic denial further in one of these routes is up to our own interpretation. Nevertheless, taking one of the routes will require dismissing the other owing to the fact that we cannot be in both routes at the same time.

* Asist. Prof. Dr., Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Department of Philosophy in Turkey.

We should eliminate nihilist tendencies in order to talk about the authentic values of existence; to be able to talk about nihilist tendencies, we should eliminate authentic phase of existence. In this paper, we will take Lucian's ironic denial not as a nihilising attitude but as a sorting method and will try to develop this approach towards the authenticity of existence. With such an approach, we think that the Lucianic philosophy will present a meaningful and fruitful tendency.

1. "Denial" as an Eliminative Attitude

Nietzsche, in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Also Sprach Zarathustra)* says, "What is the greatest thing that you can experience? It is the hour of your great contempt. The hour in which even your happiness turns to nausea and likewise your reason and your virtue."¹ In Nietzsche, the great moment of denial is the time when all the virtues, from beginning to the end, are denied. In this attitude, nihilism becomes apparent with all its features. In Lucian also, there is such a type of denial moment; but this denial does not take form as it does in Nietzsche, in whom it is brought out with direct, sharp, imperious and inclusive expression, but with indefinite, soft and indirect expression of ironic statement. The aim in his ironic denial can be stated to be a kind of "sorting" towards the "authenticity of human's existence". The valid values of the period are evaluated by ironic denial. In the end of this denial, what we could not deny constitutes the authentic phase of existence. But, as we once get into the valid values of life by the axe of denial, we may not foresee what will be left in the end. This is also the same in Lucian. From pleasure to entertainment, fame to wealth, bravery to pedantry, philosophy to different beliefs (anthropomorphised belief in a god/gods, polytheistic beliefs, the belief of karma) and love to bravery, many values get their share from ironic denial. The goal is not to reach nihilism but to discover the authentic phase of existence.

In *Hermotimus, or the Rival Philosophies*, irony appears as denial, difficulty or impossibility of finding the truth. Here, the works of philosophers and pedants are stated to be a kind of "babbling", "deluding" and being "talkative". Shining values of life such as wealth, pleasure and fame became worthless against the denying attitude of a shoe-maker who committed suicide. Thus, Lucian ridiculed about people's values with which they made life valuable. He despises them from a higher perspective and tries to state the uselessness of a common life. During this denial, he represents nihilistic tendencies. This can be considered as normal for he lingers on a breaking point. Neither in philosophical movements nor in polytheistic belief could he find what he looked for. He could not cling on the valid values of his time thoroughly and the world was reflected upon him from an ironic window. If there is no measure to obey in irony, a denying power could take us step by step to nihilism. From the point of nihilistic tendencies, it is no surprise that Lucian considers the shoe-maker who committed suicide as the luckiest of the dead. From an opposite point of view, ironic denial can be said to be an eliminative method used in reaching authentic values of existence. This authenticating attitude gets ahead of nihilistic attitudes, by extinguishing those values as time passes, creating new values to be identified with itself finally.

Ironic denial turns into ridiculing with transmigration of soul in *Cock*, into witty satire against the beliefs of the period in *Zeus Cross-examined* and *Dialogues of the Gods* and a derisive look that put forth latent meanings and implications in love affairs in *Dialogues of the Hetaerae*. If the period in which Lucian lived is taken into consideration, it would be obvious that Christianity was spreading like a wildfire as a new type of belief within the society. Contrary to this, there are no direct references about the creed of Christianity in Lucianic writings. But it is safer to say that he takes a much more sceptical attitude towards polytheist beliefs compared to monotheist beliefs like Christianity. This statement which he put in Zeus' mouth is like the proof of this claim: "We are gods for no reasons, you are right to despise me like this."² Deterioration of Zeus at the same time is, in fact, the deterioration of the type of thinking and believing of a period. In the aforementioned works of Lucian, besides gods, values such as good-evil, beauty-ugly and the life styles, ethic-aesthetic attitudes based on these values are deeply questioned.

2. Death and the Problem of Authenticity of Existence

Lucian's understanding of existence, perceptions of philosophy and world, all takes shape around the theme of death. Without it, humanity is not considered within its original location. Death in this respect is a central location that identifies life, world and the destiny of men on earth. Initially, Lucian sees death as an equalising situation.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Adrian del Caro, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, p. 6.

² Samsatlı Lukianos, *Seçme Yazılar I-II-III*, çev. Nurullah Ataç, Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, Ankara, s. 75.

In his *“Dialogues of the Dead”*, he underlies the egalitarian, undifferentiating feature of death. In front of death, the king and the slave, rich and poor are all equal. This “absolute equality” in the face of death is the necessity of the fact that the “afterlife is the world of equality”. The rich and the noble suffer more for they lose all what they have in hand; because their loss is awesome for they lose all they have by death. Yet, what will be the loss of a shoe maker; except for his knife, some pieces of stout leather. The slave, the poor and the lower class that suffer in the world consider death as a savior while the rich regard it as a thief that steals all their possessions and a burglar that depredates their life. For this reason, they make plans for staying one more day in the world and are very ambitious about realizing this. But here, what is at stake is the value and meaning of life; in other words, the possibility of leading a virtuous and serene life in this world. It can only be made possible by leading an authentic life.

We can infer what an authentic life is from the texts of Lucian. In this respect, the first value put forward by Lucian is freedom. He often speaks of freedom and of the value of leading a free life. This free attitude is also the condition of ironic denial; if we are not free, we may not even deny. What is freedom then? Not being enslaved by the treasures of the world, not being captivated by ambitions and passions and not losing the courage to live against the reality of death. It is being courageous and being able to reign in ambitions and passions. It is being able to make decisions about one’s life, deciding and choosing, and proceeding by action. Lucian exemplifies freedom by the case of Menippus: Menippus is the person who even does not have an obolus to give to the gondolier Charon to pass him through the Lethe in afterlife (according to the belief, he should give it by taking it from this world) and who sings, dances and makes fun of death while others tremble like an aspen leaf. Talking about his death, he says “Nobody called me, I came by myself”. Thus, he implies that he is such a person who gives decisions and makes choices about his own life and death. Lucian identifies him as a “free man in the strict sense” of word. Hermes says “You do not know who you took with your canoe, Charon!” “You took a free man, a man who does not care about anything, a free man in the whole sense.”³ Now here, the individual is a person who shapes his own existence with his freedom. Thus, freedom becomes the power to decide about one’s own future and choosing one’s own existence. By this power, he gathers his existence from powerful and weak, bitter and sweet possibilities and makes life the product of himself. He takes over the responsibility of the choices he makes, decisions he takes and the actions he carries out. At this point, the meanings Lucian attributes to the terms like “fate” and “luck” have been clarified.

In order for the person to get close to the authentic phase of life, he should discover the transitory nature in his own being. Only with this discovery, life can gain its base and specific location. Wisdom that emerges not by arrogance, babbling or being chatty but by a great inner sight involves the authentic phase of life. Values such as justice, austerity, gaiety, candidness and outspokenness are among the values that constitute the authentic phase of existence. Against the authentic phase of life is situated a kind of artificial domain. Artificialness of life is brought out by wealth, gold, pleasure, entertainment, pedantry and babbling that became the main aim. In *Dialogues of the Dead*, this kind of living is denied; situations such as wealth, fortune, ambition, honour, fame etc. are disdained; all these are considered as conditions that spoil the authentic and familiar features of life. Lucian dignifies Menippus for he despises the worldly life, wealth and pleasures; he identifies him as “the best of mankind”. He aims his ironic expressions at people who look forward to finding a name, fame, pleasure and wealth. Hermes, the guide of spirits, warns the ones to approach by saying: “Pass by leaving your belongings”. They will make load while they get in the boat to pass through Lethe. “Leave your arrogance also” says he; for this also make load. But wisdom, freedom, candidness and gaiety that mature personality are the best. Thus, these values that get out of the ironic denial constitute the authentic phase of existence by enabling the person an attitude towards life and death.⁴

In order to head for the authentic phase of life, human beings generally try to artificialize and try to ward it off from its true base. In this masked circle of existence, first death is denied. They do not consider death suited for themselves. They enslave others for their own concerns, pleasures and entertainments; making them not persons but means. Lucian’s ironic expression is for he who breaks away from life’s authentic phase and clings only on the pleasures of life, who try to make a fortune for this aim, who try to make others as a means and the defeat these people face against the destructiveness of death.

³ Samsathı Lukianos, *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴ Samsathı Lukianos, *ibid.*, p. 78.

For instance, a money lender who collects a fortune, walks in shabby clothes and harms people will be asked in the afterlife, “To whom you left your fortune?” and will be shocked when they learn their fortune is in the hands of somebody they hated. Even in the question “how did you die?”, there will be specific ambitions, greed, arbitrary fights and wars. The river Lethe is shaken by cries and moans of these types of people. The one who drinks a sip from Lethe is supposed to forget everything, including the pain of leaving the world. In this point, the biggest punishment is brought out as “the punishment of retention”. Hermes the guide of spirits advises “Drink as often as possible from Lethe” to the ones who have difficulty in forgetting the world.

3. *Life in the Wold from a Superhuman Point of View*

Lucian tries to understand the relationship between life and death and the human condition that emerges in this completeness. In order to do this, he seeks for a higher view point from which he will be able to see the universe of existence, for this universe cannot be understood by a insider’s look. There should be a specific distance to be observed. He tries to enable this distance by choosing the spectator from superhuman side and by looking from a certain height. This overlook supplies Lucian with knowledge and perceptions concerning the universe of existence. Not only Hermes and Charon like superhuman beings but also simple human beings, like Menippus, who are not captive in the world and protect the authentic shape of life can attain this point of view. Menippus the shoemaker is said to have ended his life with his own will and did not owned anything but a knife and some pieces of stout leather. Lucian says as follows for him: “How happy you must be Menippus, the whole world should be laid in front of your feet! In fact, I feel envious about you.

How different the cities look when you look at them from those heights? What happens to human beings?” From this point of view, cities and people are like ants roaming around the anthill. Irony also emerges at this view point since in order for the irony to emerge, the person should see himself in a different point first. In *Charon*, boatman Charon who took the dead to Hades tells Hermes: “When people die and are brought down, they all cry and groan bitterly; seeing their conditions, I wondered what they do in the world and what the belongings are that they do not want to leave in the world.” Hermes raises him on a place where he can see the deeds of human beings in the world. From this point, he tries to observe what is going on and understand them. By this observation, he arrives at important ideas about life on earth. He cannot figure out the deeds of men, especially the problem of evil deeds. He cannot understand why they are so attached to the matter they call gold, why they give such great value to and fight for it. He considers this gold syndrome as the folly of human beings. Human beings lead their life in sorrow and sadness: the places they live are not cities but as if bee hives they prick their stinks to each other.

They live in feelings such as hope, fear, madness, pleasure, greed, hatred and such. “Down there, madness joins in the human beings and governs the city with them; hatred, fury, envy, unconsciousness, scepticism and also avarice involve in the event. Fear and hope flies over them very close to their head... When you think that they are going to reach them, it goes by leaving all other’s mouths wide open. You know, there is a Tantalus in afterlife and when on the brink of touching its lips to water, the water vanishes away; those people’s condition is like his in the world.” Moirais that make human fate bind them into each other with thin threads; they produce relationships between them that look like a spider web. “This man will kill that man and that man will be killed by that one over there, this will make use of the fortune that he has, that will this...”⁵ The fate weaved by Moirais is thus. Here, Lucian comments on “will” which will be the subject widely discussed both in Christianity and Islam in the later ages: If the individual is motivated by not his own will but by the will of god, “Destiny should be blamed instead of Sisyphus and Moirais will be punished instead of Tantalus”. Well, who is guilty then: human beings or Moirais that spin the threads of fate? Here, we can say that the authentic phase of life requires a man to have his own will and to take over the responsibility of his deeds as a condition. As we have mentioned before, one can reach the authentic phase of life by protecting his own freedom and will and taking the responsibility of his deeds.

⁵ Samsathı Lukianos, *ibid.*, p. 258, Lucian of Samosata *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, tr. by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, Volume: I-II., The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1905, p. 178.

The world which is highly serious for those who live in it is actually ridiculous for the onlookers from afar. After observing the universe of existence for a while from a dominant position, Charon could not help saying "In fact, the world is an enjoyable place to live in, Hermes?" "Yes, it is, you cannot find a word to imply how ridiculous human are Charon; you must see the ones that attach at some complicated desires; when they say they have reached it, then death appears in front of their door, then, laugh as much as you could... If only they have thought that they were mortal at once: If only they say 'We will die like waking from a dream after we have stayed in this world for a short time,' they would do better and not groan for death." Mortals live like immortals; they do not take the signs of death (old age, illness) which are in different forms. During their journey in the world, they expect brilliant future, huge wealth, great happiness and big entertainment from the possibilities and roam in the world. They bear in mind only the good, brilliant possibilities for themselves. They dream according to the best probabilities but live on the worst and then die. They cling to the future with huge dreams such as success, victory, entertainment, love and money. They do not keep in mind that they are mortal and one day they should leave the world and its pleasures; "when death stands in front of them and binds them with the chains of fire or tuberculosis: they get furious by saying 'they are dragging us.'"

Lucian produces his discourse on concrete cases from daily life. He tries to show why people turn toward positive possibilities such as wealth, love, money, success and enjoyment and to exemplify how, in the end, they surrender themselves to the worst of the possibilities. "Here is a man, taking workers around him; he makes them build a house for himself. If you get close and tell him 'You are going to have a house of your own, may it as it is, but as soon as its roof is completed, before even having the first dinner in it, you will soon die and the heirs will have it,' how would he react? This man over there feels happy that he had a boy, giving a feast for his friends and names him after his father; would he feel happy if he knew that this boy would die before he is even seven? Do you know why he feels happy? One of his neighbour's son became first in Olympian Games and he is hoping the same for his son; if he had looked at the other neighbour on the opposite side, he would see that he is taking his son to grave. Which one of these children, will his son follow? Is he going to be first in Olympian Games or die young, does he ever consider this side of the coin? You see, many people are at war with others for making their soil an inch longer or trying hard to collect some belonging: all of them will follow the aforementioned messenger, death, before even they enjoy the privilege of what they have struggled for."⁶ But the authenticity of life is not made by aesthetic dreams. We need to see the other possibilities in our own existence and take death into account. The people who design their life according to best possibilities and live for the worst are warded off from the authentic phase of life.

If this is the nature of existence, so, what meaning may it possibly carry? According Lucian, this is something astonishing. Charon cannot understand why people are attached to life at this level and why they are so much addicted to the world in such a way. "I see all; this is why I cannot figure out what pleasure they get from life! When they die, they moan as if someone has taken away a huge blessing from their hands but I cannot understand what this blessing is. I look at their kings: the so-called happiest! Put aside they are in throne one day and dismissed the other and faithlessnesses of their destinies, they have no condition to be envied for: the pain they bear is far more than the enjoyment they have: they are always in fear, worry and anxiety; various hatred, fury around them, none is lucky to be deprived of being a puppet in the hand of adulators. Plus the laws, illnesses, and accidents that is common for other people! If this is the situation the kings are in, imagine what will be those of their subjects? Do you know to what I think human beings and their lives are like, Hermes? Let me hasten to explain: You might have seen the water burst out from the spring, it flows in bubbles; what is that bubble? Small, tiny blisters. Some of those blisters are tiny and burst immediately; others resist for a little bit more, they unite with others and get bigger and became huge; they also burst finally, not even one is deprived of this destiny of oblivion. Human beings are just like that: Luck blows them all up, some less some more; some fades while getting rape, some took a little bit more but none escapes death."⁷ Life passes at full speed. By death, all its speed is ceased. This, too, is one of the sources irony feeds itself.

⁶ Samsathı Lukianos, *ibid.*, p. 344, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, p. 179.

⁷ Samsathı Lukianos, *ibid.*, p. 344-345. *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, p. 180.

Conclusion

After observing enough of life on earth from the hill they are located, Charon utters these words: “You see Hermes, how people of the world who will live today and die tomorrow lead a life: They kill themselves for making places, being famous, possess belongings and fighting with each other. We are in such a higher place. Do I better shout at the top of my voice and advise them to avoid needless works and by thinking they are going to die, tell them they would live better? ‘Alas, the bewildered? Why are you attached at needless things? Stop these strains: do you think that there is no death and you will live to the eternity? None of the things you are stuck on are eternal, you can see none of them while dying: you will go from this world stark naked!’ If I tell these at the top of my voice and give such advice, won’t they hear me? Won’t they start behaving sensibly and settle down?”⁸ According to this, the greatest value of life, the enormous wisdom and tenet of ethic is realised not by denying but accepting the reality of death and leading a virtuous life according to it. So, this will mean stating the authentic phase of existence.

These statements told by Lucian through boatman Charon of Lethe river comes to our age by resounding. It is possible to say that, not only the people of his time but also of ours will have morals to get from this call. For Lucian, leading a passionate life between birth and death but unaware of the reality of death should be considered as a ridiculous since it is a futile effort discharged from its true self. Here is the irony: Being mortal but living as if you are immortal. Only when people accept their own reality of death and embrace it as a situation belonging to themselves, not to others, then they can attain authentic phase of life by freeing themselves from artificial patterns of life. Lucian compares human being’s unconsciousness and living far from the reality of death with this: “As waters of Lethe makes the dead forget things in your country, unconsciousness in this world does the same to living people,” says Hermes.⁹ Thus, there is something in the nature of man and of life that makes man forget death. But wisdom and authenticity of life may only be attained by regaining, remembering and adopting this forgotten thing. The situation of the ones who lead a life other than that mood is defined as “wretchedly” in the words of Charon. Ironical denial method is based on the principle that “as long as death exists, live like a mortal,” which is included in the authenticity of life as well. The rest is being able to be a free, familiar, open hearted individual, and a person who is able to use his own mind and will.

It can be concluded that people live by being pushed away between instantaneous feelings. This feeling of being pushed away makes them happy in one time and sad in the other, gay and doleful, optimist and pessimist and sometime anxious and sometime calm. But, as observed from a higher perspective, it would be clear that one will meet a reality far beyond all emotional states: the transitory nature of life. Tragedy does not finalise but starts with this end. If there were not death, all the deeds of human beings would have an answer. But understanding and interpreting life against the reality of death always throw up persistent difficulties. Lucian tries to understand and interpret these difficulties. These texts, by introducing comments about the earthly life from not only the perspectives of human beings but also of the death and of superhuman, present us an opportunity to think about the value and meaning of life in the face of death. What is important here is not the disappearance of human beings in the awareness of transience but the feeling of the utmost value of their life in every step and of becoming aware of this reality.

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⁸ Samsatlı Lukianos, *ibid.*, p. 343, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, p. 180.

⁹ Samsatlı Lukianos, *ibid.*, p. 345.