

# “The dance of identification: ambivalence, irony and organizational selfing”

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## Philosophy of management

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### The dance of identification: ambivalence, irony and organizational selfing

#### 'Fair Use'

Don't be fooled by me,  
Don't be fooled by the face I wear  
For I wear a thousand masks  
That I'm afraid to take off –  
And none of them is me.

Pretending is an art  
That is second nature to me,  
For God's sake, don't be fooled.

I give the impression that I am secure,  
That all is sunny and unruffled with me  
Within as well as without;  
That confidence is my name  
And coolness my game.

That the water is calm and I am in command,  
And that I need no one.  
But don't believe me, please.  
My surface may seem smooth  
But my surface is a mask.

Source: Lehmann, Peter (1974). *Lost in a Masquerade*, Celestial Arts.

#### Cast (in order of appearance)

<b>Zygmunt Bauman</b>	Polish sociologist best-known for his analyses of the links between modernity and the Holocaust and his critiques of late-modern and post-modern consumerist culture.
<b>Erving Goffman</b>	Canadian sociologist and symbolic interactionist best known for his work on the dramaturgical perspective of social interaction investigating how the self presents itself in everyday life.
<b>Robert Merton</b>	American functional sociologist who worked on the correlation between role-distance and ambivalence, specifically the ambivalence inherent in professional and managerial positions.
<b>Neil Smelser</b>	American sociologist specialising in systems, conflict and collective behavior who posited a theory of ambivalence based on Freudian psychoanalysis whilst President of the American Sociological Society.
<b>Catherine Casey</b>	New Zealand born sociologist best known for her analysis of post-industrial organizations' corporate culture change as a 'colonization' of the self.
<b>Richard Rorty</b>	American liberal pragmatic philosopher who abandoned foundationalist epistemology in preference of a conceptual schema positing no intelligible truths and with it the philosophy of Ironism.
<b>Gideon Kunda</b>	Israeli sociologist best known for his analysis of employee commitment in designer or engineered cultures. Ironically, given his ironic attack on strong culture organizations, he theorised employee irony as unstable and nihilistic.

#### Scene 1. The dance of identification

##### Overhead sign

*"Perhaps there are times when an individual does march up and down like a wooden soldier, tightly rolled up in a particular role. It is true that here and there we can pounce on a moment when an individual sits fully astride a single role, head erect, eyes front, but the next moment the picture is shattered into many pieces and the individual divides into different persons holding the ties of different spheres of life by*

*his hands, by this teeth, and by his grimaces..."*  
(Goffman, Erving, 1962, *Encounters*, p. 143).

##### Enter the chorus

Seven people in the chorus walk around wearing masks of Oscar Wilde. One by one they chant the following and, one by one, they put their masks in front of their faces after the names they are representing have been mentioned. In order, the masks are: Imre Lakatos; Bertrand Russell; Steve Woolgar; Kenneth Gergen; Frederick Schlegel; Mi-

Ian Kundera. At the end, they all turn their masks around, and all become Oscar Wilde.

**Player One:** What about getting the authors to play with a few ideas. Let's put it into their heads to write their paper as a conversation, a kind of simple play. What would they worry about? A bit risky? Won't be taken seriously?

**Player Two:** Well, give them the upside. Most theory papers are boring. People play more now. Everything is a narrative, after all, so you might as well make the story interesting.

**Player Three:** Yep, just look at their main argument. That modern organizations are staffed by ambivalent selves. That the ambivalences are rooted in modernity. That these may be denied or accepted. That the acceptance option has been inadequately explored. That it is best understood as an ironic sensibility. That established speculation on this sensibility has not successfully mapped out the complex and fluid nature of irony – as a gaze, face and temper. Great stuff, maybe, but it turns life into greyness, drama into analysis, and the ironic Kopalaki into a stuffed shirt.

**Player Four:** They have to play. Encourage them. Emphasize this is not so new. The LSE philosopher of science, Lakatos, wrote his Ph.D. as a play in the 70s. Plato thought poets were a dangerous challenge to social order, so they can't be all bad!

**Player Five:** But, and this is a big but (with one 't!'). Bertrand Russell said one had to write one serious and unreadable book, and then this leaves you free to be comprehensible later on. The authors haven't written the definitive incomprehensible theory piece yet. So it is risky.

**Player Six:** You are right. Remember that enfant terrible of the sociology of science, Steve Woolgar (now a Professor of Marketing at Oxford, is this what we mean by irony?). He gave some entertaining papers but remarked after one of them that it still lowers one's reputation. People laugh at the presentation but don't take the person or the ideas seriously.

**Player Seven:** But look at what interesting people have done. Gergen uses the phrase 'serious play' to refer to the world of the postmodern saturated self. Schlegel, the romantic philosopher of irony, talks of 'everything should be playful and everything should be serious'. Kundera shows us the burden of our age: the unbearable lightness of being. Can we really pontificate meaningfully about irony from the academic pulpit in a language of sobriety and seriousness?

**Chorus:** As dear Oscar put it, 'Life is far too serious to talk seriously about'. There is only so much

of the bureaucratic soullessness or Germanic angst that one can take. So, let them just do it. In the end, what do the results matter? The play is the thing!

### Stage directions

*Zygmunt Bauman (Ziggy) sitting in an armchair, enter Erving Goffman (Erv). Bauman gets up, interlocks his right arm with Goffman's left, they swing each other around in a brief jig, and then sit down in opposite chairs.*

**EG:** Well, hi Ziggy! I can see you're OK, how am I?

**ZB:** That's an old one Erv. If you want people to forget you've been dead for 20 years, you need to update. The modern world is a liquid one; you are going to have to lighten up!

**EG:** Lighten up! Ziggy, remember how I began? I was in Edinburgh writing great stuff on Encounters. I used amusing little examples to get people to pay attention to what they half-knew about themselves. Remember the merry-go-round? Kids throw themselves into it, teenagers act nonchalant or try and bust the equipment by going around really fast, and parents act like they are really just doing it for the kids. It's a performance, a balancing act (excuse the pun), multiple audiences, multiple displays. Don't get me wrong, it is not a sacred individual dealing with the profane demands of something called society. Our distance from one role is the result of pressures from others, or even what the role prescribes as a natural or healthy degree of engagement. A valuable little illustration of what I called the dance of identification. What *you* do, it's the bloody Holocaust. Establishing community as stepping over dead corpses on the field, for God's sake! You say be 'light' because 'heavy' modernity is over, but, Christ, Ziggy, you're the heavy one! Give me the merry-go-round any time (Goffman, 1961; Bauman, 1989).

**ZB:** Should I conform? Throw in a little post-modern *jouissance*? Remember I'm from East Europe, Erv. It's difficult to shrug off. It is no accident this area now seems to breed more world serious intellectuals than the Left Bank of Paris in the old days. Move over Jean-Paul (*Sartre*), enter Milan (*Zizak*). We have some heavy things to say about lightness!

**EG:** Post-modern *jouissance*! Whatever happened to pure 'joy'? Are we trapped in this pretentious jargon, surrounded by self-citing publication machines? By the way, Ziggy, I don't include you in this. The way you write; quite remarkable! I love it. Maybe this is why they all know you without really grappling with your arguments. You're too understandable, maybe too humane and committed! I do

yearn for the old days, when people wrote more clearly, were better versed in the subtleties of normal language. Remember Geertz? Now that guy could write!

**ZB:** We've moved on from the old days, Erv. Things are more complicated. Identities are shifting, new concepts are needed. You haven't had the chance to read Milan Kundera's *An Unbearable Lightness of Being*. That novel was great! It captured the angst over our new conditions – a lightness of touch, the ethos of the camp and peg communities. It makes Muhammad Ali a great post-modern figure, 'float[ing] like a butterfly, sting[ing] like a bee'. Pity the heaviness of boxing did his brain in.

**EG:** Fine, conditions might have changed, but I'm still going to argue for the merry-go-round. I think I captured some of your 'lightness'. Do you remember Loius Coser's phrase, 'greedy institutions'? Organizations that want 'all of you' and 'want you to want them' back. My ex-wife was a perfect example. Maybe I am too? Well, they can't have all of us. Even in my mini-version of your Holocaust, the mental asylum, people are making up, making out. You don't need to be 'light modern' to experience this. We are always 'holding company' selves, juggling multiple demands, making do in a series of situational encounters (Coser, 1974).

### Stage directions

*Enter a serious looking academic dressed in mortar board and gown, holding a clipboard, a stop watch and a pen. On the back of the gown is written 'Professor of the Bleeding Obvious'. She mutters loudly to herself while plodding heavily across the stage:*

*'Must get this article out. No time to look around. Let's recap. Downsizing. Outsourcing. End of the era of loyalty. A changing psychological contract. Trust based on effort and flexibility for security of employment. Now distrust and more open mutual manipulation. Now what were the figures from that survey? What was it that idiot in the sociology department said? Sounds like a simplification of the 'orientations to work' literature? So, they talked about 'bureaucratic', 'instrumental', and 'solidaristic' orientations to work 40 years ago, so what? Debunked stereotypes. I'm creating new publishable stereotypes. Ring-a-ring-a-roses. Maybe, but in the long run we are all superannuated – and at different levels.'*

*Goffman and Bauman let out a deep sigh.*

**EG:** Why don't they get it? Fortunately, some still do. A new book is about to come out on representations of organizations in popular culture arguing that they provide a more complex and sophisticated view

of organizations than the one found in organizational studies!

**ZB:** Let's see what we *do* have, firstly by going back nearer to your era. As children of Weber (1968 [1922]), we know that organizations are structures of authority and control. Etzioni (1961) calls it a 'compliance' relationship. The means of control may be coercive, pecuniary or normative but they are control all the same. Every organization imposes demands on people to perform according to some idea of their requirements. At the same time, organizations tend to engender a degree of voluntary compliance. They appear, in part, to have a degree of real legitimacy or authority. And people believe that; like to believe that. You don't have to follow Karl (*Marx*) and Fred (*Engels*) to see the tension between the 'arbeitsgeber' (*work giver or employer*) and 'arbeitsnehmer' (*work taker or employee*). And you don't have to be a slavish follower of old Emile (*Durkheim*, 1984) to believe that organizations, as mini-societies, are partly held together by shared rituals, people conforming and developing shared identities that give them a sense of meaning and purpose. People are both insiders and outsiders, conformists and critics, exploiters and exploited. We don't need questionnaires to discover this tension.

**EG:** People take the game so seriously! They don't see Peter's (*Berger*, 1991, p. 184) 'comedy, in which men parade up and down with their gaudy costumes, change hats and titles, hit each other with the sticks they have or the ones they can persuade their fellow actors to believe in'. Your Marxist friend Burawoy (1979) may be correct. Employees are actively critical and 'making out', both they and employers collude in this activity, with the result that they all accept the underlying 'rules of the game'. Everyone is pretending. De Certeau's (Certeau, 1984) *la perruque* (the wig) is rife. But masks tend to stick. Remember *The Mask* and *Spiderman 3*, Ziggy?

**ZB:** Must have missed them, Erv. Are you saying that organizations make us oversocialized people, cheerful or angst ridden robots, despite the distance we feel or the games that we play?

**EG:** It might sound like that, but no, although the point is an important one. On the one hand, 'when they issue uniforms, they issue skins'. Arlie (*Hochschild*) (Goffman, 1974; Hochschild, 1979, p. 556) added, rather nicely I thought, 'and two inches of flesh'! Our identities *are* the product of who we are expected to be and how we play out our lives. On the other hand, things are far more fluid. People are little more than 'ambulatory units' moving from one encounter to another. They are not shaped by norms; they merely frame and reframe themselves and oth-



ers in series of encounters or interaction rituals. They always adopt a stance towards what is expected of them, and what is expected is always mediated by the situation they are in. The juggling of multiple commitments is an active, complex and messy process. There is always this experience of being 'inside' and 'outside' in relation to the ritual at hand. As my faithful, if rather serious, follower Gideon (*Kunda*, 1992, p. 213-214) puts it, 'organizational self is the stance'. But, how do people really experience this? Are we cynical game players, playful dilettantes, anxious fragmented selves, distracted and stressed survivors or reflective searchers for a coherent identity? I'm tempted to say we may become any or all of these things as our life-in-situ unfolds.

### Stage directions

*A floodlight beams up to the roof, where Joanna Martin sits on a throne in high priestess garb. She reads from a stone tablet:*

*"Remember the three commandments. Thou shalt be an Integrationist, if you believe that organizations are purposive and orderly systems. Thou shalt conform to the strictures of the Differentiationist, if you believe that they are riven by fundamental inequalities and embedded conflict between those with and without power. Thou shalt be a Fragmentationist, if you believe that organizational meaning and action is more complex, uncertain, contradictory, fragmented and emergent than Integrationists and Differentiationists allow. Which are you guys? What is the fundamental character of this 'organization'/'organiza-tion member' dynamic you are discussing?" (Martin, 1993).*

**ZB:** If I may? Let us get away from these frames, paradigms and commandments. I think our situations are all three. They are not frames but components, and they are components in tension. Organizational ideology, and practice, requires a purposive-rationality, a sense of common orientation, and deliberation on how this can effectively be brought about. Our rational selves, our social selves, are committed to this collective task. Inequalities of conditions, the exercise of power, and the self-interested pursuit of our own ends all create situations of conflict and control, domination and resistance, antagonism and struggle. Organizations and institutions are riven by such conditions within and between them. Our Machiavellian selves struggle to survive and develop in such a world. In living our lives, the way our selves and situations are defined, how we and others make sense of the uncertainties of interaction; these are all far more confused and ambiguous than simple unitary or conflictual ideologies suggest. Our sense-making selves have to

struggle with such complexity. Our 'commitment' to the organizations within which we live and work will always reflect such tensions.

**EG:** Well put, Ziggy. I hate to agree with anyone but this time... The dance of identification is a three-step jig on a tightrope. In any social encounter, we collude in keeping a common unifying narrative going. We also stand apart from this definition, assessing and manipulating it. How we experience and act it out is a dynamic and iterative process of uncertain framing and reframing of who we are and the situation we are in. It is this dance of identification that structures our response to our organizational lives. Gideon (*Kunda*), bless him, made the important point that 'commitment' and 'distance' are no longer opposite ends of a continuum of employee responses to organizations. In a sociological equivalent to the debunking of the Phillips Curve, he revealed that employees were both committed *and* distant towards the organization. Where Gideon is doubly mistaken, I think, is in regarding this as a condition particular to a new 'ironic' group of employees. On the one hand, to a degree, it is a universal condition of social life. On the other hand, he appears to presume an angst ridden agony of the lonely crowd subjected to such conditions (more of this later!). This is far too impressionistic, too universalistic and too moralistic in its tone. We are all dancers in the dance but how these steps are performed, how skilled we are, how we experience it differ. These are topics worth exploring further (*Kunda*, 1992).

### Scene 2. Modernity and ambivalence

#### Overhead sign

*Arbeit Macht Frei*

*(Work makes you free)*

*Source: Sign above the gates of Auschwitz and Dachau.*

**ZB:** Don't you ever wonder what would have happened if people researching organizations had taken up more of your ideas?

**EG:** Are we talking about me here or you? What's wrong Ziggy, feeling a bit of outside angst, part of the waste you talk about? (Bauman, 2004a).

**ZB:** I have lived my life as an outsider. I think I quite like the place. Foucault once remarked that the traditional view of the intellectual is out in front but off to the side? To be off to the side may be less of a contact sport but you still experience the agony and ecstasy of the maverick. Enough of my digressions! Stewart (*Clegg et al.*, 2006) and his mates have just argued that you have been unjustifiably neglected in organization studies, that your work on asylums, as

with mine on modernity and the holocaust, goes relatively unnoticed, or at least not extensively used in mainstream work.

**EG:** Well, it's not quite the case with you, my old mate. Didn't you read Paul's (*Du Gay*, 2000) book; a strange character, the head of Michael (*Foucault*) and the body of Isaiah (*Berlin*)? I'm not sure he's got it the right way round! What it was against was interesting. You and Tom Peters bundled together in the romantic anti-bureaucracy camp! How did you like that? Dilbert called Peters a 'spitter'. Are you a spitter, Ziggy, are you?

**ZB:** Not a spitter, Erv. More a 'splitter'. I occupy the same spot as the 'Popular Front of Judea'. Didn't you see *Life of Brian*?

### Stage directions

*Enter stage left.*

*Monty Python team playing philosophical soccer, dressed as Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Nietzsche, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Schlegel, Kant etc. They huddle together having a discussion.*

*Enter stage right.*

*James March slides in uncontrollably on a slippery and icy surface, collides with the Monty Python team, and sends them scattering.*

**ZB:** James has made his point. And it symbolizes what I want to say about modernity. He said that people deny uncertainty and ambiguity, and try to show that they are in control, when actually the opposite is the case. He has slid in on his own metaphor. He once told us that leadership was something akin to trying to steer a car when skidding on an icy surface (Cohen & March, 1986).

**EG:** This is what I sought to uncover in face-to-face work. Everyone is trying to appear what they are meant to be, to keep the ritual going. People expect leaders to be in charge, to have control, to provide certainty. One of the authors of this piece told me a worker in the Australian steel plant he researched observed of management, 'they must have a cunning plan. They can't be this stupid!' So they all collude to keep up appearances. Can you hear what James is saying to Cleese? I bet he has a really good explanation...(Badham (field notes)).

**ZB:** You can see this denial in these local encounters and your presentation of ourselves to ourselves is great. But the denial is rooted in something bigger. At the heart of modernity is a quest for order founded on an attempted elimination of ambiguity and ambivalence. This quest sees only two alternatives, order or chaos. An inadequate 'chaotic' present is compared to an ideal 'orderly' future.

Progress is achieved by systematizing language, developing science and technology, and creating new systems of administration to 'scientifically manage the defective human stock'. Modernity classifies, organizes, describes, analyses, deconstructs, reconstructs, to provide us with 'the order' that we want. It does it to nature and it does it to people. A Latin name for all flora and fauna and a Myers-Briggs typology for all people! In this world, ambiguity is not merely a problem, it is a threat, it's sacrilege. Modernity compulsively searches out and seeks to eliminate ambiguity. In our organizational ideologies, at least, we live in Max's icy world of disenchantment. Little boxes, little boxes, all made out of ticky-tacky, all in a row (Bauman, 1991, p. 33; Weber, 1968 [1922]).

But my point is not merely to rail against this image as a threat to our inner humanity. Nor is it, like Tom Peters, to say we are witnessing the flowering of a new age where romantic creativity is both the Real and the Rational, a desirable ethos for living and a competitive requirement for hyper-modernity. My point is that while modernity creates the conditions for bureaucracy and order, it also undermines them. Modernity seeks to eliminate ambiguity and ambivalence yet ends up creating it. Our main problem lies in the attempts by the 'ordering' component of modernity to deny, deceive, pathologically neglect or obsessively campaign against ambivalence, plurality and diversity.

**EG:** I don't quite understand this. Are you saying that our very attempt to recognize and live with ambiguity and ambivalence is also a product of this all-embracing modernity of yours? What isn't part of this Leviathan?

**ZB:** First things first, Erv. Remember, I was being nice to you. Ultimately, yes, I am saying that modernity creates all this. It seeks to eliminate ambivalence but only ends up creating more. This occurs through three conditions: what I have called the 'pluralism of power', 'unintended consequences', and the 'human condition'.

**EG:** Sounds OK as slogans, but what do they mean?

**ZB:** The *pluralism of power* refers to conflicting authoritative opinions about who people 'should be'. This refers to conflicts within institutions (between bosses, colleagues, subordinates etc.) and between institutions (between family and work, private and public life etc.). It also manifests itself in contradictory formalized and expert statements about the 'appropriate individual'. The outcome is what Gergen characterises as 'multiphrenia'. This phenomenon is accompanied by the *unintended consequences* of attempts at control. To quote myself, just to add spice to my conversation. 'Problems are created by prob-

lem-solving, new areas of chaos are generated by ordering activity. Progress consists first and foremost in the obsolescence of yesterday's solution.' Finally, the ordering impulse comes into conflict with all the ambiguity and ambivalence that inevitably accompanies the *human condition*, the agonies and the ecstasies that surround attempts to craft out a meaningful life in recalcitrant conditions, all the hopes and despair, achievements and failures and so on.

**EG:** So what does this mean for what we have been talking about earlier, how we live our lives in organizations, how we manage the dance of identification?

**ZB:** We can go on to talk about how we 'should' be. But, for the moment, I am taking a leaf out of your book. This is analysis only, identifying the sources of ambivalence in the modernist quest. It applies directly to this organizational dance of identification. Our organizations, and ourselves, yearn for total certainty, order and identification. Yet we, and they, create uncertainty, disorder and plurality. So we are pushed and pulled. If we take Neil's view of ambivalence as "the simultaneous existence of attraction and repulsion, of love and hate", then we love and hate the organizational demand to have 'all of us'. How this plays out is another thing. My work on the Holocaust is about the dangers of domination by an obsessive pursuit of 'order' driven in part by a pathological repression of disorder and plurality. But that is for a later discussion about the responses to ambivalence.

**EG:** Before you climb out of this one using the old academic adage of 'this is another paper', can you quickly say how our organisations and ourselves could craft out a meaningful dance of identification, a successful ritual if you will?

**ZB:** I refuse to get embroiled in this yet. But I will provide a teaser, a little relevant self-quotation 'The only consensus likely to stand a chance of success is the acceptance of the heterogeneity of dissensions'.

### Stage Directions

*Enter stage right: a misty ethereal ghost of Emile Durkheim, dressed in 'wasp' like French T-shirt, beret, and smoking Gauloise.*

*Enter stage left: a darker and heavier looking ghost of Max Weber, bearded, besuited and with a pipe.*

*They lock arms, like Bauman and Goffman did earlier, and spin each other around. They speak, both at once.*

*MW: 'I wish I had said that, Emile!'*

*ED: 'I wish I had said that, Max.'*

*MW & ED: 'You will, Ziggy, you will.'*

**EG:** Wow, Ziggy, did you see those ghosts? Are they you, or you them?

**ZB:** I think it was that nice liberal old stick Galbraith (1977) who said something about the plans of practical men reflecting ideas of long dead philosophers or economists. Did you see him on Parkinson with Bette Midler? She, how do the liquid youth put it, 'creamed him'! How to destabilise urbane poise in one easy lesson! Enough of Bette; the ghosts are grousing! Ideas live on, and I am proud to be part of a heritage of critical observers of modernity. Durkheim (1984) went into this. He pointed out how modern society was a highly diversified one, with different personalities, different people, different sub-cultures. Jobs and careers became more specialized, organizations more differentiated, and society made up of multiple regions, levels and sub-cultures. This led to a plurality of voices about who we should be, where we should be going.

**EG:** I suppose this is something that is reflected in my observations about the 'holding company' self that we are forced to become. With different specializations, audiences, groups etc., we end up having multiple personalities, wanting to please different audiences, live up to different ideals. So where does this leave us, other than being superficial social chameleons with no 'inner direction'?

**ZB:** Durkheim went part of the way in trying to solve this. He was aware that there was a problem of order and guidance. And he realized that there could be no return to a detailed 'mechanical' moral code, and that science, technique and industry ultimately provided no final authority or promised resting place. But rather than making an awareness of all of this part of a new desirable consciousness, he wanted us to search for an individualistic ethos and create corporatist style associations to solve people's 'anomie'. I want to create a greater knowledge of our 'elusive' or 'peg' communities, and how we should live in an ambivalent world. As we experience all these plural views and pulls, and try to juggle them in our lives, we have an inner yearning for community, a one-dimensional resting place, slippers and a dog by the fire, where we can relax, and simply be. The more diverse, rushed and stressed our life becomes, the more that we are given views of what Donald (Schon) calls a stable state. We long for the domination of an uncertain and uncaring world, turning it to our own ends, and reaching some kind of secure Nirvana. It is present in yearnings for ecological communities, Buddhist retreats, passionate commitments to all-encompassing causes. Yes, we are creatures of modernity, but it is a modernity with inbuilt ambivalence. Just the other day, I saw a billboard outside Sydney airport advertising superannuation, 'secure your fu-



ture' it proclaimed. It neglected to point out that in the long run we are all dead!

**EG:** Sounds depressing.

**ZB:** Not necessarily, Erv. Our slippery friend James (*March*) (Cohen & March, 1984) argued for a 'technology of foolishness'. Our organizations have multiple, competing and ambiguous goals which are given different interpretations by the various stakeholders and groupings that make up the organized anarchies that they are and become. As conditions change rapidly, we create what our German pal Ulrich (*Beck*, 1999, p. 19-48) calls 'manufactured uncertainties', we cannot control the things that we have created. To dramatically paraphrase Goethe's Faust 'The phantoms I have summoned will not go'. But, as James recommends, we can accept this, and play with the dilemmas.

**EG:** If you are going to bring in Faust, then I have to play the devil's advocate. Surely, if we recognize this situation, then we don't have to be ambivalent about it any more? We can just rationally work out a solution.

**ZB:** Well played indeed, but we need to shift the answer onto another level. Modernity gives us just such a faith in knowledge and rationality. Surely we can think and plan our way out of anything! The problem is that we cannot think and plan our way out of the problems of thinking and planning! You see, science extended its scope to undermine its own certain assumptions. As facts began to disappear up their own microscope, historians and philosophers showed us (rationally, using 'science' again) that science was uncertain and contested, a social, and political, construction, a source of ongoing conflict and debate. In the work of liberal followers of science, the search for excessive certainty, and dogma about having grasped it, is a very non-scientific attitude. Great humanitarian liberals like Karl Popper and Bertrand Russell saw the rise of authoritarianism as being the result of not acknowledging what science has really given us – a critical, tentative and exploratory outlook. Science cannot tell us how to live, any more than it can tell us about the ultimate nature of the world or even its own provisional 'truths'.

Increasing public scepticism against scientists and technicians is a witness to this. As Ivan Illich, the Catholic environmentalist, remarked, 'what is an expert? An 'ex' and a 'spurt', the latter being a little drip with a lot of pressure behind it!' Now we have a plurality of competing 'scientific' voices, each giving us different opinions about 'reality' and the 'facts'. Do we believe the supporters of 'hi-tech' solutions or simple 'low-tech' remedies, the prophets of 'global warming' or their 'critics', the greater

danger of 'caffeinated' or 'decaffeinated' coffee, the value of a glass or two of red wine or not? Science cannot give us the simple authority we yearn for. And, believe me, we yearn for it. This is the promise that modernity has given us. Even our doom-laden critiques appear as a 'legislative' knowledge claim. In reality, however, (and here we go again!) we are merely 'interpreters' of the inner cultural tensions of a modernity that is ambivalent about its own claims to knowledge. As our little jokester Rowan Atkinson put it, 'There is certainly a lot of uncertainty around. Of that, one can be...certain!'

**EG:** So, let's cut to the chase then, you agree with Max (*Weber*, 1968 [1922]) rather than Emile (*Durkheim*)!

**ZB:** To be serious for a moment, Erv (you know I'm generally not!), I think Max said many really appropriate things about the disenchantment of the world, the rationalistic legitimization of organizational authority, the value of an 'ethic of responsibility' and so on. His idea that there was a 'substantive' rationality behind the 'formal rationality' that drives modern civilization, but that all substantive rationales have been undermined as a hangover of pre-modern society is excellent. It goes far beyond the simple undermining of the religious ideal of the 'calling', and its replacement with personal or ritualised 'psychological contracts'. He nicely grasps that this has left us with a meaningless, albeit strenuous, quest for more rationality (more knowledge, more products, more control, more analysis and so on). This, in turn, takes directions that are influenced by the self-interested strivings of partial interests. They are also ignored by those who want to reject this world, and cope by adopting more fundamentalist searches for an alternative lifestyle. So we are locked into denial, short term self-interested manipulations, and a meaningless striving. I mentioned East European angst earlier on; well, it has at least its match in the German *schadenfreude*.

**EG:** So you are nothing but a set of footnotes to Max?

**ZB:** I hope a little more.

### Stage directions

*Enter stage left: In walks a tweedy looking traditional male Professor type arm in arm with his wife and accompanied by a medical group of a nurse, intern, doctor and patient wheeled in on a trolley. Everyone apart from the Professor goes to different parts of the stage and start calling 'Robert'! Robert (Merton), for that is the Professor, walks quickly from one to the other, looking more bewildered and confused. Finally, he goes to his wife, and says: 'What do you want from me?' She replies, firmly yet pleadingly, 'I just want you to want me!' All the*



*characters leave, and Merton sits down opposite Goffman and Bauman.*

**EG:** Hi, Rob. How is your 'push me-pull you' life going as the world's greatest functionalist? Before your long answer, I have my own pressures and have to go. Apologies, but I mustn't let you keep me!

*He gets up, shakes Merton's and Bauman's hands, and turns to leave.*

**RB:** That's OK, so long Erv. Keep up my good work!

*Goffman turns and gives Merton the finger while smiling.*

**RM:** Hi, Ziggy, I know Erv must have been giving you a hard time, he does that to everyone. I apologize for him.

**ZB:** No apology necessary, Rob. I love his laconic style – citizen of light modernity in an all too heavy world.

**RM:** I'm glad you raised that. Can I just try out a little test?

**ZB:** Sure, just so long as it's non-discriminatory!

**RM:** *(pulls out a large and shabby red book, and opens it to the front pages)* Who said this and when 'To the costly ideology of bureaucratic conformity is added the irony of conflicting and ambiguous directions'?

**ZB:** Was that me? I don't remember it.

**RM:** To quote a now popular line, 'You will, Ziggy, you will!' No, it was a group of American social psychologists at Michigan looking at organizational stress – back in 1964! No post-modernism or late modernism here. Do you know how cold it gets in Michigan? Freezes your car's tyres to the driveway. But back to the main point, look what they had to say. 'To the haunting question 'Who am I?' answers are sought from an environment often unresponsive or itself in flux.' And they argued (some-what reluctantly, apologizing for the speculations, they were positivists after all!) this was due to the twin processes of the growth of the sciences and large organizations.

**ZB:** How so?

**RM:** They say both growth processes encourage and accelerate the rate of technological change yet also create dependence and conformity. Why? Because the complexity of science means that we cannot translate their findings any more, the use of simple 'billiard ball' metaphors is no longer enough. Rapid change in science makes the experience of the individual irrelevant. The craftsman (sorry, craftsperson) gives way to the scientist. Tried to repair your car lately? We become dependent on the 'experts'.

Sound familiar? (*Ulrich*) Beck, eat your heart out! And large organizations – let me tell you about large organizations! So complex, so interdependent. They produce diversity yet require conformity. If one cotton picker in a gang is missing, it just reduces the output by their contribution. But one person missing from the assembly line...it grinds to a halt! Large organizations need such people and it fits into their ideology. The conformity that science breeds is a different matter; it is the unintended consequence of an ethos that is often liberal and independent. Do you know what Bertrand Russell (Russell, 2006, p. 119) said about large organizations? 'Mankind decided that it would submit to monotony and tedium in order to diminish the risk of starvation'! These Michigan social psychologists quoted that. God, would I like to meet them again!

**ZB:** So, what's your point?

**RM:** The point is a simple one. On the one hand, they made similar arguments to you. Science, bureaucracy and large organizations create ever greater requirements for conformity, at the same time as they undermine the unity that they search for. Science challenges authority, creates multiple knowledge claims, yet its development encourages greater dependence on its knowledgeable authority. Large organizations possess and foster multiple goals, divisions and sub-cultures yet require greater degrees of cooperation and conformity. On the other hand, they did this within a framework of traditional functionalism and role theory.

**ZB:** OK, but how far can you push such an analysis?

**RM:** Quite far, actually. Sometimes with far more precision than many so-called contemporary theories of ambiguity and ambivalence in modern organizations. The background, of course, is the idea of a differentiated and plural society requiring new and more complex forms of integration. It also requires more flexible and plural individuals. Hochschild commented, for example, her concept of 'feeling rules' is something that could only have emerged in modern plural settings. My work, however, pointed in particular to the problematic 'sociological' ambivalences that this can create, i.e. 'conflicting normative expectations socially defined for a particular social role associated with a single social status'. While many others had pointed to the ambivalences created between different positions or statuses (i.e. worker/family person; parent/child etc), I focused attention onto not only conflicts between roles within a status (i.e. boss, subordinate, colleague etc.) but also within these roles. Many of our roles contain contradictory requirements. Scientists frequently complain about bureaucratic responsibilities undermining their time and energy for creative work, aca-

demics about the conflict between their roles as teachers and researchers etc. I pointed out, a special favorite of mine, to the existence of tensions within a role, norms and counter-norms that specify how people should behave. One of the most noted illustrations is the idea of a doctor having 'detached concern', human empathy towards patients yet also professional distance. Some of these norms, as Louis (Coser) and Erving (Goffman) have pointed out, relate to what is regarded as a 'balanced' playing out of a role, not too 'fanatical', not too 'distant'. More broadly, I also pointed to ambivalence between internalized norms and situational demands, cultural values and institutionalized normative prescriptions, the demands of alternative (including past and present) reference groups and so on. The Michigan guys provided a more systematic look at 'role conflict' and 'role ambiguity' as the contradictory demands of alternative 'role senders' or 'requirements ambivalence, stress and frustration'.

**ZB:** Much of this sounds useful. It nicely grasps multiple sources of ambivalence. But isn't your analysis ultimately just arguing for the need for an utopian removal of such ambivalences, the design of a perfectly functioning organism that eliminates such sources of 'anomie' and distress?

**RM:** Thanks for the compliment. But, for the second point, no, not at all. I see the ambivalences that you point out, between unity and plurality etc., to be examples – at a macro level – of just what our analysis points out. What we add, however, is a rich set of concepts for exploring multiple levels of ambivalence. As to the old functionalist utopia illusion, we are probably as caught up in this as you are in the statement that the Holocaust is the outcome of modernity. Paul (Du Gay) sees you as a proto-romantic, unjustifiably seeing the Holocaust as the automatic outcome of the modernist project – and hence, you as providing a blanket romantic critique of an alienating bureaucratic rationalization (Bauman, 1989; Du Gay, 2000). You may, at heart or at times, be making such an argument. But you are also showing how the bureaucratic ethos, rooted in the quest and support for order and control, *can* be used for such ends. Also, maybe, you are pointing to the fact that the tension brought about by the ambivalence generated and surrounding the quest for order can lead to a pathological commitment to serving whatever functions the 'order' generators demand, however much this conflicts with other plural and humane values. Your analysis may, or may not, be a strong romantic critique of the inherent tendencies of bureaucracy, but it does not have to be. So, with our functionalism, we can accept the inevitability of conflict and ambivalence, even its value and creativity. Also, the personal conse-

quences are not necessarily seen as mere generators of anomie and angst. The Michigan boys, for example, talked about the response of individuals being mediated by their cognitive capacity for uncertainty and ambiguity. Rose (*Laub Coser*) put a liberal case quite nicely in arguing that individuals who have passed through multiple stages, different careers, operated in multiple settings with competing institutional demands etc., are capable of developing a 'mature' ability to juggle and integrate such differences. Back in the 70s, Peter made a similar point in his overview of sociology, as did Isaiah in his promotion of a liberal view of political theory. The 'mature' individual creatively coping with sociological ambivalence may have a dose of the 'lightness' that you talk about – not purely as a phenomenon of late modernity, but throughout modernity. But we are stepping ahead of ourselves here. We promised to stick to the causes of ambivalence.

**ZB:** Thanks for that, Robert. Another reason to go back to the greats! I think we have extended the dance of identification argument adequately. We both saw fundamental ambivalences in the person/organization relationship in modernity. I raised the issue of the dance in modernity involving identification with, on the one hand, organizational conditions and demands for order, authoritative knowledge and a final community or resting place and, on the other hand, conditions and demands inside and outside organisations for plurality, competing knowledges, and ongoing dynamic journeys. You explore the myriad sub-routines in the dance, as people are pulled between multiple competing and ambiguous demands within and outside the organization. So, where do we go next? Much as I hate to admit it, Erv put this really well, "The model of man according to the initial role perspective is that of a kind of holding company for a set of not relevantly connected roles; it is the concern of the second perspective to find out how the individual runs this holding company." This is our next destination (Bauman, 1991; Merton, 1976; Goffman, 1961, p. 90).

### Stage directions

*Robert gets up and ambles to a corner of the stage as if to exit. He hesitates and returns to centre stage. He then walks to another corner, hesitates and returns again to centre stage. He is looking very confused. There is a round of deafening applause. From the opposite side of the stage strides Neil Smelser, resplendent in academic robes and carrying a Presidential seal. He walks purposefully to Robert, taps him on the shoulder and says, 'It's just that there are two exits, Robert' before taking Robert's hand and leading him off-stage. He then walks over to Ziggy.*

### Scene 3. The response

#### Overhead sign

*Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them...What is called resignation is confirmed desperation...A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.*

Henry Thoreau (1845). Economy Part A, Walden, pp.1-3.

**NS:** Poor Robert. Always having to cope with competing demands!

**ZB:** My fault! We were talking about ambivalence. I should really know better by now. He never sorted out what to do about it.

**NS:** Old functionalists never die, they just keep on functioning!

**ZB:** I was hoping he'd stay. I wondered how he'd view your view of an ambivalence approach as an alternative to rational explanations of human behavior.

**NS:** I have to be clear here, Ziggy. Considering ambivalence as a supplement not an alternative to rational choice. It is about dealing with the ambivalence that humans' feel towards parents, organizations and other things upon which they are dependent. And the anxiety this causes, the repression involved, the choices available and so on (Smelser, 1998).

**ZB:** Oh, oh! Repression, I sense some Freud (Bauman, 1997). I may have to repress my anti-Freudian feeling (*laughs*).

**NS:** Well, if you are reluctant to deal with Viennese angst, let's use a Kiwi observing the Yanks (Casey, 1995).

#### Stage directions

*A loud, clanging noise is heard as sparks of fire leap out from the wings. A powerfully built, yet obviously lame, young man walks to the back of the stage and sits on a golden couch with Imperial Hephaestus emblazoned on the side. In comes a bespectacled, slightly aggressive and critical looking woman (Catherine Casey) with a notepad and pen. She sits next to the couch and starts interrogating the man. Spotlight is focused on Casey and the man.*

**CC:** So, you think Hephaestus is held up as a real family company, a strong culture, a home away from home. Is it truly a 'real star' company?

**Young man:** "It's like a moralistic, righteous parent. It's the kind of parent everyone should be lucky

enough to have...It's a very moral company. It does the right thing" (Ibid, p. 104).

**CC:** What about the toxic waste dumping, the air pollution?

**Young Man:** No one mentions that. I'm not sure I remember...

*Catherine writes down:*

*Reaction formation: repressing one side (negative commentary) and rigidifying the other (positive idealisation of the corporate parent) (Smelser, 1998).*

*Catherine adds:*

*Note to self: evidence of widespread ambivalence and denial in Hephaestus. Indications of Freudian projection (projecting ambivalent feelings onto something or someone else, the problem lies not with the company but the supervisor, ourselves etc.), displacement (displacing or substituting a remote object or symbol for the real object – note Bauman's (Smelser, 1998; Bauman, 1989) contrast between the 'hypothetical Jew' and the actual Jew that people knew), reversing (turning a negative into a positive – stifling procedures, intrusive controls, may be for the greater good?), and splitting (transferring positive side into unqualified love of some people, groups, parts of the company etc., and the negative into an unqualified hatred of others). Explore further.*

*Spotlight returns to ZB and NS.*

**NS:** Just my point. As companies encourage dependence, they inevitably create ambivalence. And with ambivalence, comes potential anxiety, and hence denial. Freud nicely captures some of our defence mechanisms, and these are displayed clearly in Hephaestus and other companies.

**ZB:** So, do you agree with my modernist view. Organizations managing culture. Everyone pruned into shape, becoming a flower in the corporate garden. All weeds, however beautiful, must pretend to be a flower or be pulled up. Ambivalence is being constantly purged and the psychological pressure to conform enormous. Catherine observed the 'troublemaker Tom' at Hephaestus being pressured to not 'ask questions'. In your words, organizations 'manifest the principle of in-group solidarity and out-group hostility'. Louis (Coser) said the same thing; organisations 'sacrifice everything for cohesion and maintain that cohesion by excluding dissent'. There are pressures to 'expel the rebels'. Where people fear the consequences of being expelled, they must deny ambivalence, as different ways of doing things are unacceptable, no matter what the culture (Bauman, 1997, pp. 128-138; Casey, 1995, pp. 140-141).



**NS:** I hate to agree so readily, but yes. I tried to capture some of this, using Hirschman's three choices of: exit, voice or loyalty i.e. to be a committed corporate citizen, a distant and withdrawn critic, or a more active and critical faithful dissatisfaction somewhere in between. Catherine has a similar threefold model – identifying 'capitulated' or 'conformist' selves, 'resistant' or 'defensive' selves, and 'dramaturgical' selves as more openly ambivalent players in between. I side with Catherine in seeing all these forms as wrestling with ambivalence, albeit in different ways. I am not so certain, however, about the negative pessimism of her overall analysis.

**ZB:** Let me suggest a heavy modern/light modern twist on your ambivalence ideas. In heavy modernity, the negative side of worker ambivalence was expressed through the union and their challenges to authority given official voice. Both employers and workers recognized a mutual interdependency, but they also institutionalized their admitted conflict. But light modernity has repressed and isolated this voice. Capital has become ex-territorial, unilaterally cutting its dependency on labor. The absent owner has been joined by the absent manager and the absent supervisor. There is no 1984 style panoptic authority to confront; those manning the towers have fled. Light modern synoptic control, the many watching the one, leaves the individual trapped uncomfortably in ambivalence, with no avenue for voice. Even if (s)he has the courage to voice a critique, who does (s)he voice it to? Many of Jim's (*Barker*) team members voiced ambivalence towards the new 'iron cage' of peer surveillance, concerned at the intrusion but not wanting to 'go back'. So how do they voice this concern at intimate repression?

**NS:** This might be over-generalized but I agree with your basic point. And even if the ambivalent person does find someone to express his or her voice to, (s)he does so knowing the overwhelming temptation of organizations to punish those who don't conform. In the face of all those Freudian repressions of ambivalence, the projection, the splitting, the displacement, the reversing, the reaction-formation, there is a real danger of opening up the Pandora's Box of ambivalence. They can alleviate their anxieties, shore up their defences, by demonising you – in all your constructive and open authenticity! As the old Turkish proverb says, 'Those who would tell the truth should have one foot in the stirrup'.

**ZB:** But let's explore this 'voice' option a bit further. Agreed, nearly all commentators seem to argue for a threefold response to ambivalence, the bewitched, the bothered and the bewildered. The range of this acceptance has been nicely documented by one of the authors of this play (one has to be polite

to the authors!). The extreme ends seem clear. The repression and costs of the rigid, conformist and potentially burnt out over-committed zealot. The self-destructive, defensive, stressed, resigned or apathetic existence of the distant, withdrawn and alienated cynic. But, in between, is there no room for Simmel's 'stranger', those with 'distance and nearness, indifference and involvement' (Badham and Down, 2006; Simmel, 1950, p. 403).

**NS:** No, it doesn't have to be only denial, or why would I bother to argue my case for integrating rational choice with ambivalence? Individuals and organizations can, as Peter (*Weigert*) argues, accept some degree of ambivalence by relaxing demands for behavioural conformity? I can see the point of those who argue that 'high levels of ambivalence may lead to distress, erosion or dissolution of the relationship, whereas moderate levels can enhance and revitalize commitment'. Ambivalence may be 'a necessary and perhaps cyclical element in continuing involvements' (Weigert, 1991, p. 131; Lorenz-Meyer, 2001; Thompson & Holmes, 1996, p. 503).

**ZB:** We seem to be in agreement here. Indulgently quoting myself for a moment, the 'socio-scientific' concept of ambivalence requires a leap from thinking of ambivalence as competing experiential pushes and pulls towards a "widening of horizons" (Bauman, 1992, p. 133).

**NS:** Be careful, Ziggy, there's pride in your work, and then there's arrogance. Try to be a little more ambivalent (*smiles*)! My comment here is more than a little dig; however, there are real ambivalences and tensions in this 'voice' space. If we follow up the stranger/marginality theme, Adam's (*Weisberger*, 1992) work can be useful. At one extreme, he argues, there is 'assimilation', at the other the 'return', but in between there are two options 'transcendence' and 'poise'. Transcendence is about overcoming the conflict between two 'cultures' by creating a third way that is supposed to surpass and reconcile them. Voice, in such a view, would be crafting out a relatively stable 'third way'.

**ZB:** (*smiling*) Stability?

**NS:** (*also smiling*) You might prefer the last option, 'poise'. This is a stance that abides in the ambivalence, refusing to resolve it, despite the cost of loneliness and anxiety. It is both the 'flight from dependency and the recognition of human limits'. The poise response keeps frames in a liminal state; one is always standing at the threshold of the freeze-frame but never quite willing to step over the line. Those who abide in marginality elect to be *heimatlos*, homeless in a cultural sense. The payoff, Adam argues, can be a high degree of intellectual originality



because it frees one from attachment to established frames of thought. But there is a problem, the angst (Bauman, 1993; Weisberger, 1992)!

**ZB:** I suppose we must keep in mind that etymologically, ambivalence is the modern translation of agony. A modern can't abide the concept of agony. Agony has no cure; it is long-term torment. Modernity creates a lust for authenticity but this ends up creating a fear of insanity or lonely self-affirmation. Where moderns redescribed agony as ambivalence, this was sometimes taken to be a psychological complaint to be addressed, somewhere between schizophrenia and neurosis. An object for therapy. But what is really needed is something else. The marginal person with 'poise' needs to 'walk a tightrope over an abyss, and is therefore in need of a good sense of balance, great reflexes, tremendous luck, and the greatest among them: a network of friends who can hold her hand.'

**NS:** OK, Ziggy, enough of the continental eloquence. What does this mean? Do we have transcendence and poise as alternative options? If the ambivalence creation/denial/purging/creation merry-go-round spins faster and faster and never stops, what exactly is the hope for those living in its midst? As your friend Tom (Peters) puts it, 'no checklists?'

**ZB:** Solutions, solutions! I suppose I am arguing for an initial recognition of ambivalence towards our organisations, our dependence on them and them on us. An avoidance of an uncontrolled and unreflective swing between love and hate, a more self-aware grappling with the tensions. I am offering a version of Schizophrenia Awareness Week.

#### Scene 4. Ironic sensibility

##### Overhead sign

*The lightness with which the individual handles a situated role is forced upon him by the weight of his manifold attachments and commitments to multi-situated social entities. Disdain for a situated role is a result of respect for another basis of identification.*

Source: Goffman, Erving (1962). *Encounters*, p. 142.

##### Enter the chorus

*Beautifully radiant dancing girls mill around the stage, each dressed in different costumes of different colour, each dancing their own steps and at their own pace. Waltzing between the girls are four couples. Through the whirlwind of joyous colour it is possible to make them out as Gilbert Ryle and Daniel Dennett, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson, Frederick Nietzsche and Georg Hegel, and Harold Bloom and Sigmund Freud. The dancers begin to move to*

*each side of the stage, leaving a central aisle down which a white-suited, white-haired figure casually strolls to join Ziggy in front of the fireplace.*

**ZB:** Nice understated entrance, Richard...NOT!

**RR:** If it isn't Ziggy, my favourite social redescriptionist. How's the liquid lifestyle?

**ZB:** Ambivalent, Richard, ambivalent. Have you met Neil, by the way? Neil, this is Richard Rorty. Have you time to stay and chat?

**NS:** No, I want none of his fiddly expertise. He's only likely to instigate an ambivalent angst of needing to hear more and yet be free of him. I'm off (*grins and walks off-stage*).

**RR:** (*grins*) And I thought I alleviated ambivalent angst! Redescribed again! What were you two chatting about?

**ZB:** We were discussing the problems of ambivalence, the near impossibility for a modern to walk the tightrope between commitment and distance without falling into the traps of disillusionment or opportunism. But what's with all the dancing girls? (Dewandre, 2005, p. 308-309).

**RR:** Oh, they're my ironists. Each of them has their own idiosyncratic style. Pretty, aren't they?

**ZB:** Indeed they are.

**RR:** Christianity. Revolution. Liberalism. Nationalism.

**ZB:** Pardon me?

*Strobe lighting flashes, and the words on the backs of the dancing girls all change, morphing into others – Freedom, Justice, Truth, Efficiency.*

**RR:** Just showing the fluidity of the dance, and how we see the dancers. Your drawing our attention to dying gasps of the modernist project is a gateway into the contingency of language, of self, of community, and ultimately of late-modern society. There is organizational contingency too, a discipline in which you and I are familiar but not overly so.

**ZB:** As long as familiarity doesn't breed contempt – and children! But to return to our work. Would you see my writings as being relevant to organizational studies, to this dance of identification? Would my vocabulary be 'a half-formed one vaguely promising great things?'

**RR:** Yours is a great vocabulary, Ziggy, and in an organizational sense, yes. Your work could offer a release from the entrenched vocabularies of organizational control, be they panoptic or synoptic, and shape new possibilities.

**ZB:** So, if that is what my musings can do, what can you do?

**RR:** I'm already doing it. I'm already more incorporated than you, Ziggy. Even so irony is oft perceived as a dirty word; cynicism or larking about. I'm here to change all that.

**ZB:** To redescribe irony, as it were?

**RR:** Exactly. To rescue it from the 'funny, ha, ha' misassumption. An ironic sensibility reconfigures vision and speaking. It is about recognizing that we are all entrapped within our 'final vocabularies', that there are no ultimate grounds for truth, morality and action – yet we still wish to craft out 'our truth'. No transcendental guarantees of our rightness and correctness. We then have to look at the world not through the theoretical gaze of the detached philosopher, but with the childlike vision of one whose world is as much played out in us as we determine our world. Irony is a play; it is a language game, re-drawing rules, reinventing dramatis personae, pawn to knight, knight to queen. But it is also serious, an attempt to provide ethical alternatives, more acceptable solutions, better ways of doing things, ones in which no one gets hurt. If it is only playful it offers no substance other than playful deconstruction after playful deconstruction. If it is only serious it becomes earnestness. It is 'serious play'. As Schlegel said, for the ironist, 'everything should be serious and everything should be playful' (Rorty, 1989).

**ZB:** I get the idea of no 'final vocabularies'. It's similar to my idea of being an 'interpreter' not a 'legislator'. But I think there is more to add here. Irony is not just about language and realizing that, despite our yearning for certainty, we live in a world of Plato's shadows. It is also about life. It is as much about recognizing that there is no 'final resting place' that ultimately gives our lives meaning, yet continuing to struggle at the same time. And what does all this have to say about our problem – the dance of identification. What does an ironic view on this dance look like? (Bauman, 1987; Bauman, 1991, p. 244).

**RR:** I suppose my view is that while organizational theory seems to understand aspects of irony in addressing this issue, it isn't grasping its complexities. If you want to dance magnificently, you have to know all the best steps. Let's watch some of the dancers.

### Stage directions

*A soldier enters the stage, dressed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Austro-Hungarian Imperial Army fatigues. He sidles up to the dancers and begins to meticulously copy their movements, step for step, although every so often, when the dancer is facing away from him, he throws in a completely different action and grins broadly (Fleming & Sewell, 2002).*

**ZB:** Hi Svejik.

**RR:** The *irony of resistance*; the ironist who seeks to hide from the gaze of the disciplining authority.

**ZB:** This is a radical, light modern reading of the heavy modern problem of capitalist versus socialist, owner versus labor. Svejik understands the boundaries of the capitalist/socialist divide only too well and deems them insurmountable. He wants (needs) to have fun with them, to play around with border guards and potential gaolers, if only to create moments of personal freedom. He uses ironic methods to mask his intentions from the panoptic/synoptic agents but does not consider rewriting his role or challenging the perspectives of authority.

**RR:** Svejik's irony is *stable*; one that builds cosy, safe havens in an accepted worldview, one in which capitalism exploits the worker and the worker resists the exploitation. It offers one deconstruction only: 'you cannot (totally) control me!' The form of resistance is the use of personal ironic and cynical action rather than organized unionism. Svejik plays around with irony to obtain degrees of personal freedom and make sense of the increased control of the synopticon but he is never serious about it. To him it is just a trope. He will always remain a foot-soldier.

### Stage directions

*To a Wagnerian overture, the lights dim and hundreds of white shirted office workers scurry onto the stage and dance about hesitantly and disjointedly, with no sense of pattern. A throne is lowered from the rafters but remains far above the action. The man sitting in the throne uses a powerful spotlight to pick out an office worker. When he does the worker stops moving dancing aimlessly and dances confidently and fluidly. The man turns it off. The office worker starts dancing aimlessly again. The man does it with a different worker and the process repeats. After a few more repetitions, the stage lights brighten and the throne ascends. The aimlessness of the office workers suddenly evaporates and they start dancing in pairs and groups, each group or pair perfectly following a specific set of steps. They dance off-stage. Ziggy resumes his conversation with Richard (Kunda, 1992).*

**ZB:** And that would be...

**RR:** Gideon Kunda. His appreciation of irony is drawn from literary criticism, especially Booth's 'unstable irony'. He sees the irony in the gap between 'the ideal member [of a culturally engineered organization] as driven by strong beliefs and intense emotions, authentic experiences of loyalty, commitment, and the pleasure of work' and the actual production of 'members who have internalized ambiguity, who have

made the metaphor of drama a centrepiece of their sense of self, who question the authenticity of all beliefs and emotions, and who find irony in its various forms the dominant mode of everyday existence' (Booth, 1974, p. 236-249; Kunda, 1992, p. 216).

**ZB:** But he redescribed a cultural design program from an ironic perspective! Is he saying his irony is good and the employees' irony bad?

**RR:** To an extent, yes. His irony is stable, rewriting the idea of culture design from a different, more enlightened perspective. He is Apollonian irony, 'an all-embracing crystal clear and serene glance [...]: a glance of the utmost freedom and calm and of an objectivity untroubled by any moralism.' In that respect he is little different from the culture designers, although he operates from a different perspective. Ultimately, though, he sees his perspective as offering a better final vocabulary than that of the cultural designers, and undoubtedly that of the organizational actors (Mann, 1960, p. 88, in Muecke, 1983, p. 400).

**ZB:** Kunda operates on the heavy modern axis, so his redescribing of organizational culture and the interactions of the actors becomes a more precise, better categorized filing cabinet than the ones used by the cultural designers. The possibility that the workers' irony could be passionate 'serious play' is ignored. For Kunda, their irony is always unstable, ready to dissolve into a spiral of nihilistic deconstruction. The office workers could be in tune with the demands of a light modern organization, juggling rapidly shifting requirements, redrawing the rules of the game as they play it.

**RR:** Kunda's irony is the *irony of the lonely crowd*: and he sits apart from the crowd and redescribes it from an elevated throne. He remains forever remote. For Kunda, each actor can only be seen authentically through his sociological spotlight; without such a spotlight the actor spins in nihilistic confusion. As he is never part of the crowd, he risks not seeing the dance from the dancers' perspective. The dancers in the crowd are searching for dance partners; people who dance the same steps, hear the same music. Kunda will remain either deaf to these tunes or unable to make sense of the dance.

### Stage directions

*The lights darken again. From one side of the stage walk a doctor, a teacher and a public administrator. They are followed by a bunch of black-suited managerial types, all carrying masses of paper work and measuring devices. On the other side a patient is wheeled in, a student sitting at his desk, and a stressed looking woman with 'customer' written on her back. The doctor, the teacher and the administrator take up positions between the two groups. The*

*doctor happily dances towards the patient, the teacher to the student, and the administrator to the customer. But as they bend down to talk to them, the managers call 'time's up'. The noticeably less happy trio dance back to the managers to fill in their paper work, but before they reach them, duplicates of the patient, student and customer appear. The trio, more agitated now, dance back to the newcomers, and the process repeats. Eventually, the doctor, teacher and administrator stop dancing altogether and stand motionless between the two points.*

**RR:** A perfect example of the paralytic response towards competing discourses. The poor public servants, trying to get the job done, are trapped between bureaucratic demand and professional duty; ambivalence in the different status sets. Robert should be here to watch this (Merton, 1976).

### Stage directions

*From the rafters three ropes are lowered. On the end of each rope is a mask. The trio puts them on and grasps the ropes. They are hosted above the 'clients' and managers but can still touch their heads. They swing from one side to the other whilst dropping prescriptions, textbooks and material to the 'clients' and documents into the hands of the managers. Some of the swings are long and languid, some quick and sharp, but as the managers and clients always look downwards they can't tell one from the other.*

**RR:** More of my scene this, a radical redescription of a contradictory situation in which both sides benefit and neither side gets hurt. They are practising what Mike (Wallace) and Eric (Hoyle) call *principled infidelity*, masking their actual intentions and actions, and crafting out their solutions in the space that they create. They don't just dance the tune of others: they write and listen to their own music.

**ZB:** So, they are pragmatic pluralists, recognizing the impossibility of aligning two contradictory heavy modern commands: the needs of their 'clients' ('heal me', 'teach me', 'serve me') and the managers' ('adhere to the gospel of the performance metric'). They inhabit the space between competing discourses, public expectations of service and governmental definition of duties.

**RR:** This is the *irony of the outsider-insider*, of the person who spends his or her work life straddling the boundaries of two competing worlds. They wear the compassionate mask as well as the dispassionate one. They lean in both directions but don't lose their balance.

### Stage directions

*The lights darken again. Svejck, Gideon Kunda, the office workers, the doctor/teacher/public administra-*



*tor, the mangers, and, the dancing girls all dance around the stage, each lost in their own steps, moving to their own private music. Despite all the different steps and speeds, the dancing seems beautiful; composed amid the chaos.*

**ZB:** I can see the beauty in the complexity of interaction, the fluidity of the dance. But isn't this a utopia? Surely an ironic stance cannot reconcile very real problems?

**RR:** The point is well made; irony is not a solution but a way of life. What could be described, using Adam's (Weisberger) terms, as a 'transcendental' solution has been given by my more pragmatic US counterparts. Debra (Meyerson) has given us cases of what she calls 'tempered radicals', juggling commitments to their organization and careers as well as 'external' commitments to women's rights, racial equality and so on. Janice (Klein) has talked to us about the 'outsider-insiders' working inside organizations to bring about change to a new way of thinking. Rosabeth (Moss-Kanter) has described the 'confidence' that she wishes to engender in turnaround organizations as being 'the sweet spot between arrogance and despair'. In each case, there is a recognition and awareness of dilemmas, contradiction and ambivalence, and no relapse into simple zealot like commitment to one agenda or the distanced and cynical withdrawal of those who take their toys and go home. This does not mean that they will succeed. It also doesn't mean that they have the 'poise' that we talked about earlier. When I asked Rosabeth about how ironic her successful leaders were, she admitted 'I have not thought about it.' But they do possess the kind of critical engagement, the ability to be both 'in' and 'out', that characterises those able to dance more lightly in the face of ambivalence (Weisberger, 1992; Meyerson, 2003; Klein, 2004; Kanter, 2002).

**ZB:** This begins to make more sense.

**RR:** But don't get me wrong. These ironic exemplars are only partial. They do not incorporate the full complexity of meaning and action that make up irony.

**ZB:** So, what does it involve?

### Stage directions

*From the chorus one of the she-ironist dances to the front of the stage. She is holding a sign, on which is written 'the ironic gaze'. She quotes the following:*

*The ironic gaze recognises situational irony, unintended consequences, the clash between aspirations and achievements. In its more 'unstable' form, it recognizes the potential for redescription in all thought and interaction.*

**RR:** The *irony of resistance* notes the discrepancy between the rhetoric and actions of those in power,

and seek to create situational ironies, ensuring that the actions of the powerful have consequences that they did not intend; the *irony of the lonely crowd* is less stable, it also recognizes the gap between rhetoric and reality, but it generalizes this to all of our multiple rhetorics, and perceives no secure or authentic pass to follow; the *irony of the outsider-insider* gazes at two opposing legislatures, and sees both as unable to achieve their goals, without recognizing their contradictory other.

**ZB:** Yet irony is richer than that, surely. Is it not more than simply observing incongruities in words and actions?

### Stage directions

*From the chorus one of the she-ironist dances to the front of the stage. She is holding a sign, on which is written 'the ironic performance'. She quotes the following:*

*The ironic performance goes further. It extends the traditional view of verbal irony, saying one thing but meaning another, into a masked performance. It uses ironic communication, indirect speech and action to simultaneously reveal and hide meaning. It assumes a knowing and unknowing audience. It is maieutic, creating solidarity amongst the 'knowing' audience or leading it to a new perspective. It also has an edge, a put down, a masked deceit, towards the unknowing audience. It allows the performer to be more than one thing at a time, to work on different levels. As dear Oscar put it, 'The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for.'*

**RR:** The *irony of resistance* performance has an unknowing audience (ironic victim) in authority, while binding together the dispossessed in mocking or challenging that authority. The *irony of the lonely crowd* performs to multiple audiences, each of which is unknowing, unaware of the insincerity and lack of conviction in their performance. The only knowing audience are those who are aware that all is performance and nothing is purposeful. The ironic performance of the *outsider-insider* to two main audiences, either one being in a position to be a knowing audience if they accept the validity of the other, but being an unknowing audience if they ignore or seek to repress it.

**ZB:** But your view of irony seemed somehow to be more engaged than that. Is irony nothing but a wry look at the world and a playful mask?

### Stage directions

*From the chorus one of the she-ironist dances to the front of the stage. She is holding a sign, on which is written 'the ironic temper'. She quotes the following:*



*The ironic temper is a philosophy of life, an underlying orientation towards knowledge and the world. It is not just about using irony as a trope within a local language game, but being aware of the relativity of all such language games. It is not just about recognizing local paradoxes, contradictions and unintended consequences, but about understanding the comedy and the tragedy of inevitable gaps between human aspirations and achievements. When someone has an ironic temper, they stand back from the local 'finite' games to embrace the more fundamental 'infinite' game, acknowledging endless re-descriptions, the absence of a final resting place. It is about recognizing the disjunction between hopes, ideals and aspirations on the one hand, and achievements, results and outcomes on the other – and simultaneously embracing and distancing itself from the striving to close such gaps (Gergen, 1992, pp. 196-198).*

**RR:** In different ways, the ironies of resistance, the lonely crowd and the outsider-insider each capture elements of the ironic temper but only partially so. The *irony of resistance* gives up on the striving to engage in transforming organizations, and fails to question its alternative stable source of authority and meaning. The *irony of the lonely crowd* gives up on all aspirational commitments, and does not question the meaningfulness of its own enterprise. The *irony of the outsider-insider* provides us with a two-dimensional focus for action and reflection, but does not reflect on that basic focus itself. In short, while hinting at some dimensions, none of these organizational studies stereotypes captures the full complexity of the ironic temper.

**ZB:** Does our analysis stop here, then? In accepting and addressing the ambivalence in the dance of identification, is your argument that we should adopt an ironic temper, of a kind not yet recognized in organization studies? Or is complex irony even more than that?

**RR:** It is more than that. Complex irony recognizes the fluid interconnections between the *ironic gaze*, the *ironic temper* and the *ironic performance*. It embraces the multiple concepts and usages of irony. Moreover, it does not simply stigmatize any of the particular uses of irony as being 'wrong', to be replaced by a 'superior' form of irony. Irony is far more unstable than that. Each of the positions adopted within organizational studies captures a dimension of irony but then appear to fix it within a particular zone. It prescribes a restricted form of irony, without understanding the tensions and dilemmas that make it such a fluid orientation. Irony is more than a smirk and a sneer, cynicism and larking about, but it has all these dimensions. It can have a more elitist ridiculing or collaborative bond-

ing element. It can be more stable, authoritative, serious and fixed or more unstable, playful, self-critical and fluid in its orientation.

**ZB:** Again, trying to pull you back to our central concern – the ambivalence towards our organizational lives, and our dance of identification. What contribution do you see irony as playing?

**RR:** Well, Erv has nicely shown us that our organizational commitments are a dance of identification. We depend on, identify with and commit to the collaborative endeavours of the organizations we are part of but we also identify with other social commitments. The balance may vary but the tension exists, particularly within modern plural settings. We are, inevitably, holding company selves. In performing the inevitable dance, we are faced with ambivalence. Our organizational commitments are both a source of self-realization and a threat to our autonomy and independence. Modernity fosters, in us and organizations, a unitary commitment to organizational order, adherence to authoritative knowledge and a quest to attain a stable 'resting place'. Yet it also creates multiple commitments within and beyond the organization, plural and uncertain knowledges and knowledge claims, and a recognition of ongoing struggle and change. And this is not a case of one 'sacred' truth facing a 'profane' other – either as autonomous individuals exploited by organizations or as organizational champions dealing with disruptive unproductive people and conditions. We are caught in ambivalence that, to varying degrees, we accept or repress, and which makes us anxious and stressed or playful and creative.

**ZB:** But, how exactly do people respond to this ambivalence? How do they interpret and act on it? I would say that it is at this point that organizational studies is at its weakest. Most of our attention has been focused on documenting ambivalence. Those who have sought to interpret its effects have all too quickly leapt into premature judgements about what this ambivalence 'means'.

**RR:** Agreed, and so it is with the discussion of the ironic response. I would say there are good arguments for acknowledging rather than denying ambivalence – ranging from the costs of repression to the benefits of acceptance. If so, then an ironic awareness of these contradictions, that we are inevitably caught up in ambivalence and dilemmas, and have to craft out a response that acknowledges this situation, seems eminently sensible. An ironic gaze allows us to accept that our plans inevitably go awry, that we undermine one set of ideals by pursuing others. An ironic performance allows us to create a community with others in a similar situation, acknowledging the pressures that are on us, and to act effectively in situ-

ations where a degree of deception is inevitable. An ironic temper enables us to recognize and directly address the comic, and tragic, nature of our dilemmas. But, how this is all done, is another thing. Ironic awareness can take many different forms, from a background semi-conscious liberal playfulness to a foreground angst ridden sense of purposelessness. We need to explore further how people are actually responding, and what appear to be the costs and benefits of different forms.

**ZB:** So, after all this, you are not taking a stance. It is just 'more research'. Don't you have a preferred ironic position, from which you suggest we analyze and evaluate how people conduct their dance of identification?

**RR:** I do, and it is linked to the old Socratic view of the critical ironist, 'a gadfly constantly agitating a horse, preventing it from becoming sluggish'. My ironist knows gadflies are swatted by irritated horses but persists anyway. Horses do not recognize the benefit of the stings; they just want to stop the pain. They are unlikely to recognize an ironic sting as engagement, rather an unneeded and uncalled for agitation. As Socrates discovered, punishment can be swift and merciless (Plato et al., 1901).

**ZB:** Why the performance is so necessary? To anesthetize the sting?

**RR:** On the proviso it doesn't risk the goal of challenging sluggishness in ourselves and others. As you mentioned earlier, the greatest need of the contingent person *was a network of friends who can hold her hand*. As the *ironic performance* plays towards *knowing* and *unknowing* audiences, the ironist needs to find out who is going to hold her hand, and who will slap it away. Any ironic strategy is inevitably high risk – but is there any other way?

**ZB:** So, do you have an ironic model? Organizational theorists like models.

**RR:** Ziggy, the last thing an ironist needs is a model of irony.

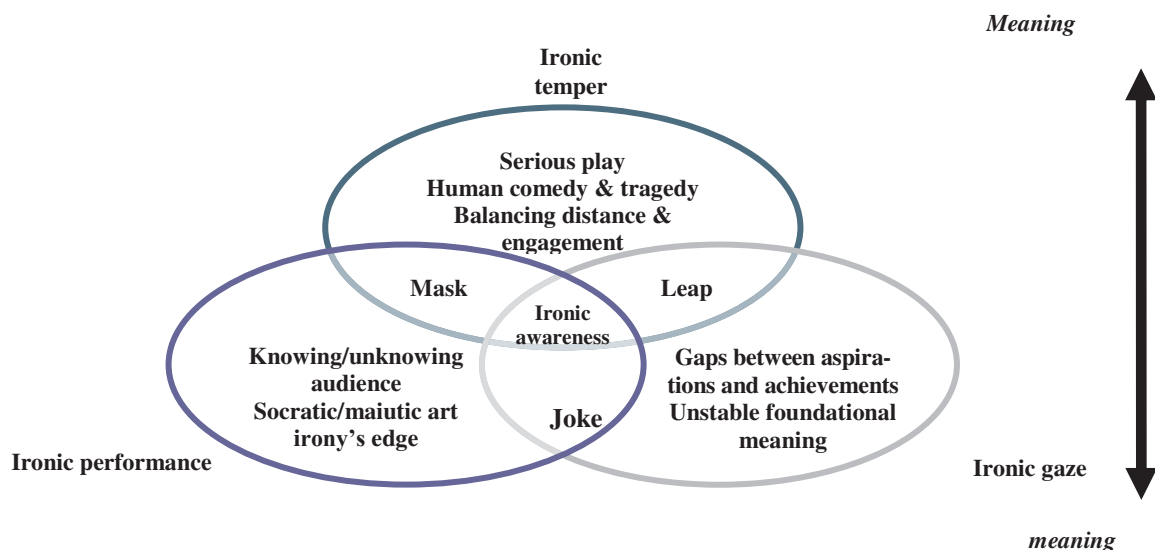
### Stage directions

*Both ZB and RR stand up. They are joined by the other actors. All bow. As they rise, they pull back masks from their faces, revealing what we knew all along – they all look remarkably similar to the authors of the play.*

### The curtain comes down

*On the back of the curtain is the following model of irony:*

*Any resemblance to any person living or dead is purely coincidental. They are all academics!*



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