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Motherhood in Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter* : A Case Study of Irony as Extraordinary Reflection

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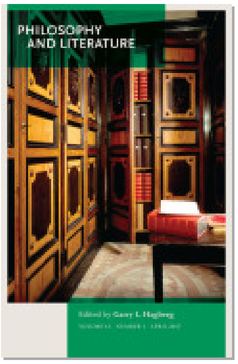

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MOTHERHOOD IN FERRANTE'S *THE LOST DAUGHTER*: A CASE STUDY OF IRONY AS EXTRAORDINARY REFLECTION

Abstract. In *A Case for Irony*, Jonathan Lear aims to advance "a distinguished philosophical tradition that conceives of humanity as a task." I suggest that Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter* illustrates the mode of ironic experience that interests Lear, and helps us assess his relation to a key contemporary proponent of this tradition—Christine Korsgaard. I explain why Lear's account of the phenomenology of ironic experience relies on Korsgaard's conception of practical thinking, but argue that he must reject her idea that reasons for action come from "practical identities" in order to make good on his conception of irony as radical reflection.

I

The final words of Elena Ferrante's novella *The Lost Daughter* consist of the narrator's reply to her daughters, who are living abroad with their father and have just reached her on the phone. "Mama, what are you doing, why haven't you called? Won't you at least let us know if you're alive or dead?" they ring out in unison—having evidently rehearsed the line and playfully mimicking their mother's Neapolitan accent.

> Deeply moved, I murmured:
> "I'm dead, but I'm fine."[1]

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Her reply is perhaps conventionally ironic—she is *not* dead and she is *not* exactly fine—but I aim to consider the reply, and the events leading up to it, as an example of the radical and unconventional form of irony that Jonathan Lear writes about and traces to Socrates and Kierkegaard.[2] For Lear, irony is a mode of reflection—*extraordinary* reflection—accordingly distinguished from the reflection that is a normal expression of any even minimally critical engagement in a way of life. Normal reflection does not disrupt the commitments of a way of life (whatever they may be): it operates within—and may even be needed to sustain—a given matrix of practical possibilities. Learian irony, by contrast, is disruptive: the experience of irony involves finding oneself struck with uncertainty about what it is to be practically committed along certain lines, where the normal possibilities for going forward seem suddenly weird and unfamiliar, even comical.[3] Irony is characterized by deep practical disorientation. For Lear, openness to such disorientation is necessary for a creative engagement with value that is itself a proper part of being human.

Leda, the narrator of Ferrante's novella, becomes disoriented in ways that bear the essential marks of Learian irony—or so I will argue. The immediate question is what we stand to gain by thinking this through. Lear's overarching purpose is to advance "a distinguished philosophical tradition that conceives of humanity as a task" (*CI*, p. 3). He begins by pointing out that this conception of humanity is liable to seem either absurd or overly familiar: absurd, if one understands humanity as membership in a biological species; and overly familiar to the extent that one is schooled in the philosophical tradition at issue. One of his aims is to make this conception of humanity less familiar, precisely by returning that tradition to the ironic figure at its origin—Socrates—and by making the case that irony is essential to the practical problem of being human. But Socrates is a well-worn example of ironic existence, even if philosophers have largely been at a loss of what to make of it. A less familiar example of Learian irony might cast fresh light on the phenomenon, putting us in a better position to discern what survives in it from the philosophical tradition that it both criticizes and, inasmuch as this criticism is transformative, aims to advance.

The greatest contemporary proponent of the tradition "that conceives of humanity as a task" is Christine Korsgaard. Lear's relation to Korsgaard is complicated, because he both challenges her conception of reflection as inadequate to the aim of this tradition and yet adopts her basic model of practical thought. I will explain why he needs the

Korsgaardian model of practical thinking to be running in the background in order to understand ironic experience as “a peculiar species of uncanny anxiety” (*CI*, p. 94). At the same time, I will argue that he needs to reject the idea, central to the Korsgaardian model, that the sources of the reasons we have for doing anything lie in the various conceptions we have of ourselves—that is, in what Korsgaard calls our “practical identities”—if he is to make good on his claim that irony is “a peculiar form of *committed* reflection” (*CI*, p. 21). My argument for this rests on the example of ironic experience in *The Lost Daughter.* I begin, though, with the Korsgaardian background, and Lear’s account of ironic experience.

II

Korsgaard’s contribution to the philosophical tradition at issue stems from her argument for the broadly practical significance of the Kantian cogito—“The *I think* must be *able* to accompany all of my representations.”[4] It can be taken as a plain fact that a rational intelligence can stand at some distance from its own representations. But this fact gives rise to a problem—the inherently first-person problem of needing reasons to believe and to act—and, with it, an imperative to address the problem. “The reflective mind cannot settle for perception and desire, not just as such. It needs a *reason.* Otherwise, at least as long as it reflects, it cannot commit itself or go forward.”[5] Rationality *requires* us to be reflective: to view our representations as mere proposals about how things are and what to do and, viewing them thus, to endorse or reject them accordingly.[6] This is a general account of reflection, meant to hold for theoretical and practical thought equally; for present purposes, though, we need consider only the thoroughly practical side, that concerned with thinking what to do.

What exactly is the reflective person supposed to be stepping back *from* on this account? Something in the remark just quoted is already potentially misleading. For another bit of the Kantian legacy on which Korsgaard builds is the idea that we commit ourselves to practical principles—to what Kant somewhat unhelpfully calls “maxims”—directly in action, regardless of whether we are reflective about what we are doing and why. So we do not step back from bare, isolated desires; rather, what we step back from is already a point of view on what is worth doing.

Thus reflection, on the Korsgaardian view, calls for holding at arm’s length a default perspective on what is worth doing. This should not be taken to mean that we somehow escape to a different point of view, or momentarily cease to have a point of view altogether on what is worth doing. To see why, consider what is supposed to govern reflective endorsement. For Korsgaard, to think about what would be good to do *just is* to think about how to exercise one's own causality: "When you deliberately decide what sorts of effects you will bring about in the world, you are also deliberately deciding what sort of a cause you will be. And that means you are deciding who you are" (*S-C,* p. 19). Or: "When the agent asks whether the action is a good one she is also asking: do I wish to be a person who is so moved, a person who does that sort of act for that sort of end?" (*CA,* p. 193).[7] So while reflection is generally governed by a basic, underlying interest in one's own agency, this interest can only be manifest in specific commitments to realize one's agency in particular ways, and so—Korsgaard claims—to be a certain sort of person. She refers to these commitments as an agent's "practical identities." A practical identity is therefore not a theoretical description of what in fact you are; it is rather "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking" (*SN,* p. 101). On her view these identities are the sources of our reasons for doing anything at all. Most of them are contingent: they can be given up; and once they are, they no longer provide us with reasons. Thus even if it is a biological fact that I am someone's daughter, someone else's mother; even if I am not in any position to, say, change my citizenship, or facts about my ethnicity, nevertheless I could choose not to endorse the reasons and obligations that, as Korsgaard sees it, issue from them as practical identities. To do that is just to give up valuing myself under this or that description or self-conception.

I am a daughter, a mother, a teacher at a university: of course there is some sense in which I can identify with these roles, and thereby make myself live to certain interests, feelings, and obligations. But the Korsgaardian model of practical thinking suffers—at the very least—from a nontrivial distortion of emphasis. For Korsgaard, my reasons to do anything at all come from my commitment to certain roles: in other words, to a set of abstractions, rather than to the actual human beings with whom I share a life. The complaint can be iterated for cases where the value of persons is not directly at stake. Having a relatively serious and longstanding interest in art would presumably count as a contingent practical identity by Korsgaard's lights. Is this identity really what gives me a reason to visit the Fogg Museum when I find myself in Cambridge? Or is it rather that I have heard that the collection is good? Korsgaard might say that it is only because I identify in this way that I *care* that the collection is supposed to be good. And of course I am, at least in some sense, going to the gallery for myself—I expect to enjoy myself, and I have the time. But to say that my reason for going issues from some practical identity as an art lover (or whatever) gets the emphasis all wrong. The paintings themselves give me reason to go.[8]

III

Would Lear lodge any of these complaints about Korsgaard's model of practical thinking? I take there to be some tension between the spirit and the letter of Lear's case for irony, at least as far as the Korsgaardian model goes. In the letter, he accepts the model as adequate to account for normal engagement in a way of life. So he remarks, "Ordinary life is constituted by people assuming practical identities and then, in reflection, asking what is required of them" (*CI*, p. 5). Somewhat more ambiguously, he says, "If we accept that becoming human requires that we inhabit a practical identity well, and that doing so requires both that we reflectively endorse (or criticize) the various incentives presented to consciousness and actually live by our judgment, then we can see how becoming human might be an arduous task. It can be tough work fending off those temptations that would undo our claim to be the person that we are; it is, on occasion, tough work to live up to the demands that, given our practical identity, are required" (*CI*, pp. 4–5). I suspect Lear is a bit tongue-in-cheek here. Even so, he gives no indication of rejecting the first part of the antecedent above: that becoming human requires that we inhabit a practical identity well. He only means to reject the idea that reflective endorsement along Korsgaardian lines is both necessary and sufficient for this task. Such reflection does not get at the special difficulty of being human; only irony can. Why does he think this?

His answer is that normal reflection is compatible with being perfectly sure about what it is to be practically committed along certain lines. Irony is a matter of not being perfectly sure. Glossing Kierkegaard, Lear presents irony as "an insecurity about being human that is at once constitutive of being human" (*CI*, p. 6).[9] And why should it matter that we be open to the possibility of not being perfectly sure? Lear's answer can only rely on a conception of what it is to be human, which he never makes entirely explicit. But he seems to be drawing on the idea that human beings face a question about how to live that can never be definitively answered by instinct and received tradition. This much is uncontroversial, and close kin to Korsgaard's views about the broadly practical significance of the reflective nature of the rational mind. Lear, though, emphasizes the openness to the question itself: this goes to the heart of the difficulty of being human, he suggests, rather than the readiness to have an answer that keeps normal reflection going full throttle.[10] Irony is "a peculiar form of *committed* reflection" (*CI*, p. 21) because it sustains an openness to the question of how one should live through its very uncertainty about what would even be recognizable as an answer.

Talk about the insecurity in being human may be a bit high-flown for many tastes and, at any rate, we need to examine the point for some particular way of being human—some particular, practical identity or form of life. Consider Lear's first-personal example of a teacher, taken up with the workaday—and often dispiriting—task of marking papers: it is normal to find oneself asking what the point of it all is. Lear's figure queries this more earnestly than is probably typical. First he discusses the problem with his colleagues in hopes of finding a better way of evaluating students, "one more in line with our core function of teaching" (*CI*, p. 17). He does not yet have any doubts about his handle on what this core function is: that is why this is normal reflection. But then this reflection gets "out of hand": the teacher finds himself wondering who his students even are, and what it would mean to help them to learn or develop.

Now his experience crosses over into irony. He can still think and talk about the basic elements in play—a teacher teaches, a student learns—but these ideas seem suddenly strange: "I no longer know who my 'students' are, let alone what it would be to 'help them develop.' Are my students the individuals coming into my classroom at the appointed time . . . or are they to be located elsewhere? Are they in the younger generation . . . or are they my age or older? . . . And if my classroom is where my students are, where is my classroom? What am I to make of the room I actually do walk into now?" (*CI*, p. 17). Lear doesn't really account for *why* things get out of hand, why the experience crosses over into irony as he muses. I surmise he remains too much in the grip of the Korsgaardian model of practical thinking: I will return to this in section 4. All he does say is that, because he really cares about being a teacher, his disorientation takes the committed form that it does.[11] If he didn't care, he would have a different sort of problem, and solutions readier to hand: he might hire a graduate student to take over his grading.

We can now begin to make out why Lear needs Korsgaard's model of practical thinking to make his case. For Korsgaard, practical thought—thinking what to do—is a kind of self-knowledge. It is practical, not theoretical, self-knowledge. Consider, briefly, the source of this distinction in Kant. Kant says that theoretical knowledge merely determines an object that is given to the intellect from elsewhere (from sensibility), while practical knowledge does not merely determine its object—the good—but also makes it actual.[12] Practical knowledge is efficacious: it brings its object, what it knows, into being. On the Korsgaardian interpretation of this bit of the Kantian legacy, the agent who knows what to do is realizing her own agency: the constitution of agency is the fundamental good to be realized in action.[13] The task of being human is self-constitution. It is to make oneself the coherent source of one's actions, a challenge that any normal person will meet only to this or that degree.[14]

Now, for Lear, the experience of irony is something like being lost to oneself as an agent, being unable to go forward: he appeals to Alcibiades's story of Socrates, stuck on a problem and standing stock-still on the battlefield all day and all night, as perhaps literal illustration of this.[15] If we say just this much then we have to conclude—given the Korsgaardian background—that irony brings self-constitution to a momentary halt, a hiatus. But Lear's point goes deeper. In ironic experience, one realizes that *all along* one didn't really know what one was up to—one didn't really know what it is to be teacher, and so on—and one *still does not know.*

Lear needs the Korsgaardian model of practical thinking running in the background to make his case for irony, which he presents as "a peculiar species of uncanny anxiety" (*CI*, p. 94). Its uncanniness consists in the way in which some previously familiar point of view on how to go on suddenly strikes one as odd and unfamiliar (*CI*, pp. 15–16). "Anxiety," Lear says, "is by its very nature a disturbance of our ability to achieve reflective distance" (*CI*, p. 98)—a perfectly plausible gloss. Anxiety is suffocating, and paralyzing: that is familiar enough stuff. So, for Lear, when we find ourselves unable to step back and do normal reflection, and yet at the same time find ourselves unable to go forward—because we no longer have a practical point of view on what it is, say, to teach[16]—we have the uncanny anxiety of irony. Underscore now Korsgaard's view that every act of deliberation is itself an expression of the interest one takes in one's own agency: self-constitution is a kind of foundation of all our practical thought. If I cannot step back and reflectively deliberate, then I cannot realize my agency as a human being, and this would plausibly be experienced as anxiety because it pulls the ground from beneath our feet.[17]

The upshot of the foregoing paragraph may be that the Korsgaardian model of practical thinking and Lear's case for irony stand or fall together. But I want to suggest a conciliatory move. Korsgaard's deep insight, I think, is to recognize that a certain interest in one's own agency is built into practical thinking; accepting this, we can in turn allow for Lear's characterization of irony as a certain form of uncanny anxiety. But we should also question the importance the model accords to our practical identities, and chiefly the idea that these identities are the source of all of our reasons and obligations. If we reject this idea, I think we will be better positioned to see how a case for irony might transform the philosophical tradition that conceives of humanity as a problem or a task. For guidance on this, I turn now to the portrayal of ironic experience in Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter.*

IV

The story begins[18] with the narrator, Leda, a literature professor, breezily recounting the time since her two daughters, now young adults, have moved to Toronto to live with their father. "I was embarrassed and amazed to discover that I wasn't upset," she says (*LD*, p. 10). Freed of "the constant bother of shopping and doing the laundry," she was able to do what she wanted, when she wanted; her body effortlessly returned to a slimmer, more youthful, guise; her thoughts "returned to their proper speed" (p. 12). These opening remarks provide an illustration of motherhood as a contingent practical identity, for Leda effectively claims that motherhood is no longer the source of her reasons and obligations, except in the shallowest of ways. "My only obligation with regard to the girls was to call once a day to see how they were, what they were doing" (p. 10). When the girls call her, they invariably make some request—to send some papers left in a book, or dispense fashion advice. She is not irritated by this. She does what they ask—easily, as if she is miming a role.

The main events of the novel take place during Leda's summer break, in a rental on the Ionian coast, where she plans to prepare for the next year's classes. Leda's days quickly settle into a routine, swimming and working in the shade at a nearby beach. A few days in, she first sees the young woman and her child. She is struck by their complete absorption in each other, the peaceful way they speak together "as if they alone existed" (*LD*, p. 18), apparently impervious to the antics of their noisy, sprawling Neapolitan family group. Leda admires their leisurely play in the water, their physical closeness, and the games they play together with a doll: "They did it with such pleasure, dressing her, undressing her, pretending to put suntan lotion on her; they bathed her in a green pail, they dried her, rubbing her so that she wouldn't catch cold, hugged her to their breast as if to nurse her, or fed her baby food of sand. . . . If the young woman was pretty herself, in her motherhood there was something that distinguished her; she seemed to have no desire for anything but her child" (p. 19).

Captivated, Leda surreptitiously watches them and the larger group over the next few days, gradually working out the family structure, and their names and many nicknames: Nina, the mother; Elena, the daughter; Nani, the doll. A stout, pushy, heavily pregnant woman named Rosaria is the antithesis of the graceful Nina; she is the sister of Nina's mostly absent, implicitly Camorrist, husband. The personas are recognizable to Leda, who is originally from the same sort of Neapolitan society.

Leda's voyeuristic phase comes to a head on the first busy weekend, when it is too chaotic to try to work; she searches the beach instead for the mother and child "as if they were a show" (*LD*, p. 21). She suddenly finds herself enormously irritated: the child now seems daft, and the mother affected. "I suspected that she was playing the role of beautiful young mother not for love of her daughter but for us, the crowd on the beach, all of us, male and female, young and old" (p. 22)—an astonishing thing to think for someone who also effectively admits to herself that her own gaze cast Nina into the role in the first place. Leda is especially bothered by their play with the doll, above all that they each speak for the doll in a different voice, carrying on as if they do not notice the inconsistency: "I felt an unease as if faced with a thing done badly, as if a part of me were insisting, absurdly, that they should make up their minds, give the doll a stable, constant voice, either that of the mother or that of the daughter, and stop pretending they were the same" (p. 23).

The novel roughly accounts for the source of this irritation. At first Nina and Elena had seemed aloof and uncontaminated by their extended family group; but this aloofness later reminds Leda of her own mother, who tried to distinguish herself, in elegance and taste, from the crudity of the family she married into (*LD*, p. 26). Her mother "played at being the well-dressed, well-behaved lady"—it was an act—and Nina seems to Leda to play the same role, and just as badly. A conflict on the beach provides an opportunity for Leda to take a closer look: "She seemed to me less beautiful, not as young, the waxing at her groin had been done badly, the child she held in her arms had a runny eye, a forehead pimpled with sweat, and the doll was ugly and dirty. I returned to my place, outwardly calm but in fact extremely agitated" (p. 27). Roles botched again.

Many of the early parts of the novella are straightforwardly about the role of motherhood and, against this backdrop, Leda's memories of childhood. But the bulk of the novella, I will argue, is a portrayal of an ironic experience of motherhood. The central action of the novel makes the transition to this portrayal: Elena goes missing on the beach and Leda finds her, but also steals her doll. When Elena first goes missing, Leda takes in the scene like a spectator; she finds Nina "mad with anxiety," "as if from her very guts something were sucking the life from her face" (*LD*, p. 40). This prompts Leda first to remember her own mother's saying that she, Leda, was always getting lost as a child, and then to reflect that she herself has no memory of these disappearances. What she remembers instead is how she felt the few times she lost track of her own children on a crowded beach, how she would look frantically in every direction, except out at the water—she couldn't bear to look there. Seeing Nina behaving the same way—"desperately [keeping] her back to the sea" (p. 41)—she is moved, and roused to help look for the child. As she looks, she imagines taking the point of view of the lost daughter:

> A child who gets lost on the beach sees everything unchanged and yet no longer recognizes anything. She is without orientation, something that before had made bathers and umbrellas recognizable. The child feels that she is exactly where she was and yet doesn't know where she is. She looks around with frightened eyes and sees that the sea is the sea, the beach is the beach, the people are the people, the fresh-coconut seller is really the fresh-coconut seller. Yet every thing or person is alien to her and so she cries. To the unknown adult who asks her what's wrong, why she is crying, she doesn't say that she's lost, she says that she can't find her mama. (*LD*, pp. 41–42)

This attempt at empathetically taking the point of view of Elena is in fact a projection, and Leda implicitly recognizes as much. She says that the lost child would say that she is crying not because she is lost, but because *she cannot find her mother*. And when Leda finds Elena shortly thereafter, Elena confirms this: she says she is crying because she *has* *lost her doll* (*LD*, p. 42). The child is looking for something determinate. She may be sad and frustrated because she cannot find it, but she knows what she is doing. She is not lost to herself. She experiences no radical practical disorientation. However, this is precisely what Leda projects onto Elena as she sets out to search for her—a frame of mind that, indeed, is an embodiment of the uncanny anxiety that Lear attributes to the experience of irony. The implication is that this is her own frame of mind: she is lost to herself, not looking for something lost.

The act of the theft is never presented directly to the reader. Leda herself cannot plainly recall it: "I discovered that I couldn't recall the exact moment of an action that I now considered almost comic, comic because senseless. I felt like someone at the moment of realizing, perhaps with fear, perhaps with amusement: look what happened to me" (*LD*, p. 44). She just has the doll in her bag, apparently having grabbed it as she left the beach. She can't make sense of herself, on this point, in any satisfying way. First she tells herself she took the doll out of compassion—having noticed it, before the girl went missing, abandoned in the sand "limbs askew, her face half buried, as if she were about to suffocate" (p. 45; see also p. 39). She dismisses this, thinking the action was just cruel: but she exhibits no self-understanding in this explanation, either.

As the days go on, and Elena becomes more and more unsettled by having lost her doll, Leda secretly mothers the doll: "I kissed her face, her mouth, I hugged her as I had seen Elena do. She emitted a gurgle that seemed to me a hostile remark and, with it, a jet of brown saliva that dirtied my lips and my shirt" (*LD*, p. 62). One might be tempted to say that she takes the doll *so that* she can do the things a mother does, feel the things a mother feels; but her theft is not straightforwardly intentional, and the actions and feelings that ensue are surreal. When she wakes in the morning, she feels anxious when she cannot immediately lay eyes on the doll, "as if it were possible that she had thrown herself off the terrace during the night" (p. 63). More days pass; she buys the doll some new clothes, cleans and dresses her, and is attacked by more brown goo (p. 85). Eventually, Elena—still distraught, and having regressed to stroller and pacifier—tells Leda that Nani "has a baby in her stomach" like her aunt Rosaria (p. 114). Leda cleans out the doll's insides. The "baby" is a decomposing worm (p. 124).

Leda does something else without self-understanding: she tells Rosaria and Nina about a time in her life that she never spoke of to anyone—"not even to myself," she recalls (*LD*, p. 69). This is when the reader, too, learns that Leda had abandoned her own daughters for three years when they were quite young (four and six), leaving them with their father and evidently cutting off all contact, so that she could pursue her academic career and an affair with a distinguished professor of English literature somewhere in the United Kingdom.

At this point in the narrative, she has already stolen the doll and is fully aware of how it has unsettled Elena. She gives some indication, at least as she narrates the event in hindsight, that she exposes this fact about her history in order to unsettle Rosaria, whom she sees—particularly at that moment—as making a show of having "learned the part completely" and being better able to soothe the despondent Elena than her own mother can: "I felt a strong impulse to confuse her, to punish her, to throw her off balance" (*LD*, p. 68). With this, Leda arguably emerges as an ironic figure: that is, not as someone simply in the throes of an ironic experience but as someone bent on deploying irony—though perhaps less skillfully, and certainly more cruelly, than we find in the Socratic elenchus.[19] What I want to focus on instead, though, is a later exchange, without Rosaria, where Nina presses Leda for reasons: Why did you leave? And why did you return?

Leda's answer is that she left and returned for the same reason, "for love of myself" (*LD*, p. 118). I think her response should be understood not as crass egoism, but as an illustration of the Korsgaardian idea that the difficulty of being human is that we have to figure out what to make of ourselves. Certain commitments may run so deep that failing to honor them would be a kind of agential death. And Korsgaard herself explicitly speaks in such terms.[20] After all, by her lights the task of being human is to constitute one's own agency; and so failing at this in certain ways, and to certain degrees, might court a kind of fear of death. Leda left in order to have her thoughts running at their own speed, without interruption from children who need things and want to tell her things and call for her attention; she left to do academic work, which she imagines involves creating something that is fully her own. So she leaves for love of herself, because no longer being capable of creative, self-directed thought seems like a kind of death to her. And she returns because she realizes the venture failed to be optimally self-constituting: she says that she realized that nothing she could create on these terms "could ever truly equal" her daughters (*LD*, p. 117). So she returns to realize her agency on other terms. "I was resigned to living very little for myself and a great deal for the two children: gradually I succeeded" (p. 118). This is no less an idea of self-constitution than the first, only now under a different practical identity, a more conventional conception of motherhood—one that requires its own modes of self-mastery.

Worth underscoring is that the picture we have of Leda's motivations for abandoning, then returning, to her children is not in the register of irony. She is accounting for her past motivations from the throes of irony.[21] Questions arise about why exactly she comes to have an ironic experience, and how the experience resolves. We know the moment when the irony begins to dawn: namely, when she projects a frame of mind onto the missing daughter that does not fit the daughter's own self-report of being upset *because she cannot find her doll.* The frame of mind is anxious uncanniness, and so—if my interpretation is correct—it is one of not having a handle on one's own agency, of being unable to move about in determinate, self-perspicuous ways. Thus she is bringing to mind the fear of agential death that led her to abandon her children, and indeed the same fear of death that led her to return. Only the leaving and the returning were alike ways of keeping this anxiety at bay.

With this in mind, I want to return to the unanswered question from Lear's case for irony: what accounts for the transition from normal to extraordinary reflection? Lear's teacher example doesn't have a ready answer because it remains in the grip of the idea that our practical identities are the source of our reasons. Thus Lear's only recourse is to say that this happens because he really cares about being a teacher—his practical commitment runs deep. But why should that unsettle him so? Lear has the hint of a better answer in one of his other examples, of being a citizen of "Liberaldom" (the secular analogue of Kierkegaard's Christendom, each an all-encompassing way of life or practical identity). Citizens of Liberaldom tend to keep certain commitments about human dignity that constrain thought in certain recognizable ways, even as the precise limits and grounds of these commitments remain contested within Liberaldom. Walking home from work one day, the citizen finds himself looking into the eyes of a beggar (*CI*, p. 94). He is arrested by the presence of another human being, who—simply by being there, and looking him in the eye—effectively says, *are you sure you know what you are up to?* His grip on what it is to be committed to human dignity then comes unraveled. That is irony.

The point I am trying to make is that practical identities—such as they are—are self-sustaining things. They govern practical thinking, and are in turn given life by practical thinking, by one's conception, case by case, of what one is up to and why. So it is hard to see why a practical identity should have the power to arrest one, as Lear's teacher example suggests that it might. He does better when he suggests, in the Liberaldom example, that our openness to irony is a certain way of being open to the actual people with whom we share a life. Now, this brings me to another difficulty in considering Ferrante's story as an account of ironic experience: Leda's own daughters are not present in the events of the novel until the very last moment. Taking account of this will, though, allow me to drive home my point.

Relatively little direct dialogue takes place in *The Lost Daughter*. With one exception, all conversations before the main events of the novel—i.e., before the vacation on the Ionian coast—are narrated in indirect speech.[22] Most of the conversations occurring during the principal events of the novel are narrated in indirect speech, as well. A few pivotal conversations in direct speech with Nina and Rosaria concern either the missing doll or Leda's abandonment of her daughters.[23] Her daughters are not directly present until they call at the very end, after a final denouement in which Leda returns the doll to Nina, who then stabs her with a hatpin and leaves. There is comedy in this scene, and it makes some sense that Leda might joke about being dead. (The injury is serious enough to cause her to faint as she drives back to Florence later that night, but she is not actually hurt by the crash or the stabbing.)

When we hear her daughters' voices—when at last they themselves enter into the dramatic space of the novel—the effect on the reader is palpable relief. Though they have rehearsed their lines, though they exaggerate their mother's Neapolitan accent, though they play and tease, though we might imagine their voices tinny or broken coming over a mobile phone from the other side of the world, they now have a potent presence, a reality, that shatters the relentlessness of Leda's point of view, her memories and thought-worlds. Leda is arrested by this reality, and so is the reader.

Why does Leda say, in response, that she is dead and that she is fine? She says she is dead because she has been lost to herself, in the way of irony; and she says she is fine because she realizes, hearing their voices, that she has been confused about the difficulty of being human. The difficulty of being human is not a matter of constituting one's own agency under some conception of oneself as a mother, or as anything else. The difficulty of being human is to be fully awake to the actual people with whom we share a life. That is the lesson of irony.

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1. Elena Ferrante, *The Lost Daughter*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2008), p. 140; hereafter abbreviated *LD*.

2. Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); hereafter abbreviated *CI*.

3. See esp. Lear, *CI*, p. 17.

4. I refer to the transcendental deduction of the categories; see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 246 [B131]. The Kantian cogito is explicitly invoked by Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 18; hereafter abbreviated *S-C*.

5. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 93; hereafter abbreviated *SN*.

6. See also Christine Korsgaard, *Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4; hereafter abbreviated *CA*.

7. See also *SN*, esp. §3.3.1 (pp. 100–102).

8. This is a broadly realist objection to Korsgaard's constructivism about value, and the complaint is not original. See Thomas Nagel's commentary in *SN*, especially pp. 205–6. Similar concerns have been raised by Kantian moral realists who object to the perceived inevitability of Korsgaardian-style constructivism as the Kantian metaethical legacy. See, for instance, Rae Langton, "Objective and Unconditioned Value," *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 157–85; and Allen W. Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. chaps. 3 and 5.

9. Lear distinguishes between ironic experience, the capacity for irony, and ironic existence (*CI*, pp. 9, 30, 119); the remark just quoted strictly speaking concerns ironic *existence*, conceived by Lear as a basic form of human excellence, classically embodied in the figure of Socrates. Ironic existence requires the middle item, a capacity to "deploy" irony; for Lear this seems to be an active form of the susceptibility to ironic experience, perhaps together with some ability to arouse irony in others as well. My remarks in this paper focus on ironic *experience*, to which the remark just quoted also speaks perfectly well.

10. See Lear on normal reflection as—very often—an expression of practical confidence (*CI*, p. 6).

11. Lear invokes Platonic eros in an effort to account for the transition from normal reflection to the extraordinary reflection of ironic experience (see *CI*, pp. 20, 34). A central idea of Platonic thought (e.g., in the *Republic*) is that we are properly guided by standards of goodness that we can only conceive in pure thought, and cannot find manifest in experience. The further point about eros (from, e.g., the *Symposium*) underscores that we are not likely to be clear-sighted about these standards from where we

stand: we are only pulled toward them through the inchoate longings of eros. However, in this context, the point about eros amounts to another way of saying that irony is compatible with earnestness, with *really caring* about teaching. However, I do not see what Lear's point about eros adds that could explain why normal reflection gets out of hand in the relevant way.

12. See the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., Bix–x (p. 107).

13. I discuss the issues here at greater length in Melissa Merritt, "Practical Reason and Respect for Persons," *Kantian Review* 22 (2017): 53–79.

14. Since intentional action is self-constituting, it follows for Korsgaard that action itself admits of degree: "An action chosen in a way that more successfully unifies and integrates its agent is more authentically, more fully, an action than one that does not" (*S-C*, p. 25).

15. Lear (*CI*, pp. 33–34), citing Plato, *Symposium* (220c–22c).

16. Lear: "The version of 'what does any of this have to do with *teaching*?' that is genuinely uncanny and ironic is not the adoption of any perspective—certainly not the fantasy of adopting a transcendent perspective on the Platonic form of teaching; rather, it is the experience of breakdown in the perspective one has hitherto taken oneself to have" (*CI*, p. 183n19).

17. As Lear says, "The experience of ironic uncanniness . . . is . . . like losing the ground beneath one's feet: one longs to go in a certain direction, but one no longer knows where one is standing, if one is standing, or which direction is the right direction" (*CI*, p. 19).

18. The opening chapter narrates the ultimate chronological events—the aftermath, really—of the denouement in the final chapter. I am setting out here from the second chapter.

19. See note 9 above.

20. See *SN*, p. 161. In the earlier exchange, Leda implies that she left "in order not to die" (*LD*, p. 69).

21. Nina is by turns confused and unsatisfied by Leda's account of her motivations for leaving and returning. This exchange might also be read as a kind of elenchus, except Leda is kinder now, since Nina (unlike Rosaria) is not "perfectly sure" about her grip on the reasons and commitments of motherhood.

22. The exception is a conversation recalled, in direct speech, with her daughter Bianca as a teenager (*LD*, pp. 52–53).

23. Apart from this, in direct speech there are a couple of conversations with the beach attendant, Gino (pp. 52–55 and 131–32), which revolve around their shared obsession for Nina; and one with Giovanni, the apartment caretaker (pp. 103–11).