

## The Ironic Socrates: Reflections on Plato's Use of *Eirōneia*

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And he [Aristotle] named all those speaking big about themselves to be boasters and the vice boastfulness, and those reducing their own qualities toward the lesser in speech and pretending to have less than that which exists in them (and they are depraved, for all earnestness concerning falsehood is depravity) he called ironists and the vice irony. But irony seems not to be a vice to some; for they say that Socrates was an ironist. But Socrates was never an ironist. Proof of this is that none of his companions refer to him in this way, but the many who are thoroughly mistaken about him, like Thrasymachus and Meno. But he was saying, as it seems, that he himself knew nothing, comparing human wisdom with that of the god; for these things are also said in the *Apology* of Plato. But perhaps he was guarding against the base and offensive, and was speaking less of himself not on account of love for falsehood, which is not irony. Or perhaps there are two modes of irony: a blameworthy mode that consists in pretending to something and cultivating falsehood; the other mode similar to wit, when someone guards against what is offensive in their speeches. How these things hold it is necessary to consider.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction: Irony and *eirōneia*

Irony has long been central to interpretations of Socrates' life and philosophical practice, and contemporary interpretations of Socrates are, in this respect, not unique. Where they are unique, perhaps, is in the degree of emphasis placed on Socrates' irony and their positive assessment of this central characteristic. Many contemporary scholars have found in Socratic irony the foundation for a democratic interpretation of Socratic philosophy: pedagogically, it is a technique that places the interpretive burden on Socrates' interlocutors and forces them to arrive at their own conclusions;<sup>2</sup> politically, this mode of cultivating thoughtfulness resonates with the democratic need for reflective citizenship.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary assessment of Socratic irony, of course, is part of a larger shift in the interpretation of Socratic irony, one that can be traced back to the evolution of the understanding of irony within German Romanticism. For thinkers like Friedrich Schlegel, irony was not just a rhetorical figure or trope, but could be a whole way of

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<sup>1</sup> G. Heylbut (ed.), *Aspasia in Ethica Nicomachea quae supersunt commentaria*, Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca XIX 1, Berlin, 1889. (54:13-28) All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> G. Vlastos, 'Socratic Irony', *The Classical Quarterly* 37.1 (1987), pp. 79-96; I. Vasiliou, 'Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues', *The Classical Quarterly* 49.2 (1999), pp. 456-472 and 'Socrates' Reverse Irony', *The Classical Quarterly* 52.1 (2002), pp. 220-230.

<sup>3</sup> Representative are D. Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, 2001), ch. 1 and E. Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech, and Democratic Judgment* (State Park, PA, 2008), ch. 3.

life, in itself a philosophical *Weltanschauung*.<sup>4</sup> It is from this period onward, moreover, that irony becomes far more central to the interpretation of Socrates, and the much more deeply ironic Socrates of Plato's dialogues comes to supplant Xenophon's Socrates as the more accurate historical portrayal.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, we might view contemporary assessments of Socratic irony as grappling with the implications of this shift in our understanding of irony more generally.<sup>6</sup>

Given the past 200 years of scholarship on Socrates, it is perhaps surprising to read the above attempt, by the 2nd-century CE Peripatetic Aspasius in his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, to deny that Socrates was an ironist. Aspasius, of course, quickly qualifies this statement, explaining that there are perhaps two modes of irony and that Socrates practiced the preferable mode. Nonetheless, his overall analysis of Socratic irony remains clearly apologetic. Working within the parameters of Aristotle's account, Aspasius classifies irony as a vice; yet, like Aristotle, Aspasius notes those who practice irony in order to avoid pomposity, like Socrates, are more refined than those who practice irony for the sake of profit.<sup>7</sup> Socrates' irony, in short, is something that Aspasius must defend.

While Aspasius' denial of Socratic irony is atypical, the negative assessment of irony it reveals is not. Though Socrates continues to be associated with irony throughout antiquity, this association did not generally enjoy the same positive association it does today. *Eirōneia* remains a vice for Aristotle, despite the fact that he argues it can be more refined than boastfulness (*alazoneia*), at least in some of its manifestations. Theophrastus' description of the ironist, moreover, displays none of the idiosyncrasies of Aristotle's account; in *Characters*, the *eirōn* more closely resembles the dissembler of Aristophanic usage.<sup>8</sup> During the Hellenistic period, *eirōneia* is criticized by both Socrates' detractors and his admirers. Among the Epicureans, the one Hellenistic school that did not trace its intellectual origins back to Socrates,<sup>9</sup> Socrates' characteristic irony is singled out as an object of criticism: Cicero attests that Epicurus himself

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<sup>4</sup> J. Seery, *Political Returns: Irony in Politics and Theory from Plato to the Antinuclear Movement* (Boulder, CO, 1990), pp. 226-234.

<sup>5</sup> Though Schleiermacher does not particularly emphasize irony in his seminal treatment of the Socratic problem, Alexander Nehamas rightly suggests a connection between Schlegel's reconceptualization of irony and Schleiermacher's understanding of the historical Socrates. See A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 92-94. Schlegel, of course, first undertook the project of a new German translation of Plato that Schleiermacher later finished on his own; Schlegel, moreover, had even planned to use the concept of irony as his guiding principle in ordering the dialogues. On this point, see J. Lamm, 'Schleiermacher as Plato Scholar', *The Journal of Religion* 80.2 (2000), pp. 206-239, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, one might argue that contemporary commentators, while starting with conception of irony first articulated during the Romantic period, are reassessing its political implications. As John Seery well demonstrates, 19th-century theories confined irony to the realm of art rather than politics. See *Political Returns*, pp. 258-262.

<sup>7</sup> See *EN* 1127b21-24.

<sup>8</sup> Theophrastus, *Characters* 1.

<sup>9</sup> See A.A. Long, 'Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy,' *The Classical Quarterly* 38.1 (1988), pp. 155-6.

held this view of Socratic irony, and the Epicurean Philodemus' description of the *eirōn* in his *On Vices (peri kakias)* is a thinly-veiled portrait of Socrates.<sup>10</sup> While the Stoics, in contrast, regarded Socrates as one of the few individuals even to approach the status of a sage, they also held irony to be a characteristic unfitting of the sage.<sup>11</sup> Finally, even though the Cynics were fond of abusive mockery, they were not practitioners of irony.<sup>12</sup> From this (admittedly schematic) picture, we can see that Socratic irony appears as something that Socrates' admirers in antiquity must either disown or attempt to defend.

Scholars have long recognized that at the core of this division between ancient and contemporary assessments of Socratic irony is the meaning of the Greek word *eirōneia*.<sup>13</sup> In its earliest attestations in the plays of Aristophanes, the word *eirōneia* and its cognates seem to indicate a type of dissembling or feigning, one with the negative connotations of trickery and deceit;<sup>14</sup> *eirōneia* in other words, is quite different from the cultivated wit associated with *ironia* in Cicero and Quintilian.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing the gulf between *eirōneia* and *ironia*, both Gregory Vlastos and Alexander Nehamas have argued that a shift in the meaning of *eirōneia* occurs in the dialogues of Plato; it is in Plato's presentation of Socratic *eirōneia*, in other words, that the concept begins to take on the positive characteristics associated with its Latin counterpart. For Vlastos, Socratic irony is a type of complex irony applicable in cases where Socrates both means and does not mean what he says. To use the example that Vlastos takes to be paramount, when

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<sup>10</sup> *Brutus* 292. For Philodemus' assessment, see K. Kleve, 'Scurra Atticus: The Epicurean View of Socrates,' in *ΣΥΖΗΤΗΣΙΣ: Studi Sull' Epicureismo Greco e Romano Offerti a Marcello Gigante*, ed. G. Macchiarioli (Naples, 1983), pp. 245-7. At the core of the Epicurean criticism of Socratic irony is the pedagogical importance of *παρρησία* (frank speech) for the Epicureans; for the Epicurean sage to withhold information from his pupils that can free them from mental disturbance would violate the ethic of friendship governing the relationship between members of the Garden. In addition to Kleve, see M. Riley, 'The Epicurean View of Socrates' *Phoenix* 34 (1980), pp. 55-68; J. Opsomer, *In Search of the Truth: Academic Tendencies in Middle Platonism* (Brussels, 1998), pp. 105-126; and M. Erler, 'Parrhesie und Ironie: Platons Sokrates und die epikureische Tradition' in *Ironie: griechische und lateinische Fallstudien*, ed. R. Gleis (Trier, 2009), pp. 59-75.

<sup>11</sup> *SVF* III.630. Epictetus is a possible exception here, insofar as he is often ironic in the *Discourses*. On this point, see A.A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (New York, 2002), esp. ch. 3. To what extent such irony was characteristic of the historical Epictetus or should be attributed to Arrian (both the author of the *Discourses* and a self-conscious imitator of Xenophon) is unclear. On Epictetus' sources for Socrates' thought and life, see J-B. Gourinat, 'Le Socrate d'Épictète', *Philosophie Antique* 1 (2001), pp. 137-165.

<sup>12</sup> Lucian's *Demonax* recounts the life of the 2nd-century CE Cynic philosopher Demonax who, though he spent his life mocking the pretensions of those around him, did not cultivate the irony of Socrates. On Lucian's *Demonax*, see D. Clay, 'Lucian of Samosata: Four Philosophical Lives', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2 (1992), pp. 3406-3450. On the place of humor in Cynic rhetoric, which confirms Lucian's distinction, see R.B. Branham, 'Defacing the Currency: Diogenes' Rhetoric and the Invention of Cynicism', in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy*, edd. R.B. Branham and M-O. Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 81-104.

<sup>13</sup> O. Ribbeck, 'Über den Begriff des εἰρων', *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 31 (1876), pp. 381-400.

<sup>14</sup> *Clouds* 449, *Wasps* 174, and *Birds* 1211. For recent analyses of these passages that advance the interpretation referenced above, see M. Lane, 'The Evolution of *Eirōneia* in Greek Classical Texts: Why Socratic *Eirōneia* is not Socratic Irony', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (2006), pp. 54-56 and P. Wolfsdorf, 'ΕΙΡΩΝΕΙΑ in Aristophanes and Plato' *The Classical Quarterly* 58.2 (2008), pp. 666-672.

<sup>15</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.67.269-271; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 9.2.44-53.

Socrates denies that he is a teacher, he means what he says insofar as a teacher is one who imparts knowledge to others; yet he does not mean what he says in the sense that his dialectical questioning is itself a mode of teaching, though a non-traditional one.<sup>16</sup> Crucial for Vlastos is the idea that such complex irony is devoid of the deceit associated with *eirōneia*; Socrates can thus be ironic without engaging in the same sort of cheating as his rivals the sophists.<sup>17</sup> While Nehamas sees in Socrates an irony that is more ambiguous and that more thoroughly conceals Socrates' meaning, he concurs with Vlastos that it is an irony free from the intention to deceive.<sup>18</sup> For both Vlastos and Nehamas, then, Socratic *eirōneia* is Socratic irony in the sense that it involves Socrates saying something other than what he means.

In contrast to Vlastos and Nehamas, Michel Narcy and Melissa Lane argue that εἰρωνεία should not be translated as irony in Plato, and that Socratic *eirōneia* is *not* Socratic irony. Narcy argues that *eirōneia* and its cognates involve a shirking of one's obligations (*se derober*), and, more specifically, a refusal to play one's expected role.<sup>19</sup> With Alcibiades, Socrates refuses to play the expected role of the older, male lover who pursues his beloved; with Thrasymachus, he refuses to play the role of the answerer in a dialectical exchange.<sup>20</sup> For Narcy, *eirōneia* thus has none of the comic connotations of the modern concept of irony from which it must be kept distinct. For Lane, there is a clear distinction between *eirōneia*, which she argues should be translated as 'concealing by feigning' and never as irony.<sup>21</sup> The ironist, she argues, seeks to *convey* her meaning by saying something else than what she means; the eironist, in contrast, seeks to *conceal* her meaning by saying something else than what she means.<sup>22</sup> Though Lane does identify a shift in the meaning of *eirōneia* toward the Latin *ironia*, she locates it in Aristotle, rather than in Plato. For both Narcy and Lane, then, *eirōneia* retains its negative association throughout Plato's dialogues.

In this paper, I want to suggest a different approach to the problem of Socratic *eirōneia*, one that centers on what I argue are the apologetic aims of Plato's presentation of Socratic irony. We can discern these apologetic aims if we attend more closely to Plato's limited use of the word *eirōneia* - the word *eirōneia* occurs only thirteen times in Plato: once in the *Apology*, twice in the *Gorgias*, twice in the *Symposium*, twice in the *Republic*, once in the *Euthydemus*, once in the *Cratylus*, three times in the *Sophist*, and once in the *Laws*. Despite its infrequent appearance, we

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<sup>16</sup> G. Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, 1991), p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>18</sup> Nehamas, *Art of Living*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>19</sup> M. Narcy, 'Le comique, l'ironie, Socrate', in *Le Rire des Grecs: Anthropologie du rire en Grèce ancienne*, ed. M-L. Desclos (Grenoble, 2000), pp. 283-292.

<sup>20</sup> M. Narcy, *Le Philosophe et son double: un commentaire de l'Euthydème de Platon* (Paris, 1984), pp. 45-47.

<sup>21</sup> Lane, 'Evolution', p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> M. Lane, 'Reconsidering Socratic Irony', in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. D. Morrison (New York, 2011), pp. 237-259, p. 248.

can identify three apologetic strategies connected to Plato's deployment of the word. First, Plato attempts to discredit those who accuse Socrates of *eirōneia* - Thrasymachus, Callicles, and Alcibiades - by presenting these accusations ironically. While each of these interlocutors claims to be exposing Socrates' true nature in explicating his irony, they each end up revealing just as much about themselves. As Aspasius comments in the epigraph to this paper, it would seem that those who accuse Socrates of *eirōneia* are those who are mistaken about him. This strategy of discrediting those who would accuse Socrates of εἰρωνεία is addressed in sections II-III.

Though Plato presents these accusations ironically, this does not constitute a denial that Socrates was ironic. Plato's second strategy of dealing with Socratic irony is to distinguish it from sophistic irony: while sophistic *eirōneia* consists in pretending that one has knowledge one does not have, Socratic *eirōneia*, in contrast, consists in pretending that others have knowledge one does not believe they have and/or that one does not have knowledge others believe one has. This strategy is bound up with Plato's attempt to distinguish between Socrates and the sophists in the *Euthydemus*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophist*, both of which are the subjects of section IV.

Explicating this last strategy in particular can help us gain purchase on the meaning of the word *eirōneia*. Despite Plato's attempt to distinguish between Socratic and sophistic irony, there remains a common thread that connects the two. Drawing on Aristotle's account of *eirōneia* in the *Rhetoric*, I suggest that *eirōneia* signals a type of practical joking, one in which the person deploying *eirōneia* engages in a mocking pretense. On this reading, *eirōneia* in Plato consists in something like 'pulling one over on someone', where the ironist himself, and often the ironist alone, is the audience for the practical joke. Highlighting this affinity between Socratic and sophistic irony reveals Plato's third apologetic strategy: in presenting Socrates' use of irony against his interlocutors, Plato lets us in on the joke, thereby allowing us to laugh with Socrates at those interlocutors who he portrays as boastful charlatans. This third strategy is dealt with in section V.

The paper concludes with a consideration of the possible implications this reading of Plato's presentation of Socratic *eirōneia* might have for recent attempts to construe Socratic irony as a democratic practice.

## II. The Ironic Atheist

In book 10 of Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian stranger and his two interlocutors draft the laws concerning impiety for their hypothetical city. In a typically lengthy preamble, they identify and discuss three categories of impious belief: 1) that the gods do not exist; 2) that they do exist, but do not care about human affairs; and 3) that the gods can be bought off by bribes. While these three categories outline the substantive divisions between varieties of impiety, the Athenian stranger adds a further distinction treating the manner in which such impious beliefs can be held - one's impiety, he explains, can be either parrhesiastic or ironic.

The Athenian stranger explicates this final distinction with reference to the first type of impiety - the ‘complete’ atheist who does not believe the gods exist. The first type of complete atheist has a naturally just character and is not tempted to commit injustice. This type of atheist will freely discuss his beliefs with others, and mock the piety of others in an attempt to convert them to his beliefs; it is his frank discussion of his atheism that lends him the label *parrhēsiastēs*. The second type of complete atheist uses his cunning - by practicing divination, for example - to conceal his atheism from others. He is drawn to political power, and is the type of person who invents the tricks (*mēchanai*) of the sophists. For the interlocutors in the *Laws*, the latter form of atheism is a far more serious crime; while the parrhesiastic atheist should be incarcerated and reeducated, the ironic atheist deserves to die many times for his errors.<sup>23</sup>

Looking to Plato’s *Apology*, this category of the ironic atheist resonates with the only use of εἰρωνεία in that work. During the sentencing phase of his trial, Socrates entertains the hypothetical suggestion that he be allowed to live and remain in Athens under the condition that he agrees to cease questioning others. He offers the following response:

“This indeed is the most difficult thing of all to persuade some of you [about]. For if I say that this would be to disobey the god and on account of this I am unable to lead a quiet life, you will not be persuaded by me, thinking that I am being ironic (*ou peisesthe moi hōs eirōneuomenōi*). If on the other hand I say that this thing happens to be the greatest good for a human being - to engage in speeches every day concerning virtue and concerning the other things which you hear me discussing, testing both myself and others, and that the untested life is not worth living for a human being - concerning these things you will be persuaded by me even less (*tauta d’ eti hētton peisesthe moi legonti*).<sup>24</sup>

Here, Socrates outlines two possible explanations, neither of which he anticipates will prove successful. If he argues that the unexamined life is not worth living, and, hence, that to give up philosophizing in exchange for his life would be an unacceptable trade, he does not think they will be persuaded *that he is correct concerning the worthlessness of the unexamined life*. If, on the other hand, he claims he would be acting impiously by agreeing to such a deal they will not be persuaded *that he is being sincere*. Why will the jurors think that this claim is ironic? They might, of course, believe that Socrates’ piety is sincere, but that this particular claim is so exaggerated that even he himself cannot ultimately believe it; in other words, they will not be persuaded that his philosophical questioning constitutes service to the gods. Yet it is more likely, given both the formal charges against him and Meletus’ conviction that Socrates is an atheist, that Socrates fears that the jurors doubt his piety altogether. If this is indeed the case, then the accusation of irony that Socrates anticipates is driven by the suspicion that he is attempting to conceal his atheism by ironically professing his devotion to Apollo. From this perspective, Socrates anticipates that the jurors believe he is an ironic atheist in the sense in which that term is used in *Laws*.

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<sup>23</sup> *Leg.* 908a7-e5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ap.* 37e4-38a7.

In this passage, then, we might argue that Socrates *appears* ironic to the jurors, despite the fact that he is expressing his sincerely held beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, their dismissal of the claim that it would be impious for Socrates to live a quiet life as ironic and insincere results in a refusal to consider the idea that such philosophical questioning could be an act of piety. In this respect, the attribution of irony to Socrates precludes an exploration of the content of Socrates' piety, one that would reveal the challenge it poses to more traditional conceptions of piety. As Gregory Vlastos and Mark McPherran have argued, the conception of the gods espoused by Socrates, even in early dialogues like the *Euthyphro* and *Apology*, is quite distinct from that associated with ordinary religious belief in classical Athens. Socrates claims that the gods are fully wise, and, as such, are fully virtuous. Since they are fully virtuous, they can only be the cause of good things, and never the cause of bad things. Socrates thus rejects traditional myths that portray a pantheon of feuding gods who regularly deceive and harm human beings, offering in their place a vision of a fully rational, and hence, fully benevolent god.

Socrates' defense of his philosophical activity is linked to both this revisionary theology and to his concomitant reinterpretation of the concept of piety. Socrates, as Vlastos argues, conceives of piety as "doing god's work to benefit human beings," and interprets his own activities to be pious in the sense that he is assisting Apollo by endeavoring to rouse others to cultivate self-knowledge, and, in so doing, to care more about their own souls.<sup>26</sup> For Socrates, the oracle received by Chaerephon was not just meant for him; rather, he believed that Apollo was using him as a model (*paradeigma*) to demonstrate the need for self-knowledge to all human beings: "This one of you, men, is wisest who like Socrates recognizes that in truth he is worthless when it comes to wisdom."<sup>27</sup> It is thus necessary for Socrates to communicate this divine message by questioning others. Socrates' conception of piety, then, is more demanding than the traditional notion of piety as "saying and doing what is pleasing to the gods by praying and sacrificing;"<sup>28</sup> it requires that he actively serve the gods in his everyday words and deeds.

By interpreting the claim that he is serving Apollo through his philosophical questioning as ironic, Socrates anticipates that the jurors will disregard his religious convictions. In this sense, the attribution of irony to Socrates is portrayed by Plato as itself ironic: while the imputation of *eirōneia* to Socrates is viewed by those who would make it as a revelation of his true beliefs, it actually signals a refusal to engage with those sincerely held beliefs. Assuming

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<sup>25</sup> As Christina Tarnapolsky observes in her study of shame in the *Gorgias*: "Out of respect for his interlocutors, Socrates utters the truth as he sees it. Yet, for this very reason, he ends up appearing strange, annoying, non-sensical, mocking, and thus ironical to the very Athenian audience he refuses to flatter." See C. Tarnapolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), p. 118.

<sup>26</sup> G. Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, 1991), p. 176. Cf. Mark McPherran, "Socratic Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. D.M. Morrison (New York, 2010), pp. 131-2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ap.* 23b2-4. See T. C. Brickhouse and N. D. Smith, 'The Origin of Socrates' Mission', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44.4 (1983), p. 658.

<sup>28</sup> *Euth.* 14b.

that Socrates is speaking ironically is of course easier than attempting to interpret charitably what he says; moreover, it prevents his interlocutors from the potential psychic pain of discovering the insufficiency of their own beliefs. In this respect, it is not surprising that others might use the charge that Socrates is speaking ironically as a type of defense mechanism.<sup>29</sup>

While it is perhaps inevitable that such a defense would be met with disbelief and the suspicion of irony, the use of *eirōneia* in the *Apology* exhibits a pattern that is also in evidence on the three occasions where Socrates is explicitly accused of *eirōneia* by his interlocutors. It is to these passages that we now turn.

### III. The Ironic Socrates

When Aspasius comments that only those who are mistaken about Socrates call him an ironist, he names Thrasymachus and Meno as examples. Technically speaking, this is incorrect - Meno never uses the word *eirōneia* to refer to Socrates. This detail aside, Aspasius' point is insightful; Thrasymachus, Callicles, and Alcibiades are the only three interlocutors in the Platonic corpus to use the term *eirōneia* to describe Socrates and his actions. These three interlocutors, moreover, express ideas and possess characteristics that permit us to classify them as a distinct group: scholars have long recognized, for example, the echoes between the accounts of justice offered by Thrasymachus and Callicles. Why, though, is it only these three interlocutors who accuse Socrates of irony?<sup>30</sup> One could say that all three are more clever than Socrates' other interlocutors, and hence, better able to recognize the irony that others miss. One might further argue that they are also less self-deluded than an interlocutor like Euthyphro; Euthyphro's failure to recognize Socrates' irony is a consequence of his unflinching confidence in his own knowledge of piety. While these explanations do capture important aspects of Plato's presentation of Thrasymachus, Callicles, and Alcibiades, they also too readily assent to these interlocutors' own self-characterizations. While each thinks that he has uncovered some truth about Socrates that others have missed, Plato presents their claims as self-deluded. As I hope to show in the following analysis, Alcibiades and Thrasymachus<sup>31</sup> end up revealing just as much

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<sup>29</sup> Here, a contrast might be helpful. Iakovos Vasiliou has interpreted this passage as an example of what he terms 'reverse irony', by which he means those instances where Socrates says precisely what he believes, but that the statement is so ludicrous (from the standpoint of conventional opinion) that his audience/interlocutors are bound to assert that he is speaking ironically. For Vasiliou, reverse irony is a pedagogical tool, one geared toward producing "immediate *aporia*", with which Socrates "is attempting to generate perplexity *en masse*, and therefore attempting to do something positive and educative." Yet, the use of *eirōneia* by Socrates in the *Apology* would seem to demand exactly the opposite interpretation: it is not his irony that is producing immediate *aporia*, but the revelation of his sincerely held beliefs that compels his audience to understand him as speaking with *eirōneia*. Far from inducing perplexity, the attribution of *eirōneia* is a way of pigeon-holing Socrates' beliefs - he is just another one of those atheistic sophists - rather than grappling with his revisionary theology. See I. Vasiliou, 'Reverse Irony', pp. 226-227.

<sup>30</sup> Burger, 'Socratic *εἰρωνεία*', pp. 143-144. While I agree with Burger's conclusion that these accusations of irony are themselves presented ironically by Plato, I do not agree that what ultimately explains their reactions to Socrates is their common love for, and desire to master, the *dēmos*.

<sup>31</sup> Given the similarities between the accusations of Thrasymachus and Callicles, I have omitted discussion of the latter out of considerations of length.



themselves as they do about Socrates when they accuse him of *eirōneia*. In this sense, Plato's presentation of these accusations is in harmony with the dynamic illustrated in the previous section.

This strategy is most evident in Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium*. Alcibiades is confident that no one else really understands Socrates (*eu gar iste hoti oudeis humōn touton gignōskei*), and claims that he will disclose the truth about Socrates to those gathered at the house of Agathon.<sup>32</sup> Alcibiades' need to explain what he takes to be the truth about Socrates appears to be driven by the powerful effect Socrates has on Alcibiades: his words have the power to throw him into a frenzied Corybantic state, to make him feel that his life is no better than that of a slave, to make him feel shame, and even to reduce him to tears. The utter strangeness of this effect provides further motivation. On their surface, Socrates' arguments appear completely laughable (*geloioi*), just as Socrates himself is ridiculous and grotesque in his outward appearance. Why then have they had such an effect on Alcibiades? Because, as Alcibiades explains, their outward appearance is deceptive. Socrates' arguments are actually the only arguments that make sense, but few people have seen past their outer appearance to the inward beauty they contain. This itself is not surprising, since Socrates "spends his whole life being ironic and jesting" (*eirōneuomenos de kai paizōn*), with the result that few if any have seen the beauty both inside him and within his arguments that is evident during those rare moments when he is serious and opens up (*spoudasantos de autou kai anoichthentos*).<sup>33</sup>

From the start, then, Plato highlights Alcibiades' personal reasons in giving the speech he does, and these are no less relevant if we consider the immediate context of his first reference to Socrates' irony. Alcibiades does mention the familiar connection between Socrates' irony and his disavowal of knowledge (*agnoei panta kai ouden oiden*), which will also be important in his second use of the term later in his speech; yet, at this point, Alcibiades has something more specific in mind. In fleshing out his comparison between Socrates and the Silenus, he emphasizes Socrates' pursuit of beautiful boys - he appears to be erotically disposed towards attractive young men (*horate gar hoti Sōkratēs erōtikōs diakeitai tōn kalōn*) and always hangs around them, appearing to be overcome with desire (*ekpeplēktai*) for them. This, however, is only his outward appearance; on the inside, he is exceedingly moderate (*gemei sōphrosunēs*). He does not care for physical beauty; he disdains (*kataphronei*) those honors that most people cherish, such as physical beauty and wealth. In fact, he considers such things to be worthless, along with those who possess them. It is not just Socrates' profession of ignorance, then, that Alcibiades is thinking of when he references Socrates' irony, but more specifically the way in which he pretends to care about physical beauty, and, in doing so, mocks the importance others place on such physical beauty.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Symp.* 216c7-d1.

<sup>33</sup> *Symp.* 216e4-6.

<sup>34</sup> *Symp.* 216d1-e4.

This last point, of course, is initially lost on Alcibiades; he thinks that Socrates is attracted to his beauty, and hopes he will be able to use this fact to his advantage in gaining wisdom from Socrates. Alcibiades' physical beauty, of course, is something on which he prides himself. (*ephronoun gar dē epi tēi hōrai thaumasion hoson*),<sup>35</sup> so he figures that he can sit back and let Socrates come to him. When this fails, he decides to take a more aggressive approach, first inviting Socrates to wrestle at the gymnasium, and then to his home for a private dinner. After convincing Socrates to stay the night, Alcibiades reveals his intentions to Socrates, explaining that Socrates can do with him what he will, since it is his desire to become the best man he can be. Socrates' response occasions Alcibiades' second use of *eirōneia* during the speech - he notes that Socrates responded very ironically (*mala eirōnikōs*) and very much in his usual manner (*sphodra heautou te kai eiōthotōs*):

Dear Alcibiades, you are probably not foolish, if what you say about me happens to be true and there is some power in me through which you might become better; for it must mean that you see in me an indescribable beauty far different than the beauty that resides in you. If indeed, having recognized it, you are attempting to strike a bargain with me and exchange one beauty for another, not by a little do you intend to get the greater share than me, but you are attempting to acquire the truth of beautiful things in exchange for opinion and you think to exchange 'bronze for gold.' Yet, blessed one, you should reconsider, lest you overlook the possibility that I am worth nothing. The mind's sight begins to see sharply when that of the eyes starts to decline from its height; but you are still far from these things.<sup>36</sup>

What is Alcibiades referring to when he comments that Socrates' response was ironic? First, Socrates claims that Alcibiades is 'probably not foolish', perhaps implying that he thinks Alcibiades really is foolish; yet, as Vlastos notes, this does not exhaust the irony of Socrates' response.<sup>37</sup> Socrates' next move is to pretend that he does in fact possess the wisdom that Alcibiades insists that he does, and, taking this as a premise, playfully protests the unfairness of the exchange Alcibiades is proposing. Finally, Socrates teases Alcibiades about his ability to judge competently the prudence of his proposed bargain - it may have escaped him that Socrates is in fact worthless.<sup>38</sup> It is most likely this last remark that prompts Alcibiades' remark about Socrates' irony. At this point, Alcibiades is convinced, and he remains convinced, that Socrates

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<sup>35</sup> *Symp.* 217a5-6.

<sup>36</sup> 218d7-219a4.

<sup>37</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates*, p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> Lane argues that the decisive statement that leads to Alcibiades' use of *eirōneia* actually occurs later, at 219a8-b2, when Socrates says 'In the future, let's consider things together. We'll always do what seems the best to the two of us,' implying that he has accepted the bargain Alcibiades has proposed. I find this unlikely. Alcibiades' claim that Socrates answered him *mala eirōnikōs* comes at 218d6, and it prefaces the response that Socrates gives, quoted above, at 218d7-219a4. At 219a5, Alcibiades' narrative voice reappears (*kagō akousas*), and is again expressed at 219a8, prefacing the quotation at the beginning of this note. If it was this last utterance of Socrates that elicited Alcibiades' judgment that Socrates' response was ironic, it would make more sense for that judgment to have been expressed at 219a8, and not back at 218d6.

possesses some great wisdom; given that Alcibiades is so convinced, it would not make sense for him to think that Socrates is pretending to have knowledge he does not possess. Rather, he thinks that Socrates' claim that he might in fact be worthless is ironic.<sup>39</sup>

Alcibiades never does consider, however, whether Socrates might be worthless. In fact, Socrates' rejection of Alcibiades' physical advances retrenches his original certainty about Socrates' wisdom. When his attempt at physical seduction fails, he chalks this up to Socrates' insolence (*hubrisen*); he emphasizes that Socrates has disdained and mocked his beauty (*katēphronēsen kai kategelāsen tēs emēs hōras*), and he feels dishonored (*hēgoumenon ētimasthai*) at being spurned in such a fashion.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, he cannot help but to continue admiring Socrates' moderation and courage (*sōphrosunēn kai andreian*), and he doubts that anyone could ever encounter a man with such prudence and endurance (*phronēsin kai karterian*).<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Alcibiades goes on to give an account of just how virtuous Socrates is. At Potidaea, he was better able to endure the hardships of the campaign than anyone in the army; he could easily endure both hunger and cold, and remained unaffected by alcohol. Moreover, he showed his bravery both in saving Alcibiades at Potidaea, and for his composed and orderly retreat at Delium.<sup>42</sup>

It does not take much, however, to see that much of Alcibiades' praise of Socrates is self-referential and self-serving. Alcibiades is clearly distraught that Socrates has rejected him; yet, while this rejection might be taken as a suggestion that his physical beauty is not as valuable as he holds it to be, this is not the conclusion that Alcibiades draws. Quite the contrary - his praise of Socrates' virtues reinforces Alcibiades' judgment concerning the worth of his own beauty, and the popular judgment concerning the value of physical beauty more generally. Alcibiades is so confident about his good looks that he knows that only someone who was exceedingly, indeed, perhaps even superhumanly, temperate could possibly resist his charms. By praising Socrates as exceedingly virtuous - and, in particular, exceedingly temperate and resistant to the lures of pleasure - Alcibiades is able to save face in front of his peers by rationalizing his inability to win over Socrates. The military examples he provides demonstrate, moreover, that the virtue Socrates displayed in spurning Alcibiades' advances is not an isolated incident; it is just another example of his exceeding (and exceedingly strange) virtue.

Thus, while thinking that he has exposed the true Socrates behind the ironic mask, Alcibiades has in fact explained why it is he insists that Socrates is ironic, and why it is that he interprets Socrates' irony in the way he does. For Alcibiades, Socrates' denial of knowledge *must* be ironic; otherwise he would be at a complete loss to explain why it is that Socrates has rejected him and left him so humiliated. Socrates must have the wisdom he denies having - how

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<sup>39</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>40</sup> *Symp.* 219c2-d4.

<sup>41</sup> *Symp.* 219d5-7.

<sup>42</sup> *Symp.* 219e-221d.

else could he be so sure that Alcibiades' beauty and life are so worthless? Alcibiades' accusation of irony is thus a defensive maneuver, one that resembles the use of *eirōneia* at *Apology* 38a. It is psychologically less demanding for Alcibiades to continue to insist that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is ironic than to grapple with the potentially unsettling consequences that would follow from Socrates' sincerity. From this perspective, Alcibiades' understanding of Socratic irony is an attempt to tame him, rather than reveal the truth about him.

This same dynamic is at work in Thrasymachus' accusation in the *Republic*. Thrasymachus has just accused Socrates and Polemarchus of acting like fools (*euēthizesthe*) by giving in to each other in their discussion of justice, and he accuses Socrates in particular of misrepresenting his desire to know what justice is; if he was sincere, Thrasymachus explains, then he would provide his own answers, rather than just asking questions. For Thrasymachus, Socrates' refusal to provide his own answer reveals his real motive in engaging in such conversations - to win honor for himself by refuting others.<sup>43</sup> He concludes with the demand that Socrates provide his own answer to the question of what is justice.

Socrates claims that any mistake he and Polemarchus made in their investigation is the result of their inability, rather than lack of seriousness in trying. He then pleads with Thrasymachus not to be hard on them (*mē chalepos hēmin*), explaining that it would be much more fitting for a clever man like him to pity them rather than to treat them harshly. Socrates then narrates Thrasymachus' response:

And upon hearing this he gave a very sarcastic laugh and said: By Heracles! he said, this is Socrates' usual irony that I had already informed these men here about, that you would be unwilling to answer but would ironize and would do anything rather than answer if someone asked you something.<sup>44</sup>

Like Alcibiades, Thrasymachus points to a specific example of Socrates' irony, and evinces from this evidence of Socrates' habitual irony. Unlike Alcibiades, Thrasymachus does not think that Socrates is hiding any great wisdom. Rather, Thrasymachus is accusing Socrates of hiding his *lack* of wisdom by refusing to assume the role of answerer in a dialectical discussion. It is then the specific way in which Socrates conceals this lack of wisdom that Thrasymachus identifies as ironic; Socrates has pretended that he thinks that Thrasymachus is clever while downplaying his own intellectual abilities.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Rep.* 336b7-c6.

<sup>44</sup> *Rep.* 337a3-7.

<sup>45</sup> Both Vlastos and Lane insist that *eirōneia* cannot be translated as irony in this passage. For Vlastos, Thrasymachus is accusing Socrates of lying by denying that he does not have an answer to the question 'what is justice?'; for Lane, he is accusing Socrates of feigning his commitment to the elenchus in describing his efforts with Polemarchus to reach a definition of justice. Thrasymachus is certainly doing both of these things, but the specific charge of irony does not refer to either. I see no reason for not translating *eirōneia* as irony in this passage.

This is not to say, of course, that Thrasymachus thinks that Socrates lacks an answer to the question ‘what is justice?’ Rather, Thrasymachus thinks that Socrates lacks a *good* answer, and, hence, he refuses to give that answer in order to avoid being refuted by Thrasymachus.<sup>46</sup> Herein lies the key to Thrasymachus’ assessment of Socrates’ irony: Thrasymachus assumes that Socrates is motivated by the same love of honor (*philotimia*) that he is. His irony is hence a trick designed to defeat Thrasymachus in verbal combat by forcing him to answer. Here it is important to stress that Socrates has not had the same effect on Thrasymachus as he did on Alcibiades: his words have not thrown Thrasymachus into a Corybantic frenzy or reduced him to tears. What Thrasymachus sees in Socrates is someone like himself, and whose motivation for engaging in verbal contestation is no different from his own. Thrasymachus’ account of Socrates’ irony, in this sense, is more of a projection of his own characteristics than a revelation of Socrates’ character.

Despite these attempts to discredit the authority of those who accuse Socrates of εἰρωνεία, Plato still presents us with a Socrates that is often deeply ironic. In these passages, then, Plato is not presenting these accusations of *eirōneia* ironically in order to deny that Socrates was ironic; rather, he is doing so in order to deny that these interlocutors have understood the truth about Socratic irony. That they do not is on display in the *Euthydemus*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophist* where Plato distinguishes between Socratic and sophistic irony by grappling with the epistemological and ontological arguments necessary to distinguish between Socratic philosophy and sophistry more generally.

#### IV. The Ironic Imitator: or, the Sophist

While the passage from the *Laws* discussed in the first section already establishes the link between εἰρωνεία and sophistry, the uses of *eirōneia* in the *Euthydemus*, *Sophist*, and *Cratylus* deepen this connection.<sup>47</sup> Let us begin with the *Sophist*. The Eleatic Visitor employs the term εἰρωνεία to construct the seventh, and final, definition of the sophist in the dialogue. Having demonstrated the possibility of speaking and thinking that which is not - an argument necessary to establish that imitation is possible - the Visitor reattempts his previous effort to define the sophist as a type of imitator.<sup>48</sup> To isolate the sophist from other types of imitators, the Visitor distinguishes between imitation produced through belief (*meta doxēs*) - which he names ‘belief-mimicry’ (*doxomimētikēn*) - and imitation produced through knowledge (*epistēmēs*) - which he calls some kind of imitation based on inquiry (*historikēn tina*) - and classifies the sophist as belonging to the former class. The Visitor then further divides the class of belief-mimics into the simple (*haploun*) imitator and the ironic (*eirōnikon*) imitator: while former is foolish (*euēthēs*) and thinks he knows things that he only has beliefs about (*oiomenos eidenai tauta ha doxazei*),

<sup>46</sup> On this point, I do agree with Lane. See Lane, ‘Evolution’, pp. 68-69.

<sup>47</sup> Since the use of εἰρωνεία in the *Cratylus* does not differ significantly from that of the *Euthydemus*, I have omitted discussion of this occurrence in the interests of space.

<sup>48</sup> *Soph.* 235aff.

the latter, from his experience in discussions, is suspicious and fearful that he is ignorant concerning the things that he pretends to know. The sophist, the Visitor decides, is one of these ironic imitators, and, specifically, an ironic imitator who uses short speeches to force others to contradict themselves.<sup>49</sup>

Central to the *Sophist* is the question of the relationship between Socrates and the sophists, a concern that is highlighted both by Socrates' contribution at the beginning of the dialogue and the links between the *Sophist* and the *Theaetetus*. The dialogue begins with Socrates' remarks concerning the difficulty of distinguishing counterfeit philosophers from real philosophers (*hoi mē plastōs all' ontōs philosophoi*), likening the task to that of discerning the presence of gods among men. Due to the ignorance of others, philosophers seem to take on many different appearances; to some they appear worthless (*tou mēdenos timioi*) while to others they seem worthy of everything (*axioi tou pantos*); sometimes they appear as statesmen (*politikoi*), other times as sophists (*sophistai*), and sometimes they even appear entirely mad (*manikōs*).<sup>50</sup> Socrates' claim that ignorance (*agnoian*) causes the philosopher to appear different to different people is a clear reminder of the difficulty his fellow citizens had in distinguishing his philosophical practice from the sophistry of men like Protagoras, Gorgias, and Hippias. With this in mind, Socrates asks the Eleatic Visitor to explain whether he himself thinks that sophistry, statesmanship, and philosophy are each distinct practices or not.

The Visitor's final definition of the sophist appears to provide a clear distinction between Socratic philosophy and sophistry: the sophist pretends to have knowledge that he does not possess, while Socrates repeatedly, and insistently, disavows the possession of any certain knowledge. This distinction appears even starker if we consider it in light of Plato's reassessment of Socratic philosophy in the *Theaetetus*. In that dialogue, Socrates deploys the analogy of the midwife to describe his philosophical practice, an image that reinforces his disavowal of knowledge. While he himself is barren, he is capable of helping those who are pregnant in soul give birth to their ideas and test whether they are true or mere 'wind-eggs'; those who are not pregnant in this way he sends to the sophist Prodicus.<sup>51</sup> As in the *Apology*, Socrates construes his midwifery as divinely mandated: "the god compels me to attend the travail of others, but has forbidden me to procreate."<sup>52</sup> He also highlights the approbation that attends his midwifery; some reproach him for always questioning others and never revealing his own beliefs; others treat him harshly when he tries to take their children from them, refusing to

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<sup>49</sup> *Soph.* 267e-268d.

<sup>50</sup> *Soph.* 216c2-217a2.

<sup>51</sup> This is a clear attempt to distinguish again between the pedagogical practices of Socrates and the sophists. On this point, see M.F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 24 (1977), pp. 7-16, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> *Tht.* 150d. See Zina Giannopoulou, 'Socratic Midwifery: A Second *Apology*?' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 33 (2007), pp. 55-88.

believe that he is acting out of goodwill.<sup>53</sup> In short, the dialogue both recasts the image of Socrates we get from the so-called early Platonic dialogues, and places it in conversation with the attempts to distinguish between the sophist, statesman, and philosopher in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*. The problem of distinguishing these practices is thus bound up with the question of where to place Socrates.

In both dialogues, however, Plato does more than merely assert these distinctions; rather, he engages with the epistemological and ontological questions upon which these distinctions are founded. Crucial to Socrates' deployment of the midwife analogy in the *Theaetetus* is the claim one can distinguish between true and false beliefs. As the dialogue makes clear, however, this is not an uncontroversial claim. The first definition of knowledge tested in the dialogue is the Protagorean claim that knowledge is perception. As it is interpreted by Socrates, if knowledge really was equivalent to perception, then false belief would be impossible. If, for example, a wind feels cold to Socrates but hot to Theaetetus, then it *is* cold for Socrates and *is* hot for Theaetetus. The wind itself is neither hot nor cold, and neither Socrates nor Theaetetus are incorrect in their judgment of the wind's temperature.<sup>54</sup> Leaving aside the details of Socrates' refutation of this account of knowledge, the problem it would pose, if correct, for the idea of Socratic midwifery is quite clear: if knowledge is perception, as Protagoras maintains, then false belief is impossible; if false belief is impossible, then the practice of sorting between true and false beliefs is itself impossible. As such, Socratic questioning would be little more than a series of verbal tricks designed to trip up one's interlocutors and make them look foolish. If Protagoras is right, then what Socrates does would be no different from what the sophists do.

Establishing the possibility of false belief, however, is itself insufficient for fully explicating the distinction between Socrates and the sophists. Returning to the *Sophist*, we see that the sixth appearance of the sophist in the dialogue bears a striking resemblance to Socrates himself.<sup>55</sup> This type of sophist cleanses the soul of his interlocutor by refuting his false belief in his own wisdom.<sup>56</sup> Though the Visitor is hesitant to label such a practice sophistry - thinking this would award too high an honor to the sophists - he eventually settles on labeling it noble sophistry (*gennaia sophistikē*). At this point, the dialogue takes a distinct turn. Theaetetus, the Eleatic Visitor's interlocutor in the dialogue, confesses his confusion: given the many appearances of the sophist in their discussion up to this point, he is at a loss (*aporō*) concerning the truth about the sophist.<sup>57</sup> To clarify Theaetetus' confusion, the Visitor turns to the expertise sophists possess in disputatious argumentation (*tēs antilogikēs technēs*) - they are able to contradict anyone about anything and, because of this, are able to convince others that they are

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<sup>53</sup> *Tht.* 151c-d.

<sup>54</sup> *Tht.* 152a-d.

<sup>55</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates*, p. 23; C.C.W. Taylor, 'Socrates the Sophist', in *Remembering Socrates*, ed. L. Judson and V. Karasmanis (Oxford, 2006), pp. 157-168.

<sup>56</sup> *Soph.* 230aff.

<sup>57</sup> *Soph.* 231b9-c2.

wise.<sup>58</sup> They do so, the Visitor argues, through a type of imitation. Yet, if the sophists are imitators, then imitation must be possible; but for imitation to be possible, one must be able to say that which is not. To demonstrate the possibility of imitation, then, the Eleatic Visitor must refute the argument of ‘father Parmenides’ (*ton tou patros Parmenidou logon*).<sup>59</sup> What follows is a lengthy argument demonstrating both that that which is not is, and that one can speak of it.

By demonstrating the possibility of imitation, the Eleatic Visitor is able to offer his final definition of the sophist as an ironic imitator, one that, as noted above, would seem to exclude Socrates: while both engage in question-and-answer, rather than in long speeches, the sophist pretends to know things he does not. This shift in the classification of Socratic philosophy highlights the crucial role of the Eleatic’s act of intellectual parricide. An orthodox Eleatic, one who adheres to Parmenides’ injunction against the existence of, and ability to speak, that which is not, could not allow for the existence of imitation and, as such, could not define the sophist as an ironic imitator. Without the Visitor’s willingness to refute the founder of his philosophical school, we could imagine the dialogue ending with the sixth definition of the *Sophist*, and with Theaetetus at a loss concerning the truth about the sophist. If this had been the case, then it would be difficult not to classify Socrates as a sophist; indeed, not just the sixth appearance of the sophist, but almost all of the previous appearances of the sophist bear at least some resemblance to the Socrates we see elsewhere in Plato, from the sophist’s first appearance as the hunter of young men to his last appearance as a type of magician (*goēs*).

This excursus on the connection between the epistemological and ontological questions of the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* and the question of the relationship between Socrates and the sophists bears directly on the issue of Socratic irony. As Alexander Nehamas has convincingly argued, Plato does not present the difference between Socrates and the sophists as one of method. Indeed, this seems to be part of the point in using the elenchus to classify the sixth appearance of the sophist; based on method alone, there is no real difference between Socrates and the sophists. Rather, the key difference that Plato points us to is the purpose toward which Socrates and the sophists apply such methods;<sup>60</sup> and at the core of this distinction is the different use that Socrates and the sophists make of their irony.

This interpretation of Plato’s distinction between Socratic and sophistic irony finds support in the *Euthydemus*. Though the *Euthydemus* is usually classified as a late-middle dialogue, there are clear thematic parallels with the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. First, the verbal antics of the two brothers resemble the practice of eristic discussed in both dialogues.<sup>61</sup> Second,

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<sup>58</sup> *Soph.* 232e-233b.

<sup>59</sup> *Soph.* 241d5. For Parmenides’ claim concerning the impossibility of speaking *to mē on*, see Parmenides D-K 2.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Nehamas, ‘Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato’s Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry,’ in *Virtues of Authenticity* (Princeton, 1999), p. 117. Cf. Nehamas, *Art of Living*, p. 82.

<sup>61</sup> Rosamond Kent Sprague, ‘The *Euthydemus* Revisited’, in *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides: Proceedings of the V Symposium Platonicum*, ed. T.M. Robinson and L. Brisson (Sankt Augustin, 2000), pp. 3-19.



there is evidence that suggests that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were in fact 4th-century members of the Megarian school, which traced its origins to both Socrates and Parmenides, rather than 5th-century contemporaries of Socrates; if so, it connects the *Euthydemus* with the *Sophist* via the Eleatic connection between the brothers and the Visitor, and it connects the *Euthydemus* with the *Theaetetus* via Euclid, presented at the beginning of the latter dialogue as the author of the dialogue between Socrates and Theaetetus that is presented in Plato's *Theaetetus*, and who was the founder of the Megarian school.<sup>62</sup> As Rosamand Kent Sprague has emphasized, part of Socrates concern at the beginning of the *Sophist* might be directed, in part, at the Eleatic Visitor himself; given the varying fortunes Socrates experiences with those associated with the Eleatic School (Parmenides and Zeno in the *Parmenides* and Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in the *Euthydemus*), he might well be wondering which type of Eleatic the Eleatic Visitor will turn out to be.<sup>63</sup>

If Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were in fact members of the 4th-century Megarian school, then this highlights an often-overlooked aspect of Plato's motivation in constructing their encounter with Socrates in the *Euthydemus*: distinguishing Socratic questioning from the pernicious use some of his followers have made of it.<sup>64</sup> In the dialogue, the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus not only profess to teach virtue (as do 5th-century sophists like Protagoras), but they also practice the same kind of dialectical questioning as Socrates. As becomes quickly apparent, however, their ultimate goal is nothing more than refuting and mocking their interlocutors.<sup>65</sup> In this way, the dialogue contains a sharp contrast between the serious questioning of Socrates and the purely playful questioning of the two brothers.<sup>66</sup> Unlike the midwife Socrates, the two brothers are not testing whether Cleinias' beliefs are true or false; as Dionysodorus whispers to Socrates, they plan to refute Cleinias no matter which way he answers their questions.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the types of questions they ask, and the precise ways in which they word them, are specifically engineered so that refutation will quickly follow no matter how one

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<sup>62</sup> Euclid, in fact, was known in antiquity to have written Socratic dialogues of his own, including a *Crito* and *Alcibiades*. See K. Döring, *Die Megariker: Kommentierte Sammlung der Testimonien* (Amsterdam, 1972), fr. 15-16. For evidence of the Megarian pedigree of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, see Louis-André Dorion, 'Euthydème et Dionysodore sont-ils des Mégariques?' in *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides: Proceedings of the V Symposium Platonicum*, ed. T.M. Robinson and L. Brisson (Sankt Augustin, 2000), pp. 35-50.

<sup>63</sup> Sprague, 'Euthydemus', p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> As Dorion (ibid.) puts it, "Comme ceux-ci prétendaient, en tant qu'héritiers de Socrate, pratiquer une véritable dialectique, il devenait impératif pour Platon de bien montrer que la dialectique socratique, telle qu'il la comprenait, n'avait rien en commun avec l'éristique, hormis une ressemblance purement formelle" (since they claim, insofar as they are heirs of Socrates, to practice genuine dialectic, it becomes imperative for Plato to demonstrate that Socratic dialectic, such as he understands it, has nothing in common with eristic, save a purely formal resemblance) (41).

<sup>65</sup> This is something in which they and their supporters clearly take great pleasure. See 276c; 306b.

<sup>66</sup> On this point, see D. Roochnik, 'The Serious Play of Plato's *Euthydemus*', *Interpretation* 18.2 (1991), pp. 211-232.

<sup>67</sup> *Euthd.* 275e.

answers.<sup>68</sup> In the *Euthydemus*, then, Plato offers a portrait of those who use dialectic and refutation to make themselves appear wise.

Socrates' use of *eirōneia* in the *Euthydemus* tracks both this portrait and its connection to the definition of the sophist as an ironic imitator. Toward the end of the dialogue, in the middle of a dizzying array of refutations, Socrates narrates that Euthydemus "stopped completely, in an ironic manner, as if some great matter was being contemplated" (*eirōnikōs panu epischōn hōs ti mega skopoumenos*).<sup>69</sup> Euthydemus' ironic pause helps to explicate just what makes the ironic imitator *ironic*; his pause is a carefully contrived pretense, designed to create the impression that the argument he is about to make demands great thought and attention. What follows, however, is yet another example of fallacious argumentation. Euthydemus gets Socrates to agree that that which one possesses one has the right to treat as one pleases; when Socrates then admits that he has gods that he worships, Euthydemus draws the conclusion that Socrates is free to treat the gods as he pleases.<sup>70</sup> In reality, Euthydemus' arguments require little to no thought at all; the brothers demand that their interlocutors provide one of two pre-selected answers to their questions, and already know which moves to make to refute either one of them.<sup>71</sup> Euthydemus' success, in other words, is predicated on his ability to generate the appearance of wisdom and/or conceal its lack,<sup>72</sup> and this is something that he uses irony to accomplish. In this sense, he seems to fit quite closely the definition of the sophist as ironic imitator.

## V. Socratic Irony and Sophistic Irony

Despite Plato's attempts to discredit the authority of those who charge Socrates with *eirōneia* and to distinguish between Socratic and sophistic irony, Plato still depicts a Socrates who is deeply ironic. A second look at the *Euthydemus* serves to illustrate this point. Within the inner frame of the dialogue, Socrates is fulsome in his praise for Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, even after he has experienced their verbal antics; within the outer frame of the dialogue, in which Socrates is narrating his encounter with the two brothers to Crito, Socrates is no less excessive in his praise of their wisdom. In fact, he tells Crito that he plans to go study with these men, and implores

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<sup>68</sup> For example, the first question they ask Cleinias is whether those who learn are the wise or the ignorant. His first answer is that the wise are the learners, which Euthydemus refutes by explaining that those who learn something must have first been ignorant of what it is they have learned. When Cleinias takes up the opposite position, that those who are ignorant learn, Dionysodorus asks him whether, when he was learning writing, if the ignorant boys or the wise boys were the ones who learned; Cleinias responds that it was the wise. At this point, the two brothers have a good laugh. As Socrates later explains to Cleinias, though not with such terminology, their argument employs the fallacy of equivocation concerning what it means to learn (*to manthanein*). See R.K. Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy* (New York, 1962), pp. 5-7.

<sup>69</sup> *Euthd.* 302b3-4.

<sup>70</sup> *Euthd.* 302a-303a.

<sup>71</sup> They become quite agitated, moreover, when Socrates attempts to qualify his responses in any way. See *Euthd.* 295b-297b.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Lane, 'Evolution', p. 61.

Crito to join him.<sup>73</sup> Socrates' irony is so overblown that even the somewhat pedestrian Crito suspects, after hearing Socrates' account of his conversation, that his praise of the two brothers is somewhat out of place.

While Plato does not conceal Socrates' irony, he does distinguish between Socratic and sophistic irony, and between the purposes toward which each is deployed. Sophistic irony, as it is presented in the *Euthydemus* and *Sophist*, is a type of dissembling that involves the pretense of having knowledge; Socratic irony, in contrast, involves the pretense that *others* have knowledge that he himself lacks. Yet, despite their distinct manifestations, both are still forms of *eirōneia*. Here, Aristotle's remarks on *eirōneia* in the *Rhetoric* can point us toward their underlying similarity. While Aristotle's discussion of *eirōneia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* neglects the comic elements of irony, his analysis in the *Rhetoric* does not. In the latter work, Aristotle describes *eirōneia* as a type of jesting that might be suitable for the free man:

Irony is more befitting a free man than buffoonery; for the ironist jokes for his own sake, while the buffoon does so for the sake of another.<sup>74</sup>

In this comparison, Aristotle captures a key component of the Greek concept of *eirōneia*, one that casts irony as "a joke which the speaker intends for his own amusement."<sup>75</sup> For the sophists, the joke involves getting others to believe that they are wise; for Socrates, the joke involves getting others to believe that he thinks they are wise. In both cases, however, the ironist deploys pretense to mock his interlocutor for his own amusement.

The *eirōneia* of both Euthydemus and Socrates appears to fit this conception. As discussed in the previous section, Euthydemus is quite fond of mocking and laughing at his interlocutors when they fall prey to his refutations. Such overt mockery and laughter, however, are not what constitute Euthydemus' *eirōneia*. His irony, rather, consists in the ways in which he pretends to have knowledge he does not possess. By using such pretense to convince others that he does have such knowledge, he is also mocking them; yet, such mockery remains hidden, and is intended for his own amusement. The same holds true in Socrates' case. Socrates also goes around refuting others, and, in doing so, turns them into objects of laughter;<sup>76</sup> he openly jokes about his philosophical practice, deploying the comic analogies of the gadfly and midwife;<sup>77</sup> and he also openly mocks the arguments of his interlocutors by illustrating their ridiculous

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<sup>73</sup> *Euthd.* 272b-d; 304c.

<sup>74</sup> *Rhet.* 1419b9-11.

<sup>75</sup> Z. Pavlovskis, 'Aristotle, Horace, and the Ironic Man', *Classical Philology* 63 (1968), pp. 22-41, p. 23.

<sup>76</sup> In the *Philebus* (48c-49d), Socrates argues that what makes one laughable is self-ignorance; in revealing the self-ignorance of his interlocutors, Socrates is also revealing them to be ridiculous. This argument about the laughable (*to geloion*) in the *Philebus* is worth comparing with *Apology* 33c, where Socrates notes the pleasure some take in watching his refutations of others.

<sup>77</sup> *Ap.* 30e; *Tht.* 149a-b.

consequences.<sup>78</sup> Yet, what constitutes Socrates' *eirōneia* is the way in which he jokingly uses pretense to convince his interlocutors that he thinks they are wise - in contrast with these other forms, this is a type of joking for which Socrates alone is the audience.

On this understanding, *eirōneia* is not the purely verbal irony of Cicero and Quintilian that Vlastos and Nehamas deploy in their interpretations; it is not simply a deceitful 'concealing by feigning' as Lane argues; nor is it devoid of the comic elements from which Nancy seeks to distinguish it. Rather, *eirōneia* is a type of practical irony, one in which the ironist uses pretense (both verbal and non-verbal) to make his interlocutor foolish in his eyes.<sup>79</sup> The audience for the humor associated with *eirōneia*, then, is the ironist himself; and what is humorous about this situation for the ironist is his ability to trick his interlocutor - or, in a colloquial sense, to pull one over on him.

If this interpretation of *eirōneia* is correct, then it suggests a third strategy in Plato's presentation of Socratic irony, one that is perhaps the most subtle. As readers of Plato's dialogues, Socratic irony does not appear to be a private form of joking; but that, I would argue, is because Plato lets us in on the joke. Plato portrays Socrates' interlocutors as boastful charlatans, and, in doing so, both justifies Socrates' irony and allows us to see that his praise for them is ironic. We, as readers of the dialogues, are already constituted as the audience for Socrates' irony; because of this fact, our experience of Socratic irony is quite different from the experience of those encountering Socrates in person. Plato makes transparent to us an irony that normally remains hidden and opaque, and in doing so, creates a bond between Socrates and his readers, one that arises from the sharing of an inside joke. It is thus by getting us to laugh with Socrates at the sophists that Plato ultimately hopes to persuade us of the difference between Socratic and sophistic irony.

## VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have demonstrated that attending to Plato's use of *eirōneia* reveals the apologetic dimensions of his presentation of Socratic irony, which in turn can help us to

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<sup>78</sup> E.g. *Gorgias* 488d-494e.

<sup>79</sup> In developing this interpretation of *eirōneia*, I have been influenced by the recent interpretations of both Lowell Edmunds and G.R.F. Ferrari. With Edmunds, I agree that an important, and mostly overlooked aspect of Socratic irony, is its non-verbal dimension; yet, I would argue that this quality is not unique to Socratic irony, but applicable to the Greek concept of *eirōneia* more generally. Ferrari draws from the contemporary 'pretence theory' of irony to explicate Socratic irony. According to this theory, "to communicate ironically is to engage in a pretence before an audience with the intention of eliciting a response from that audience by means of their recognition of two things: one, that the pretence would be in some way inappropriate if it were actual rather than just a pretence; and the other, that the ironist intended them to recognize this fact" (6). Ferrari goes on to argue that what makes Socratic irony unique is its "solipsistic" nature, by which he means that Socrates himself is the audience for his irony. As is evident from the preceding analysis, I agree with Ferrari concerning the solipsistic nature of Socratic irony. Where I would disagree is over his contention that this is unique to Socratic irony; I also hope to have expanded his analysis to show how as readers of the dialogue we do not experience Socratic irony as solipsistic. See L. Edmunds, 'The Practical Irony of the Historical Socrates', *Phoenix* 58 (2004), pp. 193-207 and G.R.F. Ferrari, 'Socratic Irony as Pretence,' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 34 (2008), pp. 1-33.

better understand not only what Socratic *eirōneia* was but also why Plato - and not only Plato, but a host of Socrates' later admirers in antiquity - felt the need to apologize for it. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest some possible implications that the preceding analysis might have for contemporary attempts to interpret Socratic irony as a democratic virtue. Plato's attempt to discredit those who accuse Socrates of irony casts an interesting light on Vlastos' claim that Socrates' irony forces his interlocutors to discover the truth for themselves. Socrates' irony, as it is presented by Plato, does provoke some of his interlocutors - those who recognize it like Alcibiades and Thrasymachus; but it does not provoke them to rethink any of their previously-held beliefs. For the jurors at Socrates' trial, Socrates is still an atheist; for Alcibiades, his physical beauty is still valuable; for Thrasymachus, Socrates is still playing the same verbal game that he is. Throughout the dialogues, the pedagogical value of Socratic irony remains questionable.

In fact, if Socratic irony really is a form of private joking, then it might not have any pedagogical purpose at all. In being ironic, Socrates is making fun of his interlocutors for his own amusement, and perhaps for no other purpose than for his own amusement. Alongside his professed goal of provoking others to care for their selves, Socrates also takes great pleasure in toying with his interlocutors and tricking them into believing that he thinks they are wise. By expanding the audience of Socratic irony to include the readers of his dialogues, Plato softens this disturbing aspect of its practice, making it appear less vicious and nasty than it otherwise might.