At the very end of his career and shortly before his death, the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, famous for stating that his philosophical communication was “indirect,” wrote that he had never been anything but a Socratic thinker. This can appear to be a curious postulation for Socrates, the legendary Greek, never wrote a word; while Kierkegaard tirelessly wrote two sometimes three books at once. Yet upon investigation it soon becomes apparent that Kierkegaard meant that while he could never tell us what he meant directly, he could, like Socrates spur us to thought through the use of irony. For if one recalls that Kierkegaard once ironically called irony the “way to truth but not the truth,” we can ascertain that he somehow understood the conveyance towards truth to be different than truth itself.

In this course we will investigate Kierkegaard’s aesthetic writings through the lens of his employment of irony. To do so, we will begin by looking at Kierkegaard’s relationship to Socrates. Then we will read and discuss several of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous texts, all of which employ irony as both a rhetorical and epistemological strategy. In this way, we can better understand how Kierkegaard’s philosophical strategy conveyed a sense of the reader thinking into the text in a manner that suggests praxis, and how his work prefigures much of 20th century existentialist thought.

Texts under consideration will include but not be limited to: Aristophanes, Clouds. Plato. The Symposium. Kierkegaard. Selections from The Concept of Irony, Either/Or, Stages on Life’s Way, and Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments. We will read Fear and Trembling, Repetition, and Philosophical Fragments in their entirety.