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The Practical Wisdom of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations

Patricia Herzog

The *Diabelli Variations* in C major, op. 120, is Beethoven's last and arguably greatest work for piano solo. It is also, in my view, a fount of practical wisdom. The *Diabelli Variations* has something to tell us about how we should live. The precise nature of this wisdom I shall call irony. Irony, as I understand it, is a virtue in the Aristotelian sense.¹ That is, irony is of a state of character lying in a mean. Just as courage is a mean lying between rashness, its excess, and cowardice, its defect, so, too, irony is a mean lying between vicious extremes. The vice constituting an excess of irony is skepticism, and that which constitutes its defect is idolatry. In what follows I offer a criticism of the *Diabelli Variations* that links the aesthetic value of the work to its moral content—or, more specifically, to the moral *worth* of that content. It is my thesis that the *Diabelli Variations* requires, as part of the explanation of its artistic value, an understanding and appreciation of its moral value.

Discussions of irony typically start by cautioning that the concept of irony eludes systematic treatment. In this regard, my discussion will be no different. The concept of irony has a long and complex history, and like other ideas it seems to go in and out of fashion.² Among ironies most commonly referred to—in the West, at any rate—are Socratic or dialectical irony, literary irony, dramatic irony, tragic irony, rhetorical irony, classical irony, romantic irony, philosophical or world irony, ethical irony, epistemological irony, normative irony, stable irony, coarse irony, double irony, contextual irony, and not surprisingly, ironic irony. Friedrich Schlegel, an important figure in the history of irony whose views I shall discuss in greater detail below, appeals to the gods to “rescue us from all these ironies.”³ At the same time, he appeals to the very elusiveness of the concept of irony in defending his *Athenaeum* Fragments against the charge of incomprehensibility.⁴

So far as I know, the idea of irony as a virtue modeled on the Aristotelian concept of a mean between vicious extremes has not

appeared elsewhere. Nevertheless, this idea has much in common with elements that have appeared in the literature and that are more or less constant in many types and treatments of irony. At the most general level, the concept of irony I have derived from Beethoven's music agrees with the widespread belief, particularly prevalent during the romantic and postromantic period, that irony is a kind of paradox—an important paradox, moreover, typically prized, although not always for the same reason. I quote again from Schlegel: "Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is everything which is simultaneously good and great."⁵ The paradox of irony is, in my view, a kind of poise, not in the Pythagorean or classical sense of a harmonious arrangement of parts either found in or fashioned into a beautiful whole but rather in the sense of delicate, or, better, *precarious* balance achieved in the suspension between polar and irreconcilable opposites—a poise no less beautiful, I submit, nor less virtuous than its classical counterpart.

As prelude to my discussion of the *Diabelli Variations* I want to look briefly at another work by Beethoven, also for piano solo, the *Rondo alla ungharese quasi un capriccio* [Hungarian rondo in the style of a capriccio] in G, op. 129, or "The Rage over a Lost Penny" ("Die Wut über den verloren Groschen"), as the work has affectionately come to be known.⁶ Although not ironic in the precise and important sense in which the *Diabelli Variations* is ironic, the *Rondo a capriccio* nevertheless points us in the right direction. Its interest, in the present connection, lies in the way it both approximates the irony of the *Diabelli Variations* and falls short of it.

"The Rage over a Lost Penny" is an insubstantial, lighthearted affair (a *leichte caprice*, as indicated by Beethoven's marking) not obviously attesting to the greatness of its composer. Yet, as Robert Schumann would have it, writing in his newly founded journal the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, the *Rondo a capriccio* reflects Beethoven's true genius. This is an earthy and unruly genius, not generally admired, and far removed from the noble and pious image of Beethoven as composer of the symphonies, particularly the third, fifth, and ninth symphonies. Schumann's review is so marvelous that I quote it in full:

It would be hard to conceive of anything more amusing than this little escapade. How I laughed when I played it for the first time! And how astonished I was when, a second time through, I read a footnote telling me that this capriccio, discovered among Beethoven's manuscripts after his death, bore the title: "Fury over the Lost Penny, Vented in a Caprice" . . . O! It's the most adorable, futile fury, like that which seizes you when you can't get a boot off, and you sweat and swear and the boot looks up at you, phlegmatically—and unmoved!

I've got you at last, you Beethoven fanatics! I'd like to vent my feelings about you in quite another fashion, and pummel you with the softest of fists when I see you beside yourselves, your eyes bulging, lost in rapture, and gasping: "Beethoven strives ever for the rapturous, from star to star he flew, free from this earth!"

"I'm really unbuttoned today," was his favorite expression when his spirits were high. And then he would laugh like a lion and let loose about him—for he was unruly in all circumstances.

Well, with this capriccio I shall be unruly with you, my friends. You'll call it common, unworthy of a Beethoven, just like the tune to "Freude, schöner Götterfunken" in the D minor Symphony, you'll bury it deep under the Eroica.

Should there one day be a resurrection of the arts, and Genius hold the scales with the capriccio about the penny balanced against ten of the newest dramatic overtures, well, I tell you, the overtures would flip skyward!

And you composers, young and old, there is one essential thing that you could all learn from it, something you need to be reminded of from time to time: nature, nature, nature!⁷

Beethoven's capricious rondo is indeed the work of an earthy and unruly genius. It is a whirlwind of a piece, a pianistic tour de force rushing headlong at breakneck speed, its whimsical refrain encircled by episodes of impetuous frenzy.⁸ The opening theme in the first eight bars is a lightweight affair, by itself signifying nothing. It is the penny over which so much sound and fury will be spent. Its accompaniment, a dully insistent, chordal sequence in the left hand, gives to the opening measures an oddly comical cast, at once playful and driven. Then, with the first episode, the right hand takes off in a nonstop flight of semiquaver runs, involving the listener in an increasingly virtuosic display of helter-skelter—leading, finally, nowhere.

In view of certain of Beethoven's well-known character traits, the Rondo a capriccio may be seen—both plausibly and profitably, I would argue—as autobiography.⁹ We may see the Rondo a capriccio as instancing the composer's amiable wit trained on two of his most evident failings, a notorious temper and an equally notorious slovenliness. Its scene—a manic rummaging about through heaps of junk, miscellaneous articles, correspondence, and discarded or misplaced manuscripts, all for the sake of a mere trifle—verges on the grotesque. Indeed, "The Rage over a Lost Penny" may be seen as belonging to the literary genre of the grotesque, a species of artistic production featuring images of the "ridiculous, bizarre, extravagant, freakish and unnatural" against a backdrop, either explicit or implicit, of harmony,

measure, and proportion.¹⁰ The genius that Schumann so much admired is a witty, amiable genius given to foolishness and excess, a genius that knowingly delights in its human being, which is to say, its being undone by a boot or a penny. It is an earthy and unruly genius, firmly rooted in the soil of an all-too-human nature.¹¹

Beethoven's *Rondo a capriccio* is the proverbial tempest in a teapot. But its high spirits and good-natured ridicule are not just musical highjinks. They point, in addition, to a balance or proportion made manifest by the very conspicuousness of their absence. That a lost penny should occasion much of a fuss, let alone a full-blown rage, is patently absurd, and there is no doubt that we are intended to disapprove of Beethoven's outrageously exaggerated behavior. Yet the music does not repudiate or distance us from the situation in which Beethoven finds himself. Rather, it invites us to laugh *with* Beethoven in the universal recognition that human beings lose it. Beethoven's music gets us to see that it is *we* who are lost, not the trifling penny. It is our own sweating and swearing that prevents the phlegmatic boot from coming off. Our intemperate cursing, like the exaggerated urgency of Beethoven's music, turns in on itself. It gets us nowhere.

In contrast to the *Rondo a capriccio*, the *Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli*, op. 120, is a work of major proportions, both in conception and in length. Moreover, its origins have been well documented, most notably by William Kinderman, whose recent monograph details the evolution of the work in Beethoven's sketches and drafts.¹² Beethoven composed fourteen sets of piano variations in all, of which the *Diabelli* is the last, the largest, and the greatest. Its creation spans a four-year period, from 1819 to 1823, during which the last three piano sonatas, opp. 109, 110, and 111, and the *Missa Solemnis* were composed as well. The precise number of variations, thirty-three, has given rise to a certain amount of speculation. Thirty-three is exactly one more than the total number of Beethoven's piano sonatas and also exceeds by one his largest set of previously composed piano variations. Whatever we may wish to make of these observations, the *Diabelli Variations* is ultimate in at least one important sense: it is Beethoven's last major work for piano solo. Indeed, the *Diabelli Variations* is a very late work, not only chronologically (Beethoven died in 1827, only four years after its completion) but stylistically as well.

The composition of the *Diabelli Variations* was occasioned by the music publisher Anton Diabelli, who conceived the ambitious if somewhat narcissistic idea of a collective work consisting of no less than fifty variations by fifty different composers on a theme created by Dia-

belli himself.¹³ Beethoven did not like the idea of a collective work. Nor did he particularly like Diabelli's theme. He called it a "cobbler's patch," referring to the *rosalia*, a musical form characterized by short phrases "succeed[ing] one another in . . . stepwise progression, generally at equal intervals, like beads on a rosary."¹⁴ Thus, initially, Beethoven refused Diabelli's offer. Later, however, through the intercession of Anton Schindler, from whose biography of Beethoven this account is taken, Beethoven approached Diabelli with the idea of composing a separate work of his own consisting of six or seven variations on the publisher's theme. When the matter was finally settled and Beethoven got word that Diabelli had set an unusually high price on the variations, he reportedly exclaimed, "There! Now he shall have his variations on his cobbler's patch!"¹⁵

In the words of Donald Francis Tovey, "Diabelli's theme was absurdly prosaic, but it happened to be, perhaps, the sturdiest piece of musical anatomy that Beethoven (or any composer since) ever saw."¹⁶ Tovey is certainly right that Diabelli's simple, repetitive *rosalia*, although of no particular interest in itself, served Beethoven ably. However, his anatomical imagery is apt to mislead. Beethoven's late works, or at least those typical of his late style, are marked by a departure from the architectonic. They look forward rather than back, do not recapitulate, and never fully resolve. They are not symmetrical. Rather, they *evolve*. According to Kinderman, the evolutionary character of the late works signals a "new aesthetic." The evolution of the *Diabelli Variations*, like that of the *Missa Solemnis*, the *Quartet in C-sharp Minor*, and the *Piano Sonata no. 32, op. 111*, "leaves no room for a return to the conditions of its initial stages."¹⁷ Similarly, the pianist Alfred Brendel considers that Diabelli's theme "has ceased to reign over its unruly offspring. Rather, [it is] the variations [that] decide what the theme may have to offer them."¹⁸ The theme, hitherto the centerpiece of the variations form, is no longer "confirmed, adorned and glorified . . . [but rather] improved, parodied, ridiculed, disclaimed, transfigured, mourned, stamped out, and finally uplifted."¹⁹

After a long and eventful journey, the *Diabelli Variations* ends at a place very different from where it began. The greatness of the *Diabelli Variations* can be gauged by the distance between Diabelli's waltz and Beethoven's variations, in the increasing transformation and development of the variations, whose thematic elaboration is so subtle and at the same time so simple, employing the barest of musical means. In this respect, the *Diabelli Variations* differs markedly from the *Rondo a capriccio*, with the latter's obsessive circling round the

fixed point of Beethoven's rage. Whereas the Rondo a capriccio was seen to encapsulate a biographical episode, or, better, a configuration of character traits expressed in a biographical episode, Beethoven's *Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli* may be seen as describing the complete course of a human life. What matters is not the adornment or embellishment of Diabelli's waltz, in one form or another, but rather its transformation, the evolution or development of the theme throughout the entire course of the work.

The significance of the *Diabelli Variations* depends, in my view, on our capacity to see the evolving nature of its thirty-three variations as the development of moral character, as the active or deliberative unfolding of a human life. Each human life is, if you will, endowed with a theme—a theme that both constrains and enables it, with which it both struggles and strives. As the greatness of Beethoven's music lies in the transformation of Diabelli's theme, so, too, we might say, the moral worth of a human life is measured not by its endowment, either natural or cultural—although this, too, cannot be ignored—but by what develops out of that endowment through a maturational process of criticism and reflection.

We have noted that works typical of the late style never fully resolve. According to Kinderman, the late works exhibit a “denial or weakening of cadence . . . [coupled with a] resulting lack of closure.”²⁰ Likewise, Carl Dahlhaus observes that the “musical logic” of the late works “eschews the drama of determining the present from the vantage point of the future. . . . [This musical logic is] less a goal-directed process than a network, the strands of which can radiate in all directions.”²¹ Beethoven's late style thus departs from what Susan McClary has called the “standard narrative” of the classical style, a narrative of “tonal striving, climax, and closure,”²² or from what Edward Said regards as the authoritarian “coerciveness” embedded in the rigorous thematic development of the sonata form.²³ In the classical sense of cadence or coda the *Diabelli Variations* never arrives. Instead, it merely ends, with a simple, abrupt C-major chord. I should like to say that here, too, in respect of its ending, the *Diabelli Variations* may be compared to a human life. The abruptness of its close recalls the chock of the finality of death—a finality for which we are ultimately unprepared, toward which we do not strive, and which is altogether unlike the satisfying sense of closure we derive from a classical, cadential IV–V–I sequence.²⁴

In Kinderman's words, the *Diabelli Variations* is a “masterpiece of subtlety and humour” (67). I should like to take Kinderman's statement a step further and say that the *Diabelli Variations* is a master-

piece of subtlety and humor because the life Beethoven builds on Diabelli's theme is a masterpiece of subtlety and humor. Subtlety and humor are what make Beethoven's music a masterpiece—in part, at any rate—because they are what make a masterpiece of a human life. This is not to say that subtlety and humor are all that matter, either to a flourishing life or to great art. Nor do I mean to suggest that these qualities are always necessary either for moral or artistic worth. Rather, it is to say that subtlety and humor are *among* the qualities that impart moral worth to human life and that these qualities in particular can be discerned in Beethoven's music.

The word “masterpiece” is Kinderman's, not mine. I have appropriated it, however, despite what one might possibly object to as its sexist overtones, in the interests of exhibiting a continuity between my own analysis of Beethoven's music and what has been said by others. The fact is that discussions of great musical works in the nineteenth century tend to use that word, and unless one jettisons those discussions altogether, which I see no reason to do, talking about masterpieces cannot be avoided. Let me say, in addition, that in calling Beethoven's music a masterpiece I do not mean to be speaking of mastery or perfection as such—mastery, that is, in the service of any end whatsoever or simply for its own sake. On the contrary, Beethoven's music is a masterpiece in the sense of realizing qualities that are themselves worthy of attainment. In other words, I do not take Kinderman to be saying that the *Diabelli Variations* is a masterpiece of subtlety and humor in the way it might be said, for example, that a particular life is a masterpiece of grace and style or, for that matter, cruelty and deceit. Indeed, the practical wisdom of the *Diabelli Variations* speaks to the very absence of mastery or perfection as such.

The subtlety and humor of the *Diabelli Variations* is not of the musical-joke variety, as in Mozart's composition by that name or in Haydn's “Surprise” Symphony, nor does it exemplify the cat-and-mouse playfulness one frequently encounters in works by these composers, particularly in the music of Haydn. In attempting to describe the humorous nature of the *Diabelli Variations*, Brendel recalls a distinction between high musical humor and low. In contrast to the low humor typified by the relatively crude form of the musical joke, high humor (*das hohe Komische*) represents an elevated species in which the listener is supposed to discern something serious or profound. Brendel rightly esteems the *Diabelli Variations* as a paradigm of high musical humor. Nevertheless, his description of the precise nature of that humor falls short of the critical mark. It does not do justice to the greatness of Beethoven's music.

In Brendel's view, the *Diabelli Variations* is a "remarkably grotesque work" consisting of "ludicrous, drastic and weird juxtapositions of highly disparate elements . . . [for example] the most sublime seriousness in Vars. 14, 20, and 24 . . . immediately followed by light comedy, or farce."²⁵ Its "prevailing comical spirit" exemplifies Jean Paul's characterization of *das hohe Komische* as "the sublime in reverse."²⁶ The wildly grotesque juxtapositions of the *Diabelli Variations* do indeed constitute a masterful upending of the sublime. Nevertheless, this cannot be all that the humor of the *Diabelli Variations* amounts to. If it were, then either Beethoven's music would not be truly great or else the greatness of the music would remain unaccounted for by its prevailing comical spirit. Brendel, I am sure, would not be happy with either of these alternatives.

The irony of the *Diabelli Variations* lies in its depiction of the relation between the parts and the whole of a human life. Specifically, Beethoven's music attains its ironic perspective by inviting the listener to enter into its parts, the individual variations or variation groups, *as if they were wholes*. Each variation or set of variations is a world—of feeling, reflection and action—whose musico-logical structure excludes other worlds. It is, we might say, the parochial outlook of a person from whose point of view that outlook is not parochial.

The *Diabelli Variations* attains its ironic perspective by drawing us into its parts and then wrenching us out of them. No sooner have we succumbed to the enchantment of or become entangled in one world than we find ourselves enticed by or caught up in another. Through this succession of apparent wholes the listener is brought to an awareness of the inevitability of perspectival enclosure, not by transcending all enclosure as such, but by coming to appreciate its multiplicity, and hence, contingency. The fact that we are human means that we must always participate in some world or other. Nevertheless, we have learned, the world of human experience is not the world as such. Irony is the expression of this paradox. It is the recognition that what we habitually, instinctively—indeed, inevitably—take to be the whole is nevertheless always only a part. It is the awareness and the acceptance of the fact that *our* world is not *the* world, although it is the only world we inhabit, the only world we know. This is a difficult perspective. Indeed, it is absurd. But then, so, too, is the ironic humor of Beethoven's music.

Although the *Diabelli Variations* evolves, its musico-logical structure has less to do with directionality than it does with containment. Beethoven's music is not—or, at any rate, not simply—a linear progression of events. Rather, it is the juxtaposition of simultaneously

disjoint, mutually exclusive worlds, no two of which can be taken in from a single perspective. To see the *Diabelli Variations* merely as the succession or temporal sum of its parts is not to engage with the music but rather to set oneself at a critical distance from it. It is to eye the variations from afar, refusing to enter their worlds. This failure, of engagement or commitment, is what I want to call the vice of skepticism. Skepticism denies or resists the human need for wholeness, refusing to embrace any part as if it were anything more than just a part. That which would appear to stake a greater claim to our attention, as being either crucial or essential, never warrants greater recognition by the skeptic, to whom all parts are on a par—equally tentative, equally contingent—and for whom the whole in whatever form—Being, essence, truth, ontotheology, the self-identical, the transcendental signified—must always be subverted, debunked, deconstructed.

If skepticism is the deficiency of engagement or commitment, then idolatry is its excess. Whereas the skeptic cannot see anything as whole, the idolator cannot see anything as part. Idolatry is a perversion of the human need for wholeness. It is the fanatical expression, of the human need for wholeness. The multiple and disjoint worlds of the *Diabelli Variations* have the power of idols—seducing, compelling, holding us in thrall. So powerful is their hold that we cannot see beyond or around them. The idolatrous worlds of the *Diabelli Variations* offer a perfection that is not only fully realized but immediately present, or, if not immediately present, then at least within reach. The idolator's world, like the golden calf, is something we can actually take hold of. It is neither messianic nor utopian, neither forward looking nor back, but exists entirely in the here and now. Its suffocating, totalitarian completeness leaves us no room to doubt, no room in which humanly to move about.

Discussions of irony, particularly romantic irony, tend to stress the element of detachment. The romantic ironist par excellence is the artist mocking, making light of, or otherwise puncturing the fictional world of the work. In a typical move the romantic ironist steps outside the work, inviting us to do so as well, by calling attention to its artifice, by temporarily disrupting our suspension of disbelief. There is much in Beethoven's musical corpus as a whole that exhibits these features. His music is often witty, jesting, mocking—indeed, self-mocking. Yet its penchant for humorous detachment for the most part falls short of the irony of the *Diabelli Variations*. To be sure, irony is about detachment. But it is equally about attachment. In the words of Friedrich Schlegel, irony “contains and arouses a feeling of

indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself; yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary."²⁷

Schlegel's emphasis on the "necessity of complete communication" is what is most often missing in discussions of irony, romantic or otherwise. Richard Rorty's recent series of essays, gathered together under the heading *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, is a case in point. According to Rorty, ironists never take themselves or anything they believe quite seriously because they recognize that their views are subject to change. In Rorty's words, ironists "are always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies," and thus they "renounce the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between [those vocabularies]."²⁸ In place of the Schlegelian necessity of complete communication, or what I have called the human need for wholeness, Rorty champions solidarity, or the commitment to a historically informed ethnocentrism privileging the views our group holds now. Solidarity, Rorty insists, is all the finality we need. Any belief to which we are ethnocentrically committed suffices to "regulate action . . . [and can] still be thought worth dying for, [even] among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance."²⁹ Rorty enlists Nietzsche, William James, Freud, Proust, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein in his attempt to free us from the hold of an objective, mind-independent, Platonic worldview. With their help he tries to convince us that the recognition of contingency is nothing less than freedom itself.³⁰ In breaking with Plato, Rorty claims, these important philosophers have "tried to follow through on the romantic poets . . . accept[ing] Nietzsche's identification of the strong poet, the maker, as humanity's hero. . . . More generally, they have tried to avoid anything that smacks of philosophy as contemplation, as the attempt to see life steadily and see it *whole*, in order to insist on the sheer contingency of individual existence. . . . Post-Nietzschean philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger write philosophy in order to exhibit the *universality and necessity* of the individual and contingent" (my emphasis).³¹

There is much to be concerned about in the passages just cited. To begin with, by Rorty's own lights the ironist ought not to be able to exhibit the universality and necessity of anything, let alone the universality and necessity of the individual and the contingent. Why bother to argue against Plato if we are simply substituting one universal truth for another? From a philosophical perspective the individual and the contingent, seen as universal and necessary, are on a par with

the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. Might we say that Rorty here implicates himself in the idolatry of the contingent? It seems that he mistakes idolatry for irony, in yet another sense, by appealing to Harold Bloom's idea of the strong poet's self-creation or to Nietzsche's self-willed fate (according to Nietzsche, instead of saying "it was," we are supposed to proclaim "thus I willed it"). On the other hand, Rorty casts his lot with the skeptic in speaking of the ironist as able to dispense with the whole, as having got rid of a "deep metaphysical need" for the whole, as if that need were no more necessary to human existence than some terrible but curable disease.³² What better definition of *skepticism* than that which Rorty provides for *irony*? It is skeptics, not ironists, who "renounce the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between [final vocabularies]," who refuse to weight any world differently from any other. That irony and skepticism are different species of attitude has been observed by Gary Handwerk in his *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*: "Irony is not simply equivalent to skepticism, for it starts with the recognition that ignorance is much harder to maintain than certitude. Irony adds to skepticism a doubt of one's own ability to doubt, because it recognizes the *incurable positivity* of the mind and of language" (my emphasis).³³

Ironically (and I use the word advisedly), Friedrich Schlegel, who is not only an original figure in the history of German romanticism but is actually credited with having coined the term "romantic irony," looked to Plato—or at any rate, to Socrates—in formulating his ideas. At the beginning of the passage excerpted and quoted from above, number 108 of the *Critical Fragments*, Schlegel explicitly states that the kind of irony articulated there is Socratic. Fragment 108 is often cited by commentators as central to the Schlegelian conception of irony because Schlegel himself, attempting further to elucidate the nature of irony in his essay "On Incomprehensibility," looked back to that fragment, even going so far as to quote it in full. Here it is:

Socratic irony is the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation. It is equally impossible to feign it or divulge it. To a person who hasn't got it, it will remain a riddle even after it is openly confessed. It is meant to deceive no one except those who consider it a deception and who either take pleasure in the delightful roguery of making fools of the whole world or else become angry when they get an inkling they themselves might be included. In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It originates in the union of *savoir vivre* and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism

between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself; and yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary. It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke. For Lessing irony is instinct; for Hemsterhuis it is classical study; for Hülsen it arises out of the philosophy of philosophy and surpasses these others by far.³⁴

To the extent that Schlegel's conception of irony emphasizes the whole and not just the part, the necessity as well as the impossibility of complete communication, it is indeed Socratic. Socrates exposes the ignorance of his interlocutors by feigning to adopt their points of view, by entering into their worlds—worlds, moreover, in which parts have been mistaken for the whole. When, for example, Socrates asks Meno to tell him what virtue is, Meno responds by giving Socrates a list: the virtue of a man, the virtue of a woman, the virtue of a slave, a virtue for every age and every condition of life. Virtue, for Meno, is composed of parts. For Socrates, however, knowledge is of the whole. The meaning of virtue is not to be found in any of its parts, or even in their exhaustive concatenation, but rather in that wherein the many virtues “do not differ” but are “all the same,” wherein they all exist in “one and the same form.” Socrates' ironic outburst, “I seem to be in great luck, Meno; while I am looking for one virtue, I have found you to have a whole swarm of them,” indicates that it is precisely in mistaking part for whole that Meno has gone off the track.³⁵

Again and again, Socrates' interlocutors mistake part for whole. When in Book 1 of the *Republic* Thrasymachus defines *justice* as the advantage of the stronger, Socrates responds with an absurd example designed to show that the definition could not possibly have general application. If justice is that which is the interest of the stronger and it is in the stonger's interest to eat beef, then what about the rest of us? Should we eat beef, too? Or is justice for the weaker different? By persistent questioning Socrates points beyond the apparent whole of his interlocutor's position, generating a Meno-style list of heterogeneous particulars in relation to which the whole is now seen to be only a part. What seemed like the whole of justice, the advantage of the stronger, is really just a special case, an item on the list.

It cannot therefore be said, in any straightforward sense, that the romantic poets, among whose number we may count Schlegel himself, had an understanding of irony as pure contingency. Both

attachment *and* detachment are necessary for irony—or, as I have put it, irony without attachment is skepticism, irony without detachment, idolatry.³⁶

That irony is concerned with the whole cannot be overemphasized. To quote Kierkegaard: “Irony in the eminent sense directs itself not against this or that particular existence, but against the whole given actuality of a certain time and situation.”³⁷ The scope of ironic humor encompasses the gamut of feeling, reflection, and action. It is for this reason that the Rondo a capriccio, although outrageously witty and self-mocking, is not ironic.³⁸ “The Rage over a Lost Penny” lacks irony’s synoptic vision. Slovenliness and a bad temper are not Beethoven’s fate, nor are they even the whole of his character. One can achieve a distance from these things and in some cases even overcome them. Like Rorty’s deep metaphysical need, they are curable, at least in principle. In this respect, the situation of the *Diabelli* Variations is radically different. The reflexive, self-mocking humor of that work is a consequence of the fact that irony deals with the whole. Irony has no choice, as it were, but to implicate everything, the ironist included, in the dynamic tension between necessity and contingency that is the inescapable paradox of our human being.

I want now to look at some of the individual variations that make up Beethoven’s work. I shall restrict my comments to a little less than half the total number of thirty-three, both for reasons of space and because some of the variations or variation groups, although still worlds, in my view, are less interesting than others. This is not to suggest, however, that Beethoven’s work could dispense with those other variations. Whatever we may care to make of the precise number, I think it significant that there are many variations and not just a few. As Aristotle says, “One swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day.”³⁹ A complete life requires time, and this is just what the extended sequence of thirty-three variations gives us. I start with the three earliest variations, noting, however, that references to “early,” “middle,” and “late” signify order of appearance in the sequence of the work and not date of composition. In fact, Variations 1 and 2 were among the last Beethoven composed.

Variation 1, the *Alla marcia maestoso* (in the manner of a stately march), is full of youthful assertion, admitting no doubt or contrary point of view. Brendel, who gives titles to all the variations, calls this one a “gladiator, flexing his muscles.”⁴⁰ Beethoven’s little march is pompous and naive, its premature and exaggerated dignity lacking in any true test of worth. By contrast, the second variation is a world of intense and relentless competition. Its ceaseless,

rhythmically unvarying motion, in which staggered chords follow fast upon one another, creates the impression of a constant jostling or elbowing out, a breathless sprint or rush to the finish. It is as if Beethoven's *leggiermente* marking signified not lightness but a tense alertness born of the need to be ever on one's toes. Variation 3 offers yet another vision of life, complete unto itself. Its world is one of beauty and grace—a peaceful, effortless world in which there is no trace either of the triumphal will or the competitive struggle of the preceding variations. Only in mm. 20–25, with the addition of a dissonant D-flat in the right hand coupled with a rolling figure in the bass, do we encounter anything that might complicate the picture, a dark spot glimpsed from afar on an otherwise cloudless horizon.

To this opening trio may be compared a group of middle variations: Variation 14, the closely linked Variations 16 and 17, and Variation 18. The first of these bears the inscription “Grave e maestoso” (serious and dignified). And, indeed, Variation 14 is tempered by a weight or gravity that the *Alla marcia maestoso*, the first variation, knows nothing of. Its grandeur is not grandiose but rather in the nature of a solemn deliverance, an utterance so serious that it is spoken almost reluctantly, in a double-dotted, eighth-note pattern suggestive of deliberate hesitation. Like Variation 2, Variations 16 and 17 hurtle ceaselessly toward their goal. Unlike the second variation, however, whose driving monotony is merely frantic, theirs is a chase full of high spirits and daring, a thing enjoyed for its own sake, a savoring rather than a mere meeting of life's challenges. Variation 18, in its lilting, waltzlike quality, is similarly mindful of the third variation. Yet the graceful beauty of the later variation, shaded and complex throughout, is marked by an awareness that renders happiness of an innocent and complete sort impossible.

Nothing prepares us for the utter transcendence of Variation 20. Its mysterious stillness, derived from a doubling of note values and the virtual elimination of rhythmic differentiation, comes as a complete surprise. Variation 20 is an epiphany, a transfiguring moment of profound illumination. Its appearance in the middle of the work is at first paradoxical. On reflection, however, we see that the placement is right. Variation 20 is deep and difficult, requiring an understanding of complexity—that is to say, a maturity—that in the earlier variations does not yet exist. It is arresting and sublime. Nevertheless, Variation 20 is not ultimate. Beethoven's music develops past it, as if to say that it, too, no less than the other variations, is only contingent, only part of the whole and not the whole itself.

Variation 21, like many of the variations, is lively and energetic. However, its twice-alternating tempo markings, *allegro con brio* (lively and with spirit) and *meno Allegro* (less lively), indicate a tempering of impulse by restraint. The brevity of the *con brio* section, moreover, which is half as many measures as the *meno allegro*, together with the *meno allegro* ending, point to a reflectiveness whose presence is increasingly felt throughout the rest of the work.

The next two variations constitute a pair of musical tributes, to Mozart and to the piano pedagogue Johann Baptist Cramer. Variation 22 quotes Leporello's opening words from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, as indicated by the tempo marking "*Allegro molto alla 'Notte e giorno faticar,'*" ["Night and day toiling"],⁴¹ while Variation 23 recalls the contrary-motion section of the first study from Cramer's *Piano-Forte Method*. As with Diabelli's theme, Beethoven shows himself here to be a borrower or a builder, rather than the wholly original genius that the romantic caricature would have us take him for. No "strong poet" is he, anxiously denying his predecessors' influence.⁴² Nor, I believe, is there any trace here of a Nietzschean will defiantly appropriating the past. Quite to the contrary. In these and other variations, Beethoven's creative spirit seems not only to be at home in but to derive strength from its rich and varied musical heritage.

Variations 29, 30, and 31, leading to the penultimate and final variations, represent a significant departure from the *Diabelli Variations* as the work was originally conceived. Kinderman notes that what had been a single *minore* variation in the early sketches, dating from 1819, was later expanded to three variations in the minor mode, followed by a greatly elaborated triple fugue and, finally, a minuet, itself partly inspired by the Arietta of Beethoven's last piano sonata, op. 111, completed the year before. Variation 29 introduces a sadness and a reflectiveness that exist nowhere earlier in the work (earlier in the sequence of variations, that is, not in the order of composition). Variation 30 manages to preserve this reflectiveness but without the sadness. Then there is the great and complex Variation 31. Contemplative, lyrical and free, Variation 31 provides the most striking and poignant example in the entire work of Beethoven's creative indebtedness. It is an imitation, as Charles Rosen notes, of the magnificent, ornamental minor variation from the *Goldberg Variations* of Johann Sebastian Bach.⁴³ Beethoven here pays tribute to the very giant on whose compositional shoulders his own work rests.

The ambitious triple fugue, Variation 32, signals a return to the greater vitality of the earlier variations, while reaching beyond them

in contrapuntal complexity as well as in sheer magnitude. No other variation matches its part-writing, intensity, or length. Variation 32 is emphatically determined—without, however, being either pompous and overbearing, like the first variation, or relentless and driven, like the second. Its placement, too, is remarkable, in that a sustained or prolonged effort, coming at the end of life rather than at its beginning, would appear to affirm the deepest sort of commitment of which a human being is capable, a commitment born not of the sanguine hopes and innocent idealism of youth (nor, I might add, of the idolator's intolerant perfectionism) but rather of a mature sensibility marked by an awareness of its own, finite and flawed, all-too-human nature.

The last of Beethoven's thirty-three variations is preceded by a transition, which Tovey describes as "one of the most appallingly impressive passages ever written."⁴⁴ Part of this impressiveness no doubt lies in an extended harmonic progression from the key of E-flat major, in which the fugue alone is written, to the home key of C major, in which not only the theme but every other variation is composed. In using the penultimate variation as a unique point of tonal departure, Beethoven emphasizes the significance of the last variation as a return—not to the initial conditions of Diabelli's waltz, however, but to the contemplative mood of the variations preceding the fugue. Variation 33 looks back stylistically as well, as indicated by Beethoven's marking: "Tempo di Menuetto moderato, dolce e grazioso." It is a classical minuet, sweet and graceful, in the style of Mozart.

The opening measures of Variation 33 constitute what is perhaps the greatest sigh in the history of Western music. I should like to call it the sigh of practical wisdom. The *Diabelli* Variations begins its close with a profound expression of the impossibility and the necessity—that is to say, the *irony*—of the human condition. Its sigh is neither resigned nor wistful, nor is it a sigh of relief. Rather, the sigh with which Beethoven beckons us into this last of the thirty-three variations transcends both innocence and despair in a sympathetic awareness of the longed-for whole that is beyond human reach. It is a sigh that savors and delights in the absurd dignity of the human condition, thus enabling us to face rather than to shrink from that condition. The passages following the opening measures are imbued with a rich, ripe sweetness whose character differs markedly from the unclouded sweetness of Variation 3. If there is any argument for happiness as contemplation it is here, in the ephemeral yet deeply satisfying reflectiveness that all but vanishes before the life that is the *Diabelli* Varia-

tions is abruptly ended (by the aforementioned appearance of a single, loud chord).

In addressing the question of the greatness of the *Diabelli Variations* as a work of art I was led to conceive of irony along the lines of an Aristotelian virtue. The concept of irony as a virtuous mean lying between the vicious extremes of skepticism and idolatry is something I owe to a critical exploration of Beethoven's music. Only in formulating a concept of the moral virtue of irony was I able to explain the work's greatness, a greatness that seemed to call for explanation beyond the music itself. That the meaning of much if not all music is related to an extramusical content is not something I have argued for here.⁴⁵ Suffice it to say that this view has been held by many, particularly in relation to Beethoven's music, and that it was held by Beethoven himself, in the form of a "poetic idea."⁴⁶ The delight I take in the *Diabelli Variations*, my continuing and ever deepening satisfaction with the work, both in playing and in listening to it, relates to this extramusical content. It derives from a conviction that the greatness of Beethoven's *Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli* displays not only musical genius but human genius as well.⁴⁷

Notes

I thank Eleanor Perrone, whose marvelous and soon-to-be-recorded performance of the *Diabelli Variations* has accompanied a reading of this paper on more than one occasion, including as part of a lecture-performance series at Clark University. I also thank Stephen Davies, Lydia Goehr, Jerrold Levinson, Martha Nussbaum, Hilary Putnam, Michael P. Steinberg, Lawrence Rosenwald, and several anonymous readers for their comments on previous drafts. Finally, I thank Norman Janis for his musical and philosophical reflections.

1. In Book 4 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle lists irony as one of the minor vices; he associates it with the "mock modesty" of Socrates.
2. For an attempt to survey that history, or at least a good part of it, see especially D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), and Norman Knox, *The Word Irony and Its Context, 1500–1755* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1961).
3. Friedrich Schlegel's "*Lucinde*" and the *Fragments*, transl. and introd. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 267.
4. Schlegel, 265.
5. Schlegel, *Critical Fragments*, no. 48, 149.
6. The Rondo a capriccio is one of forty posthumously published works discovered at the time of Beethoven's death in 1827. There is no question as to its authenticity,

but the date of its composition remains uncertain. Czerny, Hertzmann, and Brendel see the work as dating from the composer's earliest years in Vienna (1792–1800), while von Bülow, Riemann, and Viedl place it much later. Brendel (1973) regards Hertzmann's investigation as conclusively establishing the date at somewhere between 1795 and 1798. Beethoven's autograph shows the work as having been left unfinished; thus, the published edition, of which all performances are instances, is an edited text. There is, in addition, the question of whether the rondo was intended as part of a larger work (many of Beethoven's compositions contain movements in rondo form). Finally, the inscription of "Die Wut über den verloren Groschen," although prominently displayed across the top of the manuscript, appears not to have been written in Beethoven's hand. See Erich Hertzmann, "The Newly Discovered Autograph of Beethoven's Rondo a capriccio op. 129," *Musical Quarterly* 32 (1946): 171–95.

7. In *Schumann on Music: A Selection from the Writings*, ed. and trans. Henry Pleasants (New York: Dover, 1965). Schumann founded the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, a journal of music criticism, in 1834. The entry on the Rondo a capriccio appears the following year. For an informative discussion of Schumann's journalistic career, see Leon B. Plantinga, *Schumann as Critic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967; repr. New York: Da Capo Press, 1976).

8. The rondo form consists of couplings of a refrain with different episodes. It is usually schematized ABACAD. In actual practice, however, the refrain may be varied and developed and the episodes repeated.

9. Seeing the Rondo a capriccio as autobiography does not depend for its aesthetic yield on the substantiation of any factual claim but rather on the plausibility of such a connection, given what one knows about and how one perceives both work and man.

10. See the entry "grotesque" in *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, ed. J. A. Cuddon (London: Penguin, 1991). The Rondo a capriccio exemplifies measure and proportion not only in its implied content but in the regularity of its form.

11. Schumann was by no means alone in admiring Beethoven's earthy and unruly genius. The Austrian dramatist Grillparzer writes, "[F]or all his odd ways, which . . . often bordered on being offensive, there was something so inexpressibly touching and noble in him that one could not but esteem him and feel drawn to him." Quoted in Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer, 1977), 258.

12. William Kinderman, *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

13. This work exists and has been recorded.

14. Anton Felix Schindler, *Beethoven as I Knew Him*, ed. Donald W. MacArdle, trans. Constance S. Jolly (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), fn. 252.

15. Schindler, 252.

16. Donald Francis Tovey, *The Forms of Music* (New York: Meridian, 1956), 244.

17. Kinderman, 66.

18. Alfred Brendel, *Music Sounded Out: Essays, Lectures, Interviews, Afterthoughts* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), 38.

19. Brendel, 38.

20. Kinderman, 63.
21. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 217.
22. Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 114.
23. Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 100. In this connection Said specifically cites the *Diabelli Variations*: "An interesting yet relatively early case of attempted break with the [sonata] pattern is the third-period [late-period] Beethoven, for whom a fascination with both fugal and variational forms (for example, opus 106, the *Diabelli Variations*) is his way of getting away from the coerciveness of sonata form, opening music out exfoliatively, elaborately, contemplatively" (101). This remark is certainly true, provided we bear in mind that it is not variations and fugues that are more open but rather Beethoven's use of them. Fugal and variational forms can be more or less open, as indeed the sonata form itself can be.
24. Charles Rosen regards the surprise ending of the *Diabelli Variations* as expressive of the comic spirit of the work. See Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 439.
25. Brendel, 43.
26. Brendel, 15. "The sublime in reverse" (*das umgekehrte Erhabene*) is a quote from the novelist Jean Paul (Richter).
27. Schlegel, 156.
28. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73–74.
29. Rorty, 189.
30. Rorty, 26, 46.
31. Rorty, 25–26, 29. For an interesting and more sympathetic treatment of Nietzsche as ironist, see Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 94ff.
32. Rorty, 46.
33. Gary Handwerk, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 173.
34. The critical fragment about irony as paradox that I cited earlier is also quoted by Schlegel in this essay "On Incomprehensibility." See Schlegel, 265–66.
35. Plato, *Meno* (71e–72d), trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1981).
36. Earlier I stated that skepticism is a deficiency of engagement or commitment, whereas idolatry is its excess. This polarity is clearly not the one intended by my original formulation.
37. Quoted in Handwerk, 8. Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates* is the greatest philosophical work on irony that I am aware of. It is also a complex work from which it is difficult to extract quotes, which is why I have not made greater use of it in the present context.

38. In this, I am expressly contradicting Rey Longyear, who sees the Rondo a capriccio (the dubious provenance of the work notwithstanding) as epitomizing romantic irony. Longyear says this, however, without offering any explanation. See Rey M. Longyear, "Beethoven and Romantic Irony," *Musical Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1970): 655.
39. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1, chap. 7, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).
40. Brendel, 51.
41. In Kinderman's view, the relation between the *Diabelli Variations* and *Don Giovanni* is much more extensive. See Kinderman, 125–26.
42. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
43. Rosen, 439.
44. Cited in Kinderman, 124.
45. I have, however, argued for it elsewhere. See my "Music Criticism and Musical Meaning," *Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, forthcoming.
46. The importance of the extramusical in Beethoven has been emphasized by Theodor Adorno: "If we listen to Beethoven and do not hear anything of the revolutionary bourgeoisie—not the echo of its slogans, the need to realize them, the cry for that totality in which reason and freedom are to have their warrant—we understand Beethoven no better than does one who cannot follow the purely musical content of his pieces, the inner history that happens to their themes. If so many dismiss that specifically social element as a mere additive of sociological interpretation, if they see the thing itself in the actual notes alone, this is not due to the music but to a neutralized consciousness. The musical experience has been insulated from the experience of the reality in which it finds itself—however polemically—and to which it responds." Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Continuum, 1976), 62. See also Leon Botstein, "The Patrons and Publics of the Quartets: Music, Culture, and Society in Beethoven's Vienna," in *The Beethoven Quartet Companion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 77–109. Although Adorno's remarks in this passage are specifically geared to Beethoven's middle period, the so-called heroic period of the third and fifth symphonies, his emphasis on the relation between the musical and the extramusical holds for the late period as well, where, however, Adorno's understanding of the specific ideas embodied in Beethoven's music is of quite a different sort. See "Spätstil Beethovens," in *Moments musicaux: Neu Gedruckte Aufsätze, 1928–1962* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp-Verlag, 1964), 13–17.
47. There are many performances of the *Diabelli Variations*, some of which come close to conveying my sense of the work, others which seem far away indeed. Of the recorded performances with which I am familiar, that which comes closest is Rudolf Serkin's 1958 performance on Columbia Records, reissued in 1988 on CBS Masterworks (MPK 33837).